

1 **Coming out of the ashes we rise: Culturally and linguistically diverse international nursing students**  
2 **during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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37 **Contribution:** EL - Study conception and design, Data collection, Data analysis and interpretation,  
38 Drafting of the article; LN - Data collection, Drafting of the article, Critical revision of the article; HZ -  
39 Data collection, Critical revision of the article; AN - Data collection, Critical revision of the article; FK -  
40 Critical revision of the article.

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42 **Topic/question:** Qualitative study of culturally and linguistically diverse international student who  
43 stayed in Australia during COVID-19 pandemic

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49 **NOTE:** This preprint reports new research that has not been certified by peer review and should not be used to guide clinical practice.

50           **Abstract**

51           **Background and aim:** Research on international students conducted during the COVID-19  
52 pandemic has persistently highlighted the vulnerabilities and challenges that they experienced when  
53 staying in the host country to continue with their studies. The findings from such research can  
54 inevitably create a negative image of international students and their ability to respond to  
55 challenges during unprecedented times. Therefore, this paper took a different stance and reported  
56 on a qualitative study that explored culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) international nursing  
57 students who overcame the challenges brought about by the pandemic to continue with their  
58 studies in Australia.

59           **Method:** A descriptive qualitative research design guided by the processes of constructivist  
60 grounded theory was selected to ascertain insights from participants' experiences of studying  
61 abroad in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Results:** Three themes emerged from the  
62 collected data that described the participants' lived experiences, and they were: 1) *Viewing*  
63 *international education as the pursuit of a better life*, 2) *Focusing on personal growth*, and 3) *Coming*  
64 *out of the ashes we rise*.

65           **Discussion:** The findings highlight the importance of recognising the investments and  
66 sacrifices that CaLD international students and their families make in pursuit of international tertiary  
67 education. The findings also underscore the importance of acknowledging the qualities that CaLD  
68 international students have to achieve self-growth and ultimately self-efficacy as they stay in the  
69 host country during a pandemic.

70           **Conclusion:** Future research should focus on identifying strategies that are useful for CaLD  
71 international nursing students to experience personal growth and ultimately self-efficacy and  
72 continue with their studies in the host country during times of uncertainty such as a pandemic.

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74           **KEYWORDS:** Australia, international students, culturally and linguistically diverse, mental  
75 health, learning experiences, COVID-19, pandemic, resilience

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84                    **INTRODUCTION**

85                    All around the world, people are choosing to relocate to other countries for a wide range of  
86 reasons such as economic prospects, environmental conditions, personal safety, and employment  
87 (Forbes-Mewett, 2020). To increase their opportunities of finding employment, many are choosing  
88 to make substantial investments to pursue higher education overseas (Forbes-Mewett, 2020;  
89 Karram, 2013; Tallon et al., 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia used to attract  
90 international students from over 190 countries (Australian Government, 2021), with a large and  
91 growing proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) students coming from non-western  
92 countries (Khawaja et al., 2014). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) refers to a population  
93 that encompasses a variety of cultural backgrounds and languages. This term is often used to  
94 describe groups of people who come from different ethnic, linguistic, or national origins within a  
95 particular society or community. It highlights the diversity present within a population in terms of  
96 cultural practices, beliefs, and languages spoken (Pham, et al., 2021). The top-ranking non-western  
97 countries in descending order included India, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Republic of  
98 Korea, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the Republic of China, and Singapore (Guo,  
99 2010; Hawthorne, 2014; Lim et al., 2016).

100                    Most of the CaLD international students in Australia are young and unseasoned travellers  
101 who are leaving their homes for the first time to live alone in a foreign country (Australian  
102 Government, 2012). As such, they may be making significant lifestyle adjustments and need to  
103 acculturate to the differing social-cultural differences while living and studying in a foreign  
104 environment (Wang et al., 2008). Previous findings highlighted that CaLD international students  
105 were more conservative, introverted, and less ready to express their views with other people due to  
106 their cultural backgrounds, traditions, and family influences (Yan & Berlinder, 2013). The differences  
107 between the culture of origin and the culture of contact can make them feel out of place and  
108 powerless in the new environment – Cultural shock (Yan & Berlinder, 2013). Consequently, CaLD  
109 international students are more susceptible to poor mental health and negative learning experiences  
110 when compared to domestic students, especially if they struggle with language barriers, isolation,  
111 and acculturation stress, (King et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2017; Vardaman & Mastel-Smith, 2016).  
112 As such, it is important to ensure that their learning experiences are positive, supportive, and  
113 satisfying (Lim et al., 2023; Tallon et al., 2021).

114

115                    **Background**

116                    COVID-19 is a global pandemic that has impacted all sectors of the community including  
117 universities and the education of health sciences students (Agu et al., 2021). The international higher

118 education sector was one of the first to be significantly impacted because of border closures and  
119 travel restrictions (Sidhu et al., 2021). Although many CaLD international students moved back to  
120 their country of origin (Van de Velde et al., 2021), a huge number remained in Australia despite the  
121 comment made by the former Australian Prime Minister, “at times like this, if you are a visitor to this  
122 country, it’s time to make your way home” (Gallagher et al., 2020 pg.1).

123 At the start of the pandemic, CaLD international students who stayed in Australia to carry on  
124 with their studies were not eligible for emergency relief measures introduced by the government  
125 (Hari et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). As such, many of them had to work longer hours to  
126 support their studies, maintain food and housing security, and reduce the financial burden placed on  
127 their families (Hari et al., 2021). For instance, Asian international students had to increase their  
128 working hours which placed additional stress on their ability to uphold their academic standards  
129 (King et al., 2020). Individuals whose jobs were affected due to lockdowns experienced higher levels  
130 of stress if they struggled to find new employment quickly to meet or keep up with their expenses  
131 (Van de Velde et al., 2021).

132 At the peak of the pandemic, many of the CaLD international students, specifically those  
133 from Chinese backgrounds were allegedly experiencing an increase in racial discrimination from  
134 members of the community (King et al., 2020). The experience of racism can negatively impact their  
135 sense of belonging and self-esteem, contributing to poor mental health (King et al., 2020). To add to  
136 their distress, CaLD international students had limited support from their families and friends due to  
137 travel restrictions and lockdowns, with communication only possible through phone or online means  
138 (Aslan & Pekince, 2020; King et al., 2020). The loneliness and physical distancing from loved ones  
139 exacerbated their level of stress, anxiety, and sadness, and if poorly managed could lead to long-  
140 term psychological impairments (Aslan & Pekince, 2020).

141 In addition, the pandemic disrupted normal learning and teaching patterns, with face-to-  
142 face classes transitioning to online formats and changes in examination and assessment methods  
143 (Agu et al., 2021; Van de Velde et al., 2021). As such CaLD international students needed to make  
144 sure that they had adequate technology and internet services, learn how to navigate online learning  
145 platforms, and adapt to the changes in their learning environments to maintain a positive learning  
146 experience (Agu et al., 2021; Van de Velde et al., 2021). The majority of the CaLD international  
147 students come from middle-class backgrounds, where their families often make significant financial  
148 sacrifices to support their education abroad. In some cultures, underperforming academically can  
149 evoke deep feelings of shame and guilt for these students, as they perceive it as letting down their  
150 families (King et al., 2020).

151

152           **Aim of the study**

153           Literature highlights that CaLD international students who chose to stay in their host  
154 countries during the pandemic showed admirable resilience and adaptability (Beckstein, 2020). As  
155 such, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of CaLD international nursing  
156 students who decided to remain in Australia to continue with their studies at two Australian  
157 universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question that guided this study was, *'What*  
158 *are the lived experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) international nursing students*  
159 *who chose to remain in Australia for their studies amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?'*

160           **Ethical considerations**

161           The study proposal and participant information sheet were sent together with the email to  
162 participants who contacted the researchers listed on the flyers of every campus and university.  
163 Participants were provided an explanation about the study and that participation in the study was  
164 voluntary and would not affect their learning at the university. Participants were also assured that  
165 the chosen interview mode (either face to face or online) was anonymous and confidential.  
166 Participants were advised that they could withdraw anytime during the interviews and if they  
167 withdraw, their data will not be used for the study. During the interview, consent was obtained  
168 verbally if the interview was online and digitally if face to face. Ethical approval was obtained from  
169 Curtin University Human Research Ethics Office (HRE2022-0238) and The University of Southern  
170 Queensland Ethical Review Committee (H22REA114).

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172           **METHODS**

173           **Design**

174           A descriptive qualitative study that followed the processes as outlined in the constructivist  
175 grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was chosen to allow the researchers to gain insight into the  
176 participants' experiences of studying abroad in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tenny et  
177 al., 2023). The use of this study design enabled the researchers to follow a rigorous process to obtain  
178 an in-depth exploration and develop an understanding of the individuals' lived experiences  
179 (Dodgson, 2017).

180

181           **Participants**

182           We decided to employ the purposive sampling technique as it enables us to concentrate on  
183 specific groups of individuals who can offer insightful and pertinent data, effectively addressing the  
184 research aim of this study (Nyimbili, & Nyimbili, 2024). CaLD international nursing students who  
185 meet the eligibility criteria of (i) 18 years or older and (ii) have the lived experience of staying in

186 Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic (2019 – 2021) were invited to participate in the study. These  
187 students were either in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year or 3<sup>rd</sup> year or had recently graduated from Australia at the time  
188 of participation. Their shared lived experiences allowed the researchers to gain profound and  
189 insightful insights into the participants' encounters.

### 190 **Settings**

191 This study took place post-pandemic restrictions where teaching and learning activities were  
192 gradually returning to the on-campus mode of delivery. As such, the researchers were able to recruit  
193 participants from the school of nursing of [removed for peer-review] and [removed for peer-review]  
194 through an advertisement made on the school's webpage, blackboard announcements, flyers on-  
195 campuses, and personalised emails sent to all students who were identified as onshore international  
196 students.

197

### 198 **Recruitment**

199 The CaLD international nursing students who were interested in the study contacted the  
200 researchers of their respective universities and were provided with the participant information  
201 sheet, informed consent form, and interview guide prior to setting a date for the interview.  
202 Participants had the option of being interviewed face-to-face or virtually via Microsoft Teams at their  
203 convenience.

204

### 205 **Data collection**

206 All the participants provided their informed consent and completed a basic demographic  
207 questionnaire prior to the commencement of the interview. The semi-structured interview method  
208 was chosen as it allows reciprocity between the interviewer and participant, enabling the  
209 interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's responses (Kallio, et al.,  
210 2016). The questions were informed broadly by literature (Naz, et al., 2022) around the themes of  
211 financial support, family support, social support, work, and housing. The semi-structured interviews  
212 were conducted independently by four members of the research team (Authors 1 to 4) who were  
213 experienced in conducting qualitative, research. All the interviews were conducted using an  
214 interview schedule between the period of October 2022 to April 2023. Face-to-face interviews were  
215 recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word, and virtual interviews were video  
216 recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Initial coding of the transcriptions was performed  
217 by Author 1 after each interview, and this process ensured that data collection was guided by data  
218 saturation, whereby no new information was collected in subsequent interviews (Kyngäs, 2020).

219

## 220 **Data analysis**

221 Rigour is the means of demonstrating the plausibility, credibility, and integrity of the qualitative  
222 research process. According to Kenny, et al (2024), rigour of a study can be determined if actions and  
223 developments of the researcher can be examined. This study utilises the framework proposed by Guba  
224 and Lincoln (1981) for assessing the rigour of qualitative research: credibility (field notes, recording),  
225 transferability (thematic logs), auditability (field notes, recording and thematic logs) and confirmability  
226 (audit trail by constant comparison) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

227 In this study, all the interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants.  
228 The audio recording ensured that an identical replication of the contents of each interview was available  
229 to facilitate analysis. Audio recording was chosen as a tool for record keeping because it could greatly  
230 increase the quality of field observations (Giles, et al., 2024) by allowing the researcher to analyse,  
231 interpret, and report the participants' own words. The audio recording can be used to refute criticism  
232 that qualitative research is prone to systematic bias (Tuckett, 2005).

233 The importance of ensuring that interview transcripts are verbatim accounts for what took place  
234 is widely accepted (Eftekhari, 2024). A verbatim transcript is a faithful reproduction of an aural record,  
235 taken as an unquestionable record of the interview and as an expression of truth (Eftekhari, 2024).

236 Field notes refer to various notes recorded by the researcher during or after her observation of a  
237 specific phenomenon. Tuckett (2005) defines field notes as descriptions of experiences and observations  
238 the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner. These brief notes  
239 allowed the investigators to improve the discussion, by keeping track of ideas and themes, coming back  
240 to them for clarification and further discussion and elaboration (Tuckett, 2005).

241 The initial codes were compared and grouped by Author 1 using the constant comparison  
242 analysis technique central to the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This process ensured that the  
243 codes were grouped and categorised according to their meanings. The developing categories were  
244 checked by all members of the research team and any discrepancies found in the constructed  
245 categories were reviewed and discussed until consensus was achieved. This peer review process  
246 eliminated the potential biases in Author 1's interpretations of the data, and this ensured the  
247 trustworthiness of the findings (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

248 Next, the sentences and segments that were grouped under each of the developing  
249 categories were re-read and scrutinised for themes and concepts (Charmaz, 2006). This process  
250 allowed meanings of the categories to emerge and were grounded in the lived experiences of the  
251 participants. The emerged meanings of the categories were then related to the literature to ascertain  
252 the degree of support for the ideas generated (Kolb, 2012; Tuckett, 2005). To attain dependability,

253 this study followed the COREQ Checklist for Interviews and Focus Groups (Tong et al., 2007) to write  
254 up the findings.

255

## 256 **RESULTS**

257 We adjusted our recruitment methods to include verbal advertisements during lectures,  
258 tutorials, and simulation laboratory sessions. Despite utilising numerous methods of recruitment  
259 (flyers, community hubs, study desks, verbal during lectures, tutorials, and simulation laboratory  
260 sessions) at various campuses, only twenty CaLD international students responded. Arrangements  
261 were made with these twenty students, however only 19 students agreed to participate. The  
262 recorded interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration with a total of 10 hours and 04  
263 minutes. Eight of the participants chose to be interviewed in person, and the rest were virtually  
264 interviewed. The CaLD international nursing students who participated in this study consisted of 17  
265 females and two males. Eleven participants were aged between 20 to 29, seven were aged between  
266 30 to 39, and one was aged between 40 to 49. As shown in Table

267 1, the majority of the CaLD were from China (36.8%), followed by Malaysia (21.1%), Nepal  
268 (15.8%), Hong Kong (5.3%), India (5.3%), Kuwait (5.3%), Singapore (5.3%), and South Korea (5.3%).

269

270 [Insert Table. 1 here]

271

272 The majority of the CaLD international nursing students who participated in this study  
273 reported that they had lived in Australia for more than 3 years (68.4%) at the time of data collection.  
274 The highest qualifications of the participants were: high school (n = 6), vocational training (n = 1),  
275 undergraduate (n = 9), and postgraduate (n = 3). Close to three-quarters of the participants (73.7%)  
276 did not live with their family or relatives, 63.2% did not have family or relatives living in Australia,  
277 and 94.7% of the participants were engaged in paid work

278

### 279 **The experiences of CALD international nursing students during the Covid-19 pandemic**

280 There was a consensus among the participants that their decisions to remain in Australia  
281 were inevitably met with harsh adversaries. Three themes emerged during the process of data  
282 analysis that represented the reasons and experiences of CaLD international nursing students. The  
283 themes were: (i) *viewing international education as the pursuit of a better life*, (ii) *focusing on*  
284 *personal growth*, and (iii) *coming out of the ashes we rise* (see Figure 1. Coding tree).

285

286 [Insert Figure. 1 here]



287 **Theme 1: Viewing international education as the pursuit of a better life**

288 The first theme ‘*viewing international education as the pursuit of a better life*’ represented  
289 the mindset of many of the CaLD international nursing students who participated in this study. There  
290 was a consensus among the participants that studying overseas was viewed as a major life-changing  
291 decision that included making significant investments and sacrifices including spending an extended  
292 period away from their family or loved ones. Two of the participants stated: “*It’s a big money, so I*  
293 *don’t wanna give up, so just keeping going on.*” (P13); “*Everything changed but what can I do? I just*  
294 *have to accept it* (P17)”. For this reason, the majority of the participants shared that they were  
295 determined to remain in Australia to complete their nursing course despite having the knowledge of  
296 the impact of living in a pandemic: “*I’m pursuing a career in nursing so that’s why I need to stay and*  
297 *keep studying*” (P10); as “*nursing contains clinical placement and the only way to pass the course is*  
298 *to attend the clinical placement. If I go back to China and I can’t come back, I will have to extend my*  
299 *studies.*” (P3); “*I haven’t finished my degree so I have to stay here*” (P5); “*I’m just afraid that if I go*  
300 *back to my home country, I couldn’t return to Australia to continue my study*” (P2). Interestingly,  
301 most of the participants revealed that their knowledge of the travel restrictions imposed on students  
302 was not particularly distressing for them. As one of the participants said:

303  
304 “*There’s no choice... and if I went back home, it was the same condition, and*  
305 *the situation would be worse if I went back because I had to study online from there.*  
306 *So basically, having no choice kind of motivates me because I know that I’ll have to*  
307 *deal with it*” (P12).

308  
309 Nevertheless, a few of the participants highlighted that they were caught by surprise by the  
310 prolonged period of travel restrictions: “*I came from Kuwait and was aware of the travel restriction.*  
311 *But there were chances that the international border will reopen and they [social media] were giving*  
312 *us hope that it might be opened within one to two months*” (P6); “*Honestly, I thought that it was only*  
313 *for a short while, I didn’t know that there would be a lockdown for three years. I only thought that it*  
314 *would be only for three months*” (P4). Those who were caught by surprise by the prolonged  
315 restrictions on international travel were reportedly more likely to experience homesickness: “*I didn’t*  
316 *know that it’s gonna be three years... I’ll be able to go home if I miss home... COVID having that*  
317 *option taken away during the pandemic*” (P4). Yet, there was a consensus among the participants  
318 including those who were homesick that they would still choose to remain in Australia to continue  
319 with their studies in pursuit of a better life: “*In hindsight, I know that even if there is a lockdown. I*

320 *would still come, I would still fly here, despite the risk of not coming back. I will still fly and try to get*  
321 *before a lockdown” (P4); “Yes, I will come as I am very much career focused” (P6).*

322

## 323 **Theme 2: Focusing on personal growth**

324 The second theme *‘focusing on personal growth’* described the attitudes of CaLD  
325 international nursing students who participated in this study. Many of the participants highlighted  
326 the importance of accepting their decision to remain in Australia to reduce the negative impacts on  
327 their mental health and wellbeing. One of the participants declared: *“I convinced myself that it is the*  
328 *best decision... whatever is going to happen will happen, so I have no control over that and just take*  
329 *it positively” (P9).* Other participants shared how they engaged in positive thinking to maintain their  
330 mental health and wellbeing: *“There’s less restriction here compared to China. Lots of people that go*  
331 *back ended up having anxiety or depression” (P3); “The Australian government did a really good job*  
332 *about COVID when compared with my home country. If I go back to China, I’m not sure if I can get*  
333 *used to the restrictions there” (P10); “I think the learning environment and healthcare are much*  
334 *better in here compared with my home country during COVID” (P11).* As one of the participants  
335 stated:

336

337 *“I’m happy that they didn’t make us leave Australia. Some students who*  
338 *signed up to go to Melbourne during the pandemic had to literally finish their degree*  
339 *in Malaysia, but they have paid for coming to Aussie. So, I’m happy I’m able to study*  
340 *in Australia to get the life experience that they don’t have.” (P4)*

341

342 Many of the participants who were aged between 20 to 29 highlighted that they *“felt that*  
343 *they had to mature earlier than their peers [who are living in their country of origin] of the same age”*  
344 *(P1), and “learn to cope as this is the first time, they experienced something like COVID” (P6).* The  
345 participants perceived the need to cope with challenges like COVID-19 independently, without  
346 burdening their families. As one of the participants stated:

347

348 *“We have decided to stay in Australia and the finances are way higher than*  
349 *what we like to have back home... we know that we have to pay fees and all [other*  
350 *expenses] ... So that’s all on us and is our responsibility to pay for our fees... we*  
351 *cannot blame others but ourselves... we have to keep telling ourselves that it is all on*  
352 *us [because we made that decision] and then work on it, rather than [to rely on*  
353 *family or loved ones]” (P9).*

354 For this reason, most of the CaLD international nursing students who participated in this  
355 study highlighted that they learned to juggle their studies and paid work. This helped them to  
356 acquire skills to manage their time and finances more effectively. One of the participants shared:

357

358 *“I have to manage all the time and money, to work and study so that I don’t*  
359 *struggle. I have to work and save up enough for me to pay my next semester’s tuition*  
360 *fee, pay my rent, and pay for my food. I don’t spend on entertainment ... I believe*  
361 *that is what most international students’ life would be [remaining in Australia during*  
362 *the COVID-19 pandemic” (P11).*

363

364 Another participant stated:

365

366 *“It is definitely the experience you never expected to have back home. I*  
367 *didn’t even cook all my life. I didn’t look after myself like my family used to do*  
368 *everything for myself. I just used to do whatever I wanted to... No responsibilities or*  
369 *anything. Nothing more of that now... Being here by yourself, looking after yourself,*  
370 *paying rent. Arranging finances and all, that’s the experiences [maturing earlier than*  
371 *their peers of the same age] I was talking about” (P9).*

372

373 The need for CaLD international nursing students to assume responsibility for their own lives  
374 also motivated them to change their lifestyles, live healthier, and learn coping strategies to  
375 strengthen their psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing: *“I did a lot of mediation... and*  
376 *focused on those things [which are important]. I think it is good because I didn’t have time to think*  
377 *and worry about other problems” (P14); “I had a friend who was very depressed, but we motivated*  
378 *him to play sports. He started playing cricket, and he is much better now” (P6). One of the*  
379 participants added:

380

381 *“I changed myself a lot [personal growth] during the COVID because I know*  
382 *how important health is. So, before I went to the university campus to study, I never*  
383 *used to go to the gym but now I start attending some of the gym classes. I met some*  
384 *of the people there and did some exercise with them... I guess I made some friends*  
385 *from the gym... before that, I don’t have any friends in here” (P3).*

386

387

388 **Theme 3: Coming out of the ashes we rise**

389 The last theme *‘Coming out of the ashes we rise’* commemorated the achievements of the  
390 CaLD international nursing students who participated in this study. Interestingly, when asked to  
391 reflect on their experiences, most of the participants claimed to have had a positive experience of  
392 living in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic: *“It helped me build some resilience. I’ve finished  
393 my studies and managed to get a job as a nurse”* (P12); *“Hundred percent! I will still choose to stay  
394 here if COVID returns. I learned so much about myself that I will never get to if I went home”* (P1).

395 Most of the participants highlighted that they were pleased about the abundance of clinical  
396 job opportunities for international nursing students, which was not the case prior to the COVID-19  
397 pandemic. As such, they were able to lessen the financial burdens placed on themselves and their  
398 families or loved ones: *“During COVID, there were lots of chances to get work, especially for  
399 nursing... I work for the agency in a casual position like personal care assistant”* (P3); *“I managed to  
400 work as an AIN while studying throughout the pandemic”* (P4); *“I managed to support my mother  
401 and sister [financially] who were stuck here with me due the travel restriction”* (P1). Some of the  
402 participants were able to secure ongoing paid work in the healthcare sector and this has helped  
403 them to qualify for getting their permanent residency in Australia. As one of the participants stated:

404  
405 *“If I am not studying nursing, I probably cannot find a job during this  
406 situation. You know now it’s easier than before for nursing students to get a job, so  
407 we are very lucky, and I think the best choice. If I didn’t choose to stay in Australia  
408 during COVID, my husband and I cannot get the PR [Permanent Residency]  
409 invitations”* (P7).

410  
411 Many of the participants also claimed that they felt less stressed with the changes to the  
412 teaching patterns as they were able to personalize their learning experiences with their lifestyles.  
413 One of the participants stated:

414  
415 *“Our studies were moved online but I like it. I don’t have to wake up early to  
416 attend lectures or go to tutorials. I just signed into Zoom and the lectures were  
417 recorded so it works well for me. Then our exams were also online which to me was  
418 good because I can do the exam at home, and I don’t get stressed while traveling to  
419 the campus to sit the exam”* (P15).

420

421 Another participant who shared the same sentiment said: *“I was just happy that I have a*  
422 *break. I was already exhausted with placements and assessments, so I was happy. I get to sleep in*  
423 *and no need to wake up early”* (P16). Additionally, many of the participants shared that their  
424 relationships with their family, loved ones, and friends were improved as there was stronger  
425 communal support and understanding:

426

427 *“We talk to each other, work with each other. If one of us got COVID, the*  
428 *other one would go out to buy groceries, so I depend heavily on housemates and*  
429 *close friends from my own country... we kind of understand each other that we are*  
430 *out of the country, and we don't have anyone else here helping us”* (P5).

431

432 There was also a stronger peer support to support one another with their studies: *“I*  
433 *have a friend from church, and she organized an English corner for the international students*  
434 *to study together”* (P10). Those participants who have family or loved ones here in Australia  
435 found that they have more time to spend with them and the increased engagement has  
436 supported them to feel closer. As one of the participants explained: *“My partner is here, and*  
437 *we have to face all the struggles together, do things together and that it just makes me feel*  
438 *that life is more interesting with him”* (P2). On the other hand, those participants who do not  
439 have family or loved ones here in Australia found themselves *“spending more time catching*  
440 *up with close friends and family in [their home country] online or phone calls”* (P11). All of  
441 these highlights how CaLD international nursing students overcame the challenges brought  
442 about by the COVID-19 pandemic and emerged victoriously on the other side.

443

## 444 **DISCUSSION**

445 In line with previous research on international students during the COVID-19 pandemic,  
446 CaLD international nursing students in this study encountered similar challenges (Gallagher et al.,  
447 2020; Gomes et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Most of the studies conducted on  
448 international students during COVID-19 have continually highlighted their poor mental health and  
449 wellbeing. Consequently, CaLD international students were often perceived as lacking in resilience to  
450 remain in the host country during the pandemic (Gallagher et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2021; Nguyen  
451 & Balakrishnan, 2020).

452 Yet, the findings in our study revealed opposing evidence of CaLD international students  
453 achieving positive lived experiences while staying in Australia amidst the border closures and travel  
454 restrictions. More specifically, the findings in our study highlighted that international students were

455 motivated and determined to stay in the host country to continue with their studies, thus reinforced  
456 the importance of having temporary relief support financial assistance to support international  
457 students to remain in Australia (Ramia, et al., 2022). It underscored the importance for policymakers  
458 and decision-makers in education to rethink their approach to the pandemic, seeing it as a chance to  
459 foster a sense of belonging among international students. This entails nurturing their personal  
460 development and empowering them to pursue independent living, rather than simply advising them  
461 to go back to their home countries.

462 The findings of our study highlighted the qualities of CaLD international students such as  
463 their maturity, determination, and adaptability when pursuing international education. These  
464 attributes hold immense importance for the academic progression of international students,  
465 especially during challenging times as noted by Sabouripour and Roslan (2015). However, they often  
466 remain unnoticed amidst the more common hurdles like acculturation stress and language barriers  
467 encountered by CaLD international students. There is a need for more research that focuses on  
468 identifying the strengths and capabilities of CaLD international students to remain in the host  
469 country during the pandemic. The growing body of research findings has the potential to influence  
470 policy adjustments aimed at enhancing support for international students to stay in their host  
471 countries. Education policymakers and decision-makers must acknowledge the financial  
472 commitments and sacrifices made by CaLD international students and their families to pursue  
473 education abroad. Our study underscores that the majority of CaLD international students opt for  
474 overseas study in search of improved opportunities for a better life. The lack of humanistic regard  
475 for CaLD international students during the pandemic underscored the urgent need for more  
476 inclusive and empathetic support systems (Van de Velde et al., 2021).

477 CaLD international students and their families who felt neglected, abandoned, and devalued  
478 by the Australian Government during the pandemic (Van de Velde et al., 2021), may perceive  
479 themselves as mere commodities or 'cash cows' to the Australian economy (Soong & Maheepala,  
480 2023). This can discourage future CaLD international students from choosing Australia as their host  
481 country for international education, thus significantly impacting the total education industry's  
482 revenue and employment (Thatcher, et al., 2020). It was reported in a recent survey of Indian  
483 international students that they preferred the US or Canada over Australia or New Zealand post-  
484 pandemic (Freeman, et al., 2022).

485

#### 486 **Significance of findings to nursing education and practice**

487 The findings from our study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of CaLD  
488 international students who continued to stay in Australia to continue with their nursing program

489 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of our study showed that CaLD international nursing  
490 students who participated in this study displayed more strengths, resilience, and maturity to  
491 continue with studies onshore when compared to other CaLD international students in the other  
492 programs, for example, business, mining, or engineering. This highlighted that international students  
493 should not be treated as a homogenous group during the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian  
494 Government, 2012).

495 The results of our study also implied the need for education policy- and decision-makers to  
496 acknowledge the uniqueness of international students from different backgrounds and programs  
497 that they were studying when implementing strategies to reduce the impacts on the country during  
498 unprecedented times. For example, nursing students, both local and international, were considered  
499 essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic to address the critical nursing workforce shortages.  
500 However, there was a lack of foresight to fund nursing programs nationally and provide support for  
501 international nursing students to continue with their studies. Nevertheless, the findings of our study  
502 showed that CaLD international nursing students were able to tap into the increased paid work  
503 opportunities (Gómez-Moreno, et al., 2022) to achieve financial independence (Dempsey, et al.,  
504 2023).

505 Lastly, our findings showed that the majority of the CaLD international nursing students  
506 were juggling between their work and studies and welcomed the changes to normal learning and  
507 teaching patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding highlighted the need to personalise  
508 the nursing curriculum to improve the learning experiences (Middleton & Moroney, 2019), perhaps  
509 by incorporating the use of more modern technology to overcome the cost, time, and logistic  
510 problems (Hirt & Beer, 2020).

511

### 512 **Limitations of this study**

513 This study is not without its limitations. First, the participants in this study consisted of CaLD  
514 international nursing students who were predominately from Asian countries. Therefore, the  
515 findings generated in this study may not be representative of the whole population of international  
516 nursing students who remained in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the study  
517 provides us with some indication of which students may be most vulnerable in a pandemic. Second,  
518 we only investigated the international nursing students from two regional universities in Australia so  
519 the findings may differ among other universities, areas, or populations such as students belonging to  
520 other disciplines/programs.

521

522

523 **CONCLUSION**

524 This study explored the lived experiences of CaLD international nursing students who stayed  
525 in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue with their studies. The findings of this study  
526 provided important insights into the qualities that CaLD international students possessed to  
527 overcome the challenges brought about by the pandemic and emerge victoriously. Future research  
528 will be conducted to identify strategies that CaLD international nursing students identified as useful  
529 for them to activate personal growth and ultimately self-efficacy to stay and continue with their  
530 studies during times of uncertainty.

531

532 **RELEVANCE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE**

533 The findings of our study highlighted the importance of education policy- and decision-  
534 makers to acknowledge the investments and sacrifices that CaLD international students and their  
535 families made to pursue international education and identify more humanistic approaches to  
536 support them to stay in Australia during unprecedented times. The findings of this study also  
537 highlighted the need to reconceptualise times of uncertainty such as a pandemic as opportunities for  
538 CaLD international students to experience self-growth, achieve self-efficacy, and ultimately actualise  
539 their talents and potentialities, which is the true purpose and goal for them to pursue international  
540 education (Shkoler & Rabenu, 2023).

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**Table 1. Demographic data of participants**

Participant number	Country of origin	Gender	Age group	Relationship status	Family and relatives' status	Employment status	Highest qualification	Length of stay in Australia
1	Malaysia	Female	20 to 29	In a relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relatives: Yes</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
2	Hong Kong	Female	20 to 29	In a relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
3	China	Female	20 to 29	In a relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
4	China	Female	30 to 39	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
5	Malaysia	Male	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>More than 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
6	China	Female	30 to 39	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: Yes</li> <li>Carer responsibility: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Postgraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
7	Kuwait	Female	40 to 49	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>More than 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Postgraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 1 year</li> </ul>

8	Singapore	Male	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>More than 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 to 4 years</li> </ul>
9	Nepal	Female	30 to 39	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
10	China	Female	30 to 39	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: Yes</li> <li>Carer responsibility: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Postgraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
11	China	Female	30 to 39	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: Yes</li> <li>Carer responsibility: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>More than 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
12	India	Female	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: Yes</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 to 4 years</li> </ul>
13	China	Female	30 to 39	In a relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
14	China	Female	30 to 39	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: Yes</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undergraduate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More than 4 years</li> </ul>
15	Malaysia	Female	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> <li>More than 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 1 year</li> </ul>
16	Malaysia	Female	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family/relatives here: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paid work: Yes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 to 2 years</li> </ul>



					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>• Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>		
17	Nepal	Female	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>• Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>• Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paid work: Yes</li> <li>• 1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 to 2 years</li> </ul>
18	Nepal	Female	20 to 29	Married	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>• Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>• Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paid work: Yes</li> <li>• 1 – 20hrs a week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 to 2 years</li> </ul>
19	South Korea	Female	20 to 29	Single	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/relatives here: No</li> <li>• Lives with family/relative: No</li> <li>• Carer responsibility: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paid work: No</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 1 year</li> </ul>

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Figure 1. Coding tree

