



Discipline Guide:
History

Written by
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Research with
International Students

About the author



Dr Anna Kent researches the history of international education and the intersections between education and foreign policy. Her new book, [Mandates and Missteps](https://press.anu.edu.au) [press.anu.edu.au] analyses the role of Australian government scholarships in the Pacific between 1948 and 2018.

About this series

Research with international students is an interdisciplinary field and there are a wide range of research disciplines which can add to our thinking about this subject. This series brings together global experts to present different research disciplines and their application to this research topic with the aim of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

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History as a discipline

History, like many other academic disciplines, is not fixed. It is full of debates between scholars, methods, ideas, theories and conceptions of value. There are a variety of schools of history, some bound by theoretical underpinnings (for example Marxists), others who consider themselves by geography (such as Pacific historians), or those who focus on a time period (medievalists for one example). There are also those who work in a space that grew in the second half of the 20th century– contemporary historians. The tagline for the [Centre for Contemporary Histories](#) at Deakin University (Australia) is ‘Concerned with the pasts not yet past’, the [Luskin Centre for History and Policy](#) at UCLA’s mission is ‘to bring vital historical knowledge, perspective and analysis to bear on key contemporary issues and policy deliberations. It is these histories, and historians, who venture into policy debates, provide context for contemporary events, and suggest that there are ways we can learn from the past. It is often these historians who are working with international students, and addressing the current debates in international education.

Perspective and analysis are vital, providing context to debates about the past and the present (and, as much as historians are loath to predict the future, that too). Key to this context however, is understanding and explaining complexity. As eminent Australian historian Graeme Davidson has written ‘our intellectual bias is towards complication rather than simplification’. Historians, as a rule, don’t do simple answers.

Historians use a variety of methods to undertake their research. Archival research is perhaps the most common, where a scholar finds documents in an archive (personal, state, or other organisation) and uses many documents to answer research questions. The documents become part of a puzzle, to be put together as a whole picture or narrative. Many large archives are working towards digitisation, allowing access to documents from anywhere in the world.

Oral historians interview people to hear the stories of their lives, or portions of their lives that are relevant to this study. Oral history collections of international students, for example, give us great insight into the lives that these students experienced. These interviews, which are usually recorded and analysed by the historian, allow for a ‘real’ life understanding of those who are part of the history that is being written. There are not many broadly accessible specialised collections of oral history interviews with international students or alumni, however there are some noted at the end of this guide. Historians are also able to use other interviews with students – those not made as part of an oral history project – to gain an insight into the lives and experiences of students. For example, many institutions use student interviews to showcase alumni achievement and as a part of recruitment. These interviews can offer useful insights, even if they have been made for another purpose such as marketing. Interviews with international students as a part of research being conducted within other disciplines may also be used by historians in the future.

The growth of digital histories, which is the use of digital media in historical analysis, research and presentation, has also impacted on the study and writing of history. This includes the use of large datasets (such as slave journeys or immigration records) or collation of information into network maps. The digitisation of records sets and other textual records such as Parliamentary Hansard in the UK and [Australia](#), allows for a different understanding of large swathes of records.

More often historians use a combination of methods to research and analyse their research questions. When one has many points of reference, a rich and nuanced history can be written.

Historical studies of international students

Why?

The flows of international students have accelerated over the 21st Century, but travelling to other nations for study has been common for centuries. In the Middle Ages students and academics travelled across Europe to teach and learn at other universities and monks and religious scholars of many faiths travelled (and travel) for study. Student mobility was a key element of maintaining empires and allowed for the metropole to bestow largess and indoctrinate functionaries (or colonial subjects) on the ways of the coloniser. In the 20th century, some international students were involved in revolutionary movements, decolonisation and radicalism. Other students and alumni helped to maintain the status quo in colonised states and territories.

Governments around the world have, and continue to, use international education and international students as aspects of their soft power efforts. This can be at the micro level – whereby one student is sponsored by a government because of a perceived potential to create or influence change or development - or at the macro – where international education is encouraged to bolster the position of the country more broadly. Understanding how countries and students have navigated these policies and experiences is a key element of understanding national and foreign policy histories. The histories of international students are also intertwined with histories of migration and cultural change. For example, the presence of international students (at the time known as ‘Asian students’) in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s played a key role in cosmopolitanising the country.

How?

As discussed earlier, historians have many methods of research. Perhaps the most important of these when it comes to international students is oral history. Interviews with students and alumni form the foundation of much historical research in this area. There are some excellent collections of oral histories available to hear, watch and read, as you can see by the listing at the end of this guide. Interviews with international students are also found in other collections not necessarily focused on international education, the [National Library of Australia](#) has a wonderful collection of oral history recordings of students from a number of different research projects not related to international education.

Archives are also filled with the details of students, from application forms, reports, surveys, immigration materials and photos. The [National Archives of Australia](#), for instance, has an excellent (searchable) collection of photos of students in Australia across the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s. Together these documents can be used to piece together the stories of experience and education, but often when dealing with government records there is a need to “read against the grain”, a historical method where one reads the archives for the unsaid, the small fragments and the snippets of a life that need to be put together. This is especially important when one has access to government documents, but few or no records written by the students themselves.

Newspapers are also a key source for historians. In particular, student newspapers offer a fascinating insight into the lives of students and the issues and concerns of their lives. For example, in Australia we are fortunate to have access to [Trove](#) which is maintained by the National Library of Australia. It is here that you will find digitised newspapers, photos and other digital items from Australia and some from the region. This resource is invaluable to historians.

What’s in it for non-historians?

Historians are not only writing these histories of international students and international education for other historians. Other disciplinary areas can benefit from reading and engaging with historical work in this field. Understanding where programs, policies and projects come from, their historical context, and the motivations behind them provide essential context for discussions of the present and the future. Current international students can also benefit from understanding the stories of those who came before them. Many sponsored students and alumni have noted the benefits of understanding the histories of the scholarship schemes that they have been a part of, allowing them to see their position in a broader history and context. And educational institutions and their administrators are always interested in finding out more about students who have studied there in years gone by.

What has been done, where to find it, and what might be missing

The history of international education is still a developing field. It is also very nation based – focused at this point on destination countries more than sending countries. This is a gap and by reorienting the research to the stories of those leaving to study (where, why and what happens while they're gone?) a substantially different history could emerge.

Historians often rely on the work of social scientists, anthropologists and others when researching with international students. It is also possible to utilise other grey literature and reports produced for governments and other entities to help build a history of international students. This includes tracer studies (often produced by scholarship programs) and surveys. These sources need to be read carefully, but also ensures that the history of international students is nearly always interdisciplinary.

Some useful sources and literature are listed below.

References and further resources

Specific archives and databases

'Scholarships and Connections'

<https://exhibit.deakin.edu.au/s/scholar/page/scholar>.

The project was interested in the experiences of former scholarship-holders in positions of leadership and any networks and ongoing connections they have with Australia. This research provides a better understanding of the personal and professional networks of scholarship alumni, and encourages the sharing of experiences. The archive includes interviews with scholarship recipients, investigating the life stories and experiences of over 100 students from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea who were sponsored for Australian-based tertiary study from 1950s-2010.

Institute of International Education Archives.

<https://dimes.rockarch.org/collections/TUqFpQmzqDUDXqRnrWFtRi>

The collection includes documentation of grants, fellowships, administration, historical files, photographic files and publications.

Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program Archive

<https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/ifp>

The archives cover the issues of social justice, community development, and access to higher education, and include paper and digital documentation and audiovisual materials on the more than 4,300 IFP Fellows as well as comprehensive planning and administrative files of the program.

Database of Research on International Education

https://opac.acer.edu.au/IDP_drie/index.html

This searchable database is managed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and contains details of more than 16 500 books, articles, conference papers and reports on various aspects of international education from publishers in Australia and abroad.

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