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International Students' Suggestions for What Universities Can Do to Better Support Their Mental Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to expand understanding of how to support international students' mental wellbeing in Australian higher education. It presents findings from a study that explored international students' own suggestions for how universities could improve their wellbeing. Qualitative responses were analyzed from 601 international students at one large, metropolitan university in Australia. Findings emphasize the relationship between course experience and student wellbeing and suggest that universities could improve international students' wellbeing by focusing on improving their learning experiences and fostering a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Australia, higher education, international students, mental health, support, wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to remote teaching and learning practices across higher education sectors globally has highlighted the importance of supporting international students' mental wellbeing. In Australia, for example, there has been heightened attention on challenges of isolation, separation from support networks, and ineligibility for federal aid during the height of the crisis. Although these circumstances may seem to increase the risk of psychological distress among international students,

the importance of understanding and addressing their mental health has been a concern in Australia for over a decade, with several prepandemic studies indicating that international students are at high risk of experiencing mental health difficulties (Orygen, 2017; Shadowen et al., 2019; Veness, 2016).

Despite recognition of international students as a high-risk group (Russell et al., 2010; Skromanis et al., 2018), only a few of the growing number of empirical studies on university students' mental wellbeing have focused on international students specifically (e.g., Shadowen et al., 2019). Of those, the tendency has been to explore the efficacy of international students' actions and behaviors, such as their attitudes toward and inclinations to seek mental health support (e.g., Clough et al., 2019; Ling & Tran, 2015). Alternatively, literature has focused on the problems associated with international students' mental health and only tangentially acknowledged suggestions for improvement.

This article presents an alternative perspective and reports the findings from a prepandemic study that identified factors in the university environment that, from the students' perspective, could better support their wellbeing. The study was part of a larger research project that aimed to address the question, "What can universities do to better support international students' mental health and wellbeing?"

This question is critical for universities given the increasing proportion of students reporting extremely high levels of psychological distress (e.g., Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman 2010). It is important not just because of universities' obligations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all students, but also from an educational perspective. It is well established in published research that mental health can have a powerful impact on every aspect of a student's physical, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal functioning (Kitzrow, 2003). When psychological distress is prolonged, it can severely impact a student's ability to learn and can lead to disengagement with studies, lower self-efficacy, decreased motivation, and withdrawing from studies (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018; Thorley, 2017). In a recent study of the first-year experience, wellbeing was the most common reason that both international and domestic students gave for seriously considering deferring or withdrawing (Baik et al., 2015).

In this article, we used a socioecological perspective to explore ways that international students can be better supported in the higher education environment rather than focusing on international students' help-seeking or self-management. We believe it elevates the voices of international students by focusing on their suggestions for what universities can do to better support student wellbeing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students comprised almost one third of the higher education student population in Australia in 2020, representing an increase from around 108,000 students in 2000 to over half a million in 2020 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). There has likewise been an expansion in literature that explores the unique challenges experienced by international students. Notable among these is Marginson et al.'s seminal 2010 study of international students' lived experiences in Australian universities, which identified challenges related to cultural adjustment, English language skills, housing, loneliness, and racism, among other issues. Subsequent studies have similarly identified distinct difficulties that can put international students' safety and wellbeing at risk, such as their financial circumstances (Arkoudis et al., 2018), employment (Blackmore et al., 2014), and lack of secure accommodation (Ryan et al., 2016).

Challenges Influencing International Students' Wellbeing

Among the challenges that international students face, their difficulties with English language skills have received particular attention in the literature, as these skills have been shown to influence both international students' academic performance and their social experiences (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014; Mori, 2000). Even highly proficient speakers may be unfamiliar with local idioms, slang, or nuance (Akanwa, 2015). This can both inhibit smooth academic adjustment and contribute to a lack of deep interaction with local students (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014), which can lead to feeling as if one does not belong at the university. This is an important issue as establishing positive relationships with peers and having a strong sense of belonging can help to promote positive mental wellbeing, and, conversely, social isolation can undermine wellbeing and exacerbate mental health difficulties (Baik et al., 2017). The institutional context can often heighten this feeling of loneliness, as well (Sawir et al., 2008).

Sümer et al.'s (2008) study on the predictors of depression and anxiety elaborates on the possible influence of poor English language proficiency on students' mental wellbeing. Their study involving 440 international students in the United States found that lower levels of self-assessed English proficiency are associated with higher levels of reported depression and anxiety. This finding has important implications for countries like Australia where the largest percentage of international students come from East and Central Asian regions where English is an

additional language.

In addition to identifying the influence that language proficiency has on international students' wellbeing, international students' displacement and isolation from support networks can put their mental health at risk (Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016). For example, Cemalcilar and Falbo's (2008) longitudinal study of 90 international students in the United States demonstrated that relocating to another country negatively affected the mental health of even those students who had come from relatively similar cultures to the United States.

On top of this, international students are also vulnerable to a range of stressors in the community, including racism, prejudice, and workplace exploitation (Brown & Jones, 2013). Brown and Jones (2013) found that one third of the international postgraduate students in their study in the United Kingdom had experienced some form of racism, often in the form of verbal abuse. These experiences of racism, the researchers found, had a "strong and lasting impact on well-being" (p. 1013) and frequently led to participants' reluctance to return later to the United Kingdom as tourists. In the United States, Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students encountered incidents of verbal abuse and racist remarks both on campus and in the surrounding community. International students of color in Australia were also found to be more vulnerable to exclusion and attack than their white counterparts (Marginson et al., 2010).

More recently, Shadowen et al. (2019) explored a range of academic and social factors associated with international students' mental health. They found that perceived discrimination, poor English-language skills, and increased acculturative stress were each significantly correlated with international students' levels of depressive symptoms. Studies that have compared international and domestic students' experiences have seemed to indicate that these correlates are particularly notable for international students. For example, the international students ($n = 383$) in Skromanis et al.'s (2018) study in Australia reported lower global life satisfaction and poorer perceived social support than the domestic students ($n = 1,013$).

Help-Seeking Behavior

One common issue that has drawn some attention in the literature on students' mental health is the help-seeking behavior of international students. Research, such as that by McLachlan and Justice (2009) in the United States, has suggested that international students are particularly unlikely to seek assistance for their mental health and that they often "suffer quietly" instead (p. 30). The researchers investigated the processes that international students used to "survive and thrive" (p. 28) during their time in the United States and found that the tendency to not seek assistance

was prevalent among international students from many backgrounds. There are numerous potential reasons for this, including lack of awareness of services, difficulty in accessing services, language or cultural barriers, or embarrassment. For example, in Russell et al.'s (2010) study, 38% of students reported feeling a need to seek help but had decided not to do so mainly because they believed their problem was not important enough or because they did not know about available services. Similarly, Skromanis et al. (2018) reported that international students in their Australian study were less likely than domestic students to seek help for mental health and related problems. Compared with more than half of domestic students who had sought help, less than one in five international students reported that they had sought help. These findings pose the question of how international students might be better supported if many are averse to seeking help from existing services.

The Role of Universities in Supporting International Students' Mental Wellbeing

Several recent studies (e.g., Bore et al., 2016; Larcombe et al., 2016) have supported the idea that the university, and educators specifically, can play a valuable role in reducing students' levels of psychological distress. For example, Bore and colleagues (2016) recommended introducing a full university subject on resilience into the curriculum. Larcombe et al. (2016) suggested that helping students develop effective study skills would also be warranted. At the classroom level, academic teachers' approachability, communication skills, and quality of individual feedback were aspects that university students in Baik et al.'s (2019) recent study indicated would improve their psychological wellbeing. However, these studies tend to focus on students generally, rather than on the specific needs of international students.

With the exception of a few studies (e.g., Rosenthal et al., 2006; Skromanis et al., 2018), there is very little research in the Australian context that investigates international students' psychological distress and wellbeing, and fewer still that have considered students' perspectives on what universities could do to better support their mental wellbeing. This is critical as students hold understanding of their learning experiences and insights that researchers do not have (Flynn 2015). Without knowing what international students' themselves believe about how their wellbeing could be improved, it is difficult to fully understand the realities of their experiences. Students' perspectives can offer a valuable complement to the ideas and perspectives of teachers and staff (Keddie, 2015), offer warnings on what needs to be improved (Busher, 2012), or provide a new way of approaching education policy development (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Consciously encouraging students' voices can itself help improve the student experience. For example, by encouraging student feedback on their learning environment, students gain more ownership over their learning and will therefore be more engaged with it (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002). The encouragement of students' voices is thus believed to reduce dropout rates (Levin, 2000, as cited in Bland & Atweh, 2007). The validation of students' voices also offers benefits to the educational environment, including by establishing an "open" school culture (Quinn et al., 2009), a more inclusive school environment (Demetriou & Wilson, 2010, as cited in Busher, 2012), and environments that foster respect, empowerment, and citizenship (Busher, 2012), which can have a positive effect on students' mental health and wellbeing. In addition, as Quinn et al. (2009) acknowledged, student narratives can reduce stigma around mental health issues. This article aims to actively incorporate students' voices and it expands existing understanding of international student wellbeing by presenting international students' own suggestions for how their wellbeing could be improved.

METHOD

This study was conducted in a large metropolitan Australian university where international students account for 38% of total enrolments. It was part of a Student Wellbeing and Course Experience Survey that was conducted at the university in late 2017 and reported by Larcombe et al. (2021). The project received approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee and each participant self-identified as either an international or domestic student.

Research Approach

This exploration of students' suggestions was informed by a socioecological approach utilizing a version of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological model, which describes the human development process in terms of systematic interactions between people and their environment. In particular, we drew on two levels of systems: the microsystem and macrosystem. In the higher education context, the microsystem can be associated with the course activities, social roles, and interpersonal relationships students have with staff and peers in their courses. In the most recent understanding of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the microsystem is the most influential to development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The macrosystem level in the higher education context can be considered the broader structural and cultural environments in which the

microsystem operates. This might include institutional policies or communications and services.

Our study considered the various ecological systems of the learning environment that influence students' mental wellbeing. This approach recognizes the importance of social environments and systems on students' mental health and wellbeing. It also emphasizes the importance of students' subjective experiences, an emphasis that Wosnitza and Beltman (2012) said may be overemphasized in such approaches but that aligns with the need, identified above, to incorporate students' voices into the conversation about their wellbeing.

In addition, this study utilized a qualitative research approach that aligned with the socioecological perspective. Although the larger study incorporated a mixed methods approach, a qualitative approach was best suited to exploring students' subjective experience in the substudy (Cohen et al., 2011). It also allowed for students' own voices to be recognized (Cohen et al., 2011).

Data Collection

As part of the larger study, an electronic survey was designed to explore students' levels of psychological distress and positive wellbeing and to identify course-related factors that were associated with students' mental wellbeing. None of the questions were compulsory and participants could cease participation at any time. While the questions themselves were not expected to cause distress for students, the survey included clearly visible contact details to the university's psychological and counseling service, as well as links to websites that offer support and assistance for psychological wellbeing, such as those of Beyond Blue, Lifeline, and Orygen.

The survey was predominantly quantitative; however, it also included an open-ended question that collected qualitative data on students' own ideas about what the university could do to improve their wellbeing. This article derives from our analysis of the responses to this open-ended question.

Participants

The research team contacted the course coordinators of all schools and faculties at the university who then decided whether their students would participate in the study. Coordinators from 10 programs assented and shared the electronic survey with the students in their respective programs. A total of 1,233 international students responded to the survey, which represents a 27% response rate. Of these, 601 international students responded to the open-ended question about how their wellbeing could be

improved (see Table 1). The largest number of students were enrolled in undergraduate programs in science (25.8%) and commerce (23.5%), each comprising approximately one quarter of the sample. Postgraduates in engineering (18.5%) comprised the next most frequent cohort.

Table 1. Disciplinary Cohorts as Proportion of Sample ($n = 601$)

Course	n	%
Undergraduate	384	63.9&
Science	155	25.8%
Commerce	144	23.5%
Arts	55	9.2%
Biomedicine	27	4.5%
Fine arts	3	0.5%
Music	3	0.5%
Postgraduate	200	33.3%
Engineering	111	18.5%
Veterinary medicine	70	11.6%
Teaching	12	2.0%
Education	7	1.2%
Other course	17	2.8%

Data Analysis

Students' qualitative responses were coded, analyzed, and classified into seven categories pertaining to the student experience. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the aim to incorporate diverse student voices, all responses to this question were included in the study and analyzed.

In alignment with a socioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), students' responses were coded based on the domains of students' experiences where each suggestion was based (e.g., teaching and learning, student services, etc.). The guiding question in the coding process was the area of the university where a suggestion would be enacted. In addition, inductive coding was used for the specific suggestions in order to let students' responses drive the analysis (Cohen et al., 2011).

To ensure consistency in the coding, responses were independently recoded by a second researcher. Results between coders were compared and revised until there was 90% agreement in coding classifications between the coders. Agreement considered both the specific nature of the suggestion and the environmental dimension under which it was catego-

rized. Through an iterative process of comparison and classification (Cohen et al., 2011), the codes were finalized. Frequencies were calculated both for codes and categories.

The identified categories are represented in Table 2. The frequencies presented in the table represent the percentage of the 601 respondents who mentioned a suggestion relating to that category. It was possible that an individual respondent made multiple suggestions that each related to a different category, and so the percentages given for the categories are not cumulative. Furthermore, if a participant made multiple suggestions related to the same category, they were only counted once under the frequency for that category. A total of 750 discrete recommendations were identified. Categories under which at least 15% of respondents made comments are each discussed in the Results section next, followed by the implications of these findings as analyzed through a socioecological lens.

RESULTS

This section presents findings from the analyses of international students' suggestions for improving their wellbeing. For context, over one quarter of participants (29.8%) recorded a "severe" or "extremely severe" score on one or more of the subscales on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Although the percentage of international students reporting severe or extremely severe symptoms of psychological distress was similar to the percentage reported by the domestic students in the same study and to those found in other studies of university student populations (e.g., Larcombe et al., 2021; Naylor, 2020), it is significantly higher than the percentage of those reporting a severe or extremely severe score (5%–7%) in normative community samples (see Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). With so many international students reporting high levels of psychological distress, it is especially important to study their suggestions for how their wellbeing could be improved.

Teaching and Learning

The largest proportion of students (34.3%) mentioned that changes relating to teaching and learning would improve their wellbeing. They did not include comments related to learning spaces or general references to staff. Students' recommendations about aspects relating to teaching practice tended to focus on the quality of feedback, clarity of explanations, and perceived quality of lecture delivery. For example,

Table 2. Coding Categories for Student Recommendations

Category	Description	Frequency ($n = 601$)
Teaching & learning	Recommendations related to teachers and teaching practice; teacher attributes and characteristics; course design and curriculum; assessment; workload; student advice; and the academic calendar.	34.3%
Academic services	Recommendations related to developing stronger academic or language skills; improving or increasing existing student services; and awareness of existing services.	16.6%
Mental health support & skills	Recommendations related to supporting mental health; reduction of stigma associated with mental health; improving existing mental health services; and increasing students' skills in dealing with mental health issues.	16.0%
University community & relationships	Recommendations related to feeling part of the university community; making friends; building closer relationships with teachers, students, or staff; and bonding or fitting in.	15.6%
Finances	Recommendations related to students' financial circumstances; reducing the costs associated with university study; and requests for financial support.	6.3%
Orientation & organized activities	Recommendations related to helping new students transition to the university; increasing or improving planned campus activities; helping new students transition to the new culture; and increasing opportunities for students to socialize and relax.	6.2%
Employability & careers	Recommendations related to future career prospects; career services; development of practical skills; and existing employment opportunities.	5.3%

> Explain the knowledge during the lectures and not provide just one or two formulas without saying what we need to know in advance for that (like in math). (arts student)

> Tutors should engage more with the students instead of just blindly teaching or reading of the slides or notes that they have. (commerce student)

In addition to comments about teaching practice, there were also comments related to teachers' attitudes toward and approach to the students. For example, one participant wrote that it would be helpful if "teachers tried to form more personal relationships with students, even those who are shy/reserved" (science student). There were similar comments about the need for teachers to "genuinely care for students" (commerce student), and, specifically, to know their students' names. The following quote demonstrates the comments made about this sentiment:

> I feel my general sense of wellbeing would be improved if lecturers made more of an effort to get to know and engage with students. It's hard to feel valued and motivated when there is no interaction. (science student)

The last type of teacher-related recommendations focused on the role that teachers could play in facilitating interaction in the classroom. Such recommendations emphasized the importance of fostering interaction and connection among students in the learning environment, such as in the following quote:

> As there are only 20 students in class, I feel that there could be more group work and arrange us in different groups where we can have a chance to work with every classmate. This could help to improve our relationship with each classmate as we do not have much time to get to know each other during lectures. (fine arts student)

Under this category, many participants mentioned that there were not many opportunities for building connection through their learning experiences. Specifically, participants suggested "more class bonding in tutorials" (arts student) and more opportunities to establish deeper relationships with peers.

Students' comments about ways that teachers could improve students' wellbeing point to the strong role that the teacher has in students' learning experience, highlighting that the individual teacher "can make or

break a subject" (science student). These responses support the suggestion by Baik et al. (2019) that implementation of well-established best practices in teaching may help support student wellbeing within the learning environment.

Other suggestions about improvements related to teaching and learning referred to aspects of the curriculum and degree structure that were often outside individual teachers' control. They pertained primarily to matters of workload and elements of the course structure that students found stressful or unfair. For example, students commented on a lack of flexibility in attendance requirements, overlapping assessment schedules between subjects, and frustration with the academic calendar. A comment that was echoed by multiple respondents was that the workload was concentrated within too short and intense a period. Participants felt that it would be helpful if the workload were more balanced, both during the semester and across the length of the program; for example,

> I feel that students' general sense of wellbeing would be improved if assignments' deadlines across different subjects are not so close together, so as to allow us enough time to finish them properly. (commerce student)

It is notable that one third of participants felt that some change to the teaching and learning dimension would improve their wellbeing, and this prevalence further supports the role that the learning experience plays in international students' mental health and wellbeing.

Academic Services

The next most frequent category dealt with recommendations about academic services and skills-based support. Just over 16% of participants made comments that were included in this category, which pertained primarily to recommendations to improve such services and requests for improving specific skills such as time management and language skills. Some of the comments were requests for greater access to existing academic ser-vices. Other comments pertained specifically to the unique needs of inter-national students, including services to help develop English-language skills or assistance with understanding visa requirements and implications; for example,

> Provide more activities to help students develop English language skills for international students is a good way. (commerce student)

> More guidance specific to this course in the process of repeat-
> ing a year, especially for international students. Dealing with
> many steps in that process such as visas, re-enrolling, etc. (vet-
> erinary medicine student)

Although it is not surprising that students mentioned academic sup-
port services when answering a question about how the university could
better support their wellbeing, it is significant that these students men-
tioned that support with their academic skills would improve their wellbe-
ing. These responses therefore reinforce the importance of students' aca-
demic skills, preparedness, and success in supporting their wellbeing.
They also emphasize the importance of the microsystem of the learning
environment. Along with the comments about learning and teaching, de-
scribed above, these comments further indicate the considerable role that
students believe their learning experiences play in shaping their mental
wellbeing.

Mental Health Support and Skills

A similar proportion of participants (16%) made recommendations
that pertained specifically to mental health services and support. Students'
comments addressed both microlevel and macrolevel systems. For exam-
ple, students focused on the need for improvements in immediate services,
for better awareness of existing resources, and on the role of stigma and
university culture in mental health support.

A notable set of comments mentioned the need for better access to
the existing counseling services, that there were not enough appointment
slots available, and that the number of offered counseling sessions was too
small to be helpful. Other students felt that the services sufficed but that
awareness could be improved or that there was a need for more under-
standing of how to respond or manage mental health matters, such as in
the following comment:

> Outreach to students with mental health issues can be im-
> proved…Students going through depression often cannot iden-
> tify what they are experiencing let alone seek the help they re-
> quire…It is important not only to make these resources (coun-
> seling services, workshops) more readily available, but to make
> their presence known to students through more campus-
> wide awareness programs. (science student)

Some students pointed out the need for services to address the spe-
cific needs of international students; for example:

> I think my general sense of wellbeing would be improved if there are more workshops/consultations/psychology services that focus on international students' wellbeing, provide us with more knowledge/skills/information about how to integrate into the local society and how to confront the dilemmas that international students commonly have. (biomedicine student)

Despite the recent campaigns across universities to raise awareness of mental health difficulties, it seems that stigma remains a concern. Numerous students made suggestion about the importance of reducing the stigma around mental health challenges:

> Reducing stigma about not coping/mental illness. This is obviously hard to do since it seems to be ingrained in our society that being mentally ill equals failure. (commerce student)

> Internal pressures were talked about, things like anxiety and fear of failure and a constant second guessing of the self be discussed openly and in a helpful manner. Not like there's something wrong with you just that it's something some people struggle with and that there are ways to stop it from taking over you. (commerce student)

While the comments above were about societal stigma, others mentioned ways the university specifically could help reduce stigma, for example by offering "more events or activities catered to student wellbeing" (arts student) and "public lectures about stress and anxiety" (commerce student). In general, students requested more information, through explicit communication or the addition of specific lectures, both on aspects of mental wellbeing and on availability of existing resources.

University Community and Relationships

Another commonly mentioned issue (16% of respondents) pertained to students' sense of university community and their connection to it, further highlighting the importance of strong microsystem to support students' wellbeing. Students highlighted the importance of making friends, particularly local Australian friends, and of feeling understood and valued by teachers, classmates, and the university, such as in the following comment:

> International students who come to [X] University face a lot of loneliness. It is a time of great change and many students struggle to find emotional support they need to excel in school. It

> would be great if the university held more bonding camps or activities among students so that they have an opportunity to meet each other outside of class. (commerce student)

This supports research that "establishing friendships with local students is critical for reducing feelings of loneliness and homesickness" (Arthur, 2017, p. 891). Importantly, there was notable overlap between commentary on lack of belonging and experiences in the learning environment:

> I feel sense of belonging if all my classes are made up of people doing the same course with me, whom I will see every semester and get to know them better instead of just seeing them for one semester and the next semester I have to start over again and make new friends. (science student)

Among similar comments were recommendations for how changes to the learning environment could improve students' sense of connection to the university community and, in turn, their wellbeing, a link which the following science student describes poignantly:

> A simple fix? Tutorials that aren't 300 student lectures guided by quick poll questions. Giving students an opportunity to connect in the context of their academic studies aids learning and engenders a greater sense of community and belonging. It's not difficult to see how a stronger sense of community may contribute to better student wellbeing. (science student)

The responses under this category provide important insight into the ways that students believe their sense of connection to the university and relationships with peers is related to their wellbeing. Importantly, they also support the significant role that the learning environment plays in developing that sense of connection and, ultimately, influencing their wellbeing.

Other Suggestions

Other comments, made by a smaller proportion of students, included recommendations related to students' finances, orientation and organized activities, and employability and career matters. Of note, only a small proportion of students made suggestions pertaining to finances and employment prospects (6% and 5%, respectively). This challenges previous research in Australia that found that half of international university students feel distressed over their financial circumstances (Arkoudis et al., 2018) and that financial pressures were associated with students' increased risk

of mental health difficulties (Orygen, 2017). It was possible that students did not view these aspects as being within the role of universities to manage and, therefore, offered suggestions instead for the areas where they felt change was possible. The predominance of recommendations related specifically to learning and course experience support previous findings that students' experiences in the teaching and learning environment can influence their wellbeing. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of the microlevel systems within the university context.

DISCUSSION

Our study confirms that the main area where universities could enhance the wellbeing of international students is through improving their course experiences. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory and the fundamental role that the environment plays, not only in terms of the context itself but a person's interaction with the environment, in this case the learning and teaching environments in students' courses. Like other studies (e.g., Larcombe et al., 2021; Naylor, 2020) that have shown a strong connection between course experience and wellbeing, our study shows that a significant portion of international students believe that aspects of their immediate environment could be improved to better support their wellbeing. Our study further supports and expands that idea by emphasizing the role of social relationships within that microsystem, including relationships with teaching staff.

From the student perspective, university teachers have the potential to enhance and support student mental wellbeing, and, conversely, to have a negative effect on wellbeing. In our study, the most frequently mentioned suggestions for improving their wellbeing were related to academic teachers and the kinds of teaching and learning environments they created. Their approachability and demonstrated interest in students are perceived to be important in improving student wellbeing. Prior research has also identified approaches to enhancing student wellbeing through intentional curriculum design and wellbeing-supportive teaching practices (e.g., Baik et al., 2017). Our study supported these findings and further demonstrated that "good" teaching practices can reduce students' stress and support their overall sense of wellbeing, as also suggested by Baik et al. (2019).

In addition, findings from this study reinforce the relationship between students' sense of belonging and their wellbeing. International students' sense of belonging has been raised as a critical issue by several researchers (e.g., Arkoudis et al., 2019; Gomes & Tran, 2017), and, as discussed above, international students' vulnerability during the recent pan-

demic has highlighted the importance of investigating their senses of belonging, isolation, and wellbeing. Specifically, findings from the study presented in this article further emphasize the benefit of fostering a sense of belonging within the learning environment. Academic educators have a key role to play in fostering students' sense of belonging to their class and learning community. Research suggests that students' sense of belonging is strengthened when teachers show interest in students and create welcoming and empathic learning environments (Wilson et al., 2018).

Implications for Universities

The findings from our study offer important insight for university educators and administrators into how international students' mental wellbeing can be better supported. In particular, understanding the perspectives of international students can have important implications for design and provision of university programs (Shadowden et al., 2019). This study highlights the significance of the teaching and learning contexts and students' interactions with teachers and peers within the learning environment. In the mid- and postpandemic context where much teaching and learning continues to take place remotely, it will be even more challenging for universities to foster a sense of community and to help international students feel a sense of belonging to the university. To support and enhance students' subjective wellbeing, ongoing purposeful attention to students' own perspectives and bolstering of students' voices will be particularly important.

Our study also highlights the importance of universities finding ways to enhance and stabilize the microsystems of the learning environment during times of considerable change. Findings from this study suggest that the microlevel systems are important for students' mental wellbeing; how-ever, they are also elements that might be most directly affected by change, such as the opportunities for interaction with teachers and classmates.

Another well-known challenge for institutions is ensuring that those in need of support seek help and access the services. However, contrary to other studies (e.g., Shadowen et al., 2019; Skromanis et al., 2018) that sug-gest international students are less likely than domestic students to seek assistance for mental-health related issues, the larger study from which this article derived (Larcombe et al., 2021) found that a higher proportion of international students utilized the university's services for mental well-being than domestic students. Such findings make exploring students' per-spectives, as presented in this article, especially important because they offer insight into how to support student wellbeing beyond providing ac-cess to wellbeing services.

CONCLUSION

By seeking international students' own suggestions, this exploratory study elevates students' voices and illuminates elements of the social and institutional dimensions of the university context that could better support their mental wellbeing.

Although these findings contribute to improving our understanding of international student wellbeing, our study was limited primarily by its single-institution design and by the single-question source of data. These two aspects meant that it was not possible to ask students for elaboration or clarification of their suggestions. In addition, this study was conducted in a prepandemic context, and, although there are valuable insights for institutions to consider, it is possible that some of the students' ideas, needs, and suggestions might have changed.

Future research would be needed to add more nuance to these findings. For example, our understanding of international students' mental health and wellbeing would benefit additionally from future research that explored the perspectives of international student subgroups and those in remote or regional universities. Considering differences across disciplines may provide additional insights. It would also be useful to explore students' perspectives and suggestions post the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of the large body of research on the unique issues and challenges experienced by international students, the findings in this study suggest that a greater focus on improving learning and course experiences is key to better supporting international student mental wellbeing. Incorporating the international student voice more strongly into the conversation around student wellbeing is an important step in meeting this aim.

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