

## Media release

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### Report reveals wage theft against international students remains a key issue in Australia

Wage theft remains a major problem for vulnerable international students in Australia that has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and requires urgent action, according to Maurice Blackburn Lawyers.

A new report *International Students and Wage Theft in Australia* released today by UNSW and UTS showed the vast majority of international students were victims of theft, with three in four earning below the minimum casual wage.

Maurice Blackburn Employment Law Senior Associate Patrick Turner said the report showed international students were being routinely exploited by unscrupulous employers and many were too afraid to speak up – particularly since the COVID-19 crisis had devastated casual employment and made jobs scarce.

“Today’s report paints a damning picture of the systemic wage theft being experienced by too many migrant workers in Australia,” Mr Turner said.

“The vulnerability of these exploited workers has only worsened under COVID-19. Many are too scared to speak out because they fear they will lose their visas. Too many employers are knowingly exploiting these workers believing they are unlikely to face any consequences.”

Mr Turner welcomed moves to criminalise wage theft in Victoria and Queensland, but said more needed to be done.

“Too often in these cases the balance is tipped in favour of the employer responsible for perpetrating the wage theft, and it can be a very difficult process for a worker to bring a claim for underpayment in seeking to get back wages they are owed,” Mr Turner said.

“While new laws show that exploitation of workers, particularly those on low wages, will no longer be tolerated, more needs to be done to assist international students who have been excluded from JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments. Workers who have had wages stolen have faced considerable challenges just to come forward and report this.”

“COVID-19 has further exacerbated this for many international students who have been left jobless almost overnight with no way to pay their rent or meet basic living expenses.”

Mr Turner said federal governments must take note of the recommendations outlined in today’s report, including calls to provide a more effective wage recovery mechanism for migrant workers who have been underpaid as well as adoption of wider regulatory reforms.

“Today’s report also renews calls for an absolute firewall to be established between the Fair Work Ombudsman and the Department of Home Affairs to prevent the two agencies sharing information about potential visa contraventions when migrant workers seek help for wage theft,” Mr Turner said.

“Governments must introduce targeted campaigns to deliver clear information to international students so they know their legal and workplace rights. Importantly, international students need to be reassured by government that they will not face adverse consequences if they speak up about workplace exploitation.”

“Migration has been the bedrock of Australia’s prosperity, but we cannot allow this to be built off the back of exploitation of vulnerable migrants,” he said.

**Media inquiries:** Paddy Murphy at Maurice Blackburn Lawyers on 0490 297 391