



Journal of International Students
Volume 14, Issue 3 (2024), pp. 468-490
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org

A Qualitative Exploration of Challenges for International Students Enrolled in Health Professional Education Degrees in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study reports on the experiences of international students enrolled in a Health Professional Education program at a large Australia university. International students have long contributed to Australia's economy. However, the sustainability of international students' contributions to Australia's economy is questionable. Challenges for international students have been widely reported in Australia. Students enrolled in Health Professional Education having unique challenges of their own. In total, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2020 and the data were thematically analysed. The findings uncovered numerous challenges for international students and those unique to international students enrolled in health-related degrees. Although all identified challenges may not be feasible to address, this study highlights recommendations for strategies that could be implemented by universities and policy makers to reduce challenges and to enhance graduate outcomes for this student population.

Keywords: Challenges, International Students, Australia, Health Professional Education, Transportation, Acculturation, Wellbeing, Belonging, Student Experience, Quality Education.

INTRODUCTION

International students have been significant contributors to Australia's growing economy for decades under the category of "Education-related travel services" (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019, 2020). Improvements to the provision of education related services to international students is crucial for the reputation of Australia as an education provider and ensuring quality and maintaining a sustainable sector is paramount to the higher education industry (Adnett, 2010; Yao & Bai, 2008).

A range of challenges that international students might face when they enter Australia and participate in the Australian education system, has been reported in the literature. Such challenges can include; difficulties in adjusting and transitioning to the use of English language in various areas of their lives, adjusting to cultural differences in Australia regarding both Australia's local culture, and the country's multicultural atmosphere (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Blackmore et al., 2017; Gribble, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016; Wearing et al., 2015). Some students have reported struggling to form social capital and build new social networks, and in other more extreme circumstances some students can experience housing, employment and financial insecurity and exploitation (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2016).

Admission practices for international students leading up to 2019 had reached a point that was criticised as being irresponsible and unsustainable. Beginning in 2016, greater autonomy was granted to Australian universities in their admissions criteria, allowing them to waive specific admission requirements for select courses based on certain criteria (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). The most notable of these criteria, was the English language requirement (Worthington et al., 2019a). Commonly accepted evidence of English language proficiency for a student was completing recognised education at an English-speaking institution, or a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score or an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Four Corners, 2019; Worthington et al., 2019b). From 2016, The English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) allowed for students with lower IELTS and other testing scores to be eligible for a Visa subclass 500, as stipulated by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). The result of the changes was an amendment that allowed education institutions the discretion for English language requirements for international students (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). This later caused an admissions scandal covered by the investigative journalist body Four Corners focusing on English language admission changes to standardised student visa (Four Corners, 2019; Worthington et al., 2019b).

These practices might be viewed as profitable and beneficial in the short term for the higher education providers, however, in the immediacy the repercussions are faced by the admitted students that are confronted by a series of resulting challenges (Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2021). In the long term, continued irresponsible practices can be damaging to the reputation of the higher education

providers and Australia as a country which provides access to higher education services to foreign residents (Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2021).

Language proficiency skills have been a major theme in several studies related to international students in Australian HE (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014; Huong et al., 2017; Le & McKay, 2018; Lin, 2012; Pan, 2015; Sawir et al., 2012; Son & Park, 2014; Wearing et al., 2015; Yates & Wahid, 2013; Yeoh & Terry, 2013). Difficulties with language are related not only to academic study, they also influence student interactions within the university community and with individuals outside of the university. Schlossberg's theory of transition underpins this study, when understanding a person's ability to cope with transitions from the 4S; Situation, self, support and strategies in the context of anticipated, unanticipated and non-event transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). This is relevant to international students who are undergoing multiple transitions with varied resources for support and strategy.

Australian higher education institutions have offered a plethora of education programs to international students, including health professional education (HPE) programs. A mandatory component of most HPE programs is the requirement for students to undertake supervised training in the clinical environment as a form of work integrated learning (WIL) (Andrews & Ford, 2013; Australian Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2009; Barnett et al., 2010; Barton et al., 2018; Franklin, 2013; Jackson, 2017; Joseph & Rouse, 2017).

International studies for students enrolled in Australian HPE programs have been inadequately represented in the literature. The literature for international student related studies in Australia predominantly focuses on the student experiences for higher education programs in business, engineering and information and technology cohorts. Although there are other programs which require students to undertake industry relevant WIL, the nature of what HPE students confront in the clinical environment can be unique and therefore can present unique challenges for students to overcome (Attrill et al., 2015; Australian Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2009; Barnett et al., 2010; Barton et al., 2018; Franklin, 2013; Greenstock et al., 2014; Jackson, 2017; Universities Australia, 2019).

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of international students in HPE programs. Ethics approval was granted by the Western Sydney University human research ethics committee. Approval number H13732.

METHODS

Study Design

This qualitative study forms part of a larger mixed methods study which aimed to explore the overall experiences and challenges that international students faced in their time residing in Australia to complete a HPE course. The development of the semi-structured interview protocol was informed by the first author's evaluation of the peer review literature related to the international student experience and

international education in Australia, institutional and government reports, publications, and policies related to international education in Australia. From this evaluation the first author identified areas of significance which could use further investigation to highlight the diverse and challenging needs of international students in Australia. The second and third authors assisted the first author in the development of 11 open-ended questions to be used as a guide in conducting semi-structured interviews with international students, shown in Table 1. The chosen methodology stands as the most fitting approach for the current study, given its alignment with the exploring the challenges of students, suitability for the collecting of somewhat unanticipated nature, and its ability to yield nuanced insights. This strategic selection ensures the study's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge on student experience. This decision was informed by Creswell and Clark's guide on designing and conducting mixed methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Data Collection

Recruitment and data collection were conducted between June and September 2020. Recruitment included emails sent to student university email addresses, posting recruitment information on student course websites and flyers posted in clinical schools. This paper presents the findings of interviews with students who resided in Australia on the student visa (subclass 500) which is the standardised visa type for all foreign persons residing in Australia for the sole purpose of studying in a course at an Australian University. Interviews with participants were conducted via audio recorded Zoom conferences which were approximately 60-minutes in duration. The interview questions were set out in an open-ended nature to allow for the best opportunity to explore what the participants chose to share regarding their experiences.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were sent to a paid transcription company to provide full text transcripts of the interviews. These transcripts were thematically analysed by the first author using Quirkos® qualitative analysis software with guidance by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author was responsible for the initial code generation, searching for themes, reviewing, and refining themes. The second and third authors assisted the first author with defining and naming themes and producing a final report of the themes and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Communication and collaboration between the authors of this paper was important in maintaining trustworthiness and rigour. This constituted an initial evaluation of the peer reviewed literature, government and institutional publications and policies to identify areas to explore in relation to foreign student experience and to inform the development of an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol to

best explore in depth areas of student experience from participants. Further, the findings were analysed by the first author and consensus on the codes and final themes, and the appropriate content to discuss in this paper, were determined by agreement of all authors.

RESULTS

The themes addressed in this paper reflect the findings of 19 semi-structured interviews with students residing in Australia on international student visas and enrolled in HPE degrees from a higher education institution in Australia. The participants' demographics are demonstrated in Table 2.

The themes embody the challenges and experiences reported by participants during their time in Australia, throughout their day-to-day lives and specifically during their time as HPE students. These themes included: *Transitioning to Australian education, Acculturation in Australian society and managing a sense of belonging, English language communication and comprehension, Adjusting to Australian transportation, Seeking and managing employment during studies, Postgraduation uncertainty.*

Transitioning to Australian Education

This study revealed that transitioning to life in Australia and adapting to the Australian education system posed numerous challenges for participants. These challenges were influenced by factors such as language comprehension and confidence, acculturation, and peer relationships, with their nature and intensity varying based on participants' prior educational backgrounds and the socioeconomic conditions of their home countries. It was not uncommon for students enrolled in a HPE program to have had prior experiences studying in Australia, although for participants who had not completed prior education in Australia the challenges for transitioning to Australia were reported as more difficult. The reported challenges related to; how course content was delivered, the overall differences in curriculum design and the overall education practices and philosophies in foreign countries being significantly different to that in Australia. Participants reported that, in their previous country of education, course content delivery was less focused on individual learning and that assessments in the Australian education system tended to have a greater emphasis on individual problem-solving and empirical evidence to address learning outcomes and to demonstrate learning competencies.

The following participants reported difficulties adjusting to the fundamental differences in the delivery of education assessments in Australia compared to their home country, although the existing academic support systems were regarded as useful in transitioning.

I have studied in India and Australia, so I can compare between these two learning methods of these two countries. In India, there was no referencing style at

all, no assignments like that, even in the lessons. After coming in Australia, first, my sister informed me that there is something called referencing style that you have to learn while learning assignments here. So, it was quite a difficult task for me at first, to learn something new, because adapting to a new culture and then everything is new around a new person, like, in Australia. So, it was quite difficult but however, the [study support], it helped me a lot in learning the referencing. – Interview 1.

I guess it's more because of the different education system that I had compared to what I used to have in Malaysia. So, I had Chinese kind of education style and system where teachers just bombard you with all the knowledge and you just have to memorise them. But then maybe in university or maybe it's the Western style of teaching, they will try to show you some questions and you have to think it for yourself. So, that really challenged me a different way of learning. Also, I have to do online, the critical thinking skills and all that, which I wasn't trained during my high school and primary school. So, it takes a while to build that skill. – Interview 16.

Acculturation in Australian Society and Managing a Sense of Belonging

Participants reported challenges including accessing supermarkets, using banking services, and navigating public transport. Further, participants reported anxieties related to their actions and perceptions of social norms relating to dress standards and social customs. Socialisation inside and outside of the university as part of a multicultural society were challenges reported by participants. The use of technology in mainstream society was another noted adjustment.

When I first arrived here it was a very scary place, because my country works very different from here. Even whenever I used to go out for my grocery shopping. I did not know how to cross the road, how to read the signals. I'm constantly thinking about whether I'm breaking any rules or not. There's no train - we don't have that in my country. I would not know how it operates. Then I had to use an Opal card. it was learning everything from the very bottom. I never use bank cards before. it was a lot greater difficulty when I had to make - do the self-serving payment... I used to put off buying stuff so that I did not have to go through that. – Interview 17.

Participants reported difficulties with multiculturalism as it was something they had not encountered in their home countries. They conveyed they struggled to build social capital and rapport outside of education related discussions and relationships.

I'm not so used to talking to people from other cultures and backgrounds. In Myanmar it's all mainly Burmese. A little intimidating, to talk to anyone who's not Burmese, but I got used to it. In the classrooms, when we talk, it's mostly a discussion about a certain topic that we've been taught that day, or - when medical students talk, it's all about medicine, that's how we actually associate with each other until you become really close to that friend, who is part of the medical cohort, as well. Then we can talk about other things like sports or going out or the family, or any distress, or are you feeling okay, or anything like that. Otherwise, everyone - there's only a

superficial conversation amongst people in the cohort, if you're not friends with them. – Interview 19.

Some participants expressed difficulties with making friends and maintaining social relationships in university. They reported feeling disconnected in classes which comprised students enrolled in different degrees with student cohorts frequently changing.

The first thing that came to my mind is having friends in uni, I don't really have a lot of close friends in uni. I'm not sure if that's normal and it's quite hard because of especially being my first and second year, because every class you're going to see different people. Because the first [and second years] it's a mix of just other healthcare students, that is your podiatry student and everyone, so it's a very big group. Every class you have to see different people and the friendship doesn't really last, not until in my third year where there's only OT students and we get to know each other. — Interview 16.

Cultural differences were difficult for some students to accept, depending on the norms in their country of origin. The rules and social attitudes around alcohol consumption was a major difference for participants of this study when they first arrived in Australia. Mostly because they were not used to the idea of alcohol being a social catalyst. The following participant came from a part of India where most people were related and therefore had close social ties.

If I'm being very honest, I feel that alcohol is one of the major resources for people to socially interact, and I feel it is very different to how I used to interact with my friends in India. Maybe because I was comfortable with them, that was one thing, or people who are unable to talk to people otherwise if they are not under the influence of alcohol, which I used to feel is sort of weird, but now I understand that they need to relax themselves maybe, to be comfortable with the environment. But I still do not do that. I do not see alcohol as a social recreation. – Interview 15.

Some participants highlighted that English language difficulties and cultural differences were the most likely barriers to making friends. Although making friends was difficult, participants reported making friends with domestic students was more difficult than with other international students.

Not being able to make friends. I don't have that many friends. I guess probably because of language, and also the culture difference. We grew up reading different books and watching different TV shows. Sometimes if there's a joke, I might not be able to get it. ... It's always easy to make friends with other international students. With local students, I know some of them are really nice. We just don't have much interests in common, so it's more difficult making friends with local students. ... I think they're just very kind, but we don't have topics in common. Maybe they have a different way. Because they are aware that I am an international student, they might behave in a different way. – Interview 2.

The following participant expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of social activities offered by the university compared to other universities in the same state. They consider there should be more activities available considering the fees they paid.

I just feel like the university are already getting a lot of money from us, so

there should be some sort of support that's there that can correspond. Especially you're like why will we choose [university] versus [other universities] when they have all different student clubs, especially I think their international students, they have a lot more international students than here and they probably have student clubs ... I don't think there's really any social event been happening. Most students are local students live around here, only socialites really with people in the class they go back home, and they probably see friends they already have. So, if you're living here in this environment and it's quite isolating, especially [university campus], it's so far from the city. – Interview 3.

Contrarily participants reported living on campus improved their social experience as an international student in Australia because they had close contact with their peers and access to social events.

Yeah, so I had a few - I had three friends, who I would meet in class. But apart from that, I didn't really talk to anyone or make any other friends, because I think it's also because we had tutes [tutorials], like [classes] - so those tutes were groups. I didn't really talk to or I didn't make much of an effort to try and make friends with the people in those groups. which is the three people who I was close to. But then after that, after I moved onto campus, it was much easier, because everyone was in the same place, and we had a lot of food events and things like that. – Interview 7.

Dealing with a lack of a sense of belonging in new environments and with diverse people in aspects of their lives and during participation in clinical components of their studies was an issue reported by participants. Participants reported experiencing racism and discrimination within and outside the university environment including; perceived racism while using public transport, in the clinical placement environment, and during their time completing their degree in Australia.

The following participant talked about racism experienced from patients when participating in the clinical environment.

Oh yeah, like the patient, some patients are very racist, but we can't do anything about it. Yes, some patients, sometimes they can be very rude to you. Initially somebody got - like patients tell all the students go back to your country and something like that, they are very rude. – Interview 11.

Another participant reported an incident which was expressed as racially targeted and verbally provocative to other commuters when using public transport.

I think there was one incident before, it was in my second year when I was taking the public bus around the city with my sister and other friends. Then I'm not sure why but then this woman, she was at the back and then scolding, complaining about the China people in Australia. She just talked bad about it and said that they should go back to China and all that. Then I was like oh I have this Chinese face, although I'm not from China but I still feel like I was a bit targeted for what she says. But then because I was with my friends and my sister, I wasn't too scared about it. Then after that I don't know what happened to her, but maybe because she had a very bad day, that's why she was complaining in the bus. But then I guess that's the only bad experience that I've had so far. – Interview 16.

The following participant discussed difficulties with confronting racially

targeted or xenophobic bullying and behaviour from a fellow medical student.

There's a guy in my cohort, if you think you study in medicine and everyone's nice, all the doctors are nice, then you are definitely wrong, so wrong. Can you believe that I literally hear somebody say that international students don't deserve to be in medicine, and that person wished all international students are eliminated from the course. Also, there's other people mimicking the accent of other international students, including me as well, making fun of my accent as well. So, those people are present in my course. So, that's the worst thing. – Interview 11.

Another participant considered that racism may or may not be a cause for their difficulties forming connections with domestic students. However, they also understood that this perception could come from their own self-inflicted views and perceptions.

It's significantly easier now. I can just go out and talk to anyone - it's okay now. There's not really much of a barrier, a communication barrier. I think it's more like a bias that we had when we first came to Australia. We always talk - international students, we talk among ourselves, saying, hey, it's hard to get into that bubble. Yeah, there seems to be a bit of - a little bit of racism, perhaps. Perhaps - perhaps not. I think it's also our biases that prevent us from going to their social circles. It has dissolved, over the years, and it's relatively much easier now. – Interview 19.

English Language Communication and Comprehension

Participants reported having substantial difficulties with language in the classroom that were mostly related to understanding the educator's accent and their speed of speech. Furthermore, participants reported anxiety when wanting to speak up to clarify something or when asking a class topic related question. They expressed that English language comprehension contributed to or worsened academic difficulties.

The following participants described how their lack of confidence with their own level of English language proficiency resulted in feelings of anxiety when required to articulate themselves in front of their peers. Although, overtime this was overcome with confidence and experience.

When the tutor asks a question or when they ask us to discuss in a group, then there'll be a moment that I feel very anxious about my level of English. I want to talk to them, I want to answer the question, but then, at the same time, I couldn't find a word for it, or I feel panic and I do not want to talk. I think that they might judge, or they might not understand or anything like that. Then, another thing is sometimes when I talk to native speaker, and then they talk too fast or maybe I couldn't pick up. Then that would be an embarrassed moment for me. I couldn't catch up with them. – Interview 18.

There is some difficulties and sometimes I mean the other students, they are very brave to ask questions in the class, ask the tutor about assessment stuff. But then maybe because of my cultural background, I don't really dare to speak in front of the class to ask questions or even write an email, that was my first year. Then slowly I

get used to how the other students are doing this, and I can see that it's actually not so scary to ask the tutors. Right now, if I have any questions, I will just ask my friends then or maybe ask my tutor about questions in my assignments. – Interview 16.

The following participant reported difficulties in articulating their speech, highlighted by the stressful and fast paced nature of clinical placements. For HPE students, learning appropriate conduct in clinical environments is an important learning objective for their careers.

I think I'm quite a slow learner, yeah, I study very slow and sometimes it's not very effective. So, all the things that affect my study yes will be the same problem like my English. I understand certain concepts – it will be easy, no problem. But when you start to interact, start to apply your things, it becomes a problem because sometimes the patient can't understand you, so you freak out and you don't know what you're talking about. You mess up your grammar and you don't know what to say and end up you just say random stuff that doesn't make sense, because sometimes because you are stressed you can panic. When you talk to the consultant, talk to your professor, he's stressed out as well and you say something that doesn't make any sense. So, that's also a problem too. – Interview 11.

Participants also reported English language difficulties when completing assessments. Difficulties with reading and comprehension directly impacted their ability to effectively complete assessment tasks and academic outcomes.

My problem is that when I get into a test, sometimes I don't get the questions and I answer the questions incorrectly because I misunderstood the question. That brought my mark down which is a shame, because if I understand the question, I could answer it. I know the answer, but I understand the question incorrectly and answered incorrectly. — Interview 11.

Adjusting to Australian Transportation

Adjusting to transportation in Australia was a multifaceted challenge for participants. Most notably, participants reported concern related to public transport which included reliability, accessibility and the most significantly reported concern was the cost of public transport in New South Wales, which was reported to further exacerbate financial stress.

Participants discussed the unreliable nature of public transport combined with long travel times and extended periods of time between train or bus services can be a time consuming and exhausting experience for all students alike.

Sometimes the trains get cancelled as well and then it's an hour delay or such and some days you wouldn't be having enough sleep and you have uni and the work in the same day and then you have the train services that got cancelled the same day...I've had instances where it's an hour delay and then I had to wait an hour in the station before getting home, like, around 12:00 or something. – Interview 4.

Participants reported that the accumulated cost of using public transport in New South Wales without an opal concession card was regarded as quite high, especially when considering the reliability and quality of public transport services

provided.

There is one complaint that I have, nothing else, but I feel like as an international student, I think we should get Opal travel concessions. Not that I've had any problems with anything else, but I feel like as an international student, if I earn, I pay taxes as well, so I should be able to enjoy all the benefits that a domestic student does, but it's not the same. – Interview 15

My transportation was so expensive. New South Wales doesn't have the concession card and it's very expensive to travel. I think from all these years I've spent \$3000 to \$4000 on the Opal card. It's a massive amount of money. – Interview 9

The university offers a free shuttle bus to all students to travel between places of interest such as university campuses, to the local train station and to some hospitals for clinical placements. The following participants reported on the university shuttle bus with mixed reviews for reliability and accessibility.

University shuttle bus was okay. There was an app that we could use, to track the transportation, which didn't work well most of the time.... Sometimes we have to wait up to 40 minutes, before the next bus comes. So, I find that in the first year, especially, I spent much of the time at the bus stops, just waiting, and I can't really study while I'm waiting at the bus stop. – Interview 19.

The best thing about [University] is they have a shuttle bus, oh I've got to love it. So, before we talk about the shuttle bus, let's talk about how do I get to uni first. In [Campus] is just opposite the [Train station], which is perfect for anyone that goes by train. Also, they have a shuttle bus to take you to [Hospital] as well, and they have buses take you from the location to the main uni. It's super convenient. – Interview 11.

Seeking and Managing Employment During Studies

During the interviews, 16 out of the 19 participants reported having been employed at a point during their studies in Australia. Participants reported challenges with balancing work and study, particularly when having to attend clinical placements.

Participants commonly discussed their challenge to maintain work and study commitments as part of their lifestyle balance and how they had to change their strategy for studying as a result.

if we are working and studying at the same time, I have to plan everything prior to my submission of assignment or even exams. Like, if I have exam tomorrow and it clashes with my work, then it's very hard to convince your manager that you can't work because of your exam, because sometimes exams are on different days, and you are committed to - you have committed to work before you knew about the exams on that day. ... if you can plan to study every single day, for some moments, rather than doing everything just before the night of exam, that really helps to manage my time, so now I prefer to do that. Now I don't leave everything the day before exam to study, or everything, because that - even I have exam tomorrow, I still go to work

Post-graduation Uncertainty

The post-graduation uncertainty theme was embodied by participants expression of uncertainty to secure internships and post-graduate opportunities in health professions in Australia. Further uncertainty was expressed about the mobility of their Australian health professional recognition in foreign jurisdictional regulations for health and medical professional accreditation.

This medical student perceived the competitive nature for international students to secure an internship in Australia concerning after graduation. Further concerns were expressed about the mobility of their qualification.

I think being an international student one of the biggest stress I have compared to domestic students is getting an internship after I graduate from Medical School, because for local students they are definitely going to get an internship because I think the government finds one for them. I think almost all international students want to continue to live and work in Australia, me included, and because internship spots are limited, some international students actually don't get an internship spot. They have to go find it in other countries. – Interview 5

Some participants expressed concerns about the large out of pocket costs to fund their degree with respect to their career progression uncertainty following graduation.

In terms of the fees, like for example my friends who are domestic students, they only have to pay 10k, per year. For international student for medicine, you have to pay 60k per year, like six times more expensive. Also, after your graduation, you are not granted a spot in Sydney as well, you have to go somewhere else like rural area. That's the disadvantage of international students as well. You don't get a guaranteed spot in Sydney. – Interview 11

I mean, you study a Bachelor of Nursing degree but you don't have to be a nurse. So, if somebody can instruct you on how to develop your career into other fields and what kind of preparation or extra study you need to change your career. If that kind of supporting information can - that would be very helpful. ... One of the difficulties is that the degree you have may not be recognised by the industry back in each country– Interview 20

DISCUSSION

The findings presented highlighted participants' experiences during their stay in Australia while studying a HPE degree. They capture their shared experiences of transitioning to a new educational environment and adjusting to various lifestyle changes in Australia.

Australian education transitions were predominantly about learning in and adapting to a new education system and structure including the real and perceived

change in teaching philosophy and assessment styles. Students reflected on individual acculturation struggles including managing new relationships with their peers in the newer learning and teaching environments. Adapting to this system often involved challenges such as a lack of confidence in speaking up and managing comprehension and communication skills in an English-speaking educational setting.

These challenges have been highlighted in prior studies which focussed on disciplines primarily outside of healthcare professional education. These include work by Arkoudis et al. (2019) who explored the experiences of international students in the disciplines of business, economics, and engineering. They reported that students did not find peer support and communication with peers common in class based activities and that the education experience was not met when educators did not understand students' challenges (Arkoudis et al., 2019). From the current study, the same challenges were experienced by international students in HPE programs. International students can struggle to adapt to western teaching methods and learning styles (Lamberton & Ashton-Hay, 2015; Nguyen, 2011). It is recommended that universities provide cross-cultural training for university teaching staff to assist them in better supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds and learning styles as they transition into the Australian education system (Lamberton & Ashton-Hay, 2015).

Acculturative stress and transitioning to the differences of life in a new society can be burdensome and negatively impact the wellbeing and productivity of international students. Several studies have previously explored and measured acculturative stress for international students in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2019; He et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2012; Marginson, 2013). Similar findings have been reported by a study in the United States (Hansen et al., 2021), while, a Polish study reported that international students exhibited poorer health lifestyle factors than local Polish students (Machul et al., 2020).

Participants in this study described their evolving sense of belonging throughout their journey in Australia. This started from their arrival and encompassed their time in the community, classroom engagement, and professional identity development during clinical placements. Similar findings were discussed in an Australia-New Zealand international student study, Marginson (2013) found 90% of the participants reported the importance of family for emotional support and two thirds had no close family members in their country of residence. Adjusting to the new culture and struggling with a sense of belonging were also commonly reported (Marginson, 2013), consistent with Lin's (2012) findings. Furthermore, Arkoudis et al. (2019) reported students in their study expressed a disconnect with domestic students due to cultural divides and feeling socially fragmented. Even outside of university, students expressed feeling unable to connect with local people in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2019). These findings are similar to those discussed by participants in the current study. For a large multicampus university that is geographically diverse with regards to location, services, transportation, and the facilities in the community, it could be viewed that the institution itself holds the responsibility to foster a community with activities to combat issues of isolation and loneliness. While

universities may not be directly responsible for individual students' views and actions, these findings underscore the shared responsibility of institutions in fostering safe and inclusive environments for all students and staff in various university activities.

English language challenges were a pervasive issue reported by international students, affecting their academic pursuits, employment prospects, and personal lives. These concerns were pertinent to participants of the current study, where clinical interactions with peers, clinicians, and patients demanded a high level of English proficiency.

Benzie reported that international students not graduating with the necessary English language skills can be a hindrance to employment in English-speaking environments (Benzie, 2010). Further studies have discussed the concerns of English language comprehension for international students in their daily lives, socially, for employment and in academic settings (Sawir et al., 2012; Yates & Wahid, 2013). Furthermore, Salamonson et al. (2008 & 2013) found that students with lower English language acculturation scores in a nursing program on average had lower academic scores than their native English language speaking peers (Salamonson et al., 2013; Salamonson et al., 2008).

The relevance and effectiveness of IELTS when students reported common struggle even with high scores of 7.0 band across all the domains of IELTS which are standard minimum requirements for admissions to HPE programs in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Four Corners, 2019; University of Wollongong; UNSW; Western Sydney University; Worthington et al., 2019b). It could be necessary to explore additional options to assess the English language comprehension especially in the context of health professional education.

Participants were concerned by the high cost of transportation for international student visa holders. Except for limited exceptions, full-time full fee-paying international students are not eligible for the public transport concession card, unlike other Australian residents enrolled in the same degree. This is because international students are generally not eligible for a New South Wales Opal concession card for use in public transport (TfNSW, 2021).

The cost of public transport in NSW for persons without a concession card was viewed as a high cost of living by the participants in this study. Lowering the cost of transport could help to improve accessibility and mobility for HPE international students. A previous paper discussed the cost of public transport issue for international students in New South Wales over a decade ago and no changes are yet to be made (Robertson, 2011). The accessibility and cost of public transport for international students living in the Sydney CBD was also discussed by Ryan and others in 2016 (Ryan et al., 2016).

Numerous participants discussed the challenges they faced in managing employment and other commitments while studying in Australia. This was particularly challenging given their visa requirements, which stipulated that their primary focus should be on completing their education program. The high cost of living, especially in the diverse Greater Western Sydney area, often necessitated part-time work for international students to support themselves. Although students were

limited to 40 hours of paid employment per fortnight as was the case during data collection during this study (Department of Home Affairs, 2022), participants reported difficulties in finding employment and the perceived impact of English language proficiency on their job prospects.

Research from the University of Adelaide revealed that a significant portion of respondents reported unfair wages and work-study conflicts (Thamrin et al., 2019). Other studies have reported circumstances where international students claimed they were subjected to illegal practices by employers and sometimes felt discriminated against (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2016; Clibborn, 2021; Nyland et al., 2009), and chose to work jobs outside of their field (Singh, 2020). Ryan et al. (2016) discussed the concerns of international students for financial security, when working was a necessity to afford the high cost of living when studying in Sydney (Ryan et al., 2016). Greater research could be conducted to understand the significance of employment for health professional education students in Australia where participants are managing clinical placements in addition to study managing the cost of living.

Graduate employability, including the likelihood of continuing to remain in Australia or moving overseas subject to accreditation recognition of their health professional education degrees outside of Australia, were commonly discussed concerns. McGrail et al. (2019) analysed data collected from 18,093 doctors in Australia from 2012-2017 from a longitudinal survey of Doctors in Australia. Prior to 2019, approximately 500 international medical students would graduate in Australia with approximately 70% continuing to work in Australia with a 485 visa post-study work stream allowable for up to 4 years and can be used to gain permanent residency after that time. Further to this, McGrail and colleagues referenced Department of Health from 2009 and 2017 between 62% and 83% of international medical graduates were found to have gained an internship position nationally (McGrail et al., 2019). Participants in this study further emphasised concerns about employment opportunities outside of Australia. To facilitate the opportunity for global health workforce employment higher education institutions should meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Montiel et al., 2021; Sachs et al., 2022; UN Secretary-General, 2018).

We recommend promoting the mobility of Australian HPE programs through global accreditation may address Sustainable Development Goals 3 for Good Health and Well-Being, 4 Quality Education and 10 Reduced Inequalities and provide international graduates with broader employment prospects (Montiel et al., 2021; Sachs et al., 2022; UN Secretary-General, 2018) and we recommend providing full-time international students with student concessions on public transport to enforce finance, safety and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring accountability in the admission standards for international students by higher education institutions can have a significant impact on the overall experience

and well-being of these students during their time in Australia. Institutions could strive to ensure that they are recruiting students who are well-prepared and well-suited for the academic demands and cultural expectations of the Australian education system. This could include rethinking existing English language comprehensive tests and providing and effectively communicating the existing support services to assist international students in adjusting to their new environment. With the increase in diversity of the student population, providers could invest in understanding the requirements and cross-cultural competencies for students from further newer backgrounds and markets. In addition, higher education institutions could consider implementing additional supports to help ease the cost of living and the associated stresses for international students in realistic and equitable areas. One potential measure is to offer transport concessions for international students, which could help to alleviate some of the financial burden of living in a new country. Such supports could ultimately lead to better academic outcomes and increased retention rates for international students, which would in turn benefit both the institutions and the broader Australian community.

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Appendix

Table 1: Semi-structured Questions Used as the Interview Protocol.

Question #	Interview Question
1	How do you feel about the education at the university
2	Tell me about your current living situations
3	How do you support your living expenses and educational costs
4	Can you tell me about some of the difficulties you encounter being an international student
5	What things impact on your capacity to study
6	Can you tell me about your experiences in interacting with other students at the university
7	Can you tell me about your experiences in interacting with staff inside the university
8	How do you find your experiences in interacting with members of the community outside of university
9	How do you find the available transport services to and from university
10	Can you tell me what things interfere with your ability to focus on your studies
11	Can you tell me what would enhance your experience of being an international student

Table 2: Participant Demographics Collected During Semi-Structured Interviews.

Interview #	Nationality	Country of Birth	Current Degree	Stage/Year in Full time Years	Gender	Year of Birth	Language Spoken at Home
1	Indian	India	Bachelor of Nursing	First year	Female	2001	Punjabi
2	Chinese	China	Doctor of Medicine	Second year	Female	1999	Mandarin
3	Chinese	China	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Fourth year	Female	1998	Mandarin
4	Nepali	Nepal	Bachelor of Nursing	Third year	Female	1999	Nepali
5	Thai	Thailand	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Third year	Female	1999	Thai and English
6	Sri Lankan	Sri Lanka	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Fourth Year	Female	1998	English and Sinhala. Sinhalese.
7	Sri Lankan	Saudi Arabia	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Fourth year	Female	1999	Sinhala
8	Vietnamese	Vietnam	Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology)	First year	Female	2000	Vietnamese
9	Chinese	China	Bachelor of Occupational Therapy	Third year	Female	1998	Mandarin
10	Vietnamese	Vietnam	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Fourth year	Male	1998	Vietnamese
11	Singaporean	Singapore	Doctor of Medicine	First year	Male	1988	English
12	Swedish and German	Germany	Bachelor of Psychology	Third year	Female	1996	English
13	Bangladeshi	Bangladesh	Bachelor of Nursing	First year	Female	1999	Bangla
14	Indian	India	Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)	First year	Female	2001	Hindi
15	Malaysian	Malaysia	Bachelor of Occupational Therapy	Third year	Female	1998	Mandarin
16	Bangladeshi	Bangladesh	Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)	First year	Female	2000	Bengali
17	Vietnamese	Vietnam	Bachelor of Occupational Therapy	Second year	Female	1997	English and Vietnamese
18	Myanmar	Myanmar (Burma)	Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery	Fifth year	Male	1995	Myanmar (Burmese), some English
19	Chinese	China	Bachelor of Nursing	Third year	Male	1997	Cantonese