

Empowering International Students:

Improving sexual health outcomes through an integrated preventative health approach.

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Background

- NSW hosts the largest number of international students in Australia, with 328,518 enrolled in 2024, accounting for 39% of the national total¹.
- Following post-pandemic returns, HIV and STI prevention for this population heightened as an NSW Health priority, with efforts focused on strengthening community and preventative service navigation and reducing reliance on Emergency Departments.²
- This Medicare-ineligible population often face unique health challenges, including limited sexual and reproductive health knowledge and poorer sexual health outcomes.³
- Cultural stigma, unfamiliarity with Australia's healthcare system, and concerns around confidentiality and cost often deter engagement in sexual health checks and services.
- Existing initiatives are valuable however, largely operate independently, limiting their reach and system-wide impact.
- This project aims to deliver an integrated, culturally responsive approach to strengthen health literacy, improve appropriate service navigation, and enhance sexual and reproductive health outcomes for international students in NSW.

Method

The NSW Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service in collaboration with Sydney Local Health District (LHD) implemented a localised, multi-level health prevention approach for international students.

Initial consultations with educational institutions, student housing, health services, peers and international students revealed the key health areas of concern and guided activities.

The approach integrated:

- student engagement initiatives, delivered with Cultural Support Workers
- development of tailored localised resources of free and subsidised services.
- delivery of expanded culturally safe Sexual Health Peer Education Program (SHAPE) content, covering STI prevention, safe sex, contraception, healthy relationships and consent.
- International Student Health Hub and local health services promotion.



Conclusion

This integrated approach empowers students with sexual and reproductive health literacy and system navigation skills, influencing positive health-seeking behaviours in the long-term.

Following a finalist nomination for the 2024 NSW Health Awards, this approach is being scaled statewide across Greater Western Sydney and regional and rural LHDs, strengthening partnerships between educational institutes, local health teams and program co-leads to meet international students' health needs more equitably.

Results

Over 2024- June 2025

31 Activations • 23 events
• 8 trainings

Student welcome events

3,627
International students engaged at university, student housing, TAFE and local welcome events

3,236
Safe sex packs were distributed.

Sexual Health Peer Education Training

86
Peer educators were trained across 11 student residences and services.

94%
Pre- and post peer training knowledge quiz showed correct answers increased 75% to 94%.

“The presenters were approachable and knowledgeable. the role play was very helpful to gauge how we'd act in a novel situation.”

“was very informative and good blend of practical and theoretical”

Participant feedback

