Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities for Improving the Health and Wellbeing of International Students: Perspectives of International Students

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the challenges and opportunities for improving the health and wellbeing of international students through in-depth interviews with 21 international students at an Australian University. Interviews explored 1) conceptualisation of health and wellbeing, 2) perceptions of the most significant health and wellbeing issues for international students, and 3) the barriers to international students accessing campus-based services for health and wellbeing concerns. Almost all international students viewed health and wellbeing as a state encompassing both physical and mental/emotional health. Key challenges included mental health, lack of social support, academic stressors, financial pressures, and accommodation concerns. Barriers to accessing university support services included cultural stigma, language barriers, waiting periods to access services, and not knowing how or where to access support within the university. The implications of these findings and suggested strategies for improving the health and wellbeing of international students are discussed.

Keywords

International students, health care, mental health, higher education, wellbeing

Background

Worldwide, there are approximately 3.5 million international and overseas tertiary students studying in a foreign country (OECD, 2018). Students from Asian countries make up the largest group of international students enrolled in tertiary education programs at all levels (1.9 million, 55% of all international students in 2016)(OECD, 2018). Two-thirds of Asian students elect to study in Australia (15%), the United Kingdom (11%) or the United States (38%) (OECD, 2018). In Australia, the number of international students is increasing, with Australia likely to surpass the UK as the second most popular destination globally for international students (Marginson, 2018). In 2019, there were a recorded 612,849 international students studying in Australia, representing a 12% increase since 2018 (Department of Education and Training, 2019d). Currently, international education is worth \$35.2 billion to the Australian economy and is the fourth largest export for Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2019a, 2019c). Over half of all international students studying in Australia come from one of five countries: China (29%), India (15%), Nepal (7%), Brazil (4%), and Vietnam (4%) (Department of Education and Training, 2019d).

Students elect to undertake tertiary study in a foreign country for a variety of reasons including to improve language skills, enhance employability prospects, or to access a higher quality of education than may be available to them in their home countries (OECD, 2018). Large scale Australian research has shown that international students are generally satisfied or very satisfied with their experience studying in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2019b). However, research has also

shown that international students studying in Australia may encounter a range of challenges that can compromise their study experience by impacting their physical and emotional health. These challenges may include lack of social support and disappointment in lack of opportunities to connect with local students and the community in general (Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik, & Patience, 2019; Ryan, Dowler, Bruce, Gamage, & Morris, 2016; Skromanis et al., 2018); difficulties in finding and maintaining secure and safe accommodation, particularly at the time of arrival in Australia (Ryan et al., 2016); difficulties in managing the cost of living and in finding and maintaining employment (Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2017; Department of Education and Training, 2015; Gribble, 2014; Ryan et al., 2016); problems with alcohol use and gambling (Ryan et al., 2016); as well as experiences of abuse and exclusion (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006).

Maintaining good mental health may be a particular challenge for international students. Research has consistently documented a high prevalence of mental disorders among tertiary students in a growing number of colleges and countries, including Australia (Alonso et al., 2018; Auerbach et al., 2018; Cuijpers et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2019). The significance of this issue has been recognised in Australia through the development of the Australian University Mental Health Framework (Carlson, Browne, & Changkaoprom, 2020). Compared to local Australian students, international students studying in Australia may experience higher rates of psychological distress such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Lu, Farran Dear, Johnston, Wootton, & Titov, 2014; Redfern, 2016). Research has also shown that tertiary students (both international and local) often do not receive treatment for their mental health disorders and frequently experience substantial impairment as a result (Alonso et al., 2018; Auerbach et al., 2018; Cuijpers et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2019). A reluctance to seek treatment for mental health problems appears to be particularly common among international students with many choosing not to seek formal help when they have a mental health problem (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2006; Skromanis et al., 2018). A recent report arising from a Victorian Coronial investigation of the suicide of a Chinese-national student studying in Australia indicated that a lack of help-seeking for deteriorating mental health states was a common factor among a number of recent international student suicides in Australia (Coroners Court of Victoria, 2019). It appears not uncommon for international students to delay help-seeking for a mental health problem until a problem reaches 'crisis point' (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

This study explored the challenges and opportunities for improving the health and wellbeing of international students through interviews with international students at an Australian university. Through these interviews we aimed to explore students 1) conceptualisation of health and wellbeing, 2) their perceptions of the most significant health and wellbeing issues for international students, and 3) the barriers to international students accessing campus-based services for their health and wellbeing concerns.

Method

Sampling and recruitment

A total of 21 international students took part in an interview. Participants ranged in age from 18 years through to 32 years of age (M=23, SD=5), just over half (n=11) were female, and most (n=13) were living off-campus. Most participants (n=11) were enrolled in undergraduate programs with seven participants undertaking postgraduate study, two participants studying at the University College (an institute offering direct degree pathways into the University), and one participant undertaking a 5-week program at the University English Language Institute prior to beginning their degree at the University. Participants came from a range of countries with the most common being India (n=5), Philippines (n=3), Sri Lanka (n=3), Malaysia (n=2), and China (n=2). All participants had been living in Australia between 2 months to 5 years. International students were recruited via flyers placed across multiple university campuses and through the electronic mailing lists of international student clubs. Students interested in taking part in the study were asked to contact the research team for further information. Students were emailed a project information statement as well as a consent form

which they were asked to sign and return if they wished to take part. Ethics approval was provided by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

According to their preference, students took part in either a face-to-face or telephone interview. All interviews took between 30-40 minutes. During the interview, participants were asked about: their understanding of the term 'health and wellbeing'; their perceptions of the health and wellbeing challenges that international students face; and their perceptions of the barriers to international students accessing university support services. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data analysis

All transcripts were imported into NVivo for analysis. Thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken by a primary coder (author DCN) using a progressive process of classifying, comparing, grouping and refining groups of text segments to create and then clarify the definition of categories, or themes, within the data. To ensure inter-rater reliability, another coder (author ADL) independently coded a sub-section of interviews and cross-checked these with the findings of the primary coder. Discrepancies were discussed and a mutually agreeable interpretation was reached.

Results

Findings are presented under the three broad areas addressed in the interviews with subheadings for each theme identified as part of the analysis. Themes are presented in order of the strength of their representation within the data.

How do international students conceptualise health and wellbeing?

Wellbeing is both physical and emotional

When asked to reflect on their understanding of health and wellbeing, most participants provided a definition that encompassed both physical and emotional aspects.

I think basically health, it's not just like the physical it's the mental, like just feeling good about yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, just general wellbeing. (Participant 16, female, 32, Philippines)

I think health and wellbeing just doesn't mean having physical, being physically healthy. It also means mental, emotional health to be in complete shape. So...if someone asks me what, how would you define health, I would see I should be comfortable and happy physically, mentally, and emotionally. (Participant 7, female, 20, India)

Having 'good' physical and emotional health was seen as especially important because it allowed participants to achieve their goals at university.

I can go to university every day. And with no suffering from any mental or physical problems. Yeah, that's my image. (Participant 5, male, 19, Japan)

In general, participants placed a slightly stronger emphasis on emotional aspects of health and wellbeing.

...avoiding psychological barriers. Like, avoiding negative thoughts to stay healthy... (Participant 19, male, 21, India)

...mentally you need to feel steady like calm and also happy most of the time. You also know how to cope with stress and pressure, things like that. (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

Preventative health strategies

When conceptualising health and wellbeing, many participants spoke about the importance of preventative health strategies in maintaining good health and wellbeing. These strategies included getting enough sleep, eating a healthy and balanced diet, drinking plenty of water, engaging in regular exercise, as well as socialising.

Yeah, for me, as an international student, when it comes to health and wellbeing, health to maintain one's body while you are away from your family. So, it's how to ... what food to eat every day to keep healthy, what exercise to do every day to stay fit, especially like me where I'm alone here, no family to help me with anything. So, I've got to survive with my health here. (Participant 14, male, 29, Philippines)

...eating healthy food, going on walks regularly, also not looking at the computer screens too much and socialising to some extent. (Participant 18, female, 22, Sri Lanka)

Absence of disease

For a small number of participants, having good health and wellbeing was reflected in having a strong immune system and being free of disease.

I think you need to be physically healthy and you don't have any chronic diseases like high blood pressure or something. (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

...how immune you are to whatever diseases (Participant 21, male, 25, Sri Lanka)

Access to health services and health information

Several participants spoke about positive health and wellbeing being directly related to the types of health services and health information they could access when in need.

The medical treatment I can access and the complementary therapies I can reach and all the health and the health-related information I can get. (Participant 13, female, 30, China)

I need to go somewhere because sometimes it can be stressful for us. I need to reach out to a place. Where to go to if, for example, my stomach aches, just my first point of contact - where can I find that? Like where to go first if my health and wellbeing is not that great. (Participant 2, male, 20, Philippines)

What are the most significant health and wellbeing challenges for international students?

Mental health issues

By far the mostly commonly reported challenges for international students were those related to mental health. Homesickness was seen as a particular struggle for international students. Many felt students often lacked emotional support systems here in Australia, particularly in the early stages of their stay.

I think some challenges. One is homesick. The country is totally different from my country, so when I came here for the first time...I missed my country's dishes and my friends and family, so yes. For the first time, some international students will face this kind of homesick. (Participant 5, male, 19, Japan)

Some students reported that homesickness, particularly when prolonged, often lead to the development of anxiety or depression.

...since we come from another country and we are here by ourselves, you get homesick. When I first came I would say I cried a lot, when I first came because, you know, missing home, being alone, trying to adapt to another country, yes, it has a bit hard...so you got to be really mentally strong to overcome all that. But if you are not mentally strong then you might just get into some problems and get into more serious mental issues. (Participant 11, female, 21, Singapore)

The 'overwhelming' nature of being an international student was also perceived to contribute to the likelihood of international students experiencing anxiety or depression. International students must adjust and acculturate to a new environment and must learn to manage a new and often heavy studyload, often while juggling part-time employment. In addition, students may experience feelings of isolation and loneliness if they experience difficulties in making new friends and developing social support.

...it's hard to make friends and since you're away from family, there is no emotional support to help you get through it, and at the same time you have to adjust to the whole new lifestyle, taking care of yourself, getting out of the cocoon, the family protective environment, and dealing with making friends or whether it's cooking your own food and your laundry and a true sense of becoming independent. Some students also have to go through like, part-time work in order to make ends meet and afford their rent. And it definitely takes a toll on mental health because it's stressful and also it can get lonely. (Participant 7, female, 20, India)

Social wellbeing

For many international students, part of their hope in coming to Australia to study was that they would form friendships with local Australian students. However, many participants were surprised when this turned out to be more difficult than anticipated.

I thought that I must have made a few [local] friends by now, but I haven't... (Participant 20, female, 19, India)

... I thought it would be really easy to make friends with local students and then I find it's actually a bit hard... (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

There was a strong perception that local students were generally disinterested in engaging with international students, preferring instead to socialise within their already established friendship networks. Participants expressed despondency about this situation and felt there was little that could be done to change the situation.

...the local students, and I've talked about this with other international students as well...they're not as friendly as the international students. We all feel like they find their group and they stick with it, and they're not really willing to mingle with us and it's confusing at times. When I went to parties...there's a very clear segregation between us and it's not really a comfortable place to hang out...it's something that we've all noticed and it is a bit upsetting. But I mean, this is their country, so I guess there's no reason for them to go out of their comfort zone. (Participant 6, female, 19, Fiji)

Finding opportunities to connect with local students was often difficult. Some participants were disappointed to find that there were few or no local students in their classes.

....We don't find any Aussie here in our class or in my course...we would love to become friends with them, you know, just to know each other. To know how things work here. There's a curiosity in everyone when someone is at new place. They'd like to know how things are here. How different is my country from this country, and many other things, yeah. (Participant 19, male, 21, India)

Others had hoped to form friendships with local Australian students through living on-campus but were surprised to find that university residential accommodation appeared to segregate international and local students.

I am not sure why but they segregate the international in one room and then the Australians in another room. They have separated us out. (Participant 11, female, 21, Singapore)

Academic adjustment

The stress of adapting to a new educational system was perceived to be a significant challenge for international students. Becoming familiar with university resources, procedures and processes as well as new styles of teaching and learning was often overwhelming for international students.

...it can get really difficult in the beginning of Uni life because you're completely in a new place, new system of teaching, new methods, new expectations, new forms of assessments and different multi criteria, there's plagiarism, collusion, all these things. It's something really new to a lot of people when they first come to Uni... (Participant 7, female, 20, India)

Many international students feel extraordinary pressure to achieve good academic results to justify the money being spent on their education and to avoid disappointing their families back home.

... for international students it [academic stress] hits harder because the cost of studying here is so much more than the Australian citizen pays. So for us if you fail one unit, it's an extra \$4000 too, in cost. So, there's that and also the fear of disappointing our parents, if they are paying for uni. So that adds onto stresses....Not even just to do well, but just to pass. (Participant 4, male, 23, Singapore)

The stress of adjusting to a new academic system and the struggle to achieve good academic results can take a toll on sleep quality and mental health.

I just actually came out of this really hard week where I had three essays....so it was really tough for me to adjust to that from the school system that I was in. But I got through it, so that's great, but it still worries me that it can take such a toll and that's even before the final exam. So, it's tough, yeah...it definitely caused me a lot of stress. I could barely sleep. I kept thinking about it. It's just a lot of pressure, especially when it's the first time around. (Participant 6, female, 19, Fiji)

Financial difficulties

International students commonly struggle with the cost of living in Australia.

Yes, from my experience and as well as my classmates, which are Filipinos. They also told me that they're having financial problems when it comes to staying here. (Participant 14, male, 29, Philippines)

Many participants receive financial support from their families and feel strongly obligated to ensure that they manage to live off this allocated allowance.

Cost of living absolutely, it's too high...we have to protect our own personal expenses so that, you know .parents do not send us lots of money again and again for our expenses. So we try not to spend much. (Participant 19, male, 21, India)

A number of participants reported that they would like to obtain part-time or casual employment to supplement the allowance they receive from their families. For others, finding employment was motivated by a desire to exercise greater independence and to be less reliant on their families for financial support.

...I've been blessed enough to come from a family which is able to afford my stay here, but I have seen my friends around me who have, either because they think that they're too old to ask for money. They feel embarrassed in asking for money. Maybe that's why they just want to be able to at least pay their own rent, if not that one tuition fee. Then there are other friends who just feel that sense of independence and being able to do anything with their own money, which is why they want to earn and nobody to ask them where the money is going, just to have that sense of independence...I sometimes feel, too, that I should get a part-time job, not because of not being able to make ends meet or anything but because it would just be better to be spending my own money on like things like for the entertainment purpose and for enjoyment purpose .I mean, my parents are already

doing a lot for me and spending a lot on me and if I could just help them out a bit, either by taking care of my own rent or by taking care of my own leisure expenditure, that would be great. (Participant 7, female, 20, India)

However, many international students report that finding employment proved to be far more difficult than they anticipated.

It's very difficult getting part time jobs so that we can pay our own bills. So that is the challenge I faced. I still didn't get a job. (Participant 19, male, 21, India)

Some participants felt that their racial background and being 'non-Australian' were significant barriers to finding employment.

That [finding employment] is a bit hard. Just so you know I have actually applied for about eight jobs...Nothing came back, yeah, so maybe it is just because I am from another country and maybe they are looking for someone local, I am not sure but they did not get back to me and it's pretty hard to find a job down here. (Participant 11, female, 21, Singapore)

Several participants felt that, as international students, there was also the potential for financial exploitation in the workplace.

...sometimes being an international student, employers might take advantage of you and then they might give you a lower pay kind of thing, like underpaid wages and then it adds on to problems that you are facing like you are expected to get this amount but then, you get a different amount and then you are stressed out about it and then, makes you unhappy. (Participant 9, female, 22, Malaysia)

Housing

Finding suitable off-campus accommodation in Australia was seen as a particular challenge for international students. Ideally, students would like to be in close proximity to their university campus but often such properties were outside of their budget.

It's really hard to find a nice place which is in your budget and not too expensive. (Participant 20, female, 19, India)

Difficulties with housemates, both on- and off-campus, was a frequently reported issue. Participants described experiences with housemates who were 'inconsiderate', untidy, or racist.

... I came here and I am sharing a granny flat with another girl. I do not know her before, and she is not much, you know like, cleaning, and I am not used to such environment. And I did not want to live like that, with her, so yeah, we had problems, issues. (Participant 18, female, 22, Sri Lanka)

Others reported situations of exploitation and discrimination at the hands of landlords.

...my landlord used to charge us for no particular reason. So if anything seemed out of order, he would just say that someone has dropped it or someone has used it... (Participant 1, male, 19, India)

Maintaining a healthy diet

Eating healthily can be challenging for some international students. Prior to coming to Australia, international students may have never lived independently or been responsible for preparing and cooking their own meals.

Well another thing is the food. You know the food is very important to have good health...I live alone so I also make lunches, dinners, breakfast for the first time. It was a little difficult to make healthy dishes. (Participant 5, male, 19, Japan)

International students often find it challenging to source their preferred food in Australia and may struggle to adapt to the local cuisine.

I being from India and being a vegetarian...everything here is meat. A major part of the menu, almost 90% to 95% of the menu is non-veg. The food and vegetables we get here are not completely available here what we get in India. (Participant 19, male, 21, India)

Living independently

In coming to Australia, many international students will live independently for the first time in their lives. For some students, being unable to rely on their families for support in managing their day-to-day lives can be challenging.

...you know the term adulting, right? You're kind of thrown into that, so you have to manage everything from rent to finances, managing your social time and it's a lot of responsibility. (Participant 4, male, 23, Singapore)

Adapting to a new climate

A small number of participants reported that adapting to the Australian climate was a particular challenge for them in coming to Australia.

...the climate would be quite different for some people so that's an issue. Like I come from a very warm place so this is quite cold for me. (Participant 10, male, 32, India)

What are the barriers to international students accessing university health and wellbeing support services?

Cultural stigma surrounding mental health and psychological assistance

Many participants spoke about the stigma surrounding mental health issues in their home countries. Due to their cultural background, there was a perception that international students may not feel comfortable talking to other people about their emotional experience.

It might be like taboo for them [international students] to talk about mental health. For me in my background, I don't talk about that...So that could be a particular point of concern too...because for us, if I'm just your friend or your frat mate or your roommate, I don't know you personally and haven't been related to you - I won't talk about that, I'll say I'm all good and things like that. (Participant 2, male, 20, Philippines)

The cultural stigma surrounding seeking psychological assistance in their home countries may also deter international students from seeking psychological assistance in Australia.

Well, maybe with the Filipino background, it is a bit embarrassing to get help, psychologically, socially. It will affect your social image, I guess, because in my country, having psychological treatment would mean that you're crazy or something. (Participant 15, female, 32, Philippines)

They [counselling service] have kind of a social stigma as well. Where people, kind of look down. They think people will look down at them when they are going for counselling. Or they think they will be lower than the normal level, kind of. I mean, they think they chase something, they should not do this, should not tell the society or the world that they are having a mental problem...I think it is something in Sri Lanka. (Participant 18, female, 22, Sri Lanka)

One participant reported that, in her culture, seeking psychological assistance was perceived as an extreme step only taken when mental health issues were especially severe.

...I don't know for other cultures but for Chinese people it's just feeling not right if you go to see a psychologist or counsellor or something...when I told my parents I made one appointment...they were really shocked they were like, they think of everything in black and white, they feel like you have ideas of making suicide or something...So I think that is a reason why some international students don't see a counsellor or something to talk about themselves, they feel like it has to be very serious like they are in a severe condition, then they can see the doctor. (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

Language barriers

There was a strong feeling that poor English language skills may deter international students from seeking help from university support services. Fears of not being understood and feelings of embarrassment or shame may prevent international students from reaching out.

For me, a Filipino student, with the way of communication, we're shy when it comes to speaking in English to local people here. Maybe that's some hindrance to us in asking help from the counsellor like that because we're shy when speaking to them. (Participant 14, male, 29, Philippines)

I think one challenge is when they get a cold or when they are sick or something, they are a bit reluctant or they don't feel comfortable to go to see a GP because of the language issue. Because I have several friends who are like that, they are terribly sick and they just have that antibiotics by themselves without following any GP doctor's

instructions. They don't want to make appointments or something because they feel like their language doesn't allow them to like tell the same terms very clearly... (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

Wait-times

Participants felt that wait-times to access university medical and counselling and psychological services were often a significant barrier.

...you have to make an appointment [for the medical service], and sometimes the appointment might take a week. The waiting time's huge. (Participant 1, male, 19, India)

Several participants felt that university services were impractical for 'urgent' concerns and reported that they would be more likely to seek out community-based services for problems requiring more immediate attention.

For physical health, there's the medical centre...But I heard there's a queue for that...so if I were really sick, I wouldn't go for that...like if I'm having food poisoning, I wouldn't want to take a queue. That doesn't make sense at all. So I'd probably just see a private doctor, or something. (Participant 4, male, 23, Singapore)

Not knowing where to go

Participants felt that some international students may not be aware of university health and wellbeing support services and consequently may not know where to go to get help for a health and wellbeing issue.

... I think probably maybe another reason is that they don't know the service well. I mean in Orientation they got lots of brochures of different services, they got lots of leaflets, like cards or something and they get overwhelmed. When they feeling uncomfortable, when they need a service they don't know where to find the cards. (Participant 12, female, 26, China)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore international students' conceptualisation of health and wellbeing, perceived health and wellbeing challenges, and perceived barriers to accessing university services for assistance with a health and wellbeing issue. Almost all international students viewed health and wellbeing as a state that encompasses both physical and mental/emotional health. According to participants, challenges involving mental health/emotional health, were seen to be the most significant health and wellbeing concerns for international students. Other key challenges included lack of social support, academic stressors, financial pressures, housing, maintaining a healthy diet, and adjusting to a new climate. Barriers to accessing university support services for a health and wellbeing issue included cultural stigma surrounding mental health and psychological services, language barriers, waiting periods to access services, and not knowing how or where to access support.

International students recognised the importance of good health and wellbeing to achieving their goal of completing their university studies. Students were knowledgeable about the importance of

preventative health strategies such as good diet, regular exercise and socialisation to maintaining a positive state of health and wellbeing. Among perceived health and wellbeing challenges for international students, mental health/emotional health difficulties were by far the most commonly experienced. Indeed, this perception is supported by an increasing body of cross-national research indicating 12-month mental disorder prevalence rates of 20% to 45% among University/College students (Auerbach et al., 2016; Auerbach et al., 2018; Blanco et al., 2008), with anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders the most widespread (Auerbach et al., 2016). The experience of homesickness along with the pressures of acculturating to a new environment, navigating new university systems, attempting to form new social networks, coping with heavy study loads while often simultaneously juggling employment, were seen to contribute to the potential development of stress, anxiety or depression among international students.

A lack of social connection and social support were also significant challenges for international students, particularly in the early stages of their time in Australia. This experience coupled with feelings of homesickness was seen to render international students particularly vulnerable to the development of mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Previous research has also found lack of social support and social isolation to be particular challenges for international students (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Skromanis et al., 2018; Townsend & Poh, 2008). International students in our study often found it difficult to form friendships with other students. Many international students expressed a particular desire to get to know local students as part of their overseas study experience, however this proved to be surprisingly difficult for many. Previous research has also found that international students have a particular desire to form social connections with local students and local community members as part of their study experience (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2016; Sawir et al., 2008; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Townsend & Poh, 2008; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Participants in our study felt that local students were often uninterested in getting to know them, preferring instead to socialise with other local students. Some also felt that they lacked opportunities to get to know local students. For example, some participants were surprised to find that their classes contained few or no local students. Similarly, some participants residing on-campus were disappointed to find themselves rooming with other international students but no local students. A systematic review of the predictors of psychosocial adjustment of international undergraduate and graduate students in the United States highlights the importance of addressing this particular challenge (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The review found that social contact with Americans (e.g. friendship and frequency of conversations) was one of the most frequently reported predictors of sociocultural adjustment for international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Moreover, the review also identified social support to be the second most frequently reported predictor of psychological symptoms among international students, highlighting the importance of social support and social connection to the emotional wellbeing of international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In addressing the above challenges, universities should consider developing strategies to improve international student's social connectedness with a particular focus on encouraging and facilitating connections with local students.

Adjusting to a new academic environment was a commonly mentioned challenge for international students. International students were required to familiarise themselves with new systems and processes, oftentimes very different to that in their home countries, as well as very different teaching and learning methods. Previous research has also found that international students may have difficulties adapting to a Western style of learning and that this may negatively impact students' university experience and their academic performance (Bird, 2017; Campbell & Li, 2007; Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2018; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2009; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2009). International students often felt that they 'owed' their families for investing in their academic future and felt pressure to ensure that they performed to their usual academic standard in order to avoid disappointing their families. Participants

felt that this pressure could potentially lead to the development of mental health problems or sleep difficulties for some international students.

The difficulty of managing financially was also seen to be a challenge for some international students, with many struggling with the cost of living in Australia as compared to their home countries. Previous research also indicates that, contrary to the stereotype of the wealthy international student, many in fact experience significant financial distress (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Roberts, Golding, Towell, & Weinreib, 1999; Ryan et al., 2016). Participants in our study frequently expressed a desire for employment in the hopes of being able to supplement the living allowance they received from their families while also gaining some degree of financial independence. However, some students found obtaining employment to be more difficult than anticipated, feeling that their race and/or cultural background was sometimes a factor in their inability to secure employment. Exploitation of international students in the workplace was also a commonly mentioned concern. These findings are consistent with previous research which has found that international students often experience difficulties in finding and maintaining employment (Blackmore et al., 2017; Department of Further Education Employment Science and Technology, 2013; Gribble, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest the potential for universities to play a role in educating international students about working in Australia. For example, universities might consider provision of education on basic employment rights and occupational safety and health, including information on minimum wages, laws against discrimination and exploitation of workers by unscrupulous employers, and how students can obtain advice or support in the event of encountering difficulties in the paid work context.

Among other perceived challenges for international students was that of finding suitable accommodation. Here, once again, limited financial resources played a role. Often housing in close proximity to the university campus was outside of the means of students. Difficulties finding suitable housemates as well as discriminatory or exploitative landlords were also concerns for students. This finding is supported by previous research involving international students living and studying in Sydney. This research also found that international students experience difficulties in finding appropriate housing and that this may have a detrimental impact on student wellbeing as well as their overall experience of living and studying in Australia (Department of Further Education Employment Science and Technology, 2013; Ryan et al., 2016). Among other perceived health and wellbeing challenges for international students was adjusting to independent living for the first time particularly learning to prepare meals for themselves and maintaining a healthy diet. Prior to coming to Australia, many international students had their meals prepared for them by their family members. Living independently in Australia, students often struggle to prepare nutritious meals and find it difficult to source their preferred ingredients. This challenge has also been highlighted in previous research with international students often dissatisfied with the food available to them in their host country as it frequently differs significantly from the food available to them in their home countries (Yan & FitzPatrick, 2016).

A number of barriers to international students accessing university support services for health and wellbeing issues were identified in this study. Cultural stigma surrounding mental health conditions was, by far, perceived to be one the largest barriers to international students accessing psychological assistance for their mental health problems. Many students reported that, in their culture, it was not typical nor acceptable to discuss emotions or to admit to experiencing a mental health issue. In their home countries, seeking psychological support was often highly stigmatised. Therefore, it is likely that students from these backgrounds may be reluctant to seek psychological assistance in Australia for fear of negative judgement. These findings are supported by prior research also showing that international students often hold negative and stigmatising views about counselling services (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Lee, Ditchman, Fong, Piper, & Feigon, 2014; Masuda & Boone, 2011; Mori, 2000; Suen, 1998). On the basis of these findings, universities should consider developing strategies

to decrease stigma associated with mental illness and accessing psychological support, taking into account the varying cultural backgrounds of international students. Moreover, counselling and psychological services should be promoted to students as preventative (as well as treatment) resources that can assist them in maximising the likelihood of their academic success.

As reported by participants in this study as well as highlighted in previous research; limited English language skills may also be a barrier to international students accessing support services (Lu et al., 2014). International students who perceive their English language skills to be weak may experience fear, shame, embarrassment or shyness at the idea of speaking with a health professional. Indeed, some international students may find the idea of this experience so uncomfortable that, instead of accessing university support services, they opt to avoid seeking treatment altogether and attempt to manage problems on their own. Universities should ensure that students are aware of the availability of interpreter services to support them in accessing university support services. A small number of international students in our study felt that a lack of awareness about university support services as well as long waiting times to access these services may also be factors in international students not seeking help when needed. Indeed, previous studies of international students studying in Australia have also found that students were often not aware of the existence of university counselling services (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2006). These findings highlight the importance of universities promoting their support services consistently and via a variety of mediums in order to maximise awareness among international students.

There are several limitations to this research that should be noted. Firstly, although we had a good spread of international students from a variety of countries in our sample, our small sample size means that the results are not generalisable. Secondly, participants were all from one Australian University. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the results of this study will generalise to other universities or to other host countries as the socio-demographic and cultural diversity of international students will naturally vary between educational environments and settings. Despite these limitations, we have noted much consistency between the findings of our study and the findings of prior research. Future research should ideally involve the development and evaluation of interventions to increase help-seeking behaviours among international students. In particular, interventions targeting cultural stigma around mental health problems and interventions reframing psychological services as pro-active preventative health strategies are most warranted for this population.

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Please cite this paper as:

Newton, D.C., Tomyn, A.J., & LaMontagne, A.D. (2021). Exploring the challenges and opportunities for improving the health and wellbeing of international students: Perspectives of international students. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 29(1), 18-34- https://doi.org.10.30688/janzssa.2021.1.02