International Café: A Collaborative Approach to International Student Wellbeing and Support

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Abstract

Prior to 2020, ongoing discourse in the higher education sector underscored the increasingly complex mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by students. The "post-COVID-19" period witnessed a resurgence of international students arriving in Western Australia. Emerging cost of living pressures, accommodation shortages, and changing visa work hours have amplified the distinct challenges international students encounter, prompting renewed discussions surrounding a need for effective support interventions. Drawing inspiration from successful initiatives at Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University introduced the Murdoch International Café—a program focused on providing distinct spaces of support for international students. This supportive environment enables social connection, effective information sharing, and normalised student challenges and support seeking behaviour. Additionally, Murdoch University's Virtual International Student Hub (VISH) extends this support online. In this paper, collaborative autoethnographic methods offer insights into the efficacy of these initiatives and further explore how these proactive, student-centric mental health interventions potentially cater to the evolving needs of international students.

Keywords

Higher education, Support, Wellbeing, International students, Mental health

Introduction

International students are vital to a thriving higher education sector in Australia. More than this, their contributions to local economies, Australia's workforce, and society continues a long and important history of migrant communities shaping our national identity and national story. Since the 1960s, international students have represented a notable segment of enrolments in Australia, particularly at university level (Horne, 2020). In the past and now, many international students are drawn to study in Australia because of the high-quality education provided within the Australian education system (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Today (as of May 2023), more than 650,000 international students are enrolled within the Australian higher education and vocational education and training sectors or are undertaking an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) pathway program. These figures represent a 29 per cent increase on the same period in 2022. In Western Australia (WA), international student commencements have more than doubled, increasing from 10,243 in May 2022, to 23,044 in May 2023 (Australian Government,

2023). Acknowledging the economic importance of international students, state and local governments have invested heavily in attracting international students back to WA, following significant border closures that restricted all international travel to the region. For instance, the WA government provided AU$75.4 million to incentivise and attract students back to study within the state (Department of Jobs, Tourism Science and Innovation, 2022). This has driven a notable resurgence in WA's international student enrolments (Department of Education, 2023). However, in tension with these considerations is the reality that incoming international students are now faced with significant challenges. Due to issues such as rising living costs and shortages of available accommodation (Morris et al., 2023), students are experiencing high levels of financial stress and housing insecurity (Wilson et al., 2022). Furthermore, while international student visa holders could previously work uncapped hours, as of July 2023, capped hours are being reintroduced nationally, restricting them to 48 hours' work per fortnight (Australian Government, 2023). While this change allows more time for students to focus on their academic pursuits, it may also exacerbate financial stress and broader mental health and wellbeing concerns. Across the sector, such pressures are understood to be significant contributors to student stress and mental health concerns (Orygen, 2020a).

In recent years, the Australian higher education sector has been increasingly focused on student mental health and wellbeing (Browne et al., 2017). Within this emerging discourse, students have been important catalysts for change in shaping higher education's contemporary response to mental health and wellbeing. Through the advocacy and leadership of the National Union of Students, the release of the National Tertiary Student Wellbeing Survey results (Rickwood et al., 2016) called on universities to respond to the increasingly complex challenges that students face pertaining to mental health and wellbeing. This study found that university students experienced higher levels of psychological distress than those not engaged with tertiary-level studies. Subsequent work undertaken by Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health (2017) drew much needed attention to the lack of research and evidence to inform support practices that foster wellbeing and good mental health amongst student cohorts. It also challenged the historically dominant notion that the mental health and wellbeing of students should be of peripheral concern to universities. At the Commonwealth level, via the Higher Education Standards Panel (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017), mental health became an important consideration in the retention, success, and completion of university cohorts. This led to the commissioning of a national project to develop an *Australian University Mental Health Framework* (Orygen, 2020a). The Framework enables higher education institutions to provide mentally healthy educational settings that are underpinned by evidence and good practice and are linked to critical internal and external support structures. The importance of this work is reflected in the consistency of "health or stress" being the leading factor for students considering withdrawal from their studies (QILT Social Research Centre [QILT], 2021). Importantly, the Commonwealth government's recent *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report* (Australian Government, 2023) highlights the cost and cultural barriers international students face in accessing mental health support and, in recognising this challenge, recommends designated funding for wrap-around supports that promote student wellbeing.

Literature review

Within the Australian university student community, the extant literature highlights key student cohorts at greater risk of encountering mental health challenges throughout their university journeys. International students, rural/regional students, students studying highly competitive and selective programs of study, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with a disability are all identified as areas for particular focus in relation to mental health support (Orygen, 2017).

For international students specifically, there are several unique challenges and a need for greater discussions about the efficacy of student support interventions to address such issues (Arkoudis et al., 2018; Smith & Khwaja, 2014). The acculturation process in adapting to new social and learning environments, isolation from familiar support networks, language barriers, discrimination, racism, and financial concerns are common factors that contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing of these cohorts (Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Orygen, 2017; Orygen, 2020b). This is compounded by loneliness and low access rates to university counselling services for support (Golberstein et al., 2008; Sawir et al., 2007. A study of mental health issues among international students in Australia, as perceived by professionals working with them at the "coalface", found that students struggled with unfamiliar cultural constructions of mental ill-health and negotiating the Australian mental health system (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011). As a result, "international students commonly delayed seeking help for mental health problems until it was too late to receive adequate care that would enable them to successfully complete their studies" (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011, p. 8). International students are also generally not eligible for publicly-funded mental health care and are required to have private health cover while studying in Australia (Orygen, 2017). Furthermore, where these policies lapse after enrolment, many students find themselves at risk of being unable to pay for mental health care should they require it. Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2011) also identified concerns that, increasingly, international students were arriving with "pre-existing" psychiatric disorders. These challenges for international students, an important cohort for the Australian university sector, require intentional and sustained support programs to enable their academic and non-academic success.

Given the complex interplay of financial pressures, work demands, and academic time constraints, it can be anticipated that supporting the mental health of international students will continue to be a crucial consideration for university support services. As enrolment volumes in Western Australia increase, driving service demand, it is imperative to carefully consider initiatives to adequately address the contemporary and evolving support needs of international students. Therefore, this paper seeks to critically reflect on the impact of key support initiatives designed to respond to the complex challenges facing international students in Australia, using the Murdoch International Café (MIC) and Virtual International Student Hub (VISH) as potential examples of good practice.

Background

The International Café at Edith Cowan University (ECU) was created to offer improved support and a more cohesive experience for international students transitioning into the ECU community. Piloted in Semester 2, 2019, it has continued to grow while adapting each semester to the changing conditions and feedback. This included online options during COVID-19 restrictions and border closures. The primary goal was to provide international students with a sense of community, belonging, and support as they settled into life in Perth and at the university. Key predictors of students' sense of belonging pertained to students' ability to settle, their interactions with peers outside of study, induction and orientation activities, and a strong sense of preparedness to study (Crawford et al., 2023). All these domains are focused on as part of the International Café concept. Each week, the International Café supports different support themes, including finding accommodation in Perth, adjusting to life in Australia, Australian culture, finding employment, supporting general wellbeing, and advice on balancing life and studies. University representatives from various support services attend the event to highlight additional support available on campus and connect students with social and wellbeing or fitness programs. Peer mentors also participate and play a significant part in facilitating the sessions and fostering a welcoming and peer-led environment. Student feedback indicates high satisfaction with the program and highlights the positive impact of the Peer Mentors. Recognising that international students often require a

different transitional experience compared to domestic students (Ammigan, 2019), the MIC aimed to address their specific needs and challenges.

Through existing relationships and collaborations between ECU's Student Life team and Murdoch University's Access, Wellbeing and Equity (AWE) team, Murdoch University developed a new International Café program at their university. Across both Murdoch University and ECU, a significant proportion of students come from Bhutan, Pakistan, and India.

Murdoch International Café and Virtual International Student Hub

In recognising international students' challenges, Murdoch University implemented a whole-of-university mental health support initiative. This program of work proactively sought to address these concerns in alignment with the *Australian University Mental Health Framework* (Orygen, 2020a). A critical focus was to deliver on its key principles, which focused on the development of support programs informed by student needs and experiences (Principle 1); a whole-of-institution approach to enhance student mental health (Principle 2); and the development of a mentally healthy university community that is inclusive, diverse, and promotes connectedness (Principle 3). The Framework also calls for high-quality academic support that fosters success and collaboration, and coordinates initiatives across (and external to) the university (Principle 4) that provide access to appropriate, timely, and effective support services for students (Principle 5). Finally, it calls for a continuous improvement approach that enables innovation and understanding of impact (Principle 6) (Orygen, 2020a). This Framework is supported by a good practice guide specific to the needs of international students (Orygen, 2020b). A key initiative within this new support ecosystem is the MIC. This initiative was one informed by colleagues at James Cook University and ECU. At Murdoch University, the MIC was adapted to meet contemporary challenges facing international students by augmenting the common focus on social connectedness with intentional mental health support initiatives.

While MIC primarily replicated the ECU model, a key point of distinction was underpinned by staff observations that Murdoch international students were mostly concerned with building friendships and a sense of connectedness to others. This was also reinforced by a recent study that found, while international students reported high levels of satisfaction with their educational experience, they felt a lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging within their new communities (Arkoudis et al., 2018). These findings shifted the thinking of the MIC away from a more formal and structured program towards one more focused on social and relational activities. Informal sports, therapy dogs, a community library, musical instruments and collaborative student music playlists, and creative art therapy activities, provide students with a range of ways to connect and socialise with one another. Wrapped around these socially focussed activities, and engaging proactively with students, are staff that represent a broad range of student services across the University, including psychologists/counsellors, social workers, the medical and health service, the access and inclusion team, learning support staff, the student guild/union, and library staff. Not only does this enable staff and student leaders to have greater connections with the students, but it also breaks down barriers for students in accessing these important supports and services. This relational approach has given staff the ability to provide support at the point of need and establish formal support relationships within the welcoming and supportive space of the International Café, instead of more formal, and perhaps intimidating, contexts. Since its inception, the MIC has engaged and supported approximately 200 international students weekly during main teaching periods. MIC staff collect student identification data to inform future analyses of impact, particularly its role in normalising students' access to the University's formal support structures.

While the MIC is conducted within a physical space on campus, an online presence was also deemed critical to enhance the impact of the MIC model of support. Murdoch repurposed an

existing Learning Management System (LMS) site for offshore international students during border closures to develop the VISH. VISH serves as a virtual mirror to the MIC. It functions as a crucial point of communication to Murdoch's entire international student cohort; provides up-to-date information, local and cultural information, and pulse surveys to understand pressing student concerns; and enables peer-to-peer connections. It also enables students to communicate directly with relevant student support staff and allows for a flow of weekly communication between the University and international students. A distinctive feature of VISH is its integration of vital support services, encompassing Personal Academic Coaches (PACs), Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), AWE resources, specialised student advisory services, and counselling support.

An important part of VISH's success is the automation of student enrolments into the Hub. The Student Management team, responsible for admissions and enrolments, enable the seamless journey for international students into the VISH and associated support offerings upon acceptance of their offer. This enables students to connect with peers and the University prior to their arrival and commencement. The VISH automatically appears alongside their academic units of study. Since it was established, out of the 7,240 international students studying at Murdoch University, 84 per cent (6,240) are enrolled in VISH, with 76 per cent (5,640) actively engaging (e.g., logging on, posting, viewing articles, etc.). Staff members involved in MIC are also part of the online platform. Most services develop a whole semester communication plan with crucial articles ready to be shared each semester.

Method

A collaborative autoethnographic approach (CAE) was adopted to explore staff perceptions of MIC's impact in relation to its intended objectives and outcomes. As a methodology, CAE allows individuals to reflect on individual lived experiences to provide insights and perspectives within a particular context (Chang et al., 2016). These insights, shared through personal reflections, are transformed into data for analysis through which several rounds of self-reflexive, critical, and thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015) elucidate authentic insights into experiences, both individual and shared, to understand the impact of our work within the MIC. Following the approach outlined by Chang et al. (2016), the authors, as research participants, undertook first-person narrative reflecting on the following prompts: *Why, in your view, is the MIC important? What are you observing and hearing from students in your engagement with them via the MIC? What impacts have you observed on those students who have engaged with the MIC?* These reflections were then individually analysed by participant authors, examining emergent themes. This was followed by collective dialogic conversations with subsequent comparative and thematic data analysis. This dialogue was then transcribed to enable this analysis. A further independent analysis was then undertaken by a co-author independent from the MIC and VISH development and implementation. Finally, a collective critical examination of the results was contextualised within the existing body of literature.

Discussion and findings

From our collective analysis emerged four key themes: the importance of a distinct space of support for international students; the need for a supportive environment that enables social connection; the efficacy of orientation discussions and information sharing amongst the MIC community (i.e. peer-to-peer, staff to student, staff to staff); and the ways MIC seemingly normalised student challenges (academic and non-academic) and support seeking behaviour.

The importance of a distinct space of support for international students

A common approach within the university sector is to proactively ensure international students acculturate to the Australian context by encouraging social engagement and connectedness with Australian students and staff (Cameron & Kirkman, 2010). While this is undoubtedly important for students coming to study in Australia, our reflections suggest attention must also be paid to the cultural fatigue (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013; Xiaoqiong, 2008) that students may experience, as well as language overload for those who speak English as an additional language (Orygen, 2020b). Such spaces also enable cultural celebration and connectedness to maintain and share their cultural practices. Furthermore, distinct international student support initiatives also empower and give agency to students to choose the extent to which they immerse themselves in the host culture or take breaks in familiar cultural contexts to manage stressors and anxiety (Belford, 2017; Deuchar, 2022a)

The importance of a distinct and committed space for international students was reflected upon by all staff members. While the prevailing idea within the institution was centred on assimilating international students into the Australian cultural context and building connectedness between international and domestic students, all felt that having a space centred primarily on international student cohorts was vital.

Yohann reflected on the tension that he observed when consulting with colleagues on the development of the MIC:

> *I felt that, while people understood the importance of creating a space of support for international students, sometimes they could not understand the importance of keeping things a bit separate for them. Someone told me the MIC was a good idea but went against the University's intention in terms of assimilating students into the Australian context. This was frustrating to hear because there was no understanding that the MIC could help with acculturation because they were immersed in the Australian culture almost 24/7, to be "better" in the dominant culture, they also needed a space of refuge and connection. I know this because this was my experience coming to Australia from France barely speaking a word of English!*

This was something also supported by Rose:

> *24/7 these students are reminded they are student migrants, having a space of familiarity is important especially as they have different experiences of being in Australia compared to some of our domestic students who have different rights and opportunities.*

Shirley supported the idea that, "the shared similarities help, especially those students that don't have family or support networks here".

For international students, adjustment to the Australian context is dependent on being able to interact with Australian peers and support staff (Arkoudis et al., 2013). However, negative perceptions, stereotypes, discrimination, and racism in interactions within intercultural relationships reduce international students' orientation, sociocultural outcomes, and wellbeing, which drives them toward seeking safety amongst co-national peers as a coping strategy (Belford, 2017; Pekerti et al., 2020). It is within this paradox that the MIC operates. Through curated interactions between

international students, students and staff from the host country, and engagement with international cohorts from throughout the world, the MIC can support students. Importantly, the MIC centres and privileges their lived experience as international students to provide a strong basis for their engagement with the broader Australian cultural context on terms that empower their agency and control in relationships. These relationships are vital to their acculturation but are, in effect, double-edged swords (Pekerti et al., 2020). Having wrap-around support staff that are committed to this work and understand the complexities and tensions inherent within this space has been critical. This is particularly important as studies have shown that non-white international students perceive higher levels of negative stereotyping in predominantly white nations that lead to a cycle of non-contact with host cultures and people (e.g., Gareis, 2012).

The focus on promoting connectedness and belonging at the MIC, which is supported by wrap-around timely services across the breadth of the university, demonstrates the MIC's responsiveness to five key principles (Principles 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) recommended by the *Australian University Mental Health Framework*. Importantly, this also aligns with much of the good practice guidance provided by Orygen (2020b), particularly Practice Area 6 (designing and delivering culturally appropriate responses).

The need for a supportive environment that enables social connection

Fostering connections among university students is a contemporary challenge across the Australian higher education sector. Each year, the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching highlight the major challenges universities face in connecting learners within the learning and teaching space (QILT, 2021). Throughout the sector, learner engagement scores remain low, suggesting many do not feel enabled to make meaningful connections with their peers (QILT, 2021). A recent Australian study highlighted that, while both Australian and international students felt a sense of initial optimism in being able to connect with one another and making friendships across cultural barriers within the learning environment, international students were often disappointed. They perceived the onus of friendship-forming fell largely upon them in order to feel, or be, included (Willoughby-Knox & Yates, 2022). Therefore, activities, events, and initiatives that are co-curricular or extracurricular are vital in supporting students to connect with one another and foster important peer-to-peer relationships. Such peer support is vital to students having a positive overall university experience and is an important enabler/predictor of academic success (Menzies & Baron, 2014). For international students, this becomes more critical, where support networks must be newly created and established (Orygen, 2020a).

In commencing the MIC, staff were surprised that many of the issues they anticipated to be of concern to international students (e.g., financial stress, accommodation issues, academic concerns) were perceived secondary to the desire to connect with others socially and make friends while at university. Yohann reflected:

> *When I first started with this idea, I thought I was going to hear a lot from students about financial issues, accommodation issues, issues with studies etc. but the most common need that I heard from students was that they wanted to make friends and not be isolated in what is a bit of a strange space for many.*

Instead of seeking to address the anticipated concerns, MIC staff adapted the concept to meet the students where they were:

> *... seeing this, we took a more socially oriented approach to what we were doing. We introduced games, art therapy and creative activities to bring people together where, over time, we could gently get into talking about things that bothered them.*

Reflecting on this shift, Shirley felt that:

> *While it has been great and important having support services coming in to talk to students at the MIC, the most powerful thing has been a regular space and time where the students know that there'll be someone to have a chat to. I get the sense for some students this is the only time they manage to be social while at university.*

Similarly, Rose argued that:

> *The classroom, at the best of times, can be overwhelming for all students, let alone those facing additional barriers like some of our international students. Having a space just to debrief about what it has been like has been so good because they know they are not experiencing university life the same as the domestic students.*

Given that Australian students and academics may be reluctant to share the responsibility for building social inclusion for international students within the classroom environment (Willoughby-Knox & Yates, 2022), spaces where international students can come together at a regular time and place have been a critical part of their journey at university. Regardless, connections with other students through student-centred and student-based support (Menzies & Baron, 2014), be they from the host country or co-nationals, are not only important for students' sense of inclusion and belonging, they are also critical buffers against wellbeing and mental health challenges (Smith & Khwaja, 2014).

At ECU, staff have observed the growth of student networks throughout the student lifecycle. Liz reported that:

> *Students have now been attending International Café throughout their course to graduation. We have seen enduring friendships formed, which have served as supportive networks through difficult times. It's been apparent that these social connections have been very important to students, with groups formed in 2019 remaining in contact beyond completion of their studies.*

Principle 3 of the Framework calls for student support for mental health and wellbeing to promote connectedness within an inclusive environment (Orygen, 2020a). The staff reflections on this as one of the most critical successes of the MIC reinforce the importance of social inclusion and a sense of belonging to the successful engagement of international students in their university community. The MIC also responds to Practice Area 2, centring the importance of connecting international students to others to build a strong sense of belonging at university and beyond (Orygen, 2020b).

Orientation and information sharing amongst the MIC community (i.e., peer-to-peer, staff to student, staff to staff)

Orientation for most students can be an overwhelming experience, with vast amounts of information provided to students in a short period of time (Kift, 2008; Smyth & Lodge, 2012). For international students, the experience of commencing at an Australian university has additional domains that differ from those of Australian students. International students must often negotiate arrivals at the airport, transition to first-night accommodation, explore transportation options, set up bank accounts and tax file numbers, and get used to new learning interfaces, on top of usual acculturation stressors. For example, with the current housing crisis (Mayes, 2023), the Australian government has articulated long-term strategies; however, in the short term, the options remain limited for international students upon arrival. This paucity of immediate solutions exposes incoming international students to heightened vulnerability, increasing accommodation scams, and exploitative landlords (Mayes, 2023; Morris et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). These challenges persist over time, rendering the need for an effective support, such as MIC, paramount. This also underlines the imperative for more effective communication strategies and outreach efforts to address such concerns.

Formal orientation sessions coordinated by institutions can lead to information overload for students newly arrived in Australia (Baker & Hawkins, 2006). A key strength observed by staff coordinating the MIC was that the social community and peer connections enabled an ongoing orientation experience for new and commencing students that reinforced important orientation and transition messaging provided by the University. A recent study has highlighted the importance of such informal support networks for international students in Australia (Deuchar, 2022).

The importance of this was also highlighted by Shirley in her reflections on the success of the MIC:

> *The MIC has been important because they [the international students] are able to come together, troubleshoot, support one another, and find formal supports from trusted staff around them. I always hear students giving each other tips like "go here, buy this from there instead, it's more affordable" etc.*

This was reinforced by Yohann:

> *We tell them a lot about our support services in orientation, but we know they forget about them. Not only do we keep that information on hand at the Café, using pamphlets and posters etc., we are also able to direct them to formal support or social groups. The informal set up also allows us to chat about or even able eavesdrop on challenges they are facing which can help us monitor or intervene. We also see students referring one another to come and see us at MIC seeking accommodation support or whatever it may be, so it supports the transition experience a bit more.*

Rose also added:

> *We hear that some students skip meals to save money, so we feed them. We always hear the jokes about students surviving on two-minute noodles. What has been good to see though is that students are giving advice to one another about bus route information, life*

> *in Perth, where to go to do free fun stuff, helping each other out with enrolment*
> *information. Bringing then together makes our support work easier!*

Importantly, while support is provided by peers and staff, it is also mirrored in the VISH. As Yohann noted, "all important student information we need them to understand in the first month of study stays up on VISH throughout the entire semester. And all information we provide at MIC is made available online."

Furthermore, Em reflected:

> *Combining the two [MIC and VISH] and having a space to meet up in person and then a*
> *space to connect online and get updates about what's happening on campus and what*
> *support services are available is really valuable. I think not only has it maintained*
> *engagement, but it's also increased it. I think there is the limitation with MIC that it is a*
> *finite number of hours per week in a static location whereas the online hub is accessible*
> *from home, on campus and it doesn't need ever present staff to communicate that*
> *important information that we would usually do in person.*

This supportive environment enables a smoother transition into university and life in Australia through the fostering of connections amongst international students across all course levels and key support staff. Principle 1 of the Framework recommends peer-led and university community-driven responses to ensure students are aware of ways to access support services and have the opportunity to learn from peers about their experiences in navigating university and life challenges. The focus of this work also corresponds to Practice Areas 2 and 5 recommended in the *International Students and their Mental Health and Physical Safety Report* (Orygen, 2020b).

Normalising student challenges (academic and non-academic) and promoting help-seeking behaviours for international students.

Many international students arriving in Australia perceive the challenges they are met with as being unique to their individual circumstances or isolated in nature (Orygen, 2020b). However, there are many common experiences that international students have in acculturating to life and learning in Australia (Smith & Khawaja, 2014). Providing students with opportunities to reflect on the shared experiences they may face in navigating their new lives is critical, particularly in bolstering students' sense of resilience and their understanding of where support can be found (Mori, 2000). Within the MIC, peers and staff can facilitate such reflections with students on the acculturative stressors they may be experiencing and help them understand these as hurdles that can be overcome, as opposed to individual shortcomings.

Additionally, international students often avoid seeking support services due to a range of issues, such as assumptions about cost, and time constraints (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Furthermore, the issue of stigma surrounding the difficulties faced by international students cannot be overstated (Cogan et al., 2023; Orygen, 2019; Takeuchi & Sakagami, 2018). Many students grapple with substantial challenges, yet their families—often their sole support networks—remain largely unaware of their struggles (Cogan et al., 2023; Mori, 2000). This is particularly the case in terms of mental health support. Therefore, according to Orygen (2021), informal pathways to formal support services, such as the MIC, are critical.

Coming from a counselling and social work perspective, Rose and Shirley highlighted the importance of the MIC in providing students with a sense that they are not alone in their journeys, their experiences are not necessarily unique, and that help is available within and external to the University. Rose reflected on the importance of this work being an intentional part of the MIC:

> *It is important to normalise their struggle. These are students where literally thousands of them will go through exactly the same issues, all of them uniquely in their own circumstances, but they are cohorts that have a shared set of needs that we need to know about and we need them to know about.*

While reflecting on the importance of normalising the challenges, Rose also made an astute observation about the importance of support coming from trusted people:

> *I think the trust that you can develop with someone you've seen five or six times, that the MIC enables, is way different to "cold-call" situations where you have to walk up to a service like counselling and say, "I need help". Being able to walk them to services has also been good.*

Similarly, Shirley reflected on the importance of trusting relationships in students seeking support:

> *I think it has been really good just seeing support staff come down to have chats with students and, through that, demystifying services. For example, the counselling or medical team coming down regularly means that students have a friendly face to ask for when they need help. I know that students specifically ask for me by name in the counselling service because we have a relationship through MIC.*

Liz reflected on the evolution of peer support at International Café:

> *At ECU, students in the pilot cohort have since moved into Peer Support roles in the program. They are a valuable support layer and, through their lived experience, normalise help-seeking in an accessible and relatable way. As students attend week to week, we can identify attendees who naturally reach out to peers to offer support and encourage them to take on trusted community leadership positions.*

Therefore, the empowering aspect of the MIC is that not only do students come to understand, through relationships with peers and staff, that their experiences are shared amongst others in their cohorts, they are also provided with low-barrier means of accessing critical support services offered by the University, but commonly misunderstood by students who require them. In normalising help-seeking behaviours and tailoring support information and practice to student needs, the MIC addresses Principles 1–5 of the *Australian University Mental Health Framework* (Orygen, 2020a). Perhaps more importantly, it also aligns with Practice Area 3 (increase help-seeking behaviours) and Practice Area 5 (build international students' awareness and connection to mental health supports).

Conclusion

International students are critical to a thriving and vibrant university sector. However, as Australia progresses towards pre-COVID-19 practices in relation to international students, new challenges have emerged. The contemporary challenges facing international students (accommodation pressures, financial stressors, etc.), particularly in WA, exacerbate more familiar barriers to success at university. In seeking to address these complex issues, Murdoch University, through the MIC and VISH, has developed a support program underpinned by leading guidance and advice that has, according to staff intimately involved in these initiatives, had a positive impact on international students. In reflecting on these successes, a number of key themes emerged. Firstly, international students seemed to benefit from having a distinct space for connection (alongside their engagement with the broader university community). Secondly, a support program focused primarily on social connectedness enabled relationships to form organically in ways that were, at times, difficult for some students to achieve in more formal university settings. Thirdly, the MIC and VISH were important in bringing awareness, access, and engagement to key information which fostered greater engagement for international students with critical support services that went beyond formal orientation and outreach initiatives. Finally, through the MIC and VISH, students were able to understand that the challenges they faced were shared and common and, perhaps most importantly, could be overcome by seeking support from the university. While a more formal evaluation of these initiatives still needs to take place, these findings suggest the implementation of similar programs, underpinned by good practice guidance and the Framework, can enable success for international students who play such an important part in enriching our universities and broader communities.

Acknowledgments

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