

Modern slavery risks in the higher education sector

Children & Young People



138 million children were involved in child labour globally in 2024.¹

2 in 5 children in child labour perform hazardous work – from handling dangerous machinery to exposure to chemicals.²



226 reports of online child sexual exploitation were made a day to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation in 2024-25.³

What is modern slavery?

Modern slavery is a serious violation of an individual's dignity and human rights. Exploitative practices, including human trafficking, forced labour, child labour, debt bondage and forced marriage, are all considered modern slavery and are serious crimes under Australian law.

Regulatory context



Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Cth)

Organisations, including universities, based or operating in Australia with at least AU\$100 million in annual consolidated revenue are required to report annually on the steps they have taken to identify and address modern slavery risks in their operations and supply chains. See [Commonwealth Modern Slavery Act Guidance for Reporting Entities](#).



Modern Slavery Act 2018 (NSW)

Certain universities in NSW have due diligence reporting obligations to ensure the goods and services they procure are not the product of modern slavery. See [NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner's Guidance on Reasonable Steps to Manage Modern Slavery Risks in Operations and Supply-Chains](#).

Modern slavery practices that children and young people may experience



Child Labour

Children may be coerced into exploitative work that denies them their education and puts them at risk of harm. Child labour is particularly prevalent in agriculture, manufacturing and mining.



Child Trafficking

Children are displaced from their families and trafficked for forced labour, sexual exploitation, criminal activity and organ removal. Children have also been trafficked into orphanages to gain profit from donors, volunteer tourism and mission trips.



Online Exploitation

Children can be targeted online for labour or sexual exploitation, through grooming, coercion and deception. Traffickers increasingly use digital tools, such as social media, AI, and biometric tracking, to identify, recruit, monitor, and control vulnerable victims.

Why are children and young people at risk of modern slavery?



Economic and social vulnerability

Poverty, lack of access to education, and unstable family environments increase the likelihood that children will be pushed into exploitative situations.



Limited capacity for informed consent

Young people may not fully understand the implications of employment, contracts, or participation in research, leaving them unable to give genuine consent.



Power imbalances

Children often rely on adults, employers, teachers, or caregivers, who may misuse their authority or trust

¹ [Child labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward](#), UNICEF & International Labour Organization, 2024.

² [Child labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward](#), UNICEF & International Labour Organization, 2024.

³ [ACCCE Statistics](#), Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation, 2025.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

How child related modern slavery risks may be linked to the University sector

Procurement	
Universities may be linked to modern slavery risks in their supply chains, including in the extraction of raw materials, the manufacturing of components, final assembly of products and in the labour to deliver services on campus.	
Product, Sector & Geographic Risks	<p>Sourcing from a sector or location with documented instances of child labour without adequate due diligence, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catering: Child labour has been extensively documented in cocoa, coffee and palm oil farming and production. • Uniforms, university merchandise and personal protective equipment: Exploitative labour of children and young people in garment manufacturing and the production of cotton, particularly in Southeast Asia and Central Asia, and in the production of rubber for gloves. • Electronics: Involuntary student internships, often involving excessive overtime and overnight work, in the manufacturing of electronic equipment, particular in China (e.g. Apple watches reportedly made by forced student interns) • Lab and medical equipment has been linked to child labour (e.g. Child labour in manufacturing of surgical instruments in Pakistan). • Fleet vehicles, solar panels and critical minerals needed for research: Hazardous child labour has been well documented in mining in Africa and South America, producing key minerals needed for the automotive sector, clean energy transition and electronics, including cobalt and mica. (e.g. major tech companies, Apple, Dell and Tesla, alleged in U.S. lawsuit to be “knowingly benefiting” from artisanal cobalt mining engaging hazardous child labour in the DRC for the production of lithium-ion batteries used in electronics and electric vehicles) <p>A full list of products linked to child labour can be found here.</p>
Teaching & Research	
Universities may be linked to modern slavery risks, through their teaching and research activities and partnerships. Risks often intersect with other human rights concerns and counterparty risks related to sensitive technologies, sanctions and national security.	
Research Development & Application Risks	<p>Carrying out research without adequate safeguarding of children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitive research with children, such as research into violence and abuse or research with children who have experienced trauma, may risk physical or emotional harm, re-traumatisation, privacy breaches or social repercussions, such as community stigmatisation. This risk is heightened when the research is undertaken outside of Australia. • Medical research, involving clinical trials and the collection of children’s biomaterials, such as cells, tissues and blood samples, may raise risks related to informed consent and safeguarding, particularly for children with a disability or from culturally and linguistically diverse or Indigenous communities. <p>Research with dual academic and commercial use without adequate due diligence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artificial intelligence research may be inadvertently used to facilitate child grooming or child sexual abuse material or expose children to inappropriate sexual or violent content (e.g. AI text-to-image generator, developed with support by researchers at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, reportedly used to generate child sexual abuse material) • Surveillance technology research, such as facial recognition and fingerprinting, may be inadvertently used to monitor and detain vulnerable populations, including children (e.g. EU deploys biometric technology to track refugee and migrant children)
Partnership & Collaboration Risks	<p>Student placements without adequate due diligence of the provider.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering in orphanages overseas may inadvertently facilitate child trafficking and exploitation. An estimated 80% of children in orphanages worldwide have one or more parents, with families tricked on false promises of care and education to send their children to an orphanage. Orphanages can be harmful to children’s development, and in some cases, children may be kept in neglectful conditions to attract donations. <p>Research partnerships or collaborations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with external parties with documented links to modern slavery, including child labour in their operations or supply chain.

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Case study

This case study has been developed using publicly available reports. It is intended solely for illustrative purposes and does not represent any specific university, supplier, or partner organisation.

A major global provider of laptops to several Australian universities identified that one of its suppliers were engaging hundreds of student interns in China on their assembly lines to manufacture servers.

The students were working 10-12 hours a day, six days a week, for up to five months under conditions which violate Chinese labour law and educational standards for internship programs. Human rights experts consider these internships to be a form of forced labour, as students are compelled to complete them to graduate, regardless of whether they are relevant to their studies.

Several of the Australian universities worked together to engage the laptop provider to improve its supply chain due diligence and work with its supplier to put in place higher standards for student internships.

Learn more

- [Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends 2024](#), UNICEF & International Labour Organization
- [Guidance on Preventing and Addressing Child Labor in Supply Chains](#), Fair Labour Association, 2025.
- [Safety By Design](#), Australian eSafety Commissioner
- [Researching Sensitive Topics Involving Children: Managing Risk, Distress and Trauma in Research Design and Data Collection](#), Unicef, 2025.
- [ReThink Orphanages](#), Better Care Network
- [ICT Risk Assessment: Child Rights](#), Investor Alliance for Human Rights

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