

Empowering International Students to Succeed: An Innovative and Beneficial Initiative for Health Professions

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ABSTRACT

International students report higher sociocultural and academic stress when settling into a new university compared with their local counterparts. Three disciplines in the health professions collaborated to create a transition program addressing international student health and well-being in Australia. Commencing students and senior student mentors participated in a four-session program of activities to reflect on their current study/work practices and learn self-management strategies. They developed plans for coping with cultural, language, academic, and social barriers, and assisted in improving physical and mental

health and well-being. Of the 26 participants who attended sessions, 15 participated in in-depth interviews. Facilitating adjustment, establishing relationships, gaining new skills and knowledge, and transforming beliefs and behavior were the four themes identified that captured and explicated the impact of the initiative. Although limited by the number of student participants, the program demonstrated a positive impact in creating a supportive learning environment for international students.

Keywords: academic success, coping and self-management strategies, dietetics, health profession nursing, international university students, occupational therapy, transformation

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of students are choosing to study abroad, with Australia now being the third most popular destination for international students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Universities Australia, 2019). Most international tertiary students in Australia come from Asian countries, particularly China (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016), with the number of Chinese students expected to increase sevenfold within a decade (Council of Australian Governments, 2010; Redfern, 2016). In 2018, Australia hosted 565,975 international students, and 50% of international enrollments were in higher education (Department of Education and Training, 2018). However, while international students make a significant economic, cultural, and social contribution to Australian society (Ryan et al., 2016), many face challenges that need addressing.

Not all international students perform effectively within a new environment with different norms and rules (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). They experience a variety of complex challenges as they adjust to the way of life of their host countries (Ryan et al., 2016). These include language difficulties, academic pressures, loneliness, cultural conflict, and financial demands (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011). Given the psychological, social, and academic adaptation required, the adjustment to tertiary education is often greater for international students than for domestic students (Andrade, 2009; Baker & Hawkins, 2006). Furthermore, the need to negotiate clinical placement environments and local healthcare systems compounds the adjustment required by international health professional students (Hirai et al., 2015; McKenna et al., 2017).

Many Australian universities have demonstrated awareness of international student needs, and consequently established services and programs to assist adjustment to tertiary-level study (Andrade, 2006). One way universities assist students' adjustment is by conducting transition or orientation programs. However, the transitional programs developed are short, insufficient, and confined to the orientation period (Krause, 2006). The programs also cater to a homogeneous group of international students and are not focused on students' areas of study (Krause, 2006). Thus, they have limited value, particularly for international students who require more support, mentoring, and sufficient time

to adjust to the university environment (Hirai et al., 2015). A national study exploring international students' experiences of studying at Australian universities reported that orientation did not offer much help to students in integrating socially with other students, making academic progress, or improving the quality of their university experience (Krause, 2006). Thus, there is a need to provide a transition program that is available beyond the standard university orientation week, and that would benefit the increasing number of international students by focusing on improving their coping and self-management strategies to help with their adjustment and enhance the student experience.

At present, the transitional programs provided to international health professional students in Australia are limited. In addition, there is a paucity of literature investigating students' responses or attitudes toward transition programs needed to evaluate the impact of these programs. Therefore, our research team aimed to design a better transition program for international health professional students and assess how it could facilitate the transition process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Australian and international research suggests that international students experience poorer psychological and physical well-being than domestic students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). International students find it harder to create and maintain satisfactory daily life routines (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Townsend & Poh, 2008). This difficulty has adverse implications for their academic progress and quality of university experience (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011; Marginson et al., 2010). Moving away from home to a new, unfamiliar country means that international students must adjust to more than just the expected stressors associated with commencing tertiary studies (McKenna et al., 2017; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). The term for this situation is cultural or acculturative stress (G. Thomson et al., 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

The experience of international students enrolled in health profession degrees similarly reflects the above findings according to a scoping review by McKenna et al. (2017). International health profession students were found to experience increased levels of anxiety and stress in trying to meet family expectations, resulting in lower quality of life and unsatisfying personal relationships. More specifically, given the nature of health professional education, additional demands are present; students need to complete clinical practice and negotiate local healthcare systems (McKenna et al., 2017). This scoping review recommended that universities develop interventions to support international health profession students academically alongside strategies intended to enhance their health and well-being.

Research also identifies that some students can successfully adjust to studying overseas, with several factors protecting against stress. These include an enhanced understanding of differences between home and host country (G. Thomson et al., 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003), familiarity with the local culture (Sherry et al., 2010), predeparture preparation (Alharbi & Smith, 2018), and social

connections (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Having a social connection is a critical factor in adjusting to a new culture. It may lead to a decrease in depression and difficulties associated with cultural adaptation (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Similarly, Hendrickson et al. (2011) reported finding a feeling of social connectedness is associated with an increased level of satisfaction and diminished homesickness. These attributes enhance students' sense of belonging to the campus and are predictive of a successful transition (Smith & Khawaja, 2011a).

Additionally, host country universities can play a critical role in promoting the well-being and success of international students by providing cultural transition programs, enhanced orientations, intentional roommate pairings, bridging programs, and support services (Roberts, & Dunworth, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011a; Tolman, 2017). Cultural transition programs typically include a series of workshops to prepare international students for living in a new environment (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017; Brunsting et al., 2018) and target the main stressors of language and cultural differences to help students succeed academically (Goodwin et al., 2016; He et al., 2012). Cultural transition programs have a more significant impact on international students' adjustment and well-being compared with short-term orientation programs. An Australian study that explored transition programs for international students reported the program resulted in better socioemotional skills and outcomes, perceptions of support, as well as enhanced confidence in communicating with students from other cultures (Brunsting et al., 2018). Moreover, communication skill development (Andrade, 2006), support from colleagues and faculty (McLachlan & Justice, 2009), mentorship (C. Thomson & Esses, 2016), social support (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015), and peer-pairing (Tolman, 2017) are critical aspects of transition programs. However, students indicated discipline-specific transition programs are considered more authentic and relevant to their course of study and future careers (Brunsting et al., 2018).

There is growing evidence to suggest that international students enrolled in health science courses experience significant adjustment issues due to language differences, challenges associated with clinical placement, and navigation through the education and healthcare systems of a new country, compared with other disciplines (He et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2018). Therefore, offering extended transition programs targeting health profession students, beyond the standard university orientation offerings, is crucial and much needed. Further, it is important to better understand students' experiences of such programs and the impact these programs have on their adjustment to university life, social integration, and sense of belonging to the community. Evaluating the impact of transition programs will help to further develop integrated and targeted initiatives that will enhance the quality of the first-year experience for all international health profession students. Considering the limited transition programs available for international health profession students in Australia, the current study aims to describe and report students' experiences of a program designed to support and inform the transition of international students in health professions attending a large, metropolitan university in Australia. This program intended to support

international students' adaptation to university and life in Australia in general while also facilitating their coping and self-management strategies.

METHOD

The research team used a descriptive qualitative approach to generate rich and robust data and to explicate meanings, attitudes, and practices relevant to the topic (Creswell, 2009; Polit & Beck, 2018). Researchers used semistructured interviews including closed and open-ended questions to gather information about participants' experiences of the transition program.

Program Design

As a research team we developed and implemented the program designed for students commencing a health science course in the academic years of 2018 and 2019. Our team consisted of academic staff from nursing and midwifery, nutrition, dietetics and food, occupational therapy, and faculty-based staff who provided welfare and academic support for international students in the health professions. We have substantial experience in teaching international students pursuing health sciences courses. We designed a program based on evidence reported in literature, collective experiences as educators and researchers, and lessons we have learned from previous successful programs. For example, the first author pioneered a project empowering regional university first-year students to care for their mental health in South Australia (Penman et al., 2019). Program outcomes using pre- and posttraining questionnaires revealed that the participants learned and utilized coping strategies to care for their mental health. Some aspects of that program informed the design of the new program.

The newly designed program consisted of three segments. The first segment was a series of four 2-hr presentation sessions held throughout the semester of the students' course. The content of the four sessions included canvassing the needs of the international students, distributing self-assessments, providing evidence-based self-management strategies, planning goals, identifying support within the university and general community, and fostering insights into resilience (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Penman, 2015; Penman et al., 2019; Van Der Riet et al., 2015). See the Appendix for a detailed outline of the workshop content.

The second segment of the program consisted of online support and resources through a closed Facebook page. This platform provided students with continuous and flexible access to supportive resources, such as *Staying Well* (2018) and the *NEWSTART* program (2020). These resources encouraged participants to implement the content of the program independently and to maintain and promote health through stress management activities, healthy diet, sleep hygiene, and positive thinking, among many other techniques.

The third segment involved mentor support. We trained senior students to mentor junior students. The mentors shared their experiences about the university,

helped mentees achieve their goals, and supported the mentees' personal and professional growth.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) was the conceptual framework used to guide the program. This theory underpins behavioral change with the individuals' belief that they are capable of making a change. Embedded in the program were the sources of self-efficacy, such as the personal experience of success, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal that are expected to catalyze change (Bandura, 2019; Mitchie et al., 2014). During the program, personal experiences of success were achieved by participants learning and practicing new skills, such as communication and time management. Senior students co-participated in the program as mentors and positive role models, providing opportunities for vicarious learning. Receiving positive verbal feedback during the workshops following activities and discussing complex scenarios allowed the participants to believe that they had the required competencies to complete tasks and solve problems. In teaching stress management, the participants learned to be self-aware of the factors causing anxiety during challenging situations and how best to deal with them, again aimed at improving self-efficacy (Mitchie et al., 2014).

Setting

We conducted the study was conducted at our university, a tertiary educational institution with domestic and international students enrolled in health profession courses across two metropolitan campuses—Clayton and Peninsula. The Clayton campus is the largest with eight faculties represented. The Peninsula campus specializes in health sciences. International students choose to study at the university because of its global presence of high standards in research and education.

Participants and the Recruitment Process

All first-year international students enrolled in nutrition, dietetics and food, nursing and midwifery, and occupational therapy disciplines in the undergraduate and graduate programs in their first semester of the study were invited to participate in the study. We invited continuing international students from the same disciplines to participate as mentors.

The participants consisted of mentees and mentors. The mentees were in the first year of their courses, while the mentors were in their second or third year. We excluded domestic students from the study. In total, 26 students participated in the program over two iterations: 10 participants in 2018 and 16 participants in 2019. Among those, 16 were mentees and 10 were mentors. At the conclusion of the program, only 15 participants agreed to be interviewed. These were 12 female and three male international students. The interviewees consisted of students enrolled in Bachelor of Nursing (BN; 2), Master of Nursing Practice (MNP; 7), Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (BTHO; 5), and Bachelor of Nutrition Science (BNS; 1). Mainland China (8), Hong Kong (3), Malaysia (2), Taiwan (1), and the

Philippines (1) were their countries of origin. Table 1 provides information about the interview participants.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Year	Discipline	Number of participants	Mentor/mentee
2018	Postgrad dietetics course	1	4 mentees /
	Postgrad nursing courses	7	4 mentors
2019	Undergrad nursing course	2	2 mentees
2019	Undergrad occupational therapy course	5	2 mentees / 3 mentors

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee. The interviewees signed consent forms to audiotape the interview beforehand. We informed participants that the information they provided would remain confidential and that participation was voluntary. The LabArchives, a cloud-based platform designed to manage research findings within the research team, facilitated data storage.

Procedure

After ethics approval, we approached the course and subject coordinators to invite all eligible international students to participate in the program. The invitation was distributed by email and advertisements. The unit and/or course coordinators invited students to participate in the program on behalf of the research team. Potential participants received the explanatory statements that elaborated on the program. The explanatory letter contained the aims and potential benefits of the study, the involvement from the participants, and steps to take part in the study. Those interested contacted the research team to discuss the project. After the program, we directly invited the participants to share their perceptions and impact of the program. Those willing to be interviewed indicated their interest by nominating a time and place they were available for interview.

Data Collection

We conducted posttraining interviews to explore the participants' experiences of the program and how it could be improved. Eight mentees and seven mentors participated in the in-depth interviews. The questions sought to understand the impact of the program in terms of the students' gains and improvements in coping, resilience, mental health and well-being, most valuable aspects of the program, and areas for improvement.

We developed two semistructured interview guides—one for mentees and one for mentors. We held the interviews held face-to-face, over the phone, or via Zoom upon completion of the program. The interviews were approximately 25–60 min. They were informal, open, circular, and spontaneous (Whitehead &

Whitehead, 2016). We audiotaped the interviews and then a professional transcribing service transcribed them verbatim.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interview transcripts using a thematic analysis approach proposed by Clarke et al. (2019). This approach included a six-stage process involving familiarizing ourselves with data, generating initial codes, searching and reviewing patterns, defining and identifying themes, reviewing themes, and writing up results. After reading the transcripts, two researchers coded the data independently by assigning labels to each of the lines and paragraphs. Once we generated codes, the same researchers compared and examined the codes, and collated them to identify patterns of meanings (themes). In the next stage, we defined themes, comparing the codes and data, and further refining as required. This process allowed us to determine if each theme told a story. This final step involved naming the themes and writing them up, linking back to the extracts from the data. We highlighted representative quotes from participants to illustrate these central overall ideas. When the initial two researchers completed the process, another two researchers checked the coding and generated themes.

Trustworthiness

Triangulating results through multiple researchers and adopting well-established methods ascertained credibility (Polit & Beck, 2018). Prolonged engagement, including a series of workshops and Facebook group involvement, helped us build trust with participants and have additional insights into the research inquiry. This strategy increased the likelihood that we would produce credible findings (Polit & Beck, 2018). Providing adequate contextual information to facilitate the adoption of findings to other contexts ensured transferability. Investigator triangulation achieved dependability (McKenna & Copnell, 2018). Four team members undertook the interpretation of data, and their multiple perspectives led to a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' perceptions about the program. Providing a full description of the research process and using rich verbatim text quotes from participants met the confirmability criterion (McKenna & Copnell, 2018).

RESULTS

As international students, both the mentee and mentor participants reported high levels of loneliness and anxiety, saying that they really struggled to fit into university life and also to the Australian way of life more generally. Despite having been accepted by the university into their courses, they expressed strong feelings of self-doubt in their ability to complete them. They described how their feelings were also barriers to their full participation in university life both academically and socially. The mentees said that they had joined the empowerment program because they were looking for connection and support

from other students, while the mentors were motivated out of compassion and desire to support new arrivals because of their past experiences. The interview quotes represented the interviewees' firmly held beliefs. We use their exact words and indicate a code for the participant (which consisted of the mentee or mentor number, as well as the page and paragraph number(s) as documented on the interview transcripts).¹

Perceptions of the Program

This section uncovers the different perceptions of the participants about the program and explicates the depth of their experiences. Other pertinent findings, such as how the program assisted participants in transitioning and adapting to university, and the suggested improvements to the program, are noted.

Following thematic analysis, four themes emerged from the text highlighting the impact of the program on the participants. These were facilitating adjustment, establishing relationship, gaining new skills and knowledge, and transforming beliefs and behavior. Discussion of these themes follow.

Theme 1: Facilitating Adjustment

The empowerment program facilitated international students and faculty members coming together in a highly structured but informal manner over activities and food that provided opportunities for sharing information, achieving personal development, and fostering resilience. This initiative enabled the students to get to know other students, as well as the academic staff. The feelings of connectedness that flowed from the experience increased their sense of acceptance and belonging in the university, which in turn helped reduce negative feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Two participants explained:

I feel safe and supported to express myself and participate in the activity. It [the program] is absolutely beneficial to international students who are adapting to the new environment. We covered all aspects of students' life that builds resilience. It was a safe space to share our difficulties. It allows me to participate socially in a university activity. We were all equal. (Mentor 2)

Mentor 3 said, "The best aspect of the program is that it is friendly, it is a supportive environment, and we feel very welcome, and we are free to express ourselves."

Students indicated that finding a safe place was crucial for relationship building and adjustment. The program provided an environment that was beneficial in terms of encouraging positive behaviors and participation, reducing

¹ Alterations of phrases and statements were made to make them more understandable to readers.

academic pressure, and increasing confidence in communication and interactions with students and staff. In short, a more comfortable space was created, one that was less threatening and nonjudgmental, where they could relax and enjoy the program.

... knowing that I was not alone and going through all these things, that there were people I could go to if I needed help. That was very comforting for me as an international student because it's a new environment and you're trying to get around, trying to fit in and make things work. (Mentee 7)

Theme 2: Establishing Relationships

Theme 2 encompasses the connections and personal relationships the participants built by being involved in the program. Interviewees valued the opportunity to establish new relationships with their peers, mentors, and academic staff in a new context that was beyond the usual formal academic setting. A strong sense of connection between the program participants was identified. There were many opportunities for interaction, and out of those came social and peer learning. Mentor 4 depicted this theme well in her narrative: "...the most important outcome was the exposure to new people, and I got to know people from different fields instead of just dietetics."

Interviewees identified a combination of time and multiple meetings as necessary for the establishment of rapport between the students and with the presenters. The opportunity to build confidence over time and develop relationships with each other was perceived as a foundation for their learning to occur. Students were then able to adopt new behaviors to participate and engage more deeply with the program. Mentors valued interactions with mentees, and mentees suggested extended time with a regular mentor each session. Some excerpts from the interviews are as follows: "At first, I think that the audience was not that active until they got used to coming, and then they knew each other well. I think it takes time" (Mentor 4). Mentee 6 said, "I'm not quick to build a relationship with others, so I think it's a good opportunity that you can slowly know someone."

This theme also encompasses a change in relationships with academic staff, where the role of students and staff differed from traditional pedagogical roles. Academic staff members were seen as facilitators motivated by the best interests of the students, rather than as an authority figure delivering a lecture or tutorial, or assessing the student's performance. Sociocultural barriers in communicating with academic staff were thus diminished.

I think that [the program] encouraged us to talk to the staff. International students might be a little bit afraid of talking with staff or lecturers because we are not used to doing that. So, I think it's quite good you feel really safe. (Mentee 2)

... The most important outcome of the program is that I knew so many lovely people who helped me a lot. I met many classmates in this

program, and I also met many good teachers. I only know a teacher in class, but I saw her in the program. We are now closer than just being in the class. (Mentee 3)

Another dimension of this theme is the mentee-mentor relationship that emerged, which contributed to social and peer learning, and the safe environment that was created. The following quotations aptly describe the perceptions of the mentors and mentees about the impact of the mentoring program on relationships: “I think never give up [is what] I learned from this program, specifically from a mentor. ... If you meet some difficulties, never give up” (Mentee 5). “I love mentoring people, because of the joy of seeing your mentees succeed and when I learn more mentoring skills, I am so eager to apply [them]” (Mentor 3).

Theme 3: Gaining New Skills and Knowledge

The program provided opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge that were helpful to adapt and cope with change. The interviewees valued exposure to new skills or new ways to develop existing skills and share knowledge with each other. They learned self-management skills and also valued the provision of information about where to seek assistance and the services and support available to them. Interactions with other students while learning and the opportunity to share experiences were seen as beneficial. The exercise session, for instance, was identified as one of the best aspects of the program as it was a creative way to cope with stress, enabled interaction with other students in a novel way, and provided stronger rapport between students who previously only knew each other through lectures and tutorials. There was a preference for activity-based learning rather than just “talking and teaching.” These sentiments are depicted in the excerpts: “I think this program is very active. They have many activities and directions. It’s that second or third class; they invited a gym teacher to our class to teach us dancing. Helps release our energy and find pleasure” (Mentee 3).

...I felt [it] was helpful. It builds up the relationship between students, and also learn more about motivation, empowerment, physical exercise and meditation, mindfulness, which are really helpful. I wish I had that when I was a new student, I really enjoyed it. I loved the activities. (Mentor 7)

The program activities facilitated the development of a sense of community. Community referred to the university environment and support services, but also the people belonging to the community. Hence, there was a sharing of culture, ways of learning, relationships, and food.

... all those sessions teach us something, so you will be able to learn, and all those soft skills as well, and also the fun part was the [food], culture and also all those exercise sessions. It’s terrific to work out with people that you know. (Mentor 4)

Moreover, new knowledge and skills came in the form of advice and sharing knowledge and experience about practical and mundane concerns international

students would encounter. These included issues, such as graduation, employment, language test requirements, career goals, and future expectations. The following is a remark from a participant demonstrating useful advice:

One of the good things that I got out of it was sharing my experiences and learning from other people's experiences, that was very important because you know we are in a class in university with many people and we do not open up. It is very difficult sometimes unless someone prompts us, so this course definitely helped me. I recommend continuing this program. (Mentee 1)

Theme 3 covered the transferrable skills and knowledge students gained. Some of these were skills for coping, communicating, managing stress and time, and managing themselves. The participants confided that they had some prior knowledge of the skills they were taught; however, it was not until they discussed, demonstrated, and shared their experiences that the students had a better appreciation and connection with the skills. This in-context approach to skills development assisted participants in incorporating new skills into their life routines, contributing to feelings of greater connection, wellness, and empowerment. These experiences are illustrated in the interview excerpts that follow:

... we have many things we worry about like study, life, a lot of things in our lives but learning mindfulness helped me to focus on one task at [a time] and that can improve my productivity. Most impressive was time management, shows what our day is like. (Mentee 4)

I have learned a lot of skills to empower myself and better equip myself for future challenges as an occupational therapist, like how to manage your stress, how to maintain good health, and how to structure time better. The program is also building self-development and personal growth. (Mentor 6)

Theme 4: Transforming Beliefs and Behavior

The program activities led to changes in students' beliefs and behaviors by facilitating engagement with others in ways more culturally appropriate for their new academic environment. Students identified that the program increased their comfort and motivation to participate as active learners in their new learning environment, in contrast to the passive role of the learner typical of their previous education experiences. During the program, students were able to try new ways of communicating with others, which included more active participation ("speaking up") in tutorials and asking academic staff questions. Mentee 3 aptly described this change:

I think this program really helped me a lot. I felt very nervous for the first time, and I could not talk a lot in the class. Nevertheless, after two classes, I became very active in the class because the class was exciting,

and I wanted to take an active part and show my interest. That never happened in my previous class [in China].

The new knowledge and skills acquired in the empowerment program facilitated the process of behavior adjustment to conform to the prevailing cultural norms in several essential ways. These skills were all acquired and practiced in a safe English-speaking environment, and this was considered another significant benefit of the program. The following quotes illustrate these critical cultural adaptive processes.

The university support improved my academic performance. I was struggling with my daily life, such as cooking, laundry, finding a job. However, this program helped me to deal with stress. I hope this program continues until I complete the first year of my course. (Mentor 5)

Mentor 6 said, "...professionally, it allowed me to reflect on my current coping strategies and to work out where I can improve. I never thought of sitting down and reflecting on my coping strategy or how I use my time" (Mentor 6).

The following comments reflect evidence that participation in the empowerment program helped students to cope with the stress associated with not meeting expectations of high academic standards or concerns about employment or future challenges.

The resilience part [of the program], giving you tips like how you should behave in our hospital placements. You need to shift from wanting to be good at everything, to have a learning attitude where it is fine to make mistakes; it is fine to have failures. You just learn from it, because you're never going to be able to do everything perfectly. (Mentee 1)

... being a nurse is a very stressful profession. It is not just a profession; it's the advocacy of passion. When you care for people, you feel sad when they are sick. You feel bad when they are about to die; you feel sad for the family. So, you need these strategies to keep your inner peace. (Mentor 3)

When we asked participants about the benefits of the program, their responses were overwhelmingly positive with particular reference to the new knowledge and new skills they had acquired that assisted their transition as university students in a foreign country. The participants agreed that the empowerment program filled a significant unmet need among international students. Their suggestions for improvement centered on expanding the program in several ways, including that it could be longer, involve more community activities, and expanded to include local student mentees, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts. Mentor 7 stated, "...The program could have been a bit longer. Also, it might be helpful for the mentors and mentees to build their relationship a bit more." Mentor 6 suggested, "It might be helpful to introduce some community activities or resources. It took me a while to actually go into the local community to meet the people, and experience the different lifestyles." Mentee 6 pointed out that

“including some of the local students would be beneficial for mentees so they can have more connections.”

DISCUSSION

This study evaluated a program designed to support international students studying in the health professions to adapt to university and life in Australia by providing opportunities to learn coping and adaptive strategies that were helpful for university transition. Under the umbrella of self-management, these strategies included becoming more self-aware, communicating effectively (listening to others), reducing stress, managing time and workload, adjusting cross-culturally, learning empowerment principles, sustaining motivation, planning goals, and fostering resilience. Based on students' perceptions of the program, four themes emerged that suggest how the combination of these factors worked to facilitate the transition.

Not surprisingly, participants valued the opportunity to gain new knowledge about local culture, as well as local academic and health environments. This knowledge was identified as being particularly important for international students who study in health profession programs in Western countries (McKenna et al., 2017). Participants also appreciated the holistic nature of the program that focused on communication, self-management, and coping skills that help manage acculturative stress but are less commonly featured in university orientation programs (Briggs & Ammigan, 2017; Brunsting et al., 2018). Supporting health profession students to be able to self-manage high levels of anxiety and stress is especially vital as most international students are less likely to seek help from university health and well-being services (Martin, 2010).

The program was designed to actively involve participants in sharing new experiences, helping to build a sense of belonging and community that is important for promoting well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011a). Participants' enjoyment in these practical activities supports findings that behavioral-based training programs are most effective in improving tertiary students' cross-cultural knowledge and adjustment (Sit et al., 2017).

Creating a safe, supportive, and interactive environment was important to participants, and enabled them to develop their confidence to try new experiences and practice their skills. Conducting the program over several workshops also increased the opportunities to make social connections among interprofessional participants and benefit from this additional support. Based on past research, campus belonging and social support are two essential outcomes for international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011b), and have a direct link with their mental health and academic success (Bai, 2016).

Including mentors as equal participants in the program is likely to be a critical ingredient in this regard, particularly having more senior peers with lived experience of similar cultural and academic challenges. The benefits were also felt by mentors in this study who viewed the program as an opportunity to develop self-management skills, motivation, and empowerment—skills which could be utilized in their future career and practice. This finding is consistent with existing

evidence that mentors benefit from increasing their intercultural awareness, strengthening their communication skills and being able to build confidence and connections by reapplying their learning and experiences to support other international students (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; C. Thomson & Esses, 2016).

Limitations

The small number of international students who volunteered to participate in the program limits the generalizability of the findings, as well as the focus on health profession disciplines. There are several possible reasons for the limited participation, including students choosing to prioritize academic tasks, finding no compatibility with their academic timetable, and being unsure about the scope of the program. These would have to be addressed before future offerings. Other limitations were that a comparison group was not included in the study, only participating students were interviewed, and no students outside of the program were interviewed. A comparison group would determine whether there was an effect in participating in the program or not, that is over and above the impact of time on student transition.

CONCLUSION

This article described the self-reported experiences of international students studying in the health professions with a discipline-focused transition program, based on Bandura's self-efficacy conceptual framework. The behavioral-based program aimed at empowering students to support each other to build self-management skills and resilience. Students valued the opportunities to engage in discussion actively and to share experiences and activities that facilitated cultural adjustment through self-reflection. The mentors and mentees who participated in this study reported that the program helped in facilitating adjustment, establishing relationships, gaining new skills and knowledge, and transforming beliefs and behavior. These emerged as the themes that captured the impact of the program.

Future studies should explore the benefit and value of including domestic students as peer mentors in these programs. One possibility is to integrate cross-cultural training into the first-year university curriculum to foster academic-supported programs in facilitating international students' transition. Ideally, the program could be extended beyond the four sessions to continue throughout the first year of study, as suggested by the participants. Extending the scope of the program to include local students and activities outside of the university context would help students become more familiar with the host culture. Incorporating these aspects into a future iteration of the program would be an essential step toward developing a more sustained and comprehensive approach to meeting the transition needs of international students.

NOTE

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website: <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis>.

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