COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences: Cross-Border Voices of International Graduate Students in Australia and America

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Abstract. The study analyses cross-border experiences of international graduate students in two universities, one in Australia and the other in the United States of America, during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how this impacted their learning and wellbeing. COVID-19 crisis led to dramatic changes in higher education institutions worldwide, affecting the academic and social life of international students, and as well opening windows of opportunities for them. International students of African and Asian backgrounds were purposely selected for the study. Data were collected with an open-ended qualitative questionnaire and analysed

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thematically. Findings indicate international students had mixed experiences, including stress and hardship, isolation, fear and insecurity, frustration and helplessness that affected their academic and social lives and wellbeing. Other students however developed strong connections, resilience, confidence, and optimism for the future. The shared cross-border experiences raise awareness to the global impact of COVID-19 in higher education. Findings have implications for how universities could respond to the needs of international students, which must be inclusive, equitable, and human-centric, during unforeseen crises.

Keywords: COVID-19; experiences; higher education; international students; learning; wellbeing

1. Introduction
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) took the world by storm, raging across borders, and plaguing nations and continents. It was first reported in Wuhan, a central Chinese province in December 2019 (Cao et al., 2020), but became known to the world in January 2020. COVID-19 ravaged a few countries such as China in Asia and later Italy in Europe. And it then travelled across the globe, from North America to the United Kingdom, Europe, South America, Asia, and finally to Africa. Quite a few countries were spared, including Tonga, Saint Helena, Nauru, and Cook Islands (Hubbard, 2021). The fast spread of COVID-19 in a short time increased global awareness that the world is interconnected.

COVID-19 exposed the opportunities and challenges of navigating a new global world. It engineered a new world order and lifestyle (Ackah-Jnr & Appiah, 2021), marked by silence, fear, and panic, and later self-quarantine, social distancing, and lockdown practices (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021), but retrospection of what world countries can do in common to help its citizens and economies. Despite the scepticism, unbelief, hesitancy, and uncertainty about the spread and impact of the virus, it became a reality: The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020) due to its devastating effects on the world's population and ecosystem. The number of COVID-19 cases has surpassed 270 million, with more than 5 million deaths (Hubbard, 2021). In every facet of human life, the virus affected millions of people socially, economically, culturally, politically, and educationally. Global economic activity was expected to fall by 6% in 2020 (Schleicher, 2020). Education funding fluctuated in response to external shocks, as governments reprioritised investment to focus on their citizens and people's health, safety, and lives. The pandemic led to behavioural changes and health-related outcomes of the world population (McBridge et al., 2021).

COVID-19 moved beyond institutional boundaries. As it later developed into a global emergency, the economy of international higher education was impacted and not spared (Cao et al., 2020). In the United States, COVID-19 had a significant impact, with more than 1100 colleges and universities rescinding in-person classes and sending students home (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). International student experience fractured (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021) as students encountered grave disruption and uncertainty in their academic, personal, and social lives

(Ackah-Jnr & Appiah, 2021). Higher education institutions, including universities worldwide, responded to COVID-19 by making changes to the organisation and delivery of teaching and learning and support architecture to cushion students. COVID-19-induced changes, and the need to avoid in-person contacts meant most universities were shut down, but others offered limited on-campus face-to-face activities. As Sahu (2020) claims, universities shifted partially or fully to online or virtual platforms, which brought excitement and challenges to some students and lecturers. Disruptions in traditional instruction or schooling practices, however, gave way to new opportunities for higher education institutions to use innovative pedagogies, reach out and share information, and collaborate with a range of educational stakeholders to promote safe and human-centric teaching-learning processes. If not for nothing, COVID-19 ignited flexibility, outside-the-box practices and thinking in higher education.

COVID-19 also increased awareness and utilisation of technology in education. In higher education, educational programs and courses were increasingly delivered online or remotely via technological media platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and Panopto and other similar applications. This resulted in new challenges and opportunities (Schleicher, 2020) for students who needed to adapt their learning and social habits. While digital media in education can increase student engagement, some lecturers however 'struggled' to adapt to these teaching-learning modes COVID-19 occasioned. The sudden change in instructional modes, with technology playing a critical role, aggravated difficulties some students had due to limited physical support to use such online and technological resources for learning (Huges, 2013).

The shift to technology-led instruction exposed inadequacies and inequities inherent in universities as many students could not physically access university campuses, networks, and friends or lost relationships. As Schleicher (2020) claims,

> *perhaps most importantly, the [COVID-19] crisis raises questions about the value offered by a university education which includes networking and social opportunities…educational content. To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent their learning environments so that digitalisation expands and complements student-teacher and other relationships.*

Berg and Farbenblum (2020) note that international students who were financially reliant on their family found themselves with less or no support due to the financial impact of the pandemic in their home countries and study destination. To make matters worse, many students lost their jobs, were unable to work, and others were made redundant. Research shows COVID-19 caused mental and emotional health issues for international students (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Perz et al., Sahu, 2020), but others responded to the pandemic with resilience (Sarmiento et al., 2021; Versteeg & Kappe, 2021).

Studies show that international students have a wealth of personal, professional, educational, social, cultural, and economic experiences and competencies or resilience that enable them to succeed and achieve their academic aspirations and goals (Huges, 2013; Sarmiento at al., 2021). Push and pull factors inform their decision-making expectations of higher education and choice of university and

destination country selection (Bista & Dagley, 2015). International students, particularly in a COVID-19 world, are more likely to face new challenges. Because they were hard hit during the lockdowns as they negotiated implications of limited university support and closures on their status on campus and within their host country (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021; Schleicher, 2020), it is important their experiences are examined. Their experiences especially in times of crisis can provide new insights into how higher education institutions might respond to future crises in a manner that considers the uniqueness of this category of students.

2. Wellbeing of international students

To study abroad can be a tremendous sacrifice as students may not enjoy the same level of care and compassion from people around them as they would normally have in their home country. International students' ability to successfully adjust to new environments and avoid obstacles, including homesickness, social isolation, and financial pressures (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Bista & Dagley, 2015) impacts their success and wellbeing in their chosen universities and destination countries. Mesidor and Sly (2014) found international students experience increased psychological problems such as depression and anxiety if universities and countries are unsupportive of their needs. The incidence of mental health problems, particularly anxiety, is high among tertiary international students compared with domestic students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Wellbeing, which also denotes how international students feel good and function well, matters. As previously stated, context-specific factors may conspire to impact the wellbeing and functioning of international students. For instance, directives by countries such as America that international students stand to lose their visas or should return home because their programs were online culminated in doubts, frustration, and despair, affecting their wellbeing. Jordan et al. (2020) captured in *The New York Times* a directive by the Trump government

> that [sought to] strip international college students of their U.S. visas if their coursework was entirely online prompted widespread confusion …students scrambled to clarify their statuses and universities reassessed their fall reopening policies amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the Trump administration later abandoned the deportation plans, this directive damaged the emotional and psychological welfare of many international students (Jordan et al., 2020). In Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison similarly told international students to go home if they could not support themselves. Unlike industries and businesses, Australian universities were not supported with COVID-19 stimulus packages, leading to high redundancy and loss of jobs in mid-June and late November 2020. This lack of institutional funding affected how universities could support international students. These practices contrasted responses from countries, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada, that supported universities and provided wage subsidies to temporary migrants such as international students (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020). Overall, student wellbeing was impacted during the coronavirus outbreak, resulting in hardship and vulnerability (Versteeg & Kappe, 2021). Following local and international restrictions, social distancing and isolation requirements, international students experienced psychological distress (Brooks et al., 2020).

These experiences cannot be essentialised, so there is the need to unpack how the pandemic played out for different international students. The study's purpose was to explore cross-border experiences of international graduate students in Australia and the United States of America during the COVID-19 crisis and how this impacted teaching, learning and wellbeing. The question is: What are the experiences and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students' teaching, learning and wellbeing?

3. Methodology

The methodology discusses the research approach, research instrument, and data collection and analysis. We also considered the study context, participants, and sampling approach.

3.1 Research Approach

We used a qualitative method to explore the experiences of international students. As Leedy and Ormrod (2019) argue, a qualitative research approach is relevant for describing, interpreting, verifying, and evaluating situations. It enables us to answer questions to gain deeper understanding of participants' views. We employed a partial ethnography, with embedded case studies, to examine the lived experiences of international graduate students in America and Australia. The researchers were not detached observers, as most of them have also been international graduate students and were resident in the two countries during the COVID-19 crisis. We appreciate the participants' everyday life experiences.

3.2 Research Instrument, Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected between July and August 2020, with an open-ended qualitative questionnaire (OQQ), which offered participants the opportunity to share their experiences in a non-restraint manner on COVID-19 and how this impacted teaching and learning and wellbeing. The OQQ had a demographic section and two questions: What are your feelings and experiences during the COVID-19 crisis? How did the COVID-19 impact on teaching and learning and wellbeing at your university and study country? Participants were encouraged to provide candid responses. Data were analysed using thematic analysis approach, from which key themes were derived, interpreted, and supported with selective extracts. The thematic analysis involved a 6-step process, familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We undertook inductive coding and themes classification.

3.3 Study Context, Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposely selected international graduate students enrolled in two universities in Australia and America during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), involves choosing people for a particular purpose, or intentionally using non-random sampling to select data sources, which can yield the most information about a topic under investigation. The universities and countries attract international students from Africa and Asia. Nine students voluntarily participated in the study after

consenting or being attracted to its objectives. Participants, whose stories formed the study's data corpus, comprised five female and four male graduate students. Two were undertaking doctoral studies in education and chemistry, while the remaining seven pursued masters' programs in education (1), forestry (1), business (2), health (1), engineering (1), and tourism (1). Four were beginning graduate students, while five were in second (3) and final (2) year. The students were aged above 25 years. Three students were from Ghana, and one each from Congo and Kenya. Another three were from China and one was from Japan. In effect, five students were Africans and four Asians, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pseudonyms, programs, and countries of participants

Code	Pseudonym	Program	Country
1	Male African student #1	Masters in Forestry	Ghana
2	Male African student #2	PhD in Education	Ghana
3	Female African student #1	PhD in Chemistry	Ghana
4	Female African student #2	Masters in Education	Congo
5	Female African student #3	Masters in Health	Kenya
6	Female Asian student #1	Masters in Business	China
7	Female Asian student #2	Masters in Tourism	Japan
8	Male Asian student #1	Masters in Engineering	China
9	Male Asian student #2	Masters in Business	China

4. Findings and discussion

Participant responses revealed a mixture of positive-negative experiences that impacted the academic and social life, as well as the health, safety, and wellbeing of international students. Findings are presented and discussed as five themes: (1) isolation and loneliness, (2) fear and insecurity, (3) frustration (4) helplessness, and (5) stress and hardship, as shown in figure 1, based on categorisation and labelling of common experiences. Verbatim data excerpts are used to support interpretations of findings, as a step to enhance the study's credibility.
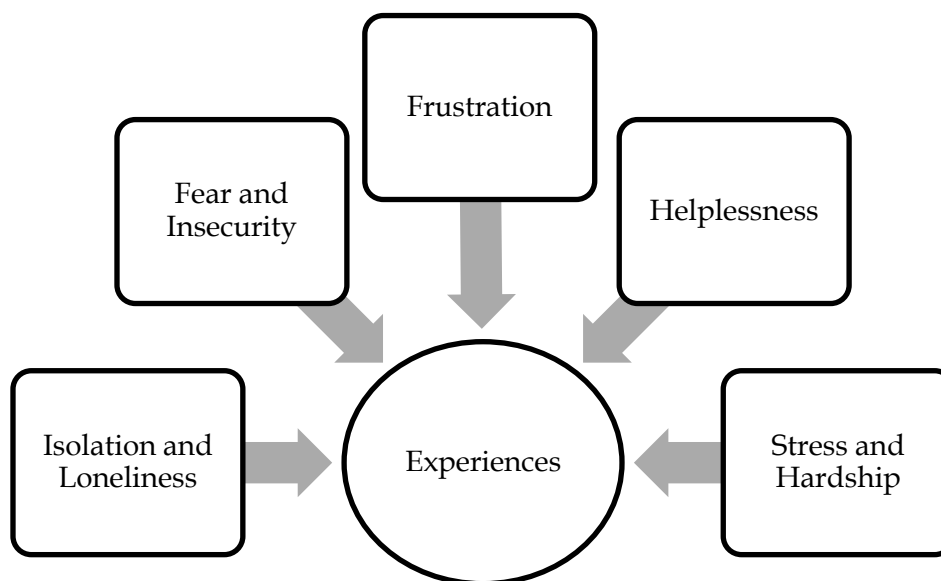
Figure 1: Experiences of international students during COVID-19 crisis

4.1 Isolation and Loneliness

While quarantine, social distancing, and border restrictions are health measures for COVID-19 containment, our study indicates these strategies increase instances of social and physical isolation, and the amount of time spent away from friends and families (Lewnard & Lo, 2020). Feelings of exclusion, disconnection, loneliness, and isolation among international students (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) have detrimental effects on their mental health and wellbeing, and during crises, especially COVID-19, this can worsen (Brooks et al., 2020; Sanderson et al., 2021). In our study, loneliness was one key experience. International students reported feeling emotionally, socially, and physically isolated since they were physically cut off from their university campuses, lecture rooms and other facilities. Other students had minimal interactions with their faculty because teaching and learning were wholly conducted online and remotely, or that their universities had closed. Feelings of separation somewhat worsened for students that did not get face-to-face interactions with course mates to physically share and discuss lecture notes, course contents, or other information. One participant stated:

> *Because of COVID-19, most work, lectures, and assignments are done remotely… no campus work or interaction… we want one-on-one, face-to-face meetings with our teachers…we can't physically interact with our course mates and share ideas on course content. It's not all about virtual stuff… (Male African student #1)*

Some first-time international students felt lonely due to their location and lack of social support such as friends and physical access to peers for collaborative learning and engagement:

> *I felt extremely lonely. For someone who lives alone on the Gold Coast,*
> *I don't have friends as I just moved here at the beginning of the year*
> *to Australia and soon after our university life commenced, we began*
> *online learning. It's very isolating and worrying. There is no one to*
> *discuss class contents and assignments… (Female Asian student #2).*

Other students were isolated because of how online teaching and learning was conducted in some universities. Some "lectures were recorded and uploaded online for students to access, without live face-to-face virtual meetings and discussions" where students could interact with their lecturers and peers. The recorded lectures did not afford students the opportunity to ask questions for immediate clarification. Other students had delayed feedback.

> *Even if you send messages to lecturers to ask questions or for an*
> *explanation of things that are not clear, it takes a longer time to get*
> *responses than the face-2-face… (Female African student #2)*

Another factor responsible for experiences of isolation was separation from family members and spouses or loved ones. The presence of loved one could have eased the burden of loneliness and challenges:

> *we are separated…doing so alone as our family is not around. If they*
> *are here this will be the best choice. If not because of COVID-19 it will*
> *afford me the opportunity to have time with my wife and other family*
> *members. (Male African student #1)*

These notwithstanding, some students had increased contacts and connections due to access to friends, online interactions, and other physical communications. Frequent phone calls and online messaging were social support and comfort, enabling some students to overcome feelings of isolation or loneliness:

> *For me I speak with my mother and family many times through*
> *WhatsApp…They keep checking on me. I have some people from my*
> *country in Australia and where I live. They helped during the time*
> *COVID was high. (Female Asian student #1)*

Travel and movement restrictions, aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19, limited international students' ability to access family members and other people for interaction and support, resulting in further social exclusion (Dube, 2020). Such lack of social connectivity placed a damper on students' emotional, health and wellbeing and academic matters. This finding is consistent with the results of LaRosa et al. (2021) that at the individual level, feelings of isolation was one major challenge students faced during COVID-19, affecting their mental and physical health, and ability to learn.

4.2 Fear and Insecurity
Perz et al.'s (2020) validation of the fear of COVID-19 found high anxiety for students of Asian backgrounds. Liang et al. (2021) identified Chinese postgraduate students had negative experiences of anxiety and depression, which impacted their mental health and academic work. Participants' responses also showed international students, including Asians and Africans, were quite insecure on campus, at shopping centres and within the larger community. Such

sense of insecurity heightened students' fear when they were "outside", in the open or encountered large groups of people in the community. Participants noted some Australians and Americans branded international students as potential sources for spreading the COVID-19 virus and were alarmed at their presence. For some participants, such 'erroneous' thinking caused students from countries that reported high spikes of COVID-19 cases to live in fear because they became targets for induced gaze, discrimination, ridicule, and exclusion. Threats and unsavory commentaries about them built an atmosphere of insecurity. Such racial attachments and aggressions are detrimental:

> *The challenges for international students were that people looked at us as if we infected them with COVID and avoided or wanted to attack us. It makes us feel bad. They talk about us anyhow. If we're infected, we wouldn't go on with our normal lives but be in quarantine, so you aren't happy to go out and meet this… (Male Asian student #1).*

As Gomes and Forbes-Mewett (2021) similarly found, international students, especially those from China and of East Asian background, experienced racism and xenophobia. COVID-19 ignited a sense of 'fear and freeze' in international students not only because they could contract the virus and die but claims that it spreads in enclosed environments and where people were in close contact. Due to concerns about the safety and effectiveness of social distancing practices in universities, schools, aircraft, and cars and other public places, some students had no choice but developed 'protective' mechanisms of staying indoors or secluding, which limited their movements and interactions.

> *I prefer to stay at my location without travelling by car or plane to avoid being infected. One needs to be careful moving in the community and to campus. With social distance people are getting the virus. (Female African student #1)*

Despite experiences of insecurity and occasional negativity, some students were safe and secure due to assurances and encouragement from their social networks, including friends, relatives, families, university, and community members.

> *It's a pandemic, so we [international students] need not to fear… my university and family kept telling me things will be fine… I also believe it will be okay. I don't think about the COVID too much…I was [a bit relaxed] doing my studies... Something [vaccine] can be found… (Male Asian student #2).*

It was evident that some international students were optimistic the virus would end or a vaccine could be found, which gave them the assurance, resilience, and stamina to continue with their daily learning and social routines. Evidently, some humans turn to faith and religion for comfort and explanation (Bentzen, 2021). They can pray and hope to cope with adversity or uncertainty, and COVID-19 is no exception. Goodman (2020) claims people, including university students, can activate their faith to find peace in COVID-19 times. Unsurprisingly, some students relied on their religious faith and beliefs as buffers to stay confident and safe. One student reported, although "there is some [air of] doubt and panic, I keep faith in God…pray for strength to stay strong, and not be afraid." The findings indicate that due to the unpredictability of the virus and its associated

health and emotional concerns, some people, including international students, prayed (Bentzen, 2021) and were hopeful and assured, enabling them to stay secure and confident.

4.3 Frustration

Sanderson et al. (2021) identified that during the COVID-19 pandemic, student experiences and learning were impacted by feelings of worry and frustration. Similarly, a sense of frustration was a common experience among some participants. One female participant from Africa was particularly worried and dissatisfied with events and issues because she found it "difficult to meet the demands of the new 'normal' and [induced] learning, social and life needs". She added, "the changes were quick, and I have to learn many things before I can adjust to studies and life…". This means some international students' inability to quickly adapt to the changes or attain proficiency to reach desired goals were disappointed. In specific instance in America, the announcement by President Trump that international students "should return home since university programs are now online" aggravated their frustration and uncertainty. They were upset, disappointed and irritated, and others lost confidence.

Other students felt broken because the logical pursuit of the directives meant they might be unable to pursue their goals, considering the financial investment. In Australia, international students were frustrated when the Morrison government also said it could not support them financially but rather supported domestic students and citizens. These actions were found discriminating. In the words of one participant, the 'threats' from some governments could have worsened the plight of international students if they had also contracted the virus:

> It was very frustrating and a feeling that could have ended our lives. If we had contracted COVID-19 it would be worse…announcements that students should return home if they can't support themselves made us more uncertain (Male African student #2).

The frustrating experiences made many international students unsure about their plight in the study destination. It was a feeling of anxiety and hopelessness:

> COVID and things like no support for international students made us feel bad. We are sometimes anxious and didn't know what to do. (Male Asian student #1)

The inability of some international students to get refunds of payments for accommodation and other utilities or get goods and services they ordered online further worsened matters. Delayed delivery and non-availability of stock or the inconvenience of online shopping increased their frustration and worry.

4.4 Helplessness

A sense of helplessness in coping with threats in a specific domain, including COVID-19 pandemic, can serve as an anxiety-buffering function (Lifshin & Mikulincer, 2021). Participants also noted that international students were somewhat helpless during the COVID-19 outbreak. They were caught in webs of indecision because they were unsure of what to do to stay safe and how to get help. Others were helpless due to fear of contracting the virus or whether to

abandon their programs. With the devastation COVID-19 was causing, some participants indicated that students lost their self-regulation capacities. Some students felt abandoning their programs was not the best option since it would take them further away from the weekly interactions with lecturers and peers or would not overturn the shutdown imposed on schools and communities. As international borders were closed and flights cancelled, students had to hang on and put in the best effort to continue with their programs amid the challenges of getting support and physical contacts. Some students stated that the COVID-19 trapped "them in [a sea of] confusion, not knowing what to do" or "where to go for help". Since no one could control the COVID-19, they felt "the end [of the road] had come". Feelings of helplessness impacted more those with limited social networks.

> *…we didn't know what to do because of COVID-19. My family asked me to return to my country as they were concerned but I couldn't …Things were out of control… (Female Asian student #1).*

> *As a first-year student, I was really looking forward to learning with people with the same interests but COVID-19 has made it very difficult…I don't know what to do (Female Asian student #2)*

However, some international students developed confidence, resilience, and positive attitudes during the crisis, enabling them to pursue cherished activities. They adapted and braced the circumstances and were optimistic that things would normalise, so what they needed to do was to follow healthy life practices to stay safe to pursue their learning, and social and life goals.

> *I tried to stay focused on my life and learning. I did my best to be positive and mindful but avoid things that will expose me to COVID. I learnt to adapt… (Female African student #1)*

This experience of international students agrees with Lifshin et al.'s (2020) study that perceived helplessness can help people to stay safe and avoid being infected with the COVID-19 virus. In a similar study conducted with participants from the USA, Australia, and other Asian countries, it was found that helplessness can also serve as a protective psychological function against fear and anxiety arousal due to COVID-19 (Lifshin & Mikulincer, 2021).

4.5 Stress and Hardship
Stress can disrupt the academic progress of university students (OECD, 2021). Dealing with the threats and uncertainties of COVID-19 was likely to cause stress for many people, including international students (Garfin et al., 2020; Qi & Ma, 2021). Research identified that higher levels of stress and anxiety were evident among international students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016), which impacted their mental health and wellbeing (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). Our findings show international students were subjected to forms of stress and hardship during the COVID-19 period. Naturally students were anxious and tense, and others worried about contracting the virus, having worse health conditions, and eventually losing their lives. For some participants, the fear of the unknown—contracting and exhibiting symptoms of the novel virus—affected students mentally, emotionally, and psychologically, resulting in academic and health challenges. Stress increased for students that monitored news updates on

COVID-19 and cases of deaths. Students were stressed when they learned of the deaths of family members, close relatives, and members of their communities.

> *Watching TV news and seeing people in my country and community die of COVID was stressful…sometimes I said what next? (Female Asian student #2)*

> *Life in America is stressful. COVID-19 has made it harder than before. Our family can't support us; the virus is everywhere (Male African student #1)*

> *Online [studies] is hard and the way people are dying from the virus…see Italy where I have relatives. I think a lot… can't sleep. (Female African student #3)*

Sahu (2020) found there was inadequate time to prepare to reorganise the teaching and learning processes and because the transition had to be quick and efficient, this placed more stress on university staff and students. Our study uncovered that some students were academically stressed due to universities shifting to online learning, with increased workload and expectations. It was noted COVID-19 led to the use of online platforms and other technologies that many international students were unprepared for and unfamiliar with or increased the challenges they experienced using online resources to learn pre-COVID-19 (Huges, 2013). COVID-19 thus aggravated challenges students face accessing online platforms, locating academic materials, or conducting group work. Other students found the limited proficiency of some lecturers to use online technologies, for example, in teaching math-related content, made it difficult for students to understand concepts, adding to their stress. One participant felt students were overwhelmed with balancing the 'new' study-life demands:

> *It's difficult to balance my studies and personal life. There is no escape from the pressure. It's stressful for us (Female Asian student #2)*

Many students reported financial hardships because they had planned to return to their home countries or travel for the summer holidays and paying in advance for air tickets and other expenses but the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent international border closures meant they had to stay behind. Because payments for air tickets were mostly not refunded, these students did not have extra money to cover induced expenses. Some participants revealed students had no option, so the continued payment of rent and other utilities impacted them financially because they did not undertake much activity at the peak of COVID-19 and were confined indoors. Some participants claimed that their situations were stressful and differed from that of their counterparts in countries such as New Zealand and Canada, where they received wage subsidies and housing support (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020) or had their rent and other utility bills reduced:

> *We continued to pay our rents and related bills while our stipend did not cover the whole academic year. The school or state could have supported us in some way to pay our bills or sanctioned the freezing of rents for all international students. (Male African student #2)*

Qi and Ma (2021) found that some Australian universities' reluctance to reduce tuition fees was a source of worry and hardship for international students. According to almost all the participants, the inability of international students to

work, was another major source of stress and hardship. Many students could not gain employment to raise money to supplement the payment of tuition fees and support families during the crisis, and those students who had secured jobs received messages from employers terminating them.

> *There is so much problem getting some work to do to support ourselves*
> *e.g., fees, bills and other families. It's difficult (Male Asian student #2)*

It was however noted that those international students on sponsorships and scholarships and did not have to worry about paying fees and other charges, were less stressed: "I am paying fees and other utilities, so I am feeling the pain". But I don't think it is the same for those on scholarships" (Female African student #3).

5. Conclusion

The study indicates that international students had mixed experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. There were positive experiences, including resilience, increased connections, and feelings of security and hopefulness, which show the wealth of buffers or coping strategies international students can rely on during unforeseen disruptions to their academic and social pathways. Experiences of stress and hardship, isolation, fear and insecurity, frustration, and helplessness were also common, which impacted students' academic success, health, and wellbeing. Findings show that the level and accessibility of support systems at the university, community, and host country influenced the cumulative effects of COVID-19 on students' experiences. We identified border crossing experiences of international graduate students from Africa and Asia in Australian and American universities, who have unique orientation to community or collectivistic values and ideologies. We believe their experiences were impacted more because they might have lost the benefits and buffers of belonging, caring and concern for one another that characterise their home countries. And this we perceive is what some universities could not fully appreciate, together with the practical realities of being an international student in a foreign country in a COVID-19 era.

Cumulatively, international students experienced stress, so it is appropriate to support them to acquire coping strategies to enhance their resilience and ability to manage the effects of such unplanned situations to their academic journey. The identified experiences also necessitate universities to reconsider how they support and engage international students, as this can help ameliorate the pandemic's effects on their wellbeing and academic life. As Sanderson et al. (2021) found in their study on supporting student experience during the pandemic and beyond, such effective support services can improve students' mental, social and psychological wellbeing. We propose that such support practices should entail universities adopting a more human-centred, inclusive, equitable and sustainable approach, regardless of student backgrounds. These practices are imperative, as Berg and Farbenblum (2020) found that international students experienced exclusion and discrimination and others felt a "sense of abandonment" during the COVID-19 outbreak (p. 9).

International education, student mobility and corresponding foreign revenue for destination countries cannot exist without international students. The role universities play during crises such as COVID-19 can impact students' satisfaction

with academic, social, and emotional life (Aristovnik et al., 2020) and future study destination choice. Thus, the increased internationalisation of higher education and the economic benefits to universities, make increasing financial and other material support to international students tenable in any situation (Lieb, 2016). For effective support to international students in higher education, Bista (2019) articulates this requires a deep understanding of the complex and shifting realities of international students and a commitment to addressing these comprehensively. As she pointedly adds, this must involve a balanced ratio of support services and international students, with a human face. LaRosa et al. (2021) re-echoed, university students, including international students, felt that learning cannot be prioritised over loss of safety amid the pandemic, health concerns or social injustices. This suggests the need for universities to refocus attention on the safety, belonging and wellbeing of all students.

Regarding the teaching-learning experiences during COVID-19, it is important that ongoing needs-specific pedagogical and technological supports are provided to enhance students' efficacy of using online platforms and technologies for learning. Assessment and learning requirements should embed humanistic lenses that consider their health, mental and wellbeing. Higher education institutions must incorporate online support platforms to improve students' interconnections while studying remotely. Collaborative online learning with telecommunications technologies can reduce students' feelings of loneliness and foster their learning (LaRosa et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers and lecturers who lead teaching and learning through online platforms should be adequately trained. We reaffirm OECD's (2021) call that COVID-19 exposed the need for higher education institutions and policymakers to re-examine established instructional models. This change should be geared towards using innovative and blended learning provisions for traditional and international students to promote a sustainable internationalisation in higher education that is resistant to disruptions.

6. Limitations
COVID-19 conditions, such as fear and isolation, could not afford the researchers the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews, which could have provided more in-depth knowledge from participants. We acknowledge the sampled students and universities are not representative of Australian and American universities and student population, and a matter of convenience is reflected in the choice. As such, the experiences participants shared might differ from those of other countries, universities, and international students. Yet the experiences shared highlight the need for universities worldwide to support international students in times of crises.

7. Recommendations
The experiences of participants are not distinct to only international students, so we recommend domestic students' experiences are examined. We suggest further that a study be conducted into the relationship between international students' experiences and support systems universities provided during COVID-19, as well as students' coping strategies.

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