Forms of Racism and Discrimination faced by International Students

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Definition of racism

Racism is often defined as “prejudice, discrimination or hatred directed at someone because of their colour, ethnicity or national origin” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014, para 1). Racism can be expressed through “stereotypes (racist beliefs), prejudices (racist emotions/affect) or discrimination (racist behaviours and practices)” (Berman & Paradies, 2010, p. 217). Racist behaviours can include jokes or comments that hurt other people, harassment or intimidation, commentary in the media or online that trigger hostility towards a certain racial groups or unfair treatment of people because of their race (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Racism is however more than just these words, beliefs and actions. It includes “all the barriers that prevent people from enjoying dignity and equality because of their race” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014).

Forms of racism and discrimination faced by international students

International students might face challenges in the host country caused by a wide range of social inequalities including racism (Tran & Hoang, 2019; Tran & Gomes, 2015; Tran & Vu, 2016). International students might encounter physical and verbal racist abuse such as swearing, being told to go back to their home country, pejorative comments about the home country, aggressive laughter and missiles thrown (Brown & Jones, 2013). While verbal assaults occur more often, international students also face significant physical abuse of being thrown at objects such as bottles, stones, eggs and water, and some students experience multiple racist incidents (Brown & Jones, 2013).

Linguistic racism is another form of racism typically endured by international students due to their attachment to an academic environment as a student. Dovchin (2020) denotes two main traits of linguistic racism: “ethnic accent bullying” and ‘linguistic stereotyping’. Racism and discrimination facing international students might originate from stereotypes and negative perceptions about their home countries as national discrimination rather than the traditional racism that solely from the colour of their skin (Lee, 2006).

International students are also prone to subtle, unintentional forms of racism and discrimination termed as racial microaggressions (Nadal et al, 2014). This presents itself in scenarios whereby someone avoids sitting beside an international student in public transports or in lectures and tutorials on campus. International students have been discriminated against when it comes to doing group works when students have to choose their groupmates. These subtle statements and behaviours unconsciously communicate negative messages to international students that they are not accepted or seen as part of the community (Nadal, 2011).

New forms of racism and discrimination facing international students during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been an escalation in racism towards people of Asian backgrounds worldwide. For example, in Italy, the civil group Lunaria has collected over 50 reports and media accounts of assaults, verbal harassment, and bullying against Asian descent. Human rights and other groups in France and Russia have also reported an increase in racist attacks related to COVID-19. Similar problems have been observed in the UK and the US (Human Rights Watch, 2020).
In Australia, both the Australian Asian Alliance and the Australian Human Rights Commission have received an increased number of reports of physical and verbal attacks related to COVID-19 that occurred in the streets, shops and supermarkets, public transport and other places. Graffiti and vandalism with racist messages have also been found to damage the homes of Asian-Australians (The University of Sydney Law School, 2020). Among the reported racist attacks in Australia are the two Asian students bashed in the Melbourne CBD, an Asian doctor in Geelong abused when waiting for take away and Asian’s family homes in Sydney and Melbourne vandalised with abuse messages (Sojo & Bapuji, 2020).

One of the typical forms of racism relating to the pandemic is the racist epithets of ‘virus’, ‘coronavirus’ used to call Asian students. For example, in the UK, McKie’s (2020) study reports that Chinese international students are experiencing extremely high levels of anxiety, discrimination and insecurity during the pandemic. They have encountered xenophobic attacks verbally and physically and are often associated with the coronavirus such as “you brought the virus”, and “Coronavirus, Chinese”. A group of female Chinese students in this study said they were chased by local teenagers down the street, who shouted “virus, Chinese virus” at them. Those wearing face masks were also brutally sworn at. Although a number of international students likely experience racial abuse, the incidents are under-reported (Brown & Jones, 2013), which is also observed during the pandemic. In Australia, for every case of being racist, there are ‘10 more who remain silent’ (Precel, 2020).

Research demonstrates that international students have developed coping through avoidance as a mechanism to deal with racism and discrimination (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007). Such an approach often means that international students remain silent when facing acts of racism and discrimination. This indicates that students might view these acts as a natural predisposition of being in a foreign country and therefore it is something that is unchangeable and they should not take action. Students might hesitate to take action as they lack the courage and support system to stand up to such acts (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Nadal et al. 2014). Therefore, it is important to not only educate the community broadly but also empower international students through both the support system and the conditions for them to increase their awareness and exercise their agency.

References


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