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International student mobility: Pacific Islander experiences of higher education in Australia

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Abstract: *Tertiary education scholarships for individual students from developing countries, including those in the Pacific Islands, are a key pillar of Australia's development policy. Understanding students' experiences of these scholarships are important in identifying both positives and challenges, which can help foster improved future opportunities. This is especially the case for Pacific Islander students engaging in the Australia Awards Scholarship programme for which there is limited understanding of experiences. As such, this paper identifies that although educational mobility programmes can offer a wealth of opportunities for students, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the challenges of such programmes which can inhibit students from reaching their full potential. Educational mobility programmes that effectively address the needs of students and empower them to achieve their goals are required to better facilitate transformative development pathways for Australia's Pacific Island neighbours.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, education, mobility, Pacific Islands, transformation*

Introduction

International student mobility is a global phenomenon widely recognised as a pathway for transferring skills and knowledge from high-income countries to emerging economies (OECD, 2007; Ziguras and McBurnie, 2011; Gribble *et al*., 2017). Teichler (2017) defines international student mobility as 'border-crossing for the purpose of embarking into study in the country of destination' (p. 187). The motivations for students to pursue education abroad include to acquire knowledge and credentials not available in their home country, the value of a foreign university degree, to improve professional development and in some cases, to emigrate (Engberg *et al*., 2014). However, the COVID-19 outbreak has undoubtedly made studying abroad less appealing and less feasible, creating uncertainty about the future of international student mobility. This situation therefore calls for research into the experiences of those studying abroad amidst a global pandemic to develop strategies for building healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments for international students.

To increase the enrolment of promising students from around the world, many governments and even institutions offer scholarship programmes for international students. One example of this is the Australia Awards Scholarships (AAS) programme, which is funded and administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and offers study and research opportunities in Australia for students from developing countries. Although the benefits and challenges of studying abroad for international students have been well-documented (Fry, 1984; Vincent-Lancrin, 2004; OECD, 2007; Varghese, 2008; Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011; Lawson, 2012; Teichler, 2017; Skromanis *et al*., 2018; Roy *et al*., 2019), there has been little research on Pacific Islander student experiences. Further research is needed to improve our understanding of how local and national institutions can better support and accommodate

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student mobility experiences and opportunities, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of 13 Pacific Islander students in the AAS scheme from Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of the educational mobility scheme among Pacific Islander students, including the consequences of COVID-19 and the impacts of international education for development pathways.

Literature review

The global rise of student mobility began in the 1980s when the governments of Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – key export education countries – deregulated international student enrolments as well as fees, meaning that institutions could set their own fees and enrol an unlimited number of international students, without displacing government-subsidised domestic students (Ziguras and McBurnie, 2011). On a global scale, the number of people studying outside of their home country grew from 2.1 million in 2000 to 5 million in 2014, more than triple the number in 1990 (OECD, 2015). The highest mobility trends have involved students moving from developing to developed countries (Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011; Yu, 2020). Australia has become the second most popular host country for international students from the East Asia and Pacific region and has ranked fourth most popular host country on a global scale, following France, the United Kingdom, and the United States (UNESCO, 2009). In 2018–2019, international education was Australia's largest service export industry (and fourth largest export, after iron ores and concentrates, coal, and natural gas) and contributed $37.6 billion to the Australian economy (O'Sullivan *et al*., 2020; DFAT, 2020b).

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 impacted significantly on international student mobility, largely due to travel restrictions which prevented students' movement, and campus closures around the world. Educational institutions had to switch from face-to-face learning to online learning within a short period of time, with many students and staff members struggling to adapt to their new virtual classroom environments (Mok and Montgomery, 2021). The tertiary education sector has been hit particularly hard in Australia, due to its reliance on revenue from international students (Marginson, 2020; Welch, 2020). Statistics show there has since been a stark decline in the number of enrolments and commencements of international students in Australia (Austrade, 2021). There were 525 892 international students in Australia in May 2021, which was 17% lower than in May 2020 (DESE, 2021). One modelling study has predicted national losses of AUD12-18 billion in international student revenue by 2024 (Marshman and Larkins, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, international student mobility strengthened higher education partnerships between countries and collaboration between researchers across the globe (Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011). For universities, attracting large numbers of international students secures their reputation as a global player in higher education (Adnett, 2010; Kell and Vogl, 2012). Key advantages of international student mobility noted in the literature include the development of foreign language competencies, international economic impacts and foreign exchange remittances, and cross-cultural enrichment (Fry, 1984; OECD, 2007). In addition to these wider societal benefits, studying abroad can improve the career prospects of students by enhancing their academic credentials, language proficiency, cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication skills, global mindedness, and access to wider professional networks (Vincent-Lancrin, 2004; Varghese, 2008; Roy *et al*., 2019). The experience of living and studying overseas can also have a positive impact on the personal lives of students, through exposure to diverse people, ideas, and opportunities (Teichler, 2017).

In addition to contributing to the development needs of partner countries through educational opportunity, there is emerging evidence that education-related mobility might contribute to climate adaptation potential. However, the relationships between climate change, adaptation, and education-related mobility are complex. Some have suggested that educational migration might operate as a proactive adaptation strategy that can reduce vulnerability by increasing economic agency and diversifying livelihood opportunities. In their analysis of internal migration in 36 countries in Africa, Deuster (2021) found that long-term adverse

climatic changes are correlated with an increase in the number of people moving from rural to urban regions to invest in higher education. However, research with participants in the Kiribati-Australia Nurses Initiative (KANI) (2007–2013) found no evidence that climate change impacts and predictions contribute to mobility decisions among KANI students, or that educational gains contribute to climate adaptation in Kiribati (O'Brien, 2013; Shaw *et al*., 2014). So, these few studies suggest that there are no clear relationships between climate change, adaptation, and education, and that context matters.

Additionally, there have been many criticisms of international student mobility. One of the most widely cited challenges is referred to as 'brain drain' which occurs when international students do not return to their home country after completing their studies (Kim, 1998; Adnett, 2010). Several scholars have argued that this phenomenon can lead to greater social inequalities, between sending and receiving countries, but also between households within sending countries (Matthews and Sidhu, 2005; Waters, 2005; Brooks and Waters, 2011; Holloway *et al*., 2012; Waters, 2012). One strategy to overcome this is to require students to return to their home country as a condition of their financial assistance (Gribble, 2008), which is the current requirement for Australian Government scholarship holders. This argument is put forward by the 2006 United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development which has highlighted that *temporary mobility* avoids permanent loss of human capital in countries of origin, and fosters the transfer of skills, knowledge, and technology (UNGA, 2006).

The global mobility trends of international students moving from the Global South to the Global North have raised questions surrounding neo-colonialism in higher education. Students from the Global South are often taught based on Western ideas, methods, and knowledge systems during their time abroad, even though these may often be quite inappropriate and inadequate in their home countries (Haug, 2005). The influence of Westernisation on international students can contribute to a learning environment which sustains hegemony (Razack, 2002; Askeland and Payne, 2006). Zuchowski *et al*. (2017) suggest that concepts of reciprocity, voice and collaboration are potential pathways to establishing transformative partnerships between the Global North and Global South in international student mobility.

At an individual level, studies have shown that international students can face many challenges in their host country and institution (Lawson, 2012; Skromanis *et al*., 2018). Some key challenges for international students include funding constraints, administrative issues, seeking accommodation, connecting with host country students, language barriers, coping with new teaching and learning styles, meeting unfamiliar academic standards, and adjusting to a new environment, climate, and culture (Teichler, 2017). In an Australian context, racial discrimination against international students, particularly those from Asian countries, is an ongoing issue (Kell and Vogl, 2012).

Overview of the AAS programme

We turn now to the AAS programme, which is the focus of this paper. This programme offers study and research opportunities in Australia to people from developing countries, particularly those within the Indo-Pacific region (DFAT, 2020a). These opportunities – in the form of scholarships – are a core component of the Australian Government's development policy (DFAT, nd). Under the AAS programme, which is administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), recipients can embark on full-time undergraduate or postgraduate study at participating Australian universities and Technical and Further Education institutions. In striving for equality, the AAS supports study by people with disability and aims to empower women to develop their education and leadership potential so they can contribute to the economic development of their home countries (DFAT, 2021b).

The purpose of the AAS programme is to contribute to the socio-economic development needs of Australia's partner countries by providing the opportunity for individuals to advance their skills and knowledge. In general, these prestigious scholarships include a return airfare, academic and other compulsory fees, an establishment allowance, and a living allowance paid fortnightly. A mandatory pre-departure

briefing, and 'Introductory Academic Program' is included to provide awardees with support and prepare them for study during their first weeks in Australia. Under the scheme, students are required to leave Australia for at least two years after completion of their scholarship to ensure that they contribute to development in their country. Further, the scholarships are not offered for undergraduate courses that are available in the applicant's home country (DFAT, 2021b).

In 2020, DFAT offered 741 AASs to prospective students from over 45 developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and the Middle East (DFAT, 2021a). Eleven Pacific Island countries are eligible for the scheme, and in 2020 there were 179 scholarships offered to recipients from the Pacific Islands, that is Federated States of Micronesia (1), Fiji (13), Kiribati (13), Marshall Islands (1), Nauru (4), Papua New Guinea (67), Samoa (26), Solomon Islands (25), Tonga (17), Tuvalu (3) and Vanuatu (9) (DFAT, 2021a). In response to the pandemic, the programme now offers entitlement to cover costs of visa extensions for 'any awardee who has completed their scholarship but is unable to return home due to border and flight restrictions as a result of COVID-19' (DFAT, 2021b: p. 91).

Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by one of the co-authors with 13 participants from the Pacific Islands in the AAS programme Brisbane, Australia, between May and August 2020. Participants were studying at the University of Queensland. The scholarships unit at the university provided a list of AAS holders from the Pacific Islands to the research team with names and contact details. These students were contacted via their university student email address about this research project and invited to participate in an interview. Students who emailed back were provided further information about the project, including the interview guide, and a suitable date and time for the interview was identified.

Interviews took place via Zoom video conferencing software, given the closure of the university campus due to COVID-19. They were conducted in English and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews explored participants' lives and livelihoods in their countries of origin; reasons for participating in the AAS programme; perceived benefits and challenges of participating in the AAS programme (personal, community-level, national-level); the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; new knowledge, skills and/or experiences gained; and future aspirations upon return to countries of origin.

Human research ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Melbourne (reference number: 2022-13016-24613-7). Prior to interviews, the purpose and nature of the research was explained verbally (at the start of the Zoom call) and via a written Plain Language Statement (that was provided over email prior to the interview). Where consent was provided, interviews were audio-recorded. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. Interview notes and transcriptions were coded using NVivo software, an effective and appropriate software for organising and analysing qualitative data (Hilal and Alabri, 2013). Thematic content analysis was then used to organise responses and identify key themes and patterns (Guest et al., 2011: 3). Once a final coding scheme was developed, this was applied across the entire dataset.

This study has limitations. It has a small sample size because there are few Pacific Islander participants in the AAS in Brisbane. Nonetheless some level of data saturation was reached, and in-depth methods were used to off-set the small sample. Data saturation is reached when no additional data is required to obtain the information needed for the study (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Given the self-report methods there is the possibility that students provided answers that highlighted particular opportunities or challenges, with the potential for example that participants might have provided answers which align with the stated aims of the AAS programme. Further, the study was cross-sectional, and conducted at a point in time when the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly heightened including for international students. Given that the interview was undertaken by an academic at the same university that participants were studying at, there was the potential for unequal power relations between the participant and interviewees. The researcher attempted to overcome this by establishing rapport and trust both prior to and during interviews and assuring participants of the value of their insights into the AAS programme.

Participants and their expectations

The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 55 years. Most participants were from Kiribati ($n = 5$) and the Solomon Islands ($n = 5$), with two participants from Fiji and one from Tuvalu. The majority were women, with 10 women and three men participants. They were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across a range of fields, including governance and public policy, arts, biomedical science, entrepreneurship and innovation, international studies, science, commerce, architectural design, and international economics and finance. Table 1 provides an overview of the socio-demographic profile of participants.

When asked how they knew about the AAS, most participants said that they had known about the scholarship for many years ($n = 12$), with some indicating that it is a highly regarded programme among people in their home country. One participant from Kiribati elaborated on this, explaining that the scheme is well-known and local participants receive a lot of publicity:

> 'Back home, I think everyone knows about it. Everyone tries to get it, so you know about it when you're in high school, when you're in primary, because back home we have the names of those who are sponsored, that get the scholarship. On the radio they announce it. So yeah, that's how everyone knows. Oh, this person is going to study in Australia, this person is going to study in New Zealand.' (Interviewee 12)

Most participants had a clear understanding of the key expectation behind the AAS, which is to contribute to the development needs of their home country ($n = 11$). All participants were confident that they would achieve this goal through their studies and subsequent work and contributions to their country.

Benefits of the AAS programme

Social networks and connections with diaspora

The term 'diaspora' links to the sense of an ancestral home that is often a central part of identity among many people and populations who are living abroad (Bose, 2021). Most participants ($n = 11$) felt connected to diaspora from the Pacific Islands within Brisbane. Some of these participants had extended family members living in Brisbane ($n = 4$) or within the state of Queensland ($n = 1$).

Participants had also developed strong social networks with other AAS and international students at university. These networks were mostly maintained online through social networking and messaging platforms, such as Facebook or WhatsApp, through which students shared knowledge and ideas with each other. Two participants mentioned the 'Introductory Academic Program (IAP)' which connected students from the Asia-Pacific region. One participant expressed their gratitude for this programme:

> 'The IAP really did a good one for us. Where we get to know each other initially before uni starts, so we are like a family now. We connect with each other, we have our Facebook page, we check on each other, we help each other with common issues. We have little picnics, late night phone calls…' (Interviewee 4)

Diasporic networks act as an important development pathway for sending countries. They can play a pivotal role in forming capacity development partnerships, 'both through their knowledge of the local context and through their commitment and loyalty to their home country' (Arnot *et al.*, 2013: 575). Moreover, they can ensure that those living abroad are informed of changes taking place at home (Gribble, 2008). Although students were able to develop these networks and connections, they indicated that these mostly were maintained without assistance from the AAS programme. Participants suggested that they would appreciate the facilitation of more regular meetings and ongoing contact with other AAS students.

New knowledge, skills, and experience

All participants agreed that the development of valuable knowledge and skills was a key benefit of the AAS programme ($n = 13$). The disciplinary knowledge obtained by participants fell under the categories of scientific knowledge, theories, politics and languages. Participants described a diverse range of skills that they had gained during their academic studies. The most cited skills were in written and oral communication ($n = 5$), and policy development ($n = 3$).

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile

	Fiji	Kiribati	Solomon Islands	Tuvalu
Number of participants	2	5	5	1
Gender				
Female	1	5	4	0
Male	1	0	1	1
Age	38, 38	19, 19, 25, 27, 28	18, 20, 37, 43, 55	37
Duration of stay in Australia				
<1 year	0	3	1	0
1–1.5 years	2	1	4	1
2–2.5 years	0	1	0	0
Faculty	Business, Economics and Law.	Business, Economics and Law; Humanities and Social Science; Medicine.	Business, Economics and Law; Engineering, Architecture and Information Technology; Health and Behavioural Sciences; Science.	Business, Economics and Law.
Program	Master of Governance and Public Policy.	Master of Governance and Public Policy; Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Biomedical Science; Master of Entrepreneurship and Innovation; Bachelor of International Studies.	Bachelor of Environmental Science; Master of Commerce; Bachelor of Architectural Design; Master of Philosophy; Master of Governance & Public Policy.	Master of International Economics and Finance.
Course level				
Postgraduate	2	2	3	1
Undergraduate	0	3	2	0

Participants also said they were developing skills in analysis, leadership, software and technology, critical thinking, research, teamwork, and finance.

Participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to pursue higher education in a foreign country with advanced technology and resources that were not available in their home country. One participant who had brought their family to Australia illustrated this in the following quote:

> 'From the first day I arrived here until now I enjoyed everything that Australia has given me: from studying, what I have learned, networking, environment, the kids' – my children's school, whatever they bring home. Those are all the things that I love, and we are really appreciative of that as a family.' (Interviewee 8)

Four participants mentioned a 'Women's Leadership Initiative' (WLI) as an opportunity within the AAS program. However, only two participants had joined this initiative. One participant said the WLI provided an opportunity to develop leadership skills:

> 'The WLI Women's Leadership Initiative … it's a leadership connect. It's a six-month one. So, I'm taking that one. That is one of the things that I would never had the opportunity to take if I didn't come on this. If I didn't get the scholarship. So, I'm really grateful for it. I mean, I have the chance to learn more how to become a good leader, how to be able to help those in my country to develop more. Just to get the skills and knowledge; that's really amazing. Yeah, that's one of the things that AAS has offered me that I didn't have to pay for. It's for free, so I'm like, yes, more knowledge.' (Interviewee 11)

Only one participant had taken an internship during their studies under the AAS programme. The internship took place over four weeks during summer semester at a not-for-profit organisation that provides services to low-income communities. After completing the internship

and final report, they reflected on their experience and the potential for transferring knowledge and insight to work when they return to Fiji.

> 'During my internship, I expanded my knowledge in knowing the impact of public/private/community partnership; I did research on that, and it was part of my assignment on that internship. That gives me appreciation that once I go back to Fiji, if it can work – it is working in Australia; it can also work in Fiji.' (Interviewee 8)

Another three participants expressed interest in undertaking an internship at some point during their studies but were not sure how to approach it. This suggests a lack of information for AAS students to pursue internships or additional activities that can enhance their professional development.

Transformative intentions

Given participants were still completing their studies, the longer-term transformative impact of the AAS programme for their lives could not be examined. However, there were clear positive short-term impacts through the knowledge, experience, skills, and networks gained thus far. All these benefits contribute to the personal and professional development of students.

When asked about their future aspirations, all participants ($n = 13$) said they were highly motivated by their improved career prospects and were confident in their ability to achieve their professional goals. Some of the professional aspirations of participants included: linguistics teacher, senior economic advisor, diplomat in the Department of Foreign Affairs, heart surgeon, biomedical scientist, and World Health Organization advisor. The motivations behind applying for the AAS were strongly linked to these aspirations.

Another key motivator for participants was making a difference in their home country. Although some expressed interest in studying or working abroad again ($n = 4$), most participants ($n = 12$) wanted to bring their newly learned skills, knowledge and experience back home. Three participants indicated they wanted to assist their country with climate change adaptation after completing their studies. However, they were not confident that the skills they were learning would enable them to contribute to climate adaptation efforts. One of these participants elaborated on this, indicating they hoped that a Bachelor of Architectural Design would enable them to design and build disaster-resilient buildings. However, they had not yet learned about this topic in the course:

> 'Well, when I decided to take a Bachelor of Architectural Design, I was hoping I could contribute to the disaster resilience. But so far, how we've gone, I'm not so sure if I would be able to. Just because Solomon Islands is really prone to disasters, and like climate change. During the flash flooding a few years back it was really bad. Lots of houses just got swept away, beside the river. I originally thought, oh, maybe if I went, I would be able to get those skills and knowledge to build or design buildings that were more resilient to these kind of disasters. But so far, we haven't done anything like that.' (Interviewee 7)

Only one participant said they wanted to eventually migrate to Australia after working in their home country for two years (in line with the programme conditions). This suggests that all participants intend to make a positive contribution to their home countries, with most hoping to contribute to the development of their countries. The compulsory requirement for students to return home for at least two years under the AAS programme is likely to reduce the 'brain drain' phenomenon. The desire of students to improve both their personal careers and to contribute to their home country highlights the multiple motivations behind student mobility that range from the personal to the national (Robertson *et al*., 2011; Tran, 2016).

Challenges of the AAS programme

Family and community separation

One of the key challenges for participants was being separated from family and community who remain in their home country ($n = 9$). This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as participants were distressed given the uncertainty about when they would be able to see their families again. Kinship and community are

imperative parts of culture and way of being for many Pacific Islanders (McDonald and Rodriguez, 2014; Keck and Schieder, 2015), so making the decision to study abroad was a huge sacrifice, especially for those with children. One participant shared their feelings on the difficulties of being separated from family:

> 'Yeah, it's tough, being away from your family. Since I'm an only child, I've always been with my parents, my mum and dad, so it was tough, but we all made some sacrifices for our future and the future of our country, so yeah, it's worth it.' (Interviewee 11)

Most participants were able to maintain regular contact with family back home through social media sites such as Facebook ($n = 8$). The increasing social connectivity accessed through various online platforms – known as 'polymedia' – has allowed international students to sustain connections now more than ever to their home countries, cultures, families and friends (Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth and Arnold, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2013). This helps international students sustain 'the continuity of self' (Marginson *et al*., 2010: 360).

Cultural barriers and integration struggles

Participants indicated that they experienced some culture shock when arriving in Australia, which they found challenging ($n = 9$). They described an initial sense of being overwhelmed and underprepared for the high-rise buildings and unfamiliar transport system. They experienced some language and/or communication barriers when engaging with their tutors, lecturers and peers. Another key difficulty was moving between a communal way of living to an individualistic lifestyle, and participants indicated that they missed their sense of community back home. Participants noted that people in the wider Australian community were not as friendly as people back home. Although they had made connections with members of the Pacific Islands diaspora, some experienced difficulties connecting with domestic Australian students. According to Gribble *et al*. (2017), many international students struggle to connect with Australian society during their study experience. This can result in marginalisation and negative impacts on students' mental and physical wellbeing (Tran and Gomes, 2017).

All participants spoke of challenges with learning course content and completing assessment ($n = 13$). Although this is standard for most students, these learning difficulties had been exacerbated for AAS students by multiple factors. One of the most prominent challenges was adjusting to a Western higher education system. Coming from the Pacific Islands, the academic structure and ways of learning are quite different. Moreover, some participants noted that their home country, and the wider Pacific Islands region, was absent from course content. One participant provided an insightful yet concerning perspective, highlighting the lack of reference in their course to the Pacific Islands, other than as a recipient of international aid:

> 'When I came here the Pacific is just nothing. We learn about, in international relations, you learn about wars and stuff. The Pacific is nowhere. You learn about something, and the Pacific is nowhere. So, it's like I learn linguistics, there's no examples from the Pacific, whereas when I studied language and literature at USP [University of the South Pacific] we always have examples from either Kiribati, Fiji, all those countries. It's made me think that in the world affairs, the Pacific is not important. They're something that need aid. They're not capable.' (Interviewee 12)

Impacts of COVID-19

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted higher education globally. In early 2020, many universities around the world rapidly shifted from face-to-face learning to online teaching, along with the cancellation of physical events and activities, causing difficulties for both teachers and students (Tesar, 2020). Most participants found this transition to online delivery of teaching quite challenging and reflected on how it affected their studies ($n = 12$). With valuable in-person social interactions with peers and lecturers gone, participants said they missed participatory and engaging face-to-face learning opportunities. As one participant explained:

> 'When we started having these online lectures and seminars, it was a big struggle for not only me but people from the Pacific. We are getting more used to face-to-face, verbal teaching, and our lives revolves around this kind of approach, so it's really affecting me in the first place. I was just lost.' (Interviewee 3)

Four participants in particular indicated they were struggling with the transition to online lectures and tutorials, as they found it isolating and a less engaging way to learn; only one participant said they preferred online learning due to their introverted nature. One participant also explained that home-schooling their children during periods of COVID-related lockdown (policies that restrict movement to prevent COVID-19 transmission) had adversely impacted their ability to focus on their studies and learning.

Six participants said the emotional distress caused by isolation and 'fear of the unknown' (Interviewee 11) had a negative impact on their studies but also on their well-being:

> 'It's kind of affecting me sort of emotionally, psychologically, and uncertainty feelings, wondering what will happen. It's a pandemic, and then thinking about families back home, children and all of this.' (Interviewee 3) 'Sometimes it's hard to get up and have that motivation to do your work … affecting me mentally and physically, I've barely been out, sometimes I find it a bit stressful to be in the same room the whole time.' (Interviewee 7) 'Yeah, for me sometimes it's hard, it's hard for me to focus on my studies. Sometimes I am depressed and sad, yeah, and it affects my assignment and attending class, this one time I didn't want to attend class.' (Interviewee 1)

Additionally, some participants shared their disappointment with the lack of contact and support from the AAS programme team at the beginning of lockdown ($n = 4$). This echoes a study from Amoah and Mok (2020), which found that international students across 26 countries and regions reported insufficient support from their institutions during the pandemic. Improved communication, outreach and pastoral care were deemed critical during this time to ensure the well-being and welfare of international students.

This emotional distress and uncertainty were exacerbated by the challenges of family and community separation due to the Australian border closing in March 2020. Five participants indicated that they had thought about returning home to be with family and friends. Participants grappled with this decision of whether to return home or to stay in Australia to continue their studies. This was particularly stressful for one participant who was trying to fly home to be with their two-year old daughter:

> 'Yeah, I push hard to go home, but I just don't want to miss a semester, because they never give us a chance to go home and continue online. They ask, like they told us to defer if we want to go home. I just sent an email now to my scholarship officer, here and the one in Tarawa to request if I can – they can give me one option, like allow my daughter here or either me going back home and continue studying online. I can't cope with this.' (Interviewee 10)

For another participant, planned family reunion was no longer possible due to border closures:

> 'My family's back home, yeah, I'm here alone … wife and four children … We were planning for them to come this year but then with all this pandemic going on, it's just hard…' (Interviewee 3)

The emotional distress related to the impacts of COVID-19 was prominent for these international students. Wider studies of international student well-being during COVID-19 have similarly identified heightened challenges among students, including disrupted education (e.g. transition to online lectures, cancelled internships, changes to examination), loss of social activities and loss of employment and income (Van de Velde *et al*., 2021).

Suggested improvements to the AAS programme

Given the centrality of education to Australia's development policy, particularly in terms of training the next generation of regional leaders, it is important to identify areas for improvement. The most common suggestion for improvement of the AAS programme was to implement

strategies to better facilitate inclusion of students into Australian universities and society ($n = 8$). One student explained that the pre-departure training workshop they attended in their home country, before arriving in Brisbane, had not adequately prepared them for life in Australia:

> 'Honestly, that two days of workshop was – it was just rushed within those two days. We didn't get the real scenario of what we will see here in Australia, because they were just touching on the surface of the real life of what we are going to face in Australia, the real situation of what we face here that we only came to know when we faced it here in Australia.' (Interviewee 8)

It was suggested that the pre-departure workshops should be longer and more interactive. Participants added that the organisation of regular social events or meetings for AAS students would assist them to build social networks and maintain connections with diaspora community members. Connectedness plays a key role in the well-being, resilience and success of international students (Tran and Gomes, 2017). Further, engaging with diaspora is recognised widely as an effective way for migrants to contribute to the socio-economic development of their home countries (Gribble, 2008).

Six participants suggested that there needed to be increased support and contact from the AAS team. Students indicated that they would have appreciated more support during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, some students suggested that programme conditions should be more flexible so that they had the option to return home to be with their families during emergency situations. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the importance of an institution's ability to provide sufficient support to the security and well-being of international students, which will likely become a crucial deciding factor for prospective students in the future (Mok *et al*., 2021).

Participants also suggested various ways that educational experiences could be strengthened, including access to relevant internships, addressing communication and language barriers between AAS participants and tertiary education staff, improved understanding of Western educational expectations in the early stages of arrival, and access to additional training and leadership opportunities. For example, three AAS participants indicated they would value educational workshops on climate change. As one participant said:

> 'There are some of us we don't really know about climate change. We don't understand what causes climate change. I think a workshop and something like that, we'll be able … to understand more. When they go back and as part of their – what the contract to, it could be in the contract for every AAS student to also have a course about climate change.' (Interviewee 1)

Students said this opportunity should be available for students across all faculties, instead of just those studying environmental programmes. One participant added that this would enable students to bring their ideas together:

> 'not only [from] the perspective of environmental science, but also in health and also in political side and all those other areas of studies.' (Interviewee 2)

Incorporating this into educational mobility schemes such as the AAS could provide Pacific Islander students with improved knowledge and skills to better understand and respond to climate change in their home countries.

Conclusion

For these students, the AAS programme offers a valued opportunity to develop professional skills and livelihood opportunities, which can be used to pursue their career goals and contribute to their home country. This aligns with the stated aims of the AAS scheme, and the broader understanding that international student mobility can enable the transfer of skills and knowledge to emerging economies. Importantly, most students indicate that they intend to return to and remain in their home countries following studies, to work and live. While studying in Australia, key challenges are building connections with people within and beyond the Pacific Island diaspora, being separated from family and community, and adjusting to a new sociocultural context. This echoes the findings of similar studies that highlight the sociocultural,

academic and emotional adjustments of international students (Gümüş *et al*., 2019). Importantly, many of these challenges have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the transition to online learning, fewer opportunities for social interactions, and international border closures and travel restrictions, which prevented AAS students (and many other international students) from returning home.

While the programme is designed to contribute to the long-term development needs of partner countries, one area where the AAS could provide more targeted support is in the development of students' education and skills to respond to climate change impacts in their countries of origin (Barnett and O'Neill, 2012; Gioli *et al*., 2016). Of course, educational migration can increase economic agency and diversify livelihood opportunities, which contributes to adaptive potential in a broad sense. Yet among participants in this study, there is no indication that educational gains might contribute specifically to climate adaptation in their countries of origin, with a few expressing disappointment that their courses have not focused on climate adaptation and resilience.

The COVID-19 outbreak has presented an opportunity for institutions to rethink their approach to supporting international students and creating a better learning environment for all. Sustainable long-term strategies for accommodating international student mobility are needed to assist with economic recovery for both Australia and our Pacific Island neighbours. Educational scholarships should ensure that international students are well-supported in times of crises and throughout the duration of their studies. Given the encroaching impacts of climate change on Pacific Islands, educational mobility programmes such as the AAS should provide opportunities for Pacific Islander students from all disciplines to build knowledge and skills to prepare future climate adaptation leaders.

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