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Higher Education, Exclusion and Belonging: Religious Complexity, Coping and Connectedness among International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Generations of migrants from Asia since the 1800s have endured challenges in locating their place and belonging in Australia due to systemic racism and discrimination against the cultural and religious 'other'. These persistent issues have intensified during the pandemic, especially towards Chinese communities, including international students. In this paper, we investigate the impact of the pandemic on Chinese, Indian and Russian international students in Australia. It reveals how, throughout the first year of the pandemic, international student, ethnic and religious community organizations implemented multiple and overlapping coping strategies to assist international students in Australia, who had been left vulnerable by a lack of government support and escalating geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. By highlighting the religious dimensions of these strategies of connectedness and belonging, it contributes new insights in an under-explored aspect in studies on international students in Australia, pointing the way for further investigation.

Keywords: international students, racism, belonging, religion, coping, connectedness, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

International students[1] who were already in Australia at the start of 2020 have been identified as one of the most vulnerable and hard-hit groups during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dodd et al., 2021; Fronek et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Their vulnerability was exacerbated by being excluded from all federal pandemic assistance programs, such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper (Firang, 2020), and by political rhetoric, when Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that these students should return home if they did not have the financial means to fulfill their visa requirements (Gibson & Moran, 2020). A 2020 pandemic survey conducted among 5,000 temporary visa holders (mainly international students) reported that 65% were made jobless, 34% became homeless and 39% lacked basic living expenses (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020), demonstrating the multifaceted challenges endured by international students during this crisis. Additionally, Chinese and other Asian students, along with Australians of Asian appearance, have been the victims of elevated rates of racist attacks and discrimination during the pandemic (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020; Woolley, 2020; Zhou, 2020).

Even though Australia has been one of the world's most popular destinations for undergraduate and postgraduate international students since the 1950s (Brown & Jones, 2013; Megarrity, 2007), the exclusion of student support in federal policy and problematic rhetoric has raised questions about Australia's long-term desirability as a destination for overseas education (Smith, 2020). This exclusion and racism experienced by Asian students has its origins in a long-standing and persistent history of racism against Asian communities in Australia, dating back to the 1850s Gold Rush and the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, known as the White Australia Policy (Hage, 2012).

It is within this context that this article presents preliminary findings from an Australian Research Council funded research project on Religious Diversity in Australia, which reveal that ethnic and religious community organizations have played a critical and often under-appreciated role in assisting international students with belonging in Australia, and coping with persistent exclusion, racism and discrimination, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. International students also demonstrated a high level of agency through their involvement in university and youth groups, and cultural and religious organizations. These groups were instrumental in developing and implementing strategies of inclusion to support international students in the face of this pandemic and escalating geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. These findings suggest that larger scale mixed methods such as quantitative and qualitative research is needed to better understand the complex religiosity of international students and their strategies of religious coping and connectedness in Australia.

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[1] In Australia, the term 'international student' is used for students who are residing and studying in Australian universities and are on a temporary student visa.

LONGING TO CONNECT AND BELONG

Belonging is shaped by everyday encounters and practices, and is best understood through an intersectional lens, including social locations of ethnicity, race and religion. Belonging is acknowledged as a basic need, and when this need of feeling safe and being part of a community is unmet, it can lead to alienation, insecurity and depression (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010). Migrants seek to belong immediately upon their settlement in a new country, even if they have the status of transient migrants. 'Transient migrants' refer to 'individuals who criss-cross provincial, state and rural-urban borders in order to study, work, seek sanctuary, live differently, and be with family and loved ones' and include international students (Gomes et al., 2017, p. 7).

The concept of belonging, however, is often defined by the dominant group's 'rhetoric of sameness' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 650), where 'whiteness' is a fundamental dimension of 'Australianness' (Hage, 2012, pp. 16-17, 20). Full belonging then is hindered by differences in 'place of birth or skin colour' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 650). In this 'white nation fantasy', non-whites in Australia are viewed as subjects to whites in social and professional hierarchies (Hage, 2012, pp. 16-17, 20). For instance, the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (White Australia Policy) was implemented as a response to Indigenous and Asian diaspora communities outnumbering European communities in the North of Australia, and this policy subsequently contributed to the creation of a myth of White Christian Australia (Hage, 2012; Halafoff et al., forthcoming). Part of this myth entailed a disconnection from the reality of Australia's cultural and religious diversity, where non-White Australians continually resist exclusion and fight for representation and an active role in governance (Hage, 2012). This 'politics of belonging' and maintenance of boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205), defined by whiteness, continues to problematize belonging for international students and culturally and religiously diverse diaspora communities in Australia.

International students traverse transnational boundaries and seek to belong in their host and home country simultaneously through establishing various points of 'connectedness' (Tran & Gomes, 2017, p. 7). They experience high levels of satisfaction when they are able to connect and become part of the host society (Brown, 2009; Brown & Jones, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). Nevertheless, research consistently reveals a gap in meaningful interaction between international students, local students and host societies (Brown, 2009; Gomes, 2020). Concurrently, international students often connect with international student or 'same-culture' groups to navigate their place and belonging in the host society (Sawir et al., 2008; Gomes, 2020). This sense of belonging and connectedness can fluctuate depending on the quality and duration of time they spend interacting with diaspora and mainstream communities (Berry, 2005).

International students experience a fluid sense of belonging which can become disrupted when they become unwillingly caught up in geopolitical tensions and conflicts, especially where racial, religious and ideological differences exist between their countries of origin and host societies (Brown,

2009). Such crisis events are often the stimulus for Australian state actors to engage with particular communities. For instance, a series of violent attacks in Melbourne in 2009, that appeared to racially target Indian students (ABC/AAP, 2009), made state actors more aware of the students' needs, and of the need to work much more closely with Indian and Hindu communities in particular (Halafoff, 2013).

At the start of the COVID-19 health crisis, Chinese and other Asian students began experiencing increased levels of discrimination through the ethnicization of the virus as 'Chinese' (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020). Reports of racial attacks and discrimination were made by Chinese international students and Australians of Asian appearance (Woolley, 2020; Zhou, 2020). These attacks bring to mind memories of how the White Australia Policy came into being to curb mass Chinese migration during the Gold Rush period (Jones, 2008). The COVID-19 health crisis became a catalyst that exposed social and racialized fractures between Asian-looking international students and Australian society (Furnham et al., 2005; Marginson et al., 2010).

RELIGION, COPING AND SETTLEMENT

Prior research reveals that religious communities can play an important role in combatting discrimination in the face of crisis events. Indeed, religion has long played a significant role in settlement, connectedness, coping and belonging of diverse migrants in Australia. From the First Fleet to contemporary times, religious groups have been active agents in helping migrants settle into life in Australia (Bouma, 1994). They have done so through providing friendship and support, finding housing, accessing health and educational services, and assisting with employment (Jupp, 2009; Frame, 2002; Village et al., 2017). Historically this has followed a communal pattern. Australia's Anglicans have welcomed and assisted with settling UK migrants; Catholics assisted migrants from Ireland, Malta and Italy; and Dutch Reformed Churches and Greek Orthodox communities also assisted their diaspora communities (Jupp, 2009; Frame, 2002). Muslims and Buddhists from Turkey, the Middle East and Asia were similarly supported by their respective religious communities in the 1980s and 1990s (Bouma, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). Hindus and Sikhs likewise have a history of organizing themselves into religious societies and temple communities as an integral part of their settlement process in Australia (Bilimoria, 2015).

Religious organizations and places of worship have long provided meeting spaces for those with shared languages and cultures (Bouma, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c) that facilitate religious coping as a strategy to rise above and grow from stressful events, including migration journeys and settlement. This can involve religious narratives, religious figures, and relying on God or other supernatural beings in times of need (Pargament, 1990; Pargament et al., 1998; Counted, 2019).

As with migrants in general, research has revealed that international students in Australia tend to seek social connections as a coping strategy through 'same-culture' networks, including religious groups. Although religion was only briefly mentioned in Sawir and her colleagues' study, they highlighted more problematic

aspects of ghettoization that could occur if international students relied too heavily on same-culture or same-religion networks (Sawir et al., 2008). A more recent Australian report also noted that evangelical Christian churches play a vital role in providing support for vulnerable Chinese international students, while also problematizing the mixed motives involved in this provision of care (Martin, 2020). Religion was once again not a primary focus of this inquiry.

Research from other 'Western' societies of the UK and New Zealand has found that the levels of religiosity of international students tends to be higher than that of the local student body. A 2013 study of international students in the UK by Guest, Aune, Sharma, and Warner, found that a significant majority (63.6%) of the 4,500 undergraduate students (including international) surveyed reported being religious. Two New Zealand studies reported similar findings. International students were found to be generally more religious, or more spiritual and connected with their beliefs, and more religiously involved, compared with domestic students (Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al., 2009). In particular, students of Asian heritage were more likely to be religious and inclined to use religion as a coping strategy in times of stress (Chai et al., 2012).

Table 1: Religious Affiliation in Australia by Country of Birth - 2016 Census

Country of Birth	Australia	China	India	Russia
1st largest	Christian, nfd - 52.1%	No Religion, so described - 73.4%	Hinduism – 49.3%	No Religion, so described - 35%
2nd largest	No Religion, so described – 30.1%	Buddhism - 10.9%	Sikhism – 20.4%	Eastern Orthodox – 32.8%
3rd largest	Muslim – 2.6%	Catholic – 2.4%	Catholic – 13.1%	Christian, nfd – 9.4%
4th largest	Buddhism – 2.4%	Christian, nfd - 2.3%	Islam – 3.4%	Judaism – 8.3%
5th largest	Hinduism – 1.9%	Baptist - 1.5%	No Religion, so described – 3.4%	Catholic - 2.8%

Results suggest that the level of religiosity among international students and their connectedness with religious diaspora communities in Australia could also be a

significant factor in their strategies for coping and belonging. Australian Census data shows that while 33.8% of the population who are born in Australia report 'no religion', this figure is markedly lower, at 27.1% for those born overseas and residing in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). A comparison between the religiosity of the Australian general population and the Chinese, Indian and Russian diaspora communities, focused on in this article, is presented in Table 1. While members of the Chinese diaspora largely report as being non-religious, there are significant numbers who identify as Buddhists and Christians. The Indian diaspora is largely Hindu, but with numbers of Sikhs, Christians and Muslims. And the Russian diaspora is also mixed, with most members reporting as being either non-religious or Eastern Orthodox, but with a significant minority identifying with forms of Christian and Jewish affiliation as well.

Australian Census data on religious affiliation is more detailed than in most other Western countries but is nevertheless limited by the fact that it frames religiosity through a Western-centric approach, relying upon metrics of belief and participation (Tao & Stapleton, 2018). This approach contrasts with participation in Asian religions which tends to be complexly melded with association with heritage, culture and family and is consequently difficult to quantify (Tao & Stapleton, 2018). As such, even when ethnic Chinese individuals claim non-belief, they may still 'believe in certain religious concepts (like karma, fengshui, or reincarnation) and in some sense, are still deeply bound up in religious thinking' (Johnson, 2017, as cited in Tao & Stapleton, 2018). These observations are also applicable to other Asian societies, particularly in communist or post-communist contexts where association with religion was, and in some cases continues to be, denigrated. In any case, the religious complexity (Furseth, 2018), coping and connectedness among international students with diaspora communities and mainstream society in Australia is yet to be analyzed in any depth, and certainly warrants more attention.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this article, we investigate impediments to, and strategies for, fostering connection and belonging among international students, drawing on interview data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, within the Migration Stream of an Australian Research Council funded research project on Religious Diversity in Australia[2]. The interviews were conducted with community, youth

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[2] The Religious Diversity in Australia: Maintaining social cohesion and preventing violence, Australian Research Council Discovery Project 2018–2020, has six streams, on Demographics, Migration, Legislation, Policing, Education and Interfaith Engagement. The Chief Investigators are Douglas Ezzy (University of Tasmania), Gary Bouma (Monash University), Greg Barton and Anna Halafoff (Deakin University). The Migration stream is led by Halafoff and Barton (Deakin University). Weng worked as a Research Fellow and Smith as a Research Assistant on the Migration stream. Human Research Ethics approval was provided by University of Tasmania and Deakin

and religious leaders[3] in Melbourne and Hobart[4], and this article focuses on data from 25 interviews with members of the Chinese[5], Indian and Russian diaspora communities[6]. Ten interviewees are quoted in this paper, including two international student interviewees (from India and from Russia) studying in Melbourne[7]. The remaining interviewees quoted include three Indian, two Chinese, and two Russian community leaders, and a Victorian public servant working in the field of migration.

Chinese and Indian communities constitute the two largest cohorts of international students in Australia, accounting for slightly more than 50% of all international students. In 2018, 174,905 (33.5%) of Australia's international students came from China[8], and 89,018 (17.1%) from India (DESE, 2020).

University, and an amendment approved to include questions pertaining to the coronavirus.

[3] The names of research participants and their affiliations are provided in this article, where they consented to being identified. Where research participants were not comfortable being identified, no name or identifying context has been included, only their ethnic diaspora group and a broad description of their position, (e.g. community leader).

[4] Melbourne and Tasmania were chosen as the main sites for the Religious Diversity in Australia project, primarily given the location of the Chief Investigators, but also given the two city's differences including in population size, and cultural and religious demographics, and as Hobart is designated a regional capital city. Melbourne is the capital city of the state of Victoria, one of the two Australian states that attracts the most international students. In 2018, more than one third (35.3%) of all university students in Victoria were international students. In comparison, in Hobart, capital city of the small island state of Tasmania, international students make up a tiny 1.5% of the entire higher education student population (Parliament of Australia, 2019).

[5] Chinese interviewees were identified as such according to their Chinese ethnic heritage. Some had arrived in Australia via China, but also from Asian countries with large Chinese ethnic diaspora including Malaysia and Hong Kong.

[6] Chinese in Melbourne (n=7) and Hobart (n=3); Indians in Melbourne (n=5) and Hobart (4); and Russians in Melbourne (n=5) and Hobart (n=1).

[7] While the research team initially planned for the inclusion of more international students in the Religious Diversity in Australia study, the period of the interview coincided with the start of the pandemic in Australia in April 2020. International student university clubs in Victorian and Tasmanian universities were largely uncontactable, as mobile phone numbers listed were either disconnected or went straight to voice mail. As a result, this article also draws heavily on interviews with cultural and religious community leaders, who assisted international students during the COVID-19 crisis. It is worth noting that many diaspora ethnic and religious community leaders and members were former international students themselves, and have undergone a complex acculturation process of becoming Australian citizens and feeling increasingly part of Australian society over time, while concurrently still experiencing persistent racism and exclusion. This resulted in the community leaders interviewed for this study having valuable insights pertaining to international students, based on their own and their community members' experiences.

[8] This statistic excludes those born in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau.

China's economic reforms from 1979, coupled with the one-child policy, has contributed to increased household income. In the face of fierce competition for local education, Chinese parents have turned to overseas education for their children (Yang, 2007). Overseas education has been popularized among the Chinese, since there is prestige, better job prospects and social capital tied to a foreign education. Sending Chinese children overseas has also been supported by the Chinese government, with the hope that they will return to China in the future and contribute to the Chinese economy.

The steady growth of international students from India over the past two decades in Australia is a result of a combination of push and pull factors. India's population of 1.4 billion, rapid rates of urbanization and decades of strong economic growth driving demand for university education, but with supply severely constrained by limited spaces being available in India universities, meant that many Indian families looked to send their children abroad to pursue a university education. Australia has responded to this by actively recruiting for students in India through advertisement campaigns and education agencies (Kumar & Bilimoria, 2015).

The Russian Government currently offers a Federal Scholarship Program known as Global Education, which provides funding to study courses of benefit to the Russian economy and society in top universities around the world including in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. This program has helped support a small but significant community of Russian students to study in Australia. The terms of the scholarship require graduates to return to Russian for at least three years following completion of their studies abroad (GEP, n.d.). The number of Russian international students is comparatively low (908 or 0.2% from the Russian Federation), compared to Chinese and Indian students. However, Russian students were included in this study given the long-standing and current geopolitical tensions with Russia and the West, in order to further investigate issues of exclusion facing international students and strategies for connection and belonging among culturally and religiously diverse diaspora communities in Australia.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and limited to one hour each. Questions focused on issues of religious and ethnic diversity and social cohesion, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO. A summary of the research findings pertaining to international students and COVID-19 arising from this study are presented below.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Racism, Discrimination, and Geopolitical tensions

This study revealed how perceptions of entrenched racism and discrimination towards Australia's ethnic diaspora communities have significantly impacted international students. This was intensified by geopolitical tensions, particularly affecting the Chinese and Russian communities. 'Everyday racism' against the Chinese community in Australia was widely felt during the pandemic. Most Chinese participants had experienced racism or knew of someone who had. These

experiences occurred in everyday spaces such as child-care centers, in supermarkets, and in busy streets. Respondents reported that Chinese-Australians were viewed as strange for wearing masks in early 2020 when mask-wearing was not thought to be necessary, much less compulsory. In some cases, they were physically assaulted, or 'told to go back to their own country' as a result of the 'China virus'. Chinese community leaders spoke up about perceptions of a widespread 'bias' against Chinese people, that was 'subtle', but that the pandemic was a 'trigger' for overt racist attacks to occur.

One Chinese community member reflected on the racism experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, that although heightened by pandemic anxieties had long existed in Australian society.

> While most of Australians believe that racial profiling and racial attacks are not on, …what truly frightens me is that…I think it has something to do with a strong presence of Chinese in this country, including students on city streets and the visitors in tourist destinations…the ghosts of the White Australia Policy are still haunting us, there's no question about that.

According to many Chinese interviewees, escalating tensions in the geopolitical relationship between Australia and China have contributed to the return of stereotypes such as 'communist' and 'spy'. The persistence of these racist views has clearly had a significant negative impact on members of the Chinese diaspora community, and on international students in particular, including with respect to their sense of being a part of Australian society.

Reflecting on the experience of the Russian diaspora, Father Alexander Abramoff, Manager of the Russian Ethnic Representative Council (RERC), recalled that 'in the 1980s there was a lot of anti-Russian propaganda, that Soviet is Russian, Russian is Soviet, [and] all you Russians are communists.' He added how currently 'we're [still] always fighting against the real tide of negative news and negative perceptions of the Russian community' in Australia.

Nikolai Artemev, founder of the Monash Russian Club (MRC) at Monash University, said that while 'people know a lot of things about Russia…[and] have these stereotypes', there is also a general level of 'interest among students' at Monash in 'Russian culture' and 'literature'. These negative and concerning perceptions about Russia centered on Russian politics, and perceptions of safety in Russia, driven by discourses perpetuated by international media. Artemev, who was born in Siberia, said another prevailing stereotype of Russians was that they are all Caucasian, and that they have the same accent. Instead, he explained how 'we have this diversity in Russia, [it is a] multicultural population.' There are students in the MRC from Tatarstan and Buryat also, who are Muslim or Buddhist and of Asian appearance, as well as those who are Russian Orthodox, Jewish or non-religious and mostly white.

Economic and Employment Challenges

Respondents in this study recounted how international students and graduates often experience employment challenges due to language and qualification barriers. They described how economic issues worsened for international students during the first year of the pandemic, through exclusion from employment opportunities and their ineligibility for government financial assistance due to their temporary visa status. An Anglo-Australian Melbourne public servant pointed out that the lack of support for international students from the government could have long-term consequences, as this 'has probably impacted their sense of belonging in this country, or what or how they could potentially contribute to a country, if not now, [then] later'.

Ayush Kamal Bhardwaj is an international graduate student at the University of Melbourne who joined The Indian Graduate Students Society (IGSS) 'immediately' upon his arrival in July 2019 and was its Events Manager in 2020. Bhardwaj observed that 'English is the first language of Australia', and 'whenever someone [is] hiring…[they are] going to look for…people will have to know English…to communicate with the customers. If you cannot do that then that's an issue…so language is always a barrier.'

In addition, international students are routinely excluded from some job opportunities because of a lack of local experience. An Indian community leader shared the conundrum faced by these students: 'When they apply, [potential employers] always ask for experience. Now as [an international] student they don't have experience. And when they're asking for the Australian experience, they don't get [the job].'

Many international students have also faced severe challenges when it comes to their finances during the COVID-19 crisis. Artemev of the MRC explained, 'we face the same problems as other international students. For example, we get funding in Russian currency. And since then, there was a rise of Dollar against the Ruble, so that was a problem. And, of course, losing jobs, and also finding jobs was difficult for us.' He added that some international students wanted to return to their home country, given all of the classes were moved online, and the high costs of rent and tuition fees in Melbourne, but they did not know when borders would safely open again so they could do so.

A Chinese community leader in Hobart pointed out that Chinese international graduates applying for permanent residency (PR) in Hobart faced significant difficulties as there are comparatively less jobs and housing opportunities in Hobart than on the mainland, given Tasmania's much smaller population. The lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing intensified during the pandemic, given that the hospitality and tourism industries where most international students are employed casually were hard hit, and this exacerbated existing stresses.

Religious and Community Organizations

Community and religious groups, organizations and spaces have long played, and continue to play, a significant role in combatting negative perceptions of their diaspora communities. They frequently provide their members, including

international students with financial and emotional support with finding housing and employment, thereby assisting with creating a positive sense of belonging in Australia. This trend intensified during the first year of the pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities facing international students, it also created greater opportunities for these ethnic and religious communities to step in and provide welfare and support for these students, and for others.

A number of Chinese community members recounted how they had initially come to Australia to pursue higher education and then became involved in Chinese cultural or religious organizations 'to serve' the Chinese community, eventually taking up leadership roles within them. Many Chinese Community associations and groups spoke out against the racism experienced by international students during the pandemic and reached out to assist them to meet their physical and emotional needs. As one Chinese community member explained, 'we feel that international students should always be made to feel safe and welcomed in Australia, and…we condemn any form of violence and discrimination and racism against anyone in society, especially with the rise of COVID-19.'

Another Chinese community member explained how members of the church community, who had been international students themselves, actively reached out to assist newly arrived Chinese students with finding housing or employment, and that international students were welcomed as 'newly arrived brothers and sisters' in their church. Chinese interviewees also describe how Chinese international students often attend places of worship, including Christian churches and Buddhist temples, frequented by the Chinese community in both Melbourne and Hobart.

Mrs Usha Gullapalli, Treasurer of the Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria (FIAV), an umbrella organization that coordinates around 17 Indian organizations, explained how FIAV provided either direct assistance or referrals regarding accommodation, food, mental health support, dealing with domestic violence and employment for the most vulnerable in their communities, that includes international students. Individual members of FIAV, who were business owners themselves, reached out to students and provided them with employment.

Bhakta Dasa, Communications Director of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, described how religious communities and centers, in this case the Melbourne ISKCON Hindu temples, can create familiar community and religious spaces and community hubs for Indian migrants and international students. A religious dimension is also, according to Dasa, a significant component of their lives:

> And so they come to the temple here, where we have food that they can relate to, where we have worship that they can relate to, where they have counselling, that they can relate to, that they can talk to people about their heritage and about this faith. So that's really, really important.

Dasa noted that religious spaces are critical for these students especially for their mental wellbeing in the face of challenges. He stated that their issues tended

to pile up, such as when they can usually only find work that pays 'a pittance', and their 'study falls behind', and that as a result 'sometimes they need to be consoled'. The ISKCON community tries to be available to these students especially when the students 'open up to us', yet often 'they hold it to themselves'. This has at times, Dasa explained, tragically resulted in international students committing suicide.

ISKCON and Sikh Volunteers Australia (SVA) also played significant roles in providing immediate welfare support and provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, including to international students. Mr Jaswinder Singh, secretary of the SVA, shared that they were one of the organizations at the forefront of providing 300 to 400 meals a week to survivors and first-responders during the previous summer's (2019-2020) historic bushfires. When the pandemic occurred, both SVA and ISKCON already had the existing infrastructure, plans and resources in place to assist with a sudden increase of people in need. International student Bhardwaj of the IGSS explained how he participated in SVA, to provide free food to those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, including to international students. The Sikh community received substantial positive media attention for their generous provision of these services (Grewal, 2020), which added to Bhardwaj's pride in being part of SVA's initiatives.

In a similar fashion, Russian community members came together to find ways of helping one another. Father Abramoff recounted how the Russian Ethnic Representative Council (RERC) was first formed in 1983 by a group of Russian community leaders who had immigrated to Melbourne from China and Europe in the 1950s and 60s. They saw a need 'to bring the community together', to provide them with community services, and also to 'protect the Russian name' in the face of ongoing anti-Russian prejudices. He added that 'we're [still] always fighting against the real tide of negative news and negative perceptions of the Russian community' in Australia. This is done through promoting positive aspects of Russian life and culture through Russian House, that has an active Youth Group that includes international students (described in more detail below).

International Student Associations and Community Youth Groups

The long-standing Chinese, Indian and Russian diaspora, including religious communities in Australia have also established student and youth organizations that provide support to international students. These communities played a leading role in stepping up to assist during the COVID-19 crisis. Chinese student clubs at universities are diverse and include international students, Australian-born Chinese, Caucasians who are studying Mandarin and other students with an interest in Australia-China relations. When Chinese international students were targeted early in the pandemic, the Australia China Youth Association (ACYA, 2020) immediately posted a statement of support on their website, saying that:

> International students make up a large portion of ACYA's membership and are an important part of Australian universities, life and culture.

International students should always be made to feel safe and welcomed in Australian society.

Chinese associations such as ACYA (2020) also provided links to resources that students could access if they needed help or aid. They also acted as support networks, making themselves available to students in need of assistance, information or someone to talk with. Additionally, ACYA members came up with creative initiatives such as producing a cookbook during the pandemic that celebrated Australian-Chinese relations. Such initiatives allowed students to participate actively and creatively in response to this crisis, and an extension to ACYA's engagement with students through the shared culture of 'food – from Orientation Week barbecues, to lively hotpot dinners, to late-night bubble teas' (2020). All of these activities are aimed at assisting international students with achieving a greater sense of belonging in their new home.

The Indian Graduate Students Society (IGSS) brings together diverse Indian international and local students from a variety of backgrounds. The IGSS is predominantly made up of Indian international students, but also those who are permanent residents or citizens. As described above, Indian students often seek support from the Indian diaspora and religious groups in Australia, with international student associations at times facilitating bridges between them. For example, the IGSS encourages belonging among Indian students through participation in Indian cultural and religious festivals. Bhardwaj of the IGSS explained that,

…we all used to get together and enjoy it because they're the only family that we have here, staying away from home and friends... So, it is nice that we have someone to celebrate our festivals with…as there is no point of celebrating festivals sitting at home alone.

He added that when students find diaspora and student communities from similar ethnic or religious backgrounds to them, they feel that 'they have someone in Melbourne, someone in Australia for them', and this enhances their sense of belonging through having a home away from home.

Russian student clubs and youth groups have also been formed at universities and within Russian community organizations that include international students and new migrants, Australian-born Russians and students studying Russian. These groups provided community around education regarding Russian culture, life, language and literature. Artemev founded the MRC at Monash University as he and fellow Russian students thought they 'needed representation on campus', given there were already existing Chinese, Indian and Korean Clubs, for example. The MRC has an active Facebook page, and Artemev also explained how in order to counter negative stereotypes of Russia and Russians, 'we thought that we need to break [them]…and to just introduce our culture…by meeting other students and, yeah, just [talking] more about it'.

Artemev believes that 'culture is the main thing which can connect Australia and Russia.' The MRC, and the Russian House Youth Group, which Artemev is

also a part of, hold annual Maslenitsa, Russian cultural and religious pancake festival[9] events. They also have Russian movie, trivia, and comedy nights, including 'Slav sport' events, made popular by YouTubers, in which students dress up in Adidas gear and eat semichki, sunflower seeds. Humor is used to good effect by migrant groups in Australia to break down religious/cultural barriers between migrant and host communities, and this has also been the case with the Slav sport events (Davis 2009; Weng & Halafoff, 2020). These cultural and religious activities create opportunities for international students and newly arrived Russian youth to connect with and feel supported by Russian diaspora communities and organizations. They also provide opportunities for Australian-born Russian Australians to practice their Russian language skills and to deepen their connection with Russia.

Digital Spaces

The pandemic resulted in major interruptions to cultural and religious events and activities through the physical closure of cultural and religious spaces, and most cultural and religious organizations adapted quickly, pivoting to digital platforms (Halafoff, 2020). Echoing findings from Gomes' research (2015), this study revealed that digital spaces play an important role in connecting students with their ethnic and religious communities. As the majority of student and community organizations are not-for-profit, social media becomes an economical method to broadcast their profile, activities and to engage with their target audience.

Members of the Chinese, Indian and Russian communities reported that their diverse religious communities had largely transitioned to online prayers, chanting, meditation, rituals, services, and/or support group meetings via Zoom and WhatsApp, especially during the first wave lockdown. Bhardwaj from IGSS, in reflecting on his own media consumption, noted how online groups such as 'Indians in Melbourne' on Facebook facilitated opportunities for help and support between more established community members and international students in practical ways:

> There were people giving out their extra bedroom for free to international students during this pandemic. Also, they volunteered…they will take the cars, they will come pick them up, take them to the grocery store, take them to Woolies, take them to Coles and buy whatever they need, and they will pay for it.

Although these forms of digital outreach were certainly beneficial, there were still some needs that could only be met in face-to-face settings (Halafoff, 2020). Egor Sadanov, who coordinates the Russian House Youth Group felt that the long

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[9] *Masla* means butter, which is traditionally melted and poured over pancakes eaten with caviar and other seafood before Lent.

lockdowns were especially challenging for young people and that they did not feel that online events were as beneficial as in-person events. He remarked: 'I don't know why but this magic [of the Russia House Youth Group] that works, it only works when we are, when we see each other, when we are face to face…and you get together.'

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study show that many international students undergo experiences of (dis)connected belonging as they search to locate their place in Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing issues that they have long endured – notably racism and discrimination because of negative stereotyping and geopolitical events – and created disruptions in their education, finances, social life and future plans. This study's findings indicate that given their exclusion from Australian government support due to their visa status, many Chinese, Indian and Russian international students have relied on the assistance of ethnic student, community and religious organizations to get through this challenging period. International students have actively created, participated in and contributed to the efforts of these organizations to create a sense of connectedness and belonging to Australian society. The study confirmed that international student groups, and ethnic and religious groups, have strong links within same-culture diaspora communities, and that they are often religiously diverse. These pre-existing networks helped diaspora communities to assist international students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study revealed that Chinese, Indian and Russian international students (and community members and leaders) endure persistent experiences of everyday racism, discrimination and exclusion, especially related to employment. This study also found that for international students their sense of connected belonging, and of being accepted as a part of Australian society, is influenced by the changing stability and quality of geopolitical relationships between Australia and their countries of origin. Growing tensions between Australia and China, triggered by the coronavirus and other geopolitical events, for example, have had a deleterious effect on Chinese diaspora in Australia. Tensions between Russia and the West have also sustained negative stereotyping of Russian diaspora in Australia.

When comparing the discriminatory experiences of these three communities, the whiteness of the majority of Russians in Australia seems to lessen the amount of overt prejudice against them. Nevertheless, they too report being negatively affected by problematic stereotypes long circulating in society. In response to racism and discrimination facing Asian communities, many ethnic and religious community leaders who were former international students themselves have worked hard to counter these negative stereotypes, resist exclusion and build better relations between their diaspora communities and mainstream Australian society.

Religious and ethnic community organizations, including student and youth groups, are critical agents at the forefront of advocating social and cultural changes that assist international students with belonging in Australia. They have

also been a key source of emotional and financial support for international students during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, assisting them to cope with the many stresses the pandemic has created, and stepping in where state actors have failed them. The positive contributions of ethnic, and particularly religious organizations helping international students cope, and facilitating connectedness and belonging have been under-acknowledged in previous studies.

The findings of this study point to the need to undertake further and larger scale research into the religiosity of international students, their coping and connectedness strategies, and their engagement with diaspora religious organizations and groups. The findings also suggest that universities could benefit from further investing in and supporting international student clubs, and strengthening partnerships with national and state 'peak'/umbrella ethnic and religious community organizations, especially in times of crisis. Nevertheless, as Sawir et al. (2008, p. 170) noted, this should not result in 'a lazy strategy' where universities relinquish their duty of care to community organizations and merely outsource this labor to community groups.

If the Australian federal and state governments are to rebuild international trust in Australian higher education, they must provide more social and financial assistance to international students when they are in need. The significant levels of racist and anti-Asian sentiments prevailing in Australia need to be acknowledged and addressed by state actors in partnership with community organizations. A more inclusive narrative of Australia's 'multicultural real' (Hage, 2012, pp. 232-9), rather than the myth of a white Christian Australia, is required to inform rhetoric, policies and practices to support international students and Asian diaspora communities with being accepted and respected as belonging to Australian society.

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