



Australian Social Work Academics Respond to International Students in Crisis During COVID-19

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OPEN ACCESS

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Educational Psychology,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

Received: 03 December 2020

Accepted: 08 February 2021

Published: 17 March 2021

Citation:

Fronek P, Briggs L, Liang J, Gallagher H, Doherty A, Charles B and McDonald S (2021) Australian Social Work Academics Respond to International Students in Crisis During COVID-19. *Front. Educ.* 6:637583. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2021.637583

This article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on a cohort of international students studying at one Australian university and the efforts made by social work academics to assist these students through a challenging and distressing time between December 2019 and July 2020. International social work students usually rely on scholarships and casual employment to support themselves while studying. Nonetheless, the Australian government made no financial provisions for international students when the COVID-19 pandemic struck leaving many students without any means of support. Students from all parts of the world attend Griffith University, located in south-east Queensland, Australia, including students from Wuhan, China, where the first known outbreak of COVID-19 was identified. Shame, anxiety, racism and concerns related to the wellbeing of families overseas were superimposed onto their own health concerns and day-to-day survival while still seeking to maintain academic progress. Material and emotional support were provided through the establishment of a food bank and the development of a case management model to address the needs of students. A COVID-19 Alternative Placement course and a field education student hub supported academic success during the health emergency. These interventions developed independently as a crisis response and were merged into a multi-pronged, coordinated approach that included collaborations with other sections of the university and the community. A School working committee was established to co-ordinate interventions to address individual student need that included crisis intervention, referrals to internal and external resources, and developing communities of support. The journey traveled by students and academics and the lessons learned from this experience are described, all of which are relevant to future health emergencies including the value of involving social work in university preparedness planning. The article concludes that intensive support can enhance resilience while supporting students' own survival strategies, and, importantly, how such efforts can minimize, as far as possible, disruption to academic progress.

Keywords: international students, COVID-19, higher education, social work, Australia

Abbreviations: WHO, World Health Organization

INTRODUCTION

Australian Universities have undergone a series of transformations in the last sixty years moving from independence to corporate models of delivery dependent on ever-decreasing government funding and increasing student contributions. By the late 1980s, there was an increasing reliance on income from international students, who unlike domestic students pay full fees (Croucher et al., 2013). Between 2006 and 2019 the number of international students in Australia grew exponentially (167%) contributing AUD 38 billion to the Australian economy annually (Hurley, 2020a). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent border closures, international students living and studying in Australia dropped by 75,000 and on the March 25, 2020, there were 400,000 international students in the country (Hurley, 2020b). An even greater fall in the number of future applicants were expected.

In pre-pandemic conditions, international students were faced with a range of challenges including acclimatising quickly to a new culture and idiomatic language, new methods of learning, different working conditions and isolation from the usual social supports (Harrison and Ip, 2013). International students also faced discrimination, marginalisation and racism in many countries including Australia despite a national self-perception of egalitarianism (Lee, 2007; Brown and Jones 2013; Dovchin, 2020). These experiences leave emotional scars and generate strong feelings ranging from sadness to anger. It has been reported that international students tend to be essentialised and homogenised as passive with a focus on deficit rather than resilience and strengths which makes it difficult for students to openly express their practical and emotional needs (Ryan, 2011; Felton and Harrison, 2017; Tran and Vu, 2018).

However, this perception is changing, at least in the literature, attributing greater agency to international students and how institutions play a significant role in the exercise of agency as an interactive dynamic (Tran and Vu, 2018). While saying that, risks of psychological distress and a reluctance to seek formal assistance has been documented perhaps reinforced by the deficit perceptions of others as well as student experiences. This reluctance has also been attributed to saving face and reputation while cultural diversity has influenced how this is expressed (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Other concerns relate to student access to physical and mental health care, safety and security, social support and the general cost of living including substandard living conditions (Arkoudis et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Pejic, 2012; Briggs et al., Forthcoming). Yet, international students are diverse and resilient, bring skills with them and draw on a range of strengths.

According to Chen et al. (2020), the 5.3 billion international students globally who remained in host countries during the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly vulnerable to adverse effects particularly on their mental health. This article outlines the development of an innovative, co-ordinated, multi-pronged response to the COVID-19 induced crisis by social work academics at Griffith University which brought together various strategies that supported international students' own initiatives and coping with changed and uncertain

circumstances. In consultation with Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee, ethics approval was not required for the reporting of these initiatives.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

A global pandemic has long been predicted (Doherty, 2013). The SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes the disease COVID-19 first came to world attention in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Velavan and Myer, 2020). By March 11, 2020, a pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), and the Australian government after a series of restrictions locked down the country at the end of March 2020. As early as January 2020, Haugen and Lehmann (2020) described how the higher education sector was concerned about unfolding events in China and the impact on the flow of international students. Although flights directly from China were stopped on the 1st February, 47,000 students from China entered Australia in the next seven weeks along with the many thousands from other countries. This precipitated the complex interplay of a number of challenges for new and existing students and universities. As the pandemic unfolded, a strong potential to negatively affect the wellbeing of international students and ultimately, their academic progression became clear. Closure of campuses during lockdown were particularly difficult for students around the world (Sahu, 2020).

In the midst of the pandemic in Australia, the Morrison government instigated the latest in a series of budget cuts to universities, notably proposing the doubling of fees for social work students while halving the fees of other allied health professionals (Fronek and Briggs, 2020). The proposal was ultimately overturned in October due to extensive lobbying which emphasized the value of social work, particularly in insecure conditions. International students usually in insecure work were excluded from the federal government's COVID-19 relief measures, Job Keeper and Job Seeker. This mirrored the early experience of international students in Canada, especially those from developing countries who were initially excluded from relief measures and suffered hardship as a result (Firang, 2020). International students in Canada suffered emotional distress, an impaired sense of self-worth, loss of interpersonal contacts and impaired academic performance (Firang, p. 2). However, attitudinal change meant Canada along with the United Kingdom, Ireland and New Zealand offered assistance to temporary visa holders including support packages for international students (Schleicher, 2020).

Rather than focusing on the pandemic itself and preserving health and life, the political blame game aimed at China for the COVID-19 pandemic risked Australia's reputation as a desirable study location, particularly for those students from China. Prime Minister Morrison's announcement on the April 3, 2020, suggesting that international students should "go home" was particularly distressing (Gibson and Moran, 2020). He strongly stated that international students were expected to have the

capacity to support themselves for twelve months ignoring the reality that many international students must work to do so (ABC News, 2020). An open letter was sent to Morrison about the plight of temporary migrants by 43 academics warning of the implications (Whiteford, 2020). By May 2020, 65% of temporary visa holders were unemployed and 23% had working hours reduced. Sixty-seven percent of the total were international students and the immediate consequences were food insecurity, loss of housing and a reliance on charity (Unions, 2020). These findings were supported by other studies (Defeyer et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Noble et al., 2020). International students continued to be denied access to COVID-19 related benefits with no change to the government's position.

It is a myth that all international students have wealthy families who can support them as most, at least in social work, are reliant on scholarships and work to sustain international studies. Prior to COVID-19, food insecurity, insecure employment and housing were noted as long standing problems for students in the United States and Australia (Hughes et al., 2011; Silva et al., 2015). During the pandemic, insecure, casual employment was the first affected leaving many international students unable to pay their university fees while facing starvation and homelessness alongside concerns about the impact on their residency status (Cortis and Blaxland, 2020; Fronek and Briggs, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020).

Similar to the United States and the United Kingdom, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an avenue for political opportunism in Australia which intensified underlying racism particularly toward people of Chinese appearance. A survey conducted by the Asian Australian Alliance found that the majority of reported incidents (35%) were racial slurs and name calling and 60% were physical and verbal threats including spitting and being coughed or sneezed at. The rest involved incidents such as being barred from restaurants or train stations and generally being excluded (Asian Australian Alliance and Osmond Chiu, 2020). Abuse (or at least its reporting) was also gendered with the majority of respondents being women. Traumatizing experiences were accompanied by shame and fear resulting in adverse impacts on mental health and a sense of safety (Gallagher et al., 2020). The intersection of unemployment, food and housing insecurity, pre-existing challenges, racism and separation from families, along with contagion concerns placed considerable strain on mental health (King et al., 2020). A study conducted across three United Kingdom universities found that food insecurity related to poor mental health and that, in turn, food insecurity related to living conditions (Defeyer et al., 2020). The authors strongly recommended that these needs be met by policy makers and universities at multiple levels.

All these factors severely affected international students in the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University. Social work academics and students took the initiative to respond to the practical and psychosocial needs created by these circumstances.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GRIFFITH SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

In the first trimester of 2020 (February-June), 55 of the 101 international students (62 in the Bachelor of Social Work and 39 in the Master of Social Work, qualifying) in the School of Human Services and Social Work were on field placement. Enrolled students were citizens of China, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The Bachelor of Social Work has an articulation program with Central China Normal University in Wuhan, and Griffith academics teach some classes in China every year. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the School had established additional support mechanisms for students alongside university level initiatives. Two specialised roles in the social work program, the International Program Advisor who is Chinese and an International Field Education Convenor, were established several years earlier in recognition of the specific challenges international social work students face. Alongside the work of other social work academics, these roles were invaluable during the unfolding crisis.

With the exception of three students, all international social work students were able to return to Australia before border closures for the start of the trimester. While two Australian students on field placements overseas were brought home, one international student remained stranded in Sierra Leone, torn between family obligations and his studies and is now waiting for international borders to re-open. It was through specific academic programs and the observations of academics that the extent of the crisis became apparent. International students were found to be in acute distress. Many students had lost jobs, many families were only able to provide financial support for a short period or not at all, and students were without food, homeless or facing homelessness which affected their physical and mental health. Two early examples were students found to be living crowded into one room and a student who was found sleeping in the PhD study room and who had not eaten for some time. Students reported feelings of shame and for many, loneliness. Although grateful for the material and emotional support, these feelings were intensified by the need to rely on charity to survive.

Students were very aware of the Australian government discourse, policies and the social climate that evolved during the pandemic and acutely felt the negative impact of circulating discourses. Issues identified involved racism, housing insecurity, food insecurity, mental health and academic engagement. Experiences of racism were endemic in the community. For example, one Chinese student on placement in a high school was called "Corona" by the students. Conflation of the pandemic with Chinese people in conspiratorial misinformation spread on social media and the politicisation of the pandemic at the federal level of government added to a divisive social climate in some parts of the community and to episodes of racism. Another student from India reported that she was too frightened to leave her accommodation for several weeks for fear of racism and did indeed experience racism when she did venture into the community. She expressed how upset she was by the Prime

Minister Scott Morrison's comments which, in her view, incited discrimination and the "othering" of people from Asia. Chinese students, in particular, reported direct intimidation and threats based on their appearance.

Students were particularly concerned about their academic progress and their immigration status as the granting of student visas are dependent on the ability to support themselves while in the country. They shared stories about how difficult it was to study when living in overcrowded conditions. Mental health was affected by these factors with students reporting symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, and of course, there were health concerns related to the deadly and highly contagious SARS-CoV-2 for themselves and their families in their home countries where struggles were exacerbated by health and political conditions. Students were also concerned about how their families were coping and their struggles to maintain some form of support for their children studying in Australia.

SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS

Once distress was identified, a crisis response was initiated which included material, emotional and academic support delivered via a foodbank, a student field education hub and a social work health clinic (Gallagher et al., 2020). A case management model was developed, and communities of support and peer leadership roles emerged. A COVID-19 Alternative Placement course further supported academic success for those students on placements during lockdown and campus and agency closures. These interventions developed independently as crisis responses and were merged into a co-ordinated multi-pronged approach. This approach included collaborations with other sections of the university, external agencies and the establishment of a School Working Committee for the continued co-ordination of support through subsequent outbreaks and recovery periods. The health of all students was a priority and masks were distributed by the International Program Advisor and sanitiser was available through food bank donations.

Food Bank

One of the most pressing needs was food. Students from developing countries in Africa and Asia struggled the most. While they were fewer in number, many had fewer financial resources and limited networks with other students. As a group, they rallied together to share food and other resources.

The need for a foodbank was identified in early April 2020 when individual students were found squatting at the university without food. The first student that came to the notice of academics was given a food voucher provided by the School. Social work academics began donating food and a distribution centre was established via the Social Work Student Clinic with the assistance of social work students on placement in the clinic. The Lynne Richardson Community Centre, multi-cultural organisations and other community agencies (already struggling with local demand) and other individuals within the university contributed food and offered other types of assistance

to students. By the end of May, the local Scouts, Guides and other community groups donated food and students on placement at Gold Coast University Hospital facilitated food donations from hospital staff. Word circulated quickly amongst international students which generated more referrals from the Social Work clinic, the International Student Hub, academics in the School and students themselves. International students from other Schools (also in crisis) sought help from the food bank and collaborations were established with other sections of the university. With the onset of winter, some students also needed warmer clothes and blankets and were provided with donated items and vouchers to purchase what they needed.

Between the 22nd May and 21st July, a university level initiative distributed 2,380 meals to international students at two of the five campuses through Study Brisbane, FareShare, and Foodbank Australia Frozen Meals. Although the Scheme finished in early August 2020, food hampers with dry goods continued to be distributed through the International Student Advisory. The Gold Coast Hindu Multicultural Association donated meal vouchers for Indian students. As no food service was available at one of the two campuses that offers social work programs, social work students continued to seek assistance through the School.

Case Management Model

In response to emerging complexity, demand and the prolonged period of pandemic mitigation measures, the School developed a student-focused case management model to concentrate on immediate student needs, responsiveness, and the co-ordination and linking of services. The first task was to determine case manager responsibilities. As social work academics had the necessary expertise to fill the vacuum, they assumed the roles of case managers which demanded consideration of tensions such as balancing the dual roles of teaching while delivering a social work service. It was recognised that struggling students may not necessarily come forward themselves as some students that had accessed the food bank had not been proactive, instead they waited for an approach from the university.

The next task was to contact potentially affected students, devise assessment and develop interventions to meet individual needs. Using a series of general questions, a "mini-psychosocial assessment" was conducted to ascertain how a student was faring and to gauge if their basic needs were being met. The mini assessment asked five basic questions about how the student was faring with accommodation, food, financial support, coping ability and social supports. Many students were reluctant to provide detailed information about their financial situation as they were concerned about how this information would impact on their immigration status. By using the mini assessment to connect and explore issues, it was possible to ascertain when buying food was a problem, to identify students who had not eaten for several days or were in emotional distress while also allowing for further elaboration and more-in depth assessment where required. Ultimately, a total of 151 international students were contacted by phone or email. Forty (26.5%) were MSW (qualifying) students, 62 (41.1%) were in the BSW program and

17 (11.3%) were in other programs in the School. Another 32 (21.2%) students assisted were from other parts of the University.

With the assistance of students who assumed active leadership roles, social work academics who assumed the role of case managers provided a range of interventions linking students to available services. Resource lists compiled by students were distributed and links to services in the areas where each student lived were facilitated. Students referred for financial and housing support were assisted in negotiating these systems. Students continued to be referred to the foodbank which was stocked by donations. Twenty-three (15.2%) students who were case managed reported loss of employment and 8 (5.3%) had no income at all. University bursaries were offered to students who could prove financial hardship. Fifteen students (9.9%) who had applied were either turned down or the outcome was unknown.

Psychosocial support was provided by case managers and referrals for more intensive support were made to the student counseling service who offered virtual counseling sessions and to local service providers. In April, the Queensland state government made provision for international students to access mental health care (The Queensland Cabinet and Ministerial Directory, 2020). Eighteen (11.9%) of the international students reported mental health problems (low mood, anxiety, sleep disturbance, loss of appetite) consequential to income and housing loss, concerns about academic progress and the impact on their immigration status. Negotiating systems were also problematic for students who felt increasingly helpless and hopeless in the initial stages of the crisis.

Academic Support

On many levels, the inability to meet basic needs threatened the well-being of international students especially in relation to their academic progress and capacity to remain in Australia. Although alternative modes of study were developed for all students, intensive academic support was developed to support the specific needs of international students.

In pre-COVID conditions, international students were required to study the vast majority of their courses on campus which posed obvious problems with lockdown looming. While the Australian government did make concessions for international students during lockdown allowing them to study online, additional challenges associated with virtual learning and technology threatened to impact negatively on their studies adding to their precarious position. Only seven students reported having technical difficulties, no or inadequate internet connections and access to computers. Permission from the university was negotiated to allow individual students access to on campus computer laboratories during lockdown provided appropriate COVID-19 protective measures were in place. However, some students were reluctant to use the computer laboratories for virtual learning activities due to a lack of privacy as their courses required interaction with other online students and teachers.

Prior to COVID-19, the student hub model had been established to provide a mechanism that supported adjustments to new socio-cultural contexts and offered

additional support to students struggling on first placements. Hub and spoke models are student focused placements that build learning communities which deliver sufficient support needed for student development particularly in relation to relieving anxiety and building confidence as students learn in safe and professionally supportive environments (Regehr et al., 2007; Roxburgh et al., 2012; Knight, 2013; Thomas and Westwood, 2016; McClimens and Brewster, 2017). In trimester 1, 2020, an aged care hub and spoke model established for international students coincided with the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. The hub with five aged care organisations was extended to include students on placement at a disability service and a youth unemployment service. Relationships had been built with receptive agencies alongside intensive support from onsite supervisors, external social work supervisors and University Field Educators to maintain academic performance and to support students to attain field education competencies. Each student was matched with a domestic student for additional peer support. In addition to onsite formal and informal supervision, a weekly 3 h group supervision was co-facilitated by two field educators, a cis-man and a cis-woman. Mixed gender supervision was helpful in facilitating discussion.

Despite extensive support, student anxiety rose as the pandemic unfolded and Australia moved toward lockdown and agencies, particularly aged care, were closing. Students were prepared for the impending closure of agencies which began with a phone call from one student on the 10th March advising the immediate closure of the facility and her inability to continue placement. Within two to three weeks all aged care placements had folded, except for one. One student was required to quarantine at home for 14 days because her flat mates had returned from overseas and were in quarantine. During a group supervision the student advised that she had no food. A volunteer was arranged to leave groceries at her door. Some students took responsibility to maintain contact with her to ensure she had a continued food supply during the quarantine. During this time, the student became increasingly anxious about returning to placement due to concerns about contracting COVID-19 but benefitted from practical assistance and peer support. The model proved particularly beneficial during the pandemic as a sense of community and connectedness was established with the School and placement experience.

A COVID-19 Alternative Placement Course, established in two weeks as agencies closed, was developed as a virtual alternative using simulated learning and other strategies to ensure placement progression for all students including international students. Four placement options were developed Fully Integrated Placements, Partially Integrated Placements, Mixed New Placements, and new Research and Project placements. Fully Integrated Placements were in agencies that remained open and there was no change other than enhanced protective measures against infection such as working virtually or wearing masks, physical distancing and hand hygiene. In Partially Integrated Placements, students continued in agencies for two days and embarked on an agency related project for two days. Mixed new placements involved a two-day participation in the new COVID-19 Alternative Placement course and two days on a

placement related project, and Research and Project placements involved four days on a project. On the fifth day all students were required to complete a co-requisite course online. The course is currently being formally evaluated and early feedback suggests the course was useful in attaining field education competencies and was valued by students.

Students were commonly worried about using technology to connect with clients while those who remained in agencies that provided modified services were also concerned about whether they would be understood on the telephone and how they would be perceived. A high degree of distress and concern about working from home was expressed. Ongoing additional support through the hub was increased to three times per week with additional virtual group supervision, check-ins on Monday mornings, and a COVID-19 Recovery virtual tutorial on Wednesdays for 2 h. International students outside the hub, who were struggling with changed arrangements were invited to join the hub for additional support around specific challenges. Students on projects were able to present their work in these forums and three students created an interpersonal/counseling skills practice group that met weekly. The model enabled a structured, supportive response to vulnerable students and enabled students to mobilise their own resources, express agency and put the social work skills they were learning into action. Peer support enhanced student confidence in participating in group supervisions and the mix of domestic and international student led to the breaking down of barriers through continued social networks.

Student Leadership, Agency and Communities of Support

Throughout the pandemic and ongoing through the aftermath, students continued to play a key role in managing the social work food bank and identifying students in need. Students leaders emerged who took considerable responsibility for the well-being of other students and were supported by staff to be aware of their own needs for self-care and maintaining certain boundaries in order to do so.

With support, international students asserted their agency assuming responsibility to advocate for each other and provide peer support. Natural leaders emerged in this space alongside a domestic student on placement in the Lynne Richardson Community Centre, located near one of the university campuses, who worked with international student leaders and academic staff providing food for the foodbank and emergency relief. Another student in a student ambassador role assisted with other support and information about rental accommodation and access to counseling. Students continued volunteering activities, networking and applying for jobs (usually unsuccessfully) during this period. Generally, students took control of what they could in their lives, for example, self-managing daily expenses and other problem solving, meeting assignment deadlines and placement tasks and applying for extensions. They self-advocated and advocated for others on issues such as financial hardship and concerns about paying for tuition. Students also shared accommodation and transportation information and

recommended each other for part-time work. While students experiencing emotional distress also contacted counseling and mental health services, they reported that due to cultural differences the experience was not useful. Two resourceful MSW students in placement agencies that were closing due to COVID-19 negotiated alternative and appropriate work-based placements giving them the capacity to financially support themselves during the early stages of the pandemic.

It became apparent, that students from countries that had previously experienced epidemics and pandemics, such as SARS and H1N1 and other communicable diseases, were well versed in health measures and were better informed than many academics and other students whose only exposure was confusing health advice from government. At the onset of the pandemic, federal health advice was meted out in a painfully slow process prioritising economic concerns over health and lives before eventually introducing lockdown in late March. Universities, to a certain extent, relied on advice from governments. Many international students relied on their own knowledge of transmissible diseases and found it difficult to comprehend why mask-wearing and other measures were not widely adopted. This is not surprising given prior experience and clear advice being given in many of their home countries as well as the success these countries had in containing the COVID-19 pandemic during the first wave.

The School Working Committee in Support of International Students

On the 16th April, social work academics who had initiated and led the development of the food bank, case management, student hub and alternative placements developed from rapid responses to crises, came together in a co-ordinated, collegial approach forming the School Working Committee in Support of International Students. The working party still meets every two weeks to ensure the co-ordination of all parties actively working with international students continue to identify unmet needs and to ensure that no student would fall through the cracks. Student participation was considered, however, as confidential and personal information was likely to be discussed about particular student circumstances, students were not included on the committee in the interests of privacy, and confidentiality.

DISCUSSION

Fear, denial and uncertainty affected many members of the community whose own livelihood was threatened. Younger people have been particularly affected (Fronek and Briggs, 2020). However, international students were somewhat invisible to the wider community and unlike others in the community had no resources other than their own to fall back on. Decline in mental and physical health was consequential to not having their basic needs met. If temporary support had been offered to enable struggling students to maintain decent accommodation and to eat, mental health consequences would

have been lessened. Other countries recognised the plight of international students, however this did not happen in Australia. Instead the Australian Government, in contradiction to their focus on the economy and the significant contribution international students make to the Australian economy and to universities, left international students to fend for themselves in the midst of a global pandemic (Firang, 2020; Gibson and Moran, 2020). The full economic impact of pandemic is yet to unfold especially on universities. The government is planning to withdraw COVID-19 related benefits which means eligible Australians and businesses will return to pre-pandemic social welfare provisions. It is then the full impact on the economy and employment will be felt. Recovery is expected to be long and the opportunities for international students to return to non-exploitative employment quickly and what the “new normal” will look like for them are unknown. International students are important members of our community and should be supported as they are vital to the pathway out of this health emergency. (Hurley, 2020a).

The impact of lockdown, agency closures, job losses and food and housing insecurity on students heightened common experiences noted in the literature pre-pandemic (Morris et al., 2020; Noble et al., 2020; Unions, 2020). In other words, international students already “did it hard.” The fallout from the pandemic heightened risks to health and well-being. The mental health of some social work students was severely affected related specifically to anxiety about their families, meeting their daily needs, isolation and managing the consequences of racism and exclusion. As noted in the international literature, isolation from families and social supports, discrimination, marginalisation and racism were significant challenges for international students prior to COVID-19 (Lee, 2007; Brown and Jones, 2013; Harrison and Ip, 2013; Dovchin, 2020). Having a culturally diverse academic team and early strategies in place did much to reduce isolation and feelings of hopelessness in a culturally sensitive way. The co-ordinated, multi-pronged approach became a necessity to ensure no student was missed and to meet complex needs in the absence of resources. The participation of domestic students was useful for their development as well as well as engaging in peer support for international students to reduce their isolation.

From this experience, there are lessons to be learned from the fortitude, coping, resilience and the sense of community demonstrated by international students during this health emergency. Their many skills including leadership came to the fore with just a modicum of support and assistance with material needs. Many international students come with experience of disease and disease management, were not strangers to hardship or trauma and have developed knowledge and skills as a result, although these same experiences leave them vulnerable. They did not expect to be in such a precarious situation while studying in Australia, especially given the sacrifices and costs associated with being able to further their education in a foreign country. It is important to shift our understandings about the reluctance of international students to seek help from a tendency to attribute this reluctance to individual students to encompassing an awareness of cultural

differences and those structural factors that deny their basic needs and create environments that are unsafe. The unifying goal for international students is to complete their education. Already acclimatising to new learning environments, different working conditions and isolation from their usual support systems, students had to adapt to virtual learning and practice and rapidly build new support networks (Harrison and Ip, 2013). Although a vulnerable group and universities responded quickly to the crisis, governments and the higher education sector, had failed to include international students in any form of disaster planning. Zoonotic disease is a common occurrence and combined with anthropogenic climate change and the sheer volume and rapid movement of people in a globalised world, a pandemic was inevitable (IPBES, 2020). COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic, nor will it be a one-hundred-year event if modern world problems are not addressed. This experience has taught us that it is essential to ensure international students are included in pandemic planning.

The social work profession has a strong role to play in disaster response in identifying and responding to community, social and psychological needs (Harms et al., 2020). The importance of social work knowledge to pandemic response is further emphasised given the uncertain and ongoing nature of a pandemic caused by a novel virus because it creates new conditions and vulnerabilities and possibly has even longer and globally significant impacts than other types of disasters. In this higher education example, social work academics were able to identify need and, more importantly, had the skills to respond rapidly in crisis situations and to establish longer term mechanisms that maximised the chances of international students achieving their academic goals while supporting material and psychosocial recovery. This was achieved over and above rapidly developing online curriculums, maintaining teaching and research activities, while also supporting domestic students struggling with the transition to virtual study. Given social work's expertise and skill set in disaster response, government and universities should include social work's expertise in pandemic preparedness. Australia is geographically advantaged and although the nation is faring better than many other countries and worse than some others, the challenges are not over for international students and “the new normal” is yet to be realised.

This article is a descriptive report on crisis-and-response-in-action. The interventions described were not empirically evaluated at the time of writing this article. Establishing the efficacy of the model would benefit from research on longer term outcomes. Three authors were directly involved in delivering case management and overseeing the foodbank. Two authors supervised and managed the placement hub. The first author, the Program Director, became involved at the School Co-ordination Committee level along with all authors and other School leaders. The second author, the Academic Lead of Field Education, oversaw all field education activities, rapidly developed the COVID-19 Alternative Placement course, and worked closely with Griffith International. Documentation taken throughout the crisis from the foodbank, case management notes, placement documentation, and School

Co-ordination Committee minutes, concerned individual students, assessments, interventions, follow up and student feedback. This documentation provided the sources of information about student circumstances and experiences, and the responses described in this article which partially addresses any potential bias in reporting and enhances trustworthiness of the information.

Strengths lie in innovation born in crisis which highlighted the social work knowledge and skills needed in identifying and responding to the needs of international students during the health emergency. Reflections on this period also highlighted areas for improvement such as introducing co-ordination at the outset to ensure earlier collaborative planning. The model developed may also be relevant to other countries where international students experienced crises during COVID-19.

In summary, the main findings concern the failure of governments and the consequential unmet need experienced which impacted disproportionately on international students, psychologically, socially and educationally. The exclusion of international students in government policy was short-sighted and caused unnecessary harm to the students described in this paper. The provision of psychosocial and material support enabled students to draw on their resources, develop agency and continue with their studies.

CONCLUSION

This article has considered the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and government inaction on international students. Students throughout the world have suffered during this pandemic, however, international students have been greatly affected. After experiencing dramatic job losses, in a cruel, and very deliberate way, the Australian Government left these students with no viable means of support. They were virtually discarded and became homeless, hungry, discriminated against and displaced in a country that had previously welcomed them for the revenue they bring into the higher education system and the communities in which they live. The examples given here of the experiences endured by international social work students at Griffith are consistent with other studies reported in the

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literature. While social work academics were able to develop a cohesive model of support, students were still left in increasingly tenuous circumstances, and the pandemic was not yet over at the time of writing this article. Overall, the experiences of international students during 2020 and beyond do not bode well for Australia's reputation. When international borders do eventually reopen, they may be less likely to recommend Australia as a welcoming place and study destination.

Recommendations

1. University disaster plans must include vulnerable student groups
2. Social work should be included in preparedness planning in relation to identifying and responding to student vulnerabilities
3. Further research is needed to evaluate innovations developed during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Australian government has a responsibility to address the failings described in this article which were better understood by other national governments that supported international students. Universities have a role in advocating for these changes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

PF and LB initiated and coordinated this writing project, they also did the final editing of the collegial work from all authors. JL, AD, HG, BC, SM are all contributors in writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge the support from Griffith University, Health Group, Griffith International, the School of Human Services and Social Work, partnering social work organisations and community agencies, academic and administrative staff, and fellow students. Special acknowledgment goes to all international students including student leaders and their families who demonstrated great resilience in pandemic conditions.

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