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Using Arts-Based Methods and Reflection to Support Postgraduate International Students' Wellbeing and Employability through Challenging Times

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ABSTRACT

International students face many challenges when studying and living outside their home countries. These challenges are magnified when unexpected events occur such as COVID-19. Due to border closures, travel restrictions, quarantining and even job losses international students have particularly faced hardship in the first six months of the 2020 academic year in Australia. This paper reports on an arts-based research study that aimed to support international students to reflect on their studies and personal working lives during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The authors implemented a reflective process involving mindfulness and body mapping to support international students in expressing their experiences and feelings during this time. Results show that the international students gained a deeper understanding of what they experienced personally and how these experiences were both different and similar to their peers. The process enabled students to acknowledge and accept challenges faced as well as provided a safe avenue to do so. They reported the powerful nature of the arts-based methods in helping them think positively about their studies and future working lives.

Keywords: international students, reflection, wellbeing, challenges, future, employment

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted higher education students in varying ways worldwide. International students have particularly faced extraordinary challenges due to the global pandemic (Zhai & Du, 2020). In Australia, lockdowns of universities and workplaces nationwide as well as travel bans and closed borders to foreign travellers, including international students, has and will continue to challenge them

into the foreseeable future. Such challenges have significantly disrupted international students' studies and increased their overall stress levels (Fischer, 2020).

Research shows that international students encounter a myriad of stressors when undertaking studies in a foreign country (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019; Li, 2017; Li & Gasser, 2005; Tran & Gomes, 2017; Ward, 2009). The Orygen report (2017) for example, found that international students' levels of distress have increased over the past two decades (Orygen, 2017) due to a number of reasons including financial and lack of culturally-appropriate support which often leads to a limited sense of belonging (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015). Similarly, Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2011) reported that international students are at an increased risk of mental health problems because of language difference and pressure to adjust to unfamiliar environments. Although students have access to university support such as face-to-face and online counselling when experiencing mental health issues, many students delay in seeking help because they feel embarrassed, afraid and anxious (Wynaden, Wichmann, & Murray, 2013).

Another barrier faced by international students is the lack of knowledge to access services (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2012). Therefore, the need to adapt to unfamiliar environments and conditions, means that these students are at increased risk of developing mental health issues (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010) which can be compounded during times of uncertainty (Zhai & Du, 2020). Given the seriousness of issues such as these, international students may not achieve the results they are capable of or may even withdraw from their studies; which ultimately can impact on their success in seeking employment post-study.

As such, this paper reports on a project that sought to support international students in reflecting on the first semester of study during COVID-19. We implemented a range of arts-based workshops, both online and face-to-face that aimed to provide international students time to reflect on the challenges they were facing as well as share these experiences with others. The workshops aimed to improve international students' resilience and wellbeing through targeted activities designed around personal and professional reflection. It was hoped that these opportunities would support the international students to feel positive about their studies, ensuring success and hence future goals in employment. Therefore, the aims of the project were:

1. To provide an opportunity for international students to reflect on personal and/or professional challenges they faced during COVID-19; and
2. To support international students in finding effective ways to address challenges through their participation in reflective arts-based workshops.

ARTS-BASED REFLECTION

Life events can be described as those that significantly disturb daily routine (Luhmann, Hoffman, Eid, & Lucus, 2012). As highlighted, international students face certain challenges that their domestic peers do not. Issues such as language differences and difficulties, financial stress, and social isolation due to not being near friends and family (Barton, Hartwig, & Cain, 2015). Moving to another country and starting at a new university can be considered significant life events for international students. For this study, we focus on exploring the experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflection and reflective practice are well-recognized as assisting individuals and groups in coming to terms with certain life events, whereby one can consider what has happened, why it has happened the way it did, and how it might be different if experienced again (Bonanno, 2004). Many scholars note that reflection involves a number of phases and these have been extensively implemented in the higher education contexts (Gibbs, 1998; Johns, 2017; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Benefits of explicitly teaching reflection to higher education students is critical for deep reflective practice to occur (Fergusson, Van Der Laan, & Baker, 2019; Barton & Ryan, 2013). Such practice can occur on either professional or personal levels. Fergusson, Allred and Dux (2018) share a micro-reflective cycle when contemplating personal challenges. They state that it operates on a personal level:

...within the domain of the 'self' of an individual learner, on the level of thinking and doing. Thus, micro-reflective practice occurs within an individual's personal sphere of influence, centred on one's assumptions and beliefs, and is therefore intimate to personal learning (p. 291).

For the purpose of this paper we use Rodgers' (2002) framework, as did other authors in this special issue, to identify the process needed for international students to reflect on their first semester of study in an Australian university in 2020 (see below for further details). We found it necessary to implement a deeply robust framework in which to plan an arts-based reflective workshop for international students. Having such a conceptual framework as the basis of this work was imperative so that students were supported through an appropriate process in order to reflect deeply on this life event (Barton & Ryan, 2017) that will ultimately impact on their future employment prospects.

There is a growing body of evidence that points towards the importance of the role of arts-based practice in reflection and the improvement of health and wellbeing (Barton, McKay, Garvis & Sappa, 2019; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Arts-based research is described as "a method designed to enlarge human understanding...and enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of other and in the situations studied" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 8.) The approach has emerged over the last few decades using arts approaches such as dance, drama, song, poetry and visual arts to assist people in understanding, examining and reflecting on their experiences. It is also noted that arts-based research uses stories, images, sounds, scenes and other sensory approaches to present research data (Ary et al., 2018). Such methods are "essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analysing data and presenting the research results" (Austin & Forinash, 2005, pp. 460–461).

Some research using arts-based methods stem from a cognitive or therapeutic base (Hertrampf & Wärja, 2017; Khan & Moss, 2017) however, it was not the intention of this study to use, for example, cognitive behavioural theory or medical intervention. This project used creative art-based practise to reflect on and process international students' experiences during the COVID crisis.

To date, there has not been a significant research focus on the impact of stress on the wellbeing and resilience of international students in major life events (Richardson, 2002). Studies in Scandinavia, Australia and the USA have found arts-based practices enhance the individual's capacity to resolve social issues and to assist

in recovery from natural disasters (Clift, 2012; Cox et al., 2010; Ewing, 2010). For example, the Big hART project in Australia used arts-based activities to work with tenants in the NSW Department of Housing to help participants to tell stories through photographic portraits, music and performance theatre. The study found that these activities created an opportunity for participant's lives to be validated and to encourage conditions that decreased violence and isolation (Wright & Palmer, 2007, p. 6). Similarly, O'Connor (2020) led an arts-based project in Australia called the *Banksia Initiative* to support teachers and schools during the bushfire disaster in early 2020. The project provided participatory arts-based methods to restore individual, community and national wellbeing during and after a disaster and strengthen social support to help people to "build critical hope" (Arts Health Network, 2020). A National Arts and Health Framework developed by the Australian Health and Cultural Ministers, acknowledges the wellbeing benefits through participation in creative engagement with the arts (Health Ministers & Cultural Ministers, 2014). These engagements, for example, can be used as a means for community recovery and regeneration after trauma and to solve health and wellbeing problems by inspiring new ways of thinking (Harms, Brady, Wood, & Silard, 2018).

It is timely to understand and gather evidence on the wellbeing and resilience of international students in this critical life event. Acknowledging and identifying the impact of this life event will allow universities to be prepared to improve international students' wellbeing and support them in personal, social, and cultural growth to successfully complete their studies.

RESEARCH DESIGN USING RODGERS' REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORK

To be present in, and see, the world means to pay attention to the detailed minute happenings around us. As researchers employing arts-based activities to teach reflection, we argue it is necessary for students to "slow down" to observe these minute happenings to ensure critical and transformative reflection occurs (Rodgers, 2002). As such we developed a creatively reflective workshop, as a way of conducting research (Ørngreen & Levensen, 2017), that aimed to support international students in slowing down to reflect on their lived experience to facilitate change and improve wellbeing. The workshop provided a vehicle to provoke the international students to use their senses to reflect on their learning and challenging times such as during the COVID pandemic.

In our workshop, the international students participated in a number of arts-based reflective processes including photo elicitation (McKay & Barton, 2018), meditative reflection by focusing on the senses (Siegel, 2018), and a body mapping exercise (MacCormack & Draper, 1987). By utilising these methods, deep reflection was possible through prompting and eliciting rich information (Boydell et al., 2012). We now highlight how these arts-based processes align with Rodgers' (2002) four principles underlying the reflective cycle.

The first principle deals with the idea that the primary text for reflection must be centred on the individual's own experience (Kolb, 1984). We acknowledge how international students bring with them to their studies their own unique stories due to differing cultural beliefs, language and the ways of being (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2007). We therefore began the workshop with each student drawing a card from a selection

of motivational quotes and images. Students were then invited to introduce themselves one at a time and use the quote and image on the card to focus their introduction through a technique called photo elicitation. Photo elicitation is a visual sociological methodology used in qualitative research (McKay & Barton, 2018). It uses images to evoke responses from participants. By listening to each participant, we were drawn into their world of experience and with respect, the uniqueness of each individual was shared.

In Rodgers' second phase, the process to move away from ordinary thought (Dewey, 1933) and reactivity to challenging issues was implemented through a mediation exercise. To introduce "slowness", we led the students through a mindful meditation session where they visualised the wheel of awareness (Siegel, 2018). This wheel has a central hub, an outer rim, and four quadrants in between. This metaphor embodies how the mind is structured. The hub represents experiences of awareness such as the feeling of calmness, perspective openness and peacefulness. The four quadrants represent: the *sensory awareness* of what we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch; *bodily awareness* and what we can physically sense; *mental activities* such as feelings, thoughts and memories; and the *interconnectedness* with things outside ourselves such as other people and other things.

By connecting with these experiences during the meditation, the activity fostered a sense of connection and awareness with the individual and their connection with the world (Altinyelken, Hoek, & Jiang, 2019). After the meditation, students were encouraged to write down the thoughts and feelings experienced during the mediation session on a hard copy of the wheel. This served as a starting point to focus their reflection on specific events and connections in their lives (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). These words, symbols or images were then transferred to a map of the body that communicated the richness of their life story as a visual representation.

The third principle is guided by the notion of community of respect among participants (Rodgers, 2002). Body mapping is a means of visual storytelling, where individuals visually share their reflections (Botha, 2017). Unlike an interview where only the interviewer is present, the body mapping process is revealed and shared with others. There was a sharing of reflective practice as students put marks, images and words on their body map. Students continuously throughout the workshop, revealed and shared their stories with other students and workshop facilitators. In our workshops, we found that the mundane conversation between participants revealed the depth of reflection as students talked about events in their lives. Herein lies the recognition that their stories were not insignificant and were worthy of sharing. At the completion of the workshop, each student reflected on their body map in front of the other students. Body mapping becomes a story of "This is who I am, this is my story, and this is what is important to me." An integral part of the workshop was to value and foster mutual respect for each other's stories.

Rodgers (2002) applied a critical understanding of the value of feedback as the fourth principle underlying the reflective cycle. Feedback is associated with improving student learning, where the teacher is merely telling students what is right and wrong and how might improve. This narrow view of feedback relegates feedback to a one-way transmission process (Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010). Hence our view that the workshop's purpose was not used to provide "feedback" by facilitators to students on their reflections and artwork. Rodgers (2002) proposed structured feedback as a way for a teacher to see through the eyes of their students and become a partner in the

inquiry. She continued to say that teachers as reflective practitioners start to realise the way, for example, learning materials, activities and even classroom setup can offer opportunities to observe student learning.

The arts-based workshops were offered both online (1 hour x 1) and face-to-face (3 hours x 2) on two different campuses within the university. We planned the online workshop to be shorter given our knowledge of online fatigue experienced by participants in past projects. Each workshop was held 4 weeks apart, therefore over three months throughout Semester 2, 2020. Participants were international students who were currently enrolled in higher degree research programs such as master's or doctoral level studies. An invitation was emailed to all students across the university through a regular events notification. The online workshop was attended by 12 international students and the face-to-face workshops were attended by 8 and 7 participants (it is important to note that strict COVID-19 hygiene practices were carried out during the face-to-face workshops including a limit on how many students could attend).

The arts-based and reflective workshops were developed based on our experience conducting research in the arts and on reflection (Barton et al., 2019) as well as our work with international students (Barton et al., 2017). Our position as researchers also involved our role as supervisors and academics. Most of the students who attended the workshops were from other faculties across the university but one of the authors had two of her doctoral students attend. We positioned ourselves as participant-observers in the face-to-face workshops as we created artwork alongside the students. All ethical protocols were carried out appropriately including formal approvals to conduct this study.

Our workshops were structured so that the international students felt comfortable and safe to share their experiences with each other. We also conducted semi-structured interviews after the workshops with students who provided consent to do so. For example, asking questions such as the ones below, so we were able to experience the way in which students were present in the world.

- What symbols/images have you chosen to describe your emotions and journey as an international student at USQ and Australia?
- Can you explain the meaning of your symbol and slogan?
- Where on your body map would you like to place these symbols and why?

These questions opened up the discussion between facilitators and students, and students and students, but there were also moments of silence for the participants to ponder quietly, the meanings of each other's work.

Lastly, Rodgers (2002) claims that "student learning should guide teaching and practice. Reflection as a practice should focus on the response to student learning and not be seen as a checklist of teaching behaviours" (p. 7). Our workshop endeavoured to break the chain of checking in for learning by teachers and engaged in activities that used reflection as a response to student learning. As reflection and learning are intertwined and described as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38), we understood that this approach provided a way of questioning and sharing underlying beliefs (Moon, 2013; Schön, 1983). Through reflective practice, we invited the whole human being into the learning situation.

The analytic methods used to comprehend our data were thematic and visual analysis. We used inductive thematic analysis to understand the international student

interviews and oral reflections made throughout the workshop. We also used a semiotic framework to analyse the final works of art created by the international students. According to Hodgetts, Chamberlain, and Groot (2012) visual methods "provide a basis for understanding hardship...in relation to situational, societal, material and relational contexts" (p. 299). Such methods can be used to reveal information from research participants and/or be the result of data collection including drawings and other artworks (Gleeson, 2012). Our analysis involves the selection of specific aspects in the art that the international students chose to discuss more deeply in their interviews and reflections. Consequently, we first describe the work then share these features in the hope that the international students' voices are strongly present.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In analysing the semi-structured interviews and visual body maps, an over-arching theme speaking to the difficulties associated with being an international post-graduate student were identified. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged during analysis. They were isolation during COVID-19; a need for a sense of belonging to the community, and the importance of self-reflection through arts-based approaches to understand challenges faced. As students strongly identified with their body maps created in the workshop, they felt at ease to speak to their artwork during the interviews. In mapping the visual analysis of the body maps, these themes were visible on the body maps in the form of semiotics such as symbols and icons, colours, cultural representations and written language.

Isolation during COVID-19

In Australia, international students faced the suspension of face-to-face classes and the move to online teaching in March 2020 to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Participants described the lockdown as "very unfortunate" (Participant 2) and spoke about the stress and anxiety the event had on the personal lives and studies. Most students felt that the lockdown at first did not affect their study. One student commented: "To be honest, I do not think it affected my study at all because it allowed me to study more because I was in my apartment all the time" (Participant 4). As time progressed and the lockdown measures intensified, the students felt the isolation more acutely. On an academic level students felt isolated and lonely. Two students commented on the isolation and the effect it had on them:

There were days when I will be able to work, there are days when I'm just so demotivated. And it was... I think I spent a whole month to adjust to working from home because I had to go buy a table. The university allowed us to take computers home and eventually I got into a routine. *Participant #3*
and

Working from home is as a PhD student is very difficult. Sometimes I feel bored, sometimes sleepy, but I am not coming to office frequently. Working from in home has greatly affected my study and is not good for my progress. My PhD will be completed in early 2022, but due to COVID, maybe it will now be shifted six months later. *Participant #2*

The lockdown due to COVID-19 also had adverse consequences on students' personal and professional lives and in particular students who worked to support their studies in Australia. One student demonstrated this effect as she explained:

The first thing is that I lost my job because of the COVID-19. I used to work in the shopping centre, in a tea shop and [large store]. After the COVID-19 they say they don't need too many people work here. So they just fired me because I just worked there part time. They just fired me, and I don't have any income because I am supporting myself. It's a little bit hard for me. I try to find another job, but it's very hard for me to find a part time job during this time. *Participant #5*

These reflections on the effects of COVID-19 on their lives as international students were reimaged on their body maps. *Figure 1* shows a body map of a person with a white torso and blue and black covering on the legs. Of importance here is the bottom part of the pair of legs. The student reflected on his current situation and explained that he placed the black striped material on the bottom half of the legs and made holes in them to show, although his legs are strong, the isolation and uncertainty of COVID-19 is weakening him. The participant in this image also likened the striped material to his thesis drafts and the holes represented the edits his supervisors did to his work.



Figure 1: "Weak legs"

On a personal level, the students felt the isolation more intensely. Many students have planned trips to their home country to visit family and friends. These trips are now on hold until international borders reopen. Many of the students are married and their partner and children are in their home country. Two students remarked:

When the lockdown was announced, so prior to the lockdown, I bought my tickets and everything to go to Fiji in April for my sister's wedding. But then when the lockdown was announced, then I had to cancel everything.

Participant #1

and

I'm so scared of what's going to happen to my marriage right now, because we tend to spend a lot of time apart and now, I can't go home. So sometimes it is like, okay, my husband is trying, we are good. And then sometimes I feel like we are disconnected. *Participant #3*

The higher degree students also were worried about what would happen in terms of employment once they completed their studies. As post-graduate students they were all very passionate about their areas of study and making a difference in their communities. Their love of their home countries was a large focus in their reflective artworks.



Figure 2: "My red heart"

These fears are manifested on the student's body map as she drew a red heart on her chest, denoting the love she has for her husband (Figure 2 on the left-hand side of the canvas). Although the red signifies love, the red could also be the signifier for the loss of not being near her husband and the fear of how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect her marriage.

A sense of belonging in the community

The sense of belonging to a community and establishing friendships were perceived as essential factors by all participants. A study by Ramsey et al. (2007) showed that international students struggled to find opportunities to integrate into the local community and form emotional and social companionship. One student commented:

In Fiji, I have got lots of friends, so mostly at least once a week I meet them. But here I have two friends. It was hard to make friends because I didn't have any classes and I did not know anyone in Queensland or the places near, because once the lockdown started, they (Australians) all went to their homes from the apartments where I live. *Participant #1*

It was especially difficult for students to form friendships, pursue existing friendships and to become part of society after the lockdown of the USQ campus in late March 2020. Although participants acknowledged that they hoped for social inclusion and wanted to make local friends, the reality was very different. After the lockdown, it was even more challenging to make friends as the interaction that took place between students in class disappeared as classes moved online. The COVID-19 lockdown prompted Australian students, who lived in university residences, to move back to their families.

The participants displayed a real sense of longing to be part of the fabric of society and contribute to society. Students expressed the desire to join university groups and community volunteering activities as one of the students stated that "I want to input my energy to working with the community as this can be helpful for us because we can mix with them" (Participant 2). One student mentioned that he had already donated blood three times since arriving in Australia. This action of giving back to the community was very fulfilling for him and made him feel part of society.

The lack of opportunities to develop intercultural friendships can also play a role in developing and advancing students' English language capacity (Martin, 2020). The students also admitted that it was challenging to establish interpersonal relationships with Australian students as an international student. Most of their friends were either international students or students from their own home country. Participants saw interaction with English speaking students as an opportunity to improve their English and learn about Australian culture.

However, students all agreed that they had received support from their academic supervisors and that the university was "always there for us" (Participant 1). Students mentioned how supervisors and lecturers had regular contact with them, mostly weekly and how they appreciated this support. Many students lived in university residence and shared accommodation with other students. Because of the prolonged periods spent together during lockdown, it was revealed that their housemates were a

great source of support for them. Participants also mentioned that they started doing exercises in their flats to combat anxiety and depression. One student commented:

And even during lockdown, even though I was not able to go to gym, I was being able to do things, follow YouTube videos, just work out in the house. It wasn't very effective, especially in terms of getting benefits, but it was something. *Participant #5*

Participants also spoke about the support they received from their families in their home country. They mentioned that regular Skype and Messenger conversations kept their spirits up but also realised that it would be a while before they would see each other.

The importance of self-reflection

The students self-identified that they valued the chance to reflect on their studies and recognised the importance of reflection as an essential part of wellbeing. Barton et al. (2019) argue that arts-based activities contribute to resilience and wellbeing as it provides agency through foregrounding students' voices. Similarly, research has shown that expressing feelings through arts-based methods allows participants to access a less invasive and safe way to reflect on self and others (Dodge et al., 2012). In addition, arts-based activities encouraged communication that exposed ideas, emotions and feelings that previously might not have been expressed.

International students are at a high risk of psychological problems such as stress and anxiety (Rosenthal et al., 2008). However, Barton et al. (2019) argue that the "arts can trigger different ways of knowing and thinking about situations that require reflection for advancement (p. 1). Students felt that the reflective body mapping activity assisted them "to break depression" (Participant 2). The workshop allowed them to reflect on their journey through the lockdown of COVID-19 as international students in Australia.

In the interviews, we asked students about the importance of reflection, especially using arts-based activities such as body mapping. The students pointed out that the body mapping activity not only helped them to meet and connect with other people but also to understand and reflect on their journey. The non-judgemental space provided by the workshop to express their feeling and emotions was considered significant by the participants. They felt that they could express themselves without being judged. The activity assisted them to reflect on their personal and educational journey and at the same time to improve communication, connect with others and learn from and about other people. Presented below are the reflections from three participants:

Reflection 1:

It [the reflection] allowed us to engage with others and learn from others. For example, if you see this body art, we can learn about different people just by looking at art. It also allows us to put things which we cannot write or cannot describe in the form of paintings. Even though no one else will understand what you have put, as long as you understand you have put your message out. And it is a kind of challenge if anyone, without me explaining, if anyone can point

those things out, then it would be quite interesting to see if people can think the same way as you. Doing this also allows us to disengage from the daily studies, which are quite stressful now in these times. *Participant #2*

Reflection 2:

I know more people here in USQ and I made more friends and I was so amazed by [another participant's] work because I can feel the totally different thinking mode between us. I can feel the difference between us. I can feel like a kind of foreign culture from his work. But for me, it's very hard for me to imagine his work, but when he presents his work, I feel it is very different from other's work. I think I know more about difference, the meaning of difference, especially on a thinking mode. And just now, before I came here, we had really long conversation about Australian life, culture and language. I think I learned more about this country and the culture here and as well as the language. *Participant #5*

Reflection 3:

It helped me to connect with people, make new friends. It was interesting to work with another person, get their ideas, to ask them "What do you think?". Having somebody there who we can share ideas with. It made us express our feelings freely, especially with the painting without being judged. Most of the time our lives we follow this protocol, especially with writing, follow this, do these things this way. But with the creative workshop, we can just be yourself. You can think about your situation. *Participant #3*

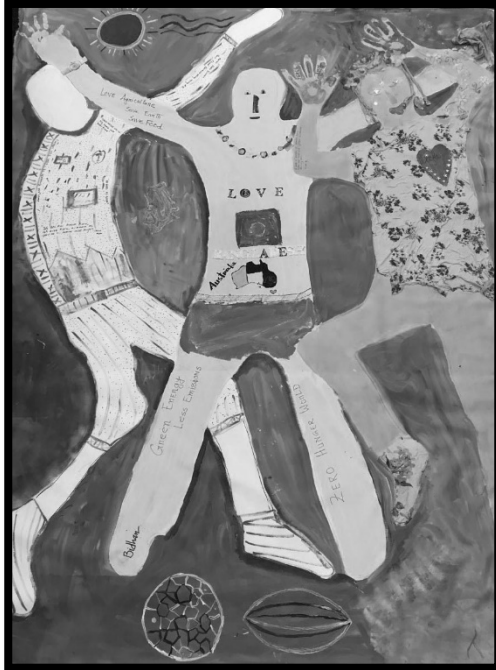


Figure 3: "Move it"

The body maps in Figure 3 depicted an appearance of movement, activity and animation. Although the participants revealed that depression and anxiety were part of their journey as international students, they felt that through expressing their feelings and emotions through reflection, they could manage stress and anxiety. One student described his need for reflection accordingly:

I think it is really important to have such reflective experiences as international students, because it enables us to connect with other people and it also allows us to disengage from the daily studies, which can be quite stressful at times, and to show something of ourselves as people. *Participant #1*

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It was clear that the reflective arts-based workshops provided a much-needed opportunity for international students undertaking post-graduate studies to reflect on their experiences during an international crisis—COVID-19. The varied and multimodal approaches to reflection provided the necessary tools for the international students to reflect in a way that was culturally responsive and appropriate (Barton & Ryan, 2020). Rodgers' framework provided a robust way to develop an approach for the reflective arts-based workshops as well as a way to make sense of the artworks and interview data. Acknowledging and valuing the international students' own personal and professional experiences prior to and during their study was important for the students to feel comfortable with each other or as Rodgers' puts it a 'community of respect'. Using images and motivational quotes initially enabled the students to share their own stories and motivations to be a post-graduate student. It allowed them to reflect on the challenges faced during COVID-19 and how this might eventually impact on their capacity to find their employment of choice post-study.

Further, the mindfulness activity, through the guided meditation, ensured the international students had a way of 'moving away from ordinary thought' as well as providing a prompt by which to develop their artworks. Without such creative approaches it would have been difficult for the international students to reflect deeply and reveal their inner feelings and thoughts related to their professional and personal lives (Moffatt et al., 2016). In addition, the artworks were appropriate vehicles by which the international students could express specific instances in their lives, their cultural and linguistic diversity, and things that mattered to them most; which were heightened during the global pandemic.

Implications

It is apparent that ongoing and continued support for international postgraduate students is critical during critical happenings and challenges. We acknowledge that international students studying higher degrees by research would receive support from their supervisors, however, we argue that other systems of support are needed from a range of staff located across the university community so that all needs are met. Such support should value the fact that international students need to feel a sense of belonging and community as per Rodgers' third principle whereby respect is at the core. Our study showed that our participants had, to date, limited access to others that

were experiencing similar situations. They greatly valued the opportunity to meet other international students who were studying master's degrees or doctorates.

In addition, reflective work with international students must value cultural or linguistic differences and provide the platform for both students and facilitators to reflect and learn from each other. As such, we found that a more informal approach to sharing encouraged growth through the reflective process itself. It allowed participants to first, name and recognise challenges and then second, appreciate and embed appropriate strategies for change and improved wellbeing to occur. We noticed that international students then felt more positive about their future and prospective employment post-study.

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