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Understanding the Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities within the International Student Life Cycle

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ABSTRACT: *The rising number of international students in higher education offers many benefits but presents challenges to students, including adapting to independent living, academic and social acculturation, and financial pressures. These challenges can affect students' mental health, academic engagement, and overall well-being. Despite universities offering various support services, their utilization remains inconsistent. This study explored the perspectives of academics, students, and international marketing representatives on international student experiences in health programs at an Australian university via a qualitative, two-phase approach, including focus groups and a co-design process to identify solutions. The study moved beyond traditional academic and counseling perspectives by incorporating international marketing representatives as transition brokers alongside students, alumni, and academics. Three key themes emerged: student support services, learning and teaching experiences, and employability. Strengths within these themes included assignment support, peer mentoring, and career development, whereas challenges involved access to psychosocial support, accommodation, and financial aid. Concerns about program recognition internationally and flexibility were also noted. Strengthening international partnerships was identified as a solution to these concerns. The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive support services that address academic, health, personal well-being, and employability needs throughout the student lifecycle. Importantly, both students and staff must be aware of these services and how to access them.*

Keywords: Acculturation, International Students, Student Lifecycle, Student Support, Student Transition

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students who cross international borders for study, increasing from 2 million in 2000 to 6.9 million in 2022, which has been accompanied by a diversification of host countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024; Jin et al., 2021). The growing international reputation of universities outside of the traditional destination countries of the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada and the expanding number of those universities offering programs taught in English, combined with greater affordability of fees and living expenses, geographical accessibility and cultural closeness, will continue this trend (Davey, 2023; Galloway et al., 2020; Hu & McKay, 2012; Jianvittayakit, 2012; Jin et al., 2021).

Studying overseas offers high-quality, internationally recognized courses and migration pathways while fostering personal growth, intercultural competence, and improved employment outcomes (Bodycott, 2012; Davey, 2023; Davey et al., 2013). The host institution and country also benefit in numerous ways, including exposure of domestic students to global perspectives, increased revenue streams, development of a workforce to fill local skills gaps, and extension of influence (Bodycott, 2012; Davey, 2023). Alongside the increase in international enrollment, universities across the globe are becoming increasingly dependent on international students as a key revenue stream and for global ranking competitiveness. Compared with domestic tuition fees, international student fees often contribute disproportionately to institutional budgets, making this demographic vital to the financial sustainability of many universities. As such, the ability to attract, retain, and support international students has become a strategic priority across higher education sectors. This shift necessitates a deep understanding of the international student lifecycle and institutional readiness to respond to the evolving needs of this diverse student group.

Despite the potential benefits of studying in a foreign country, international students face challenges. They may be living away from home for the first time and adapting to independent living, which can lead to loneliness, homesickness or financial pressures (Bodycott, 2012; Li et al., 2013; Owen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021). At the same time, they face the challenge of adapting to living in a different culture where the values, beliefs, expectations, norms, and cultural practices may be very different from what they are accustomed to (Bodycott, 2012; Jin et al., 2021; Li et al., 2013; Owen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021). They could also potentially face issues such as xenophobia and difficulty finding paid work (Zevallos, 2012) and/or be vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace (Outhred & Chester, 2013). In the academic sphere, they may need to adapt to different learning styles and expectations, become more self-directed, face the challenge of studying in a nonnative language, and struggle to engage with fellow students and teaching staff (Outhred & Chester, 2013; Owen et al., 2017; Rivas et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021; Wang & Bai, 2021; Xing & Bolden, 2019). All of these factors have the potential to impact psycho-social development, mental health, engagement with study, and/or academic grade (Cena et al., 2021; Davey et al., 2013; Jin et al., 2021; Owen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

The impact of the factors discussed above on any individual depends on a range of personality and interpersonal factors, including their motivation to study abroad and willingness to adapt to the host culture (Jin et al., 2021; Tran, 2009; Wang et al., 2021). It could also be influenced by the closeness of culture between the home and host countries and the level of expectation of society that foreigners adopt local culture (Jin et al., 2021). Given the trend toward greater diversification of host countries, there will be ever more nuanced dynamics between student and host country factors, which will impact students as they transition to, through, and beyond university. Much of the current literature focuses on Asian students transitioning to Western universities and may not necessarily reflect the experiences of students outside of this paradigm. Hence, it is important to understand the local context, as each university has a different blend of cultures depending on its geographical location, staff background, and student mix. Additionally, university staff often juggle the dual responsibility of academic instruction and student support. Faculty may not always have the training or cultural competence to identify or address the specific needs of international students. This underscores the importance of institution-wide awareness, professional development, and integrated support structures that embed international student well-being into the everyday operations of academic departments (Davey, 2023; Leask, 2013). The presence of international students can enrich the academic experience for all, but deliberate pedagogical and institutional adaptations are needed to foster equity and belonging (Davey, 2023; Leask, 2013). An important, and often overlooked, aspect of international student support is the role of the international marketing team, which is often the first point of contact for prospective students, parents, agents, and school counsellors. They play a key role in advising prospective students and their representatives

prior to university entrance, and these relationships can endure once the student commences their studies.

The student lifecycle is characterized by four crucial stages in the university journey: the transition toward university; the transition into the university environment; the transition through the university experience; and, finally, the transitions upward, away from, and back to the university (Matheson, 2018). International students need support through this lifecycle to help them with the unique challenges that they face. Support mechanisms include predeparture briefings, orientation week, tailored introductory courses, student counseling, career services, community engagement, language support, clubs and societies, and peer mentoring (Bodycott, 2012; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005; Outhred & Chester, 2013; Wang & Bai, 2021; Zevallos, 2012).

Despite the increasing provision of these services by educational institutions, their utilization by international students is mixed. Students from Asian backgrounds tend to underutilize mental health counseling services (Gonzales, 2001; Li et al., 2013), and the use of peer-mentoring services is generally low (Outhred & Chester, 2013). This may be due to cultural influences, a preference for relying on family and close friends for support, stigma, lack of awareness, or a belief that such services are only for those with severe problems. However, they are more willing to seek support for academic issues, with females being more likely to seek support than males are (Gonzales, 2001; Li et al., 2013). Given these complexities, universities must adopt a holistic and student-centered approach that not only ensures the availability of support services but also fosters a culture of help-seeking, trust, and community belonging. Co-designing support initiatives with international students, regularly evaluating their effectiveness, and ensuring they are accessible and culturally appropriate are critical to improving the overall student experience. More nuanced research that captures the voices of students, staff, and institutional representatives is vital in designing sustainable, responsive strategies.

This study is grounded in Schlossberg's transition theory, which conceptualizes transitions as events or non-events that result in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles, with four sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (the 4S) (Schlossberg, 1981). We adapt the 4S system to the international student lifecycle, recognizing concurrent academic, sociocultural, and logistical transitions of varying impact. We further integrate complementary lenses from acculturation (Berry, 1997), stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), student integration and persistence (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993), cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001), and ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to capture multilevel influences (micro to macro) on appraisal, coping, belonging, and outcomes.

Within this framework, the study aimed to explore the challenges, student support, and opportunities in relation by international students enrolled in various health programs at an Australian university. The research questions explored were as follows:

- (1) What do academics, students and university marketing representatives perceive as the strengths of the systems that are currently in place to support an international student's lifecycle?
- (2) What do academics, students and university marketing representatives perceive as the challenges of the systems that are currently in place to support an international student's lifecycle?
- (3) What are the opportunities to improve the experience of the international students through their lifecycle?

For the purpose of this study, an international student is defined as a student enrolled at an Australian university who is not a citizen or permanent resident of Australia or a New Zealand citizen and is studying under a valid student visa.

METHOD

Study Design

The study was carried out in two phases, both of which were conducted on the same day, to gain insights into key aspects of the student lifecycle and to identify potential strategies related to the issues impacting retention, well-being, cultural diversity, and employability. Phase 1 employed a qualitative approach involving focus groups of international students, university academics, and university international marketing representatives (offshore and onshore) to answer research question 1. Phase 2 used the same participants but employed the principles of co-design to address research questions 2 and 3.

Setting

The study was conducted as a part of the annual Global International Summit at a large Australian university. Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by the University's Human Ethics Research Committee (GU Ref No: 2023/431).

Participants

The participant cohort in this study comprised representatives from various sectors within the university. All university international marketing representatives, representing different geographical regions, both onshore and offshore, attending the summit were recruited for the study. Additionally, the study included a balanced representation of international postgraduate students, alumni, and academic staff involved in teaching and supporting international students. Together, this brought together participants who were able to provide insights into each stage of the student lifecycle. Recruitment for the study was conducted via email, with voluntary participation and informed consent.

Data collection

During Phase 1 of the study, data were collected through focus groups with the three different cohorts. The focus group was led by the project leaders (authors MV and SK), who used the situation, task, action, and results (STAR) framework to gather responses. The participants were asked to document a challenging situation they faced during the International Student's Lifecycle and then describe the actions they took and the results achieved. The focus group moderators played a crucial role as facilitators, establishing the framework of the international student lifecycle component and guiding the direction of the group discussions. It was important to keep the marketing representatives in their regional groups for this phase, as the situations that arise during an international student's lifecycle can be quite specific to a particular region.

In Phase 2 of the study, focus groups were conducted with the same group of people. The focus group discussions were guided by the principles of codesign using the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) framework. The aim was to identify the perceived barriers to and facilitators of an international student's experience and to generate ideas for opportunities and aspirations to enhance their overall experience. The participants were also prompted to discuss and write about the potential results that could stem from the new opportunities. Authors MV and SK led the focus group to ensure consistency in data collection. The marketing representatives were randomly redistributed into new focus groups to encourage the exchange of diverse cultural perspectives and problem-solving approaches. This randomization was crucial in breaking down cultural silos and broadening participants' understanding of the diverse cultural contexts and challenges faced by international students and staff from various countries.

The STAR (situation–task–action–result) prompting structure was used to elicit structured participant narratives and was aligned with Schlossberg's transition theory (4S system). Specifically, situation captures the nature and controllability of participants' transitions; task foregrounds role demands and cognitive appraisals; action reflects coping strategies and mobilization of personal and institutional resources; and results reveal short- and longer-term outcomes, including engagement, well-being, and adaptation.

In Phase 2, the SOAR (Strengths–Opportunities–Aspirations–Results) codesign framework was employed to translate analytic insights into actionable interventions. Conceptually, SOAR maps onto transition theory by foregrounding self-support resources (strengths), identifying ecological enablers and constraints (opportunities), articulating desired identity, belonging, and progression trajectories (aspirations), and specifying practice-level outcomes (results).

Used sequentially, STAR and SOAR function as complementary analytic logics, enabling participant accounts to be systematically mapped to theoretically grounded domains, thematically coded, and compared across cohorts while supporting translation from theory to practice.

Data Analysis

Data derived from two phases, the STAR and SOAR activities, were analyzed through manual theme coding. Given the manageable size of the datasets, Microsoft Excel was employed for the coding process. The process was iterative, involving sorting and grouping participant responses into thematic categories, thus facilitating the recognition of similarities and variances. This manual theme coding approach was particularly targeted at garnering diverse perspectives on the international student lifecycle, especially themes concerning support services, employability, retention, and student engagement. The data were first independently analyzed by the third author (AC), who was not involved in the data collection process, to allow unbiased interpretation of the data. All findings were subsequently reviewed by the entire research team, and any discrepancies in data interpretation were resolved through discussion, ensuring the integrity and reliability of the research findings.

Methodological rigor and trustworthiness were supported through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, reflexivity, and analytic saturation. Authors MV and SK led the data collection, whereas Author AC, independent of the data collection, conducted initial coding to support reflexivity. Coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively, with disagreements resolved by consensus. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across STAR-guided focus groups and SOAR-based codesign phases. Analytic saturation was indicated by repeated themes across stakeholder groups, with no new themes emerging in later analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 33 participants completed this study, consisting of three groups of subjects: the university's international marketing representatives, academic staff, and international students/alumni. See Table 1 for further details on the participant characteristics and the importance of each of the groups to the study.

Data from the activities of both phases were collated and analyzed together to understand the strengths and challenges of the mechanisms currently in place to support an international student's lifecycle, and to identify opportunities to enhance these mechanisms. Three primary themes were identified: employability, student support services, and learning and teaching experience. Employability (E) is described as a multidimensional, lifelong, and life-wide phenomenon. It is not just a one-time achievement or a static state but an ongoing, evolving set of skills, experiences, and attributes that individuals develop and maintain throughout their lives and in various contexts (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Student support services (SSSs) refer to the array of tools and services provided to maximize students' university experience, including academic, health and well-being, and personal support, which can be accessed to ensure the best outcomes during their time at the university.

Table 1 Overview of the study participants and the rationale for their inclusion in the study

Participants	Role in the University Student's Lifecycle	Reasons for inclusion in the study
University's Marketing Representatives (n = 24)	Involved in the marketing and recruitment of international students and representing diverse geographical regions – both onshore and offshore. Specifically, they belonged to 6 different regions and their distribution was as below: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater China (n=4).• South Asia and the Middle East (n=6).• SEAPAC (Southeast Asia and Pacific) (n=6).• Mature Markets (Europe, North America, Japan, South Korea) (n=4).• Emerging Markets (Africa, Latin America) (n=4).	Possess substantial experience in attracting international students from various global locations. Often a first point of contact for prospective students and their families and/or agents, and this relationship may continue once the student enters the university.
University Academics (n=3)	Teaching staff including lecturers and professors who held service role of International Lead for their respective disciplines.	Active involvement in the international student lifecycle, enabling them to offer authentic and valuable insights into the existing circumstances.
International Students and Alumni (n=6)	Current postgraduate students and alumni.	Able to provide a student perspective, including the transition away from the university phase of the student lifecycle.

Learning and teaching experience (LTE) accounts for the comprehensive interaction between students and faculty within an educational setting,

encompassing academic experiences, faculty expertise, curriculum flexibility, and practical learning opportunities to enhance both types of knowledge.

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The three key questions (strengths, challenges and opportunities) are aligned with the key themes (SSS, E and LTE) (see Figure 1). The findings are presented on the basis of three key questions.

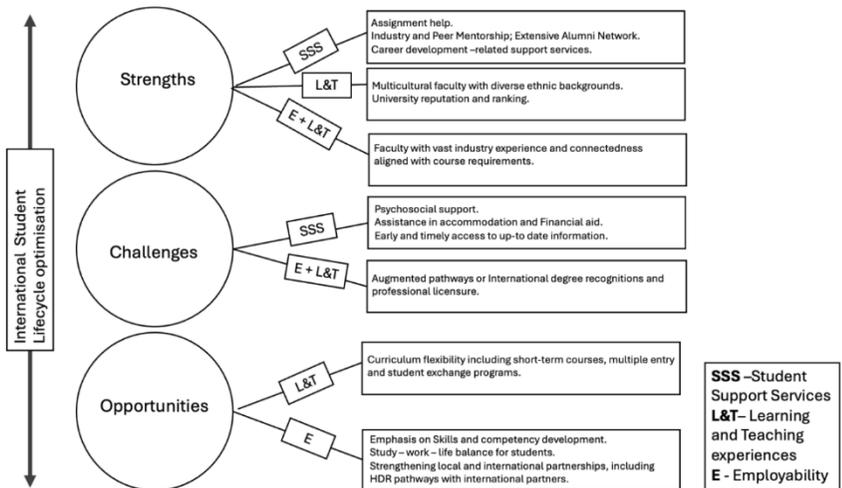


Figure 1: Themes found in the qualitative analysis

Strengths

Distinct strengths were identified under the themes of Student Support Services (SSS) and Learning and Teaching Environment (LTE), with some overlap between the themes of Employment (E) and LTE. Under the theme of SSS, the strengths included assistance with assignments, industry mentorship opportunities, diverse and inclusive peer-assisted study sessions, student mentorships, and extensive alumni networking. Additionally, the participants agreed that career development-related support services, including career fairs, resume enhancement workshops, and various career development opportunities, were beneficial. Career fairs were highlighted as providing platforms to explore and engage with diverse organizations, offering first-hand information on employer expectations.

“Resume improvement workshops every trimester are very helpful.”
“Career fairs to connect with industry.”

The LTE theme identified study sites and multicultural faculty with diverse ethnic backgrounds as strengths. In addition, university reputation and ranking were perceived as key strengths.

“University ranking/reputation attracts prospective international students.”
“Multicultural/Award-winning academics”

In the overlapping themes of E and LTE, strengths included faculty with vast industry experience and connectedness aligned with course requirements. These factors were reported to enhance the level of engagement and quality of learning. Furthermore, they were also found to contribute to future employability prospects.

“Most of the teachers have 10+ years of experience + some are still working in the field.”

Challenges

Like strengths, distinct challenges were identified under the theme of SSS, with some overlap between the themes of E and LTE. Within the SSS theme, the participants expressed a strong need for enhanced emotional support upon their arrival in Australia. Despite the university offering mental health services and counseling sessions, there was a desire for more comprehensive and prioritized mental well-being support, especially during periods of heightened academic stress or personal challenges. Difficulty in accessing these services and the sparsity of tailored mental health services accommodating the diverse needs of the student body were reported.

“Poor living arrangement and no emotional support”

While the university extends support to students' personal lives, offering scholarships and bursaries for financial aid and assisting in finding accommodations to enhance their Australian living experience, one notable challenge that was raised was the accessibility of information on the university's websites. The participants expressed a desire for more diligent research and up-to-date information on these platforms before they were officially recommended by the university. This feedback stems from past negative experiences some students have experienced. Additionally, it was highlighted that there is a need to provide more personalized information which should be shared as a part of preorientation prior to departing from their country of origin.

“Need to improve the website.”

“More personalized support, for example, where is the nearest supermarket, where to shop”

Across the overlapping themes, concerns were raised about improved international degree recognition, which would facilitate licensure in students' home countries and offer a compelling rationale for international representatives to market the university. It was suggested that stronger international partnerships could facilitate a more streamlined licensing process, fostering trust in the university's education and easing students' postgraduate pathways.

“Schools need to build international networks + databases of where grads are going + of how to get recognition in each country.”

Opportunities

Opportunities were identified under the themes of LTE and E. Participants expressed a keen interest in more short-term courses, such as graduate certificates, programs with multiple intakes, and increased opportunities to study abroad. These enhancements provide greater flexibility and choices in program selection, leading to a more dynamic and adaptable curriculum structure.

“More short-term courses – duration & diversity.”

“Offer more PGs on campus programs.”

Furthermore, while the university's work-integrated learning sessions were highly regarded for offering invaluable hands-on experience that enriched students' knowledge, skills, and professional networks, opportunities for more flexibility in these programs were highlighted. Suggestions included flexibility in the selection and allocation of placements, considering factors such as travel time and shift schedules that support study–work–life balance for students. The dialog consistently emphasized the importance of developing a robust set of skills and competencies for successful career advancements post-graduation.

Opportunities for improvement were highlighted in integrating transferable skills into the curriculum to ensure that students were job-ready upon graduation. The participants expressed a desire for increased global engagement by the university to bolster international connections. Additionally, participants advocated for the strengthening of local and international corporate partnerships to provide a wider array of internship opportunities and to further enhance the global recognition and appeal of the university's degrees. Likewise, opportunities were recognized in strengthening higher-degree research pathways with international partners to enhance global partnerships and employability outcomes.

“Strategize Global WIL and Exchange programs for students”.

“Schools need to build international networks and create databases of graduate destinations and guides for international recognition.”

DISCUSSION

This study employed qualitative methodologies that involved focus group discussions to provide in-depth and multifaceted insights into the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders actively involved in the lifecycle of international students. The qualitative nature of this approach, facilitated through small, interactive group settings, allowed for a rich exploration of participants' perceptions and ideas (Nyumba et al., 2018). This fostered a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. The involvement of multiple authors (SK, MV), along with one independent analyst (AC), ensured a balanced and unbiased interpretation of the data.

This study provides valuable insights into the need for comprehensive student support services, including academic, health, and personal well-being services. It underscores the importance of accessible and tailored support mechanisms, advocating for policies that prioritize student well-being and integration (Wiedermann et al., 2023). A key area identified for improvement is psychosocial support, which requires accessible services, especially during periods of heightened stress, the need for which has further increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Dingle et al., 2024; Marangell & Baik, 2022; Morris et al., 2020). While the students acknowledged the importance of the existing support services, navigating the university website to identify and access relevant support was reported to be challenging. This raises the question of whether there is an overreliance on orientation week (O-week), where information regarding support systems is traditionally provided to students (Chen et al., 2020; Sawir et al., 2008).

O-week is a busy and exciting time for new students with activities, including meeting fellow students and faculty; ensuring that you are enrolled in the right classes; learning to access library and IT resources; working out how to find classrooms and other campus facilities; engaging with clubs, societies and professional organizations; and settling into new residences; working out how to

use local transport; and becoming accustomed to living away from home. Information overload during O-week often leads to details being forgotten, highlighting the need for sustained onboarding.

Analyses of agent–university relationships indicate that market-facing agents significantly shape student expectations and decision-making (Raimo et al., 2021; Salema et al., 2025; Xue & Wu, 2025). Hence, the marketing team’s early interaction with prospective students can lay the groundwork for a comprehensive support framework. Marketing representatives play a crucial role in providing holistic support beyond just recruitment. This can include informal counseling of students and their parents about academic and cultural adaptation and the availability of support services through highly structured predeparture briefings. A distinctive contribution of this study is the systematic inclusion of international marketing staff (regional and onshore) as lifecycle actors—first contact points who advise students and families and maintain relationships post-enrollment. The international literature largely focuses on student, academic, and counseling perspectives; by foregrounding marketing teams, our study introduces the role that these staff undertake as transition brokers: facilitating pre-departure briefings, informal counseling on cultural adaptation, and country-specific advice on recognition pathways. This widens the institutional lens beyond recruitment into holistic support.

Moreover, universities recognize that student support is not a one-off activity but an ongoing process. As students progress through their academic lifecycle, their needs evolve. Initial concerns such as housing and enrollment may lead to more complex needs related to academic support, career planning, and mental health well-being. Periodic check-ins, targeted communications at milestone points (e.g., first major assessment, middle semester, and end of year), and the ability of students to self-navigate support systems are strategies that could improve sustained engagement. A centralized online student support hub with intuitive navigation and multilingual content could help reduce the obstacles that international students currently face when seeking help. Leveraging technology for 24/7 support and using predictive analytics to identify students at risk of disengagement could further enhance institutional responsiveness.

Following O-week, academic mentoring, peer mentoring and/or buddy systems can be helpful, but it is important that academics, professional staff and mentors who interact with students are aware of the support systems available and how to access them. This is seldom the case because university systems are often fragmented, which creates accessibility challenges (Davey, 2023; Martirosyan et al., 2019). One initiative recently trialed by the author (AD) is an incentivized mid-semester survey that promotes and provides links to key resources as students move through the survey. The timing of the activity is intended to highlight the support services at a time when students are more aware of areas where they may need support, whether academic, health, social or financial. This strategy could assist in making systems more amalgamated and bespoke.

Within the theme of learning and teaching experiences, faculty from diverse ethnic backgrounds are seen as strengths and have previously been highlighted as

key factors in international student experiences (Davey, 2023). The challenges around degree flexibility, including a lack of multiple entry pathways, limited opportunities for exchange, and short courses, are not uncommon for programs within a health faculty where this study took place (Davey, 2023). A combination of stringent accreditation requirements, alongside logistical and legal constraints in relation to work integrated learning (WIL), means that health programs can have a very prescribed structure that is difficult to change within an accreditation cycle. However, the constraints placed on curricula vary among accrediting bodies depending on whether they are outcome oriented or content oriented. Similarly, the concerns highlighted in this study around international professional recognition of health programs are well known (Davey, 2023). With close to 100 health programs within the university, drawing students from 130 different countries, mapping professional recognition for all possible scenarios is a major challenge, which is further compounded by a lack of transparency by many international accreditation agencies. Furthermore, there is not always consistency in the recognition of professional degrees from different Australian institutions by foreign accreditation bodies, and this situation is further amplified for prospective students considering different study destinations globally. This creates the potential for stress and confusion for students considering options for studying professional degrees overseas. While there have been attempts to map international recognition of our health programs with some limited success, this finding highlights the importance of regional marketing teams being able to provide local knowledge and the value of alumni who are able to be examples of successful transitions from the Australian degree to professional practice within their home country. The authors have also seen first-hand the positive effects of engaging with industry and educational institutions within a country on gaining recognition of professional programs in those countries, a point that came through from the participants of this study.

The importance of alumni as cultural and professional bridges cannot be overstated. Institutions should consider investing in structured alumni mentorship programs, where international graduates mentor incoming students from the same country or region. These relationships can be instrumental in easing the transition, setting realistic expectations, and fostering long-term institutional loyalty. Alumni also serve as credible ambassadors for the quality and transferability of education received, which can be leveraged in both student recruitment and employer engagement within students' home countries. Additionally, strengthening partnerships with international employers, professional associations, and government bodies could help streamline the recognition of qualifications and create pathways for transnational employment.

The employment outcomes of health graduates in Australia are generally very strong, including for international students whose success rate of finding employment within 4 months of graduation is comparable to that of domestic students (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2023). Current employability initiatives, such as resume building, developing interview skills, and career fairs, are all useful. Students also gain substantial benefit in terms of

skills development and building professional networks from extended WIL placements during their program of study (Xu et al. 2025). However, these placements are mostly within the Australian context, and this study highlighted a desire to have more opportunities for international placements to enhance graduate employability in their home country or elsewhere internationally. Notwithstanding the constraints placed on professional programs by some accrediting bodies discussed above, where it is possible for students to undertake a recognized placement with an overseas partner, this is likely to enhance their long-term career outcomes (Davey, 2023).

Therefore, institutions need to consider the necessity of international students adapting to local practices and culture while simultaneously providing opportunities and support that will equip them to enter the global job market by building connections with industry and communities both locally and internationally. The findings also emphasize the importance of enhancing the knowledge and awareness of university staff about the unique cultural and academic experiences of international students. The staff that participated in this study had a specific interest in international students, and their insights may not be representative of the broader university. Therefore, it is important to ensure that all staff who work with international students understand the challenges faced by these students and the influence of culture on learning styles and class interactions. This raises the need for more professional development initiatives focused on intercultural competence for academic and administrative staff. These programs should provide not only theoretical understanding but also practical strategies for inclusive curriculum design, assessment, and communication styles. Embedding intercultural awareness as a core competency within teaching and support roles could foster more empathetic and responsive institutional cultures. Furthermore, encouraging the co-creation of curricula with international students through feedback loops, advisory panels, or student-staff partnerships can result in more authentic, student-centered learning environments.

It is also important to integrate opportunities into the curriculum through teaching activities and assignments to develop transferable skills, capabilities, and attributes that support international students' adaptation to diverse contexts (Davey, 2023; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Embedding authentic, real-world tasks such as case studies, simulations, and collaborative projects can foster critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and problem-solving skills that are essential in both local and international work environments (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2017). Moreover, aligning assessment tasks with global competencies and offering reflective components can encourage students to connect their learning with personal and professional growth, better preparing them for dynamic and multicultural settings.

The findings of this study can be interpreted through Schlossberg's transition theory and the complementary lenses of acculturation and ecological systems. International students experience multiple, concurrent transitions—academic, sociocultural, and logistical—across their lifecycle, each requiring appraisal and coping strategies (Schlossberg, 1981; Anderson et al., 2012). Early

challenges such as housing, cultural adjustment, and mental health reflect high-stress situations with limited controllability, increasing vulnerability during entry stages (Morris et al., 2020; Sawir et al., 2008). While academic and employability support aligns with problem-focused coping and is widely utilized, psychosocial support remains underused due to cultural stigma and a lack of tailored delivery (Chen et al., 2020; Gonzales, 2001; Li et al., 2013). This underscores the influence of “Self” factors and cultural norms on help-seeking behavior (Berry, 1997; Zhao & Bava Harji, 2024). At the institutional level, fragmented systems and information overload during orientation hinder sustained engagement, highlighting the need for ongoing, adaptive support rather than one-off interventions (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Outhred & Chester, 2013). From an ecological perspective, macrolevel constraints such as rigid accreditation and global licensing regimes restrict curricular flexibility and international recognition, whereas microlevel enablers—marketing teams and alumni networks—emerge as critical bridges for cultural adaptation and employability (Davey, 2023; Xu et al., 2025). These dynamics illustrate that effective strategies must integrate culturally sensitive student support initiatives, structured alumni mentorship, and global partnerships to address evolving needs across the student lifecycle and foster belonging, resilience, and career readiness (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

A notable strength of this study lies in its unique summit setting and the diversity of participants involved. Conducting the research during the Global International Summit enabled cross-functional engagement in a single forum, bringing together international students, alumni, academics, and marketing representatives who rarely interact collectively. However, the summit setting may have created an environment of heightened institutional awareness and collegiality, encouraging participants to present more positive or aspirational views of existing systems rather than candid critiques. Furthermore, the compressed timeframe and group-based format may have limited opportunities for deep individual reflection, resulting in data that reflect consensus-driven perspectives rather than nuanced personal experiences. These contextual factors should be considered when the findings and their transferability beyond this setting are interpreted.

Although the inclusion of international students adds strength by incorporating first-hand insights, the self-selection of participants already engaged in university-led activities may have introduced a response bias toward more informed or proactive individuals. Additionally, the qualitative design, while well suited for exploring complex and nuanced experiences, limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context of this study.

Future research could enhance these insights by incorporating individual interviews, which may elicit more personal or sensitive experiences that are less likely to surface in group settings. Longitudinal designs that follow international students across different stages of their academic lifecycle would provide a deeper

understanding of evolving needs and challenges. Comparative studies across faculties, institutions, or countries would also enrich the evidence base. Finally, future work could evaluate the impact of codesigned interventions trialed over time, with a focus on measurable outcomes related to student well-being, retention, and global employability.

Implications

The findings of this study offer transferable strategies for universities globally. Support systems should move from event-based onboarding to stage-sensitive interventions: a model adaptable across higher education systems. Milestone-triggered communications, multilingual digital hubs, and embedded navigation scaffolds can be implemented in any institution to normalize help-seeking and reduce fragmentation.

Employability strategies must extend beyond local job markets. Institutions worldwide can adopt recognition capital frameworks, including licensure maps, alumni mentorship, and international work-integrated learning (WIL) to prepare students for transnational careers. These approaches are particularly relevant for regulated professions but can be adapted for all fields.

Finally, the inclusion of international marketing staff as transition brokers is a globally applicable innovation. Formalizing their role in predeparture briefings, cultural adaptation guidance and recognition advice, bridges recruitment and retention, offering a model for integrated lifecycle support across national systems. Collectively, these strategies provide a scalable blueprint for fostering belonging, resilience, and global career readiness in diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study extends the literature on international student support by moving beyond traditional emphases on academic and counseling services to foreground the entire student lifecycle and the institutional actors who shape it. While prior research has largely focused on student and faculty perspectives, our findings introduce the novel inclusion of international marketing representatives as transition brokers—the first points of contact that influence expectations, provide cultural adaptation guidance, and support recognition pathways. By integrating Schlossberg’s transition theory with complementary lenses of acculturation and ecological systems, this study offers a theoretically anchored framework for stage-sensitive interventions that address evolving needs across the entry, progression, and exit phases. Furthermore, the codesign approach highlights actionable strategies such as milestone-triggered onboarding, culturally responsive mental health initiatives, and recognition capital frameworks (e.g., licensure maps, alumni mentorship, and global WIL placements) to increase employability and belonging. These contributions provide a scalable blueprint for universities seeking to move from fragmented event-based support toward holistic, lifecycle-

oriented systems that foster resilience and global career readiness in increasingly diverse higher education contexts.

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