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## **Resilience of International Students during a Global Pandemic: An Australian Context**

Hyacinth Udah  
*James Cook University, Australia*

Kathomi Gatwiri  
*Southern Cross University, Australia*

Abraham Francis  
*James Cook University, Australia*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges for international students in Australia, affecting their academic, social, and personal well-being. In this article, we examine how international students in North Queensland (NQ) responded to these challenges and their resilience coping mechanisms. Using a mixed methods approach, we collected and analysed data from students who reported significant social, cultural, financial, and mental health challenges. Our findings showed that international students utilise different resilience strategies to adapt, cope and survive during times of crisis. In light of the challenges and opportunities that international students face in their academic journey, we argue that higher education institutions have a responsibility to develop and implement effective strategies to foster the resilience of this diverse group of learners. Such a commitment can also contribute to the internationalisation of higher education and international students' retention, which are important goals for many higher education institutions in the globalised world.*

**Keywords:** Australia, coping strategies, international students and internationalisation, pandemic, resilience, mental health, well-being

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Interest and focus on resilience are growing as environmental challenges, and natural calamities become more prevalent and the world grapples with the impact of a global pandemic and unprecedented rise in the cost of living (Masten, 2021).

The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed international students' vulnerabilities across multiple dimensions, including financial, emotional, social, and academic aspects, disrupting their usual coping mechanisms (Zhai & Du, 2020). While some international students experienced severe isolation and disconnection, others suffered economic hardship, academic difficulties, and mental health distress (Udah & Francis, 2022). Such compounded vulnerabilities remain understated yet may lead to increased risk of exposure to potential harm. The adverse impacts of the pandemic highlight the need for higher education institutions to create a more equitable environment and for more research on enhancing international students' resilience.

International students represent one of the most diverse and biggest sojourner groups that account for international travel. Despite this, the diversity of international students is often concealed by the narrow variables that many higher education institutions and researchers use to classify them, such as nationality or visa status. The characterisations predicated on nationality fail to capture the diverse and heterogeneous characteristics inherent within the international student demographic. Concurrently, the classifications based on visa status obfuscate the myriads of challenges experienced by these students and erases not only their diverse, sometimes overlapping needs and experiences, but also limits the provision of more equitable, inclusive, relevant, and targeted services, academic and pastoral support (Jones, 2017).

Thus, it is imperative to adopt an intersectional lens to fully appreciate the heterogeneity that characterises the international student body. This includes a thorough understanding of the complex layers of their identities, experiences, necessities, and resources, as well as their varied racial, religious, and cultural heritages, which are essential both at the individual level and collectively as a demographic cohort (Glass, Heng & Hou, 2022). Therefore, acknowledging the intricate interplay of international students' experiences and recognising their multifaceted nature, this article advocates for more nuanced approaches within higher education institutions, which are essential to effectively support international students, whose diverse contributions significantly enhance the educational milieu.

## **INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA**

Australia is one of the most popular destinations for international students, with the OECD placing it as an equal second alongside the UK, with an 8% global share (Wilson et al., 2023). According to the Department of Education, Skills, and Employment ([DESE], 2023), there are over 896,960 international students in Australia. Out of these, 425, 273 were enrolled in higher education sector (DESE 2023). International students view Australia as an attractive place to fulfil their study abroad aspirations due to its stable democracy, quality of education and life, career opportunities and student-friendly policies (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2023; Wilson et al., 2023). Each year, international students contribute at least \$36.4 billion to the Australian economy and help also to address skill gaps in the Australian labour market system (DESE, 2024). In

fact, McCrohon and Nyland (2018) argue that “education is Australia’s third largest export and...the country’s biggest service export” (p. 18).

Besides being treated as cash cows to fuel the Australian economy and the Australian higher education sector, international students are required to meet additional costs such as health insurance while also competing with locals for jobs and affordable housing. The restrictions imposed on their visa often limit their capabilities to earn enough money, travel, socialise or engage in activities that increase well-being, such as hobbies or therapies (QILT, 2023). Also, the recent global pandemic intensified the challenges they faced in Australia. Social alienation and the isolation of online study were exacerbated by a lack of voice and support from the Australian government, where students and temporary visa holders were excluded from almost all government financial support packages (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020). Other barriers, such as language and cultural barriers (Gatwiri, 2015) and compounded experiences of racism and marginalisation lead to poorer health, psychological, and social outcomes (Yuen, 2022). Some of these challenges amplified students’ vulnerability, making research on international students’ resilience in the post-pandemic era even more relevant. This article, therefore, examines the resilience and coping strategies employed by international students in North Queensland (NQ)<sup>1</sup>, elucidating the array of determinants — social, economic, cultural, psychological, and spiritual — that may amplify or hinder resilience within this cohort.

## **RESILIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ WELL-BEING: A SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL LENS**

Resilience is a multidimensional, multifaceted concept that contains psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, economic, and environmental contextual dimensions. Mohamed and Thomas (2017) explain that resilience is not a singular, binary attribute; rather, it represents “the accumulation of many skills and resources at different times and to varying degrees” (p.252). It is a dynamic process characterised by interaction and positive adaptation, enabling a person to handle stress effectively and emerge from difficult situations with a sense of growth and improved functioning (Masten, 2021). Despite the multidimensional understanding of resilience, it is frequently misconstrued as an innate trait of an individual, which has resulted in the misuse of the term (Aleghefi & Hunt, 2022). As a personality characteristic, resilience is intertwined with an individual’s arsenal of coping mechanisms and capacity to bounce back in the face of

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<sup>1</sup> North Queensland is one of the most successful examples of a tropical region settled by Europeans. The region is characterised by its tropical climate, lush rainforests, and the Great Barrier Reef — one of the world’s most renowned natural wonders. The region’s economy and lifestyle are influenced by a combination of tourism, agriculture, and mining.

adversities. Seen from this perspective, resilience is constructed as a manifestation of personal fortitude, foundational to the positive attributes embedded in an individual's psychological constitution (Ploner, 2017). Therefore, resilience is experienced both a process and an outcome of mobilising positive resources in the face of challenges.

The construct of resilience, traditionally perceived as a personal attribute that enables individuals to recover from adversity, is increasingly scrutinised for its limitations (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022). This lens places an undue emphasis on personal responsibility, potentially leading to an overestimation of one's ability to withstand stress without acknowledging the necessity for external support systems. It risks overlooking the environmental and systemic factors that significantly influence an individual's capacity for resilience. Such a perspective may inadvertently justify adverse conditions, suggesting that resilience alone should suffice to overcome them. This misapplication of resilience can hinder necessary changes to the conditions causing the adversity, perpetuating a cycle of stress without addressing its root causes. Humbert and Joseph (2019) have criticised dominant notions of resilience as being complicit with the neoliberal agenda, where "resilience is seen as matching with contemporary neoliberal governance, particularly in terms of its individualistic approach, its shifting of responsibility onto individuals and communities and its promotion of reflexive self-governance through strategies of awareness, risk management and adaptability" (p. 216).

In a context where the socio-ecology of an individual is central, resilience is better understood as not just the result of an individual's internal quality but rather "related to the way that societies adapt to externally imposed change" (Joseph, 2013, p. 39), which stems from interactions, experiences, and outcomes within individual's external environment (Masten, 2021; Ungar, 2012). According to Masten (2021) and Ungar (2012), resilience is both an individual's ability to navigate their way towards positive outcomes and the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being successfully as well as their ability individually and collectively to negotiate with the wider system (e.g., family, teachers, community, society) for available resources. In this sense, resilience involves a negotiation across three interconnected variables: adversity, outcomes, and mediating factors where "resilience is as, or more, dependent on the capacity of the individual's physical and social ecology to potentiate positive development under stress than the capacity of individuals to exercise personal agency during their recovery from risk exposure" (Ungar, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, a more holistic understanding of resilience, and one that recognises the interplay between personal strengths and the broader socio-economic context.

For international students, resilience can be conceptualised as an outcome of effective adaptation. Here, we consider resilience as a robust *ecological asset* that encompasses positive individual attitudes and adaptive capacities linked to skills and competencies, interests, and motivation, as well as self-esteem, the ability to self-regulate and seek help, and the willingness to adjust to institutional culture. We also see resilience as a *resource* characterised by positive external influences such as familial networks, social support structures, and cultural, spiritual, and

religious affiliations (Mupenzi, 2018; Villani et al., 2019). Possession of both assets and resources is necessary for international students to sustain well-being. In this way, well-being is not just the absence of challenges and adversity (Yuen, 2022), it is also the presence of positive external and internal protective factors such as good coping style and available opportunities in the family, and school, in the form of meaningful participation (Jowkar et al., 2014). Drawing on Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach, we operationalise well-being in the context of students' abilities to make informed choices, utilise resources, and partake in activities that afford them a sense of dignity and self-determination as these are instrumental in enhancing subjective well-being. Put simply, the well-being of international students is contingent upon their capacity to employ available resources that add value, significance and meaning to their experiences. This empowers international students to live and study with dignity, enabling them to remain resilient to external constraints and adversities.

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This article draws on findings from a mixed methods study examining international students' lived experiences in NQ, where there has been an increase in international students' enrolments. The study received ethics approval (H8195) on 10 September 2020 from the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee. Quantitative data were first collected via an online survey. The survey link was sent out via university noticeboards, international students' offices, and community organisations. Permission/approval was sought from organisations where sites were moderated at which survey links were disseminated. The survey, a multidimensional instrument, consisted of sixty questions and collected data in different domains, including identity, ethnicity, education level, pandemic impacts and coping strategies, social needs, socioeconomic status, and life priorities. In total, fifty-eight (58) students completed the survey. Of the fifty-eight respondents, fifteen (25.9%) were males and forty-three (74.1%) females identifying. In terms of age, thirty-four (58.6%) were between 25-34 years of age; fourteen (24.1%) respondents were between 18-24 years of age; and ten (17.2%) respondents were between 34-45 years old. The survey respondents come from India (n = 35), China (n = 7), Nepal (n = 3), Nigeria (n = 3), Hong Kong (n = 2), Philippines (n = 2), United Kingdom (n = 2), Ecuador (n = 1), Ghana (n = 1), Kenya (n = 1), Sri Lanka (n = 1), and United States (n = 1). As described above, the majority came from India.

The key survey findings were explored in more in-depth interviews to account for a more qualitative view of students' experiences, allowing the identification of resources to sustain well-being. Interview participants were purposefully selected through a snowball strategy and consisted of 13 females and 7 males between the ages of 22 and 40 years. They were interviewed (60 minutes) to gain a rich understanding of their experiences, well-being, and resilience. Most interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim.

**Table 1: Demographic Information about the Interview Participants**

Name (Pseudonym)	Age group	Gender	Origin country	Educational level	Arrival visa	Year arrived
Abigail	18-24	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2019
Amber	25-34	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Ann	25-34	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2019
Arabella	25-34	Female	Ecuador	Master's degree	Student Visa	2017
Ashley	34-40	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Camila	18-24	Female	Hong Kong	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Chelsea	25-34	Female	Sri Lanka	Master's degree	Student Visa	2018
Dorcas	25-34	Female	India	Doctorate	Student Visa	2019
Frederick	34-40	Male	Ghana	Doctorate	Student Visa	2017
Jeffrey	25-34	Male	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2019
Patience	25-34	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Paul	25-34	Male	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Nicole	34-40	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2013
Rachel	25-34	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Rosita	25-34	Female	Kenya	Master's degree	Student Visa	2018
Sandy	25-34	Female	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2019
Sean	25-34	Male	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2019
Sergio	34-40	Male	India	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Simon	25-34	Male	Nepal	Master's degree	Student Visa	2020
Thiago	25-34	Male	England	Doctorate	Student Visa	2018

Half of the participants were from India. Most of the participants were full-fee-paying students in private accommodations. Participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was sought and obtained from participants. Participants were assured of their privacy and confidentiality. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interview data coded using NVivo. Some of the important themes that emerged, based on our analysis of participants' accounts, involved themes related to resilient coping strategies. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS/RESULTS – PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES, COPING STRATEGIES, AND WELL-BEING.**

While survey respondents reported feelings of loss (12.1%) and anxiety (36.2%), several participants had deep financial concerns around tuition fees, leading to a sense of loss and increased anxiety. Nevertheless, we found that survey respondents (10.3%) and several participants (18 out of 20) demonstrated resilience. In the following paragraphs, we present six themes to highlight what we found from our analyses.

### ***Theme 1: Self-sacrifice and self-discipline***

Despite the challenges and adversities posed by the pandemic, a significant number of participants maintained unwavering commitment to their academic goals. Their intrinsic self-motivation and discipline played a pivotal role in sustaining their pursuit of an Australian qualification, which held the promise of bolstering their future career prospects. For instance, Sergio—an Indian student aged between 34 and 40—exemplifies the critical role of personal responsibility in reinforcing resilience. His familial obligations, coupled with his career goals, were instrumental in fortifying his resolve. Completing his academic degree represented more than a mere obligation for Sergio; it was an essential milestone that significantly contributed to his psychological well-being and overall health, thus rendering the notion of giving up less favourable. He explained:

Right now, my family and I are struggling a lot, but I don't want to give up. Even my daughter has sacrificed for me. I left them for something good, and I don't want to give up. I am always motivated by my family and daughter to finish off anything that I started. I still want to continue what I am studying now. I believe it is going to be settled over a period of time.

Sergio's journey reflects a significant life transition. Dissatisfied with his well-paying job in India, Sergio recognised the need for change, leading him to make bold decisions: quitting his job, liquidating his assets, and embarking on a new chapter in Australia as a student.

Before coming here, my family and I were living in a very big house. We had a good car and even everything was very comfortable over there. I was getting a very good income, but I was not satisfied with the work I was doing and that's how I discussed with my family. They were also supportive that I wanted to choose a career based on my interest in social work. But to come to Australia, I resigned from my job. I sold that house, and we moved to a very small home. I also sold my car. I think for my studies here, even my daughter has sacrificed parenthood because of me, and I don't want to give up.

In this transformative process, the magnitude of Sergio's sacrifices underscored the intensification of his self-discipline and, more critically, his resilience. This dedication was instrumental in navigating challenging situations and motivated him to find positive outcomes.

Other participants mentioned the sacrifices they had to make to cope with the financial stress of being an international student. However, they remained focused on completing their studies as they saw this as a "means to an end" for better life prospects and career trajectories. For example, Rachel, from India, stated:

The major factor that pushed me was I am paying so much. So, why did I come to Australia? It was to achieve a dream. If I give way for all these factors to pull me down, then I am not going to even be able to survive. It's a highly competitive world and if I can survive this, I will survive anything in the future. So, I should study hard for the money that I pay.

Another participant, Nicole, who moved to North Queensland in 2019 for her studies, suggested that the desire for a better career motivated her to self-sacrifice to stay disciplined and resolute. She explained:

For me, it is like my parents have spent that much money on me. And now, if I am paying that much, I really need to study well so that I can excel, and I must do it for my children and my family and for myself to make my own career. They were the things that always motivated me during that period, and even now, I think that's the one thing that always kept me going.

Nicole, like Sergio, exemplifies the interplay of several critical factors including unwavering dedication, coupled with a profound desire to honour her family. These intrinsic drivers fuelled her commitment to achieving her career



goals despite the obstacles she encountered. Her ability to stay focused on her aspirations, even when faced with challenges, demonstrates the transformative impact of purpose-driven commitment. Following Jowkar et al. (2014) suggestion, Nicole's story reinforces the notion that resilience is not solely about overcoming external barriers; it also involves harnessing internal strengths. Her pursuit of academic and career success was not merely a task—it was a deeply meaningful endeavour that resonated with her sense of purpose.

### ***Theme 2: Adoption of various self-care strategies***

The study findings revealed that a considerable number of students encountered financial difficulties during the pandemic, which had a notable impact on their mental well-being. In response to these challenges, they employed various “self-care strategies” that helped them find meaning and purpose amidst their stressful circumstances. Notably, shortly after the lockdowns were implemented, many students lost their part-time jobs, making it challenging to raise funds for their tuition. Consequently, stress levels escalated, directly affecting their academic pursuits. As Sergio stated:

Even though it was a stressful time to stay away from family, when COVID hit, everything changed. You know, when you come to Australia from a different country and culture, it's going to be very stressful... I think your friends, your cultural interactions, being with people, your professors or getting support from the university, interaction with a group or class, all these things matter, but suddenly, all those things were taken away. The stress level went up. I had a stressful time to make up the school fees.

Sergio's account poignantly reflects the vulnerabilities faced by international students, emphasizing the significance of employment and social engagement. Similarly, Nicole's reflection sheds light on the psychological strain and stress she experienced during the pandemic. To alleviate the accumulating stress, she “*started doing meditation and going for early morning walks to calm down*”, counteracting her disrupted eating patterns and sleep disturbances. Another participant, Camilla, from Hong Kong, explained that she “*would go to the beach for reading. I like yoga. I do a lot about self-care. So, I do meditations in the morning, at night and I like to go for a jog around the strand.*” Nicole and Camilla's intentional practices of care played a significant role in their well-being, became helpful protective factors, and exemplified the transformative impact of intentional actions on mental health and overall resilience.

Reflections from other students revealed a variety of stress mitigation strategies that were adopted during the pandemic. For instance, Paul, an Indian student pursuing a Master of Social Work degree, noted the diversity in his own

individual responses to stressful circumstances, citing that coping mechanisms are highly personalised and can vary significantly among individuals. He stated:

I came up with various ideas, you know, like enjoy my day, have time with friends and indulge in something healthy. I was gaining weight, and I hated myself by looking at the mirror. So, I tried working out three times a day. I still tried to eat healthy, and then I would ask my friends to come over to my place, and we used to go out for running. I also provided fitness training to clients in India. I sort of gave them nutrition protocols and workout programmes just to supplement my pocket money here.

Paul's holistic approach to well-being encompassed a disciplined fitness regimen and healthy dietary habits, which significantly contributed to his mental health, reducing stress and fostered resilience. Furthermore, Paul's engagement in social interactions provided emotional sustenance and a sense of community, essential for psychological support. His entrepreneurial initiative to provide fitness training and workout programs not only offered financial relief but also empowered him to utilise his skills and passions, thereby enhancing his self-esteem and sense of purpose. Collectively, these strategies underscore the multifaceted nature of coping mechanisms and their critical role in maintaining well-being during challenging times.

Sports and cultural festivities were also seen to reduce loneliness and as a form of self-care. Simon, from Nepal, explained:

Sometimes, we gathered and played volleyball and football. Sometimes, we visited beaches, and together, we celebrated our Nepalese festivals. Sometimes, we went to cycling in the Castle Hill and Mount Stuart [in Townsville]. We went swimming as well. So, these types of activities helped me.

Simon's experience reveals that developing and maintaining social connections during the pandemic was beneficial, demonstrating the "significance of situating self-care in the social domain" as "collective and relational" rather than individual (Lewis et al., 2022, p.1).

### ***Theme 3: Faith, spirituality, and religion***

In response to the escalating unpredictability and instability in the global landscape, a significant number of female participants turned to their faith and spiritual beliefs as coping mechanisms during the pandemic. These participants engaged in various spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and participation in online religious services. This finding aligns with a

substantial body of existing literature (Mupenzi, 2018; Pargament, 2001; Villani et al., 2019; Xu, 2018; Yuen, 2022) that underscores the frequent utilization of religion and spirituality as both a meaning system and a resource for coping during crises. For instance, Chelsea, a participant from Sri Lanka, stated that she ‘drew her strength’ from her Buddhist faith and religion:

I am a Buddhist. So normally I chant my Buddha in the morning and when I have a stress, I meditate within 5 or 10 minutes sometimes or every day. I chant Buddha and pray to Buddha to make the day a good day. So, it gives me a calm situation for my mind. So, it was very helpful.

Chelsea reflections reveal that her religious and spiritual convictions facilitated a profound connection with a higher power, fostering a sense of serenity. The act of prayer, particularly within her Buddhist practice, appears to have had a salutary effect on her mental health by nurturing positive emotional states. This practice notably augmented her capacity to confront and navigate the myriad challenges presented by the health crisis.

Multiple other participants also relied on faith and religion to deal with their stresses. Ashely, for example, explained that she and her family; *“used to pray every evening as a family and that’s the only thing I did and only hope I had.”* Ann also stated that she *“used to pray to God... [and] listening to Christian devotional songs and it was a kind of relief.”* Jeffrey stated *“I am a Christian. So, I used to pray, and I used to read the Bible and meditate. So that was one of the main support systems.”* Nicole indicated the importance of prayer, faith, and spiritual connection to the higher power to build resilience, stating that *“I think my prayers, meditation, and connection to God kept me.”* Rachel added, *“Not losing faith in God obviously helped me to survive.”* For Frederick, a doctoral student from Ghana, he was also ‘meaning-making’ around his scientific and Christian belief systems:

It’s not like I don’t believe in science, but I believe in God... So, even though I am afraid of contracting the virus, I still got faith that God is protecting me from the virus. So, it has kind of helped me.

Echoing the experiences of numerous international students, Sandy embarked on a journey of academic pursuit in Australia, leaving behind her husband and son. The unwavering support of her family, the solace found in her Christian faith, and the backing of her church community constituted her primary sources of strength and comfort. She articulated that knowing her home church was praying for her served as a fundamental ‘pillar’ and kept her grounded.

The thing that kept me going was hope in what God was doing for my family and the support that we had from our

church... There's a sense of security when I know that all these people are praying for me and my family. They emotionally supported me. My church that's praying for me gave me a sense of hope, which is essential to fuel me into saying yes, I still need to do well in this course... All I can say is my church and faith have been my pillars of strength.

As established from the student's reflections, the pandemic was a difficult time for many students, who had to face unprecedented academic, personal, and social challenges. However, many students reported that their spiritual and religious beliefs were a source of comfort. Their faith and connection to a higher power enabled them to maintain a positive outlook during the pandemic. Also, being part of a supportive 'community of believers' offered them a sense of belonging and purpose. These reflections indicate that spirituality, religion, and community can play an important role in enhancing resilience and well-being among students by providing hope, meaning, and control in the face of adversity.

#### ***Theme 4: Support from family and friends***

Although faith and religion constituted key sources of resilience for numerous female participants, the quality of familial and relational support, both in Australia and in their home countries was also prominently emphasized. For instance, Nicole, despite the adversities of job loss and separation from her spouse and children during the pandemic, was buoyed by the unwavering encouragement from her family. This support galvanized her commitment to her professional goals, with her parents and husband providing pivotal motivation to maintain her focus. She stated:

Having video and phone calls to my family everyday made me alive. I was always motivated because my mum was always encouraging me, and dad always encourages me to study and not to worry about other things... My husband used to tell me; you can do it.

Nicole's experience underscores the pivotal role of family solidarity and positive reinforcement in navigating adversity. Similarly, another participant, Rachel, suggested that family connection motivated her, stating that "*maintaining that contact with family through video calls, text messages helped me to survive*". Rachel's perspective also amplified that the simple act of maintaining contact with family—whether through video calls or text messages—became a lifeline. These connections transcended physical distance, offering emotional sustenance and resilience. Another participant, Amber added:

When I came to Australia, I was impacted by Covid. I used to talk to my family and my mom every day for 3 to 4 hours.

I used to connect with my family and my few friends back in India because I had no friends in Australia. I connected with them through phone and face timing. I constantly talk to them, and I ate good food, so I get myself positive.

Collectively, these narratives highlight the enduring power of family ties—a source of hope, strength, and purpose in the face of adversity. Nicole’s story is an example of how family solidarity and positive reinforcement can help individuals cope with stressful situations. This was also echoed by Amber, from whom we learn how regularity in contacting specific family members and friends can help maintain calm and manage mental health during a crisis.

### ***Theme 5: Support from university, professors, and staff***

Some participants were also encouraged by the quality of support from their university. For these participants, their universities played a key role in providing much-needed counselling, living and financial aid during the pandemic. For example, Thiago, a doctoral student from the UK, considered the university counselling services as the most helpful and beneficial source of support. He explained:

The thing for me was to keep attending the counselling sessions because there was more going on. I usually did once a month and then when the psychologist saw that my mood and motivation were getting lower and I was having more of the bad thoughts, she was ok, ‘it is time to stop it and you are going to speak to me every two weeks for at least 20 minutes’ which was good. She was very helpful in providing sort of strategies and alternatives.

Thiago, psychological well-being is enhanced through a stable and structured routine. Once that was disrupted by the pandemic, his morale and motivational levels were severely affected. The proactive measures undertaken by his university to provide counselling services during this period were instrumental in catalysing his decision to keep persisting in his education.

Similarly, Amber reflected that her university’s international support team provided food and counselling services, which she found very helpful, especially due to the financial challenges she was facing. Describing herself as an introverted person, the option to receive support online was a welcome change. She stated that she “*used to email the international support team every now and then. They were very supportive and provided me with some beautiful counselling sessions to improve my mental health*”. While she lived alone during the pandemic, Amber found the support and resources offered by her university during the pandemic as a good reminder that she was cared for and ‘not alone’.

According to Chelsea, “*The university counsellors were very good and helpful in getting some advice about how to cope with stress and other things.*” Camilia also stated that she “*was quite impacted emotionally and started contacting the university wellbeing counselling to talk about it.*” Simon, from Nepal, explained that when his non-profit organisation went bankrupt during the pandemic, he struggled to afford his tuition fees. However, he was grateful for the food assistance and fee deadline extension that his university offered as a financial relief:

Personally, I am very impressed with the Uni. My Uni always tried to support international students with care. They helped us financially. Personally, they gave me 500 dollars and provided a computer for online classes. They gave us food. I did not have a job at that time, so the groceries were helpful. Due to COVID, our business in Nepal was collapsing so the fees extension was also helpful. Professors were also helpful.

For many participants, the institutional support was not just welcome; it was critical for their well-being. Many reported that they also found their university’s instructions and regulations in accordance with government policies and decisions, including support from professors and staff, very helpful in navigating what they need to succeed and negotiating available resources to sustain well-being during the pandemic.

### ***Theme 6: Developing Social networks and new skills***

While many participants expressed a sense of disconnection and isolation as a result of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, they also demonstrated resilience and agency by seeking ways to establish and maintain social relationships, enhancing their well-being. Patience explained:

I was never a person who would initiate a conversation or go and make friends. It would take a long time for me, but then, this time, I knew I couldn’t survive being alone and keeping my distance from people. So, I tried, like I got out to know people and let them know a bit more about me. I found some people to talk to, and I understood that they were going through the same problem, so we could relate.

Despite her seemingly introverted personality, Patience demonstrated remarkable resilience and flexibility in seeking social connections with others. She also acquired new skills that helped her cope with the adverse circumstances of the pandemic. In addition to expanding her social circle, Patience engaged in

physical activities and culinary pursuits that enhanced her well-being. She stated that she was “*a person who never used to cook; I mean, I know a little bit of cooking, but I actually started cooking more.*”

Like Patience, there were other participants who learned new ways to survive. For example, Jeffrey explained that he “*started to cook traditional Kerala curries. I think I looked after myself at that time. I was like giving it a go to see what happens. I still cook for myself.*” Frederick also added that he has learned new ways to study, and he has ‘taken the positives’ from the experience. Fredrick also made a choice to limit his exposure to the news media, which was causing him anxiety. He stated:

I was too anxious and was jumping into every piece of news, every piece of information about COVID-19 to the point of even contacting experts on the virus. It was always increasing my anxiety. So, I stopped reading news of the COVID-19. Now, I don’t read or watch anything about it. Yeah, so that has been my coping.

Fredrick suggests that one’s mental health can be adversely affected by continuous exposure to a negative cycle of news. As such, resilience can be cultivated by (a) disengaging from things and experiences that induce fear, (b) disconnection from experiences that do not offer positive meaning, or (c) insulating oneself from experiences that trigger trauma (Hunter & Chandler, 1999). In this case, Frederick exhibited this process by disengaging, isolating, and insulating himself from the negative news media overload that was exacerbating his anxiety.

## **DISCUSSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the Australian international education sector and negatively impacted international students (QILT 2023), who contribute not only to the Australian international education industry but also to Australian society and economy (DESE 2023). While these students faced additional challenges, stresses and anxiety during the pandemic, our findings show that they are resilient and resourceful. Despite their increased vulnerabilities, they have many strategies for dealing with adversity. Mental health issues, feelings of anxiety and distress were raised as concerns by many participants. This was primarily because participants were living far away from family and friends, had lost jobs and income, and had increased uncertainty following the pandemic lockdowns. Our participants adopted resilient self-care strategies to cushion themselves against the adverse consequences of social loneliness and isolation while also simultaneously improving their subjective well-being and academic success.

Our findings are consistent with previous research that shows that goal orientations can influence resilience, satisfaction, and well-being (Jowkar et al., 2014). Our findings also highlight the importance of social contacts for students' mental health and well-being (Elmer et al., 2020) and the need to consider self-care as a social practice (Lewis et al., 2022). However, as resilient individuals, many male and female participants adopted self-care coping strategies that became helpful protective factors. Most importantly, participants benefited from resources such as regularly reinforcing social connections through contacting specific family members, friends, and loved ones. Based on participants' accounts, it is important for higher education institutions to identify and support students at risk of negative psychological effects in a time of stress and crisis.

This study's findings also support the argument that faith and religion play important additional roles in resilience. Spirituality, faith, and religion were reported as resilience development tools, which served as mechanisms for meaning-making in times of stress (Pargament 2001). Consistent with existing studies (Mupenzi, 2018; Villani et al., 2019; Yuen, 2022), we found that meditation, prayer, faith, spirituality, and religion helped to reduce stress and anxiety. For many participants, faith and religious beliefs gave them hope to remain calm, and make sense of their challenges, improving well-being. This supports Mupenzi's (2018) assertion that faith and religion can become coping mechanisms in times of challenging circumstances, often bringing about a sense of calm, hope, and peace of mind. For many participants, faith, spirituality, and religiosity helped them to regain control, decrease stress and find meaning in their lives (Yuen, 2022), sustaining both their internal (self-worth) and social (sense of belonging) resources (Villani et al., 2019). Hence, there is a need for higher education institutions to recognise that faith can be a major element of a student's identity and should consider spirituality and religiosity in service delivery.

The participants' accounts draw attention not only to the significance of personal agency on resilience but also to the influence of socio-ecological systems surrounding an individual, such as a supportive university community (Ungar, 2012), which can enable students to successfully negotiate and manage their challenges. While most universities have well-being support teams, there is an indication from participants' accounts that university support is important to sustaining well-being. Being far away from their families, financial and professional counselling support helped some participants to cope and maintain their well-being. For these participants, utilising university resources such as counselling services, professors, staff, and financial support influenced their level of resilience and well-being. Therefore, higher education institutions play a significant role in student resilience-building frameworks when they appropriately identify the institutional gaps of how students 'fall through the cracks' and provide them with a supportive learning environment to minimise the factors that erase dignity and resilience during their studies. Therefore, participants' accounts support our conceptualisation of resilience building as an internal (personal) and external (socio-ecological) process.

In summary, findings also show that international students' resilient coping strategies can predict their well-being, adjustment, and life satisfaction. We argue



that investing in students' resilience will go a long way to meeting students' well-being needs, increasing academic retention, and fostering internationalisation. Hence, higher education institutions should become more aware of what can be done to provide timely and effective resilience-building interventions as they complement students' individual agency with institutional support. Hence, it becomes imperative to provide comprehensive support and facilitation for international students that encompasses fostering positive emotional well-being, establishing meaningful social connections, addressing mental and emotional obstacles, enhancing learning management strategies, and ultimately elevating academic performance and the overall quality of the study experience.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have explored international students' unique experiences and resilient coping mechanisms during a global pandemic. While the study focuses on the COVID-19 challenges of international students enrolled in NQ, regional Australia, it also offers an opportunity to delve into the broader context of international education in Australia. Findings show a need for further research on resilience, pandemic stress, intersectionality, and pre-existing issues among international students such as visa regulations, work opportunities and access to healthcare and welfare. A deeper exploration of intersectionality and international students' work rights and related restrictions is needed. While our findings may not be generalised beyond the study participants, the findings contribute to emerging knowledge of international students' resilience coping strategies.

We conclude that resilience and well-being are crucial parts of international student's academic success and overall study experience. Having a better understanding of international students' everyday resources of resilience can help higher education institutions take responsibility and effectively implement more equitable and inclusive policies, services, and practices to lessen their vulnerabilities, meet academic needs and enhance their well-being. Our participants' reflections can be applied to decision-making and policy thinking, allowing higher education institutions, through their internationalisation policies, to respond more appropriately to international students' needs. Consequently, we call for higher education institutions to learn from international students' experiences and tailor programs that minimise vulnerabilities and improve well-being and resilient outcomes, fostering internationalisation in education and international students' retention.

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*Author bios*

**HYACINTH UDAH**, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at James Cook University. His doctoral study explored the African immigrant experiences, and his recent research publications are extending his interests in migrant and refugee experiences, international students’ cross-cultural experiences, coloniality and decoloniality, community development, employment and labour market, mental health and well-being, social work ethics, education, research, and practice. Email: [hyacinth.udah@jcu.edu.au](mailto:hyacinth.udah@jcu.edu.au)

**KATHOMI GATWIRI**, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Health at Southern Cross University, an ARC DECRA Fellow at the Centre for Children & Young People (CCYP), President of the peak body Australian Women & Gender studies Association (AWGSA) and a practicing psychotherapist. Kathomi is one of Australia's leading Afro-diasporic scholars whose award-winning interdisciplinary research investigates the intersecting topics of racial trauma, belonging, blackness, and migranhood. As a community leader, she is the Founder and Director of Healing Together, a service that provides accessible, culturally sensitive therapeutic support for people impacted by racial trauma. Email: [kathomi.gatwiri@scu.edu.au](mailto:kathomi.gatwiri@scu.edu.au)

**ABRAHAM FRANCIS**, PhD, is an Associate Professor, and the Head of Academic Group in Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University, Australia. Dr. Francis is a research fellow at the Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and an Adjunct Faculty with Prasanna School of Public Health, MAHE, Manipal, India. In 2018, Dr. Francis received the NAPASWI lifetime achievement for his outstanding contribution to social work education. Email: [braham.francis@jcu.edu.au](mailto:braham.francis@jcu.edu.au)

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