

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Overseas families in battler category

JOHN ROSS THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 27, 2013 12:00AM



Malaysian student Suearna Thayala, in Sydney yesterday, says her family made great sacrifices so that she could study in Australia. Picture: Nikki Short Source: TheAustralian

**SUEARNA Thayala says she could probably name the movies she's seen during her three years in Australia. "Everything's really expensive so I don't go out much," she says.**

A journalism student at the University of NSW, she staffs the reception of a student residence to make ends meet. But it's a delicate balancing act, as she struggles to ensure her work duties don't interfere with her studies and force her to repeat any subjects.

Things were not very different back home in Malaysia, as her engineer father took on extra work to send her here in the first place. "We hardly went out. He was always very controlled and made sure we didn't overspend."

Students from countries like Malaysia are the lifeblood of Australia's fourth biggest export industry. They generate revenue for hundreds of private colleges and the nearby service businesses, and underwrite the running costs of Australia's globally recognised universities.

But a new survey of thousands of would-be international students has found almost half come from families that would be considered battlers in Australia.

The online survey, conducted by global educational company Hobsons, targeted people who had inquired about Australian higher education courses over the past two years.

It attracted almost 8000 responses from people in about 180 countries, the bulk of them in Australia's key Asian markets.

Almost one in two - 48 per cent - claimed to come from families earning less than \$US25,000 (\$27,200) a year. "There's a belief out there that international students are all rich," says Hobsons' Asia-Pacific managing director, David Harrington.

"A large proportion come from income brackets that we in Australia would put into the very low socioeconomic status category. If you used the Australian poverty line, way over 50 per cent of international students coming to this country would be below that line. It shows the amount of time the families must be planning and saving for these young people's education."

The survey found the "rich kid" tag did not even apply in the rich countries. About one-third of US applicants and almost 60 per cent from Britain came from this low family income bracket.

People from Asia, who responded in far greater numbers, told a similar story - including two in five Koreans, three in five Indians and an extraordinary three-quarters of applicants in relatively prosperous Malaysia.

In the key market of China, more than one-third of students said they came from sub-\$US25,000 households - despite perceptions that the one-child policy has funnelled the resources of two parents and often four grandparents into the education of each member of the latest generation.

Some 19 per cent of respondents came from families earning between \$US25,000 and \$US50,000 a year, with another 8 per cent claiming incomes between \$US50,000 and \$US75,000.

At the other end of the scale, just 8 per cent of respondents said they came from households earning more than \$US150,000 a year - roughly equivalent to the income at which welfare payments and government concessions no longer apply in Australia. "What people need to understand is that families make huge sacrifices over a large number of years - and often the wider family as well - to finance international students' education in Australia," says Mr Harrington. "This data screams loud and clear that international students (come) from diverse financial backgrounds.

"Australian higher education is a massive decision for the families of (many of) these students, and a huge investment in their future."

He says Hobsons will make the data available to the government and publish a white paper next

## Family wealth of international students

Malaysia	75%
Brazil	67%
India	59%
Colombia	55%
Vietnam	54%
Indonesia	53%
Hong Kong	43%
South Korea	40%
China	36%
Japan	33%

Proportion of international students whose families earn less than \$US25,000 a year.

Source: Hobsons

Source: TheAustralian

month.

"It's clear that international students, or a large proportion of them, don't have a lot of disposable income, (so) any concessions governments are able to make would certainly be beneficial."

He says the survey may also furnish useful information on domestic students' finances, after 1500 Australian students completed the survey. But international students were the principal target, he says.

Ms Thayala says she is not sure of her Malaysian family's exact income. She suspects it is "slightly more" than \$US25,000.

While she hopes to graduate this year, her family now faces the cost of educating her younger sister. "(My plan is) to work and help my sister, and make sure my dad doesn't have to feel that burden as well."