

# International Students Engaged in Australian Social Work Study: An Exploratory Study

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## ABSTRACT

With existing literature reflecting a problem-oriented view of international students in highly populated disciplines of study, this small study explored how students achieve and progress throughout their studies, specifically in social work. A small sample of six international students studying a postgraduate qualifying social work program in Australia participated in semi-structured interviews. For all participants, initial challenges improved over time, yet this process varied due to intersecting individual and environmental influences. The social work education setting both aided and hindered engagement due to several factors, including: critical reflection tasks; group participation; field education; institutional policy; and a western-based value system/teaching style. These outcomes highlight the need for consideration of the culturally informed assumptions that influence how social work is taught in contexts where diversity is encouraged. Further research is needed to examine the post-study outcomes for international social work students, to explore how well education prepares them for the field. When conducting research, it is proposed that methods should be selected to capture international student agency when negotiating study over time. This can help to more accurately reflect the variations among international students and inform an Australian social work education setting which values diversity among its students and future practitioners.

**Keywords:** *International students; Social work students; Social work education; Diversity; Research methods; Strength-based practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

International students in Australia are those on visa subclasses 570–575 (Department of Home Affairs, 2018b). Enrolment of these students in higher education institutions in Australia has increased in recent years (Department of Education and Training, 2017a), with 21.1% of all higher education enrolments in Australia in 2016 made by onshore international students (Department of Education and Training, 2017a). Over the period 2016–2017, education-related activity, resulting from the hosting of international students studying and living in Australia, contributed a total \$28.6 billion to the Australian economy (a 16.1% increase from the previous financial year), with 68.1% of these total earnings (\$19.1 billion) generated by the higher education sector alone (Department of Education and Training, 2017b).

The growth in overall international student numbers is also evident in the anecdotally observed increases in enrolments in Australian social work programs, including that which is the subject of this study. Unpublished data generated from the study site indicate that in 2017, more than 60% of the 400 students enrolled in the Master of Social Work were international students; this compares to 30% in 2015, and none in 2010. Such increases have been influenced by the profession's initial inclusion on the Australian Skilled Occupation List (SOL) in 2010 (Department of Home Affairs, 2010), and current inclusion on the Australian Medium and Long Term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL); providing access to a range of permanent and temporary visas to train, work or permanently settle in Australia (Department of Home Affairs, 2018a).

Despite growing research interest in these changing social demographics, gaps in knowledge exist surrounding international student engagement with Australian social work pedagogy over time. With findings from prior research typically focused on broader disciplines more highly populated by international students, such as management and commerce (Department of Education and Training, 2018), it is questionable whether outcomes from previous studies can be generalized across all disciplines of study (McKenna, Robinson, Penman, & Hills, 2017). The existing literature also reflects a problem-oriented view of international students in Australia (Benzie, 2010; Brydon & Liddell, 2012), focusing on the obstacles experienced when connecting with a host-university's learning environment. These obstacles reportedly challenge international students when engaging academically and socially, due to cultural/racial difference and communication proficiency (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010), leading to loneliness and isolation (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008) and racial discrimination (Tan & Liu, 2014). Less attention has been given to how students achieve and progress throughout their studies, or to the potential strategies that can support students and create a more inclusive learning environment.

The current study therefore seeks to move beyond simply describing the problems experienced by international students, to start to understand their capacities and strategies for success when interacting with a foreign learning environment, with a specific focus on social work students. Social work, as a discipline, is well placed to lead this discussion, with its emphasis on critical reflection of culturally constructed values (Gibbons & Gray, 2004), an acceptance of diverse others, and culturally responsive and inclusive practice (Australian

Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2010).

### **International students: existing literature**

A narrative review of Australian studies published over the past 10 years, examining international student experiences from a range of disciplines was conducted, augmented, where appropriate, by research findings from similar western settings. Two key problems for international students were identified in this literature: social isolation, influenced by limited interaction with domestic students; and challenges in academic performance, resulting from communication difficulties in conjunction with non-western learning styles.

#### *Isolation, loneliness and connectedness to others*

Sawir et al. (2008) examined the social and economic concerns of 200 international students from 30 nations and enrolled in nine higher education institutions. Two-thirds of their participants reported feeling lonely and isolated. Western norms within the Australian host environment, such as an emphasis on “individual achievement, competitiveness and impersonal social relations” (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 172) were reportedly a major challenge for many. The authors concluded that this was a result of the absence of familial, social and cultural connections, typically experienced within their ‘collectivist’ countries-of-origin. Despite this, however, one-third of the respondents ( $N = 70$ ) did not report any loneliness. Those participants tended to have previous life-experiences of travel, a familiarity with being alone and an anticipation of a “new personal freedom” (p. 167). A foreign educational setting for those students was viewed as an opportunity for personal development. Of interest is the finding that, where loneliness did occur, it was mostly experienced in the earliest stages of relocation. Yet adaptive processes were not explored further. The length of time the students had been in Australia was not noted by the researchers, nor was any potential influence of the study discipline. Questions therefore arise as to how students settled into the foreign setting over time, and whether this varied for different students from diverse cultural, experiential and disciplinary backgrounds.

The influence of time on the international student experience was explored by Irizarry and Marlowe (2010). It was found through group consultation and individual semi-structured feedback sessions with 13 international social work students at Australia’s Flinders University that the first year of international study was reported to be the most challenging when interacting with local students and the learning environment. Subsequent levels of stress were said to reduce dramatically over time however, as students proceeded through the later stages of their study, utilizing learnt strategies and available supports to overcome initial challenges.

International student isolation is also discussed throughout the literature and found to be influenced by the degree of interaction with domestic students. Although interaction between domestic and foreign students has been shown to have improved over time, due to rapid developments in globalization (Montgomery, 2009), more recent findings suggest that such interactions continue to be strained (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet, 2013).

From the perspectives of local students, Colvin et al. (2013) found in their small study

that mono-lingual/mono-cultural first-year students preferred to not work with culturally diverse peers when engaged in small group-learning activities. As with findings by Sawir et al. (2008), the researchers did not explore whether perceptions improved beyond the first year of study. Leask and Carroll (2011) argue relying on the co-location of international students and local students/teachers alone to spark the flow of intercultural learning between parties is misguided. Similarly, Brunton and Jeffrey (2014) also argue for host responsibility, given that the attitudes of university staff and local students can directly impact on international students' sense of belongingness and learner empowerment.

For international students, a related finding from Montgomery and McDowell (2009) showed that engagement and integration into foreign settings can be helped by building connections with members of one's own cultural group, as well as with other international students. In their small observational study, interdependent social groups formed between international students enabled the "reconstruction of the social capital" lost through the students' transition to the United Kingdom (p. 464). Putnam (2000), on the other hand, argues that, while the social capital produced by within-group bonds allows group members to get by, and feel supported and understood, it may also hold people back. In the case of international students, it is possible that these tight in-group bonds may hinder opportunities to build bridging connections with the wider student group or the host community. Wider connections are of vital importance in the discipline of social work, due to the need to engage with local people and cultures during study and professional practice. Having the capacity to build such social connections is reliant on communication proficiency, an area given much attention in research. This has often focused on the impact of poor proficiency on academic performance and interactions with domestic students.

#### *Academic performance – communication proficiency*

A range of problems relating to international student communication proficiency are noted in the international literature: not being able to keep up with fast-paced spoken lectures (Mathias, Bruce, & Newton, 2013); difficulties with academic writing and understanding assessment tasks (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014); challenges in developing relationships with peers (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014) and a lack of confidence while on field education placements (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Despite this, in a study across five Australian universities, Dooley, Oliver, and Rochecoste (2012) showed that international students were highly motivated to improve their communication skills. Key motivators were: forming social relationships with native speakers, developing academic success and an enjoyment of learning new languages indicating communication proficiency is developed only with student agency.

Some research provides initial ideas for how communication competence can develop over time, specifically for social work students. Communication proficiency is a principle concern for social work practice, relying heavily on verbal and written communication. Irizarry and Marlowe (2010) reported the benefits to international social work students of attending workshops, collaborating with peers and teachers and engaging with peer support programs in the process of settling into study. Testa and Egan (2014) similarly found that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) 3rd and 4th year undergraduate social work students, linked their adaptation with course requirements of expected interaction with

fellow students/teachers and critically reflective practice. Despite this, foreignness in the learning context can be exacerbated by perceptions held within the host environment.

#### *Academic performance – perceived differences in classroom participation*

Some previous literature reflects the existence of culturally informed stereotypes of particular ethnic groups in Australia (Mathias et al., 2013). For instance, students described as of Confucian heritage and studying within western countries are broadly stereotyped as rote learners (Rocheouste, Oliver, & Mulligan, 2012) who lack creative and critical thinking skills, and have a reluctance to share their opinions in class (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). Despite this, research has demonstrated that such students have the capacity to learn and adapt interculturally despite the challenges encountered in the learning environment (Mathias et al., 2013; Tran, 2012). Tran (2012) for example, explored the personal agency and intercultural adaptation of eight Chinese and Vietnamese students studying education and commerce in an Australian university, gathering data in two separate interviews with each participant. The first examined the experience of writing academically for the first time in Australia; the second, six months later, focused on student reflections of these initial attempts. Over time, students had transformed their perceptions of their capacities and of the learning environment. Further, Tran (2012) reported that participants believed their foreignness to have been beneficial to their learning as it had provided an additional bank of knowledge, or cultural point of reference, with which to compare the Australian host environment. Here, Tran (2012) demonstrates that focusing on the challenges of foreign learning can lead to a lack of recognition of the capacities of international students.

These capacities potentially extend to the advancement of social work education. For instance, increasing cultural diversity within social work student cohorts is argued by Grace et al. (2013, p. 133) to enhance opportunities for learning for all students, given the funds of knowledge that international students bring with them to the learning environment.

Despite recently observed growth in Australia in the number of international students enrolling in social work programs, their specific experiences of adjusting and progressing are not widely captured in the existing literature. A response to this requires both a more specific and a more general focus. Specificity is required as research has tended to look at international students in disciplines such as business and economics; traditionally those disciplines with highest numbers of such enrolments. Further, a wider view, temporally, is required; whilst there is a need to understand the challenges that students face when initially relocating to a host university, it is also necessary to explore both how these may change over time, and the responses to these challenges.

## **METHOD**

This small study explored the learning experiences of international students in postgraduate social work study in Australia, addressing the question: What are international students' experiences of learning and succeeding in a postgraduate social work program in Australia?

Given the first author's position as a social work student enrolled at the university involved, the researcher role was complex. With a shared, lived-experience of social work study

within the institution, the first author was an insider to participants and the institution. As a domestic student of the dominant culture however, the experience of social work study differed from that of the participants; outsider status was further influenced by the first author not being a member of the postgraduate student cohort. The student researcher was also supervised by staff members in the department where participants were enrolled. The position of the researcher therefore was neither insider nor outsider, but rather a complex combination of the two. As Kerstetter (2012, p. 101) argues, all researchers fall somewhere within the space between insider/outsider researcher and will occupy varied spaces depending on context. It is the responsibility of the researcher to understand their own position and how it may influence research processes and outcomes.

Given this complexity, attention to issues of power and confidentiality was imperative. This was addressed by ensuring that potential participants could opt in to the study, and the identities of each participant were held and undisclosed by the first author. The research was approved by the university's human research ethics committee and implemented in accordance with professional social work ethical values and practice standards (AASW, 2010, 2013).

### **Data collection**

The study adopted a qualitative approach to yield rich data relating to students' experiences, abilities and coping strategies. The study used a purposive sampling method, seeking data from international students in a full-time, on-campus, two-year Master of Social Work program at an Australian university. Recruitment took place during August and September in 2015. Students from both year levels were sought to examine the varied experiences of international study and to capture the process of engagement over time. Potential respondents ( $N = 88$ ) received both a verbal invitation, via a brief lecture presentation by the first author, and a written invitation sent to all students via a bulk message through the university's intranet. Students expressed interest by directly emailing the first author.

Six students participated in semi-structured interviews with the first author, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews took place on campus in specific locations that were selected by participants. The students were at various stages of the degree, and their total time spent in Australia ranged from approximately nine months to eight years. Table 1 shows the gender, year level (1st or 2nd year) and region of origin for each of the participants. The specific countries of origin for each of the respondents are deliberately withheld, to ensure participant anonymity.

**Table 1.** International Student Participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Global region of origin</b>	<b>Level of study</b>
Participant 1 (P1)	Female	East Asia	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Participant 2 (P2)	Male	East Asia	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	South East Asia	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Participant 4 (P4)	Female	East Asia	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Participant 5 (P5)	Male	Middle East	1 <sup>st</sup> year
Participant 6 (P6)	Male	South East Asia	1 <sup>st</sup> year

Although broader geographical terms are used, all participants originated from different countries and had varied cultural backgrounds. None of the participants were native English speakers. Students were asked questions relating to their personal background, experiences of commencing study in Australia, the challenges faced, responses to these challenges and how they had progressed through their studies over time.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach, using deductive, and then inductive, processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial process of coding occurred immediately after each interview, firstly determining respondent characteristics, then allocating data to specific pre-existing codes derived from the reviewed literature. These included student isolation/marginalization, communication proficiency, cultural difference with the learning environment and the contextual issues relating specifically to the social work learning setting and course content. While pre-existing themes shaped the initial analysis, these were clearly limited by the previously discussed problem-focus within the existing literature. Subsequent inductive coding allowed for the identification of new themes relating to international student strengths and how the social work learning environment influenced their experience. Finally, coded data were analytically interpreted and refocused into broader overarching themes and sub-themes. This was done by linking codes or identified features within the data together (Braun & Clarke, 2006) relating to the central idea of diverse students engaging with Australian social work study. Direct quotes are presented in the discussion of findings section, labelled P1–P6 indicating the participant number, corresponding with the order in which interviews occurred.

### *Trustworthiness*

A range of strategies, outlined by Flynn and McDermott (2016, pp. 111–114) were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. To address issues of dependability and confirmability, semi-structured interviews were used, meaning a consistent range of topics was covered with each participant. To address credibility, prolonged engagement, via two interviews with each participant was planned. Due to slow recruitment and unanticipated changes in staffing/supervision hindering the project's implementation, only the first two participants completed a second interview. The topics raised for discussion in these subsequent interviews were, however, included in all single interviews conducted with remaining participants. Credibility was also addressed via member checking throughout interviews, clarifying and summarizing participant responses to ensure these were correctly understood. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Peer review of the coding of the data with the first author's supervisor and a peer research group also occurred.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Due to the time-limited nature of the project, the sample size was limited. Difficulties in recruiting participants may also be partly attributed to the study being conducted 'in-house', and concerns about privacy. Although this latter concern was addressed by ensuring the anonymity of all participants, this inevitably compromised detail in the reported data. Additionally, the first author's position as a member of the cultural majority potentially influenced how data were interpreted (Richards, 2014). Although peer reviewing of the

data took place, those involved in the peer reviewing phase were also of the dominant culture. Future research may therefore benefit from the inclusion of international students throughout analytical stages of data management.

## RESULTS

Overall findings indicate, that although all respondents experienced various challenges throughout their studies, the extent of these difficulties varied due to unique intersecting circumstances, such as culture, individual attributes and experiences; each of which interacted with the social work disciplinary context. These combinations were both challenging and beneficial to students. All reported however, that initial challenges improved over time due to deliberate efforts made by each of the students. The following discussion sets out the challenges identified and concludes with 'what helped'.

### Overcoming challenges

The challenges outlined by participants reflect, in part, issues identified in the existing literature, specifically communication proficiency, and classroom participation, but also indicate the additional challenges that come with studying in a values-based discipline and preparing for professional practice.

#### *Communication-proficiency*

While communication proficiency was described as challenging by some participants, deliberate efforts were reportedly made to improve their communication. Participants described a range of strategies, including: exposure to native English-speakers (P2), reading newspapers written in English (P3) and seeking help from local students (P1). Two participants (P1, P4) outlined their approach of joining supportive networks with other international students: those coming "from similar situations, similar environment[s]" (P1). Yet for P4, who particularly described a reliance on communications with members of her cultural group (which was quite a large group in the overall student cohort), without bridging out to the broader student cohort; there was an accompanying sense of *otherness* to the broader community. Of additional interest is the observed parallel trend where participants from cultural groups not highly represented in the course (P3, P5) were more compelled to connect with the local students and culture. Both latter students reported a perceived need to build wider connections, having no tight cultural bonds on which to rely. Subsequently, they reported feeling more accepted and integrated into the environment and consequently, that their communication had improved.

Communication proficiency itself created classroom challenges for some (P2, P3, P4) for instance, P3 reflected on her difficulties when trying to keep up with discussions dominated by local students:

...sometimes I need to think about what I need to say, and other students say that, and then that's the end of the discussion.

Although P3 described herself as confident in some areas, the learning environment appeared to not make allowances for participation at her required pace. It appears that, for



the involved student cohort, the social work learning environment privileged local students over international students in some instances.

Related to communication proficiency is the capacity to participate openly in class, which can be further challenged by accustomed-to learning styles and values that are incongruent to those central to social work study. This is now discussed.

#### *Classroom participation*

Study findings indicate that classroom activities and discussions created difficulties for some participants; this was particularly due to the differences in teaching styles, including the expectation that students actively contribute in class. An example of this is engagement with critical learning tasks, central to the core social work skill of critical reflection. Some participants identified, particularly in the early stages of study, difficulties in questioning oneself and others. P4 reflected:

[In my culture] we don't...criticize a lot...we just accept...what we hear, and this starts from the beginning of our education; we think everything that the teacher said is good...we never [go] against [this].

This was not the case for all students however, with P3 describing adapting more easily; this was due to what she described as her questioning outlook and prior exposure to western learning environments. Other students (P2 and P6), despite initial challenges, report improving in their understanding of the process and purpose of critical reflection over time. Notably, P6 described how, over his first year of study, practicing critical reflection had been difficult but, that, over time, and with persistence, he had learnt to embrace it as a “way to improve yourself”.

#### *A values-based discipline*

As suggested above, although familiarity with western life does not necessarily guarantee immediate integration with Australian social work values, students with this familiarity (P1, P3 and P5) seemed to find adjustment an easier process. Perceived clashes between culturally informed views and those being taught in social work are also seen to have some impact on class participation, notably for the male participants in the study (P5 and P6). For example, P5 described the program as a “feminist course”, and noted feeling uncomfortable expressing alternative views in class, due to concerns that the Islamic beliefs of his home country would be judged. P6 similarly demonstrated an awareness of his personal opinions differing from espoused social work values, reporting a similar difficulty in expressing his beliefs in class. He stated, more broadly:

...a lot of international students have so many things to talk about but...they are afraid to talk....

International student reluctance to participate in class discussions then, appears to be influenced by wider factors, relating to the normalization of western values in social work education settings and the perception that social work education settings can be unaccepting of culturally diverse perspectives. Potential opportunities for the exchange of

intercultural knowledge were potentially missed therefore, for P5 and his fellow students and teachers.

### *Preparing for practice*

The completion of field education throughout social work study is perceived by some international students as an important source of learning about “how life goes in Australia” (P1), as well as the skills required for Australian social work practice. P2 described his field education experience as the most influential factor in his ability to “[blend] into the local culture”. Challenges were experienced by some participants in obtaining a field education placement however, due to differences between the university’s English language entry standards, and those of field education placement agencies. For example, P6 described being rejected from one placement agency due to perceived English-language limitations. This was described by P4 to be a common experience for many international student colleagues.

### **What helps?**

Analysis of the interviews indicated three potential variables helpful to participant learning and engagement in social work studies, all are individual characteristics or factors: sustained persistence – overcoming initial challenges; student agency in seeking ‘fit’ for themselves in the educational environment; and prior international experiences.

### *Sustained persistence: overcoming initial challenges*

Findings indicate, as suggested in recent Australian studies (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Testa & Egan, 2014), that an ability to persist while remaining motivated to engage socially and educationally enables students to overcome the difficulties faced at the beginning

of social work study. All participants in the current study discussed the interaction of persistence and time. All described their difficulties as typically being experienced in the earliest stages of their study, which were overcome by personal motivation. P4 for example, used the term “persistence”, to describe overcoming her feelings of isolation, despite “wanting to quit [the] course” and feeling “very depressed”. It was by being “strong”, seeking counselling services and speaking to friends that, by the second semester of her first year, P4 described herself as progressing well. These findings indicate that, while isolation is a problem, this is not necessarily experienced throughout the entirety of study; with personal attributes appearing to influence how this is experienced and how it may be addressed.

### *Student agency: seeking individual ‘fit’*

The accounts of most participants indicated that they acted with agency; actively seeking out a learning environment where they would ‘fit’, as well as developing skills for global/wider application. This finding suggests international student progression through their studies is dependent on their own choices, rather than their initial capacities alone.

As noted earlier, participants with previous exposure to western values described adapting more easily to the Australian social work education context. Such students reported they had “blended in” (P2) or “integrated” (P5) with local culture and pedagogy, which felt familiar. While these participants’ responses highlight the impact of similarity in helping them settle in, other respondents sought fitness, through difference. For P3 and P6, the

restrictive nature of their home countries motivated the search for a setting where freedom to pursue personal interests was possible; interestingly both also noted that the diversity of a multicultural environment such as in Australia also offered them a sense of fit.

This is not the case with P4, however. She described a social policy in her home country as contributing to parental expectations for success in international study, regardless of the challenges: "...[parents] put everything on this one child". Her account suggested more being 'pushed' by parental expectations than being 'pulled' by opportunities; although she described herself as doing well over time, she also described limited connection to the wider student group or the community. Coping and adapting therefore are influenced by the students' origins, their reasons for initiating foreign study, and what makes them stay or persist through their initial challenges. It is important to note however, that even those who struggle due to outside pressures can do well by utilizing available supports through personal agency or openness to new experiences.

#### *Prior international experiences*

As well as seeking a fit with the study environment, some participants articulated international study as fitting with their wider, global goals: wanting to engage in further international study (P1); striving to "develop countries and communities" (P1); seeking future travel, having "multicultural" experiences and gaining international employment (P5). Seeking further global experience through education was particularly important for Participants 4, 5 and 6. All reported travelling internationally on their own for leisure, work and study prior to commencing social work study in Australia. These previous life experiences appear to assist with preparedness for study in a foreign setting and, at least in part, encouraged an openness or curiosity for new experiences. On its own, however, this did not guarantee a seamless transition into the host majority, as demonstrated by P4's reflections on her initial difficulties in settling into foreign study, despite volunteering internationally prior to her study. Overall however, these previous experiences along with the personal attribute of persistence appear to assist in overcoming challenges.

## **DISCUSSION**

With previous research focusing on the challenges encountered by international students, and the difficulties when teaching them in western host-universities, this study sought to contribute a wider viewpoint. It has moved beyond describing challenges and deficits and focused on how student engagement with the learning environment is influenced. Furthermore, it has explored what helps diverse and mobile students do well in their social work studies. The social work discipline can influence the way international study is experienced, since prior research has mostly focused on those international students enrolled in more highly populated disciplines.

Whilst findings from this exploratory study are not necessarily transferable to the broader population due to its small sample size, the six participants demonstrate the complexities involved when foreign students, with varied origins and motivations, enter a values-based discipline such as social work. This is due to a noted heterogeneity among the students' countries of origin and cultural, political, familial or religious factors influencing the

way international social work study is experienced. Connected to these are students' previous experiences; motivation to initiate international social work study; capacity to communicate; and familiarity with western values. International students therefore are not a homogenous group with clearly defined needs and experiences, as is often portrayed in international student literature (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Despite this diversity however, a common thread is noted in the stories of international students when navigating the pathway throughout their social work study, surrounding personal agency.

Like previous research on international students, current findings show how initiating international study can be a challenging process, broadly due to cultural differences (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Sawir et al., 2008) and communication proficiency (Benzie, 2010; Mathias et al., 2013). This study adds to these understandings by recognizing the capacities of international students when engaging with international study, and, when overcoming encountered challenges. Similar to ongoing argument by Tran (2012), agentic persistence, despite these challenges (and when immersed in a culturally foreign setting), can be a personally rewarding process, which is not commonly discussed in literature.

Findings also suggest that some aspects of the social work discipline can encourage this sense of personal development. An example of this is social work's emphasis on critical reflection and culturally constructed values (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Grappling with new concepts, such as critical reflection, can be challenging for students who are unaccustomed to questioning socialized values. Through openness, persistence, and adherence to course requirements however, learning to think in new ways, while challenging, can be personally meaningful and transformative (Tran, 2012).

This type of learning however, is dependent on how the education setting fosters international students' motivations when engaging with new ways of learning. The expectations for all students to participate in class discussions in social work study, again while challenging, creates an environment where students are encouraged to learn in a more interactive and empathic manner. While the cultural or experiential backgrounds of international students in Australian social work study can influence the ease of adjustment, similar to findings by Tran (2012), transformative processes in education tend to develop over time, something which has not received much attention in previously conducted research. More can be done to ensure members of highly represented cultural groups of international students are encouraged to interact with the broader cohort.

Despite the interactive and critically reflective nature of social work study (Gibbons & Gray, 2004), and the agency of students engaged in this process, international students are shown here, and in existing literature by Mathias et al. (2013), to feel estranged from class discussions. This is not only due to language barriers, however, but also to students' culturally informed perspectives clashing with the western-centric values that underpin Australian social work (Gray & Fook, 2004). Similar to previous research, current findings suggest the western leanings of social work may not be universally agreed upon by students who are culturally diverse (Testa & Egan, 2014). This raises questions surrounding the transferability of social work education across international contexts (Crisp, 2017). Given

the broad 'global goals' noted among students in the present study, many international students may transition to social work practice in contexts outside of Australia. Further research is needed on the outcomes for international social work graduates, surrounding the various pathways to practice, and the way education in the Australian setting translates in broader foreign contexts.

Similar to broader findings by Colvin et al. (2013), social work education settings too, can privilege domestic students over international students. With international social work students feeling estranged from class discussions, a sense of detachment from the local student cohort, both socially and academically, exists. Further consideration is needed of the possible strategies that can be implemented to encourage intercultural interaction and learning within a diversifying social work student cohort.

Similar to discussions by Harrison and Ip (2013), local student privilege is also apparent in the learning opportunities provided in field education placements. Lessened opportunities provided to international students may hinder practice development for the field (Harrison & Ip, 2013). This is particularly concerning in settings such as Australia, where diversity is invited into higher education institutions, and economic benefits are reaped from increasing international enrolments. With increasing numbers of international students entering social work education programs, further research is required to examine whether the international cohort is being prepared for a complex and contextual profession.

With international student cohorts in host universities growing in response to the process of globalization, it is proposed here that further consideration is required on how to better draw on student diversity in the international social work student cohort (Grace et al., 2013; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Diverse experiences, influenced by culture, ethnicity or gender, need to be understood to be harnessed in order to encourage meaningful and reflective learning (Grace et al., 2013). Ultimately, this will improve social work education's inclusiveness for students and new professionals entering the field. Given social work's emphasis on social justice, acceptance of cultural diversity (AASW, 2010), and pursuance of an internationalized profession (Crisp, 2017), much can be done to encourage international student engagement for the development of social work education and practice. Further examination of the potential of incorporating diversity into social work education is necessary to enhance learning for all students. Drawing on diverse "banks of knowledge" in classroom settings, as proposed by Grace et al. (2013, p. 133) can help to ensure education is relevant for a diversifying and internationally moving cohort, while remaining inclusive of diverse students and avoiding cultural bias and privilege.

## **CONCLUSION**

Barriers to international student adaptation to study in Australia are not merely due to the cultural mismatch between international students and their host universities. Political structures and institutional policies can also influence the progress of international students – when international enrolments are actively sought by higher education institutions without appropriate planning. It is in these settings that inconsistencies between expected norms in social work, such as communication proficiency and personal engagement, and

the priorities of the educational institution can occur; this will inevitably influence student engagement experiences.

From a disciplinary perspective, a lack of encouragement for interaction between international and domestic students seems remiss in social work, where communication and collaboration are central aspects of the profession. Social work students/practitioners in Australia are required to have these interactive capacities, including: the ability to work with diversity; a willingness to question one's own culturally constructed assumptions; and understanding one's own place within the broader social environment (AASW, 2010). Current findings also suggest a need for further examination of the processes for developing language proficiency amongst international social work students. By encouraging interaction between international and domestic students, communication proficiency can be developed among international students to ensure future practitioners are well prepared for practice with diverse service users. Specifically, there is a need to explore if the interdependent, highly bonded networks of same-cultured students can hinder the desire to build connections with others. It is possible that such processes may have a negative impact on improving communication and for engaging and integrating with the broader community. It is argued here, however, that the responsibilities for facilitating this engagement belong not only to international students, but also to the universities that host them. Further examination of the barriers and facilitators of engagement with domestic students can help improve the way international social work students engage with the learning environment, and thus contribute to social work education in a more meaningful way for the profession.

Finally, dominant methods in data collection may have misrepresented cultural minorities in previous research on international students, by reinforcing problem-saturated, generalized views of people. As demonstrated by the current findings, focusing on the process of settling into foreign study over time, rather than on the initial, most challenging, phase alone, enables recognition of the diversity in the international social work student cohort. The process of engagement and learning is influenced by various combinations of factors, which are unique for each student. It is therefore necessary for researchers to consider the capacities of international students when embarking on such a process, and on the environmental factors which may hinder or facilitate these capacities. Further research from larger samples, focusing more on strengths than problems, can help contribute to a knowledge bank that more accurately reflects diverse people; informing a more responsible system of higher education, and an Australian social work education setting which values the diversity among its students and future practitioners.

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