

# ACCESSING SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES WITHIN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COMING FROM EAST ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

## Authors

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## Background:

Previous studies highlight increasing sexually transmitted infections, blood borne viruses, and unplanned pregnancies amongst international students (IS) in Australia, contrasted with lower usage of local health services. This study sought to understand the factors that enabled or prevented female East Asian and Southeast Asian IS from accessing sexual health services in Perth, Western Australia.

## Method:

A qualitative research method was employed, informed by principles of phenomenology. Data was collected by semi-structured in-depth interview with cisgender females aged 19 to 35 years. All were IS, originally from an East Asian or Southeast Asian country, and currently residing in Perth, Western Australia. Thematic analysis was used to uncover recurrent themes.

## Result:

Fourteen participants voluntarily consented to be interviewed. Not all were currently sexually active. Overall, experience of accessibility to sexual health services varied and several intrapersonal and structural barriers were identified. Intrapersonal barriers included attitudes, beliefs, conceptualisation of health service access, and language difficulties. When participants acknowledged sexual health matters as a problem, they were able to seek further help. However, most participants revealed limited understanding of various emotional, psychological, and social issues related to their sexual health. This impacted their ability to navigate help-seeking pathways. Structural barriers included quality of care, difficulty in navigating the Australian health system, and transparency of the Overseas Student Health Care process. Finally, participants revealed limited understanding of various emotional, psychological, and social issues related to their sexual health.

## Conclusion:

This study highlights the necessity of IS-friendly sexual health information platforms and quality post-arrival education. IS voices highlighted room for improved sexual health support in health care settings and via tertiary institutions. Regardless of their sexual status, participants want to receive quality sexual health information and health care, and be informed about their sexual rights.

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