



University of  
**Southern  
Queensland**

**AN INTERNATIONAL ON-CAMPUS DOCTORAL  
STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES AT AN AUSTRALIAN  
UNIVERSITY DURING COVID-19**

A Thesis submitted by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Covid-19 global pandemic affected the whole world in profoundly negative ways, including distinctive effects on particular groups of people. One such group was international on-campus doctoral students in Australia, many of whom experienced significant disruption to their study, and some of whom experienced stress and trauma of various kinds. This thesis presents my autoethnographic account of the effects of Covid-19 on my life as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university. The impact of Covid-19 on my life that I identify and analyse in this study had significant continuing effects on my family's and my mental health and wellbeing. This impact also reflected some of the broader continuing effects of Covid-19 on the Australian economy and society, with this thesis being only one student's account among many other thousands of international students in an equivalent situation. Conceptually, the study was informed by the interplay between two groups of concepts: (1) at the institutional level: among university social responsibility (USR), corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer relationship management (CRM); and (2) at the individual level: among liminality, marginalisation and mental health. I argue that, if a university exhibits a healthy and sustainable connection among its USR, its CRM and its CSR, its students will be far less likely to experience liminality, and marginalisation and mental health concerns. By contrast, I argue that, in my own case and that of many other international on-campus doctoral students at Australian universities, our experiences of liminality and marginalisation resulted directly from an ineffective alignment between our respective universities and their USR, CRM and CSR functions. This negative outcome was intensified by the Australian federal and state governments' policies related to Covid-19, whose effect was to exacerbate the marginalisation of individuals and groups experiencing liminality in Australian society, including international on-campus doctoral students.

## **CERTIFICATION OF THESIS**

I Hisham Bakr declare that the PhD Thesis entitled: An international on-campus doctoral student's experiences at an Australian university during Covid-19, is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 26/02/2023

Endorsed by:

Professor Patrick Danaher  
Principal Supervisor

Dr Meg Forbes  
Associate Supervisor

Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

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# **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated with love and affection  
to the memory of

**Lotfy Bakr**

(10 August 1937 – 4 October 1998)

**Soheir El Baddaly**

(28 June 1940 – 16 December 2020)

&

**Hossam Bakr**

(4 April 1969 – 10 October 2021)

## **PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS RELATED TO THIS RESEARCH**

1. Bakr, H. (2022). *Customer relationship management, corporate social responsibility and impact on marginalisation and liminality of an international doctoral student's academic life and mental health*. Paper presented at the 29<sup>th</sup> Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher group research symposium, University of Southern Queensland, Australia.
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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ABS .....	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT .....	Australian Capital Territory
AFI .....	Academic Freedom Index
AI .....	Artificial Intelligence
ASIE .....	Australian Strategy for International Education
AUD .....	Australian Dollars
BRICS countries .....	
.....	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CoC .....	Confirmation of Candidature
CPV .....	Customer Perceived Value
CRM .....	Customer Relationship Management
CSiR .....	Corporate Social Irresponsibility
CSR .....	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSSs .....	Corporate Sustainability Systems
CSV .....	Creating Shared Value
CV .....	Company Value
DASS-21 .....	Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – 21
DFAT .....	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DoE .....	Department of Education
EASI .....	Emotions According to Social Information
EDI .....	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
ELICOS .....	
.....	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ERM .....	Enterprise Risk Management
FTE .....	Full-Time Earnings
GDP .....	Gross Domestic Product
GNI .....	Gross National Income
GNP .....	Gross National Product
GOS .....	Gross Operating Surplus

GSISA .....	Global Satisfaction of International Students in Australia
HB.....	Haemoglobin
HDR .....	Higher Degree by Research
HE.....	Higher Education
HEIs .....	Higher Education Institutions
IEAA.....	International Education Association of Australia
IR .....	International Relations
JoTR.....	Journal of Travel Research
LoA .....	Leave of Absence
MDGs .....	Millennium Development Goals
MHCIS .....	Mental Health Change Indicator Scale
NSW .....	New South Wales
OECD .....	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PhD .....	Doctor of Philosophy
PRIA.....	The Participatory Research in Asia
PRISMS.....	Provider Registration and International Student Management System
PRS .....	Private Rental Sector
RMIT .....	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
SA.....	Sentiment Analysis
SARS-CoV-2	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus
SD .....	Sustainable Development
SDGs .....	Sustainable Development Goals
TEM.....	Thematic-Extrapolation Method
UAE.....	United Arab of Emirates
UIS .....	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UK.....	United Kingdom
UN .....	United Nations

UNESCO .....  
..... United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
    USA.....United States of America  
    USR..... University Social Responsibility  
    VET ..... Vocational Education and Training  
    WBCSD.....  
..... The World Business Council for Sustainable Development  
    WHEC ..... World Higher Education Conference

# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1. Chapter introduction**

This study's research problem focused on the barriers to improving university social responsibility (USR) while improving both customer relationship management (CRM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Australian universities to enhance the international on-campus doctoral students' production of knowledge and contributions to the Australian workforce and economy. In addition, this study explored the crucial role of the CRM and CSR of Australian universities in enhancing the international students' performance and success. Demonstrated failure by policy-makers in Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic constituted a failure of implementing an effective and sustainable USR, CRM and CSR policy that harmed the Australian economy dramatically, and that also increased the liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns of international on-campus doctoral students attending those universities, among others.

From that perspective, marginalisation has been recognised as having a greater negative impact on the mental health of overseas university students studying in Australia than on those studying in their country of origin before and during the Covid-19 pandemic (O'Keeffe, 2013; Zhao et al., 2022a; Zheng et al., 2004). Experiences of discrimination have been identified as a key mediating factor in this relationship (Zhao et al., 2022a).

In the light of these experiences, possible implications for higher education institutions in Australia are discussed. This autoethnographic study explored the Australian Federal and State/Territory governments' performance-related issues and regulations that prevented me, as an international on-campus doctoral student, from being eligible to receive any of the financial support, internships, scholarships or fair work

opportunities as an international higher degree researcher that were available to Australian citizens.

Further, I experienced marginalisation from many employers that led to their rejection of my multiple applications while applying through Australian universities both internally and externally, in addition to hundreds of business employers. Despite this, evidence from my own experience and from the experience of other Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students indicates that there is significant unemployment and underemployment in Australia that could be addressed through the employment of many highly qualified international research students.

This thesis sought to explore the ways in which the effects of ongoing unemployment and underemployment are marginalising, disempowering and disabling, including for international on-campus doctoral students. Further, this autoethnographic study discusses the influence of marginalisation on the overseas students' mental health in Australia and its impact on the Australian economy, particularly during the Covid-19 global pandemic.

## **1.2. Background to the Study**

### **1.2.1. *The Macro Level***

Coronavirus 2019 is a disease that was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Park, 2020) and that was caused by a virus named "Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus – SARS-CoV-2" (Konings et al., 2021). It was recognised as a Covid-19 global pandemic in February 2020, and it has affected the whole world in profoundly negative ways, including distinctive effects on particular groups of people. One such group was international on-campus doctoral students in Australia, many of whom experienced significant disruption to their study, including a debilitating range of stress and trauma.

Following the end of 2019, when Covid-19 was discovered, societies worldwide responded to the quickly spreading virus (Brown & Zinn,

2022). The rate at which the Covid-19 pandemic killed thousands of people and left millions sick pushed the International Federation of Social Workers (2020) to call on scholars to examine the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations. One of the most vulnerable population groups ignored by social work research on Covid-19 is international students (Firang, 2020).

For example, severe mental health problems for international students living in China were discovered after an online cross-sectional survey was conducted from 28 May 2020 to 12 June 2020 with 402 full-time international students across 26 provinces in China. Alam (2021) found concerning symptoms of participants, including symptoms of insomnia (77.6%), anxiety (76.6%), depression (73.4%), fear (73.1%), psychological distress (71.4%), loneliness (62.4%) and stress (58.5%) (Alam et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Council on Social Welfare and the International Federation of Social Workers (2010) launched the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development ("The Agenda") in 2010. The Agenda is a global process and platform that promote human dignity and social justice in a "socially just world" (Jones & Truell, 2012) based on the professional values, understandings and principles of social work and community development. Alongside the alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they increased global concerns about inequality and environmental sustainability (Salvia et al., 2019), which have been exacerbated by the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a different perspective, Paulo Goes (2021) stated that the Covid-19 pandemic gave us an opportunity to rethink our teaching and learning methods, and that virtual exchange projects will have a positive impact post-pandemic. Similarly, Bali et al. (2021) argued that such virtual exchanges have built on the affordances of computer-based

learning and have facilitated collaborations in education and also in our everyday life, and using our own language (Bali et al., 2021). At the same time, it is important to note that there were adaptability issues in Russia for international first-year university students based on the experience of making the transition from face-to-face learning to various online platforms during the nationwide pandemic lockdown in Russia in spring 2020 (Novikov, 2020). Nevertheless, resolving uncertainties is a critical leadership activity, especially during a crisis, and a dramatically higher tempo of communication both from university leadership and within schools has helped to reduce the recognised distance between leadership and colleagues. One of the benefits of adapting to Covid-19 is the success of holding frequent scalable online meetings through Microsoft Teams, Zoom or other platforms that permit open Q&A formats that reassure staff regarding how universities have been adapting to the crisis (Brammer & Clark, 2020). These might be considered to be among the positive learnings arising from the pandemic.

On the other hand, since the Covid-19 outbreak, there have been unprecedented challenges of mental health of international students worldwide. In 2020, among 5.3 million international tertiary students, approximately 43.8% of them were studying in the five largest host countries: the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and France (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS] database, 2020) (<https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/data/>). All of these countries experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, and all of them were severely affected by it (World Health Organisation, 2020). Providing a foretaste of a major theme of this thesis, the mental health of the overlooked minority international students worldwide was dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). Under regular circumstances, international students are more prone to mental disorders (e.g., depression), struggling with the local medical system and having less motivation to seek psychological services (Alharbi & Smith, 2018;



Brunsting et al., 2018). However, the pandemic isolated them further, with less access to public resources owing to monetary, informational, language or cultural barriers. Because the specific needs of international students were often neglected by their host countries, as the minority on campus, some universities were shut down without taking into consideration that some international students resided on campus and had nowhere else to live (Crawford et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

More broadly, international students have been historically valued by universities around the world for their educational, cultural and economic contributions to their host countries (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020). Yet perceptions about international students by the general public have become increasingly mixed in recent years, as research in many countries shows competing public narratives between their perceived societal benefits and the challenges that they represent. Covid-19 often resulted in increased hostility towards international students, particularly those from China or East Asian countries, as demonstrated through reports of increased discrimination towards international students on and off campuses worldwide (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020). For example, the media in countries such as the United Kingdom reported increased hate crimes towards international students in response to the pandemic (Xu et al., 2021). Similarly, the Chinese government also recently expressed formal caution against studying or travelling in countries such as Australia owing to perceived discriminatory treatment by the public (Ross, 2020).

### **1.2.2.      *The Micro Level***

In my personal journey studying for a PhD in Business and Management, I started my studies in the Doctor of Business Administration program at an Australian University. Since then, I completed successfully the coursework units in that program; I completed successfully my confirmation of candidature (CoC) in that program

(requiring the writing and presentation of a detailed proposal for my doctoral research); and I successfully transferred to the PhD program at the same Australian university.

Throughout that time, I was living in Australia, while my wife and our son were living in the family home in Egypt (with no possibility for visiting or reuniting owing to the pandemic restrictions). Despite this long and continued physical separation for two years since the Covid-19 pandemic started in early 2020, I progressed in my doctoral study, as evidenced above, while preparing for my wife and our son to join me in Australia in 2021. This included arranging for my son to enter an Australian school upon his arrival in Australia. However, from late 2020 onwards I experienced a significant change to my demeanour. This began when my mother tragically passed away in Egypt in December 2020, and I was unable to attend her funeral or to grieve for her with the rest of my family. Preparing myself and my family overseas for my mother's death was critical to me as an act of crucial anticipatory grief work (Wallace et al., 2020). However, this was complicated by the fact that I was living alone in Australia without my family, and with my wife and our son stranded overseas. I found myself in a situation described by Stillion and Attig (2015) as being "like standing in a small pool of light surrounded by vast darkness" (p. 4).

Furthermore, the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic placed significant additional pressure on myself; concern for the health and wellbeing of my family in Egypt in turn impacted highly negatively on my own health and wellbeing, to the extent that I was experiencing recurring nightmares and other sleeping disruptions, and I was seeking appropriate counselling and psychological support from relevantly qualified colleagues. These negative experiences undoubtedly began to impede significantly my capacity to progress in my doctoral program.

In late 2021, I experienced a second significant loss when I lost my elder brother. This had a direct negative impact upon my mental health

as we had been sharing our wonderful memories, stories and feelings. At the time of writing my thesis in 2022 and into 2023, despite my brother have passed away more than a year ago, I continued to feel the loss as if it happened yesterday. One month on from his death, at the end of 2021, I finally succeeded in being reunited with my family in Australia. This followed three previous attempts to achieve Australian travel exemptions to bring my family over. After the Australian borders had been opened, my family was turned back at the airport because of a missing document for an Australian Travel Declaration of which I had been unaware and that needed to be submitted 72 hours before the flight's departure. Both my wife and our son have been facing mental health adaptation issues in Australia and continue to require my ongoing support.

Through my focus on perseverance and resilience for all my family members (including my son), I felt an obligation to take several loans from friends and relatives that enabled me to continue to pay my PhD in Business and Management tuition fees, following repeated attempts to secure funding from my university, and/or employment opportunities, as an international on-campus student.

This thesis engages comprehensively with both the macro and the micro levels of the background to the study as outlined in this section of the chapter. In particular, the thesis presents and analyses my autoethnographic experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university, as well as my analysis of the broader implications of those experiences, in a systematic way in order to address the study's research questions.

### **1.3. The Research Questions**

In response to the macro and micro levels of the background to the study outlined above, the following research questions were developed to frame the thesis:

Research Question 1 (Chapter 5): How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family's and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns?

Research Question 2 (Chapter 6): What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

These research questions draw on specific concepts that are introduced in the next section and that are elaborated in Chapter 3.

#### **1.4. Introducing the Study's Conceptual Framework**

The six concepts constituting the study's conceptual framework were clustered around two foci, as depicted in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1**

*The Study's Macro and Micro Level Concepts*

<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>CONCEPTS</b>
Macro level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• University social responsibility (USR)</li><li>• Corporate social responsibility (CSR)</li><li>• Customer relationship management (CRM)</li></ul>
Micro level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Liminality</li><li>• Marginalisation</li><li>• Mental health</li></ul>

At the micro level, liminality incorporates instabilities in the social context, ongoing ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, and a lack of resolution of those meanings. Therefore, liminality can be defined in the anthropological sense as being a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed (Beech, 2011; Salvia et al., 2019). In the context

of this study, international students faced ambiguity while being unable to plan for their study in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a lack of analysis of the pandemic's impact on the international education sector globally (Hurley et al., 2021), and there was corresponding uncertainty during the Covid-19 global pandemic. At that time, international students were experiencing financial hardships and anxiety about their health and future and the safety of their families, as well as loneliness. A substantial majority of international students have part-time jobs on or off campus, related to supplementing scholarships for their tuition fees or to sustain their livelihoods. During the global health crisis, bars, restaurants and libraries, where many students worked, were closed, leaving international students with significant financial worries (Bilecen, 2020).

From this perspective, uncertainty leads to ambiguity, and then to liminality, which in turn can lead to marginalisation and then to mental health issues. In this context, marginalisation refers to a sustained and systematic positioning of a specific group (in this case, international on-campus doctoral students) as marginal to the concerns of governments and other policy-makers in comparison with the majority (in this case, Australian citizens and permanent residents). Also in this context, such marginalisation prompts the development of mental health issues that lead to underestimated value related to the employability of international students, as well as to less financial capacity and uncertainty regarding these scholars' continuity and persistence. All these micro level concepts when combined also contribute to a seriously restricted Australian economy because of missed opportunities to build on, and benefit from, the undoubted extensive knowledge and skills of these international on-campus students.

At the macro level, in this thesis, I discuss the relationship among USR, CSR and CRM and how that relationship can impact on the financial, emotional, employability and mental health experiences of international

on-campus doctoral students in Australian universities. From a different perspective, I explore how the relationship among these three macro level concepts can minimise liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns, and hence how the Australian economy can progress. Using a new and innovative approach and analysis, and a new business and educational perspective, I demonstrate how supporting international students with scholarships can add to the Australian gross domestic product (GPD), rather than perceiving such students as a burden on the Australian monetary system.

Furthermore, USR is crucial and universities must integrate their USR principles into their mainstream functions (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017). The USR concept is the policy of maximising the ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote sustainable human development (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

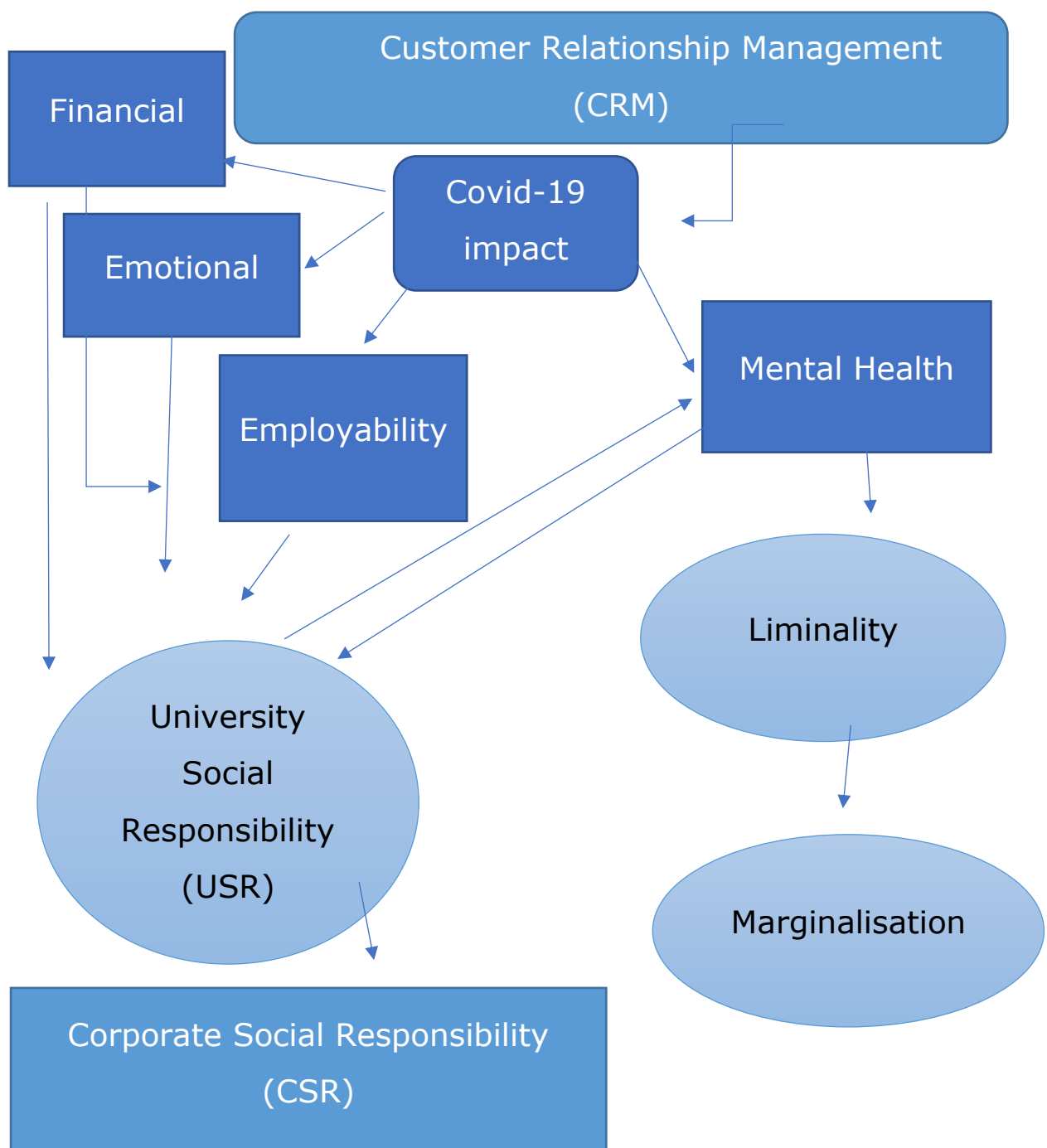
Building on Table 1.1, Figure 1.1 represents the key concepts of my autoethnography in this thesis and the interrelationships among USR, CSR and CRM, and on the other side their interrelationships with liminality and marginalisation. All these issues combined can lead to mental health issues for international on-campus students.

CRM is considered a problem definition of real-life business questions rather than building a technical system, and involves defining relevant solutions, focusing on fully utilising client data for commercial processes, conducting and analysing market research and building test environments aimed at the fulfilment of client needs and client experiences (Paas & Kuijlen, 2001). Furthermore, to tackle a CRM project successfully, it is essential to have an overall integrated methodology that begins by defining the company or university strategy, and that includes aspects like planning, analysis of the strong and weak points of the

processes oriented towards the customer, information technologies and financial control (Chalmeta, 2006).

**Figure 1.1**

*The study's key concepts: Relationships between the Institutional Level of USR, CSR and CRM and the Individual Level of Liminality, Marginalisation and Mental Health*



Most of the universities in Australia are capitalistically oriented, in the sense of competing for finite student numbers, and hence it is better to implement crucial CRM systems to assess, and as far as possible to fulfil, those students' satisfaction. Building on the above, because USR is not always or necessarily implemented properly in the Australian universities, they must build good CRM systems and integrate with CSR concepts for a better retention of their students. As this thesis elaborates, during Covid-19, ignoring the financial, emotional and employability needs of both on-campus and offshore international students led to their liminality and marginalisation and finally to severe mental health issues for many of them. In this thesis, I discuss the mental health impacts on both on-campus and offshore international students and how these impacts in turn affected the higher education income in Australia during Covid-19.

The implementation of USR can impact on international on-campus students' mental health either positively or negatively as per the university's performance. CRM can improve USR by assessing the emotional sentiments of international students, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and can help to integrate with CSR concepts to minimise liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns. I elaborate the detailed interrelationships among these concepts in Chapter 3, thereby demonstrating the study's conceptual framework's fitness for purpose in facilitating the addressing of the study's research questions.

### **1.5. Introducing the Study's Research Design**

As Chapter 4 elaborates, the research design for this study demonstrated a number of characteristics. Given the focus on presenting and analysing my experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student in Australia, the study's research paradigm drew on the affordances of interpretivism, "which encompassed meaning-centered research and problematized positivist ideas of truth correspondence,



objectivity, generalization, and linear processes of research” (Curry, 2020; see also Scauso, 2020). Moreover, interpretivism is “an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon” (Nickerson, 2022).

In addition to exhibiting the features of the interpretivist research paradigm, this study was aligned with the qualitative research orientation. This was on the basis that “A core feature of qualitative research methods is that satisfactory explanations of social activities require a substantial appreciation of the perspectives, culture and ‘world-views’ of the actors involved” (Allan, 2020), a feature that resonated very strongly with the study’s research questions. An equivalent synergy was evident also with a different definition of qualitative research “as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon [being] studied” (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 139). Crucially, in this mobilisation of qualitative research I was attentive to the importance of ensuring appropriate levels of research rigour (Johnson et al., 2020), as well as to the value of deploying a variety of data gathering and analysis techniques (Liamputtong, 2009; Morrison et al., 2020). Additionally, I was alert to the need to fulfil relevant criteria for ensuring the quality of the findings arising from this qualitative research project (Alturkistani et al., 2020; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013).

The interpretivist research paradigm and the qualitative research orientation aligned in turn with the study’s application of the autoethnographic research method. A recent definition of autoethnography helpfully highlighted three distinguishing features that were interwoven in this study’s research design: “‘Autoethnography’ is comprised of three interrelated components: ‘auto,’ ‘ethno,’ and ‘graphy.’” Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal

experience ('auto') to describe, interpret, and represent ('graphy') beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ('ethno')" (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, given this study's location in and intended contribution to the scholarly field of higher education research, the thesis displays as well the more specific features of autoethnography directed at educational research, including the acknowledgement that "Autoethnography opens windows into the aspirations, assumptions and outcomes of individuals and groups involved in learning, teaching, leading educational sites and systems, framing curricula, assessing learning and teaching, and evaluating the impacts of educational programs and courses" (Anteliz et al., 2023, p. 1). This distinctive interplay in autoethnography between the intensely personal and private on the one hand and the broader public sphere on the other hand was reflected in this study's interweaving of the micro level concepts to address Research Question 1 in Chapter 5 and the macro level concepts to engage with Research Question 2 in Chapter 6.

Chapter 4 elaborates in detail the specific data gathering and data analysis techniques deployed in the study to respond to these two research questions. Chapter 4 also articulates the ethical and political considerations encountered in enacting the study's research design, including engaging with the apposite question often posed in autoethnographic research projects: "Do we need others' permission to share our experiences?" (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 3). Additionally and finally, Chapter 4 considers carefully the criteria for assessing the study's research quality and trustworthiness.

## **1.6. An Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is arranged in seven chapters. This chapter has stated the background the study and articulated and explained the two research questions to be answered. Chapter 2 presents a critical review of selected literature about relevant key issues, including international education and

the Australian economy pre- and during Covid-19, the experiences of international on-campus students (including doctoral students) in Australia, and mental health and international students (also including doctoral students). Chapter 3 elaborates and justifies the conceptual framework of the study, beginning with an analysis of the interrelations among USR, CSR and CRM at the macro level, and also among liminality, marginalisation and mental health for international on-campus doctoral students at the micro level. Concepts associated with CRM are examined in detail, demonstrating CRM's centrality in helping universities to achieve their corporative objectives (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018). In addition, broader previous CSR definitions can inform the urgency of a contemporary obligation of universities to contribute to social responsibility improvement. These ideas in combination constitute a conceptual approach that assisted in understanding and theorising the interplay among liminality, marginalisation and mental health in the context of current USR performance in Australia and its impact on the Australian economy.

Chapter 4 discusses the research design of the study. As noted above, that design mobilised the affordances of selected elements of the interpretivist research paradigm, the qualitative research orientation and the autoethnographic research method, while also acknowledging and addressing identified limitations of those elements. The chapter outlines the study's specific data gathering and data analysis techniques, the research project's ethical and political considerations, and demonstrated evidence of the research design's quality and trustworthiness.

The next two chapters constitute the data analysis of the study. Chapter 5 addresses the first research question, by examining my autoethnographic experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university that highlighted significance evidence of my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns. That discussion leads onto Chapter 6's focus on what my doctoral study

experiences indicated more broadly about the USR, CSR and CRM of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they can contribute to reducing international on-campus doctoral students' liminality, marginalisation and mental ill-health, as well as presenting a counternarrative about what new strategies for the Australian higher education sector in Australia can and should be in a post-Covid world.

Chapter 7 draws the study to a close by synthesising the data analysis chapters' answers to the two research questions outlined above. It concludes by synthesising the study's multiple knowledge contributions, as well as making recommendations related to policy and practice in higher education in Australia and internationally.

### **1.7. Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I posited that USR, CSR and CRM in Australian universities are each equally important to international students' satisfaction, integrity and success. Moving forward to enhanced mental health for international on-campus students, these crucial university functions may contribute dramatically to Australian economic growth and to a better society with mutually beneficial exchanges of cultural knowledge across and within nations. Taking into consideration that Australian universities must implement their roles for USR, including a well-planned strategy to enact both CSR and CRM, this requirement is likely to impact positively on the individual experiences of international on-campus doctoral students, and can contribute to reducing their liminality, marginalisation and mental ill-health.

In Chapter 2, I discuss in detail the number of international on-campus students in Australian universities, including doctoral students by their country of origin, and their contribution to the Australian economy and the GDP, in addition to the export value of international students based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. On the other hand, I also explain how mental health issues associated with being on-campus

international doctoral students at Australian universities can impact on the positive contributions of such students.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Chapter Introduction**

The complex interplay between macro and micro levels of analysis that was introduced in Chapter 1 is taken up and developed extensively in this chapter. As I elaborate below, the first two main sections in the chapter focus on the macro level analysis of international education and the Australian economy pre- and during Covid-19, while the following two sections synthesise the literature about the micro level analysis of the experiences of international students (including doctoral students) in Australia, and the complicated relationships between mental health and international students.

Against the backdrop of this interplay between macro and micro level analyses, in the current economic environment, international students provide a significant source of income to universities around the world. However, while international students represent much-needed funds for many institutions, they also come with their own variety of characteristics and requirements (Blythman & Sovic, 2013). The literature presents critical stances on contemporary views of international students and challenges the way that those involved address the important issues at hand. From this perspective, international students' experiences can be a ready asset from which to glean valuable information, particularly in relation to teaching and learning, academic support, and the formal and informal curriculum (Sovic & Blythman, 2012). Where university mental health frameworks and strategies have previously been developed in Australia and internationally (McGorry et al., 2013), a lack of investment and accountability in their implementation has resulted in mixed success in achieving systemic change or intended impacts (Andrews, 2019; Francis & Carter, 2022). More broadly, the continuing effects of Covid-19 in Australia and internationally illustrate the equally continuing

ambivalence related to international students and the host countries where they are located during their international studies. This ambivalence is demonstrated by governments' and universities' efforts to retain existing international students and to attract new ones, which contrast starkly with the strategy of excluding such students from Australia during Covid-19. This ambivalence is equally evident among international students, including doctoral students, whose commitment to their host countries is understandably troubled by their highly stressful and sometimes traumatic experiences as international students during Covid-19.

Table 2.1 provides an overview of the structure of the chapter, clustered around the macro and micro levels, as well as the key proposition underlying each main section in the chapter.

**Table 2.1**

*The Literature Review's Macro and Micro Levels and Related Propositions*

<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>CHAPTER SECTION</b>	<b>SECTION PROPOSITION</b>
Macro	Section 2.2: International education and the Australian economy pre-Covid-19	International education made continuing and significant contributions to the Australian economy that were not always understood and valued fully.
Macro	Section 2.3: International education and the Australian economy during Covid-19	Australian government policies devastated international education during Covid-19, when different policies could have yielded more sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes.

LEVEL	CHAPTER SECTION	SECTION PROPOSITION
Micro	Section 2.4: The experiences of international students in Australia	International students' experiences in Australia demonstrate continuing ambivalence and reflect broader policy uncertainty.
Micro	Section 2.5: Mental health and international students	International students' risks of mental ill-health were significantly exacerbated by Covid-19.

In elaborating these selected sections of the literature review and in articulating and evidencing the accompanying propositions, the chapter identifies a significant research gap that the thesis was designed to address.

### **2.1.1 The Background to the Literature Review**

A 58-year-old man from Wuhan, China arrived in Melbourne on 19 January 2020 and was admitted to the emergency department of the Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne, Australia on 24 January 2020 with a fever, a cough and progressive dyspnea (Caly et al., 2020). On 23 January 2020, Australia began screening passengers on flights between Wuhan and Sydney (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). Within two days, Australia's first four cases of Covid-19 infection had been detected (*Guardian Australia*, 2020). Various border security measures, including restrictions on foreign nationals entering the country from China, were put in place. On 3 March 2020, a warning against citizens and permanent residents leaving the country for non-essential reasons was introduced (*Guardian Australia*, 2020). By 21 March 2020, these border restrictions were extended to all non-permanent residents and non-citizens. These restrictions were expected to be incrementally lifted over several months



from an as-yet-unspecified date (Lee et al., 2020). On 13 March 2020, Australia had 156 Covid-19 cases (*Guardian Australia*, 2020). That day was distinguished by confusion as Australian Federal and State and Territory Governments considered introducing strict physical distancing measures, but they explained them inconsistently and incoherently.

In presenting the above introduction, the *Guardian Australia* (2020) provided an accurate description of the Australian government's performance in relation to Covid-19 in 2020 as being characterised by "confusion" (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/24/australia-is-crying-out-for-clearer-messaging-on-coronavirus-rambling-politicians-told>). This confusion created in turn an economic crisis with looming dark global recession clouds as well (Baldino, 2020).

Covid-19 restrictions had arguably limited benefits while obligating everyone to work and study online. This could have been a potential strength by making a balance between locking down people in Australia and considering this excellent opportunity to provide employment for international on-campus students. Certainly, planning to move from face-to-face learning to online education was designed to provide more safety for everyone at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and to enhance people's adaptability to the crisis. However, the Australian Federal Government's change of visa and immigration policies during 2020 frustrated the career and immigration aspirations of many international students (both onshore and offshore), especially Chinese students, as well as their wellbeing (Qi & Ma, 2021, p. 95).

In early April 2020, Scott Morrison, Australia's then Prime Minister, told all international student and visitor visa holders, "As much as it's lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time ... to make your way home" (*ABC News*, 2020) (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>).

In addition, Mr Morrison (2020) said, "People should know, though, particularly for students, all students who come to Australia in their first year have to give a warranty that they are able to support themselves for the first 12 months of their study"

(<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6710557/international-students-should-go-home-morrison/>).

As another indication of the interplay between the macro and micro levels of analysis, the current Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (2022) said that comments made by his predecessor Scott Morrison advising temporary visa holders in Australia to leave the country at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic were not a good move and had left many "with ill feeling towards Australia" (*SBS News*, 2022)

(<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/anthony-albanese-labels-scott-morrison-urging-visa-holders-to-leave-during-pandemic-unhelpful/mo0yfd2tm>).

I totally agree with Anthony Albanese that the previous Australian Prime Minister left a harsh feeling in me and thousands of others about the value of international students in Australia, and that this statement had impacted severely on my mental health status at that time. The evidence for this was that I was brought by ambulance to Toowoomba Hospital in Queensland a few days after this harsh speech, not only because of this poor public speech and associated crisis management during 2020, but also because of several other stressors that I discuss in Chapter 5. Moreover, I discuss in Chapter 6 more details about the Australian government's performance during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects of that performance on international students in Australia.

## **2.2 International Education and the Australian Economy**

### **Pre-Covid-19**

The purpose of this section is to analyse the literature about the relationship between international education and the Australian economy

prior to the Covid-19 impact. The argument presented here is that, pre-Covid-19, international education made continuing and significant contributions to the Australian economy that were not always understood and valued fully, despite the undoubted contribution that international education made to the Australian Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as elaborated below. The corollary of this proposition is that, when the negative effects of Covid-19 started to be experienced, insufficient protection was afforded to international education in Australia, with serious continuing and long-term damage to international education and the Australian economy alike being the result. From this perspective, fully valuing international students in Australia must be assessed by analysing both direct and indirect expenditures locally and internationally, as well as by employing international students in appropriate workforce opportunities that can help to enhance the Australian economy and maintain the international students' economic and social sustainability.

These multiple contributions by international students in Australia need to be seen against the backdrop of historical and ongoing changes to the Australian higher education sector. Between the mid-1950s and the late 1980s, a period of less than two generations, a high participation university system of good quality was constructed in Australia. In 1955, in a national population of nine million people there were only 30,792 higher education students. Most doctoral students were enrolled in the United Kingdom or the United States of America on the other side of the world. The eight universities were perceived as small and weak, overshadowed by their stronger British forebears. The nation spent 0.25 per cent of its gross national product (GNP) on higher education. By 1989, the situation was completely different. There were 441,074 students and enrolments were growing rapidly. The rate of participation was in the top third of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and was like North American levels when non-university enrolments in technical and further education were included. A higher education system

of 20 universities and 50 colleges of advanced education was being turned into 36 universities with doctoral degrees (Gürüz, 2011; Marginson, 2002). Several fields of science-based research had a strong global presence, including medicine, agriculture, geo-sciences, mathematics, astrophysics and parts of engineering. Australia, with 0.3 per cent of the world population, published 2.5 per cent of the world's research papers (Kemp & Kemp, 1999). Academic communities were partly self-reproducing, and while largely monolingual were mobile within English-speaking countries. Many professorial chairs were held by local graduates, and Australian-trained academics worked in British and North American universities.

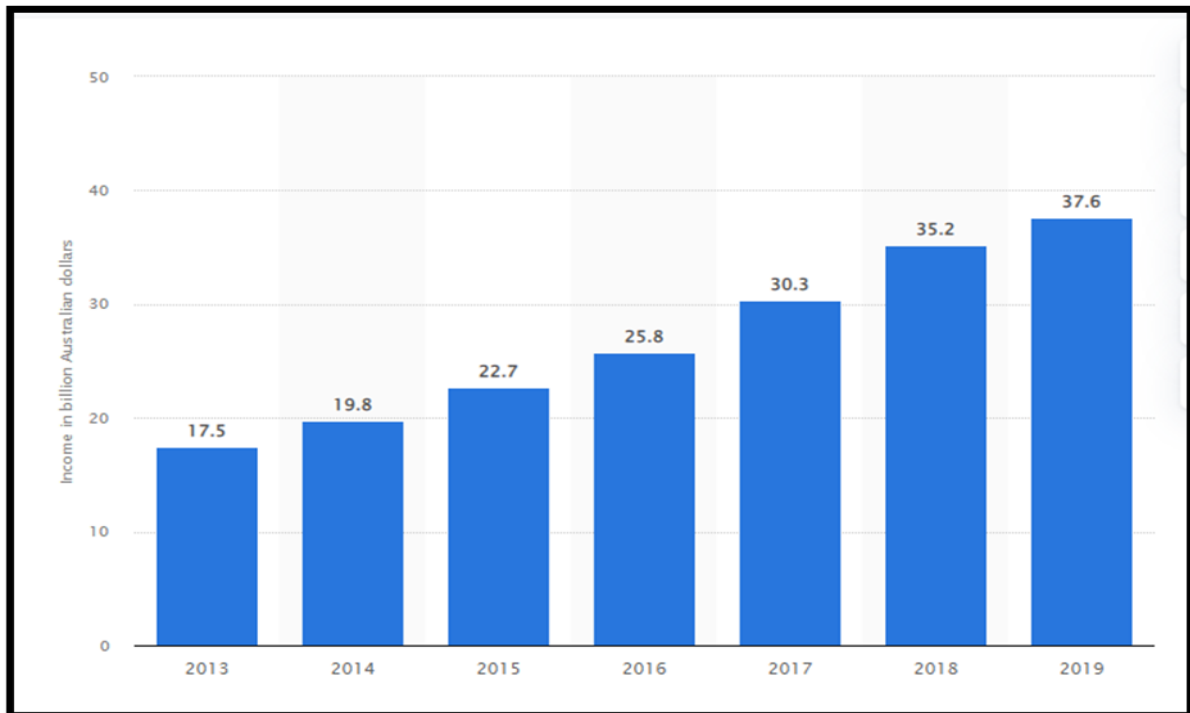
Moreover, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in some Anglophone countries, especially Australia and the United Kingdom, have leveraged international student fees as a means of financing their operations (Murray et al., 2011). Three countries – the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia - attracted over 40% of students studying outside their home country in 2007. Half of the world's international students were from the Asian region. China was the main source country, followed by India and South Korea. China and India showed the strongest growth in outwardly mobile students between 1999 and 2007 (Meek et al., 2009). Australia positioned itself as a major exporter of education, and some Australian HEIs collected nearly one quarter of their total revenue from overseas student fees (Cantwell, 2015).

Against this wider backdrop, in 2009, higher education student expenditure in Australia amounted to AUD10.3 billion being spent by 203,324 students and had a total value-added contribution to the economy of AUD9.3 billion at AUD45,016 per student. This resulted in the creation of 99,923 Full-Time Earnings (FTE) positions in the Australia economy. These impacts flowed from international student expenditure only. In addition, visits by international students generated expenditure in Australia of around AUD233 million and created added value of around

AUD184 million and employment equal to 2,464 FTE positions. Combined, therefore, international higher education students' and student visitors' expenditure in 2009 was equal to AUD10.6 billion or around \$51,735 per student. The economic impact in terms of value-added contributions was considerable. Education alone benefited by AUD3.5 billion, with the rest of the economy seeing an increase in added value of AUD5.8 billion. Total value added created through onshore international higher education was equal to AUD9.3 billion or AUD45,916 per student. This resulted in employment equal to 102,387 FTE positions or around 0.51 FTE positions per international student. Approximately 83,050 of these FTE positions were created outside the education sector (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010). In 2014, nearly 350,000 international students took courses with Australian universities. In addition, in 2015, the higher education workforce had 53,000 people holding academic jobs (Norton et al., 2016). Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) presented in Figure 2.1 showed that, in 2017–18, international education was worth AUD30.3 billion to the Australian economy, up from AUD25.8 billion in 2016–17. Recent research for the Department of Education (DoE) showed that Australia also gains social, cultural and skilled workforce benefits from international education, as this section elaborates. Higher education accounted for 68.5% (AUD22.2 billion) of international education export income in 2017–18, and 45.6% of all overseas student enrolments in 2018. Overseas students also enrol in Australian vocational education and training (VET), schools, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) programs and non-award courses. However, each of these accounts for fewer students and has less economic impact than overseas student enrolments in higher education (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019).

**Figure 2.1**

*Export Income from International Education Activity in Australia from the Financial Years 2013 to 2019.*



*Note.* Source: Statista Research Department 2022 (in billion Australian dollars). (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/977688/australia-export-income-from-international-education-services/>)

From a different perspective, Table 2.2 highlights that education-related travel services were ranked in fourth place among Australia's top exports in 2018–2019, and that they generated about AUD37.5 billion.

**Table 2.2***Australia's Top 10 Exports 2018-19*

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Commodity</b>	<b>AUD million</b>	<b>% Share</b>	<b>% Change</b>
<b>1</b>	Iron ores and concentrates	77,189	16.4	25.7
<b>2</b>	Coal	69,592	14.8	15.3
<b>3</b>	Natural gas	49,731	10.6	60.9
<b>4</b>	<b>Education-related travel services</b>	<b>37,556</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>15.2</b>
<b>5</b>	Personal travel (excluding education) services	22,450	4.8	5.2
<b>6</b>	Gold	18,867	4.0	-2.2
<b>7</b>	Aluminium ores and concentrates (including alumina)	11,358	2.4	20.2
<b>8</b>	Beef	9,476	2.0	19.0
<b>9</b>	Crude petroleum	8,491	1.8	30.5
<b>10</b>	Copper ores and concentrates	5,936	1.3	4.1

*Note.* Source. The Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) - based on ABS trade data database and in the ABS catalogues 5302.0 & 5368.0 (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/trade-and-investment/trade-and-investment-glance-2020#:~:text=The%20minerals%20and%20fuels%20sector,out%20of%20five%20Australian%20job>)

Moreover, and concerningly, education- and non-education-related travel services were the only entries in this list that were not related to natural resources and primary food production. This in turn signified the importance of international education to the ongoing diversification of the Australian economy and to offsetting its previously very heavy dependence on its resources sector. From a different perspective, this importance was emphasised by the fact that in 2016 the world's third

largest provider of international education services had been Australia (UNESCO, 2016).

More specifically, Table 2.3 portrays changes to the enrolment data of different categories of international students in Australia throughout the period between 2013 and 2021. Firstly, the five categories – higher education, VET, schools, ELICOS and non-award – exhibited the depth and diversity of Australian international education, of which university students constituted only one part.

**Table 2.3**

*Basis Pivot Tables for Australian International Students' Enrolment Data 2013-2021*

	Data	Year							
	Sum of DATA YTD Enrolments								
Sector	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Higher Education	223,235	240,314	262,119	294,748	337,944	384,160	428,561	411,373	356,143
VET	119,593	131,360	148,301	164,511	189,283	213,073	247,009	273,441	262,402
Schools	16,799	17,269	19,471	22,094	24,465	25,762	24,679	19,971	13,390
ELICOS	91,898	108,832	115,873	120,660	125,780	126,195	129,630	94,571	35,719
Non-award	26,812	32,833	36,373	41,721	47,549	46,872	45,039	30,671	12,080
Grand Total	478,337	530,608	582,137	643,734	725,021	796,062	874,918	830,027	679,734

	Sum of DATA YTD Commencements								
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
	88,221	100,373	107,244	120,417	137,547	151,577	165,041	129,248	98,719
	68,506	81,107	88,663	96,199	108,830	116,548	134,078	134,197	116,705
	7,813	8,496	9,962	11,200	12,205	12,103	11,086	7,770	3,535
	68,589	79,041	82,273	84,942	88,257	87,804	90,445	56,483	22,595
	21,693	26,665	27,817	32,451	34,601	34,065	32,555	18,767	5,909
	254,822	295,682	315,959	345,209	381,440	402,097	433,205	346,465	247,463

*Note.* Source. Department of Education, Skills and Employment (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2021.aspx>)

Secondly, three of the five categories reflected continuous growth in student enrolments through the designated period, although school students represented decreased enrolments between 2018 and 2019, and non-award students likewise represented decreased enrolments between 2017 and 2019. These trends were matched in the commencing student

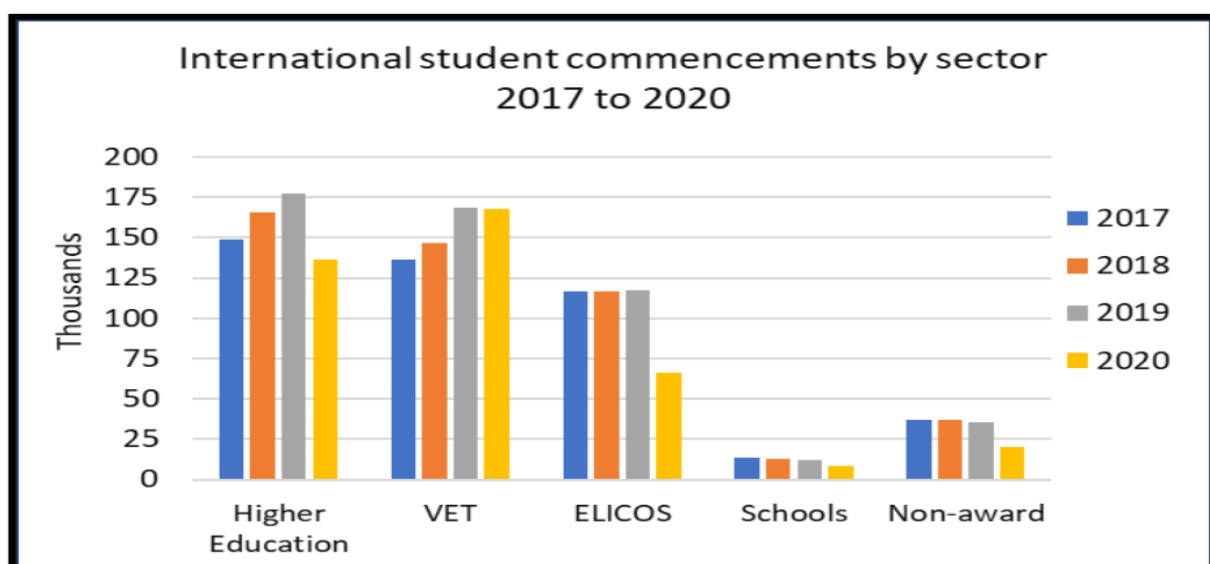


data, except that ELICOS students experienced fewer commencements in 2018 than in 2017. (The impact of Covid-19 on both sets of figures in the years 2020 and 2021 is taken up in the next section of the chapter.)

Figure 2.2 continues the focus on commencement data for international education students in Australia. The figure highlights consistent increases in such data for higher education and VET students between 2017 and 2019, unchanged figures for ELICOS students, and reductions for school and non-award students.

**Figure 2.2**

*International Student Commencements by Sector (2017 to 2020)*



*Note.* Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/Documents/MONTHLY%20SUMMARIES/2020/Full%20year%20summary.pdf>)

In view of the depth and diversity of forms of international education in Australia noted above, it was unsurprising that the International Education Association of Australia ([IEAA] 2019) published results indicating that international students have a tremendous impact on the communities in which they live, study and work, and that they contribute significant economic benefits to Australia

(<https://www.education.gov.au/enabling-growth-and-innovation-program/resources/1718-ieaa-regional-economic-impact-international-students-australia>). This export value includes the combination of fees and living expenses that international students provide to the Australian economy that, in 2018, amounted to AUD34 billion. This figure, however, accounted for only a small number of benefits provided by international students. For instance, it did not reflect the ultimate impact that international students have on the economy, as it did not take into account the various adjustments that occur as revenue from students is removed from or introduced to a region (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2021).

Furthermore, international education in Australia contributed AUD37.6 billion to the Australian economy in the 2018-19 financial year, which was an AUD5 billion increase compared with the 2017-18 financial year. ABS figures found that the economic contribution of the international education sector had grown by 15 per cent compared with 2018 (Tehan, 2019). In 2019, the then Australian Federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, noted that “International education has experienced its fifth year of consecutive double-digit growth, highlighting the strength of Australia’s higher education system”, and that “Australians should be proud of our innovative international education sector”. The Minister also stated that international education was Australia’s largest service-based export and supported 240,000 jobs, business opportunities and economic growth (Tehan, 2019). Section 2.2.1 explores in greater detail the diverse contributions made by international students in Australia to the Australian GDP.

### **2.2.1    *The Contribution of International Students in Australia to the Australian Gross Domestic Product (GDP)***

In 2015, the then Australian Government Department of Education and Training commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to assess the value of international education to the Australian community. This assessment encompassed the sector's contribution to the Australian economy and its broader economic and social impact on regional communities, tourism, and the calibre and productivity of Australia's workforce (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016).

According to that analysis, beyond the normal measures, there is a wide array of benefits that Australia as a country and a society accrues from international students (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). These benefits include: economic benefits stemming from increased entrepreneurship; knowledge exchange and international collaboration; economic benefits derived from trade and investment links; soft diplomacy in Australia and in the countries from which the students come; and social benefits flowing from improved cultural literacy, stronger cultural linkages and enhanced cultural capital generated in Australia and in the source countries. The report indicated that in 2015 international students added 130,000 skilled workers to the Australian workforce and make a significant contribution to Australian regional communities, with at least 5% of them living and studying in regional areas (<https://www.studygroup.com/blog/international-students-and-their-valuable-contribution-to-australian-society>).

More specifically, international students made contributions to the Australian GDP in both direct and indirect expenditures. The direct contribution of the sector measured the value added created directly as a result of expenditure on fees and other goods and services by international students. The direct value added consisted of the returns to labour in the form of salaries and wages, and the returns to capital in the

form of Gross Operating Surplus (GOS) directly from expenditure on fees and goods and services. Expenditure on goods and services also directly contributed to employment in the economy. The direct economic contribution of the sector was the value added to the economy from the income earned by the sector's labour and capital over a given period. With total income from providing international education services equalling AUD19.0 billion, the direct value added at the Australian level was equal to AUD11.9 billion. Of this, wages were equal to AUD7.4 billion, while GOS was equal to AUD4.6 billion. The revenue also directly supported approximately 92,700 FTE jobs in the Australian economy (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016).

The indirect component of international education's economic contribution was driven by the international education sector's expenditure on intermediate inputs in Australia. In the financial year 2014–15, the indirect value added was approximately equal to AUD4.9 billion, and international education indirectly supported an additional 35,600 FTE jobs. The combination of the direct and indirect contributions provided the total economic contribution. For 2014–15, the international education sector's total economic contribution to the Australian GDP was AUD16.9 billion, equal to approximately 1.0% of GDP. The sector also supported a total of approximately 128,000 FTE jobs, equivalent to 1.3% of employed persons in Australia (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016).

Furthermore, Figure 2.3 shows the export revenue for the Australian international education sector recorded by the ABS over the 2014–15 period. Export revenue from the provision of international education services was AUD18.8 billion, with Mode 2 contributing approximately 97% at AUD18.2 billion. Of the remainder, Mode 4 made up 2% at AUD418 million, and Mode 1 1% at AUD185 million. Because many goods and services purchased by international students or educational institutions were directly imported from overseas or were made up of imported components that did not contribute to Australia's

GDP or, therefore, living standards, as noted above export revenue from Australian international education may be categorised into direct and indirect contributions.

**Figure 2.3**

*Export Value of International Education Analysed by the ABS, 2014–15*

Mode	Category	(\$m)
1	Royalties on education	37
1	Correspondence courses	11
1	Education consultancy services	137
2	Education related travel	18,172
4	Educational services provided through registered educational institutions	341
4	Other educational services	77
<b>Total</b>		<b>18,775</b>

Source: ABS, 2015

*Note.* Source: Retrieved from ABS (2015). Australian government's report on international students' value in Australia (Prepared by Deloitte Access Economics) (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/research-papers/Documents/ValueInternationalEd.pdf>), p. 9

In Figure 2.3, the ABS data at the national level broke down total export revenue of AUD18.2 billion from education-related personal travel into fees and goods and services for the relevant education categories. In 2014–15, higher education was the single largest contributing sector to Australia as measured by economic contribution, with total value added equal to AUD11.1 billion. It also supported approximately 76,700 FTE jobs. The contribution of the higher education sector was approximately 70% of the total contributions (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). As I stated above, the proposition framing this section of the literature review is that for an extended period of time international education made continuing and significant contributions to the Australian economy that

were not always understood and valued fully. This was explained partly by the fact that these contributions were divided into direct and indirect categories, and that they were therefore not always immediately visible to policy-makers and to the direct and indirect beneficiaries of those contributions. As I also noted above, a crucial corollary of this proposition was that, at a time of global crisis that Covid-19 undoubtedly was, international education emerged as a casualty of Australian national, state and territory government policies. I turn now to illustrate the existence and extent of this casualty.

### **2.3 International Education and the Australian Economy during Covid-19**

The proposition guiding this section of the literature review, also articulated above, is that, through their effects rather than by design, Australian government's policies devastated international education during Covid-19, when different policies could have yielded more sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes. This section analyses data as evidence in support of that proposition.

More specifically, the Covid-19 crisis had a profound and ongoing effect on the higher education sector in Australia. Indeed, Australian universities stood to lose up to \$19 billion in revenue by 2023 owing to losses in tuition fees from international students alone (Thatcher et al., 2020).

It should be noted at this point that considerable difficulty attends comparing statistical data pre- and during Covid-19 related to Australian international education. This was partly because, on 1 July 2022, the former Department of Education, Skills and Employment was replaced by two new Departments: Education, and Employment and Workplace Relations. As part of this transition, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment website was decommissioned (The Australian Government, 2022) (<https://www.education.gov.au/about->

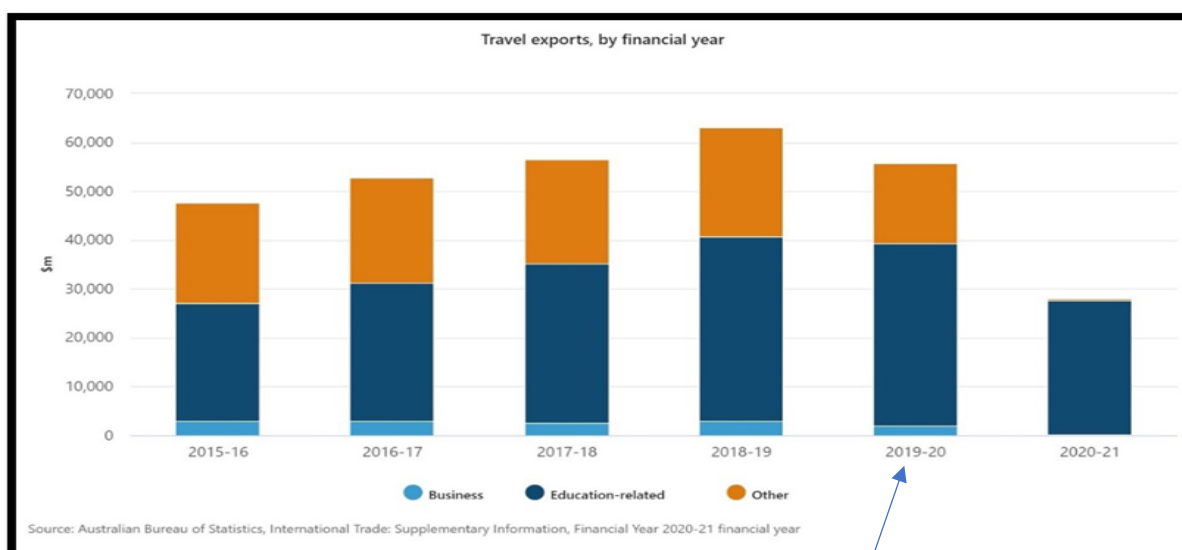
us/announcements/dese-changes). As a result of this transition from one department to two departments, statistics and records about the number of overseas students, enrolments and other details have differed after 1 June 2022. Thus, it has been difficult over time to confirm the exact statistics retrieved from government websites about such differences (<https://www.austrade.gov.au/australian/education/education-data/current-data/summaries-and-news/summaries-and-news>), because of changes to ministry titles in the Australian Government.

Figure 2.4 illustrates the travel exports by education-related sources only, indicating that the total income to the Australian economy was stabilised at around AUD37 billion in both financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20. The dark blue colour in Figure 2.4 shows the education-related export income from the international education trade. ABS data (ABS, 2022) (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/international-trade-supplementary-information-financial-year/latest-release>) indicated the dramatic drop from nearly AUD37.5 billion in 2019-20 to AUD27.5 billion in 2020-2021, with a drop of \$10 billion compared to 2019-20, and this drop occurred after the pandemic began in March 2020.

It might appear odd that, although the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, Australia generated AUD27.5 billion in 2020-21. However, further analysis indicated that it was a drop of 27% compared to 2019-20 before the pandemic started in 2020.

**Figure 2.4**

*International Education Trade: Supplementary Information, Financial Year 2020-21*



Travel exports, by financial year			
	Business (	Education	Other (\$m)
2015-16	2,916	24,145	20,669
2016-17	3,059	28,123	21,628
2017-18	2,661	32,592	21,332
2018-19	2,881	37,824	22,450
2019-20	1,984	37,338	16,343
2020-21	192	27,554	363

*Note.* Source: Retrieved and adapted from ABS financial year 2020-21. (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/international-trade-supplementary-information-financial-year/latest-release>)

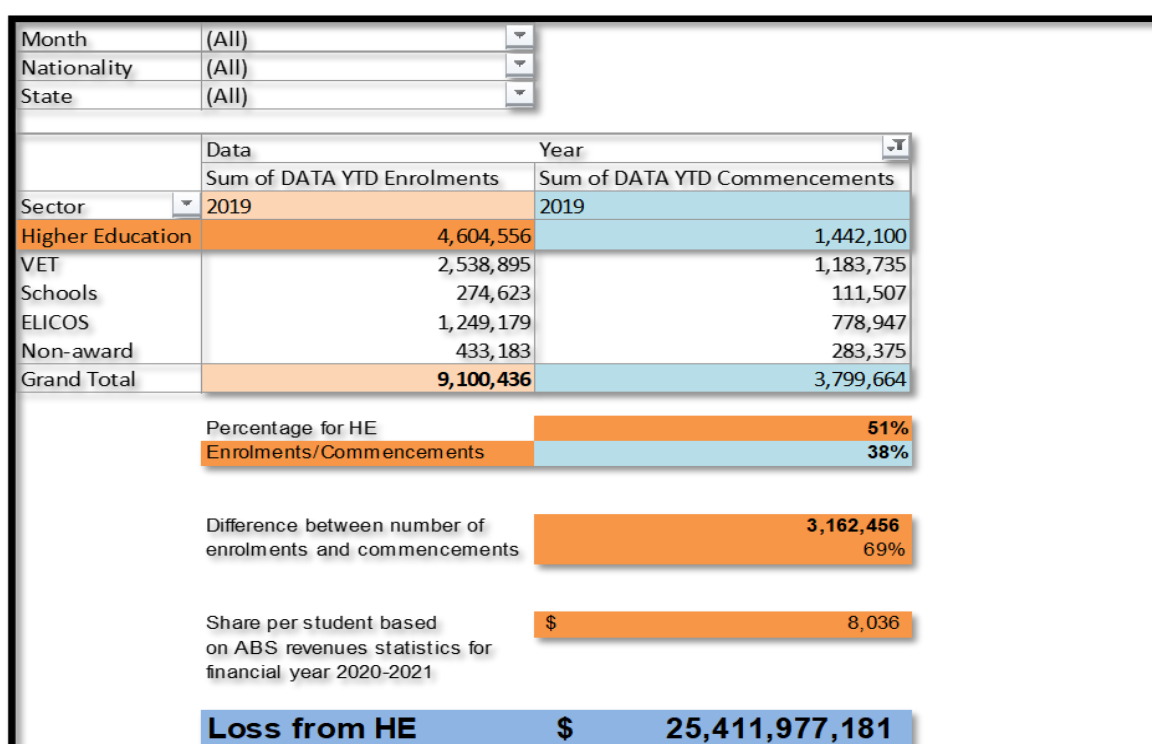
International students who preferred or were obliged to stay in Australia as a result of the lockdown represented this AUD27 billion, since few people were able to leave or return to Australia in 2020-21 beyond Australian citizens, people with permanent residence and those who had Australian travel exemptions. Being unable to travel to Australia during



2020-21, something that had been regarded as a normal freedom before the pandemic, caused the drop from nearly AUD37.5 billion to AUD27.5 billion since international students were unable to come to Australia to study, and thus began looking to study elsewhere.

**Figure 2.5**

*International Student Data 2019-20 – Full Year Data*



*Note.* Source: Based on the data finalised by Australian Department of Education in December 2021. (<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/resources/international-student-data-full-year-data-based-data-finalised-december-2021>) (Analysis conducted by Hisham Bakr, 2022)

By analysing the international student data on the Australian Department of Education website, as shown in Figure 2.5, it was elicited that there is a difference between the numbers of enrolments and commencements for only the higher education sector for the financial year 2019-20. The difference was more than 3 million international students (69% of the total number of enrolments).

**Figure 2.6***International Student Data 2020-21 – Full Year Data*

	Data	Year
	Sum of DATA YTD Enrolments	Sum of DATA YTD Commencements
Sector	2021	2021
Higher Education	3,979,298	886,346
VET	2,777,939	1,028,483
Schools	156,530	39,122
ELICOS	369,373	212,053
Non-award	134,923	59,695
Grand Total	7,418,063	2,225,699
Percentage for HE Enrolments/Commencements		54% 40%
Difference between number of enrolments and commencements		3,092,952 78%
Share per student based on ABS revenues statistics for financial year 2020-2021		\$ 9,298
<b>Loss from HE</b>		<b>\$ 28,758,646,374</b>

*Note.* Source: Australian Department of Education. Based on the data finalised in December 2021.

(<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/resources/international-student-data-full-year-data-based-data-finalised-december-2021>) – (Analysis conducted by Hisham Bakr, 2022).

Aligned with the outcomes of my personal analysis were those of Universities Australia, indicating that the higher education sector contributed 67 per cent – or AUD21.1 billion – of the international education export income in 2020. Of this, 55% of export income (or AUD11.6 billion) was generated by international students spending on goods and services from Australian businesses, and the remaining 45% (or AUD9.5 billion) was international student fees payable to higher education providers ([https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/220207-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2022\\_2.0.pdf](https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/220207-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2022_2.0.pdf)).

**Figure 2.7**

*International Student Monthly Summary Discrepancies between the Australian Department of Education, Skills, and Employment and the Department of Education*

Month	Dec		Nationality	(All)		State	(All)		Month	Dec	
Nationality	(All)		State	(All)		Month	Dec				
State	(All)										
	Data	Year									
	Sum of DATA YTD Enrolments	Sum of DATA YTD Commencements									
Sector	2021	2021									
Higher Education	363,859	106,113									
VET	284,994	139,206									
Schools	13,362	3,578									
ELICOS	41,314	28,204									
Non-award	13,392	7,123									
Grand Total	716,921	284,224									
	1921	Difference in enrolments									
	1608	Difference in commencements									

		Year									
Data	Sector	2019	2020	2021							
Sum of DATA YTD Enrolments	ELICOS	156,475	104,802	41,843							
	Higher Education	440,815	418,382	365,780							
	Non-award	48,219	32,333	13,546							
	Schools	25,465	20,097	13,097							
	VET	281,379	304,411	282,276							
Sum of DATA YTD Commencements	ELICOS	117,289	66,709	28,748							
	Higher Education	177,135	136,101	107,721							
	Non-award	35,732	20,424	7,266							
	Schools	11,873	7,925	3,421							
	VET	168,409	165,119	136,437							
Total Sum of DATA YTD Enrolments		952,353	880,025	716,542							
Total Sum of DATA YTD Commencements		510,438	396,278	283,593							

*Note.* Analysis conducted by Hisham Bakr (2022).

Left side source:

Adapted by Hisham Bakr from:  
International Student Data 2020-  
2021 – full year data (based on  
data finalised in December 2021  
(Department of Education, Skills  
and Employment - Australia)  
(<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/resources/international-student-data-full-year-data-based-data-finalised-december-2021>)

Right side source:

Adapted by Hisham Bakr from:  
International student monthly  
summary – July 2022  
(Department of Education -  
Australia)  
(<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-monthly-summary-and-data-tables>)

The international education export income in 2020 was almost 43% less than 2019 with AUD16 billion, and this could be owing to the Covid-19 pandemic and the highly severe travel restrictions imposed by the Australian Federal and State and Territory Governments.

Figure 2.7 highlights that there was a difference between enrolments and commencements for international students in Australia in December 2021, with 1921 and 1608 students respectively. Moreover, also in Figure 2.6, the higher education sector in 2020 constituted 51% (the highest rank) of the international student enrolments in Australia (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2020). The rank for commencing students for higher education was second after VET.

Research revealed a lack of available data starting from 2021 on the Australian government website. Similarly, I found no publications for trade and investment for 2021 and 2022 after the Covid-19 pandemic about any recent statistics for international education in Australia.

By contrast, IBISWorld (a global company founded in 1971 with over 400 employees in six offices around the world: New York, Los Angeles, Melbourne, London, Frankfurt and Beijing) published a list of the biggest exporting industries in Australia in 2022, based on their expert analysis and their database of 750+ Australian industries (<https://www.ibisworld.com/australia/industry-trends/biggest-exporting-industries/>). This list is presented in Table 2.4, in which every entry relates to natural resources or primary food production, and from which education-related travel is conspicuous by its absence.

**Table 2.4***The 10 Biggest Exporting Industries in Australia in 2022*

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Exports for 2022</b>
<b>Iron Ore Mining in Australia</b>	AUD132.0B
<b>Oil and Gas Extraction in Australia</b>	AUD57.7B
<b>Liquefied Natural Gas Production in Australia</b>	AUD55.7B
<b>Coal Mining in Australia</b>	AUD37.6B
<b>Gold and Other Non-Ferrous Metal Processing in Australia</b>	AUD27.9B
<b>Grain Growing in Australia</b>	AUD14.6B
<b>Meat Processing in Australia</b>	AUD14.2B
<b>Alumina Production in Australia</b>	AUD7.4B
<b>Copper, Silver, Lead and Zinc Smelting and Refining in Australia</b>	AUD6.8B
<b>Copper Ore Mining in Australia</b>	AUD6.7B

*Note.* Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2019) (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/trade-investment/trade-at-a-glance/trade-investment-at-a-glance-2019/Pages/default>)

Furthermore, as Figure 2.8 portrays, in 2020, in the end of year summary of international students' enrolments, there were 882,482 enrolments generated by 686,104 full fee-paying international students in

Australia on a student visa. This represented a 7.3% decrease from enrolments in 2019, compared with an average annual enrolments growth rate of 7% per year over the preceding five years. Commencements also decreased by 22% on 2019. This compared with the average annual commencements growth rate of 1% per year over the preceding five years (Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020)

(<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-studentdata/Documents/MONTHLY%20SUMMARIES/2020/Full%20year%20summary.pdf>).

## Figure 2.8

### *End of Year Summary of International Student Data 2020*

Sector	Enrolments				Commencements			
	2019	2020	Growth on 2019	Share of all sectors	2019	2020	Growth on 2019	Share of all sectors
Higher Education	440,667	418,168	-5.1%	47.4%	177,155	136,138	-23.2%	34.1%
VET	281,337	307,295	9.2%	34.8%	168,415	168,041	-0.2%	42.1%
ELICOS	156,570	104,626	-33.2%	11.9%	117,386	66,531	-43.3%	16.7%
Schools	25,483	20,430	-19.8%	2.3%	11,887	8,188	-31.1%	2.1%
Non-award	48,214	31,963	-33.7%	3.6%	35,731	20,060	-43.9%	5.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>952,271</b>	<b>882,482</b>	<b>-7.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>510,574</b>	<b>398,958</b>	<b>-21.9%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
The top 5 nationalities contributed 58.4% of Australia's enrolments in all sectors.					Double-digit commencement changes for countries outside the top 5 with over 2,800 enrolments.			
Nationality	2019	2020	Growth on 2019	Share of all nationalities	Nationality	2020	Growth on 2019	Rank
China	260,042	229,448	-11.8%	26.0%	Vietnam	13,017	-20.5%	6
India	142,821	148,684	4.1%	16.8%	South Korea	12,218	-24.9%	7
Nepal	68,920	71,117	3.2%	8.1%	Thailand	11,437	-23.6%	9
Brazil	40,763	33,563	-17.7%	3.8%	Malaysia	10,587	-27.6%	10
Colombia	31,716	32,877	3.7%	3.7%	Taiwan	7,953	-26.6%	13
Other nationalities	408,009	366,793	-10.1%	41.6%	Japan	6,809	-35.5%	14
<b>All nationalities</b>	<b>952,271</b>	<b>882,482</b>	<b>-7.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>5,352</b>	<b>-40.9%</b>	<b>17</b>

*Note.* Source: Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). Provider Registration and International Student Management Systems (PRISMS). The data on enrolments and commencements in this update related only to international students on a student visa.

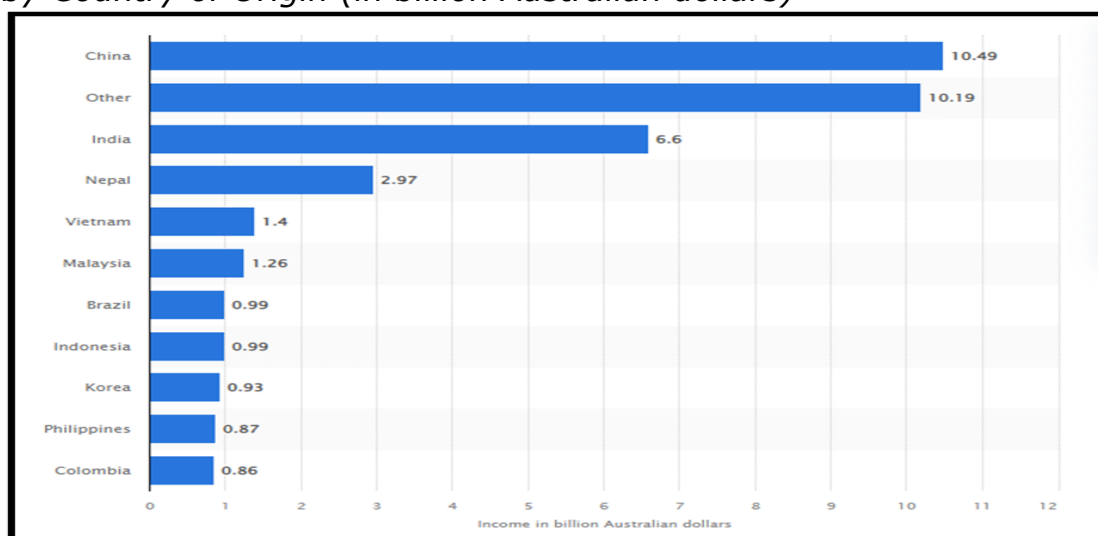
(<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-studentdata/Documents/MONTHLY%20SUMMARIES/2020/Full%20year%20summary.pdf>)

Moreover, higher education enrolments declined by 5.1% between 2019 and 2020, while enrolments in VET increased by 9.2% in the same period. In the Australian higher education sector, the top two source countries were China (38.4% of enrolments) and India (19.0% of enrolments). In the VET sector, students from India contributed the largest share of enrolments (21.0%), followed by those from Nepal (10.6%), China (7.1%) and Brazil (6.8%) (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/Documents/MONTHLY%20SUMMARIES/2020/Full%20year%20summary.pdf>).

In Figure 2.8 in the Australian ELICOS sector, China was the largest source of enrolments (23.6%), while Colombia was the next largest nationality (14.6%), followed by Brazil (10%) and Thailand (6%). In Australian schools, China was the largest source of enrolments (44.7%), followed by Vietnam (20%) and South Korea (6%). Enrolments and commencements in non-award courses (including exchange and foundation programs) decreased by 34% and 44% respectively. China (42%), the United States (12%) and the United Kingdom (3%) accounted for more enrolments in non-award courses than any other nationality.

**Figure 2.9**

*Export Income from International Education Activity in Australia in 2020 by Country of Origin (in billion Australian dollars)*



Note. Source. Statista (2022).

(<https://www.statista.com/statistics/977784/australia-export-income-from-international-education-services-by-country-of-origin/>)

Figure 2.9 shows the export income from the Australian international education sector in 2020 by country of origin. China was the top contributor with AUD10.49 billion, and then came India with AUD6.6 billion AUD. Combined, China and India represented nearly 40% of the export income from the international education sector in Australia.

Total student visa arrivals in the year-to-date in June 2022 were 38% of what they had been in the year-to-date June 2019, including the fact that arrivals from China were 16% of what they had been in 2019 (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2022).

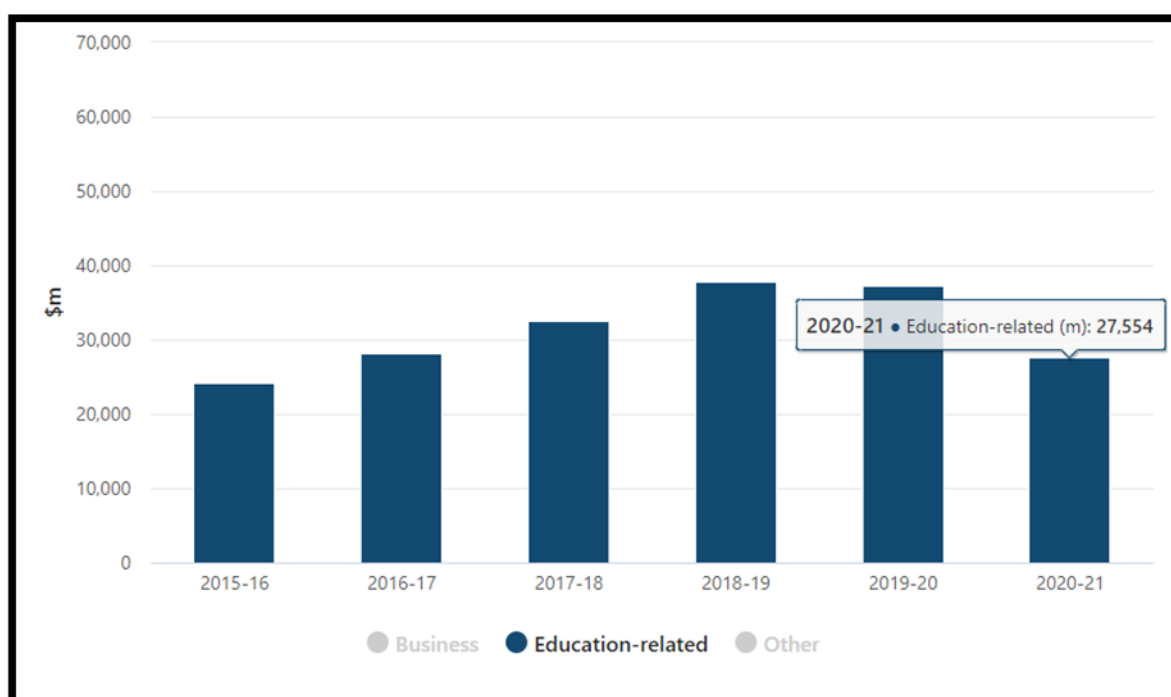
In Figure 2.10, despite the large decrease, exports of Australian travel services continued to be the largest contributor to total service exports, accounting for 45% of the total value in 2020-21 (down from 60% in 2019-20). Education-related travel accounted for 98% of the total Travel value, up from 67% in 2019-20, with many international students continuing their studies or having entered Australia before the introduction of travel restrictions. Other personal travel, down



AUD15,980m (98%), and Education-related travel, down AUD9,784m (26%), were the main drivers of the decrease in exports of Travel services. These decreases were a result of Covid-19 restrictions, with travel restrictions in place throughout most of the 2020-21 financial year (ABS, 2020-21).

**Figure 2.10**

*Education-Related Travel 2020-21 Exports (Financial Year 2020-21)*



*Note.* Source. ABS (2020-21).

International Trade: Supplementary Information, Financial Year. *ABS.*

Despite the value of New South Wales Travel services imports decreasing by 95% in 2020-21, its proportion of total Travel imports increased from 33% in 2019-20 to 53% in 2020-21. By contrast, Victoria's proportion of Travel service imports decreased from 27% to 18%, and Western Australia's decreased from 13% to 7%. These changes in proportions of Australian travel service imports in 2020-21 were a result of:

- the trans-Tasman travel bubble with New Zealand

- varying restrictions across states and territories
- state and territory specific Covid-19 outbreaks and subsequent lockdowns

(<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/international-trade-supplementary-information-financial-year/latest-release>)

### **2.3.1 The Australian Strategy for International Education (ASIE) 2021–2030**

In October 2019, almost 51,000 new and returning international students arrived in Australia. In October 2020, this figure had fallen by 99.7% to just 130. In January 2021, Australian states and territories had plans to trial the return of some international students with quarantine arrangements in place. These included 300 returning international students to South Australia, 350 to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and setting aside up to 1,000 quarantine places per week in New South Wales for international students and temporary migrants. Other Australian states had not yet specified their plans (<https://theconversation.com/2021-is-the-year-australias-international-student-crisis-really-bites-153180>).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had interrupted the flow of new international students and fewer new students were replacing those finishing their courses. More specifically, there were 830,027 international students enrolled to study in Australia in 2020; however, only 346,465 international students commenced their study (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2021.aspx>). Similarly, in 2021, 679,734 international students were enrolled and only 247,463 were able to commence their studies. From this perspective, to assess the impact on the Australian economy, we must assess the new arrivals among international students during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 until 2022.

In economic activities, there is a relationship between flows and stocks. In addition, the forms of categorisations of the stocks available to a society include human, financial and cultural capital (Stahel & Clift, 2016). Therefore, given that the international students are considered forms of human, financial and cultural capital, the concepts of stock (the number of current students) and flow (the number of new students) help to understand the nature of the problems facing the international education sector in Australia resulting from the pandemic.

Given the very serious, even devastating, effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on international education in Australia, as outlined in this section of the literature review, in January 2022, the Australian Strategy for International Education (ASIE) 2021–2030 set a new roadmap for the sector's recovery in 2022 and beyond, owing to the fact that Covid-19 significantly affected Australia's international education sector in 2020 and continues to present challenges. Australian educational institutions have faced a decline in enrolments and onshore student numbers that may continue for many years in the future. A new strategy for the post-Covid recovery will support the sector to recover and grow sustainably. However, Covid-19 is not the only reason for a new strategy. Innovations in educational delivery, changing bilateral relationships with key partner countries and risks to the sector's sustainability were already transforming the way that international education was delivered. The effects of Covid-19 have accelerated many of these challenges, and highlighted the need to embrace new ways of engaging with students locally and overseas for Australia to remain globally competitive (<https://www.applyboard.com/blog/applyinsights-how-australias-international-ed-sector-will-recover>). In early 2022, the then Australian government decided to focus on four key pillars for the ASIE:

1. Diversification
2. Alignment with Australia's workforce and skills needs
3. Students at the centre

#### 4. Growth and competitiveness.

From this perspective, the Australian Government in January 2022 (four months before the Australian federal election) decided that international students must be at the centre of the ASIE. This was the same Australian Government that said to international students in April 2020 to go home (a few days after the Covid-19 lockdowns had started in March 2020).

Nevertheless, because the Australian Government during 2014-2018 was valuing international students, it could be a positive new direction for the new Australian Government that was elected in May 2022 to resurrect this crucial export economy of international education, and to implement the ASIE in a more effective and transparent way.

As a specialist international education consultancy based in Melbourne and Canberra, the Lygon Group took the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process related to the ASIE. The Lygon Group's proposed new strategy, as part of the ASIE, focused — for at least the first three years — on recovering Australia's competitiveness, and on looking forward, beyond Covid-19. They made seven suggestions for inclusion in the proposed new strategy:

1. The student experience: implement a new consultative international student body to advise the National Council, Government, and the sector on improving the student experience
2. A forward-thinking strategy: Covid-19 recovery as contextual rather than guiding principle
3. Recognition of the diversity of student experiences and exposure to pandemic upheaval
4. Onshore, online, offshore: international education in Australia should aspire to build all segments
5. A big, bold approach to improve national competitiveness

6. Protecting students and institutions: caution when integrating international education with the short-term needs of the Australian labour market

7. Appoint an international education champion to build social licence for the sector.

(<https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/documents/submission-file/2021-06/The%20Lygon%20Group.pdf>).

Covid-19 presented the greatest challenge to Australia's international education sector that had ever been faced. While Australia was successful in containing the virus within Australia's own borders, this came at the cost of closed borders to international students, and onshore students facing real and unique hardship as they lived in Australia during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. In addition to the impact of the pandemic, geo-political tensions complicated student mobility from some of Australia's key source markets, and global competition for international students saw some of Australia's key competitor nations gain an edge over Australia. Moreover, a positive transition must be undertaken as promptly as possible in order to regain the trust of international students in Australia.

This section of the literature review presented evidence to support the underlying proposition that, in combination, the policies of Australia's national, state and territory governments devastated international education in Australia during Covid-19, when different policies could have yielded more sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes. The philosophy and principles underpinning such potential alternative policies are elaborated in detail in Chapter 6, clustered around the interplay among USR, CSR and CRM.

## **2.4 The Experiences of International Students in Australia**

To this point in this chapter, I have elaborated the macro level review of selected literature related to international education and the

Australian economy pre- and then during Covid-19. I turn now to present the two micro level analysis sections of the chapter, beginning with the experiences of international students in Australia. The proposition framing this section is that international students' experiences in Australia demonstrate continuing ambivalence and reflect broader policy uncertainty. This ambivalence and uncertainty are despite the undoubted mutual benefits to Australia and the international students themselves arising from a sustainable and thriving international education enterprise.

International students in Australia are an important global cohort of 'non-citizens' whose experiences are central concerns for scholars working in a wide range of scholarly disciplines and from a variety of paradigmatic positions. The literature also traverses qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies, and includes both system level and individual level research that in turn presents macro and micro level perspectives alike.

Moreover, while much of the literature focuses on international students attending Australian universities, some studies have considered the distinctive experiences of international students participating in other forms of Australian education. For instance, Lawson (2012) reported research conducted by Australian Education International involving 41 focus groups across Australia in 2011 that involved international school, VET and university students. The analysis of the international students' voices was clustered around six themes: student pathways; pre-departure and arrival information and assistance; orientation programs and 'buddy' systems; support services; increasing social interaction and engagement; and work experience and volunteering. Lawson's report identified three key areas for improvement that, paradoxically and poignantly, re-emerged with a heightened urgency 10 years later during the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia:

- helping international students to interact with Australian students and the broader Australian community,

- providing and promoting support services to international students, and
- providing opportunities for international students to undertake work experience relevant to their studies, which will then help them to find suitable jobs after graduation. (p. iv)

Subsequent research demonstrated the continuity of many of these themes articulated by international students living in Australia. For example, while the Australian government regularly reports international students' high levels of satisfaction with their educational experiences, there was also evidence of some dissatisfaction regarding their social and educational experiences (Mak et al., 2015). Universities were not meeting the social and educational needs of international students, according to an analysis of their experiences through the two dominant rationales in international education. Research conducted by Arkoudis et al. (2019) examined the perceptions and experiences of international students at a large metropolitan Australian university in 2019. The study was conducted in two phases: an online questionnaire, followed by focus group interviews. The findings indicated that, while international students might rate their overall satisfaction as high on questionnaires, deeper analysis through focus groups highlighted the lack of social integration and belongingness that the international students perceived. These results challenged universities to innovate their practices in order to develop and integrate cosmopolitan experiences that may benefit international students, and also enrich the understandings of local students (Arkoudis et al., 2019).

From a different perspective, but also drawing on research carried out in Australia in 2019, survey fieldwork conducted among international students in the private rental sector in Sydney and Melbourne provided new knowledge about the hardships experienced by international students who reported financial stress (Wilson et al., 2022). Using a modified scale

developed by the ABS, the findings highlighted the accelerating role of high levels of financial stress in producing disruptive events such as housing evictions and fears of homelessness, as well as reliance on inadequate housing like 'hot-bedding'. Financial stress was significantly more likely for students from low gross national income (GNI) countries, and higher stress reduced wellbeing. Access to paid employment, however, did not protect against higher financial stress. The researchers concluded that higher education policy-makers needed tools and policies to prevent disruptive life events among international students related to financial stress, particularly those associated with housing (Wilson et al., 2022).

Such concerns are longstanding among international students in Australia. For instance, because of housing accommodation worries, lack of social support, confusing enrolment procedures and inadequate support services being experienced as basic problems faced by international students at Australian universities, many international students had previously preferred to study in the United States (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Clearly, the experiences of international students in Australia varied considerably, rather than constituting a single, homogeneous essence. For instance, one marker of divergence among those experiences derived from whether the students expected to return to their home countries at the end of their studies, or alternatively hoped to become permanent residents and potentially eventual citizens in Australia after their studies. Lim et al. (2016) reported that occupational therapy students from Asian countries studying in Australia identified difficulties in transferring their newly gained theoretical knowledge of occupational therapy to the very different structures and institutional cultures of the healthcare systems in their home countries. Similarly, and strikingly, the study authors noted that, "Although students made adaptations to fit in as occupational therapy students in Australia, they continued to see themselves as



different, and their adaptation also influenced how they saw themselves in relation to their home culture" (p. 303).

This reference to "adaptations" presented a timely reminder of the complexity and significance of what is involved in being an international student in Australia, including farewelling family members and friends, moving countries, finding a new home, adjusting to a new culture and routines, adapting to new academic requirements and so on. In that regard, Tran (2011) differentiated among committed, face-value, hybrid and mutual adaptation that constituted different forms of relationships between international students and Australian academics, and that in turn represented different approaches to maximising the mutually beneficial understandings afforded by international education. The courage and inventiveness of these efforts at adaptation stood in marked contrast to the existence of "linguistic racism", comprising "ethnic accent bullying" and "linguistic stereotyping", identified by Dovchin (2020) in the responses of some locals to international students' attempts at speaking Australian English.

In view of the devastating impact of Covid-19 on Australian international education mapped in the previous section in this chapter, it is unsurprising that a large and growing subset of the literature about international students in Australia has focused on their experiences during Covid-19. For instance, Dodd et al. (2021) explored the intersection between psychological wellbeing and academic experience of international students at an Australian university during the pandemic, and they noted heightened self-reported wellbeing concerns among undergraduate compared with postgraduate students, among female compared with male students, among lower compared with higher subjective social status students and among negative compared with positive overall learning experience students. That is, while Covid-19 has a serious and significant impact on most if not all international students in Australia, the character

of that impact has varied across categories of students and among individual students.

Drawing more explicitly on the macro level analysis outlined above, Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020) provided an even more pointed critique of the negative effects of Australian government policies on international students during the pandemic. In particular, and in an encapsulation of many of the ideas explored throughout this thesis:

In this essay, we discuss the Australian Government's refusal to provide international students with adequate support during the Covid-19 pandemic, in spite of the hardships these students are facing in relation to mental health, financial hardship, exploitation and the risk of homelessness. We call on the Australian Government to provide better support, not only for the sake of international students, but also for the benefit of the Australian international education sector. (p. 1372)

This critique was powerfully and poignantly distilled in the conclusion to the same article (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), which is accordingly worthwhile quoting here in full:

Overall, it is evident that there is inadequate support being offered to international students during the pandemic and the meagre amount available is definitely disproportional to the billions of dollars international students bring to the Australian economy. Despite the support provided by State governments and institutions, there is a lack of support from the Australian Federal government. The consensus is that Australia could have done a better job in caring for international students during the pandemic.

The fears, the challenges, the struggles and difficulties that international students have faced are much more than the hopes and dreams that they had before coming to Australia. Australia has a long way to go in terms of improving its reputation to prospective students about how international students are treated and valued as

community members. Since international students call Australia home for the duration of their studies, and some possibly longer, much more needs to be done to include international students as part of the community rather than alienating and othering them when a pandemic strikes. (p. 1375)

This is an effective synthesis of many of the propositions framing this thesis, which are elaborated and evidenced in this chapter and in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

#### **2.4.1    *The Experiences of International Doctoral Students in Australia***

Against the backdrop of these accounts from the scholarly literature of the highly diverse and very powerful experiences of international students in Australia, the more focused literature about international on-campus doctoral students in Australia is also informative and instructive. As a starting point for this subsection, and building on the insightful commentary presented by Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020) in the previous few paragraphs, their commentary resonated with the reflections of Le (2021), an international on-campus doctoral student at the University of Melbourne in Australia, whose response to the previous Prime Minister's injunction to international students that "it is time ... to make your way home" (ABC News, 2020) (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>), as mentioned in the previous chapter, was as follows:

He forgot the fact that border closures meant temporary visa holders could not easily go home even if they wanted to [do so]. And staying in the country has not been easy for many international students who are not eligible for the support that only has been available to Australian citizens. The [corona]virus does not

discriminate who gets infected, but social structures do discriminate who gets supported. (p. 135)

This powerful critique of the Australian Government's policy-making regarding international on-campus students, including doctoral students, during the Covid-19 pandemic exhibits a marked synergy with this study, and helped to inform the data analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

From a broader perspective, much of this literature refers to the distinctive opportunities and challenges that such students experience during their time in Australia. Examples of these publications included research about the particular difficulties of writing in English as an additional language reported by 27 doctoral students in diverse disciplines at an Australian university (Qi & Ma, 2021), the metacognitive strategies deployed by six Chinese doctoral students in Australian universities to enhance their research competence (Yang & Bai, 2019), how the academic writing of international doctoral students in Australia is influenced by the intersection of academic integrity, the imposter phenomenon and cultural differences (Cutri et al., 2021), a narrative study of six international scholars' experiences of doctoral learning at an Australian university (Cotterall, 2011), and the character and time commitment related to international and domestic doctoral students at Australian universities completing a thesis by publication (Mason et al., 2020).

Also by way of introduction to this subsection, the findings of a mixed methods study exploring the experiences and perceptions of international doctoral students from five different countries studying in Australia revealed that the most important issues in terms of satisfaction were not directly related to academic studies (Banks & Bhandari, 2012). Instead, factors such as integration into the community, interacting with other students, relationships with supervisors and the provision of adequate desk space were often given the greatest weight. Further

research into the implications for how university policy can better support international doctoral students was recommended (Yu & Wright, 2016).

Moreover, the literature more directly relevant to this study both reflects and deepens many of the themes identified in the wider scope of analysis presented earlier in this section in the chapter. For instance, more than 10 years ago, Fotovatian (2012) explored the identity constructions of four international on-campus doctoral candidates at an Australian university. Intriguingly, Fotovatian's analysis highlighted the differences, even more than the similarities, among the participants, finding that "students chose different pathways for integration, engagement in institutional interactions, and identity construction" (p. 577). Furthermore, her analysis emphasised "the role of agency and intentionality in participation and learning through interaction which leads to a critique of the 'international student' as a label that underplays student agency" (p. 577). This telling critique certainly resonates with the responses to this study's two research questions in Chapters 5 and 6, where student agency is a key element of my family's and my actions outlined in Chapter 5, and where it is similarly central to the alternative vision of doctoral student support elaborated in Chapter 6.

Similarly, Nguyen and Robertson (2022) posited student agency as a necessary corrective and counternarrative to "the long-standing deficit discourses of international students" (p. 814). Moreover, they used their study of six Vietnamese doctoral students' experiences at an Australian university to differentiate among specific types of student agency, as follows:

*Needs-response agency* is displayed in the way the students dealt with language for research purposes. *Agency as struggle and resistance* is manifest in the soft strategies, which may be culturally invisible through the Western lens. *Agency for becoming* shows the transformation into a more confident and autonomous elf. Pervading the other forms of agency, *relational agency* refers to the way these

candidates effectively mobilised their families and communities and matured networks. (p. 814)

I certainly recognise the utility of this kind of conceptual typology of student agency, and again traces of this phenomenon can be found in Chapters 5 and 6. On the other hand, I am wary of advocating an over-reliance on such agency, given that my experience has been that without reliable and trustworthy systemic supports individual agency counts for very little.

10 years after the publication of the research by Fotovatian (2012) and drawing on autoethnography as I have done in this thesis, Li et al. (2022) explored the academic identity development of three international doctoral students at an Australian university. The authors contended that the participants' multiple interactions with diverse stakeholders revealed tensions between their 'fitting in' and adapting on the one hand and their 'fight out' against these institutional norms on the other hand. On the basis of these tensions, Li et al. (2022) posited "the creation of a third space – emerging from how these three novice scholars bring in their own learning academic conventions from their home countries to an Australian academic community" (p. 1).

From a different perspective, but again highlighting the complexity and significance of international on-campus doctoral students' shifting identities in Australia and also in their home countries, Dang and Tran (2016) tellingly entitled their book chapter about 30 Vietnamese doctoral candidates studying in Australia "From 'Somebody' to 'Nobody'". Furthermore, they reported an underlying paradox in the participants' self-reported changing sense of self:

The results of the study reveal that there is home connection host and host connection in home. Notably, while studying in the host country, these international doctoral students feel connected but not belong[ing] to the host institution. They maintain a strong sense

of disconnectedness with home institutions upon their return. (p. 75)

Drawing from another perspective again, Xu et al. (2021) conducted research with 24 Chinese doctoral students enrolled at 11 Australian universities. Deploying selected aspects of bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993), the authors elicited qualitatively different experiences among the participants, using the innovative data gathering technique of voluntary-employed photography. Xu et al. found that “the negative and positive forces that influence students’ developmental trajectories during their doctoral education ... exert varying influences via interactions between individuals and their environment” (p. 1342). Moreover, they asserted that “International doctoral study follows a developmental trajectory that is co-shaped by personal characteristics and the multilayered bioecological system that individuals negotiate and manage day-to-day” (p. 1342). As Chapter 5 elaborates, while I employed a different conceptual framework from bioecological systems theory, my experiences as an on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university also revealed the complex interplay between my personal actions and agency and the individually experienced forces and influences that variously enabled and constrained opportunities and options available or not available to me.

Table 2.1 contained the following proposition helping to frame this section of the literature review: international students’ experiences in Australia demonstrate continuing ambivalence and reflect broader policy uncertainty. It is certainly important to acknowledge that many international students have profoundly positive, even life-changing and transformative, experiences as part of their studies. At the same time, this section’s focus on international students, including doctoral students, in Australia has highlighted that they also experience a wide range of challenges, some related to the inherent complexity of changing countries, and others pertaining to the broader, systemic issues attending

studying in a different country. The posited ambivalence refers to their own sense of being between two worlds (which links directly with the concept of liminality, which is elaborated in the next chapter), as well as to how they are perceived and received by the host country and community. Similarly, the broader policy uncertainty cited in Table 2.1 was encapsulated in the previous Australian Prime Minister's injunction, cited above, to international students that "it is time ... to make your way home" (ABC News, 2020) (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>).

As other researchers noted about this injunction, it implied that international students were welcome in Australia only when it suited the nation's economic and social interests to include them, but that by contrast they were not even 'second class citizens', but instead were positioned as 'non-citizens', as soon as the pandemic's significance became clear. This positioning took no account of the undoubted direct and indirect contributions made by international students to the Australian economy canvassed earlier in this chapter, and it devalued the mutually beneficial relationships between international students and Australia that can flourish in more favourable circumstances (Yu & Wright, 2016).

## **2.5 Mental Health and International Students**

Given that one of the three micro level concepts elaborated in the next chapter is mental health, it is appropriate that this final main section in this literature review chapter places that concept in a broader scholarly context. This section contains three subsections: an introduction to mental health issues worldwide is followed by an account of mental health and international students in Australia, which is followed in turn by an analysis of mental health and specifically international doctoral students in Australia. The accompanying proposition listed in Table 2.1 related to



this section of the chapter was that international students' risks of mental ill-health were significantly exacerbated by Covid-19, thereby reinforcing the relevance and significance of focusing on this issue in this section.

### ***2.5.1 Introduction to the Mental Health Issue Worldwide***

Initially from the broader geographical perspective mooted in the preceding paragraph, Muurlink and Poyatos Matas (2011) communicated their concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of students in higher education in the United Kingdom, based on a survey of over 200 students. Their research reported that, for some students, university can be a stressful experience and even detrimental to mental health. Through investigating student perceptions of wellbeing and its relationship to effective learning, the authors identified strategies that had the potential to enhance wellbeing and learning for all students, as well as supporting students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. The mainstreaming of inclusive teaching and learning strategies, alongside equipping students with the specific skills needed to manage their wellbeing, is crucial, in order to enjoy a positive learning experience and optimal success (Muurlink & Poyatos Matas, 2011). Conceptually, the researchers synthesised these diverse experiences as follows:

The term "mental health difficulties" refers to a wide spectrum of conditions, including for example, depression, anxiety, phobia and bipolar disorder. These can range from mild to severe, can be short or long-term and can have a profoundly debilitating effect.

(Muurlink & Poyatos Matas, 2011)

Distinctive sources of stress and struggle for international students in the United States of America include the language barrier faced as many come to a country to study in a language that is not their native tongue (Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). In such circumstances, lower proficiency in English is associated with higher acculturative stress.

Unfamiliarity with the American educational system, often quite different from the system in which they grew up and excelled, is another source of struggle, as is the loss of familiar social support networks and the need to establish new ones upon arrival, resulting in feelings of isolation, loneliness and homesickness. (Levine et al., 2016, p. 55)

“Cultural misunderstandings, racial discrimination” (Yakunina et al., 2010, p. 67), and “cultural” (Olivas & Li, 2006) isolation may add to their struggles.

These issues may escalate to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness sometimes associated with depression and impaired mental health (Mori, 2000). Other studies in Texas examined mechanisms through which acculturation influenced the psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students. Specifically, these mechanisms refer to the mediating and moderating effects of social interaction and social connectedness with host nationals upon the acculturation–adjustment linkages. Chinese international students from four universities in Texas responded to a web-based survey (N = 508). Results from regression analyses showed that social connectedness with Americans mediated the links between adherence to the host culture (the acculturation dimension) and psychosocial adjustment (i.e., depression and sociocultural adjustment difficulties). “‘Social interaction’ with Americans moderated the association between adherence to the home culture (‘acculturation dimension’) and ‘depression’” (Zhang & Goodson, 2011, p. 614).

Research by both the Department of Biotechnological and Applied Clinical Sciences, Section of Psychiatry, University of L’Aquila, Italy and the Research Student Program, Department of Public Health and Infectious Diseases, Sapienza University in Rome in 2020 reached findings that showed that Chinese people, ranging from 7% to 53.8%, experienced psychological distress during the initial stage of the Covid-19 pandemic. A range of negative psychological responses was identified:

besides anxiety, depression and stress, which were the most commonly explored conditions, insomnia, indignation, worries about their own health and family, sensitivity to social risks, life dissatisfaction, phobias, avoidance, compulsive behaviour, physical symptoms and social functioning impairment were explored as well. The levels of stress, anxiety and depression ranged from mild to moderate-severe. In the college students' population, rates of mild, moderate and severe anxiety were 21.3%, 2.7% and 0.9% respectively. Only one study found that people were psychologically stable, with just 6.33% and 17.17% of the participants reporting respectively anxiety and depression (Talevi et al., 2020).

In 2001, a study by the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom raised concerns about the extent of mental health problems in student populations, and identified factors in the learning environment that may have a detrimental effect on mental health, with implications for student progression, retention and achievement. In a survey of over 1,000 students, a high proportion (50-60%) of them reported concerns regarding academic progress, particularly in terms of their ability to manage coursework and assessment (60%), the ability to set priorities, make decisions and manage time (59%), concentration (58%) and the ability to meet academic and set up career goals (63%). In terms of seeking help, it was found that students were most likely to turn to those whom they knew best, such as friends and family members (65%) or personal tutors (54%) as opposed to the organisation's counselling service (7%) (Muurlink & Poyatos Matas, 2011).

In 2009, the Committee for the Promotion of Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education, under the auspices of Universities UK, declared that effective mental health promotion involves not only attending to the needs of those with mental health difficulties, but also promoting the general mental wellbeing of all staff and students, which will bring significant benefits to the respective university. Improved general mental

wellbeing will impact positively on institutional reputation, staff and student recruitment and retention, performance in general and community relations (Murphy, 2017; Randall & Bewick, 2016).

From a different perspective on forms of mobility, international migrant workers represent a highly vulnerable group in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic who are at risk of major mental health concerns. There are 150 million international migrant workers worldwide, who, compared with other international migrants (e.g., international students), encounter more barriers to accessing health services in host countries, particularly migrant domestic workers. Even within the same country, people migrating from one region to the other for work have faced considerable challenges with announcements of restricted travel and reduced employment opportunities (Chakraborty, 2020).

From this necessarily selective review, it is clear that mental health characteristics and determinants vary considerably based on the conditions and contexts framing individuals and groups in different parts of the world. Understandings of, and strategies to support, particular manifestations of mental ill health also vary considerably. What emerges in stark relief are the complexities of mental health and illness, and their significant and continuing impact on the lives of those individuals and groups who are seriously affected by them.

### ***2.5.2 Mental Health and International Students in Australia***

Turning now to a review of the literature related to the intersection between mental health issues and international students in Australia, concern about this intersection is longstanding in scholarly publications. For instance, the 2011 National Summit on the Mental Health of Tertiary Students in Australia drew attention to an increasing incidence of mental health problems amongst the international students' population. Media reports also reflected a growing concern over international students' mental health and adjustment issues. Within this context, it was noted

that Australia was host to many thousands of international students of an age when mental health concerns were most likely to surface. Moreover, there were an increasing incidence and severity of mental health problems amongst international students, compounded by the significant gap that existed between the cultural beliefs and practices in their home and host countries (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011).

In literature published from January 1999 to January 2020, findings indicated that Chinese international students routinely reported increased levels of fear, stress, anxiety, depression and social problems, as well as decreased levels of general wellbeing while studying in Australia. Numerous factors may exacerbate the issues confronted by Chinese university students studying in Australia, including: language barriers; social, academic and financial difficulties; challenges associated with the different education systems of the two countries; and the students' own underuse of available mental health services (Jian et al., 2022).

That underuse was analysed as well by Lu et al. (2014), who also concentrated on Chinese international students in Australia. The authors noted that, although "Chinese-speaking international students are a high risk group for developing psychological distress, ... they tend to underuse mental health services" (p. 96). Moreover, the researchers identified several specific reasons for such underuse, including "costs or transportation concerns, limited knowledge of available services, time constraints, the perception that symptoms were not severe enough to warrant treatment, language difficulties and lack of knowledge of symptoms of psychological distress" (p. 96). Clearly, these barriers were very likely in turn to exacerbate individual students' experiences of mental health concerns.

Focusing specifically on the significantly negative impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of international students remaining in Australia during the pandemic (a central theme of this thesis), Carter and Francis (2022) identified specifically "loss of jobs and income, Covid-19 lockdown,

and restriction rules including international border closure, and[,] for many, an overnight shift to online education” (p. 10). They noted also that “mental health and well-being strongly correlate with an international student’s academic performance and general overseas experience”, and that “higher education institutions have [a central role] in providing mentally healthy needs-based teaching and learning spaces and places for international students” (p. 10).

Furthermore, and as a specific example of this link between mental health concerns and international students in Australia during Covid-19, in previous studies, the Mental Health Change Indicator Scale (MHCIS) was developed to use in assessing the impact of a negative event on mental health on Chinese international students in Australia. The instrument was then used to compare the reported impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of Chinese university students studying either in China ( $n = 734$ ) or in Australia ( $n = 108$ ). Perceived discrimination and social support were also evaluated as possible mediators of the relationship between country of residence (Australia vs China) and mental health impact. Results suggested that the 10-item MHCIS was unidimensional and psychometrically sound, and that the pandemic had a significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) more negative impact on the mental health of Chinese students studying in Australia than on those studying in China. Perceived discrimination was identified as a key mediating factor in this relationship (Zhao et al., 2022b).

Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett (2021) highlighted a different potential factor framing the experiences of international students in Australia. They contended that “the mental health of international students was declined before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in Australia”, but that “[t]he impact of the pandemic appears to have exacerbated this issue” (p. 58). Their research, which entailed an online survey with 135 respondents and semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, accentuated “the challenges students from highly socially

engaged (collectivistic) cultures face, when studying in individualistic environments like Australia amid the Covid-19 pandemic” (p. 58). Clearly, from that perspective identifying and seeking support for mental health challenges would take on an added dimension of complexity and distress.

Importantly, Parker et al. (2023) sought to attribute this association between mental health issues and international students in Australia directly to what they perceived as a longstanding and significant failure in higher education public policy, which in turn can be seen as a major element of the macro level analysis introduced in Chapter 1 and continued in this chapter. In particular, the authors asserted that “flaws in the [Australian] university system revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic” heightened awareness of “how the conditions created by neoliberal policies have limited universities’ capacity to respond to a crisis” (p. 125). Arising from their analysis, Parker et al. “call for a radical rethinking of the public sector university mission for the ultimate benefit of the Australian community” (p. 125) – and, I might add, for the even wider benefit of the international students seeking to contribute their membership of that community.

Before turning to the more specific literature related to the complex links between mental health issues and international doctoral students in Australia, I should note, as did Nurunnabi et al. (2020) in their widely ranging review of “Mental health and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic in higher education: Evidence from G20 countries”, that, in partial response to the concerns highlighted in this subsection, “Australia adopted The National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan in response to Covid-19. The plan focuses on mental health and well-being in the face of the pandemic” (p. 66). At the same time, the review authors concluded their comparison starkly: “Our analysis found that students’ health and wellbeing issues were not addressed in many G20 countries” (p. 66). As I elaborate at length in Chapter 5, my own experiences reflected a lack of attention being paid to the causes of my

mental health concerns. Moreover, those experiences resonated strongly with another synthesising finding by the review authors:

Several countries within the G20 have taken significant steps to support health and well-being issues for [international] university students; however, numerous countries are far behind in addressing this issue. Hence, government leaders of G20 countries, policymakers, and health providers should promptly take the necessary measures to regulate the outbreak, improve safety measures to decrease disease transmission, and administer [to] those who demand medical attention. (p. 60)

### ***2.5.3 Mental Health and International Doctoral Students in Australia***

This subsection focuses on the scholarly literature pertaining to the distinctive experiences and outcomes of the interplay between mental health issues and international doctoral students in Australia, a focus that I elaborate from my personal perspective as part of Chapter 5 to address the first research question framing this study. This literature also needs to be understood against the backdrop of the growing research attention being paid to the complex and impactful relationships between doctoral students and their supervisors, as part in turn of a wider analysis of doctoral students being located in equally complex and sometimes destructive networks of power (see for instance Machin et al., 2019; Mulligan et al., 2022).

Against that backdrop, it was noteworthy that Gunasekera et al. (2021) used their account of two female international doctoral students working with their shared male doctoral supervisor at an Australian university to emphasise the centrality of both psychological safety and emotional intelligence to their study success. This represents an important finding because psychological safety and emotional intelligence can be seen as constituting a substantial foundation of mental health and



wellbeing. They can also be perceived as being located on the cusp between the micro and macro levels of analysis that are a recurring motif throughout this thesis. For example, psychological safety is clearly an individual construct that is experienced and enacted in a socially generated shared space.

From a different perspective, Beasy et al. (2021) mobilised the highly evocative metaphor of “Drowning in the shallows” to report aspects of their research reporting the responses to a survey completed by 222 doctoral students at an Australian university, drawn from a population of whom about half were on-campus international students at that university. The researchers drew on Bronfenbrenner’s (1995) bioecological model to conceptualise the survey outcomes, which they clustered around three equally evocatively entitled themes: “Lack of time and money – micro system impacts” (p. 608); “Lack of developmental support from the institution – ecosystem level influences” (p. 609); and “Dehumanising process of candidature – macro level influences” (p. 610). Given this subsection’s focus on mental health and wellbeing, it was relevant that the authors stated starkly, “While downward political forces of completion and commodity add pressure to the environment, so too does the bubbling need of candidate wellbeing” (p. 615).

Recalling the discussion earlier in this chapter of different types and effects of international students’ agency, Xu (2021) (who like me used autoethnography to map the continuing contours of her multidimensional identity construction related to her experiences as a Chinese international doctoral student at an Australian university [Xu, 2022]) conducted a qualitative study of 10 Chinese female international doctoral students enrolled at six different Australian universities. She distilled three distinct forms of “agency in mobility” exhibited by these doctoral candidates: “agency as struggle and resistance, needs-response agency, and agency for becoming” (p. 761), which were enacted as the students navigated “different structures in the in-between space” (p. 761), which also

resonates with the focus in this study's conceptual framework on liminality, as outlined in the next chapter. Intriguingly, these were the same three types of student agency that Nguyen and Robertson (2022) discerned in their study of six Vietnamese doctoral students' experiences at an Australian university; these types originated in Tran and Vu's (2018) conceptualisation of international student agency in transnational mobility. Again, given the focus here on international doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing while studying in Australia, it was noteworthy that Xu (2021) highlighted a participant's explicit reference to mental health:

An overseas doctoral journey is very special. It is simple, monotonous, and stressful .... Don't hold anything back, go complaining when you feel need to, go looking for a solution whenever you come across a problem. Be proactive. There are many services on campus. Chinese students think it's shameful to accept mental health counselling. But I think just like we call catch a cold, mental issues are equally common. So, take the initiative to seek help. All problems can be resolved. (Yvonne [a pseudonym]). (p. 763)

Xu (2021) classified Yvonne's statement replicated here as an example of needs-response agency, and also as demonstrating a proactive, purposeful reaction to self-identified developing signs of mental health challenges.

Finally in this subsection, and again with several strong resonances with this thesis, Patel (2023) presented an autoethnographic account of her efforts to juggle being an international doctoral student at an Australian university, supervising her two children's remote schooling during the Covid-19 lockdown in Melbourne, Australia, working as an early childhood educator and "maintain[ing her] personal emotional-mental health challenges" (p. 59). Patel concluded the introduction to her book chapter with a heartfelt and poignant statement that aligns closely

with my own experiences and those of many other international on-campus doctoral students in Australia:

Finally, this chapter raises awareness about the fragile mental and emotional state of immigrant doctoral students, particularly those who have been separated from their families, are fighting depression or anxiety, and managing the grief of losing their loved ones. My story highlights the need for institutions to intervene and support the trajectories of immigrant doctoral students, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic disruptions. (p. 60)

More broadly, the three subsections in this section of this literature review – introduction to the mental health issue worldwide, mental health and international students in Australia, and mental health and international doctoral students in Australia – have demonstrated in combination the accuracy of the proposition related to this section posited in Table 2.1: international students' risks of mental ill-health were significantly exacerbated by Covid-19. This proposition is taken up again in Chapter 5 in relation specifically to my own autoethnographic experiences.

## **2.6 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a selective review of scholarly literature and statistical data related to international students in Australia. Each section in the chapter presented and demonstrated a specific proposition pertaining to that section.

After the chapter introduction in Section 2.1, Section 2.2 was the first of two sections directed at the macro level of analysis and focused on the phenomenon of international education and the Australian economy pre-Covid-19, accompanied by the proposition that international education made continuing and significant contributions to the Australian economy that were not always understood and valued fully. International education and the Australian economy during Covid-19 were explored in

Section 2.3, which also elaborated the proposition that Australian government policies devastated international education during Covid-19, when different policies could have yielded more sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes. Section 2.4 switched the focal view to the micro level of analysis, and investigated the experiences of international students in Australia, framed by the contention that international students' experiences in Australia demonstrate continuing ambivalence and reflect broader policy uncertainty. Finally, the complex links between mental health and international students (including international doctoral students) were elaborated in Section 2.5, which also demonstrated the assertion that international students' risks of mental ill-health were significantly exacerbated by Covid-19.

More broadly, this chapter has identified and explored several of the themes traversed in the existing and growing literature about international students in Australia. At the same time, it is clear that much more research needs to be conducted, and that there is certainly space for this thesis to contribute new understandings against the backdrop of current studies.

I turn now to elaborate the specific concepts assembled to constitute this study's conceptual framework. As in Chapter 1 and this chapter, those concepts are clustered around macro and micro levels of analysis.

## **Chapter 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3.1 Chapter Introduction**

To this point, I have identified the problem with which this thesis is concerned as being what international students, including doctoral students, faced in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The previous chapter explored the scholarly literature related to the multiple contributions that international students made and make to the Australian economy pre- and during Covid-19, the experiences of international students (including doctoral students) in Australia, and the complex links between mental health and international students (also including doctoral students) in Australia. While several noteworthy studies have been published, the chapter established a significant gap in current understandings of international on-campus students' experiences in Australia, including understanding the distinctive opportunities and challenges experienced by international doctoral students in Australia.

This chapter builds on the literature review presented in the preceding chapter by outlining the concepts assembled to constitute the study's conceptual framework, which was introduced briefly in Chapter 1. These concepts have been organised into two clusters (which were also introduced in Chapter 1 and elaborated in Chapter 2). At the macro level, I explore the intersection of university social responsibility (USR), corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer relationship management (CRM). At the micro level, I examine the connections among liminality, marginalisation and mental health as they apply to international doctoral students in Australia. The two research questions guiding the analysis of the materials gathered to address the study's identified research problem were informed by these six concepts across the macro and the micro levels.

The function of this chapter is to delineate the main elements in the thesis's conceptual framework, and in the process to suggest ways of conceptualising a healthier and more productive environment for international students in Australia, including doctoral students. In doing so, in Section 3.2, the chapter starts at the macro level by examining in turn USR, CSR and CRM. Then, in Section 3.3, I discuss liminality, marginalisation and mental health from the perspective of the micro level of the conceptual framework before elaborating the conceptual relationships between the macro and micro levels in Section 3.4. Finally, Section 3.5 presents the conclusion to the chapter.

### **3.2 Concepts at the Macro Level**

As was introduced in Chapter 1, and as is elaborated in the following chapter, as an autoethnographic study of my experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university during the Covid-19 pandemic, this thesis is articulated at the micro level of analysis, which conceptually is the focus of the next section in this chapter. At the same time, those experiences need to be understood against the backdrop of broader, more powerful, macro level forces and influences, which conceptually are the concern of this section of the chapter.

More specifically, this section considers in turn the three concepts making up the macro level of analysis that is mobilised in Chapter 6 to address the study's second research question: What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The following subsections explore each of the macrolevel concepts – USR, CSR and CRM – in turn, explaining the concept's identification, origins and development, applications and critiques. In combination, I contend that these three concepts constitute a rigorous and robust half of

the study's conceptual framework, complemented by the three micro level concepts mapped in the next section in this chapter.

### **3.2.1 University Social Responsibility (USR)**

The first of the three concepts composing the macro level dimension of this study's conceptual framework is USR. This is unsurprising, given that Chapter 6, which uses that macro level dimension to guide the chapter's response to the study's second research question articulated above, is directed at identifying system level alternatives to the current, highly negative government policies that led to the equally negative experiences of myself and many other international doctoral students in Australia that form the foundation of the study's first research question, as analysed in Chapter 5.

At a broader level, USR is about the need to strengthen the civic commitment and active citizenship of contemporary universities, recognising that such institutions have among the highest levels of cultural, financial and social capital, and are seen in some quarters as highly privileged. An early definition of the concept was as follows:

... a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development, (as cited by Vasilescu et al., 2010, p. 4178)

Some of the ideas underpinning this early definition were taken up in the literature review presented by Wigmore-Álvarez and Ruiz-Lozano (2012), who clustered their analysis of USR around eight themes: conceptual framework; strategic planning and USR; educating about USR; spreading USR; reporting USR; evaluating USR; barriers and accelerators; and case studies. These ideas were also usefully extended in Jorge and

Pena's (2017) subsequent comprehensive literature review of USR, which linked the concept's development with stakeholder theory, with Freeman (1984) defining stakeholder in that context as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (as cited by Jorge & Pena, 2017, p. 305). Intriguingly, the authors returned to stakeholders in their synthesis of the main findings of the literature that they analysed:

... in spite of the changes carried out in the university sector which have emphasised the social dimension of universities, there is still a long way to go on the subject of USR. This suggests a number of difficulties in incorporating social responsibility principles in the four main areas: education, research, management and community engagement .... To [remedy] this [situation], a multi-stakeholder approach has to be implemented where all stakeholders are involved. (pp. 315-316)

This crucial question of stakeholders in relation to USR was taken up also by Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes (2016), as follows:

The idea that Universities have stakeholders to attend [to] and to satisfy is directly related to the context of USR. But, who are their stakeholders? Broadly, university's stakeholders include entities with regulatory power, clients (students, parents, employers, etc.), employees (teaching staff, administrative personnel), competitors, donors, communities (teaching systems, chambers of commerce, among others), governmental organs, non-governmental regulators, financial intermediaries and, the various partnerships established, among others .... (p. 155)

This wide range and large number of distinctly differentiated stakeholders in universities' success (Sánchez-Hernández & Mainardes, 2016) align with the proposition outlined in the previous chapter that



universities contribute directly and indirectly to the economy (and also to the community and the society) influenced by each university. This identification of multiple and diverse stakeholders also highlights the mutual benefits and the shared interests between universities and those stakeholders, encapsulated in the aphorism, “We are all in this together”. Yet, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, at the time of Covid-19, the “We” in this aphorism moved unexpectedly from the almost universal “We” at a rhetorical level to the much more exclusive “We” at the policy and practice level when dealing with the effects of the pandemic. Certainly, I never felt part of the rhetorical “We” referenced earlier in this paragraph. This was despite the emphasis by Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes on the place of university students as stakeholders in USR:

... we also agree with the opinion that students represent a core group for HEI [higher education institutions] .... Although the identification of University stakeholders has been rare throughout the literature, earlier proposals ... and recent stakeholders['] lists ... confirm the longest standing supposition, such as the student being the main stakeholder. In our opinion, this fact strength[en]s the need to focus USR efforts on this group of stakeholders, something not usually carried out by universities' managers already. (p. 155)

In this way, USR has a strong moral foundation and is about an ethical approach, developing a sense of civil citizenship by encouraging the students and the academic staff to provide social services to their local community, or to promote ecological and environmental commitment to local and global sustainable development (Vasilescu et al., 2010). The world is facing a multitude of problems (e.g., economic, environmental and social), thus requiring a more active societal engagement of its different entities from all sectors of the economy (e.g., industrial, service, educational, private and public, and small and large institutions) to partake in solving these problems (Chkir et al., 2021).

Practically, to ensure an effective USR strategy implementation, USR aspects should be embedded in the university's mission statement and aligned to its organisational culture and structure to reinforce its execution (Vasilescu et al., 2010).

From this perspective, Giuffré and Ratto (2014) defined USR as the ability of the university to disseminate and implement a set of general principles and specific values, using four key processes - Management, Teaching, Research and Extension - through the provision of educational services and the transfer of knowledge following ethical principles, good governance, respect for the environment, social engagement and the promotion of values.

From a wider viewpoint, the conceptualisation of USR includes considering universities as one form of organisation in human society. In this regard, like business organisations, universities should go beyond the core functions of teaching, research and service (Lo et al., 2017), and voluntarily act beyond their legal requirements to promote the public good and environmental sustainability. Similarly, in a study of university sustainability practices, Velazquez et al. (2006) defined a sustainable university as:

... a higher educational institution, as a whole or as a part, that addresses, involves and promotes, on a regional or a global level, the minimization of negative environmental, economic, societal, and health effects generated in the use of their resources in order to fulfill its functions of teaching, research, outreach and partnership, and stewardship in ways to help society make the transition to sustainable life-styles. (p. 812)

In this regard, one approach to defining USR was to advocate integrating universities' sustainability practices and social responsibility to retain their students and to promote positive economic, societal and health effects. Hence, promoting USR within universities can enhance the

university's profitability and generate positive effects to fulfil its functions of teaching, research and service.

Another factor contributing to the importance of USR is the increasing number of university students globally (although the continuing impact of Covid-19 on that growth is currently uncertain). Across nations, the total number of students enrolled in higher education is forecast to more than double to 262 million by 2025, and this fast growing trend indicates that universities are becoming larger communities and that their related activities will have a correspondingly greater impact on society as a whole (Lo et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Rababah et al. (2021) conducted research to assess the USR levels at universities and its complementary factors in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Rababah et al. analysed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on universities' directions in the framework of their strategies. Rababah et al. also identified factors for enhancing USR's development in the BRICS countries and concluded that USR is playing a crucial role in the strategic planning of universities' activities. On this basis, USR must be included in those activities by improving university management creativity, effective communication with the public and stakeholders, the quality of the educational process and the development of universities' scientific work (Rababah et al., 2021). In addition, the university marketing department needs to deploy as well more resources to maximise student attraction and retention (Tapp et al., 2004). The global trend of marketising higher education led to increasing competition among universities for students (Latif et al., 2021a). With universities increasingly managed as businesses, such a perspective sees students being identified as consumers, and concepts such as "customer satisfaction" as now central to evaluations of a university's success (Latif et al., 2021b). USR is conceptualised in this study as a counternarrative to such a process of marketisation and commodification of knowledge and is accordingly considered crucial to

retaining universities' students and to guaranteeing students' continuity and sustainability in their studies. The students' sustainability in their studies will, in turn, facilitate the universities' fulfilment of their teaching, research and service obligations throughout their economic sustainability.

From the discussion in this subsection, USR is an important assessment criterion with which to assess the social orientation of universities (Rababah et al., 2021). At the same time, USR needs further development and better implementation in an effective way within universities, including in Australia, in order to bring the ideal of USR into practical reality for universities' multiple and diverse stakeholders.

### **3.2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

It is logical to explore CSR as the macro level concept after the preceding discussion of USR, given the strong resonances between the two notions. In that regard, it was noteworthy that Vasilescu et al. (2010) traced the genealogies of the two concepts and highlighted their theoretical convergences.

More broadly, and as I elaborate in this subsection, CSR is a complex and multidimensional concept that has been applied in multiple contexts. Consequently, its constituent elements and its practical significance continue to receive sustained attention in the scholarly literature. For instance, Latapí Agudelo et al. (2019) presented a very helpful historical overview of CSR, finding that:

... the understanding of corporate responsibility has evolved from being limited to the generation of profit to include a broader set of responsibilities to the latest belief that the main responsibility of companies should be the generation of shared value. The findings also indicate that[, ] as social expectations of corporate behaviour changed, so did the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility.

From a different perspective, Luque and Herrero-García (2019) identified 133 distinct concepts that they related to corporate social

irresponsibility (CSiR), as evidenced in transnational textile companies. By contrast, Ashrafi et al. (2020) focused on the theoretical and practical links between CSR and corporate responsibility, while Diez-Canamero et al. (2020) explored the increasing plethora of corporate sustainability systems (CSSs) arising from the connections between CSR and corporate sustainability, which they also associated with particular aspects of stakeholder theory. That same association was also elaborated by Dmytriiev et al. (2021), who posited that “stakeholder theory and CSR provide distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks with some overlap. The actual decision to choose a particular framework depends on the problem one wants to solve and the settings of that problem” (p. 1141). Relatedly, and referencing a theme that is taken up in the next paragraph, Marques et al. (2021) elaborated the association between CSR and the power of internal and external stakeholders in a local subsidiary. Significantly, Waldman et al. (2020) articulated some of the complexities linked with strategic leadership and CSR, another idea that is an important theme in this thesis. Intriguingly, given the centrality of this thesis’s focus on the global and local effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was notable that Mahmud et al. (2012) highlighted what they identified as the implications for comprehending CSR arising from business responses to Covid-19.

Against the backdrop of this substantial scholarly literature about CSR, indeed, CSR has become an increasingly important concept globally, and it has become part of the debate about competitiveness and sustainability in the globalisation context. In the European Union, for instance, the promotion of CSR also reflects the need to defend common values and to increase the sense of solidarity and cohesion (Vasilescu et al., 2010). In this way, CSR is not or should not be separated from business strategy and operations: it is about integrating social and environmental concerns into business strategy and operations; CSR should not be a voluntary concept, and a very important aspect of CSR is

how enterprises interact, ethically and proactively, with their internal and external stakeholders. In that regard, a primary goal of CSR is to satisfy a firm's various stakeholders, with stakeholders referring to different groups of people involved in the actions of a business, including employees, customers, suppliers, creditors, shareholders, competitors and the wider community.

Furthermore, managers should be aware of the role of the social and environmental activities of their firms, and of how activities relating to employees, products, community, diversity and the environment create market value for the organisation and other forms of value for society (Theodoulidis et al., 2017). Although there has been significant growth in organisations' literature on CSR, the internal stakeholders such as shareholders, employees and management, and the external stakeholders such as consumers (e.g., students in universities), are the focus of past and current research on this topic. Other external stakeholders such as communities and ecosystems are increasingly being addressed in the literature, but more research is needed (Font & Lynes, 2018).

"Doing well by doing good" is related to the CSR role for organisations and their sustainability. However, this mantra is not always necessary to enhance the value of a firm. Some firms make a greater contribution to CSR, while others make a lesser contribution. Nevertheless, the high ranking of CSR on research agendas is reflected in theoretical and managerial discussions that argue that "not only is doing good the right thing to do, but it also leads to doing better" (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). The most important factor is that CSR maintains a competitive environment while also "doing good" (Laszlo, 2008; Liang & Renneboog, 2017).

From a different perspective, little attention has been given to the conceptualisation of internationalisation and to how the innovation perspective can contribute to the challenge of deepening theoretical understanding in this area (Williams & Shaw, 2011). Williams and Shaw

(2011) synthesised five priorities in research pertaining to CSR that reflected some of these complexities and challenges: (1) internationalisation is a form of innovation and has its associated challenges; (2) new typologies can encompass corporations' innovations in ownership, leasing and franchising; (3) internationalisation needs superior knowledge; (4) evidence exists that firms are relatively more reliant on external knowledge sources; and (5) there is a focus on shaping and reshaping the conditions of production in terms of human capital, entrepreneurship and knowledge.

From the earliest CSR definitions, only Jones (1980) and Marsden (2001) referred to an obligation to implement CSR and articulated that it is not an optional add to an organisation (Thomas, 1980). The remaining 35 definitions from 1980 until 2008 (Dahlsrud, 2008b) did not refer to or include any obligation to enact CSR that needed to be followed by organisations. Although the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Barnett, 2004), (Rahman, 2011), the United Kingdom Government (Herrmann, 2004), Foran (2001), Maqbool and Zameer (2018), Lea (2002), the IBLF (Dahlsrud, 2008b), the Commission of the European Communities (Crane et al., 2013), CSRwire (Griffin & Sun, 2013) and Hopkins (2012) all referred in varied ways to the focus on respecting the organisations' employees and treating them well, CSR was still considered an optional extra to implement rather than a crucial part of the enterprise's fabric. However, treating well all employees, and respecting and caring about their health and wellbeing, are all obligations and commitments of organisations and must be regulated by the law.

More specifically in terms of definitions of CSR, CSR is a self-regulating business model that helps a company or an organisation (e.g., a university) to be socially accountable—to itself, its stakeholders and the public. As noted above, Dahlsrud (2008b) distilled 37 distinct designations of CSR; among the most appropriate to this study was Carroll's (1991) definition, which referred to the philanthropic, ethical, legal and economic

responsibilities of enterprises. However, that definition failed to mention environmental responsibilities, in addition to the obligation of implementing the CSR role in organisations. Thus, it is concluded that the confusion is not so much about how CSR is defined as about how CSR is socially constructed in a specific context (Dahlsrud, 2008a). Moreover, CSR's definitions are often biased towards specific interests, and thus prevent the development and implementations of the concept with its real role (Theodoulidis et al., 2017). Most organisations have currently linked stakeholders' interests with the value of CSR participation, which remains "optional".

In this thesis, a new definition to create an obligation to implement CSR in any organisation, including any university, is proposed that is intended to be of value in strengthening the previous 37 definitions. From this perspective, the new university strategic development will shift the win-win business approach to a newly created win-win-win business approach that will enhance the universities' support of communities as an organisation's obligations, and at the same time will generate significant funds for the education sector in both direct and indirect expenditures. In this regard, universities have a subsidiary CSR role included in their CSR roles (as outlined in the previous subsection). They must support international students while taking into consideration that the universities in Australia are funded competitively and must generate sustainable income. At the same time, while universities should support their international students by helping them to find appropriate jobs, international students can in turn inject their earnings in the universities' revenues (e.g., via tuition fees, etc.).

This subsection has demonstrated that, as one of three macro level concepts framing this study, CSR can be a source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage when used appropriately. In particular, firms can simultaneously enhance their competitiveness in the markets and advance the economic and social conditions in the



communities when adopting policies and practices aiming at creating shared value (Feng et al., 2017). Accordingly, CSR is positioned in this thesis as a crucial macro level concept that can contribute powerfully to the articulation of the alternative vision of Australian higher education, including the experiences of doctoral students, proposed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

### ***3.2.3 Customer Relationship Management (CRM)***

CRM is defined as a process of acquiring, retaining and partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the company and for the customer (Dewnarain et al., 2019). The success of the CRM strategy also hinges on the integration of the latest technology with a service orientation culture and on the ability of employees to deliver on operational procedures in the services industry. To establish and nourish a permanent relationship with organisations' clients can become the key to the organisations' survival. From that perspective, the actions of CRM can have significant effects on perceptions of the quality of the relationship, as well as on its consequences for loyalty, word of mouth, usage quantity and purchasing (or enrolments) intention (Oviedo-García et al., 2014).

As CRM quality is perceived by the organisation, and as customers' loyalty is influenced by CRM actions, organisations (or universities) must try to reinforce their actions in this area as they will have an impact on an improvement of the quality of CRM. However, it is true that, to be implemented, CRM actions must be supported by a strong technological foundation. Other CRM definitions advocate the importance of CRM in assisting firms to enhance the efficient and effective use of their marketing budgets by allocating marketing expenses to the most profitable customers (or students) (Rahimi & Kozak, 2016). Overall, by collecting and integrating customer information for personalising customer transactions, firms can exploit CRM for: improving their customers' relationships and satisfaction (Wongsansukcharoen et al.,

2015); identifying and retaining the most profitable customers and improving the profitability of less profitable customers; and increasing business performance such as customer lifetime value, customer satisfaction and retention, and business profits (Sigala, 2018).

A CRM gap may arise with the need for an innovative approach to look at big data in examining CRM. While it is evident that CRM brings both tangible and intangible benefits to companies, more studies are needed to explore the customer side of the relationship (Rahimi et al., 2017). Delivering superior customer value has become an ongoing concern in building and sustaining competitive advantage by driving the performance of CRM. As many researchers have suggested, firms should reorient their operations towards the creation and delivery of superior customer value if they are to improve their CRM performance (Wang et al., 2004).

Turning to this study's focus on universities and their link with CRM, Latif (2021) referred to the global trend to marketise higher education as businesses, whereby students are beginning to be identified as consumers, so that "customer" satisfaction is now central to evaluations of a university's success. In view of Latif's reference to students in universities being considered as customers, universities must implement more effective CRM strategies in order to gain and retain students' satisfaction and loyalty. From that perspective, universities must treat international students as customers, because of the potential revenues that they generate for those universities.

Furthermore, it is crucial for universities to adapt their CRM strategies and to create a student-oriented environment by constantly adapting their processes in accordance with students' satisfaction indicators (Hrnjic, 2016). If we consider student satisfaction in universities as being equal to customer satisfaction in business organisations, universities must enhance students' loyalty and retention. For instance, between 2015 and 2020 in the electronic research

databases of the scientific literature, Kastrati (2021) identified 92 relevant studies out of 612 that were initially found related to the sentiment analysis of students' feedback in learning platform environments. The mapping results showed that, despite the identified challenges, the field is rapidly growing, especially regarding the application of deep learning. Kastrati identified various aspects that need to be considered in order to contribute to the maturity of research and development in the field.

The application of sentiment analysis ranges from business and marketing to politics and health to public action. Sentiment analysis is not limited to one application, but instead it provides a potentially vast application in different areas to assist in decision-making, and it can also be applied to global events such as a spectacle, activity, sport or disaster, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, that is occurring in the world (Drus & Khalid, 2019). Such a CRM methodology as sentiment analysis can be used beneficially in Australian universities to assess students' satisfaction and emotional behaviour during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. By assessing these behaviours professionally, Australian universities can proceed to the best strategic planning for students' scholarships, internships and employability. In that regard, Heller (2022) argued that universities in Australia need to collaborate rather than compete (Heller, 2022), in order to realise the power of collaboration towards supporting their student, especially low income students.

Considering further these connections between CRM and Australian universities, international graduates' employability in Australia has been shown to be determined by various factors. Holding permanent residence could, according to Blackmore et al. (2017), ease graduates' employment concerns, and it can also minimise complicated administrative sponsorship procedures for employers. High expectations and stereotyped attitudes of Australian employers were also found to impact negatively on job opportunities for international graduates (Pham et al., 2019). The emotional impact of this situation on the international students was

driving the marginalisation of their needs and voices, prompting an unwillingness to exercise the rights and protections established for them by the country of education because of how they felt about being discriminated against in everyday life (Hayes, 2018).

CRM applications are likely to influence customer satisfaction for at least three reasons. Firstly, by accumulating information across customer interactions and processing this information to discover hidden patterns, CRM applications help firms to customise their offerings to suit the individual tastes of their customers. Customised offerings enhance the perceived quality of products and services from a customer's viewpoint. Because perceived quality is a determinant of customer satisfaction, it follows that CRM applications indirectly affect customer satisfaction through their effect on perceived quality. Secondly, in addition to enhancing the perceived quality of the offering, CRM applications enable firms to improve the reliability of consumption experiences by facilitating the timely, accurate processing of customer orders and requests and the ongoing management of customer accounts (Mithas et al., 2005). Both an improved ability to customise and a reduced variability of the consumption experience enhance perceived quality, which in turn positively affects customer satisfaction. Thirdly, CRM applications also help firms to manage customer relationships more effectively across the stages of relationship initiation, maintenance and termination (Reinartz et al., 2004). In turn, effective management of CRM is the key to managing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Because universities' students can be considered as customers at universities (Latif et al., 2021b), we can link the three reasons why CRM applications influence customer satisfaction highlighted in the preceding paragraph directly with students' experiences of satisfaction with Australian universities. Firstly, while adhering to confidentiality and privacy considerations, universities must analyse students' hidden patterns through students' complaints to their schools, social media blogs,

progress reports, wellness and self-disclosed medical reports and crucially the financial status of each student. Hence, customised offers should be the best tool to enhance the students' satisfaction in order to satisfy their needs. For example, by assessing the medical and financial status of a student, the university can collaborate to satisfy any urgent appeal need (e.g., reduced study load, scholarship for tuition, annual leave of absence, etc.) by filling any identified gaps of communication between their students and them, and hence deduct any financial support from the allocated Australian Federal or State Government budget. This budget can be extracted as well as a portion of the pre-paid tuition fees for students and allocate emergency funds to support students in the case of pandemics.

Secondly, with ongoing management of the students' satisfaction at Australian universities, this satisfaction in turn will enhance the students' continuity in their studies, help them to progress to find appropriate jobs and hence impact positively on the education sector and the community. Students' satisfaction will lead to students' loyalty, and they will be more productive in the Australian workforce.

In this regard, in September 2022, the current Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese lifted the annual permanent migration intake to 195,000 places in its 2022-23 migration program, opening doors to an extra 35,000 migrants to plug the country's pressing skills shortages and to reduce reliance on temporary workers. Before Covid-19 hit in 2020, the then Morrison government capped the total intake at 160,000 a year, but migration dropped into net negative territory in the two years during the pandemic (2020-2022), leading to a cumulative loss of 600,000 temporary visa holders in Australia (<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/punjabi/en/podcast-episode/faster-permanent-residency-for-skilled-migrants-and-incentives-for-international-students-in-2023/quinnk8xa>). Hence, international students can fill the gap in the shortage of skilled workers in Australia, while

having more flexibility to gain permanent residence in case they are happy to stay longer and to have positive learning and life experiences in this country.

Thirdly, CRM can manage effectively across the stages of relationship initiation and termination to enhance the prospect that international students are satisfied and do not face any liminality, marginalisation or mental health concerns (concepts elaborated in the next section of this chapter) during their temporary stay in Australia.

In this context, the current Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (2022) said in relation to migrants and international students in a press conference at the Jobs and Skills Summit in September 2022: "It makes no sense to bring people in, have them for a few years, then get a new cohort in to adapt to the Australian work environment" (Australian Government, The Treasury, 2022). Moreover, CRM is a powerful factor for building a strong economy, by assessing the customers' and students' satisfaction in both organisations and universities. Effective management of CRM can detect both students' satisfaction and loyalty at Australian universities, mediate and collaborate with government strategies by sharing sentiments analysis of their students and include productive strategies in the long term for both the higher education sector in Australia and the Federal Government's planning.

More broadly in relation to CRM, clear national policy now exists in Australia regarding economic recovery from the effects of Covid-19. Personal strengths and expression of personal values with regard to recovery are closely related to the development of meaning, purpose and a stable sense of self, resulting in a sense of wellbeing (Oades & Anderson, 2012). Oades and Anderson (2012) described a CRM collaborative recovery model, with its emphasis on strengths and values, that drew on the emerging evidence based on positive psychology. From this perspective, at both national and institutional levels, CRM strategies can be effective in harnessing personal recovery and linking it with

national and even international recovery, provided that appropriate leadership and oversight are exercised. This first main section in this chapter has identified and elaborated the three concepts – USR, CSR and CRM – making up the macro level of this study’s conceptual framework. This analysis has included providing definitions where possible (while noting the complex character of each concept that resists easy definition), as well as including diverse applications of each concept and also how in some cases it has evolved over time. These concepts have also been linked with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which in some ways have placed additional strains on the concepts but which in other ways have generated opportunities for the concepts to develop new dimensions and possibilities. Many of these ideas are revisited and taken further in Chapter 6’s analysis of data to address the study’s second research question.

### **3.3 Concepts at the Micro Level**

In contrast with the macro level concepts of USR, CSR and CRM that were outlined in the previous section of this chapter and that inform the data analysis to address Research Question 2 in Chapter 6 of this thesis, I turn now to discuss the three concepts – liminality, marginalisation and mental health – that constitute the micro level of the study’s conceptual framework, and that also frame the data analysis deployed in Chapter 5 to respond to Research Question 1. While these two sets of concepts are understood to operate at different analytical levels, a major assumption is that the two levels function with close reference to each other, that the interplay between them is a crucial element of the thesis and that in many ways I am more interested in their interdependence than in their separation.

#### **3.3.1 *Liminality***

As I elaborate below, liminality emerged as the first of the three micro level concepts in this study’s conceptual framework. This

emergence related to my status as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university. This status positioned me in a liminal space in several respects: between my native country and my new host country; between fully fledged academics and undergraduate students; between my university and the local community; and between having the cultural capital to be accepted into a program of study at the university's highest level of qualifications and lacking the cultural capital needed to be considered eligible for basic employment. These ideas are explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Against this backdrop, the definition of liminality incorporates instabilities in the social context, an ongoing ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, a lack of resolution (or aggregation) and the substitutability of the liminal. Therefore, liminality can be understood in the anthropological sense to be a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed (Beech, 2011). Even at the outset, from this perspective liminality can be seen as creating possibilities for new beginnings and unexpected trajectories arising from this process of identity reconstruction. At the same time, if external circumstances and system level policies are not favourable, liminality can lead quickly to experiences of sustained marginalisation (the topic of the next subsection in this section).

The origins of liminality as a powerful analytical tool are often associated with research about small-scale rituals conducted by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who, according to Neumann (2012), "went from pre-liminality to liminality – a condition that his greatest follower, the symbolic interactionist anthropologist Victor Turner [,] characterised as existing betwixt and between socially recognised positions", and who "made it his life to deal with the uncertainties and the danger than any social order ascribes to those who are between categories". (p. 473)

The study of liminality is a work of potential marginality and out-of-the-ordinary experiences, and as such might be expected to have its own



effects on authors who choose to immerse themselves in the effort to understand it (Martínez, 2015). Varieties of liminality illustrated the growing international attention being paid to this approach, by aiming to reverse the under-utilisation of liminality and to explore its applicability to various cases of social transformation (Thomassen, 2016, p. 222).

Helpfully in this regard, Horvath et al. (2015) distilled contemporary understanding of liminality in a way that highlighted its political dimension, which resonates strongly with my autoethnographic account in Chapter 5 of my experiences of liminality:

Originally referring to the ubiquitous rites of passage as a category of cultural experience, liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes .... The central idea of the book is that liminal conditions of irrationality are situations to be studied in their own right. Lived experience transforms human beings – and the larger social circles in which they partake – cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures. (p. 2)

In other words, from the perspective of this study's conceptual framework, liminality functions authentically as a micro level concept that helps to explain individual actions and emotions, while also contributing powerfully to the macro level analysis of the broader structures that frame and influence those actions and emotions. Furthermore, as Horvath et al. (2015) elaborated, liminality functions at the intersection between cultural life and political activity, and is thus very well-suited to this thesis's focus on the experiences of an individual international on-campus doctoral student at a time of political instability and policy uncertainty:

As a fundamental human experience, liminality transmits cultural practices, codes, rituals, and meanings-in-between aggregate

structures and uncertain outcomes. As a methodological tool it is well placed to overcome disciplinary boundaries, which often direct attention to specific structures or sectors of society. Its capacity to provide explanatory and interpretative accounts of seemingly unstructured situations provides opportunity to link experience-based and culture-oriented approaches to contemporary political problems, and to undertake comparisons across historical periods. From a perspective of liminality, the cultural dimension of human experience is not an obstacle to a more rational and organized world but could be creative in transforming the social world. (p. 3)

Thomassen (2016) charted a unique path to position liminality as a key concept within social theory at large. Liminality belongs to rites of passage, understood also quite concretely as territorial-emotional crossings of boundaries. Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction (Thomassen, 2016). Similarly highlighting this capacity of liminality to mobilise fluidity and mobility to facilitate personal and collective change, Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) depicted liminality as “a process that brings forward the symbolic and invites recombination, [and] as a cultural explanation of cultural change, to complement prevailing political or social explanations”, and hence as a “type of intentional cultural change” (p. 522).

Turning to the connection between liminality and the focus of this study, given the location of my research within the business and management scholarly fields, I was encouraged that Söderlund and Borg (2018) recognised liminality as “a concept receiving increased attention in management and organization studies and gaining prominence because of its capacity to capture the interstitial and temporary elements of organizing and work” (p. 880), a recognition that has particular resonance with my situation, as outlined in Chapter 5. Similarly, although Raineri’s

(2015) research with two fellow doctoral students at a Canadian university was not focused on international education per se, it was noteworthy that it was located in the accounting discipline, which resonates with my location in business and management studies, and also that it drew on the concept of liminality in its analysis. More specifically, Raineri asserted that:

A full (as opposed to incomplete) liminal experience is at once constraining and empowering, being sustained through a dialectic movement that requires the learning of comprehensive knowledge and the capacity to concretely act on it with imagination and creativity, in one word, mastery. (p. 100)

Once again, the double-sided and potential ambivalent character of liminality was being emphasised: its capacity to empower and transform, and at the same time its potential for constraint and for contributing to marginalisation.

A different but complementary interpretation of liminality was presented by Phan (2022), who included in her poetic critical autoethnographic account of her experiences as a Vietnamese doctoral student in New Zealand the fact that she was unable to leave Vietnam owing to Covid-19 travel restrictions. She attested to a sense of “disorientation [that had] led to a feeling of being in a liminal space”, which she then portrayed both evocatively and poignantly (Phan, 2022):

### **In a liminal space**

Will the *me* be swept away

Like dust in the wind?

When I return, my friends will no longer be there

The office will not be the same

As I won't hear their keyboards clicking

As I won't see their name tags

And I won't find our cards

And we will no longer laugh  
In the kitchen, every lunch time  
When I return, the acculturation process has to be restarted  
And I have to re-learn to drive on the left  
And again I face the fear of driving in a foreign country  
Because just when I started to get used to it  
I left  
My skills eroded, as much as my confidence  
after over a year living offshore  
When I return, I both resume and start a new  
It's both coming *back*, and coming *to*  
It's both to reconnect, and renew the connection  
What's lying ahead, I'm not sure. (p. 71)

Furthermore, and at a broader experiential level, in Australia, owing to their liminal and transient status, their consequent inability to vote and their framing as consumers instead of citizens, international students' needs are often assigned a low priority amongst policy-makers (Hurem et al., 2021). In that regard, drawing on survey fieldwork conducted among international students in the private rental sector in Sydney and Melbourne in Australia during 2019, Wilson et al. (2022) noted that hardships had been experienced by international students, who reported financial stress (Wilson et al., 2022).

Similarly, in a qualitative, narrative study, Keefer (2015) explored doctoral liminality amongst 23 participants from five countries and 19 different disciplines. Findings cut across the diversity of the participants, with their liminal experiences comprising a sense of isolation, lack of confidence and impostor syndrome, and research misalignment. Periods of liminality were rarely discussed, even after long periods of time.

Importantly, and by contrast, and also in keeping with the resistance of liminality to being reduced to either uniformly positive

experiences or alternatively to wholly negative experiences, Kim and Cho (2022) reported on their collaborative autoethnographic study as South Korean doctoral students engaged in transnational career transitions during 2019–2021. Although they certainly encountered significant challenges in their journeys, they sought to “reframe[e their] intersectional and liminal identities in a liberating way” (p. 50).

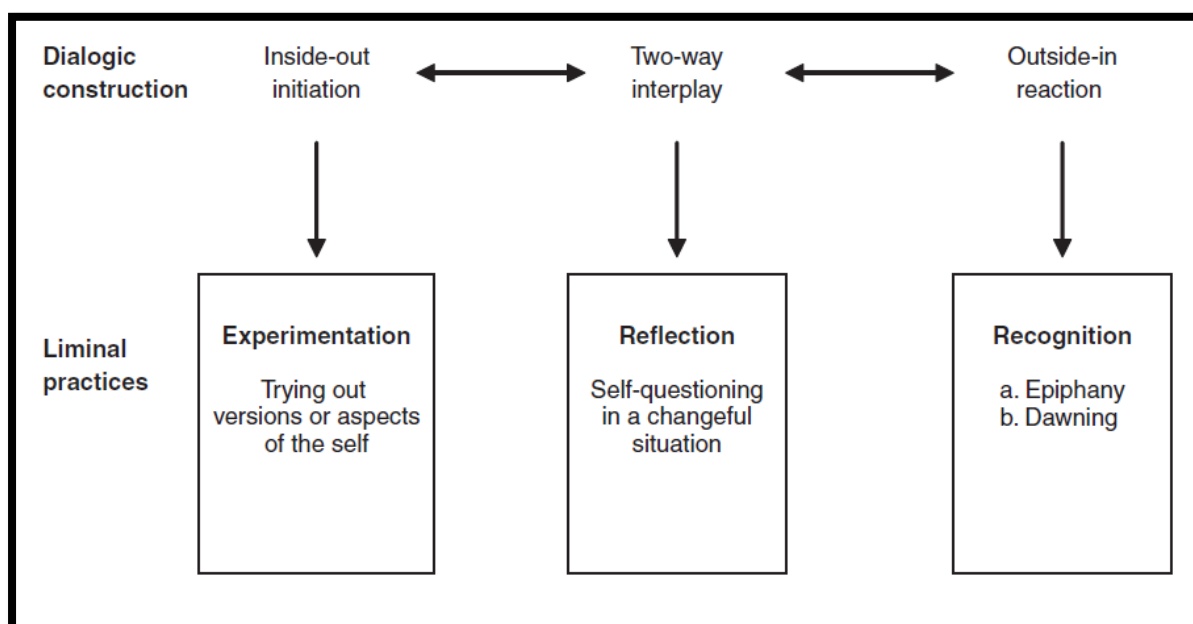
Liminality in this context of analysing the experiences of international doctoral students refers to the in-between period where one is no longer who one was previously existed, nor has yet developed into the independent researcher or expert practitioner. Doctoral liminality can be an experiment in uncertainty, confusion and lack of confidence, and, while some studies link this with doctoral conceptual or process thresholds, such as “identity construction, rites of passage, tensions and resolutions” (Wisker et al., 2010, p. 16), limited research focuses directly on this experience of doctoral liminality itself (Keefer, 2015).

As one example of applying the concept of liminality to my situation (something that I elaborate in Chapter 5), Figure 3.1 presents a flow chart of the liminality process, informed by this account by Beech (2011):

Liminality in identity work can be constituted by one or more of these practices: experimentation, in which the liminar constructs and projects an identity; reflection, in which the liminar considers the views of others and questions the self; and recognition, in which the liminar reacts to an identity that is projected onto them. (p.290)

**Figure 3.1**

*Liminal Identity Work*



*Note.* Source: Reprinted from Beech (2011, p. 290).

From the perspective of Figure 3.1, epiphany for the doctoral student starts by self-questioning and self-change, along with reacting to external influences and perceptions, and it is considered the most crucial and transitional phase of liminality. Once doctoral international students face any forms of liminality, they start to form experiences from these practices and reflect by self-questioning on the changing situation. For example, I discuss in Chapter 5 of this thesis how I faced liminality during my PhD journey in Australia, and how I reflected on self by asking, “Am I in Australia to work as a gig worker, or can I aspire to appropriate academic work or an executive managerial level?” Once I reached the “epiphany” (Beech, 2011, p. 290) phase, I found it the most crucial and critical as otherwise it was too easy to transform the personality to a negative one instead. Before drawing conclusions and devising solutions, we need to work on self dramatically in order to avoid mental health issues that compromise people’s qualifications and orientation. Hence, it is possible to benefit from liminality in a constructive way, but it is very

difficult to do so. This is because it is a default behaviour to reflect negatively after facing any form of liminality, and consequently to shift this experience to a constructively oriented focus to perform.

### **3.3.2 Marginalisation**

I noted in the preceding subsection in this section about micro level concepts in this study's conceptual framework that liminality is inherently neither positive nor negative, and that its essential fluidity and instability can be associated with productive and transformative life and learning experiences. At the same time, the preceding subsection also highlighted that liminality can readily shade into negative and unproductive experiences, particularly in the absence of systemic support and viable pathways out of the situation of liminality. In such circumstances, liminality can take on the reality of individual and collective marginalisation.

It is appropriate to note at the outset of this subsection, in agreement with Danaher et al. (2013) that "marginalization emerges as a highly complex and diverse concept and phenomenon, and [that] the relationship between education research and marginalization is equally contentious and multifaceted" (p. 1). Furthermore, I find myself in broad agreement with Danaher et al. regarding the challenge of defining and characterising marginalisation:

... a useful distillation was provided by Schiffer and Schatz (2008): 'Marginalisation describes the position of individuals, groups or populations outside of "mainstream society", living at the margins of those in the centre of power, of cultural dominance and economical and social welfare" (p. 6). This characterization highlights simultaneously the material and theoretical dimensions of marginalization: material because of the practical consequences of having reduced access to power and welfare, and theoretical

because of being conceptualized as deviating from 'mainstream society' and 'the centre'. (p. 6)

Taking this definitional discussion further, Mulligan (2020) highlighted in her book about specific form of marginalisation and attendant loss significant concerns about rates of suicide ideation and enactment, as well as other kinds of disconnection and separation, among older men in Australia. Mulligan analysed both qualitative and quantitative data to articulate many of the nuances and subtleties of the participants' varied experiences of loss and marginalisation derived from ageing and ageism, in the process constructing a rigorous research account that also resonated expressively and memorably with the reader (Mulligan, 2020).

The scholarly literature has drawn our attention to diverse forms of marginalisation and international students. For instance, Tavares (2021) presented a case study of five international students at a Canadian university, and concluded that:

... in spite of the university's long-standing commitment to aspects of EDI [equity, diversity and inclusion], international students felt excluded and othered in the community. Their experiences pointed to a lack of intercultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of the superficially multicultural community, a lack of institution-led initiatives to include the students through socialisation with peers, and the limited internationalisation of the curriculum. (p. 1)

With a strong resonance with the argument advanced in this thesis, the author concluded "with a call for universities to recognise international students as a marginalised group in their EDI efforts and, potentially, address structural issues that internationalisation frameworks have neglected" (Tavares, 2021, p. 1). Similarly, Lee and Rice (2007) concluded after interviewing a sample of 24 international students from 15 countries studying in the United States that international students



encountered a range of difficulties ranging from perceptions of unfairness and inhospitality to cultural intolerance and confrontation.

Utilising the conceptual framework of neo-racism to explain many of the students' experiences, the researchers' findings demonstrated that not all of the issues that international students faced can be problematised as matters of adjustment, as much research does, but that some of the more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society. Neo-racism emphasises cultural differences as a basis of discrimination that appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation. The aim was to stimulate the discussion of international students' concerns as an important step in enhancing their experiences and in ensuring their continued enrolment in United States universities.

From this perspective, neo-racism is called "discrimination" and is mostly attributed to skin colour as well as to culture, national origin and relationships between countries (Lee, 2007). Furthermore, Lee (2017), in another research project based in South Korea, compared the experiences of international students from within and outside the Asian region, and then examined Chinese international students' perceptions of discrimination as a form of marginalisation. Utilising the concept of neo-nationalism, survey findings revealed that Asian students reported greater difficulties and unfair treatment compared with students coming from Europe, North America and other regions. The interviews further revealed anti-Chinese sentiments resulting in verbal aggression, challenges in securing housing and discriminatory employment practices (Lee et al., 2017). It would be instructive to compare these findings of Chinese international students being marginalised in a pre-Covid-19 context with equivalent outcomes now that international travel is resuming after the imposition of global travel restrictions during the pandemic.

Moreover, neo-racism assessments can play a crucial role in avoiding both negative liminality and marginalisation for international

students. From that perspective, it is important to mobilise and monitor appropriate systems in Australian universities to ensure international students' continued enrolments at their respective universities.

In Australia, Covid-19 impacted dramatically on the delivery and implementation of university courses globally. These impacts had a disproportionate impact on communities already marginalised, as firmly established structural inequalities resulted in those most vulnerable bearing the brunt of economic, physical and emotional costs. This was partly because the university sector moved to slash operational costs in response to the loss in international student revenue. While the international student community suffered increased social vulnerability owing to the impacts of Covid-19, market-driven government rhetoric continued to promote the international students' market as a desired income stream. This created significant ethical and moral tensions as educators were exposed to the front-line realities of student marginalisation and inequality. Against that backdrop, Saxton (2021) drew from core social work concepts of social justice and human rights to construct critical narratives that reflected on the experiences of a social work academic teaching in the Covid-19 education context. The author sought to consider the diverse roles and responsibilities of government, universities and global citizens in response to the ethical dilemmas that underlie the modern Australian higher education sector.

More broadly with regard to circumstances arising from Covid-19 that contributed to the continuing marginalisation of international students in Australia, another study in Australia by the University of Melbourne predicted revenue losses of 38 Australian universities to 2024, as a result of the decrease in overseas student revenues linked to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It was clearly demonstrated that the universities faced serious challenges with varying degrees of financial management risk. Seven universities were placed in the highest financial

management risk category: Monash, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), University of Technology Sydney, La Trobe, Central Queensland, Southern Cross and Canberra universities. Another 13 universities were assessed as facing medium financial management risk. The remaining 18 universities, just under half of the total sector institutions, were categorised as facing management risks that were of lower severity. The nature of the risk varied according to the relative reliance on international fee revenue and the underlying financial resilience of individual institutions (Marshman & Larkins, 2020).

More broadly still, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the global international education sector has been fraught with multiple, intensifying stressors that have severely affected international students' lives and study. Host government policies related to international education can make a critical difference for this vulnerable population during the pandemic. Australia's crisis response policies during the pandemic have been closely tracked and vigorously discussed amongst Chinese international students. A previous study examined the extent to which Australia's crisis responses addressed the needs of international students during the pandemic, and how these policies impacted on Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions of studying in Australia. Qi and Ma (2021) conducted their research through interviews with Chinese international students, parents and migration agents, a virtual ethnography on WeChat and analysis of Australia's policy responses. Participants' experiences and views of Australia's crisis responses in the four areas of financing, third-country transit, visas and immigration, and pandemic management considered the then Australian Federal Government's crisis response to international education during Covid-19 as "offloading responsibilities" (p. 95) or as 'passing the buck' to other parties such as state and territory governments in Australia (Qi & Ma, 2021, p. 95). These findings certainly

indicated a strong sense of marginalisation felt by the students affected by these policies.

Furthermore, the Australian Federal Government level international student policies during the global crisis of Covid-19 extended to steering international students to quarantine in third countries before entry to Australia; excluding international students from the social security measures of JobKeeper payments and Jobseeker subsidies; relaxing student visa holders' work restrictions but only for those filling labour shortages in essential industries with higher health risks; and slashing skilled immigration quotas in order to prioritise business investment and global talent immigration (Qi & Ma, 2021). Unfortunately, all these issues and the poor performance of the then Australian government's performance created a significantly negative experience for myself and my family that I explore in greater detail in Chapter 5. These policy decisions also exacerbated the already existing marginalisation experienced by many other international students in Australia.

Finally, in view of the concepts outlined above at the macro level of this study's conceptual framework, marginalisation is not a disease or a psychological disorder. Instead, marginalisation is a cumulative result of poor management performance, neo-racism or discrimination, a lack of CRM systems at Australian universities, and a lack of USR and of CSR contributions in the Australian communities. Before thinking to provide any medications or wellness sessions to international students in Australia, it is recommended firstly to address these systemic issues and to work on viable solutions that can benefit from the learnings arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

### ***3.3.3 Mental Health***

The third and final micro-level concept in this study's conceptual framework is mental health. Like liminality and marginalisation, mental health is a highly complex and multifaceted concept that does not lend

itself to a single definition or to straightforward characterisation. For instance, it is important to avoid defining mental health too simplistically as the simple absence of mental illness (and vice versa). It is also crucial to avoid becoming entangled in the significant stigma attached to discussions of mental health and illness, and to retain an appropriately measured approach to analysing such discussions.

In this regard, Leighton and Dogra (2017) reported that "Ironically, referring to mental illness in terms of mental health originated in the 1960s in an attempt to reduce stigma ... " (p. 8), and they noted as well that "There is no widely agreed consensus on these terms and their use. Mental health and mental illness can be perceived as two separate, yet related [,] issues" (p. 2). Similarly, while the authors referred to the World Health Organization's (2000, 2005) definition of positive mental health, they considered that "such a definition is incomplete as individuals do not exist in isolation, but are influenced by, and influence, their social and physical environments. Furthermore, people will have their own individual interpretations of what a *good life* is" (p. 8). Leighton and Dogra were more approving of the definition of mental health provided by Rowling et al. (2002):

... [the] capacity of individuals and groups to interact with one another and the environment in ways that promote subjective wellbeing, the optimal development and use of cognitive, affective and relational abilities, [and] the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice. (p. 9)

Moreover, and crucially, Leighton and Dogra (2017) emphasised that:

... neither physical nor mental health exist[s] separately – mental, physical and social functioning are interdependent .... Furthermore, all health issues need to be considered within a cultural and developmental contexts .... The quality of a person's mental health is influenced by idiosyncratic factors and experiences, their family

relationships and circumstances and the wider community in which they live .... Additionally, each culture influences people's understanding of, and attitudes towards, mental health issues. However, a culture-specific approach to understanding and improving mental health can be unhelpful if it assumes homogeneity within cultures and ignores individual differences .... Culture is only one, albeit important, factor that influences individuals' beliefs and actions .... Interaction between different factors may lead to different outcomes for different individuals. (p. 9)

Finally, from the definitional perspective, Leighton and Dogra (2017) acknowledged that "It can be argued that the above approaches are rooted in [W]estern perspectives" (p. 9). This was a timely reminder of both the strengths and the potential limitations of conceptualising mental health and mental illness through a culturalist lens.

All of this highlights that mental health is a highly contested and contentious concept, as well as being contextualised and nuanced. Mental health is experienced by micro level individuals living in complex networks of relationships with other people and also with their mediated environments, and also in macro level structures generated by global and historical forces over which they have very little, if any, control. From this sociocultural and psychoecological perspective, challenges to mental health can certainly be exacerbated by moving from one country to another, such as is the case with international students. From this same perspective, it is vital to acknowledge individuals' agency and capacity while avoiding positioning them as being 'at fault' and 'to blame' if what are fundamentally system level failures exercise a negative and highly stressful impact on their lives and their wellbeing, as was the case for many international students in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Turning to this specific issue of mental health and international students, this topic is of longstanding concern in the scholarly literature. For instance, Mori (2000) posited that "the demand for cultural

adjustments” experienced by international students on college campuses in the United States “frequently place [those] students at greater risk for various psychological problems than are students in general”. At the same time, Mori reported these students’ “notable underutilization of existing counselling services”, and advocated “ways to provide more culturally sensitive services” (p. 137).

Similarly, Bradley (2000) conducted research that posed identical questions to international and domestic or local students, and noted that: International students voiced experience of a range of economic, social and academic pressures which appear to be different in degree and often in kind from those experienced by ‘home’ students. These factors in extreme cases may trigger and/or exacerbate mental health problems (p. 417).

Bradley also recorded “the difficulties academic staff experience when responding to students with mental health problems”. (p. 417)

Relatedly, Sawir et al. (2008) differentiated cultural loneliness as a distinctive form of loneliness, triggered by the absence of the preferred or familiar cultural and/or linguistic environment, that functioned among international students in addition to the two types of loneliness identified by Weiss (1975) that students in general experience and that are at times exacerbated by the students’ experiences in institutional sites: personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families; and social loneliness because of the loss of networks (Weiss, 1975).

Likewise, Graycar (2010) recorded several pragmatic considerations that potentially affected the mental health of international students in Australia. These factors included gaining appropriate health care, given the need to have private health insurance coverage. Additionally, poorer international students sometimes lived in neighbourhoods with a higher crime rate that reduced their sense of safety for their families and themselves. Similarly, many poorer international students have to work, and tend to work in casual jobs that are often high risk and night jobs,

such as working in fast food outlets and taxi driving. Feeling unsafe because of the obligation to earn their living, international students reported that their mental health was compromised because they felt undervalued and forgotten.

More specifically still in terms of mental health and international doctoral students, it is useful to note that Berry et al. (2020) developed a conceptual model of doctoral researchers' mental health risk and protective factors: "The model positions mental health as reflecting dynamic balance across key tensions characterising the doctoral experience (chaos–cosmos, product–person, agency–acceptance, social–individual, safety–authenticity) within core experiential domains[:] the doctoral researcher, the supervisory relationship, and the system". Concerningly, the authors reported that "International status produces additional financial, socio-cultural and bureaucratic adversity that increased the risk of mental health problems", and poignantly they cited a focus group statement gleaned from their research: "The pressure on international students, apart from even the normal PhD requirements and policy ... that alone will crush someone".

These mental health concerns of international students in general, and of international doctoral students specifically, need to be understood against the backdrop of the former Australian Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic as a whole. From that perspective, Grattan (2020) argued that the then Australian Government's response to the mental health needs of the Australian population at large had been slower than their response to providing economic packages for people who had become unemployed owing to the pandemic's outbreak. In late March 2020, the Federal Government announced an AUD 1 billion package for telehealth, crisis support and suicide prevention telephone services, domestic violence support and mental health services (<https://theconversation.com/all-australians-will-be-able-to-access-telehealth-under-new-1-1-billion-coronavirus-program-134987>). In



addition, what was also often less helpful in terms of Australians' mental health were the sometimes inconsistent or contradictory messages between officials (government and health), and between Federal and State/Territory Governments, about Covid-19 restrictions, especially regarding rules around attending schools and social gatherings. This confusion was compounded because different Australian States and Territories had different rules and restrictions. For example, the state of Victoria maintained its hard line approach to lockdown laws throughout May 2020, while New South Wales, with a higher overall rate of disease contraction from Covid-19, relaxed restrictions around students attending school (Berger & Reupert, 2020).

This subsection has highlighted how complex and contextualised mental health and mental illness are in relation to international students and international doctoral students alike. What emerges strikingly is how closely intertwined are the experiences of individual students and the broader level government and institutional policies and procedures. This emphasises in turn the mutual interdependence of international students and their host universities, and by extension of those students and the governments in their host countries. This mutual interdependence stands in stark contrast to the positioning of individual international students as being unwelcome to remain in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, this mutual interdependence constitutes an important foundation stone in constructing an alternative and far more mutually empowering and enriching understanding of the relationship between international students and their universities (and host country governments) that is presented in Chapter 6.

The three concepts assembled in this section of the chapter – liminality, marginalisation and mental health – constitute the micro level of this study's conceptual framework. In some respects, they are complementary and mutually reinforcing: international (doctoral) students' negative experiences of liminality easily shade into

marginalisation, which in turn exacerbates mental health concerns. At the same time, these three concepts exhibit certain creative tensions: for instance, marginalisation can be ameliorated by more positive experiences of liminality, and mental health and mental illness are not necessarily polar opposites of each other. More widely, these three concepts are mobilised to frame the data analysis presented in Chapter 5 to address the study's first research question.

### **3.4 Relationships between the Macro and Micro Level Concepts**

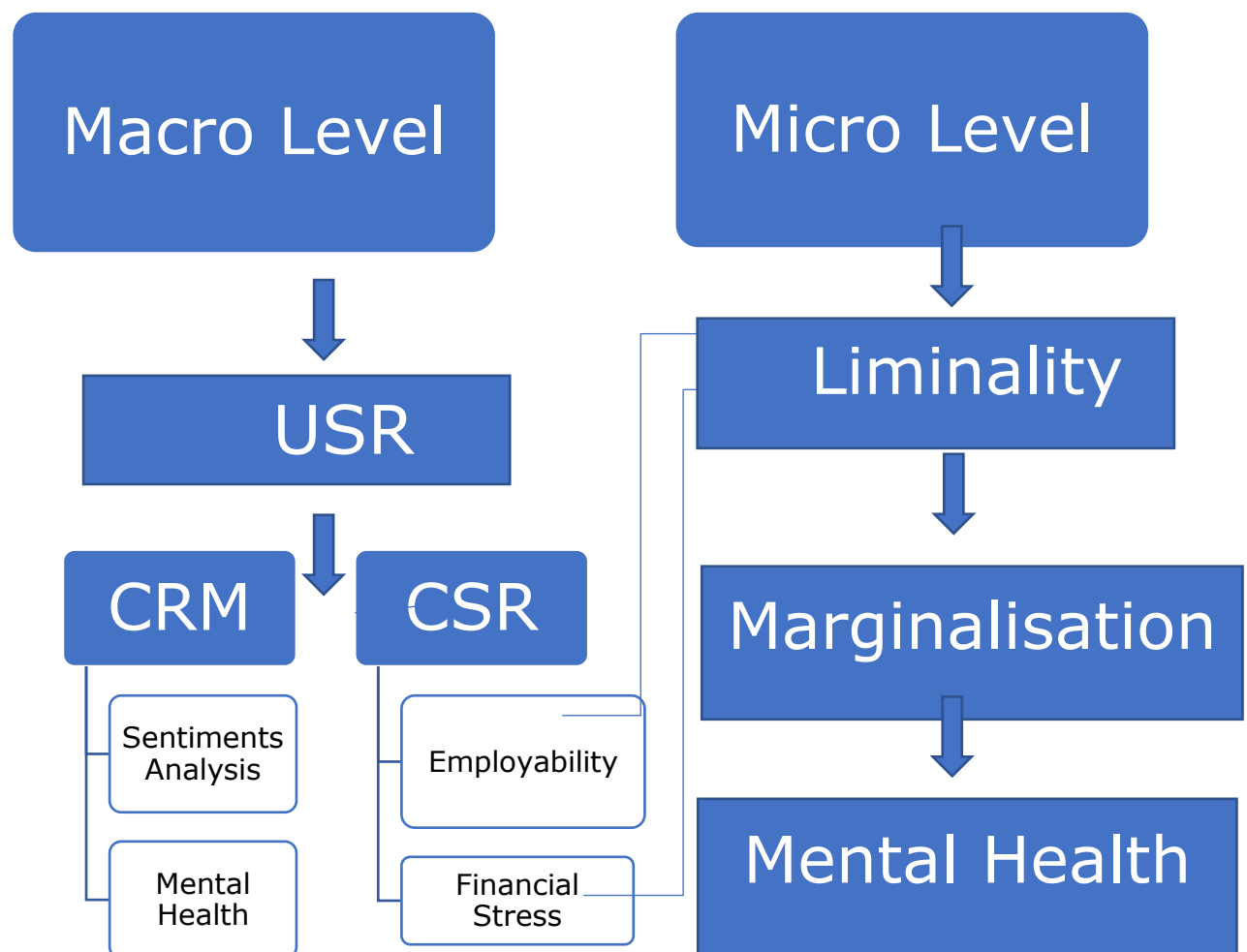
Having assembled and explained the macro and micro level concepts making up this study's conceptual framework, I turn in this section of the chapter to explain how these two sets of concepts relate to each other. I contend that the intersection between the different concepts serves to strengthen them and also to ground them in the empirical contexts of the study.

In Figure 3.2, I have represented the relationships between the macro and micro levels of the conceptual framework; on one side, the macro level, and on the other side, the micro level. The main macro level concept is USR, supported by an effective implementation in alignment with an advanced CRM system enacted by universities, which can thereby assess both the emotional sentiments and the mental health of international students. CRM and CSR are depicted side by side and as functioning in tandem to enhance international students' employability and financial support. Likewise, although at the micro level liminality, marginalisation and mental health are shown in serial form for the purpose of analytical clarity, in reality they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. More broadly, while again for analytical clarity the two sets of concepts are depicted side by side, and while each set is used to frame the data analysis to address a specific research question in each of Chapters 5 and 6, I am also interested in how they interrelate across the levels of concepts. In that regard, a recurring theme throughout this

thesis is the interdependence of, and the crossing over between, the macro and micro levels of analysis. For example, my autoethnographic experiences in Chapter 5 cannot be understood fully without detailed reference to the structural and systemic contexts analysed in Chapter 6.

**Figure 3.2**

*Relationships between the Macro and Micro Levels of the Study's Conceptual Framework*



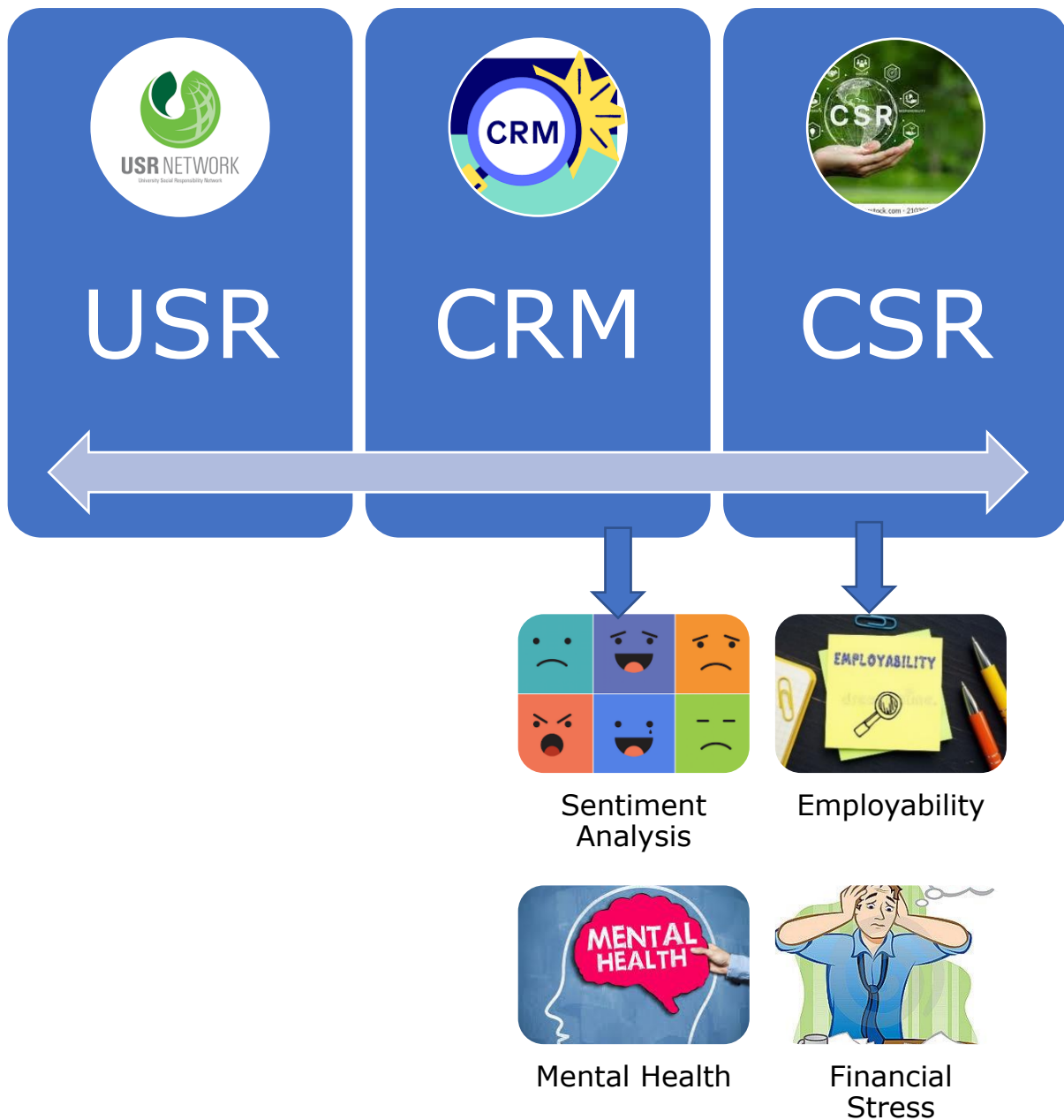
More specifically, USR must be implemented in a responsible way by Australian universities through an insightful understanding of CSR concepts and approaches in the business environment. In addition, comprehensive understandings and applications of CRM systems are necessary using advanced and integrated tools to assess the sentiment

analysis and the mental health of international students. Hence, results can equip Australian universities to plan strategically to support international students to find appropriate jobs and to minimise financial stress in all its meanings (e.g., tuition fees, living expenses, medical concerns, etc.). Once Australian universities commence, by enacting their principal role of social responsibility and by engaging their students in a responsible manner, the university's behaviour to play this socially regenerative role will be communicated to international students as a sense of engagement and security while providing, or at least supporting the students to find, sustainable employability and financial support. In turn, liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns will be minimised, and in some cases effectively eliminated, for international students.

As a result of this broader view of the interconnections between the macro and micro levels of the study's conceptual framework, a subsidiary framework of the conceptual framework's relationships has been created in Figures 3.3 and Figure 3.4. In Figure 3.3, I break down the macro level concepts into several components that lead to the micro level in Figure 3.4. As universities are corporations, the notion of CSR is applicable to universities to some extent. Nevertheless, as maximisation of profit is not a common goal of universities, and as educational services are different from commercial activities, there is a need to explore the notion of USR as an emergent field of academic inquiry and practice (Shek & Hollister, 2017), which is addressed in further detail in Chapter 6.

**Figure 3.3**

*Macro Level Conceptual Framework Relationships*



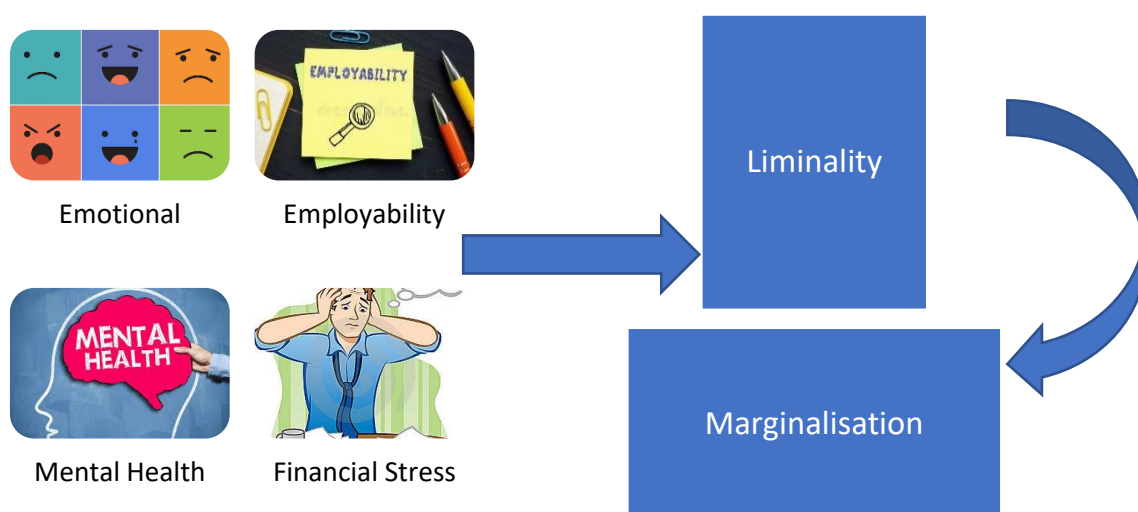
De Ketele (2009) highlighted that the importance of higher education is best expressed through the variety of “academic services” (Kettle, 2011, p. 13) that it provides for society, while taking into consideration the needs of people and society. In a study of international masters by research students, Kettle (2011) distilled the implications of an academic practice perspective for understanding student learning and

for recognising teaching possibilities within the internationalised university (Kettle, 2011, p. 13; Shek & Hollister, 2017).

From this perspective, and as Figure 3.4 illustrates, USR and CSR are interconnected and, while universities are implementing a central role for CSR, they may increase the employability opportunities for international students. Once international students have an appropriate academic collaboration matching their qualifications and professional experiences, this process will minimise any existing financial stress to them and sustain their academic progress. This has an inverse relationship with liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns (i.e., once international students' employability increases, the liminality, marginalisation and mental health issues decrease proportionately).

**Figure 3.4**

*Increasing USR, CSR and CRM Leads to a Decrease in Liminality, Marginalisation and Mental Health Concerns*



Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show the crucial role for CRM in assessing international students' emotional sentiments (sentiment analysis), and hence in assessing their mental health status. Sentiment analysis of customers' or students' social media data can illustrate the unique barriers to integrating unstructured data as one form of big data into the firm's or the university's current decision-making paradigm (Phillips-Wren

& Hoskisson, 2015; Reinhold & Alt, 2011). Sentiment analysis is the most important part of assessing the mental health status of international students, especially during a pandemic such as Covid-19. Furthermore, universities can participate in a more effective role for CSR and eliminate both employability and financial stress issues. In such cases, and as noted above, it can contribute dramatically to reducing both the liminality and the marginalisation of international students in Australia and globally, and thereby to maximising their mental health.

At this point, it is appropriate to acknowledge the complexities of these concepts and hence of their interrelationships. In that regard, among higher education students in the United Kingdom, there was little evidence that the amount of debt was associated with mental health. However, more subjective measures of increased financial stress were more consistently associated with worse mental health outcomes (McCloud & Bann, 2019). Cultural variations may influence individuals' experience and emotional expression. Thus, when researchers and practitioners employ Western-based assessments with Asian populations by directly translating them without an appropriate validation, the process can be challenging (Oei et al., 2013). Hence, while using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21) across cultures, all psychiatrists must take into considerations cultural variations as it may enhance specific mental health issues for specific cultures. This is a timely reminder that each concept in this study's conceptual framework is at the same time interdependent and individually vigorous. A consequence of this is that, for instance, some mental health challenges might remain for one or more individual international students even if their liminality and marginalisation are reduced. Nevertheless, I posit that the relationships among the concepts in this study, as depicted in Figures 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4, are sufficiently robust to underpin the data analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6 to address the two research questions in this study.

### **3.5 Chapter Conclusion**

I discussed in this chapter the conceptual framework of this study. In doing so, I assembled three concepts – USR, CSR and CRM – composing the macro level of the framework, and three concepts – liminality, marginalisation and mental health – constituting the micro level of the framework. These concepts were selected from diverse scholarly fields, including business and management, education, psychology and sociology. Rather than viewing this interdisciplinary borrowing as potentially weakening the conceptual framework, I contend that doing so has strengthened the framework, by facilitating the additional insights that can flow when we are attentive to different disciplines working together to analyse the autoethnographic experiences of an international doctoral student in Australia – the focus of this thesis. This chapter also elaborated a number of relationships in the concepts, both within the two levels of analysis and between those two levels. The result is what I posit is a conceptual framework sufficiently broad and deep, and also rigorous and robust, to frame the data analysis to address the study's two research questions.

Having assembled the six concepts at the two levels of analysis in this study's conceptual framework, I present and explain the methodological resources making up the study's research design. That is the focus of Chapter 4, to which I now turn.



## **Chapter 4: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **4.1 Chapter Introduction**

To this point in the thesis, Chapter 1 stated the background to the study, and articulated and explained the two research questions to be answered. Chapter 2 presented a critical review of selected literature about relevant key issues, including international education and the Australian economy pre- and during Covid-19, the experiences of international on-campus students (including doctoral students) in Australia, and mental health and international students (also including doctoral students). Chapter 3 elaborated and justified the conceptual framework of the study, beginning with an analysis of the interrelations among USR, CSR and CRM at the macro level, and also among liminality, marginalisation and mental health at the micro level. The chapter also highlighted different kinds of relationships within and between the two levels of concepts.

This chapter builds on those earlier chapters by assembling the methodological resources used in this study to address the two research questions. Those methodological resources have been clustered around the following sections in the chapter:

- The interpretivist research paradigm
- The qualitative research orientation
- The autoethnographic research method
- Data gathering
- Data analysis
- Ethical and political considerations
- Research quality and trustworthiness.

Given that every methodological decision in the study was based upon developing rigorous and robust strategies for addressing the two research questions, it is timely to restate those questions here:

**Research Question 1 (Chapter 5):** How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family's and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns?

**Research Question 2 (Chapter 6):** What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?

## **4.2 The Interpretivist Research Paradigm**

Given this study's focus on my autoethnographic experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student in Australia, it was appropriate that the study's research design drew on the interpretivist research paradigm. This section of the chapter explores the key characteristics of that paradigm as mobilised in this research, clustered around four subsections:

- Introduction to the interpretivist research paradigm
- Axiological assumptions of the interpretivist research paradigm
- Epistemological assumptions of the interpretivist research paradigm
- Ontological assumptions of the interpretivist research paradigm.

In elaborating these three sets of philosophical assumptions, I explain why interpretivism was suitable as the study's research paradigm and the affordances that it added to the power and utility of the study's research design.

### **4.2.1 Introduction to the Interpretivist Research Paradigm**

Interpretivism is "an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a

social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon” (Nickerson, 2022). Interpretivism has deep philosophical foundations (Van der Walt, 2020), and exhibits a number of conceptual complexities (Chalmers & Jackson, 2001), yet it provided a robust and rigorous research paradigm that framed and informed the study’s approach to data gathering and analysis in order to address the two research questions posed above.

At this point, it is worthwhile quoting at some length from the seminal account by Schwandt (1998) of interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. This is because Schwandt has written extensively about the philosophical foundations and applications of interpretivism, and also about its efficacy in education research, in which this study is partly located. In that regard, Schwandt (1998) observed:

... [Interpretivists] share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. The goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for *Verstehen*. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors. That is, particular actors, at particular times, fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language and action.

The ... interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies. (pp. 221-222)

This focus on meaning-making as being central to interpretivism resonates strongly with autoethnography (as I elaborate below), and also with my concern in this thesis to understand my actions and responses as a social actor against the backdrop of broader cultural, psychological and sociological forces of which I am not always aware but that exercise a profound impact on the options that are and are not available to me.

In a more recent and somewhat more distilled account than that of Schwandt (1998), Chowdhury (2014) depicted interpretivism as:

... refer[ing] to the approaches which emphasise the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life .... It denotes ... the methods of the research which adopt the position that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors, and so it distinctively rules out the methods of natural science .... Interpretivists look for meanings and motives behind people's actions like behaviour and interactions with others in the society and culture .... In the view of interpretivism it is argued that value free data cannot be obtained, since the enquirers use their own preconceptions in order to guide the process of enquiry ... (p. 433)

This last point about interpretivist researchers using "their own preconceptions" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433) to frame their inquiries highlights a potential limitation of this study that is addressed below under the study's research quality and trustworthiness. It is sufficient to note here that interpretivists embrace subjectivity as enhancing the depth and richness of research in this paradigm, provided that appropriate checks are made (for instance, through critical self-reflection).

It is also appropriate to note that much of the contemporary scholarship focuses on the distinctions, and sometimes the potential overlaps, between interpretivism and certain other research paradigms. For instance, Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) differentiated between interpretivism and positivism, including with reference to ontology and

epistemology, which along with ontology are addressed later in this section. While their comparison of the two paradigms traversed several points, they confirmed defining characteristics of interpretivism that also aligned with the approach adopted in this thesis:

Interpretivism developed through critique of positivism with [a] subjective perspective. Interpretivism is more concerned with in depth variables and factors related [to] a context, [and] it considers humans as different from physical phenomena as they create further depth in meanings with the assumption that human beings cannot be explored in a similar way to physical phenomena. (p. 41)

By contrast, Horvorka and Lee (2010) sought to reframe the differences between interpretivism and positivism in terms of the distinction between understanding and explanation. They contended that, in their discipline of information systems, such an approach could generate more contextually specific and nuanced understandings that resulted from a continued focus on paradigmatic contrasts. Similarly, while Ryan (2018) noted the philosophical divergences among positivism, interpretivism and critical theory, Doolin and McLeod (2005) made a compelling case for bringing interpretivism and critical theory together to constitute “critical interpretivism” (see also Baynes, 2016), again in the context of information systems research.

Finally in this subsection, while I acknowledge critiques of interpretivism such as concerns about its celebration of subjectivity and its resistance to generalisability, I was encouraged in my selection of this research paradigm by Scauso’s (2020) encapsulation of the benefits of interpretivism as generating several very fruitful lines of inquiry:

... interpretivism created an overarching methodological space that allowed for the proliferation of theoretical approaches. Since the 1980s, ... [numerous] theories have sought to expand the study of meanings, uncover aspects of domination, listen to previously marginalized voices, unveil hidden variations, and highlight

alternatives .... [T]he opening of this interpretive space has allowed ... scholars to deconstruct, reconstruct, and juxtapose meanings, contributing to the field from different perspectives and within particular empirical areas of research. Moreover, this diversifying process continues to unfold.

In other words, acknowledged methodological issues aside, interpretivism constitutes a valuable and viable research paradigm that was both appropriate and effective in guiding this study's research design.

Moving forwards in this discussion, in order to achieve a high level of trust and transparency as a researcher using the autoethnographic research method and presenting it in qualitative form, making explicit the researcher's position in relation to the data is crucial. Hence, I asked myself four questions before starting my autoethnographic study: 1) Who am I in relation to the research? 2) How do the assumptions, which I have accumulated from my life experiences, affect my reflexivity in my research (axiology/values)? 3) What do I believe underpins my knowledge of life, and where did I gain this belief (epistemology/knowledge)? 4) How does this belief influence the way that I react to situations and people (ontology/reality) (Pitard, 2017)? My responses to these four questions are clustered around the remaining three subsections in this section, thereby deepening and strengthening my account of the interpretivist paradigm, given that axiology, epistemology and ontology all help to delineate the defining features of that paradigm.

#### **4.2.2    *Axiological Assumptions of the Interpretivist Research Paradigm***

In this subsection, I present my responses to the first two of the four questions listed above and inspired by Pitard (2017) in order to make explicit my axiological assumptions framing this study's research design.

### ***1) Who am I in relation to the research?***

I am an international on-campus doctoral student who is studying a PhD in Business and Management at an Australian university, in addition to having extensive professional experience in the business and management world of multinational corporations, speaking three languages and having travelled to more than 20 countries around the world.

#### ***My personal values are:***

1. Respect
2. Innovation
3. Integrity.

#### ***My personal slogan:***

“Everybody in the world has the right to healthcare, education and a clean, affordable house, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality or ethical beliefs”.

Aligning my personal values with the Australian universities’ values, I assume that those universities may enhance their corporate values to help to grow a more sustainable education system in Australia. The axiology of this research was based also on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016) that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6.

### ***2) How do the assumptions, which I have accumulated from my life experiences, affect my reflexivity in my research (axiology/values)?***

We can assume from my accumulated life experiences that I have gained a certain body of knowledge as both a person and a researcher. Moreover, we can assume that that knowledge has a close and interdependent relationship with my axiology and values, again as both person and researcher. From that perspective, my knowledge-based values include a continuing commitment to social justice, understand in

my case as a determination to help as many fellow human beings as possible, including using the collective opportunities for growth and prosperity provided by businesses and enterprises to enhance the safety and security of individuals and groups and to provide them with sustainable and fulfilling employment. A commitment to social justice also involves facilitating cooperation and collaboration as much as possible – among businesses, governments and nations – in order to address some of the world's most pressing cultural, economic and political challenges. In the context of this research, this sense of social justice underpinned the meaning-making that I conducted related to my individual experiences as an international PhD student, as well as to my informal observations of the equivalent experiences of scores of other international students in Australia. In this regard, this axiological and values-based commitment to social justice – for me and for others – provided a frame of reference that was indispensable in analysing the data to address the study's two research questions in the next two chapters. With regard to interpretivism, these values also underpinned the meanings that I distilled from my experiences and those of others.

More broadly, the outcome of this kind of axiological self-analysis can have purposeful implications for the preparation of the leaders of the educational institutions. Given that the process of self-exploration and interrogation aids individuals in locating themselves within their own history and culture, that process also allows them to widen their understanding of their own values in relation to others (Starr, 2010). Ethical and values-based aspects of autoethnography showing how the research method is rooted in an ethical intent that demonstrates the researcher's reflexivity in relation to the research (Lapadat, 2017). Hence, those ethical aspects reflect the researcher's axiology and values at the same time.

Placing my responses to these two axiological questions in a broader context still, I note that Fischer (1990) wrote as follows about the



axiological, epistemological and ontological dimensions of the interpretivist research paradigm:

An interpretive axiology entails a commitment to understanding and is based on an ontological belief that realities are mediated by the perception and comprehension of individuals, coupled with an epistemological belief that these realities can only be grasped partially, in both senses of the term (i.e., all understanding is incomplete and is conditioned by the researcher's own perspective...). (p. 20)

It was certainly the case that my axiological commitment to striving to understand my own and others' experiences was a recurring feature of this research, as were my ontological commitment to comprehending individuals' realities and perceptions, and my epistemological acknowledgement of the inherent partiality of those attempts at understanding and meaning-making.

#### **4.2.3 *Epistemological Assumptions of the Interpretivist Research Paradigm***

In this subsection, I present my responses to the third of the four questions listed above and inspired by Pitard (2017) in order to make explicit my epistemological assumptions framing this study's research design.

##### **3) *What do I believe underpins my knowledge of life, and where did I gain this belief (epistemology/knowledge)?***

Because different epistemological assumptions inform autoethnographic inquiry, it makes no sense to impose traditional criteria in judging the knowledge producing potential of a personal text (Smith et al., 2012; Sparkes, 2000). Whether acknowledged or not, all knowledge practices are subjective and have an emotional dimension. The positive valuing of emotion is considered in research approaches such as phenomenology, paying particular attention to the significance of feeling

combining, as it does, the affective and the sensual (Game, 1997). Building on my personal values of endorsing respect, innovation and integrity, in addition to my personal slogan that “Everybody in the world has the right to healthcare, education and a clean, affordable house, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality or ethical beliefs”, as outlined above, I included in this autoethnographic study my commitment to eliciting knowledge that would help to enhance the rights of international on-campus students in Australia to have a safe learning experience and to have good mental health, as well as enabling them to access fair work opportunities. Furthermore, and again from an epistemological viewpoint, interpretivism’s emphasis on individual meaning-making meant that I approached this autoethnography committed to analysing such meaning-making in the historically constructed and socioculturally mediated contexts in which the research participants – in this case, myself – created, tested, reflected on and refined specific knowledge claims.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that working with like-minded doctoral supervisors can sometimes mean that the advice that a doctoral student receives is likely to reinforce her or his existing understanding. This effect can lead to a narrowing of perspective and the emergence of self-fulfilling beliefs (Suen, 2004). Hence, it is crucial for researchers to engage in rigorous self-reflection regarding the new knowledge that they generate through their research. Furthermore, to avoid such possible epistemological difficulties, an autoethnographic researcher must make clear the epistemological decisions that were made and why those decisions were made (McDonagh et al., 2013). In addition, it is vital to define clearly the potential risks and outcomes of the research and to design it in such a way that those risks and outcomes are appropriately managed (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010).

More broadly, and again working in information systems research, Kroeze (2011) investigated whether the epistemology of the interpretivist

research paradigm was properly classified as being postmodern, and concluded that “interpretivism, as it is used in [information systems], is a typical postmodern epistemology” (p. 9). However, it is much more common to characterise constructivism as the epistemology most closely associated with the interpretivist paradigm (Walters, 2009). Like interpretivism, constructivism assumes diverse forms (including radical constructivism, social constructivism and constructionism [Hacking, 1999]), and has received critiques of varied kinds. Nevertheless, Pilarska (2021) provided a helpful synthesis of its key features, as follows:

all constructivist approaches acknowledge that there are no universal ‘truths’ or valid categories for human experience; hence knowledge is the production of social and personal processes of meaning making. Such a stance highlights the principle that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences ....

Therefore, because they constitute the building blocks of a socially constructed reality, social and cultural facts are the essence of constructivism. From this perspective, the constructivist epistemology has clear and direct synergies with the interpretivist research paradigm. I was certainly able to build on these synergies productively when planning and implementing the study’s research design.

#### **4.2.4 *Ontological Assumptions of the Interpretivist Research Paradigm***

In this subsection, I present my responses to the fourth and final of the four questions listed above and inspired by Pitard (2017) in order to make explicit my ontological assumptions framing this study’s research design.

Ontological assumptions in the interpretivist research paradigm can be identified based on the following beliefs: (1) reality is indirectly constructed based on individual interpretation and is subjective; (2)

people interpret and make their own meaning of events; (3) events are distinctive and cannot be generalised; (4) there are multiple perspectives on one incident; and (5) causation in the social sciences is determined by interpreted meaning and symbols (Mack, 2010).

The role of the social scientists adhering to the interpretivist paradigm is to “ ‘understand’, ‘explain’, and ‘demystify’ social reality through the eyes of different participants” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 19). However, ontological divergences appear when “conflicts involving different assumptions about ‘what exists’ are gaining unprecedented visibility because the hegemony of modern ontological assumptions is undergoing a crisis” (Blaser, 2013, p. 547). This means that interpretivist researchers must be prepared to make explicit their analytical decision-making when engaging with cases of highly diverse, even conflicting, constructions and interpretations of the same phenomenon.

#### ***4) How does this belief influence the way that I react to situations and people (ontology/reality)?***

Given ontology’s concern with the deeply philosophical nature of existence, I considered carefully my developing position on that question, in the light of the character of this autoethnographic study, and in view also of my responses above to the questions about the axiological and epistemological dimensions of interpretivism. From that perspective, realism emerged as the ontology framing this research. In essence, realism is the view that reality has an existence that is independent of those who perceive it. At first glance, this view would seem incompatible with the interpretivist and constructivist assumptions outlined above, which would appear to align more closely with idealism, which holds that existence does not exist outside the perceptions of those who create it. Nevertheless, Barkin (2003) was among those who identified fruitful creativity rather than philosophical incoherence as arising from bringing together constructivism and realism. Importantly, Barkin, writing in his

disciplinary field of international relations (IR), observed that "Having a realist constructivism could prove useful in IR theory ... , including helping to specify the relationship between the study of power in international politics and the study of international relations as a social construction" (p. 325).

Barkin's (2003) observation in the preceding paragraph neatly encapsulated the rationale for my selection of a realist ontology for this research. From the outset of this study, I have highlighted the interplay between the macro and micro levels of analysis framing this research, with a specific research question being assigned to each level. Thus far in this account of the interpretivist research paradigm, I have emphasised the micro level, directed at my individual autoethnographic experiences, including in relation to axiology and epistemology. Yet it is vital also to acknowledge the macro level, which is precisely what a realist ontology does, by linking individual experiences with wider political and sociocultural forces, as observed in Barkin's work on the study of power in international relations. In other words, applying a realist ontology in this study created a direct pathway between those wider forces and my personal experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student in Australia.

This rationale was supported further by Pham's (2018) reference to one of the perceived limitations of interpretivism: "the lack of addressing the political and ideological impact on knowledge and social reality. This paradigm targets [the] understanding of current phenomena rather than focusing [on] the problems related to empowerment of individuals and societies" (p. 4). In this regard, pursuing the realist rather than the idealist ontological position created the opportunity to explore explicitly "the political and ideological impact on knowledge and social reality", as well as issues "related to empowerment of individuals and societies" (p. 4). Accordingly, drawing on the realist ontology enhanced both the breadth and the depth of the study's data analysis.

In combination, then, the four subsections in this section's focus on the interpretivist research paradigm have introduced the key features of that paradigm, and have then elaborated the axiological, epistemological and ontological dimensions of the paradigm. In doing so, I have anchored these deeply philosophical dimensions in discussion of and reflection on the empirical enterprise that was this autoethnographical study, including the interplay between the macro and micro levels of analysis mentioned in the preceding paragraph. While acknowledging the complexity and contested character of some aspects of the paradigm, I contend that interpretivism has served the study well in helping to frame the study's research design and in contributing to addressing the two research questions.

### **4.3 The Qualitative Research Orientation**

In addition to exhibiting the features of the interpretivist research paradigm, this study was aligned with the qualitative research orientation. This was on the basis that "A core feature of qualitative research methods is that satisfactory explanations of social activities require a substantial appreciation of the perspectives, culture and 'world-views' of the actors involved" (Allan, 2020), a feature that resonated very strongly with the study's research questions, as did the definition provided by Pathak et al. (2013): "[The q]ualitative method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. It generates non-numerical data" (p. 192).

An equivalent synergy was evident also with a different definition of qualitative research "as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon [being] studied" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 139). Crucially, in this application of qualitative research I was attentive to the value of deploying a variety of data gathering and analysis techniques

(Liamputtong, 2009; Morrison et al., 2020), as well as to the importance of ensuring appropriate levels of research rigour (Johnson et al., 2020). Additionally, I was alert to the need to fulfil relevant criteria for ensuring the quality of the findings arising from this qualitative research project (Alturkistani et al., 2020; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013). All these crucial ramifications of conducting qualitative research are addressed later in this chapter.

More specifically, and given the location of this study in the business and management disciplines, it was helpful to draw on Johnson et al.'s (2007) account of different approaches to defining qualitative management research by researchers applying the qualitative research orientation. In doing so, the authors engaged in extensive empirical work, including semi-structured interviews with 44 individuals. The researchers distilled eight distinct categories of qualitative management research, as follows:

- "Category 1: qualitative methods as verstehen" [researchers taking an interpretivist stance to understand participants' meaning-making in social contexts] (p. 28)
- "Category 2: qualitative methods as verstehen but with reflexivity" (p. 29)
- "Category 3: as a general bag of tools" (p. 30)
- "Category 4: as a specific bag of tools with a distinctive role and use in management research: accessing organizational back stages" [enabling researchers to go behind the scenes to understand more deeply what was occurring] (p. 31)
- "Category 5: as exploratory research with regard to little understood phenomena prior to other (i.e. quantitative) research" (p. 32)
- "Category 6: defined in terms of a disposal category" (p. 33)

- “Category 7: qualitative research as what it is not” [defining qualitative research as being outside the perceived quantitative research mainstream] (p. 34)
- “Category 8: defined in terms of specific data collection techniques” [such as case study research or focus groups] (p. 34).

On the one hand, it was instructive to note, even after the passage of 16 years, management researchers’ concerns about the perceived quality of qualitative research in their discipline, which highlights in turn the importance of ensuring research quality and trustworthiness, as is elaborated later in this chapter. On the other hand, it was encouraging to see that some management researchers were using qualitative research in relatively creative and innovative ways, by moving beyond a constructed quantitative–qualitative binary to potentially more productive imaginings of how qualitative research can add its distinctive affordances to the wider enterprise of developing high quality management research addressing complex and multifaceted research questions. That was certainly the intention in this qualitative study located partly in the management research domain.

From a different disciplinary perspective, Aspers and Corte (2021) canvassed the complexities of defining qualitative research in sociology, including reporting that some sociologists resist developing such definitions because they can oversimplify multifaceted understandings, and also because they might restrict ongoing changes in the field. Turning to education research, Yilmaz (2013) defined qualitative research:

... as an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world. (p. 312)



Writing from the difference disciplinary background of communication studies, Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) depicted a particular methodological orientation in which:

We focus on how people communicate in their own natural environments, when they are guided by their own personal objectives, and how they give meaning to their communication, especially when they are using communication for those pragmatic objectives that determine and control day-to-day existence. This approach has a host of different labels, but its central and most unifying label is *qualitative research*. (p. 12)

Appropriately, there were similarities between the characterisations of qualitative research provided by Yilmaz (2013) in education research and by Chesebro and Borisoff (2007) in communication studies. The latter characterisation, with its reference to “those pragmatic objectives that determine and control day-to-day existence” (p. 12), also evoked the wider context in which individuals and groups construct meaning-making, which in turn suggests the macro level of analysis accompanying the micro level meaning-making that is a significant feature of this thesis. Thanh and Thanh (2015) identified a different but complementary synergy: between the interpretivist research paradigm elaborated in the preceding section and the qualitative research orientation presented in this section of the chapter.

I mentioned briefly above the question of generalisability with regard to the interpretivist research paradigm. At this point, it is relevant to acknowledge that similar questions about generalisability have been raised about the qualitative research orientation. At one level, these questions arise from the postivist and postpositivist focus on rigorous sampling techniques drawing from well-established populations, often associated with quantitative research, from which viable generalisations can be made. At another level, these questions refer to the fundamental issue of significance in qualitative research – not statistical significance,

but rather broader relevance and importance of qualitative findings and outcomes. If the emphasis is on individual experience and perception, how might these personal, even idiosyncratic, phenomena relate to anyone outside the individual's or the group's frame of reference?

This question about the generalisability of the qualitative research orientation is longstanding in the scholarly methodology literature. For example, Gardner and Chapple (1999) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 patients with angina, while Green (1999) used her "Commentary" on their research article to contend that "issues of validity and generalisability are essentially the same as those in quantitative studies" (p. 421), and also that "The generalisability of this study does not derive from the representativeness of the sample, but from the concepts (such as fear of hospitals or fatalism about ageing) that may well be relevant to other settings and patient groups" (p. 421). This same view was expressed even more succinctly by Agius (2013): "The results [of most qualitative studies] are not intended to be statistically generalisable, although any theory they generate might well be" (p. 205).

A very different approach to the question of generalisability and to the qualitative research orientation was taken by Guenther and Falk (2019). Rather than positing from the position of qualitative research needing to demonstrate its equivalence to quantitative research in this regard, the authors argued from the perspective of qualitative research being a longstanding and legitimate research orientation in its own right. On that basis, they drew on their extensive body of collaborative research to propose "generalisation cycles ... which produce normative truth statements ... , which in turn can be contested or confirmed with theory and empirical evidence" (p. 1012) as distinctively and inherently qualitative generalisation strategies. Furthermore, the authors wrote more fully about "the design of qualitative research for generalisation purposes" (p. 1029):

Researchers must first be able to position themselves within a frame of existing statements of normative truth. Then[,] from a theoretical and data gathering perspective, they must ask research questions that will respond to the existing knowledge base in ways that will clarify, challenge or confirm truth. In some cases, the new knowledge created may lead to a rejection of pre-existing assumptions of truth ... and in others it may build upon and add to the existing truth statements .... Regardless, having positioned themselves in this way, researchers will be able to confidently make new statements of normative truth, and more so with each iteration of the generalisation cycle. (p. 1029)

Following Guenther and Falk (2019), I assert that the axiological, epistemological and ontological assumptions that I presented in the preceding section of this chapter constitute a viable foundation for my position regarding various normative truth statements. Moreover, the study's two research questions entail some degree of truth telling regarding my micro level experiences (Research Question 1 in Chapter 5) and the macro level implications of those experiences (Research Question 2 in Chapter 6). Accordingly, the new normative truth statements to which I aspire (distilled in my assertions in Chapter 7 of the study's contributions to different knowledge types) have enabled me to generalise the significance of the study's findings beyond a narrow focus on myself, and it is my application of the qualitative research orientation that has equipped me to do so.

Finally in this discussion of the qualitative research orientation as it was comprehended and enacted in this study, it is appropriate to explore the interplay between qualitative research and the Covid-19 pandemic, given the centrality of the pandemic to addressing both research questions in the study. From that perspective, Tremblay et al. (2021) reiterated a distinctive strength of qualitative research when they asserted:

Based on the pressing need to respond to the [Covid-19] crisis, clinical trials and epidemiological studies have been undertaken[;] however[,] less attention has been paid to the contextualised experiences and meanings attributed to COVID-19 and strategies to mitigate its spread on healthcare workers, patients, and other various groups. This commentary examines the relevance of qualitative approaches in capturing deeper understandings of current lived realities of those affected by the pandemic. (p. 1)

Relatedly, Roberts et al. (2021) noted that the pandemic had created conditions for qualitative research to innovate and diversify its applications, including “virtual methods” of researcher–research participant interactions in the context of “social distancing and the prioritization of participants’ and researchers’ safety” (p. 1). At the same time, the authors noticed greater complexity “in practice”, and they posited that “engaging in virtual qualitative research, particularly in the era of COVID-19, is a purposive exercise that requires thoughtful, careful analysis around a number of methodological challenges as well as ethical and equity-oriented questions” (p. 1). While my autoethnographic data gathering was not influenced by this consideration, at a broader level I too encountered complexity in conducting this qualitative research project “in the era of COVID-19”.

Likewise and finally, Rahman et al. (2021) acknowledged significant challenges in conducting qualitative research during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, they argued that the pandemic had created opportunities “for proactively building resilience into the qualitative research process”, and also that “reflexivity, responsiveness, adaptability, and flexibility ensured continuity in the research projects and highlighted distance advantages to using digital methods, providing lessons beyond the COVID-19 context” (p. 1). Again, while not affected directly because of my use of autoethnography to collect and analyse data, I also found that the qualitative research planned and implemented in this study was

certainly fit for purpose, and provided crucial support in my strategy to address the study's research questions.

This section of this chapter about the study's research design has explored selected aspects of the qualitative research orientation as they were mobilised in this research. In doing so, the section has highlighted complexities in defining and characterising qualitative research, has presented alternative views about qualitative research's potential for generalisability and has the distinctive opportunities and challenges in conducting qualitative research at the time of Covid-19. Despite these challenges, qualitative research has provided well-developed methodological strength that has hopefully enhanced the coherence and quality of this research.

#### **4.4 The Autoethnographic Research Method**

The interpretivist research paradigm and the qualitative research orientation having been presented as key elements of the study's research design, this section of the chapter explores the principal characteristics of the autoethnographic research method as mobilised in this research, clustered around five subsections:

- Introduction to the autoethnographic research method
- "A typology of autoethnographic practices" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1664)
- Evocative autoethnography
- Analytic autoethnography
- Pedagogies, positionality and power.

In elaborating these five subsections, I explain why autoethnography was selected as the study's research method, and how it added strength and vigour to the study's research design.

#### **4.4.1 Introduction to the Autoethnographic Research Method**

As I noted in Chapter 1, and as is worthwhile repeating here, a recent definition of autoethnography helpfully highlighted three distinguishing features that were interwoven in this study's research design: "'Autoethnography' is comprised of three interrelated components: 'auto,' 'ethno,' and 'graphy.'" Thus, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ('auto') to describe, interpret, and represent ('graphy') beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ('ethno')" (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, given this study's location in and intended contribution to the scholarly field of higher education research, the thesis displays as well the more specific features of autoethnography directed at educational research, including the acknowledgement that "Autoethnography opens windows into the aspirations, assumptions and outcomes of individuals and groups involved in learning, teaching, leading educational sites and systems, framing curricula, assessing learning and teaching, and evaluating the impacts of educational programs and courses" (Anteliz et al., 2023, p. 1).

#### **4.4.2 "A Typology of Autoethnographic Practices" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1664)**

I turn now to provide some further breadth and depth to this necessarily broad brush introduction to the autoethnographic research method presented in Chapter 1. From that perspective, Butz and Besio (2009) distilled a number of defining features of the method that are worthwhile considering in some detail here. For instance, for these authors a key characteristic was that:

... all types of autoethnography dissolve to some extent the boundary between authors and objects of representation, as authors become part of what they are studying, and research

subjects are re-imagined as reflexive narrators of self. Dismantling the author/represented boundary in this way has implications for how researchers understand their objects of research and ethnographic knowledge itself. (p. 1660)

As the next chapter elaborates, as the author of this autoethnographic text, I found that the boundary between the phenomena that I analysed and myself was certainly dissolved, and I became simultaneously the author and the object of the representation presented in this thesis. This generated both opportunities and challenges for my work as a doctoral researcher as I worked to address the study's two research questions in a way that was both personally authentic and scholastically rigorous.

More specifically, Butz and Besio (2009) helpfully synthesised "five categories of practice" that they contended constituted "A Typology of Autoethnographic Practices" (p. 1664). The authors clustered these five categories around "two poles on a continuum" (p. 1665):

At one pole, the accustomed *agents of signification* (academics) strive self-consciously to understand themselves as an important part of what they are signifying; at the other, the accustomed *objects of signification* (research subjects) involve themselves as authors in public acts of self-representation. (p. 1665)

These two ends of the continuum highlighted distinct but complementary implications of conducting an autoethnographic inquiry such as that undertaken in this thesis.

Against that backdrop, the "five categories of practice" related to the autoethnographic research method identified by Butz and Besio (2009) were as follows:

1. "Autoethnography as personal experience narrative" (p. 1665):

Here, autoethnographers are scholars who focus intensely on their own life circumstances as a way to understand larger

social or cultural phenomena, and who often use personal narrative writing as a representational strategy that incorporates affect and emotion into their analyses ....

Researchers use themselves as their own *primary* research subjects, as they strive to understand some aspect of the world that involves but exceeds themselves. (p. 1665)

2. "Autoethnography as reflexive or narrative ethnography" (p. 1666):

The point of narrative ethnography is primarily epistemological; it is a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyse how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships, and is a way to describe the situatedness and partiality of the academic knowledge that results .... [T]he main point of self-reflexivity is to understand the epistemological characteristics of information that is assembled in relation to the research field and of the resulting representations. (p. 1666)

3. "Autoethnography from below" (p. 1667):

Here, the accustomed *objects* of research produce self-representations that are meant to intervene in ethnographic and other dominant discourses about them .... [T]he aims of ... subaltern autoethnography are fundamentally political: to find a voice and speaking position that will be heeded in metropolitan representational space for purposes of self-definition and therefore self-determination. (pp. 1667-1668)

4. "'Indigenous' ethnography" (p. 1668):

... the aim here is to change the way one's group is understood in authorized circuits of knowledge. The difference is that indigenous ethnographers speak from within or at the margins of those circuits, in terms both of subject position and [of] mastery of idiom and rhetorical style. (p. 1669)



## 5. "Insider research" (p. 1669)

"... [The practitioners of] insider or complete member research ... are academic researchers who study a group or social circumstance they are part of, and use their insiderness as a methodological and interpretive tool" (p. 1669).

Intriguingly, I find that my autoethnographic approach in this thesis exhibits features of all of these "five categories of practice" of the autoethnographic research method articulated by Butz and Besio (2009). Firstly, I have used this study to "focus intensely on [my] own life circumstances as a way to understand larger social or cultural phenomena" as per "[a]utoethnography as personal experience narrative" (p. 1665). Secondly, I have used the self-reflexivity in the thesis "to understand the epistemological characteristics of information that is assembled in relation to the research field and of the resulting representations", as with "[a]utoethnography as reflexive or narrative ethnography" (p. 1666). Thirdly, I have embraced wholeheartedly the desire to "produce self-representations that are meant to intervene in ethnographic and other dominant discourses around them", as befits "[a]utoethnography from below" (p. 1667). Fourthly, I have been very conscious of seeking "to change the way one's group" – in this case, international on-campus doctoral students in Australian universities – "is understood in authorized circuits of knowledge" (p. 1669), as is the goal of "'Indigenous' ethnography" (p. 1668). Fifthly and finally, I acknowledge that I am an "academic [researcher] who [has studied] a group or social circumstance [I am] part of, and [have used my] insiderness as a methodological and interpretive tool", as depicts "Insider research" (p. 1669).

Rather than seeing these synergies between my study and all "five categories of practice" of the autoethnographic research method identified

by Butz and Besio (2009) as illustrating analytical incoherence or methodological indecisiveness on my part, I argue that these multiple synergies reflect the research richness and power of autoethnography. Certainly, I concur with Butz and Besio that in combination these five approaches constitute “an *autoethnographic sensibility*” (p. 1671), and moreover that “Thinking autoethnographically in this way is one approach to critical reflexivity” (p. 1671) of the kind presented in this thesis. Furthermore, these multiple synergies help to reinforce the rationale for selecting autoethnography as the study’s research method.

#### **4.4.3 Evocative Autoethnography**

A commonly used distinction in autoethnographic research is between evocative and analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Ngunjiri et al., 2010), while recognising that the two types can be used in combination rather than necessarily being oppositional. In relation to evocative autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2016) emphasised how to connect intellectually and emotionally to the lives of readers through the challenging process of representing lived experiences.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the potential challenges and risks related to autoethnographers using evocative autoethnography. For instance, “Honest autoethnographic exploration generates lot of ‘fears’ and ‘self-doubts’—and ‘emotional’ pain” (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). In my autoethnography, I was very keen to be extremely honest in sharing my experiences, yet, at the same time, I was sometimes very worried about any potential political conflicts or misunderstandings arising from my writing, especially given that the language of this thesis, English, is the third language that I speak and write. Nevertheless, I could see the similarities between “heartful” (Ellis, 1999) and “evocative” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) autoethnography. Given that evocative autoethnography must be honest, this process will create heartful emotions and pain at the same time. This creative process also provides a viable defence about any

concern that “evocative autoethnography may have distanced itself from the ethnographic tradition of realism” (Winkler, 2018).

Similarly, Ellis (1999) stated that “Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (p. 672). Therefore the “self-questioning” (p. 672) in evocative autoethnography is highly difficult, yet also inherently worthwhile.

#### **4.4.4 Analytic Autoethnography**

Anderson (2006) proposed the term “analytic autoethnography” to refer to research in which “the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006, p. 373). In addition, Denzin (2006) broke down two of the three previous terms for Anderson, and added “(4) uses analytic ‘reflexivity’; and (5) engages in dialogue with informants ‘beyond the self’” (Denzin, 2006, p. 419). Based on the above, developing theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena is the most crucial part of analytic autoethnography, as well as the researcher’s experiences having another key role to resonating with her or his autoethnography.

Encouragingly, Vryan (2006) emphasised a significant methodological advantage of using analytic autoethnography, as follows:

A skilled [analytic] autoethnographer ... may be able to examine features of human experience that would not normally be observable to researchers studying other people, whether due to communication norms, embarrassment, shame, guilt, limitations of informants’ self-awareness, lack of the depth of trust in researcher-as-other interactions that I can grant myself in self-inquiries, and so forth. (p. 407)

At the same time, Vryan (2006) expressed concern about a potentially misleading and overly simplistic differentiation between analytic and evocative autoethnography:

A distinction between analysis and creative or evocative first-person writing styles is unnecessary and counterproductive, as are implications that an analytical project must avoid delving too much, too expressively, or exclusively in the autoethnographer's experience .... [I]ntensive self-immersion and the discoveries it may enable represents one of [analytic autoethnography]'s greatest potentials as a unique addition to our methodological toolkits. (p. 407)

In other words, while I was aware of the evocative–analytic autoethnography debate and divide in the scholarly literature, I found no significant difficulty in using both forms of autoethnography for different but complementary purposes in this thesis. Evocative autoethnography was given full rein to use creative writing forms to communicate the strongly emotional dimension of the study and of the two research questions. At the same time, analytic autoethnography proved invaluable in articulating and evidencing the interpretive argument mobilised to address those questions, as the next two chapters demonstrate.

#### **4.4.5 Pedagogies, Positionality and Power**

In this final subsection in this chapter, I turn to one among several recent accounts of the autoethnographic research method, the editorial introduction by Anteliz et al. (2023b) to the *Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research* (Anteliz et al., 2023a). I use this selected text to make some additional points about the way that I implemented autoethnography in this study, and also to reinforce the justification for using autoethnography as a viable and valuable research method in the study.

In one sense, I could have chosen almost any example of current autoethnographic scholarship to make these points and to reinforce this justification. In another sense, what Anteliz et al. (2023b) called “three organising principles” (p. 4) that they contended helped to enhance the coherence of a large and diverse handbook resonated in distinctive and significant ways with the equally distinctive concerns of this thesis. From that perspective, it is worthwhile considering each of these “three organising principles” in turn.

Firstly, in relation to “the first organising principle ***‘pedagogies’***”: Autoethnography can and does contribute much to understanding how such pedagogies are enacted and experienced in diverse ways and with varying short- and longer-term effects, sometimes positive and at times negative. Likewise, because pedagogies are prevalent and pervasive in educational practice and research, they afford a usefully bounded and grounded set of contexts in which the limits of autoethnography can be stretched and its potential limitations reassessed and addressed. (Anteliz et al., 2023b, p. 4)

From one perspective, this distinctively educational application of autoethnographic research can be seen as applying to the formal and official educational philosophies and practices related to doctoral student supervision (see also Mulligan et al., 2022) that were enacted at the university of my doctoral study. From a different perspective, pedagogies can be understood as the informal and unofficial experiences related to learning and teaching at the doctoral level. Certainly, my autoethnographic experiences as retold in this thesis were vitally concerned with higher education, including with a specific focus on the formal and informal learning and teaching clustered around my doctoral study. More widely, international education is centrally concerned with explicitly educational issues such as knowledge management and perspective transformation in transnational contexts, and

autoethnography serves a crucial function in highlighting the experiential dimension of those issues.

The second organising principle identified by Anteliz et al. (2023b) was “**positionality**” (p. 5):

Positionality accentuates the dreams, fears, hopes and resultant actions of individuals and groups, appraised against the critically informed backdrop of the economic, political and sociocultural forces that structure our lives, and in relation to which our agency is enacted. Autoethnography has a crucial, continuing role in helping us to learn from the positionality of ourselves and multiple others, and educational research generates findings about the effects and impact of that positionality on our and others’ educational opportunities and outcomes. (p. 5)

Call-Cummings and Ross (2019) defined positionality as follows:

... the way we as researchers view our *position* in the world in relation to others, especially those who are involved in or may read our research. In particular, positionality requires us to think about how our background and experiences play a role in our relationships with participants and in how we carry out research: for instance, how might one’s gender/race/class/religion or other aspect of one’s identity affect the choices one makes about what questions to ask an interview participant or how one interacts with participants of similar or different backgrounds during the interview? Being explicit about our positionality is important as a way of helping readers [to] understand how the lens through which we see the world is reflected in our research. (p. 4)

From an autoethnographic perspective, where the researcher and the research participant are the same person, positionality is certainly central to the autoethnographer’s methodological decision-making: making explicit how and why the autoethnographer makes meaning and sees the world in particular kinds of ways is central to the

autoethnographic research method. This emphasis on the autoethnographer's standpoint and worldview aligns well with the focus on axiology, epistemology and ontology in a previous section of this chapter, which also draw our attention to these deeply personal and highly philosophical questions. In the case of this thesis, my autoethnographic positionality is expressed explicitly in Chapter 5 in response to the first research question, and also helps to frame my engagement with the second research question in Chapter 6.

Thirdly and finally, Anteliz et al. (2023b) articulated "**power**" (p. 6) as an organising principle of autoethnography in educational research "from two principal perspectives" (p. 6):

Firstly, education is fundamentally a political practice that empowers some learners, and that perpetuates the disempowerment of other learners, including those from marginalised communities, and educational opportunities have both opportunities and obligations to render the powerful intentions and effects of education tangible, visible, and open to contestation and reformation. Secondly, autoethnography has proven itself to be an enduringly empowering research method, with self-narratives of multiple kinds powerfully communicating the experiences and expectations – including those related to education – of individuals and groups. (p. 6)

This elaboration of education as "fundamentally a political practice" (Anteliz et al., 2023b, p. 6), and of autoethnography as "an enduringly empowering research method" (p. 6), resonated with the distinction in this thesis between the macro and micro levels of analysis. The macro level is certainly concerned with international education as a political practice, including the circulation of capital and the exercise of power through the enactment of policy. Similarly, the micro level focuses on the complex interplay between that political practice and individuals' and

groups' direct experiences of international education against the backdrop of the wider educational field.

This section of the chapter has highlighted key features of the autoethnographic research method, including introducing the method, exploring "A Typology of Autoethnographic Practices" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1664), examining the logically distinct yet practically overlapping notions of evocative and analytic autoethnography, and considering pedagogies, positionality and power as three organising principles of autoethnography in educational research (Anteliz et al., 2023b). At the same time, the section has explained and justified the choice of this research method as being 'fit for purpose' in terms of gathering and analysing data to support credible responses to the study's two research questions.

#### **4.5 Data Gathering**

This section of the chapter focuses on the various strategies that I used for data gathering in this study. Autoethnography's focus on the researcher also being the sole or principal research participant has important implications for those strategies, which I explain here.

A useful starting point is to examine the data gathering techniques associated with ethnography, which constitutes a considerable part of the origins of autoethnography. From that perspective, the main objective of ethnography is to provide a detailed description of the situation being analysed that then becomes the basis of the interpretation of the phenomena (Nurani, 2008). Nurani (2008) added that a key feature of ethnography "is the characteristic of 'holistic' which means seeing the data as a whole in order to get a basis for explanation about the observable fact" (pp. 442-443). This emphasis on comprehensive description generating credible interpretation and rigorous explanation depends on careful and finely honed observation, a capacity for bringing



what is observed to life for others who are unfamiliar with the phenomena, an awareness of multiple and diverse readers of the ethnographic text and a sensitivity to how the specific example relates to the broader principle in terms of analysis and evaluation.

Some of the distinctiveness of autoethnography as a research method becomes clear when we consider the need to apply this description–interpretation–explanation linkage to the context in which the researcher is also the research participant, as noted above. The next section in this chapter explores the interplay between subjectivity and self-reflexivity that is crucial to rigorous analysis of autoethnographic data. At this point, I focus on the character of those data and the options available for their gathering.

In this regard, Farrell et al. (2015) differentiated implicitly between “[e]xternal data” (p. 979) and internal data, in that they depicted external data explicitly, and they also elaborated what I inferred would come under the banner of “internal data” if they had named it accordingly. From that perspective, internal data pertain to the self about whom the research is being conducted and written. For instance, this kind of “[d]ata collection can include the keeping of both field notes and a reflective journal about interactions with learners” (p. 977), and “This type of data collection in autoethnography is similar to that in ethnographic participant observation, in which the researcher collects data while participating in the activity being studied” (p. 977). Clearly, internal research data can include a wide range of documentary sources, including the aforementioned field notes and reflection journals, and also diary entries, photographs and videos, email messages, letters and other more formal documentation, and almost any other forms of communication sent and/or received by the researcher/participant, subject to ethical and political considerations as outlined later in this chapter.

By contrast, “[e]xternal data are important as they ensure that the researcher includes additional perspectives that can help [to] inform on

his or her subjectivity” (Farrell et al., 2015, p. 979). Clearly, such data are vital to avoiding unbridled subjectivity on the researcher’s part, as I elaborate in the next section, and that avoidance is crucial in turn for enhancing the research quality and trustworthiness, as I articulate in a later section in the chapter. From this perspective, external data tend to include texts (such as policies and procedures) that are generated by others, and with which the researcher/participant has engaged in particular kinds of ways.

More specifically, I started the data gathering in this study by considering carefully the personal experiences that had prompted me to begin my project, and then I moved on to conducting initial research by writing field notes. These included records of my feelings and reflections throughout my experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university, and they were all accordingly embedded in the “natural setting” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2018; Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 351) of that university.

The initial screening for data gathering started and comprised both personal historical accounts and contemporary written documents. I filtered official emails that I had received, and all petitions and requests for support that I had composed, arranging them all in chronological order, in both written and visual texts. Written texts were in the form of doctoral study documents, journals, notes from presentations, formal publications, readings and social media. In particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic, I had registered all the important updates on a daily basis and saved them all in a specific folder on the cloud that I can access at any time. This basic data gathering structure was fundemnatal to my capacity to retrieve accurate and relevant information, and also to address vital questions about what, where and when.

What: what to write was important to strenghen the value of my autoethnography, as I did not seek only to write my personal story,

but also to write that story as contributing to a broader level of meaning-making that went beyond my personal experiences.

Where: where to place the written content in my thesis was the second important factor to ensure cohesion and a logically sequenced flow of ideas and information.

When: when to select specific aspects of my experiences from different times during my doctoral candidature at an Australian university was an important consideration to confirm some degree of representativeness in my coverage of the different phases in those experiences.

I also ensured that the data gathering for the thesis reflected an appropriate balance between internal data and “[e]xternal data” (Farrell et al., 2015, p. 979). The former category, clustered around texts that I had authored, ranging from my field notes and my reflective journal to my emails and letters to my presentations at the biannual research symposia of the Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher group at my Australian university. The latter category, focused on texts authored by others, comprised email and letter correspondence to me (including from my thesis supervisors and the graduate research school at my Australian university), government and university policies and procedures, official speeches delivered by representatives of the then Australian Government, published literature and social media posts.

The corpus of data gathered for this study was very extensive and could easily have become overwhelming. I was guided in avoiding such a situation by aligning proposed data with the study’s two research questions and also with the six concepts constituting the study’s conceptual framework, as I elaborate in the next section of the chapter.

## **4.6 Data Analysis**

This section of the chapter focuses on the strategies used in the study to conduct data analysis. It follows from the previous section's account of data gathering in the context of the autoethnographic research method that, like data gathering, data analysis in that context is both distinctive and diverse if it is to help to ensure that the autoethnography is rigorous and robust. In this thesis, data analysis was divided into two distinct forms: data analysis across both research questions; and data analysis specific to each research question (given that the two research questions were interdependent but intentionally focused on different levels of analysis that required different kinds of analysis).

### ***4.6.1 Data Analysis across Both Research Questions***

A number of forms of data analysis extended across both research questions in this study. Fundamentally, data analysis is a form of distilled meaning-making, and certainly meaning-making is central to the autoethnographic research method from at least two distinct perspectives. The first is the meaning that the autoethnographic researcher makes of the phenomenon being experienced: "In an autoethnography, the researcher/participant engages in reflection to explore personal meaning in a cultural milieu" (Wells et al., 2019, p. 336). The second is the meaning that the autoethnographic researcher conveys to the readers of the autoethnographic texts (such as this thesis) so that they in turn can discern such meaning in the autoethnographer's communicated experiences. In this regard, meaning-making helps to determine how the data are connected to the realities of other people with similar stories (Chang, 2013). Moreover, the resonance of this process of meaning-making was synthesised in an evocative metaphor by Chang (2013): gathering "fragments of life against the light and making sense of their significance" (p. 115).

In a different vein, Mhaka-Mutepfa and Rampa (2021) identified a number of different strategies that they had found useful in autoethnographic meaning-making in a situation of considerable adversity in a university in sub-Saharan Africa, including interrogating “global and situational levels” (p. 5) simultaneously, “narrative writing” (p. 5), analysing the impact of “external conditions” (p. 13) on one’s individual experiences and “evaluation of reactions to daily events” (p. 14). I incorporated all these strategies into the data analysis employed in this study.

A second type of data analysis that traversed both research questions in this thesis was critical self-reflexivity, which was used to complement and in a sense to offset the inevitably high degree of subjectivity (Ratner, 2002) associated with the autoethnographic research method. The importance of such critical self-reflexivity was recognised more than 20 years ago, when Spry (2001) stated: “Autoethnographers argue that self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experiences, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts ... ” (p. 711). Moreover, “Socioculturally reflexive critique is at the heart of ethical intimate dialogical performance” (p. 716), such as has been intended in this thesis. In practical terms, Spry highlighted a process that also became the case for me as my data analysis took shape: “I began to hear my own scholarly voice, where truth and reality are not fixed categories, where self-reflexive critique is sanctioned, and where heresy is viewed as liberatory” (p. 721).

This approach also accords with a broader use of critical self-reflexivity in different kinds of qualitative research. For instance, “self-reflexivity in research processes has become an increasingly important area for concern in qualitative research methodology in recent years” (Bott, 2010, p. 159), a trend that has accelerated since Bott made this observation. More specifically, Bott noted:

... the need for researchers to remain in 'flexible' dialogue with their research subjects and contexts, in order to preserve a sense of the researcher's own subjectivity within the process – and therefore [to] avoid the tendency to become 'absent' from or 'above' our research contexts – and also towards the nurturing of relationships of mutual exchange (of information, secrets, disclosures and 'truths'). (p.159)

At the same time, Bott (2010) acknowledged that critical self-reflexivity is not necessarily easy or straightforward in practice, and that it can generate unexpected complexities:

Often disclosures can be problematic for researchers and research participants alike; they carry potential risks to integrity, safety and privacy for both and it is among the many duties of the researcher to take responsibility for how they are handled, not only in the field but also during writing up. (p. 160)

Noting carefully the timely warning by Davies et al. (2019) to avoid "tokenistic researcher self-reflexivity written mechanically in so many research methods sections" (p. 211) of doctoral theses, I engaged in a number of techniques to augment my inevitable autoethnographic subjectivity with the additional insights presented by critical self-reflexivity. These techniques included: asking (and answering) myself the question, "What other meanings can be made from this event or phenomenon?"; asking my wife to be a sounding board about possible alternative interpretations of our separate and shared experiences in Egypt and Australia; asking my thesis supervisors to take on an equivalent role with regard to my developing analysis of my experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at an Australian university; and using my thesis examiners' written and verbal feedback about my developing analysis as an additional basis for reflecting further on the strengths and potential areas for development in that analysis.

The third and final strategy of data analysis that traversed both research questions in this study was deductive thematic analysis (Blum et

al., 2020). This strategy was noted by Sinclair-Maragh and Simpson (2021) as being “appropriate when there is a predetermined framework and theory” (p. 70), and the authors highlighted that “The deductive approach was chosen based on a priori themes identified in the literature prior [to] conducting the research” (p. 69).

From that perspective, rather than seeking to elicit inductive themes arising from the data, I used the two sets of concepts articulated in the study’s conceptual framework in Chapter 3, and included in Table 4.1, as the stable framework against which specific items of data were analysed to discern how those data aligned with, and helped to extend, the respective concept. The rationale for this approach was that the concepts had emerged from the literature review in Chapter 2, and that I assessed them as being sufficiently rigorous and robust to provide the foundation for an accurate and authentic process of data analysis. I acknowledge that this approach contained the risk of overlooking themes that were unrelated to these selected concepts, and I plan to undertake an inductive thematic analysis of the data gathered for this study in future publications.

#### ***4.6.2 Data Analysis Specific to Each Research Question***

Table 4.1 sets out the data analysis strategies that were specific to each research question in this study.

**Table 4.1***Research Question-Specific Data Analysis Strategies*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Chapter Number</b>	<b>Analysis Level</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Data Analysis Strategy</b>
1. How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family's and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns?	5	Micro	Liminality Marginalisation Mental health	Critical incidents



<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Chapter Number</b>	<b>Analysis Level</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Data Analysis Strategy</b>
2. What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?	6	Macro	University social responsibility (USR) Corporate social responsibility (CSR) Customer relationship management (CRM)	Thematic extrapolation

As noted in Table 4.1, the research-question specific data analysis strategy that I employed in Chapter 5 to address the study's first research question was critical incidents, which have a particular currency with the autoethnographic research method (Boufoy-Bastic, 2004; Forber-Pratt, 2015). As Butterfield et al. (2005) explained, the critical incident technique has evolved over time and has been widely used in diverse scholarly disciplines. Despite this diversity, Butterfield et al. emphasised the key features of critical incident analysis. Firstly, "determining the aim

or objective of [an] activity became a basic condition before any other aspect of the study could proceed" (p. 478). "The second step ... is that of setting plans and specifications" (p. 478). "The third step .... is collecting the data" (p. 478). "The fourth step involves analyzing the data" (p. 479). "The fifth and final step is that of interpreting and reporting the data" (p. 479).

Given my use of critical incidents to address the first research questions using the three micro level concepts in Chapter 5, I was particularly interested in selecting critical incidents that helped to illuminate experiences of liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns by international on-campus doctoral students in Australia. In doing so, I found myself analysing the selected critical incidents and connecting them to the existing political and social climate (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Furthermore, I also found myself in agreement with Forber-Pratt's (2015) insight:

This was an iterative process of reading, re-reading, revising, and critically asking myself if anything was missing. Many autoethnographers thrive in the creative space where we can re-write our histories, we can change the outcomes with our words, we can imagine new scenarios or re-look at critical incidents in our lives with a different lens today than we may have had years ago. (p. 834)

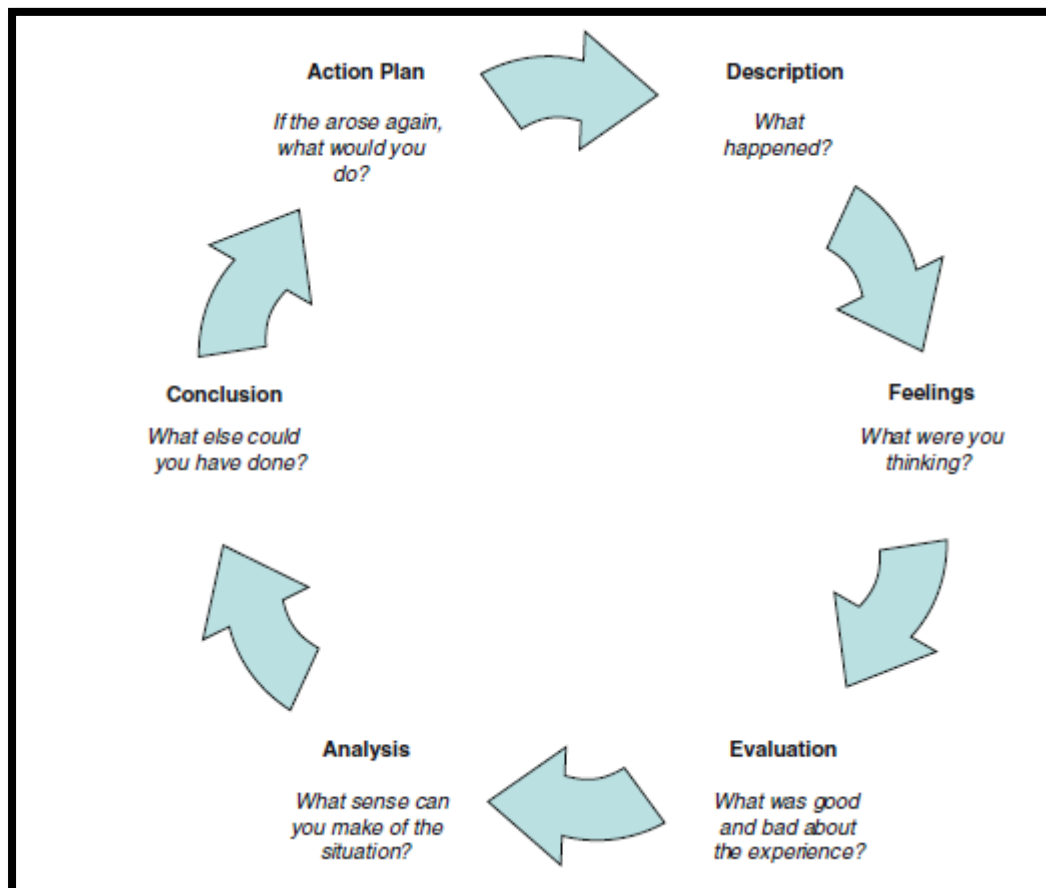
As part of this "iterative process" (Forber-Pratt, 2015, p. 834), I posed three specific questions about each selected critical incident: (1) What happened?; (2) Why did it happen?; and (3) What does what happened say about my and others' experiences of the reported phenomenon?

More widely, in analysing the selected critical incidents presented in Chapter 5 to address the study's first research question, I employed the specific phases and accompanying organising questions outlined by Serrat

and Serrat (2017) to investigate critical incidents, as represented in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1**

*Analysing Critical Incidents*



*Note.* Source: Reprinted from Serrat and Serrat (2017, p. 1080)

As outlined in Figure 4.1, Serrat and Serrat (2017) identified six stages of analysis of critical incidents that I implemented in this study:

- 1) the incident ("description")
- 2) emotional behaviours and/or reflections ("feelings")
- 3) pros/cons or advantages/disadvantages ("evaluation")
- 4) the interpreter's honest role ("analysis")
- 5) behavioural outcomes ("conclusion")
- 6) suggestions and recommendations ("action plan") (p. 1080).

As noted also in Table 4.1, the research-question specific data analysis strategy that I employed in Chapter 6 to address the study's second research question was thematic extrapolation, which was considered appropriate given the move from the micro to the macro levels of analysis related to moving from the first to the second research questions and therefore moving from Chapters 5 to 6. From that perspective, Chapter 6 involved a process of extrapolating from the critical incidents interrogated in Chapter 5 to broader themes that could be interpreted as applying to other international on-campus doctoral students in Australia beyond myself, and consequently as signifying the wider significance of the critical incidents in Chapter 5 and also of the themes in Chapter 6. It should be noted that this process of thematic extrapolation in Chapter 6 was guided also by the three macro level concepts elaborated in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3: USR, CSR and CRM.

Thematic extrapolation has a long history in the academic literature. Jepsen (1994) reported Super's advocacy (1954) of "a method for predicting career patterns called the Thematic-Extrapolation Method (TEM)" (p. 43), to which Jepsen suggested some refinements. Savickas (2001) elaborated this method as follows: "... the psychological career pattern requires counsellors to recognise and extract the themes from the work history. Having identified themes, the counsellor then extrapolates each theme into the future to provide a basis for career decision making and planning" (p. 54). A few years later, McIlveen et al. (2005) usefully elaborated thematic extrapolation as follows in careers counselling research: "This technique proceeds through analysis of events and development in order to synthesise recurrent themes and underlying trends, and ultimately predict [to] their career future" (p. 32).

What interests me in the process of thematic extrapolation is that I see it as a work of synthesis rather than of prediction. The intention is to highlight the broader, macro level meaning and significance of the

inherently individualised critical incidents discussed above. In that regard, it was encouraging to note that, beyond its origins in careers counselling theory, thematic extrapolation was highlighted in the context of business research (Kowalewski & Waukau-Villagomez, 2011), thereby confirming its utility across diverse disciplines.

This section of the chapter has explained and justified the various data analysis strategies employed in this study. A distinction was made between data analysis across both research questions (including meaning-making, critical self-reflexivity and deductive thematic analysis) and data analysis specific to each research question (including critical incidents to address Research Question 1 in Chapter 5 and thematic extrapolation to address Research Question 2 in Chapter 6). In combination, these varied data analysis strategies proved to be 'fit for purpose' in relation to addressing the study's research question and to helping to generate new knowledge, as I elaborate in Chapter 7.

#### **4.7 Ethical and Political Considerations**

This section of the chapter focuses on the ethical and political considerations related to this autoethnographic study. Although a formal process of human research ethics committee approval was not needed for this research, I was very conscious throughout the investigation of the importance of observing the ethical principles associated with the autoethnographic research method.

At the outset, I note that, while Dauphinee (2010) acknowledged some methodological risks related to autoethnography, she posited that autoethnography entails ethical power that can be positive, proactive and purposeful, referring to:

... the ethical value of autoethnography in its exploration of the limitations of academic voice and its impact on those we write

[about], the truths we are able to recognise and transcribe, and the ways in which the academic voice silences the self ... (p. 799)

Lapadat (2017) affirmed this ethical value, but she also identified risks to that value: "the [ethnographic] method is rooted in ethical intent, yet autoethnographers nevertheless face ethical challenges" (p. 589). The first challenge was "*Relational Ethics*": "How to manage the portrayal of others in an autoethnographic account or in any form of autobiographic writing constitutes a significant ethical challenge" (p. 593). Or as Adams and Herrmann (2020) expressed the situation concisely: "Do we need others' permission to share our experiences?" (Adams & Herrmann, 2020, p. 3).

This is a challenge of which I have been acutely aware throughout this study. On the one hand, I have worked hard to ensure that my autoethnographic voice has been articulated as authentically, comprehensively and powerfully as possible. On the other hand, I certainly recognise that every critical incident outlined in Chapter 5, and every thematic extrapolation presented in Chapter 6, has involved other individuals apart from myself. Sometimes these others have been my wife and our son; at other times they have been my thesis supervisors; on still other occasions they have been research administrators at my Australian university and employers to whom I have submitted job applications. I have sought to avoid appearing to represent or to speak on behalf of any of these others, or to infer any particular intentions or values from their observed interactions with me. While I have not felt the need to seek their permission to share the experiences reported in this thesis, I have not taken for granted my authority to report those experiences, and I have exercised that authority carefully and judiciously.

Secondly, Lapadat (2017) identified "*Researcher Vulnerability*" (p. 594) as an ethical challenge of autoethnography:

Autoethnographic work can affect the researcher in unforeseen ways. The evocative power of a personal narrative that makes it so

compelling and able to shift readers' perspectives rests in narrators offering themselves up for public scrutiny by an audience or readership. (p. 594)

Again, I was very conscious of this ethical challenge and potential risk to my family and myself. It was the case that I found it difficult to write about my autoethnographic experiences, and that doing so recreated memories of certain traumatic events that I would otherwise not have revisited. At the same time, the process of writing this thesis has in many ways been therapeutic and even transformative.

Thirdly and finally, Lapadat (2017) highlighted an ethical challenge related to what might be seen as the political responsibility of autoethnographic researchers:

Some critics have implied that autoethnography is an easy way out of grappling with issues of fieldwork and ethnographic writing. Legitimizing [autoethnography] could lead to a generation of researchers focused on self-absorption and self-celebration rather than using their research skills to examine global social issues and proposing pragmatic ways to address those issues. From this perspective, autoethnographers have reneged on the social expectation that researchers will use their privileged positions in universities and their theoretical and professional knowledge and research training to make a real and positive difference in the world ... (p. 596)

A variation on this theme was articulated by Ploder and Stadlbauer (2016) specifically in relation to performative autoethnography:

Given the inherent political dimension of performative research (one of the central claims of which is to contribute to an empowerment of the weak and a political change for the sake of those in need), the danger of reifying one's own voice and serving neoliberal self-marketing demands should not be ignored. It underlines the

necessity to take its emancipatory potential seriously and to aim for its enforcement in research practice. (p. 759)

Unlike the first two ethical challenges identified above by Lapadat (2017), I do not see this concern as being relevant to my study. On the contrary, I have sought to use the thesis as a platform for using my personal experiences to extrapolate broader lessons for international education in Australia and overseas, and to present an alternative vision of international education that would lead to a very different outcome from the one experienced by thousands of international on-campus doctoral students in Australia, including myself, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

All the ethical challenges of autoethnography articulated by Lapadat (2017) contained within them political considerations. From that perspective, they all required the exercise of political as well as ethical decision-making that involved the mobilisation of particular kinds of power. This same mobilisation was evident also in other autoethnographic studies. For instance, Ettore (2016) asserted concisely: "Speaking about oneself [through autoethnography] transforms into stories of political responsibility – a key issue for feminists who function as cultural mediators". Similarly, Spry (2001) advocated "the personal/professional/political emancipatory potential of autoethnographic performance as a method of inquiry" (p. 706). Furthermore, Luitel and Dahal (2021) distilled the political dimension of autoethnography as follows: "Our notion of autoethnography as a critical project is associated with raising the agenda of social justice and empowerment through storytelling practices and life-writing. The personal-is-political is the central idea of a critical project" (p. 2). As noted above, I share this viewpoint of autoethnography "as a critical project" with an overtly political purpose, while also taking appropriate account of the ethical risks also noted above.



## 4.8 Research Quality and Trustworthiness

The final main section in this chapter about this study's research design relates to the study's research quality and trustworthiness. This issue is central to effective research because it underpins every aspect of a researcher's methodological decision-making: "study design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 31).

From this perspective, it is important to note that the criteria for assessing the rigour of positivist or postpositivist research, and also quantitative research, including validity and reliability, are generally regarded as not being applicable to interpretivist, qualitative and/or autoethnographic research. This is despite the observation by Noble and Smith (2015):

In the broadest context these terms are applicable, with validity referring to the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data, while reliability describes consistency within the employed analytical procedures. (p. 34)

Accordingly, it is vital to apply different but equally defensible to establish the rigour of interpretivist, qualitative and/or autoethnographic research. In that regard, Noble and Smith (2015) advocated "*Truth value*" for "*Validity*", "*Consistency*" and "*Neutrality (or confirmability)*" for "*Reliability*", and "*Applicability*" for "*Generalisability*" (p. 34). However, other methodologists would be likely to reject the idea of a one-to-one substitution of one set of terms for another, and many autoethnographers would question the notion of "*Neutrality*" in the context of their research method.

In this study, I applied five criteria for establishing this autoethnography's research quality and trustworthiness as proposed by Le Roux (2017), and as summarised in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2**

*Research Quality and Trustworthiness Criteria Applied to this Study*

<b>Criterion (Le Roux, 2017)</b>	<b>Application in this study</b>
<i>Subjectivity</i> : The self is primarily visible in the research. The researcher re-enacts or re-tells a noteworthy or critical personal relational or institutional experience – generally in search of self-understanding. The researcher is self-consciously involved in the construction of the narrative which constitutes the research. (p. 204)	As I noted above, my subjectivity is a central element of this autoethnographic study, and I have been “self-consciously involved in the construction of the narrative which constitutes the research” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204) through this study. I have drawn heavily on my current and recollected experiences from my personal perspective, and I have sought self-understanding throughout this process.
“ <i>Self-reflexivity</i> : There is evidence of the researcher’s intense awareness of his or her role in and relationship to the research which is situated within a historical and cultural context. Reflexivity points to self-awareness, self-exposure and self-conscious introspection” (p. 204).	As I also noted above, critical self-reflexivity was one of three data analysis strategies that I employed across both research questions in this study. In doing so, I sought to move beyond unconscious introspection to heightened degrees of “self-awareness, self-exposure and self-conscious introspection” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204) by subjecting my developing analysis of my autoethnographic experiences to consistent and systematic review and critique

Criterion (Le Roux, 2017)	Application in this study
	(such as through vigorous discussions with my thesis supervisors).
<p><i>Resonance</i>: Resonance requires that the audience is able to enter into, engage with, experience or connect with the writer's story on an intellectual and emotional level. There is a sense of commonality between the researcher and the audience; an intertwining of lives. (p. 204)</p>	<p>In writing this thesis, including the two data analysis chapters, I have simultaneously engaged in comprehensive analysis to address the study's two research questions and written the text as clearly and hopefully evocatively as I could in order to construct and enhance "a sense of commonality between the researcher and the audience; an intertwining of lives" (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204).</p>
<p><i>"Credibility</i>: There should be evidence of verisimilitude, plausibility and trustworthiness in the research. The research process and reporting should be permeated by honesty" (p. 204).</p>	<p>I have designed and written this thesis as honestly as possible, sharing authentic experiences and my understandings of those experiences at the time and subsequently in order to provide systematic "evidence of verisimilitude, plausibility and trustworthiness" (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204).</p>
<p><i>"Contribution</i>: The study should extend knowledge, generate ongoing research, liberate, empower, improve practice, or</p>	<p>Chapter 7 in this thesis provides a logically sequenced account of the study's asserted contributions to different kinds of knowledge. In</p>

<b>Criterion (Le Roux, 2017)</b>	<b>Application in this study</b>
make a contribution to social change. Autoethnography teaches, informs and inspires” (p. 204).	doing so, I hope that the thesis will “extend knowledge, generate ongoing resaserch, liberate, empower, improve practice, [and/]or make a contribution to social change” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 204) in combination with other research in this scholarly, policy and practice space.

Establishing the quality and trustworthiness of any research project is central to its findings and to its claims about the significance of those findings. For this study, Le Roux’s (2017) five criteria for assessing the rigour of the autoethnographic research method were relevant and robust, and they provided an effective framework for that assessment in the case of this research.

#### **4.9 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the study’s research design and the methodological resources that I assembled to assist in addressing the study’s two ressearch questions. These resources included the interpretivist research paradigm, the qualitative research orientation and the autoethnographic research method. Data gathering involved using a range of sources of information, including internal sources (texts created by myself) and external sources (texts created by others). Data analysis entailed three strategies used across both research questions (meaning-making, critical self-reflexivity and deductive thematic analysis) and data analysis specific to each research question (involving critical incidents to address Research Question 1 in Chapter 5 and thematic extrapolation to address Research Question 2 in Chapter 6). The chapter also considered

the study's ethical and political considerations, as well as the five criteria used to assess the study's research quality and trustworthiness.

I turn now to present Chapter 5, the first of the thesis's two data analysis chapters, to outline the findings collated in response to the study's first research question.

# **Chapter 5: RESEARCH QUESTION 1**

## **5.1 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter assembles my collated data analysis and presents the evidence to respond to Research Question 1 in this study: “How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family’s and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns?”

The chapter has been structured around three main sections – selected autoethnographic experiences:

- Before my arrival in Australia
- During my doctoral study in Australia
- Post-Covid-19.

Each section contains three elements:

- A focused description of selected events from the respective period of time
- For the second and third sections, one or more critical incidents from that period of time
- Analysis of the interplay among liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns (the three micro level concepts from the study’s conceptual framework) evidenced by the critical incident/s.

## **5.2 Selected Autoethnographic Experiences before My Arrival in Australia**

The purpose of this section of the chapter is to provide a selective introduction to my life leading up to my arrival in Australia in February 2020, at the same time as the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. All autoethnographic experiences necessarily have prior events leading to those experiences that are necessary to understand in order to analyse the character and effects of the experiences. In this case, these previous

life events provided a foundation for comparing and contrasting what happened to me in Australia from February 2020 onwards. These events have been clustered around three distinct periods in my pre-Australian life: 1993–1998; 1998–2008; and 2011–2018.

### **5.2.1 1993–1998**

I completed my Bachelor of Commerce degree at Cairo University in Egypt in 1993. Because I finished my school studies at College de La Salle in Cairo, and given that I am fluent in three languages, I decided to work in the tourism sector. I started my first job in September 1995 as a tour manager in an Egyptian/French company in the travel sector in Egypt. I progressed successfully for 10 years and was selected for a new managerial appointment in 1998 with a British multinational travel tour operator – the second biggest tour operator in Europe – to be their regional director in Egypt. In 1997, I began to realise the crucial role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) after participating in the famous Opera Aida on the West Bank of Egypt (see Figure 5.1), which led to sustained growth whereby Egypt reached 3,961,000 tourists in that year (The World Bank, 2019).

### Figure 5.1

*Opera Aida at the West Bank of Egypt in October 1997*



*Note.* Source: Al-Masry Al-Youm (2019).  
(<https://egyptindependent.com/after-22-years-halt-opera-aida-finally-returns-to-luxors-hatshepsut-temple/>)

In November 1997, after a few days after this operatic event in Egypt, I was lying on a hotel beach lounge beside the Red Sea in Egypt, while escorting a group of tourists from the Netherlands, when I received the terrible news of the brutal attack at the Temple of Hatshepsut at the West Bank (see Figure 5.2) – the same location where I had escorted British tourist groups during Opera Aida a few days previously in October 1997. This brutal attack left 58 tourists and four Egyptians dead at the West Bank of Luxor in Egypt, and it was among the world's most horrific acts of terrorism in 1997  
([https://irp.fas.org/threat/terror\\_97/mideast.html](https://irp.fas.org/threat/terror_97/mideast.html)).



**Figure 5.2**

*The Temple of Hatshepsut at the West Bank in Egypt*



*Note.* Source: Reprinted from:  
<https://www.hurghadareisen.com/hatshepsut-temple/>

With almost 30% of world monuments in Luxor, and 70% of Egypt's monuments in Luxor (Hauslohner, 2010), I began to think very deeply about how we could protect tourism revenues in my country. Egypt is a very rich country; however, many people are living below the poverty line (Sabry, 2010). Poverty lines must be set at levels that make sufficient allowance for the real costs of living: enough food that is nutritious, reasonable quality accommodation, water, sanitation, electricity, keeping children in school, transport, health care and medicines when needed (Sabry, 2010). I was following very keenly the terrorist attacks that occurred in Egypt within the years 1993-1997, and, by the time of the horrible attack at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor, I decided to think about a project called "Tourism for Development". My intention was to consider whether, if we could improve community development and

reduce poverty, there would be no longer a political orientation to exploit poor people for terrorist attacks and to destroy the Egyptian economy.

### **5.2.2 1998–2008**

During 10 years of hard work, I was appointed to the position of Executive Operation Manager for an Egyptian travel agency in 2003 and then as Tourism Manager in 2005. I was supporting the agency employees as fully as possible in their development as independent, successful and confident executives. In 2008, the idea to progress further with the dream born in 1997 – after the terrorist attack in Luxor – had begun to be developed, and I considered how to raise my voice internationally.

In 2008, fortunately I received a new appointment with a multinational aircraft brokerage firm in New York in the United States of America to work as the Regional Director in the Gulf area and the Middle East. I developed my idea to create necessary alliances between multinational organisations to maximise their benefits and to reduce the penetration strategic costs for different countries through alliances. However, the most crucial part – which is CSR – was still missing. Owing to my recent research about the 37 previous definitions of CSR (as noted in Chapter 3), I found no obligations of organisations to play a significant part in strengthening CSR. Furthermore, I was prepared to wait for further development in a future role in CSR once I found that the focus was initially on benefiting organisations.

### **5.2.3 2011–2018**

In 2011, there was the Arab Spring Revolution in Egypt and many other Arabic countries. The first demonstrations took place in central Tunisia in December 2010, catalysed by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor protesting his treatment by local officials. Inspired by Tunisia's demonstrations, similar protests were quickly organised among young Egyptians through social media, bringing

out massive crowds across Egypt on 25 January 2011 (see Figure 5.3). Encouraged by protesters' rapid successes in Tunisia and Egypt, protest movements took hold in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria in late January, February and March 2011 (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>).

By then, in January 2011, I had been appointed as the General Manager of another Egyptian travel agency and was managing 586 employees, two hotels and 28 managers, in addition to a fleet of cars and minibuses. I was living five minutes away from the centre of the scenes of the revolution, and nearly 10 minutes from the Presidential residence, where I was supposed to work. Another crucial challenge in starting my job, even after 10 days after my contract had started, was how to approach businesses in these challenging revolutionary times and to convince tourists to come to Egypt at that time. I successfully approached businesses from Russia and Romania despite the revolution that was occurring in my country, Egypt. I was using a new business methodology to approach businesses focusing on transparency, safety and integrity for everyone in Egypt (including the tourists whom I needed to approach at that difficult time). Until 2013, I was trying to manage the case professionally; however, after 2013, lots of political and economic issues occurred that confronted me, and I was unable to proceed sustainably.

### Figure 5.3

*Independence (Tahrir) Square – Cairo – Egypt*



*Note.* Source: Reprinted from Hossam el-Hamalawy.  
<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/ten-years-later-reflections-on-egypts-2011-uprising/>

This very selective account of some of my key life experiences prior to the commencement of my doctoral study at an Australian university highlighted some features of my earlier life that helped to frame my understanding of and engagement with the highly complex and stressful situation that confronted me in Australia. Firstly, I have always enjoyed international travel and living and working overseas. I also have a facility at languages and a well-developed curiosity about different cultural practices and national and regional worldviews. Secondly, I have a reverence for formal and informal learning, shaped by my parents' upbringing of my siblings and me, and I am grateful for the opportunities to study and learn formally and informally in different parts of the world at different times in my life. Thirdly, having seen poverty in different countries at close quarters and at first hand, I have spent a long time thinking about practical ways in which businesses can align their CSR and

their customer relationship management (CRM) so that poverty can be alleviated rather than perpetuated.

Finally in this section, it is useful to consider initially the three micro level concepts helping to frame this chapter conceptually. From that perspective, my early and continuing experiences of international travel and of working overseas created opportunities for liminality for me, in the sense of being an expatriate in a different country. I found these opportunities to be 'betwixt and between' exhilarating and even liberating, and I learned greatly from them. At the same time, I acknowledge that, rather than experiencing marginalisation during these opportunities, I had sufficient cultural, economic and social capital to be confident about my roles and responsibilities and about my capacity to discharge those roles and responsibilities effectively despite doing so in a different country from my homeland. Consequently, a few professionally challenging situations notwithstanding, I found that my mental health was generally well-developed and robust, and that I was able to exhibit resilience appropriately.

### **5.3 Selected Autoethnographic Experiences during my Doctoral Study in Australia**

In this section of the chapter, I relate my selected autoethnographic experiences during the period of time that coincided with the start of my doctoral study at an Australian university and the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. By contrast with the events described in the previous section, this period of my life was filled with significant challenges that at times seemed to be insoluble and overwhelming.

In 2018, I was appointed to the role of Acting Chief Executive Officer for an Emirati International travel destination management corporation. My scope of development included Egypt, Oman and the United Arab of Emirates (UAE). My focus was on implementing my dream of supporting communities in a significant development role, especially in

the education sector. By the end of 2019, I started to prepare to travel to Australia to study my Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree, with the condition that I would continue working remotely from Australia until finding an appropriate job there. In January 2020, I was granted my Australian visa, and I prepared to land in Australia in early February 2020. For security in this new country, I arranged to stay in university accommodation for a few weeks with the plan of setting up my family's accommodation, at which point they could join me. I travelled to Australia – my new home for the next few years – with high hopes and heightened expectations of myself and of others.

Upon setting foot in Australia, I was provided with a luxury drop-off service from Brisbane airport to Toowoomba in Queensland, and check-in to my temporary accommodation. Over the following days, I contacted both of my pre-arranged Australian thesis supervisors to arrange our first face-to-face meeting. Both of my supervisors were very supportive of me on my arrival. I remember thanking them both as they were also supporting me to enrol my son in an appropriate school nearby, and I continued to arrange for my family's arrival as soon as accommodation was ready for them. Unfortunately, just a few days later, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown started, and the entire situation changed, seemingly overnight.

### **5.3.1 Critical Incident 1: Ambulance Trip to Hospital**

In early April 2020, as was noted in Chapter 1, the then Australian Prime Minister (see Figure 5.4) announced that international students who were not financially capable of staying in Australia were required to go home (Gibson et al., 2020; Moran et al., 2020). On 9 April 2020, one month after my arrival and a few days after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic, I was taken to the



Toowoomba hospital by ambulance. I was assisted by a professional and supportive intern doctor who provided me with a report:

This is to certify that Hisham has been in the Emergency Department today. Hisham has presented to us after failing to obtain a good sleep for the past few months. Today, he felt quite anxious and developed some palpitations in his chest. He was brought to us by ambulance .... However, it appears to me his mental health is getting compromised, as a result of this [lack of] sleep, and this cannot persist for the long term as it can have significant detriment for his health.

**Figure 5.4**

*Australian Prime Minister – Scott Morrison (2020)*



*Note.* Source: Picture by Karleen Minney, The Canberra Times, ACM. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6710557/international-students-should-go-home-morrison/>

This critical incident – being taken by ambulance to hospital with concerns about my physical and mental health very soon after my arrival as an international on-campus doctoral student at my Australian university – was a very stressful, even frightening, experience for me. I had no family or friends with me, and I knew no one in this new country. This hospital visit was a response to my very strong sense of generalised alarm about several issues simultaneously: the unknown impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on my family's and my health and wellbeing; the fact that we were living in different countries in different hemispheres thousands of kilometres distant from each other; the likely duration of the pandemic; the potential effect of the pandemic on my chosen topic for my doctoral study (travel and tourism, which were among the first casualties of the pandemic); and the then Australian Prime Minister's injunction to thousands of other international on-campus students and myself to "go home".

By way for further background information about this first critical incident in this chapter, I had been on a contract with my company in the UAE, and I had expected to be able to work remotely in Australia while completing my PhD study there. Unfortunately, as was the case with millions of people around the world, I lost my job with the company as the impact and implications of the Covid-19 pandemic made themselves felt.

I also found the student accommodation where I stayed initially after my arrival in Australia unsuitable. Many of the undergraduates residing in the same accommodation were noisy and inconsiderate towards other residents, and so I decided to move to find a more peaceful place to live. Unfortunately, the student accommodation management company was not flexible but instead focused only on collecting money, so I was required to pay the full lease even though I left soon after my arrival in Australia.



More broadly on the financial side of things, although I had secured sufficient funds to cover my tuition fees for the first year of full-time study in my PhD program, these funds became quickly depleted by having to pay for another lease and another bond to move to new accommodation after I left the student accommodation, as well as by relocation expenses related to moving my furniture. Moreover, I found the loss of my job in the UAE at this time highly debilitating and a circumstance that continues to affect my mental health and my sense of financial security even to this day.

At this point, I realised that the liminality that I had previously experienced positively as a highly valued expatriate business leader living in other countries was now being experienced far more negatively, given my status as an international student who had previously been welcomed to Australia but who was now being positioned as someone who was no longer welcome and who needed to “go home”. Thus, although I was contributing to the Australian economy at a time when that economy was being seriously threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic, I felt that my status as a non-citizen rendered me expendable and unwelcome to remain in the country that I had entered legitimately so very recently. In other words, my liminality in this situation had shifted towards marginalisation and invisibility, which in turn exacerbated my anxiety and my mental health concerns. I returned from this unexpected hospital visit very worried about my future in Australia and that of my family in Egypt.

Against this backdrop, two days later, I decided to move to another private accommodation, and I paid for the full remaining lease for the initial student accommodation. I moved to a small, two-bedroom house in Toowoomba in South West Queensland, and decided to focus on my doctoral study as my thesis supervisors and I started to have all our meetings online owing to Covid-19.

At the same time as making decisions about accommodation and starting to build my relationship with my thesis supervisors, I also started

to look for paid employment. In a different context, Danaher (2022b) found that “employment agencies work with and for government and other large employers, and that individual potential employees need to rely on personal connections for specialised assistance” (p. 186). Starting in the first week at my Australian university, I contacted the career and employability department at my university, and I was supported by their team to edit my resume according to the Australian standards. At this time, I remained hopeful of proceeding to the next step, which was to find an appropriate job. However, I soon realised that all success in Australia relies on personal connections, especially for executive jobs, and that almost by definition international students living in a new country lack such connections. Since that time, and as I elaborate in Critical Incident 2 below, I have sent thousands of applications to several recruitment agencies as well as directly to employers, and yet one outcome still occurs: a standardised response to the application, acknowledging my impressive experience, yet rejecting the application, nevertheless.

I remained persistent for three years, right up until today, and yet I still receive the same consistent response. In this way, the issue of discrimination against international students in Australia became entangled with the idea that international students deserved equal treatment only because of their economic value to the Australian state (Robertson, 2011). In this regard, the question should be asked, “If employers found my resume, and those of thousands of other international students, very impressive, what was preventing Australian employers from hiring us for our skills?”

As mentioned above, I met my two thesis supervisors soon after arriving in Australia, and I was supported by them to settle appropriately until we started our first meeting. I met as well with Professor Patrick Danaher, one of the course academics, who played a crucial role in my doctoral study, and I experienced a specific chemistry and harmony that supported my progression during our regular meetings each Wednesday

in his office at Toowoomba. As a result, I asked him to join my thesis supervisory team so that we could all benefit from his wide academic expertise. My existing supervisors welcomed him to join the team, confirming my belief that he added value to the thesis supervisory team. Professor Danaher encouraged my continuation in my study at many times when I was considering returning home, with my decision either way especially pertinent after the then Australian Prime Minister called on all international students to “go home”. In this situation, Professor Danaher strengthened my perseverance and resilience, and I decided to persevere.

During my first Australian winter in 2020, in Toowoomba, Queensland, there was a night when I stayed in my research office on campus until 3:00 am, and I remembered Professor Danaher’s feedback on my emails indicating that I was at my office until late at night or early in the morning. My thesis supervisors supported me to attain my confirmation of candidature (CoC), a crucial step in the doctoral journey. I successfully submitted my CoC proposal in July 2020, and I successfully had the CoC approved in September 2020. I remembered when the CoC panel advised that they found merit in my research and noted that my research potentially contained several doctoral studies and not just one doctoral study. That was encouraging to me in my decision to proceed with the proposed transfer from the DBA program (in which I had enrolled at the Australian university, and for which I had completed confirmation of candidature) to the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program as soon as I could do so.

To work positively towards a higher level of doctoral study and transferring to the PhD program, I was supported by my supervisors to work on a publication as soon as possible. I worked to submit a manuscript to the *Journal of Travel Research (JoTR)* on 1 February 2021. On 22 September 2020, I started by searching for relevant literature and by preparing my manuscript submission, entitled “An Empirically

Grounded Model for Innovative Travel and Tourism Post-Covid-19", which I submitted on 1 February 2021.

On 28 September 2020, I relocated to Springfield Lakes in Brisbane, Queensland, and I continued working on my article that I had started six days before relocating to Brisbane. At the same time, I was trying to find an appropriate job to support my living expenses and tuition fees.

However, I was unable to find any job until 2021, even casual or gig work. During the time from September 2020 until February 2021, Covid-19 lockdowns were starting and stopping frequently, travel bans were in place and visa processes were frozen until further notice.

On 1 February 2021, I received a response from the *JoTR* editor that said:

Unfortunately, I must advise that it is my decision not to consider the paper for publication in the Journal. Your work on this topic seems to be interesting. However, your manuscript is a conceptual article rather than an 'Empirical Research Article'. JTR does publish a few occasional review articles under the category of 'Tourism Foundation Conceptual Articles', but such manuscripts are undertaken by invitation only. I recommend that you consider now how you might undertake some empirical research in order to test the value of your conceptual model. I sincerely hope that you can appreciate my reasoning for this decision.

Thus, the editor advised me to resend a new submission aligned with the *JOTR* requirements and to develop my sense of the journal and of the manuscripts that it accepted. Unfortunately, although I had sufficient time to do that at that time, in view of my poor mental health and reduced financial capacity because I was unable to secure a viable job, I found that I was unable to work at all on this article or even to focus on my study. (I hope to return to the article re-submission in the future.)

Before that date, in September 2020, I asked support from our Associate Dean, who was supporting me to overcome my incapacity to pay almost 16 thousand Australian dollars for my tuition for the next semester of study, and the solution was to take a leave of absence from my study. I must mention my gratitude to the Associate Dean for her sound advice, as well as to my three thesis supervisors, all of whom accepted to supervise and support me even through my leave of absence (LoA) (even though this meant that they received no workload allocation for supervising me during the LoA).

On 10 February 2021, I received the following email from the Associate Dean, copying all my three supervisors that time:

Dear all, now that you Hisham have demonstrated that you meet the entry requirements for the DPHD we are happy to accept your application for this program.

You will need to submit a new application which will include your research proposal which will need to be signed by your team if they endorse this application.

Best wishes

On this occasion, I felt protected by the executive team at my university and by my supervisors that they were very keen to support my progress despite the hardships that I was experiencing. At this time, I remembered the research of Locke and Latham (1990), who, after decades of studies, presented a synthesised model demonstrating success when members are faced with high challenges or difficult goals accompanied by high expectancy of success or self-efficacy, and also of high performance results, provided that there is commitment to the goals, feedback and adequate ability, and that there are low situational constraints: "High performance is achieved through four mechanisms[:] direction of attention and action, effort, persistence, and the development of task strategies and plans" (Locke & Latham, 1990). From this perspective, the financial hardships that I encountered were minimised by

both the Associate Dean's support and the encouragement of my thesis supervisors. The feeling of security that I could complete my PhD study was enhanced by my perseverance and resilience, and by my accompanying realisation that I must be very patient throughout all stages of the journey.

Ross et al. (1975) reported two experiments with female undergraduates, and they demonstrated that self-perceptions and social perceptions may persevere after the initial basis for such perceptions has been completely discredited (Ross et al., 1975). Once I faced my inability to find any appropriate job for three years until today, I realised that my self-perception and social perceptions increased my awareness of my liminality, marginalisation and potential mental health concerns while simultaneously strengthening my perseverance.

### **5.3.2 Critical Incident 2: Unsuccessful Job Applications**

The second critical incident that I present at this point in this chapter was the series of thousands of unsuccessful job applications that I sent. I began the process of preparing and submitting these applications with high hopes, in view of what I perceived as a strongly professional resume and extensive experience in several other countries that I considered would be both relevant and useful to the Australian context. As the applications were followed by rejection after rejection, I realised that the Australian employment system is more inclined to support Australian citizens and permanent residents, and not to support foreign nationals, regardless of how much experience the latter might have. This was true even in ordinary times, and it was certainly exacerbated by the continuing long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At one stage, I was applying for an average of 40 positions a day, sometimes in particular positions that required the writing of individual cover letters and details of specific qualifications. For each, I found myself obligated to read the applicant handbook, and to write my cover letter to

highlight the key features of the position that aligned with my expertise and experience. Thus, I sometimes spent days going back and forth with recruiters, until receiving the same, default rejection template that they all used:

Thank you for your interest in and application for this position. We certainly appreciate you taking the time to apply. As you may expect, we have been fortunate to receive a high level of interest in this role, and[,] while your experience is impressive, we have determined that the profile of other candidates may better fit our client's job brief at this time.

In July 2020, I contacted a well-known organisation in Toowoomba, Queensland that specialises in supporting organisations and in reporting to the Toowoomba Regional Council, as well as to people working in project development for the Queensland State Government. I received the following reply from this organisation after I had presented and proposed my research to support the communities in Australia, especially in the regional areas:

Dear Hisham

Kindly note that this is an economic development organisation and this project is outside the scope of our constitution. I would like [to] applaud you for your vision of a better world and wish you well on your future endeavours.

In view of the fact that I met firstly with the Toowoomba Regional Council, and then with this organisation, spending more than 90 minutes in each meeting to discuss, present and share ideas, I found myself building my strong sense of resonance with the liminality that faces international on-campus students in Australia. Given that I met with top executives, whose time is surely of high value, I was left wondering why they both kept listening to me for up to 90 minutes if my ideas were not of interest to them. I could not help myself reflecting that liminality has a different taste in Australia, and that rejections are offered with courtesy,

but not before the recipients of the applications harvest the information that might be useful to them first.

Given that I spent each day applying for 40 positions, as mentioned above, by a simple calculation I estimate that I applied for 440-450 positions between February and December 2020. As noted above, I analysed the constant rejections of these employment applications in terms of my now increasingly negative liminality, which in turn increased my experience of marginalisation as an apparently expendable and non-contributing international on-campus student, which also in turn exacerbated my mental health challenges over time.

### ***5.3.3 Critical Incident 3: One Particular Unsuccessful Job Application***

As a further example of the interplay among liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns, the third critical incident focused on one particular unsuccessful job application that from my perspective distilled many of the broader concerns that I was experiencing about my study and my status in Australia at that time. With this specific application, I spent seven months following up with an Australian university to which I had applied for the position of Associate Director (Service Improvement). I have classified the rejection decision and follow-up for this position into four stages over seven months, as follows:

#### ***Stage 1 – April 2020***

Dear Hisham

Further to previous correspondence with regards to the recruitment of the Associate Director Service Improvement position at the University, I wanted to touch base to provide you with an updated decision on recruitment to this role. The impact of Covid-19 and associated response measures, including border closures and



transition of the workforce to working from home, has significantly altered our capacity to undertake normal recruitment, selection and on-boarding processes across the University.

As a result, I have decided to postpone recruitment to the Associate Director Service Improvement role position and will reassess later in the year. From a process perspective we will finalise recruitment of this position online. I have taken a note of your application and at the stage where the role is readvertised you will be provided with an opportunity to re-apply with your existing application or [to] update your application if desired.

I appreciate your ongoing interest in the University and in this role, and hope you continue to take care during this challenging time.

This response seemed to me very logical and reasonable at that time in April 2020, and thus unfortunately it gave me false hope that I would be valued in Australia. By contrast, later in July 2020, when I followed up for an update, I received this reply from a director at the university, after the top executive handed over the task of following up with me:

### ***Stage 2 – July 2020***

Whilst the University has started the return to campus, the impacts of Covid-19 and response measures (such as border closures) are still impacting [on] our capacity to undertake normal recruitment. As per the original communication, we will continue to reassess, and you will be directly contacted at such a point as the role is readvertised. Thank you for your ongoing patience.

This second reply also appeared to be rational as this was the case and I needed to comply and to be patient with the Australian regulations and restrictions of the time. However, one week before moving from

Toowoomba to Springfield Lakes in Australia, when I followed up with the Director for any update, I received the following reply:

### ***Stage 3 – September 2020***

“Hi Hisham, Shortlisting is still in progress.

Applicants successful in progressing to the next stage will be notified by next week.

Kind regards”

One month later, in October 2020, I followed up again for the fourth time for an outcome at that time, and I received the following reply from the Director:

### ***Stage 4 – October 2020***

Hi Hisham,

I hope you are well and thank you for reaching out for feedback.

We received a high volume of quality applicants for the Associate Director position making the pool incredibly competitive. Candidates that were invited to interview all had extensive qualifications and career history in process improvement, lean, agile and project management (covering system and people solutions) in addition to contemporary CI technologies (RPA/IA) applied experience.

For specific advice relating to applications – your statement of claim could be strengthened by providing some specific examples of your previous accomplishments relevant to the role, outlining the situation, your approach and outcome. For this particular role we would have been interested in specific examples that demonstrated skills/experience in[:] contemporary approaches to the design and evaluation of processes (including digitisation); project management; team leadership and building partnerships with stakeholders. A statement of claim also provides a great opportunity for you to explain why you are enthusiastic about a particular role

and what your unique contribution to it would be. The university guidance advises it is “your personal marketing tool”- it is therefore well worth utilising the full two-pages to go into greater detail on your fit for a role. I apologise that I can’t provide more detailed feedback due to the volume of applications we had, but I hope you find this helpful and wish you every success in your future career.

Kind regards

I found myself asking how, after seven months of following up about only one position, was it not worthwhile letting me know to attach a more detailed cover letter to highlight my fulfilment of the job criteria? I have 27 years’ experience, mostly in management and executive positions, and my master’s degree about CRM was from the United States of America, as well as my current PhD study at an Australian university. Additionally, all of my professional experiences were based on using technologies and on empowering people to gain loyalty, integrity and success for both the employees and all of the organisations that I was leading.

This third critical incident again illustrated the complex and at times overwhelming intersection among liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns, all arising from my ambivalent status as an international on-campus doctoral student. These negative experiences also arose from my absence of recognised cultural, economic and social capital, despite my 27 years of professional experience in other countries noted in the previous paragraph. Clearly, I felt increasingly frustrated and despondent about my lack of success in finding appropriately secure and sustainable paid employment to support my family and me. Yet I was also concerned about the waste of potentially valuable human resources represented by other international students and myself not being accessed by my new host country.

I had tens of similar experiences for the executive positions for which I applied. The most demoralising case was one in which I was

following up by phone with an executive recruitment agency about an executive director role in the Queensland Government, and I was told the following: "Because you are not Australian, we can't hire you for this position". This was despite this requirement of national citizenship not being mentioned in the job requirements, and the position not being related to any national security services. This verbal response and rejection clearly reflected a high degree of liminality and marginalisation for international students in Australia as temporary residents.

On the other hand, although I faced a great deal of liminality, marginalisation and mental health issues for three years until this time, I feel proud of my ongoing persistence, resilience and adaptability through my experiences of liminality that were very harsh within my PhD journey in Australia from 2020 until 2022. I was continually reminding myself to be as positive as I possibly could, when I was looking at the green landscapes and beautiful nature that Australia has. I continued to focus on the positive side of things, despite the very difficult pressure of both financial and mental health issues while still being separated from my family.

In May 2021, I contacted my university student Health and Wellness counselling service to try to find support for my mental health concerns and for my resultant sleep disturbances. Since then, I have engaged regularly with this Health and Wellness support for assistance with managing several personal challenges and difficult circumstances. I also attended counselling support on four occasions in both May and June 2021.

The challenges that I had included, but were not limited to, persistent difficulty with getting travel exemptions for my wife and son approved that led to ongoing uncertainty around when I would see them; concerns for the health and safety of my family in Egypt in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic; and difficulty in finding viable employment that created intense financial strain and pressure. In the

context of these challenges, I began experiencing the following symptoms: a persistent low mood; a decreased interest in most activities; disturbed sleep patterns; ongoing fatigue; poor concentration; indecisiveness; and excessive anxious rumination that I had difficulty controlling. By this stage, these symptoms had begun to affect my ability to engage effectively in day-to-day activities, including my studies. Further, the negative impact of these symptoms was expected to continue given that the above mentioned challenges were likely to persist into July 2021 and beyond owing to the travel restrictions that existed until the end of 2021. Thus, in order to try to improve my overall mood and ability to function, I engaged in therapeutic support, while actively putting strategies into practice between appointments. Through this, I displayed adaptability and resilience, as demonstrated in my disclosures around overcoming obstacles.

After the four sessions in which I participated, I received a support letter from the Wellness Educator at my Australian university, and I was grateful for his support:

Mr Bakr presents as being very passionate towards his academic goals and doctoral studies; my observations are that he conducts himself with integrity and professionalism. Mr Bakr has indicated that he would like to reduce his study load to one unit for Semester 2, 2021 in order to focus on improving his mental health as well as reducing some degree of stress. I support a reduction of study load between 12.07.2021 and 12.11.2021 as he continues to proactively work through the above challenges, while focusing on helpful strategies to foster good mental health.

Unfortunately, and in spite of this letter of support that advocated reducing my study load, as an international on-campus student I was required by the Australian Government regulations to enrol full-time (and to pay the associated tuition fees) or alternatively to be on an approved LoA. Owing to my significant mental health issues at this time, I had no

choice but to take an LoA. I did not have any opportunities to rest as I was looking for any job until May 2021.

In May 2021, I decided to be realistic and started my first gig work role as a “delivery partner”. Prior to this, I had been a Chief Executive Officer in Egypt, the United Arab of Emirates and Oman, with more than 27 years of professional experience around the world, but in Australia the only work that I could secure was as a gig worker (Bakr, 2022). I found myself obligated to divert my attention to focus on the mass of issues that I faced in Australia and to spare some of my very limited time in trying to relax while I was working very hard to forge a viable way through and out of my current situation.

With regard to my continued focus on linking my individual autoethnographic experiences with broader policy and political considerations, on 18 June 2021, I presented my third presentation to the mostly biannual research symposia of the Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher group at my Australian university about the “Practical Risk Management Guidelines for the Australian Government” (Bakr, 2021a). In this presentation, I discussed some implications for creating the future research selves of on-campus international doctoral students, given the continuing challenges that we were facing.

Against the backdrop of my ongoing struggle with my doctoral study in the context of seeking viable paid employment, I turn now to two critical incidents involving my family in Egypt. In different ways, both critical incidents highlighted my physical distance from my family and my homeland, and they emphasised my lack of agency and my sense of being helpless and of being unable to help my family members at their time of greatest need.

#### **5.3.4 Critical Incident 4: Two Family Bereavements**

On 16 December 2020, my beloved mother, Soheir El Baddaly, passed away in Egypt. I remembered, when I was preparing myself and my family, who were overseas, for my mother's death, the importance of enacting crucial anticipatory grief work (Wallace et al., 2020). A few days before her death, during a call to her in Egypt, she told me: "I missed you very much". During the lockdown in Toowoomba, Australia, I had been very keen to call her frequently to ask about her health and safety during the pandemic. On 16 April 2020 (two months after I arrived in Australia), she was hospitalised in Egypt, as her haemoglobin (Hb) had dropped to 9 g/dL and she was needing a blood transfusion. According to the WHO, low Hb levels (<12.0 g/dL) in women can cause anaemia (Cappellini & Motta, 2015).

I cannot describe my feelings when my elder brother Ehab told me that he was looking for someone in Egypt with the same blood type as our mother, while I was the only one among my brothers who has the same blood type. Thankfully, my brother was able to find and supply the necessary blood bags for her, and she left the hospital a few days later. I remained very anxious about her, and, when I called her on 16 December 2020, she didn't reply. Concerned, I called my brother, and he advised me that she had passed away that same day.

The feelings that I was unable to attend my mother's funeral or to grieve for her with the rest of my family were very difficult, and I found myself in a situation as described by Stillion and Attig (2015) as being "like standing in a small pool of light surrounded by vast darkness" (p. 4).

On 10 October 2021, I experienced a second significant loss when I lost my elder brother Hossam at the very young age of 52. My brother's death was even harder for me to bear than my mother's death in December 2020 had been. I reconnected with the university Health and Wellness services again in March 2022, in response to stressors that had

persisted over at least the past five months. These stressors included but were not limited to my elder brother having passed away and my having been unable to attend the funeral (owing to overseas travel limitations and disruptions). In the context of these challenges, I had been experiencing the following symptoms: disturbed sleep patterns; feeling keyed up with difficulty winding down; shortness of breath; low self-worth; and excessive anxious rumination that I had difficulty in controlling. I also reported that I had felt close to panic almost all the time over the previous few days.

In addition, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – 21 (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Oei et al., 2013) was administered by my Wellness educator. The DASS-21 is a quantitative measure of distress along the three axes of depression, anxiety and stress. While it is not a categorical measure of clinical diagnosis, it provides a useful measure of disturbance along these three axes compared to the general population. My results were in the following range compared to the general population: in the severe range on both the depression and the stress scales; and in the extremely severe range on the anxiety scale.

Much more positively, also in October 2021, I had a change in my thesis supervisory team, owing to new academic commitments, and Dr Meg Forbes was appointed as associate supervisor to join the team with Professor Danaher as principal supervisor. Meg added very valuable chemistry and harmony to the existing relationship that I had with Professor Danaher and supported me very well since day one. 18 October 2021 was our first meeting, and she started to enhance and strengthen my resilience and persistence from that meeting onwards. That crucial supervisory meeting took place eight days after my brother's death.



### **5.3.5 Critical Incident 5: Delayed Family Reunion with My Wife and Our Son**

In December 2021, two months after my elder brother had passed away, I was among hundreds of thousands of international students stranded overseas who were lucky to return to Australia or to bring their families to Australia. At the same time, I was preparing myself to adapt accordingly to the continuous failure, depression and anxiety that I was living. In addition, I was continuing to engage in grief work for the loss of my mother in December 2020 and for the loss of my brother in October 2021.

In that regard, I had applied unsuccessfully three times for a travel exemption for my wife and our son in May, September and October 2021 to enable them to travel to join me in Australia. Each of these applications had the same outcome from the Travel Exemption Requests, Department of Home Affairs | Australian Border Force. The employees who were replying changed, but it was the same template that was used each time:

“Dear Hisham

I refer to your request for an exemption from the current travel restrictions for travel to Australia. This advice applies to the following individuals:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Passport</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Son	Egypt	Not Exempt
Spouse	Egypt	Not Exempt

The listed individuals have been assessed against current Australian Covid-19 travel restrictions. On the basis of the information provided, I have determined that the listed individuals are **not exempt** from the restrictions. Your request has been considered

against all inward travel exemption categories, including, but not limited to, compassionate and compelling reasons, critical skills, urgent medical treatment or an automatic exemption. If you are able to provide more information, or if circumstances change, please submit a new request.

The individuals listed remain subject to travel restrictions and, should they attempt to travel to Australia, their visas may be considered for cancellation while travel restrictions remain in force.

#### Travel Exemption Requests

Department of Home Affairs | Australian Border Force"

While I was in a poor state of mental health, and although I respected the Australian Border Force outcome, I did not like at all what I perceived as the threatening wording being used: "The individuals listed remain subject to travel restrictions and, should they attempt to travel to Australia, their visas may be considered for cancellation while travel restrictions remain in force". The Australian Government unfortunately did not consider our mental health as on-campus international students and their families as urgent medical treatments or as appropriate reasons to be eligible to travel exemptions. When this lack of consideration is combined with hundreds of thousands of other international students in Australia who had faced the then Australian Prime Minister telling us all to go home in March 2020 (Gibson & Moran, 2020), I could not avoid reflecting that international students in Australia had been left abandoned, liminal and marginalised.

Before that date, in November 2021, my family and I had experienced enormous additional stress owing to the fact that my wife and our son had been returned from Cairo International Airport in Egypt because of lots of confusion that we had undergone. Although the travel restrictions had been lifted earlier that same month, there was not enough time to have an Australian Travel Declaration submitted 72 hours

beforehand. I cannot imagine how stressed and panicked my family was during this situation, especially our beautiful son; I have felt guilty towards him until today that I was not able to protect his mental health and that I put him in this harsh and non-human situation. In total, there were three unsuccessful attempts to gain travel exemptions, in addition to one occasion returning from the airport and finally one more challenge related to changing the flights because of Omicron, the new variant of Covid-19, and the associated additional travel restrictions that extended until 15 December 2021 (Schermerhorn et al., 2022). At this time of continuing trial, I remembered my mother's words: "Life will never remain the same, and one day the situation will change".

Also at this time, I was attending and presenting at a research symposium at my university about "Australian Government Performance: Researching What Matters between the 'Desire' and the 'Facts'" (Bakr, 2021b). In my presentation, I discussed the dim strategic forecasting from the then Australian Government and the confusion that was evident everywhere, including the harsh responses from the public officials to cover poor performance that were common experiences. A move to freedom in some Australian states and territories occurred in October 2021, and the reason for that move remained hidden. However, the worry became: was that a shift in response to people's integrity and needs, or for the government's desire? My questions remained: What is Australia's standing in the world? Is the Australian Government responsible only for its citizens, or is it accountable to every resident on its land, including international on-campus doctoral students? I presented specific strategies designed to conduct research that matters about this crucial public policy debate from the perspectives of international doctoral students, their supervisors and relevant policy-makers.

On 26 November 2021, my presentation (Bakr, 2021b) was scheduled at 1:00 pm (Queensland local time). However, on 25 November

2021, my family was rejected from boarding the plane because I had not been able to submit an Australian Declaration Form 72 hours before their flight, although I had been complying with all the Australian regulations for a safe quarantine upon arrival and evidence of this compliance had been provided. I was on the phone with my family until 8:00 am Queensland local time next day on 26 November 2021, by which time the plane had left without them. After my lovely spouse returned home with our beautiful kind son, my wife was very worried about my mental health as something negative could happen to me. I was at the point of cancelling my presentation, because only a few hours remained and I did not sleep at all during the night of 25 November 2021. However, and with my spouse's full support, we both insisted that I must attend and present at the symposium. I was sending my greetings to both my spouse and our son, and, owing to the time difference between Egypt and Australia, in addition to the harshest time that they had both endured, our son was sleeping, while my spouse was watching my presentation. Everyone who attended my presentation was emotionally engaged with what I was saying; however, no one had known that I had been in that harsh situation only a few hours beforehand.

Finally, one month later, my family was able to board a plane on 16 December 2021, despite my fear that the then Australian Government might change the regulations again and again at the last minute, and with the previous regulation change having cost me an additional seven thousand dollars for both flight tickets. One of the dominant emotions that I felt at this time was a significantly negative sensation, associated with a sense of bleak emptiness, encapsulated in my realisation that my mother was no longer there to talk with by telephone, and likewise that my elder brother Hossam was similarly absent.

Both Critical Incidents 4 and 5 were among the most stressful experiences in my life so far. In both of them, my family and I felt

powerless and lacking in agency and autonomy, with our fates being decided by powerful forces beyond our control, and with our senses of fortitude and optimism being severely tested. Moreover, I had a strong sense of my liminality as an international doctoral student in Australia being a burden and liability rather than a strength and asset, given that my international student status was marginalising me from being able to engage in purposeful and effective decision-making. Furthermore, my mental health concerns were significantly exacerbated by both these critical incidents, and by the associated negative liminality and marginalisation.

On 16 December 2021, both my emotional expressions and my attitude changed from sadness to happiness, although I had two major pieces of grief work that I was undertaking at that time: my mother's memorial one year after her death in December 2020; and my elder brother's passing two months previously in October 2021. This sense of happiness was influenced by the changed emotions according to social information (EASI) theory (Van Kleef et al., 2015), and it had a positive attitude on me after seeing my family happy and being able to hug both my wife and our son at the airport after being so long apart.

By contrast, some negative attitudes returned for me a month later about various topics that I began seeing as sad rather than as happy, and my experiences were accordingly negatively framed. I was thinking about the additional financial stress and the same ongoing struggle to gain any appropriate job. The financial load and stress became heavier after my family had been reunited with me, as I was wondering all the time how I could provide for them the same standard of life to which they had been used in our country, Egypt. Nevertheless, I found that the autoethnographic research method employed in this study helped me to provide clarity and structure around the critical reflections involved in analysing the critical incidents reported here. Engaging in critical self-

reflexivity (as advocated in Chapter 4) about the five critical incidents outlined above, I consider that a key feature of them was my inability to learn, and to detect and correct error. In that regard, it became necessary to distinguish between single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning occurs when a mismatch is detected and corrected without changing the underlying values and status quo that govern the behaviours. Double-loop learning occurs when a mismatch is detected and corrected by first changing the underlying values and other features of the status quo. Single-loop learning remains within the accepted routines. Double-loop learning requires that new routines be created that are based on a different conception of the universe (Beckett & Hager, 2005). To be honest, I was applying single-loop learning in Australia for the two years 2020 and 2021. I was certainly detecting the issues that I faced, and I realised the remedies. However, because of the mental health issues that I had because of physical separation from my family, and also because of facing liminality and marginalisation in Australia, I was unable to change the underlying values that governed my behaviours. I could not change lots of matters out of my control (e.g., travel restrictions and quarantine bans, unfairness to treat international students so radically differently from Australian citizens or permanent citizens, informal racism received from many people whom I met, etc.). Furthermore, after I had been reunited with my family in December 2021, I started to be more realistic and to deal with the different conception of the universe in Australia by applying new routines to the obligatory environment that I was facing. Being unable to find an appropriate job for three years, I started to adapt myself for any kind of gig work available and accept it; otherwise my mental health would be severely compromised. This acceptance does not mean that I will forget my skills and the qualifications that I have; however, it will take more time than I had realised on my arrival in Australia before achieving my objective to accomplish my PhD at my Australian university.

I learned myself that, no matter what your issues might be, no one is going to help you more than you help yourself. You need to start by yourself, plan your remedies, share your experiences and finally set up the goals. People should work keenly on their mental health, assess the risk, and plan the solutions and remedies. My success is built on several parallel plans at the same time: once Plan A failed, I replaced it with Plan B immediately to secure continuity and success in my life. Moreover, I have a confidential Plan C that I am not sharing with anyone.

Drawing for further insight on a different metaphor, sometimes in later life the effects of ageing in relation to participation and interest in gardening are felt and examined. Gardening has been explored in relation to several issues such as health, housing and social care; however, the significance of the garden in the process of home-making is less well understood, and it is suggested that the garden can have major significance in the (re)creation of 'home' in later life (Bhatti, 2006). The relation between the above and this autoethnographic study is the encouragement to look in detail at the positive areas around yourself to strengthen your perseverance and resilience, and to inject a new hope in your life. If people ignore your ability, capabilities and qualifications, you need to rebuild your self-confidence and to trust in yourself. I can add to the maxim "Life is a Teacher" some new terminology: "Life is a Coach" – a coach who tailors a private learning experience to your conceptions as per the culture, ethics and beliefs that you espouse. No matter how many times you fail, it is crucial to succeed in the end. I learnt from children that learning to walk themselves increased their perseverance and resilience. In the end, most children stand up and start to walk normally. If a child failed to walk and did not try again several times, it would not help that the parents supported that child. Human beings require support as an emotional need in their lives; however, if people cannot explore this support to persist, it will not last for a longer period, and you will lose both another person's support and your goals.

More broadly, one of the most valuable lessons that my mother taught me was that life is a teacher. In addition, she said to me all the time when anything happened: “Nothing is worth worrying about too much in our life, and we need to take care about our health”. From this perspective, life is a combination of both joyful and stressful expressions of our understandings of the world. It is this lesson that continues to encourage and sustain me through the uncertainty of my future in Australia and my continuing employment search. Moving forwards, while I am unclear about what the next few years with my family and the additional financial stress will bring, I am very happy that I can be reunited with my family in Australia. Nothing matters more than that, and I started 2023 by being clear about the kinds of activities that I am hopeful of undertaking during this year and beyond, being more realistic and persistent, and looking at what is hopefully the green light at the end of the tunnel.

#### **5.4 Selected Autoethnographic Experiences Post-Covid-19**

In 2022, I started to think proactively and more realistically about my international on-campus doctoral study in Australia. I learned in my master’s degree in business administration from Marymount California University in the United States of America that there were 130 separate management techniques to cover all fields of modern management, and I used only the financial management technique (Armstrong, 2001). As with any enterprise risk management program, I had to assess my risk management owing to the financial pressure that I had experienced in Australia for three years since February 2020. From that perspective, it is useful to consider how a carefully designed enterprise risk management (ERM) program — one in which all material corporate risks are viewed and managed within a single framework — can be a source of long-run competitive advantage and value through its effects at both a “macro” or company-wide level and a “micro” or business-unit level (Nocco & Stulz,



2006). While this reference to “macro” and “micro” emerged from the ERM literature about organisations and individuals, I see a resonant parallel with the extensive use of “macro” and “micro” levels of analysis throughout this thesis.

At the macro level, ERM enables senior management to identify, measure and limit to acceptable levels the net exposures faced by the firm. By managing such exposures mainly with the idea of protecting the firm's credit rating, ERM helps to maintain the firm's access to capital and other resources necessary to implement its strategy and business plan. At the micro level, ERM adds value by ensuring that all material risks are “owned”, and that risk-return trade-offs are carefully evaluated, by operating managers and employees throughout the firm.

I applied these financial management techniques to overcome my individual financial stress. I considered that the net exposures risk is to lose my security to gain my PhD degree and linked to my personal credit rating that is simply a numerical score that represents how trustworthy my reputation is as a borrower. In July 2022, my financial stress was becoming higher, and I was obliged to apply to the graduate research school in my university for an LoA to enable me to overcome the higher risk of having my confirmation of enrolment cancelled based on my being unable to pay 16 thousand Australian dollars as tuition for a single semester of enrolment. In that context, I asked for support from the university's Student Support section that was previously the university's dean of students.

Accordingly, I started my Plan B that I had prepared two weeks before receiving the university's final decision. As a practical solution, and as I mentioned above, I replaced both the “macro” or company-wide level and the “micro” or business-unit level with the “macro” of Hisham Bakr's PhD study and the “micro” of my family in Australia. At the macro level, I identified, measured and limited to an acceptable level the net exposures that I faced for my family. By managing such exposures mainly with the

idea of protecting my credit rating, I used my transparent credit score with my relatives and friends (who know me very well), and I borrowed 20 thousand Australian dollars and negotiated feasible payment plans with them. This helped me to maintain access to other resources that were necessary to implement my strategy and business plan "PhD study in Australia". At the micro level, I ensured that all material risks were "owned", and that risk-return trade-offs were carefully evaluated. I must declare and share my gratitude to Refaat, Hanoura and Mo for supporting me in the harshest situation that I have ever encountered so far in my life.

In this context, 5 August 2022 was my change to achieve "day". Until early September 2022, I was unable to pay the remainder of the tuition fees of 16 thousand Australian dollars; however, a few days before the deadline on 16 September 2022, I was able to get access to a last card Plan C to pay and I secured my PhD study temporarily. I was supported dramatically by my new supervisor Dr Forbes, who started her appointment at a very hard time with Professor Danaher to support me. Indeed, I am grateful to both owing to the pure sense of a family that was engaging her child "PhD candidate". This warm feeling that I felt with both supervisors helped to strengthen my determination that I am in Australia to achieve, and not to lose, this opportunity of a lifetime. It should be noted by way of background that I applied twice in 2021 and 2022 for a PhD scholarship with my university, and that both attempts were unsuccessful. I was taking heart from recent reports that job vacancies in Australia were increasing against the backdrop of the hoped-for economic recovery from the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (Danaher, 2022). However, I am still finding difficulty in attaining any appropriate job. In addition, I was unable to secure any scholarship from my university, although other international students had PhD scholarships, in addition to two jobs at the same university (one was a full-time job, and the other was a casual job). I was convinced that individual potential

employees, as well as individual potential PhD scholarship candidates, needed to rely on personal connections for specialised assistance.

Thus, my analysis of these selected autoethnographic experiences post-Covid is centred on a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, I believe that I used my reflection on the macro and micro level considerations in my family and financial situation to good effect, and the generosity of relatives and friends meant that I was able to continue my PhD study at my Australian university, and that I can see a hopefully viable way forwards with that study. On the other hand, I have continuing concerns about potential access to sustainable paid employment in the desired post-PhD phase of my career, based on the unexpected difficulty in gaining any form of ongoing full- or part-time work to this point in my time in Australia. As with the five critical incidents interpreted above, I argue that the interplay among liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns continues to impact significantly on my work (both my PhD study and my paid employment), even though the character of that impact has changed since the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **5.5 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has been the first of two data analysis chapters in this thesis, presenting my collated evidence to address the first research question in this study: “How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family’s and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns?”

The synthesis of my response to this research question is presented in greater detail in Chapter 7, along with my response to the study’s second research question. At this point, it is important to note that the three micro level concepts constituting the study’s conceptual framework – liminality, marginalisation and mental health – provided a set of rigorous and robust conceptual resources for creating meaning-making in

relation to the autoethnographic experiences reported here, particularly those clustered around the five critical incidents interpreted in this chapter.

I conclude the chapter appropriately (given this thesis's status as an autoethnographic text) by sage advice given generously by my parents to my siblings and me whose full significance has become clear to me only many years later, under the stress and strain of the Covid-19 pandemic. In that regard, I learned from my mother's discussions that "Life is a great teacher", and also that all our circumstances will never stay stagnant, and will change. There is all the time a green light at the end of the tunnel, and we all need to focus on it to charge our batteries with any grief work that we face. Liminality and marginalisation exist everywhere; however, we need to be resilient and persistent and never lose our hope. Change to achieve has to be enacted in soul and heart, and the implications of crisis management, financial management and modern management techniques help very much to apply these invaluable lessons in individual life as well as through the management of enterprises.

"Life is a great teacher" and better than any good teacher. If international on-campus students faced liminality and marginalisation in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic, they are still looking at the green light at the end of the tunnel. Nothing remains as it is, as my mother said to me all the time, and the status quo is going to change. While we are alive, we must be optimistic as nothing will happen without having perseverance, resilience and hope. In addition, my father Lotfy Bakr taught me: "If someone teaches you something, you must be grateful to him/her all your life". Learning is essential in our life, and this is the kiss of life. My father was working as a senior teacher at the Egyptian Ministry of Education, he oversaw the Egyptian Education Committee in Berlin, Germany from 1969 until 1980 and he transmitted his own educational experiences in our daily values. He spoke Arabic, English and German. I

lost him very early in my life; however, the imprint of his fingerprints is ongoing, and I continue to miss him very much.

Finally, I consider that the triangle of any positive energy must contain three components: 1) resilience; 2) perseverance; and 3) hope. This is my personal slogan in my daily life.

Having presented evidence to support my response to the first research question in this chapter, I turn in the next chapter to provide equivalent evidence to underpin my response to the second research question.

## **CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH QUESTION 2**

### **6.1 Chapter Introduction**

The previous chapter elaborated my engagement with the first research question in this study. This chapter provides information relevant to addressing the second research question, which asked: "What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?". Responding to this research question also enables me to examine what my doctoral study experiences indicate more broadly about the USR, CSR and CRM of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they can contribute to reducing international on-campus doctoral students' liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns, as well as presenting a counternarrative about what new strategies for the Australian higher education sector in Australia can and should be in a post-Covid world.

As was noted in Chapter 4, like Chapter 5 this chapter uses deductive thematic analysis (Blum et al., 2020; Sinclair-Maragh & Simpson, 2021) as a major element of its data analytic strategy to address the study's second research question. Consequently, the chapter is structured around the three concepts constituting the macro level of the study's conceptual framework: USR, CSR and CRM. Furthermore, and also as was noted in Chapter 4, another key element of the data analytic strategy employed in this chapter is thematic extrapolation (Jepsen, 1994; Savickas, 2001; Super, 1954), which McIlveen et al. (2005) described as follows: "This technique proceeds through analysis of events and development in order to synthesise recurrent themes and underlying trends ... " (p. 32). As I wrote in Chapter 5, in implementing thematic extrapolation, this chapter extrapolates from the critical incidents analysed in Chapter 5 to broader themes that could be interpreted as

applying to other international on-campus doctoral students in Australia beyond myself, and consequently as highlighting the wider significance of the critical incidents in Chapter 5 and also of the themes in Chapter 6.

In structuring this chapter in this way, I have sought to mobilise the analytical strengths of applying concepts chosen from the business and management scholarly field, to which this study is intended to contribute, to the higher education policy and practice field. From that perspective, while I acknowledge that universities differ in important ways from other enterprises and firms, nevertheless they have in common with those other organisations a fundamental responsibility to, and a reliance on, their clients and customers – that is, their students. The argument progressed in the chapter is that my highly stressful and at times traumatic autoethnographic experiences as presented in the previous chapter, and the equivalent experiences of thousands of other international on-campus students at Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic, resulted from a misalignment between those universities' USR, CSR and CRM on the one hand and their actual policies and practices on the other hand. This argument acknowledges that those policies and practices were constrained by the Australian federal and state/territory governments, and therefore the argument is extended to contending that this same misalignment was evidenced by those governments as well. The cumulative effects of these parallel misalignments were stress and trauma for individual international on-campus students, and also an Australian international education system at considerable risk of crisis and failure.

Before examining USR, CSR and CRM in turn, the chapter revisits the vital question of the multiple contributions made by international on-campus students to the Australian economy. Although this issue was canvassed in the literature review in Chapter 2, it is important to reconsider it here in the light of the USR, CSR and CRM concepts forming the macro level of the study's conceptual framework. This is because

these multiple economic contributions, which are often invisible and hence easily overlooked by universities, governments and other key stakeholders determining the quality of life of international students, constitute a crucial obligation on the part of those stakeholders that goes to the heart of giving life to, and creating a reality for, USR, CSR and CRM – even more so in the context of a global pandemic.

## **6.2 Revisiting International On-Campus Students' Contributions to the Australian Economy**

Against the backdrop portrayed in the chapter introduction, international students continue to make a crucial contribution to the Australian economy and to Australia cities and regions, despite almost all these students having made their own way in one of the world's most unaffordable housing markets (Morris et al., 2020). Morris et al. (2020) drew on two surveys, one conducted before and one during the Covid-19 pandemic. They examined the circumstances of international students in the private rental sector (PRS) in Sydney and Melbourne. The PRS is broadly defined as including any situation where an international student is paying rent. Thus, besides those students renting from landlords, the sample included students in homestay and those residing in purpose-built student accommodation at the educational institutions (Morris et al., 2020).

Morris et al.'s (2020) first survey closed in early December 2019:

It involved educational institutions in all three post-secondary sectors, universities, VET and ELICOS. Students could answer the survey in English or Chinese. A total of 43 institutions (10 universities and 24 VET, seven ELICOS and two foundation course institutions) participated, and there were 7,084 valid responses. The second survey closed on 5 July 2020 and was sent to all of the 3,114 respondents to the first survey who had agreed to be interviewed face-to-face and who had provided their contact details.



A total of 817 valid responses was received. The survey covered similar ground to the first survey, but its primary focus was to capture the impacts of the pandemic on students' housing circumstances, finances and employment. (Morris et al., 2020, p. xi)

Morris et al.'s (2020) findings included that:

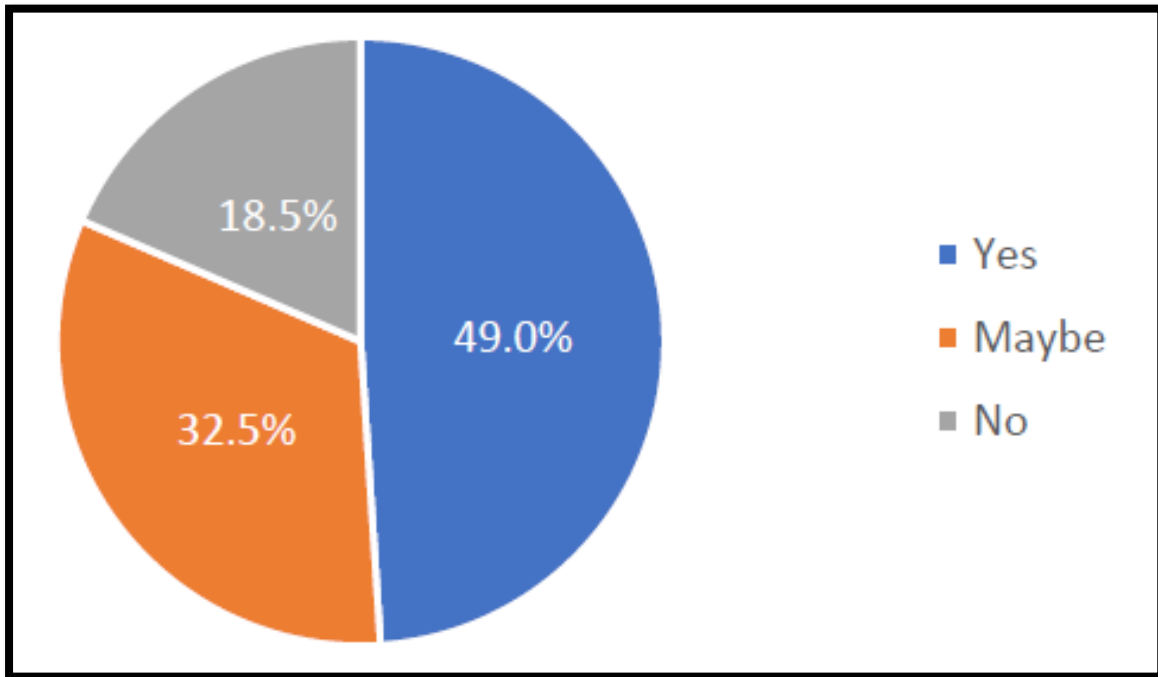
... two thirds of students (63%) organised their accommodation prior to arriving in Australia. About half relied on social networks to find accommodation (46%) and about a quarter on real estate agents (23%). It is noteworthy that just 9% of students found their home through their educational institution. Only a third said it was easy to find a suitable property (33%) and just under one in five (18%) felt that they had experienced discrimination when applying for rental accommodation. (Morris et al., 2020, p. xi)

In addition, when the international students were asked about their future study intentions in Australia, "25% of the students said that they were not sure if they would choose or recommend Australia as a place to study in the future". More than half of the international students questioned (51%) "said that they would be much less or less likely to choose or recommend Australia as a place to study" (p. 94).

Figure 6.1 shows that "Only 19% of students reported that the experience of living in Australia during the pandemic would have no impact on their future study plans in the country. For 49% of students, their experience has had an impact on their plans" (Morris et al., 2020, p. 94).

**Figure 6.1**

*Has the Pandemic had an Impact on International Students' Future Study Plans in Australia (n=719)?*



*Note.* Source: Retrieved and reprinted from Morris et al. (2020, p. 94).

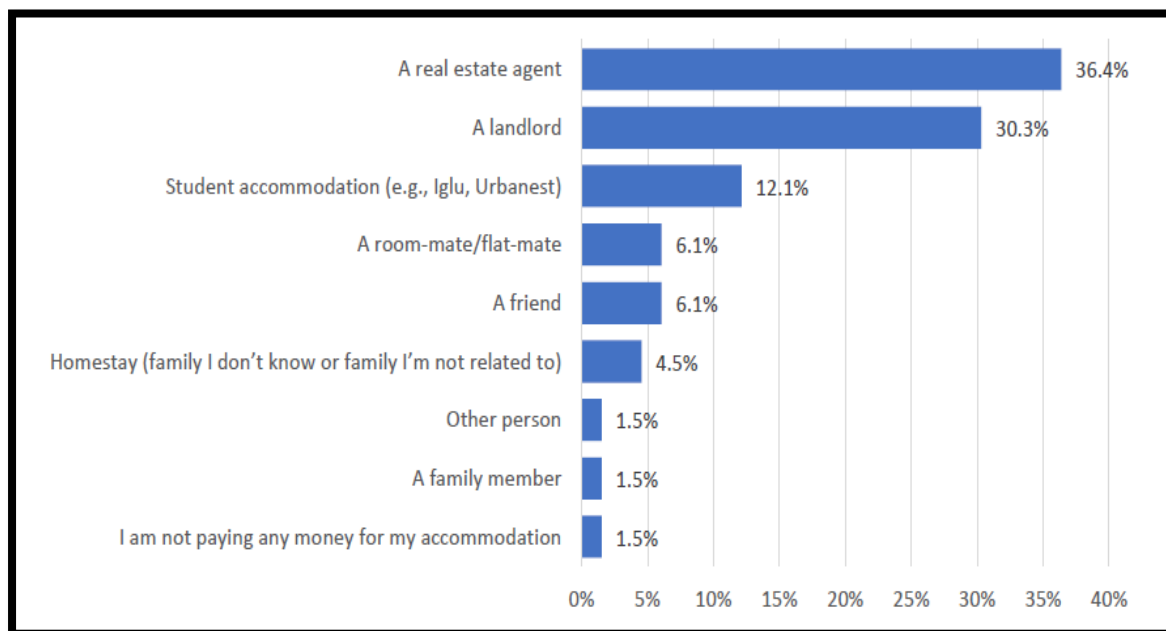
Additional analysis presented in Figure 6.2 indicated that 66 international student respondents to the survey provided information about how they had organised their accommodation before their arrival in Australia (Morris et al., 2020, p. 97).

Figure 6.2 shows an important finding as among the 66 international student respondents 36.4% rented from a real estate agent, 30.3% rented from a landlord, 12.1% rented students' accommodation and 6.1% rented with a roommate or a flatmate (Morris et al., 2020). All these rental choices combined represented 84.9% of the available rental options as being located in the real estate industry. The remaining options – renting from a friend, homestay, another person, a family member and not paying any money for the accommodation – could be assumed to be free of charge accommodation. Although the sample is too small to

consider as denoting a broader impact on the real estate industry in Australia, nevertheless in 2020 Australia had 882,482 international students' enrolments being generated by 686,104 full fee-paying international students on a student visa (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2022) (<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/international-student-data/Documents/MONTHLY%20SUMMARIES/2020/Full%20year%20summary.pdf>)

**Figure 6.2**

*Before Leaving Australia, from Whom Did You Rent the Accommodation (Property or Room) You Lived in? (n=66)*



*Note.* Source: Retrieved and reprinted from Morris et al. (2020, p. 97).

On that basis, the sample of 66 international students reported in Figure 6.2, if extrapolated even conservatively to the larger population, highlights dramatically the critical impact of international on-campus students on a single sector of the Australian economy: the real estate agents/companies.

Continuing this discussion of international on-campus students' accommodation needs in the host country, it is important to consider that the Australian real estate market services industry is expected to decline by 5.3% in 2023 (Ibis World, 2022). In addition, Michael Bleby, an Australian senior reporter who covers commercial and residential property, with a focus on housing and finance, construction, design and architecture (<https://www.afr.com/by/michael-bleby-j67se>), published a report that the value of Australian dwellings bought and sold in 2021 had soared to equal one-third of the national economy (AUD687 billion) out of the AUD two trillion that Australia generated as its GDP in 2021 (Bleby, 2022) (<https://www.afr.com/property/residential/home-settlements-surge-to-687b-or-one-third-of-australia-s-gdp-20220208-p59un9>). It is pertinent to ask what the result would have been if 84.9% of the total number of international students enrolled in Australia in 2020 (882,482) had withdrawn their extrapolated contribution to the Australian real estate industry because they had already left Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a different perspective, confirmation of the size of the contribution made by international on-campus students to the Australian real estate industry was provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report that the total value of residential dwellings in Australia in the September quarter of 2022 was AUD9,674.4 billion, down AUD358.9 billion from AUD10,033.3 billion in the June quarter of 2022. This was the largest quarterly fall in the value of residential dwellings in Australia since the series commenced in September 2011 (ABS, 2022) (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/total-value-dwellings/latest-release>).

Extending this argument about the often overlooked but significant and vital contribution by international on-campus students to the Australian economy, as encapsulated in the Australian real estate industry, the AUD687 billion that Bleby (2022) reported represented

housing services, including selling and rental. Taking this proposition further, it is noteworthy that many of these international students are working towards permanent residence eligibility that will render them eligible to buy land and houses in Australia, thereby reinforcing their economic contribution to this country.

Returning now to Morris et al.'s (2020) findings about 719 international student respondents to their survey, and as shown in Figure 6.3 (see also Figure 6.1), the researchers reported that 62 of these international students were stuck in their home country and unable to return to Australia, 59 had concerns about learning online (including that doing so meant that there was no reason for them to stay in Australia), 58 wanted to be with their family at that time, 57 reported that their families were worried about them and insisting that they come home, 56 were facing fears and concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic, 56 were worried about becoming homeless, 56 had problems with their housing and accommodation, 55 were facing financial difficulties, 55 had health concerns, 53 had lost their jobs, 53 had been evicted and 53 had lost their scholarships (Morris et al., 2020, p. 98).

**Figure 6.3**

*Why Did You Leave Australia?*



*Note.* Source: Retrieved and adapted by Hisham Bakr from Morris (2020, p. 98).

This very concerning diversity of concerns articulated by international on-campus students in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic has been intentionally juxtaposed with the information presented in this section of this chapter about the varied and significant contribution by these same students to the Australian economy. The stark contrast between these two sets of experiences – contributing positively to the economy, and being seriously affected by downturns in that same economy – highlights the lack of agency and autonomy felt by the international students, as well as the absence of meaningful and sustainable support of their situation by governments, universities and other agencies with the capacity to assist them at time of emergency. This in turn emphasises the urgency of realigning universities' USR, CSR and CRM with their international students' genuine and complex needs.

More broadly, as discussed in Chapter 2 and as elaborated in this section of the chapter, international on-campus students represent

several direct and indirect forms of expenditure in Australia. Not only are Australian universities estimated to lose up to AUD19 billion in revenue by 2023 owing to losses in tuition fees from international students alone (Thatcher et al., 2020), but also there are trillions of Australian dollars that represent indirect expenditure in Australia (in just one example, the real estate sector represented a loss of AUD358.9 billion in the June 2020 quarter as per the ABS financial report for GDP in September 2022 (ABS, 2022) (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/total-value-dwellings/latest-release>)).

This section of this chapter has presented information about the multiple direct and indirect contributions that international on-campus students have made and continue to make to the Australian economy, including during the Covid-19 pandemic and also in what is hopefully the post-pandemic phase of economic recovery. These contributions provide a very strong rationale for the argument articulated in the remainder of the chapter: that USR, CSR and CRM should include the interests and needs of international students 'front and centre' in their activities, not only as a marker of access, equity and social justice, but also because of the mutual benefits and shared interests existing between international students and their Australian universities.

### **6.3 University Social Responsibility and International Students' Experiences during Covid-19 in Australia**

This section of the chapter analyses the complex and what I contend is the indispensable link between USR and international students' experiences during Covid-19 in Australia. That analysis is clustered around two subsections: revisiting the conceptualisation of USR; and USR in practice in Australian universities.

#### ***6.3.1. Revisiting the Conceptualisation of University Social Responsibility***

As I noted in Chapter 3, an early definition of USR was as follows:

... a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development. (as cited by Vasilescu et al., 2010, p. 4178)

It is also important to revisit this timely reminder by Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes (2016) that the place of university students as stakeholders in USR cannot be assumed or taken for granted:

... we also agree with the opinion that students represent a core group for HEI [higher education institutions] .... Although the identification of University stakeholders has been rare throughout the literature, earlier proposals ... and recent stakeholders['] lists ... confirm the longest standing supposition, such as the student being the main stakeholder. In our opinion, this fact strength[en]s the need to focus USR efforts on this group of stakeholders, something not usually carried out by universities' managers already. (p. 155)

Moreover, universities, as an element of the knowledge society paradigm, are being more closely observed in terms of their social responsibility owing to the fact that they are increasingly run as commercial and competitive institutions faced with wider access to education (Geryk, 2011). However, universities as business institutions should treat laws and regulations as opportunities for improvement, insisting on ethical behaviour in their interactions with their stakeholders (e.g., students, academics and casual employees) (McDonald, 2014). Hence, the social impact of universities as institutions must arise from their ethical practices by defining several indicators to ensure that they fulfil the basic requirements of their responsibilities. In this context, it is noteworthy that ISO 26000 from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2023) (<https://www.iso.org/iso-26000-social->



responsibility.html) mentions social responsibility in higher degree by research (HDR) institutions from a managerialist perspective, as well as the focus of universities' activities being directed towards achieving a sustainable and healthy society to satisfy the needs posed by different interest groups in terms of mutual benefit (Yeung, 2018).

Furthermore, responsible HEIs have an impact on society and on economic, environmental and social development. The concept of USR manages these relationships to produce a positive impact on society through higher education, research, and the transfer of knowledge and technology, as well as education for sustainability. Meseguer-Sánchez et al. (2020) conducted very comprehensive worldwide research into this subject of USR during the period 1970–2019. A bibliometric analysis of 870 articles was made, obtaining results for the scientific productivity of the journals, authors, institutions and countries contributing to this research. The main disciplines canvassed were business, management and accounting (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Figure 6.4 provides a visual representation of the conceptual structure of USR. Given that the existing definitions of CSR refer mainly to companies and other types of organisations and to taking into consideration their stakeholders and the economic, social and environmental variables, USR can be derived conceptually from CSR (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020). Because universities are focused on the knowledge paradigm, they must train responsible citizens to solve social, economic and environmental issues. From the standpoint of Meseguer-Sánchez et al.'s (2020) conceptual structure of USR, several studies of CSR from several angles (e.g., impact on financial outcomes, company's sustainability and competition, etc) have detected that, despite their focus on generating and disseminating new knowledge, universities are in many ways being run as commercial enterprises, and they are facing

competition from other universities in terms of attracting and retaining higher education students (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Aligned with and arising from the conceptual structure of USR depicted in Figure 6.4, universities must play a crucial role in social responsibility arising from the strong foundation of demonstrably ethical practices. Accordingly, universities must define several indicators that ensure that their social responsibility role is being directed by enacting access and equity principles, a healthy environment for both students and academics, wellbeing for everyone on their campuses and environmental sustainability (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020). While enacting this responsibility, they must also treat everyone humanly and humanely. These widely ranging responsibilities take on a specific iteration and urgency with regard to international students, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Figure 6.4**

*Conceptual Structure of USR*



*Note.* Source: Retrieved and reprinted from (Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020, p. 6).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described how HEIs must train students to make responsible decisions in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations, thereby leading the positive transformation of society (Huckle & Wals, 2015), given that the universities have been positioned as forming the basis of educational transformation and, to some extent, of social sustainability. In this context, universities are obliged to implement a series of ethical principles and values in the fields of management, teaching and research, so that

they declare their intentions, in this sense, in their vision and mission (Pompeu et al., 2014).

As a distinctive example of USR as conceptualised from these diverse perspectives, the Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in New Delhi, India describes itself as an international centre for learning and for the promotion of participation and democratic governance. PRIA is focusing on initiatives related to capacity-building, knowledge-building, participatory research, citizen-centric development and policy advocacy. PRIA's vision is empowering citizens to participate in the process of deepening democracy with tolerance towards its large numbers and diversity. These include the marginalised, especially women. PRIA's vision of a desirable world is based on values of equity, justice, freedom, peace and solidarity, with a knowledge philosophy (Parsons, 2014).

As further and deeper conceptualisation of USR, and in alignment with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016), I found 10 goals among the 17 SDGs that are crucial to any industry. These 10 goals are: 1) No poverty; 2) Zero hunger; 3) Good health and wellbeing; 4) Quality education; 5) Clean water and sanitation; 6) Affordable and clean energy; 7) Decent work and economic growth; 8) Reduced inequalities; 9) Sustainable cities and communities; and 10) Partnerships for the goals.

Relatedly, if universities are implementing some or all of these 10 SDGs in their practices, they will contribute to a dramatic achievement in their USR. If universities can assist international students to find appropriate academic or professional work, especially at the HDR level, they can help to minimise poverty, hunger and wellbeing. In addition, by assessing their academics' satisfaction and insightful suggestions about the quality of education, they can improve that quality. Providing affordable and clean energy to the students and implementing sustainability policies and practices will enable universities to empower

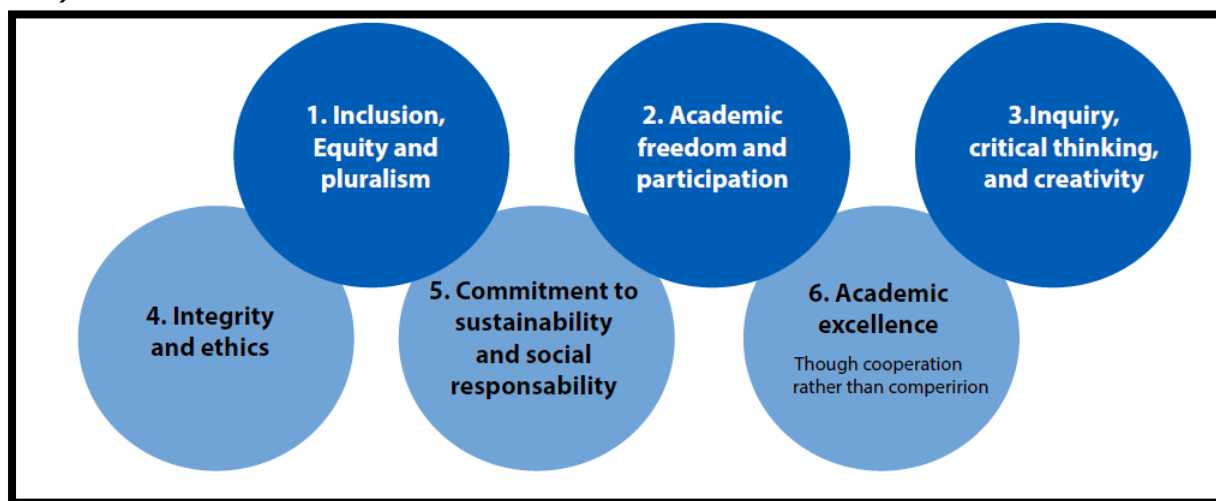
students to be future leaders and innovative academic researchers. Furthermore, universities must understand the intersections and links between supporting international students to find decent work and contributing to Australian economic growth. They must eliminate formal and informal discrimination and neo-racism in order to reduce inequalities, and they must act responsibly while behaving in a sustainably strategic way for a constructive education experience. Finally, Australian universities specifically must reframe the HDR structure by creating practical collaborations with other universities in different Australian states and territories and with the Australian Federal Government to focus on the importance of providing more scholarships for doctoral students, which in turn will contribute in the longer-term to enhancing the Australian GDP.

Aligned with the above discussion, Figure 6.5 highlights the role of the USR as it was envisaged at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) in Barcelona in 2022. Among the conference's fundamental principles was that equity of access and success at the higher education level cannot be seen as a luxury, but is instead a strong social justice imperative (UNESCO, 2022a) (<https://cdn.eventscase.com/www.whec2022.org/uploads/users/699058/uploads/69c2df623079c3845e236c56ba2d7a8aa21b3d75489e28c7910226f24f7989aec7aae05a23f31fae4587aeb4be088f99dccd.6282b2a95281d.pdf>). In addition, countries and institutions must accelerate efforts to remove the financial barriers to quality higher education for all learners, giving priority to vulnerable groups. One of the key missions of higher education is to uphold the academic tradition of free and fair inquiry and debate. Institutions must offer a safe space to academics to present and assess a diversity of views, and to engage with society in public debates on complex issues because self-governance is important to guarantee a collegial approach to decision-making and a consistent and smooth flow in

academic management (UNESCO, 2022b)  
(<https://www.whec2022.org/EN/homepage/Roadmap2030>).

**Figure 6.5**

*Principles to Shape the Future of Higher Education (UNESCO, 2022, p. 23b)*



*Note.* Source: Retrieved and reprinted from UNESCO (2022, p. 23a) (<https://cdn.eventsbase.com/www.whec2022.org/uploads/users/699058/uploads/69c2df623079c3845e236c56ba2d7a8aa21b3d75489e28c7910226f24f7989aec7aae05a23f31fae4587aeb4be088f99dccc6282b2a95281d.pdf>)

From a broader perspective, it is important to consider the connection between USR and academic freedom; if the latter is seriously compromised, it will be correspondingly more difficult to achieve the former. Based on an assessment of the de facto protection of academic freedom as of December 2021 in 177 countries and territories, there were two concerning findings:

First, the latest data reveal a substantial and statistically significant decline in academic freedom in 19 cases, with improvements registered in only two cases compared with 2011. Thirty-seven percent of the world's population live in these 19 countries and territories with major recent drops in academic freedom. Second, the decline in academic freedom accompanies an accelerating and deepening wave of autocratisation. (Kinzelbach et al., 2022, p. 3)

Building on assessments by more than 2,000 experts around the globe, the academic freedom index (AFI) for 2022 showed that Australia is among the top 20-30% around the world (Kinzelbach et al., 2022). Although this rank for Australia is encouraging overall, it may have an even higher classification if the potential of international education is considered more fully. I discuss later in this chapter how an effective CRM system in Australian universities may contribute directly to enhanced satisfaction, retention and loyalty for international students and academics alike.

Returning to Figure 6.5, the third principle to shape the future of higher education is identified as inquiry, critical thinking and creativity, which is also a key elements of universities' USR. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed that, in a world where fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories abound, critical thinking is essential. HEIs have a unique responsibility to teach how to distinguish real evidence from fabricated information, and to help their students to find innovative solutions that address the global challenges faced by our society and planet with passion (UNESCO, 2022b).

In order to discharge their USR responsibilities properly, HEIs must place a strong emphasis on ethical values and behaviours to promote honesty, tolerance and solidarity while shaping universities' integrity and ethics. All graduates should be prepared to become professionals who are agents of social responsibility, leaders of sustainability and citizens yearning for social justice (UNESCO, 2022b). Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms are increasingly important (e.g., CRM systems), and universities must ensure that AI systems work for the good of individuals, societies and the environment. Later in this chapter, I discuss the important role of CRM as an AI tool to integrate with universities' CRM systems.

Aligned with the 17 SDGs identified by UNESCO, sustainability is crucial to any organisation, and is certainly a key element of universities' USR. All HEIs can contribute actively to building a more sustainable world through educational programs, research projects, and engagements with local, national, regional and global communities. Scientific research and advances are important; however, undertaking research driven by the need to solve real-life problems and to address local and global challenges is more crucial for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022b).

Lastly, and the most critical component of shaping the future of HEIs and of being enabled to implement universities' USR effectively, is to create and build academic excellence through cooperation rather than competition. Universities and other types of HEIs can perform their educational missions more effectively through cooperation and solidarity. However, in reality severe competition between institutions exists (UNESCO, 2022b).

Finally in this subsection of this chapter, a range of social, political and epistemological crises has led to the emergence of challenges in the educational system that are a consequence of widespread distrust, hopelessness and lack of probity, evidenced in acts of corruption, injustice, pollution, deprivation, desolation and vandalism (Rafikov et al., 2021). A recent example of these crises was the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 until 2022. For this reason, HEIs should place a sense of urgency on the challenge linked to developing high quality and transferable work skills and ethical competencies (Alonso et al., 2020; Santosaa et al., 2020), which can lead to the manifestation of acts based on honesty, integrity, respect, responsibility, transparency and loyalty (Dodd et al., 2021). These can be achieved by implementing educational policies to procure an integral formation that should be based on the principles of USR, which allows the promotion of empathetic, supportive, ethical, altruistic and sustainable behaviours (Toker Gökçe, 2021). From this



perspective, USR is linked to ethical behaviour, related to the search for the benefit to each person and to the development of society in general (Ratna, 2020), which can improve the quality of life because of high social awareness.

This subsection of the chapter has revisited the conceptualisation of USR in Chapter 3 with the aid of some additional concepts and scholarly literature pertaining to contemporary universities and both the challenges and the opportunities that they encounter in discharging their complex and multiple responsibilities. This revisiting provides a backdrop for the following subsection's focus on analysing the practice of USR by Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### ***6.3.2 University Social Responsibility in Practice in Australian Universities***

I turn now to a thematic extrapolation of USR, distilled from relevant autoethnographic experiences and elements of critical incidents analysed in the previous chapter, and augmented by references to contemporary literature. The intention is to demonstrate the broader significance of USR as contributing to a potential counternarrative to the negative experiences encountered by myself and other international on-campus students at Australian universities, and hence to a renewed and more sustainable vision of international education globally.

In reflecting on the five critical incidents outlined in the previous chapter, I need at this point to acknowledge my sincere gratitude (also expressed in the acknowledgements at the start of this thesis) to individual staff members in the graduate research school and other relevant sections of the Australian university where I am completing my PhD study. It is clear to me that, from their individual perspectives, they have enacted USR in my case (and no doubt in the case of all the other HDR students for whom they have responsibility) as much as possible. For

instance, there were certainly examples where I was granted additional time that was much needed and greatly valued at the time. Moreover, I felt very supported in completing my confirmation of candidature and in moving from the DBA to the PhD programs.

At the same time, reflecting on the aforementioned critical incidents reinforced that I was not alone in having my agency and autonomy curtailed at different points in time. From my perspective, staff members, including my thesis supervisors and the graduate research school colleagues, have been similarly constrained by a combination of legislation, government policies, and university policies and procedures. This constraint has in some cases limited what individual staff members have been enabled to do by way of providing support for me, and also in identifying feasible options. Referring again to the two levels of analysis running through this thesis, at the micro level individuals have been as helpful and encouraging as they could be, while at the macro level they have been significantly hindered in their capacity to assist me. In this regard, I assert that an equivalent dichotomy between the micro and macro dimensions of USR places considerable strain on the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff members alike. In such conditions, the personal liminality of international students (and no doubt the liminality of some staff members as well) turns very readily into systematic and systemic marginalisation.

Both conceptually and empirically, thematic extrapolation related to USR reinforces that, regardless of individual goodwill at the micro level, contradictions and tensions at the macro level of Australian universities significantly increase the challenges concerned with implementing and expanding USR, a situation that was considerably exacerbated by the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Parker (2020) observed succinctly yet powerfully that:

Australian universities have aggressively pursued an accounting-based private sector business model. Their revenue generating reliance on international student revenues has been undermined by the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, university management clings to their commercialised university identity and role colonised by the accounting structures. Fundamental change requires a reversal of this relationship. (p. 541)

There is a clear dissonance between Parker's (2020) identification of Australian universities' dependence on "an accounting-based private sector business model" and on "international student revenues" (p. 541) on the one hand and a principle and a practice of USR that position such students as the principal beneficiaries of such "commercialised" (p. 541) relationships on the other hand. This dissonance helps to explain my stressful and sometimes traumatic autoethnographic experiences recounted in the previous chapter. It also serves to account for continuing and potentially growing difficulties in giving life and substance to the USR of Australian universities.

A similarly insightful analysis was provided by Doidge and Doyle (2022) that is worth quoting at some length because of its useful distillation of ideas and issues pertaining to USR and international students at Australian universities:

Covid is forcing Australia's universities to reappraise business models and forecasts that reflect the confidence of thirty years of continuous economic growth. With full-fee paying international student enrolments increasing tenfold between 1994 and 2018, to constitute a quarter of all university students, Australian higher education had become, pre-pandemic, a \$30 billion industry .... Moreover, reports by consultants and higher education peak bodies have consistently acknowledged universities' social and cultural

contributions as well as their role in preparing young people for participation in twenty-first century knowledge economies ....

Yet[,] despite this, enduring issues surrounding the funding and policy direction of Australian universities have been evident since at least the late 1980s. These have in part been papered over by the huge growth in international student enrolments. This lucrative revenue stream has enabled Australian universities to invest heavily in capital works and fostered a vigorous pursuit of research agendas targeted at improving their position on league table rankings. The dramatic Covid-driven collapse of Australia's international higher education market calls into question the current model's viability. It also reignites wider value debates on the purpose of Australia's universities—their relationship to the public good, and the appropriate balance between government and private funding—the antecedents of which go back to the sector's colonial origins. (p. 668)

Significantly, the analysis by Doidge and Doyle (2022) contained elements of a recognition of USR with the reference to “universities’ social and cultural contributions as well as their role in preparing young people for participation in twenty-first century knowledge economies” (p. 668). Yet any idealism associated with that recognition was completely overshadowed by Australian universities’ commercially motivated pursuit of the “lucrative revenue stream” that was made possible “by the huge growth in international student enrolments” (p. 668). Furthermore, the authors’ analysis suggested that it took a global pandemic to make visible and open to question the fundamental contradiction between what I am arguing in this chapter was USR – with students’ interests at the centre of universities’ decision-making – operating among individuals and at the micro level, and the opposite of USR – with universities’ interests at the

centre of their decision-making – underpinning institutional and systemic policies and practices.

This section of the chapter has focused on addressing the USR component of the study's second research question, initially by revisiting the conceptualisation of USR, and then by building on the critical incidents presented in the previous chapter and also on selected current literature to engage in selected thematic extrapolation about USR. From that perspective, the broader significance of my autoethnographic experiences analysed in the previous chapter includes the noteworthy fact that the USR role of Australian universities was not enough during the Covid-19 pandemic to reduce international students' serious worries about financial issues (e.g., fears about being made homeless and about their ability to maintain any scholarships provided to them before the crisis). Owing to these continuing concerns, a large number of international students went home in 2020 and 2021. However, it was very difficult to determine the exact number of international students who returned home owing to many discrepancies about international student data on the official websites of the ABS and the Australian Department of Education. More broadly, unless the fundamental contradiction between USR at the micro and macro levels – or between ideal and reality – can be addressed, international students will continue not to be well-served by the USR function of Australian universities.

### **6.3 Corporate Social Responsibility and International Students' Experiences during Covid-19 in Australia**

The previous section of this chapter explored USR through a thematic extrapolation from selected aspects of the critical incidents analysed in the previous chapter and relevant current literature. This thematic extrapolation identified a significant disjuncture between USR in theory and in practice, and at the micro and macro levels of policy and practice. This disjuncture helped to explain my individually stressful and

sometimes traumatic autoethnographic experiences recounted in the previous chapter. It also constitutes a continuing public policy debate and dilemma for Australian federal, state and territory governments, as well as for university leaders.

This section of the chapter focuses more positively and proactively on some ideas for what might be done to remedy this disjuncture, and thereby to render international education in Australia more productive, sustainable and viable for individual students and also for university providers. These ideas emerge from a thematic extrapolation from literature related to considering the CSR macro level concept from the study's conceptual framework as a specific dimension of the study's second research question. As with the previous section's account of USR, the intention here is to generate a deeper understanding of how CSR can contribute to an alternative and hopefully more empowering vision of international education in Australia.

This section of the chapter is formed by my identification of possible ideas for a more positive and productive vision of international education in Australia, clustered around four themes emerging from the thematic extrapolation technique applied to CSR as distilled from selected current literature, and also anchored in my autoethnographic experiences as an international on-campus student at an Australian university:

- CSR and shared value
- CSR and stakeholder satisfaction
- CSR and sustainable development
- CSR and strategic leadership.

#### ***6.4.1. Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value***

Given the significant analytical role assigned to CSR in this chapter – helping to generate ideas for a potential counternarrative to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of USR identified in the previous

section – it is helpful to recall from Chapter 3 that Latapí Agudelo et al. (2019) presented a very helpful historical overview of CSR, noting that:

... the understanding of corporate responsibility has evolved from being limited to the generation of profit to include a broader set of responsibilities to the latest belief that the main responsibility of companies should be the generation of shared value. The findings also indicate that[, ] as social expectations of corporate behaviour changed, so did the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility.

This evolution is encouraging, not least because it highlights the capacity of CSR, rather than being a fixed conceptual essence, to reinvent itself in order to address contemporary problems. Furthermore, Latapí Agudelo et al.'s (2019) reference to "shared value" identified the first element of the thematic extrapolation framing this section of the chapter.

From that perspective, Porter and Kramer (2011) were associated with developing the notion of shared value. While acknowledging critiques of this concept (Visser & Kymal, 2015), I was intrigued by the striking similarity between the opening of their seminal article published in 2011 and our current standpoint in what is hopefully the post-Covid-19 pandemic era:

The capitalist system is under siege. In recent years business increasingly has been viewed as a major cause of social, environmental, and economic problems. Companies are widely perceived to be prospering at the expense of the broader community.

Even worse, the more business has begun to embrace corporate responsibility, the more it has been blamed for society's failures. The legitimacy of business has fallen to levels not seen in recent history. This diminished trust in business leads political leaders to set policies that undermine competitiveness and sap economic growth. Business is caught in a vicious circle. (p. 4)

In terms of the analysis of USR in the previous sections, international students are understandably likely to perceive Australian universities “to be prospering at the expense” (Kramer & Porter, 2011, p. 4) of themselves, and to exhibit “diminished trust” (p. 4) in university leaders. It is therefore relevant to consider the authors’ advocacy of creating shared value (CSV) and their contrast between CSV and CSR:

Creating shared value (CSV) should supersede corporate social responsibility (CSR) in guiding the investments of companies in their communities .... In contrast, CSV ... leverages the unique resources and expertise of the company to create economic value by creating social value. (p. 16)

Helpfully, Kramer and Porter (2011) elaborated six distinct principles of CSV that they contended are readily actioned by way of policies and practices:

- Value: doing good
- Citizenship, philanthropy, sustainability
- Discretionary or in response to external pressure
- Separate from profit maximisation
- Agenda is determined by external reporting and personal preferences
- Impact limited by corporate footprint and CSR budget. (p. 16)

I propose CSV, working in partnership rather than in competition with CSR, as a viable element of a counternarrative to the current negative liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns of international on-campus students at Australian universities. The notion of “[c]reating shared value” (Kramer & Porter, 2011, p. 16) evokes ideas of conversations and dialogues, and opportunities for multiple and diverse viewpoints to be articulated and valued. If the present disjuncture is to be



transformed, mobilising the voices of international students and enabling them to work productively with university leaders and academics in the form of CSV are an important starting point in that process of transformation.

#### **6.4.2. Corporate Social Responsibility and Stakeholder Satisfaction**

With regard to the theme of CSR and stakeholder satisfaction, and revisiting relevant ideas about that theme presented in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3, I note that Diez-Canamero et al. (2020) explored some of the connections between CSR and particular aspects of stakeholder theory. That same association was also elaborated by Dmytriiev et al. (2021), who asserted that “stakeholder theory and CSR provide distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks with some overlap. The actual decision to choose a particular framework depends on the problem one wants to solve and the settings of that problem” (p. 1141). Likewise, Marques et al. (2021) elaborated the association between CSR and the power of internal and external stakeholders in a local subsidiary.

Isa (2011) defined stakeholder satisfaction as “an overall evaluation based on the stakeholders’ consumption experience with a good or service over time ... ” (p. 123). Crucially for this study of international education in Australian universities, Ismail and Shujaat (2019) advocated strongly for “the identification of students and employees as equal stakeholders within a university”, and they also “urge[d] university authorities to understand the expectations of their stakeholders for improved institutional performance” (p. 88).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of stakeholder satisfaction, which was encapsulated by Berrone et al.’s (2007) statement that this phenomenon “is viewed as a multidimensional construct ... that captures a wide range of items – at least one for each relevant stakeholder ... ” (p. 42). In that regard, I do

not see aligning CSR and stakeholder satisfaction as being either simplistic or straightforward. For instance, individual stakeholders' views are liable to change over time in line with their developing experiences, and likewise personal interests are likely to differ both within and across different stakeholder groups.

In that context, it was encouraging to note the argument by López-Fernández (2021), writing about the Covid-19 pandemic, that "effective socially responsible crisis management enables firms to transition from survival mode to survivability" (p. 169), and also her recognition that in such a situation "stakeholder satisfaction must be met, which suggests managing ethically – in a socially responsible manner" (p. 180). While some researchers might see "survivability" as a relatively limited and transitional state, preferring to aim for "sustainability" or "thrivability", López-Fernández on the contrary envisaged "survivability" more positively as follows: "Survivability is considered a functioning 'new normal' which requires a socially responsible approach to crisis management of all phases experienced in survival behavior toward transitioning from survival mode" (p. 178). Intriguingly, López-Fernández's synthesis of the situation confronting businesses after Covid-19 had strong resonances with my own and other international students' experiences at Australian universities, and is accordingly worthwhile citing at length:

The current Global Pandemic is ongoing and affecting millions around the world, both directly and indirectly, and with varying degrees of collateral effects .... People are stressed, anxious, concerned, and scared. They fear the risk of infection for their families, communities, and themselves; they worry about their income, how they will support themselves and [their] families, [and] keep their homes; they are anxious about the "end" of the pandemic, when it will happen, and, in either case, what will the "new normal" look like. Some are struggling with severe emotional

responses to the trauma, some are developing PTSD and, in all likelihood, we are all developing collective trauma.

These people are [an] organization's current and potential stakeholders; expecting them to perform at their previous level of productivity, then, is not plausible without adequate and prompt attention. Their anguish is real, must be validated, and considered in organizational leaders' decision making to collectively survive the effects of [C]ovid-19. The greatest advantage has been taught by history; human beings are resilient. We survive. (pp. 180-181)

In particular ways, many of the descriptors used by López-Fernández (2021) can be applied directly to international on-campus students at Australian universities during the pandemic. Certainly, I have felt and continue to feel "stressed, anxious, concerned, and scared" (p. 180); I too "worry about [my] income, how [I] will support [myself] and [my] famil[y], [and how I will] keep [my home]" (p. 180); and my "anguish is real, must be validated, and considered in organizational leaders' decision making to collectively survive the effects of [C]ovid-19" (p. 181). Yet expressing the scale of the situation in this way is useful rather than overwhelming, and is a key pre-requisite of aligning CSR with stakeholder satisfaction in order to enhance the future provision of international education in Australia.

#### ***6.4.3. Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development***

This subsection of this chapter explores the connection between CSR and sustainable development as a key element of revisioning Australian international education. Like "CSR", "sustainable development" has been defined in multiple ways from sometimes divergent perspectives, including economic, social, environmental and futures considerations (Kolk & van Tulder, 2010). This definitional complexity is increased by the fact that both "sustainable" and "development" are

contested as separate terms, as well as when they are brought together. Furthermore, Ye et al. (2020) considered that some of the scholarly literature positioned CSR and sustainable development as being distinctly different, and even potentially contradictory from certain perspectives, while other literature rendered them close to being synonymous.

This definitional complexity notwithstanding, it is corporate managers who have been charged with the task of integrating sustainable development considerations into their daily decision-making (Epstein et al., 2018; Moon, 2007). This integration includes a commitment to developing policies that incorporate responsible practices into daily business operations, and to reporting on progress made towards implementing these practices (Bhagwat, 2011). Commonly used CSR policies that are directed at enhancing sustainable development include the following:

- (1) Adoption of internal controls reform;
- (2) Commitment to diversity in hiring employees and barring discrimination;
- (3) Management teams that view employees as assets rather than costs;
- (4) High performance workplaces that integrate the views of line employees into decision-making processes;
- (5) Adoption of operating policies that exceed compliance with social and environmental laws;
- (6) Advanced resource productivity, focused on the use of natural resources in a more productive, efficient and profitable fashion; and
- (7) Taking responsibility for conditions under which goods are produced directly or by contract employees domestically or abroad. (Bhagwat, 2011, p. 4)

Importantly, the consistent assumption among researchers is that CSR and sustainable development can work together to promote the long-term viability of an enterprise or firm. By contrast, it is assumed that non-CSR oriented economic policy that is also not focused on sustainable development results in reducing the level of income and the long-run growth of organisations (Škare & Golja, 2014).

Shifting this discussion to Australian higher education, I draw on Sheehy and Farneti's (2021) helpful distinction between the terms "CSR" and "sustainable development", as follows:

CSR has evolved into a form of international private business regulation focused on the environmental and social impacts of business .... It includes a host of individual and collective rights in addition to guidance on ethical and environmental issues. It has been a bottom-up push focused on business which has led to a response from global policymakers .... The [other] term, sustainability, is a term that describes a broader public global policy agenda, forming a foundation for sustainable development, focused on the maintenance of ecology that allows the human species to flourish. (p. 3)

Understood in the context of Australian universities, CSR can indeed be seen as "a host of individual and collective rights in addition to guidance on ethical and environmental issues" (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). These rights encompass diverse stakeholder groups, including different categories of students, academic and administrative staff members, leaders and managers, and a rich diversity of external stakeholders, including governments, businesses and community organisations. From the perspective articulated by Sheehy and Farneti (2021), these rights might seem to contrast with sustainable development understood as "the maintenance of ecology that allows the human species to flourish". Yet from another perspective these two sets of concerns can work in

partnership to attain complementary and even mutually dependent goals. For instance, both CSR and sustainable development are concerned with identifying and as far as possible fulfilling diverse interests and needs. Relatedly, CSR can be enriched and strengthened if it draws on sustainable development's focus on human flourishing. Certainly, a reanimated Australian international education system whose policies and practices are explicitly focused on helping international students to flourish will in turn contribute directly to the equivalent flourishing of Australian universities and the wider community.

In this regard, it is helpful to note these self-assessment questions for Australian universities about their CSR clustered around three complementary lenses of sustainable development (Henriques & Richardson, 2013):

(1) Who you are? What does your university stand for, and what does it aspire to accomplish?

(2) What do you do? What are the social and environmental impacts of the services that you offer?

(3) How do you do it? How do you follow up the implementation of the environmental and social impacts of your practices and processes on students (including international students) and employees and in the communities where you operate (Henriques & Richardson, 2013).

Such self-assessment questions are complex and might be uncomfortable for Australian universities to consider. Yet they are vital if the positive consequences of aligning CSR and sustainable development with regard to those universities' operations, including their international education provision, are to be enabled.

#### ***6.4.4. Corporate Social Responsibility and Strategic Leadership***

The importance of aligning CSR and strategic leadership is another key proposition that emerged from the thematic encapsulation framing

this section of the chapter. Clearly, given the significant challenges related to Australian international education during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial to have leadership at government and university levels alike that is empowering, far-sighted and responsive to dynamic and multifaceted situations. In that regard, Waldman et al. (2020) articulated some of the complexities linked with this proposition, although what I have termed “strategic leadership” was presented as “responsible leadership”, which they defined as follows:

*Responsible leadership is an orientation or mind-set taken by people in executive level positions toward meeting the needs of a firm’s stakeholder(s). As such, it deals with defining those stakeholder(s), assessing the legitimacy of their claims, and determining how those needs, expectations, or interests can and should best be served.*  
(pp. 5-6)

Such a leadership approach would certainly be welcome in reframing Australian international education. This is against the wider backdrop of findings from a global survey of academic staff in Australia, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom about their experiences during, and their predictions of the impact of, the Covid-19 pandemic on their wellbeing (McGaughey et al., 2021). Using self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) as a conceptual framework for survey design and data analysis, the study focused on Australia’s neoliberalised higher education sector. Results concluded that the Australian universities’ institutional responses to the pandemic intensified established trends in higher education as a consequence of marketisation. These trends included work intensification, job insecurity, inadequate support from management and lack of trust in institutional leadership (McGaughey et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, it was noteworthy that Albuquerque and Cabral (2021) encapsulated their vision of “Strategic Leadership in

Corporate Social Responsibility” as follows: “This commitment leads firms to change their actions in ways that ultimately favor shareholders”, with “shareholders” understood as stakeholders, including international students, in the case of Australian universities.

While exercising strategic leadership in the context of promoting CSR is undoubtedly complex, the scholarly literature provides a number of indicators of the kinds of strategies that are likely to be useful in such an approach. For instance, Orlitzky et al. (2011) asserted that:

Leaders who base their approach to decision-making on the balancing of concerns of multiple stakeholder groups may be more attuned to long-term reputation issues, as opposed to achieving short-term returns on investments in CSR. The net, and perhaps paradoxical, upshot is that less concern for short-term returns to CSR actions may actually result in better profitability over time. (p. 12)

Moreover:

... when leaders stress the need to balance the needs of multiple stakeholders in their strategic decision-making, they are seen as more inspirational by followers. This perception, in turn, leads to better follower effort and firm financial performance. In contrast, leaders who put predominant stress on economic factors in their decision-making (e.g., profits and cost control) were not seen as inspiring and paradoxically, [and] their firms did not realize better profitability. (Orlitzky et al., 2011, p.12)

From a different perspective, Pultz Schlosser and Volkova (2022) advocated “social enterprise strategic leadership” as a particular approach to enhancing CSR in firms. Differently again, Singh et al. (2023) used their systematic review of 6,024 studies of strategic leadership to propose the following synthesising definition, which in turn suggested several



useful ways to implement such leadership in a CSR context, including in Australian universities:

*Strategic leadership can be comprehensively described as leadership that is focused on strategic consequences (e.g., economic, environmental, social) for organizations (e.g., multinationals, small and medium enterprises), which can be driven by tasks that include but transcend beyond strategic visioning, encapsulating a wide range of high-level administrative (governance), engagement, innovation (improvement), operational, and supervisory tasks for an organization without being confined to any leadership style (e.g., authentic, autocratic, bureaucratic, democratic, transactional, transformational, servant) or value (e.g., self-regarding, other-regarding).*

In my view, rather than being unwieldy or at risk of being 'all things to all people', this conception of strategic leadership lends itself to the agility, responsiveness and sense of obligation to multiple stakeholders that I argue lies at the heart of enabling and empowering CSR, including as it relates to Australian universities and their responsibilities to their international students.

This section of the chapter has used thematic extrapolation from the scholarly literature to address the element of the study's second research question related to CSR and international students' experiences during Covid-19 in Australia. Specifically, the discussion focused on the linkages and alignment between CSR and each of the selected themes of shared value, stakeholder satisfaction, sustainable development and strategic leadership. While several other themes could have been identified here, I contend that in combination shared value, stakeholder satisfaction, sustainable development and strategic leadership constitute a viable framework for an alternative vision of international education in Australia, one that is centred on a genuine CSR that is transformative for Australian

universities and for their multiple stakeholders, including international students.

## **6.5 Customer Relationship Management and International Students' Experiences during Covid-19 in Australia**

In Section 6.2 of this chapter, I used thematic extrapolation from the critical incidents arising from my autoethnographic experiences analysed in Chapter 5, and augmented by relevant scholarly literature, to address the USR component of the study's second research question. I also used Section 6.2 to highlight a fundamental disjuncture regarding USR and Australian universities and international on-campus students: between micro and macro levels of analysis; and between theory and practice. In Section 6.3, I likewise used thematic extrapolation to distil four themes, again from the relevant literature, to engage with the CSR element of the second research question. I also argued that those themes constitute a valuable and viable framework for articulating an alternative framework for international education provision by Australian universities. I contend that such a framework is vital if Australian international education is to regain its integrity and sustainability and to discharge its essential mission of global knowledge exchange and increased mutual understanding among students and across communities and nations.

In this section of the chapter, I use thematic extrapolation as well to elaborate selected aspects of CRM, once again informed by my autoethnographic experiences from the previous chapter and also by relevant scholarly literature, to add detail about what this alternative framework for international education provision by Australian universities might look like. I acknowledge that this is really the province of government and university leaders. At the same time, my ideas and those of other international on-campus students in Australia constitute a rich repository of recent and current experiences on which those leaders can readily draw to inform their thinking.

This section is divided into the following three subsections:

- Revisiting the conceptualisation of CRM
- Proposing a conceptual framework for CRM and Australian universities
- Developing an integrated conceptual framework for CRM, USR and CSR.

### ***6.5.1. Revisiting the Conceptualisation of Customer Relationship Management***

As I noted in Chapter 3, CRM is defined as a process of acquiring, retaining and partnering with customers to create enhanced value for the company and the customer (Dewnarain et al., 2019). Similarly, Scott (2001) conceptualised CRM as a set of business policies and processes designed to capture, retain and provide service to customers. In the context of Australian universities and international students, this view of CRM reinforces that those universities must identify and understand students' needs and issues, work to ensure students' satisfaction and retain them by providing the appropriate services to them (e.g., student training, supporting students to attain decent work, student wellbeing and student satisfaction).

From this perspective, in order to remain relevant, Australian universities must create value for their international students, while at the same time extracting appropriate and sufficient value from them to contribute to the university's sustainability. Strategically implementing CRM is a key component of meeting this challenge by balancing Customer Perceived Value (CPV) – in this study, international students' perceived value at Australian universities – and Company Value (CV) (i.e., the university's value). By using an international student value-based approach to CRM, profits for the universities as well as the satisfaction of

their international students can be increased in the long run (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018).

Based on the preceding points, Australian universities must build and/or purchase appropriate technologies to include strong CRM systems in their facilities. By assessing international students' value using CRM, and by working on meeting the students' needs and addressing their issues, universities can have satisfied international students on their campuses. This is proposed as a positive relationship between CRM and student satisfaction, because, in so far as universities demonstrate that they care about their students, the students will in turn be satisfied and share their perceived positive learning experiences with other students, thereby encouraging those other students to enrol at the same university. This strategic approach will ensure not only student satisfaction but also student retention in the long run. For example, if I am unhappy as an international student studying at University A in Australia, I may keep looking to transfer to University B in Australia that may provide me with a scholarship, better working opportunities or an internship grant. Hence, international students' satisfaction has a significant impact on the Australian economy because of the considerable income that they generate for the Australian GDP.

In this same vein, Bergeron (2004) concluded that CRM systems will involve changes in the organisation and operation of each company, resulting in an improvement in its performance and competitiveness. The most important improvements that can be foreseen include the following:

- (1) Higher customer satisfaction, through offering a better service.
- (2) Higher business adhesion to defining corporate objectives linked to customer satisfaction.
- (3) Increasing the number of customers and reaching customers' loyalty owing to the reorganisation of the business processes as

per the customer relations and satisfaction (i.e., through sales, marketing, customer care services).

- (4) Improving and extending the life cycle for customer relationships and generating new business opportunities.
- (5) Customers' segmentation, differentiating profitable customers from those who are not, and establishing appropriate business plans for each case.
- (6) Increasing the effectiveness of providing customer service by having complete information through CRM.
- (7) Lower costs analysis and assessment for customer behavior.
- (8) Sales and marketing information about customer requirements, expectations and perceptions in real time. (Bergeron, 2004)

On the other hand, some organisations fail to implement CRM strategies. Some of the reasons for that failure include:

- (1) Thinking that technology is the solution; however, the business objectives must be properly defined before using the CRM technology.
- (2) Lack of management support and misunderstanding the CRM opportunities.
- (3) An absence of "passion for the customer" in the organisation's culture.
- (4) Lack of a company vision and strategy.
- (5) Lack of flexibility in adapting the processes to achieve the desired results.
- (6) Poor quality of information (e.g., the company could not identify precisely in advance what is required).

- (7) Inability to manage the change properly during the CRM process (Chalmeta, 2006).

As noted above, while Australian universities strive towards implementing a strong CRM solution, many CRM implementations can fail. One of the main reasons for this lack of success is that the existing methodologies being used to support a CRM project are not adequate. As I elaborate below, universities must use satisfactorily integrated and complemented strategic and technological aspects of CRM (Chalmeta, 2006) to meet their international students' needs.

### ***6.5.2. Proposing a Conceptual Framework for Customer Relationship Management and Australian Universities***

Dreaming of a dramatic change in the current Australian international education system, and taking into consideration that education is as essential as water and air, as Dr Taha Hussein articulated in Egypt in 1950 (Pflitsch, 2015), I propose in this subsection a new conceptual framework for CRM and Australian universities that I adapted from Bergeron (2004) to align more closely with the current economic and political situations in Australia in 2023. Table 6.1 outlines this proposed new conceptual framework.

**Table 6.1**

*Conceptual Framework for Customer Relationship Management and Australian Universities*

<b>Item number</b>	<b>What to do?</b>	<b>How to do it?</b>
1.	Higher student satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sending automated adapted surveys prepared by external experts or research</li> </ul>

Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
		and development (R&D) team members to assess students' behaviours (e.g., students' financial status, students' wellbeing, students' struggles with study, etc.)
2.	Defining the university's objectives and drawing up plans to enhance students' satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing current students' satisfaction</li> <li>• Approaching and increasing the number of new students through positive word of mouth of the current students to reduce marketing costs</li> <li>• Investing in R&amp;D rather than hiring a marketing team to assess students' affective behaviour</li> <li>• Applying CRM principles in an ethical way regarding providing social support for students</li> <li>• Exploring students' satisfaction towards students' loyalty</li> </ul>

Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
3.	Improving and extending the life cycle for students' and academics' relationships and generating new business opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing special attention and support to both students and academics from the CSR budget</li> <li>• Providing practical and effective support to integrate students in the future workforce</li> <li>• Assessing on an ongoing basis students' satisfaction as well as that of academics to maximise their continuing satisfaction and retention</li> <li>• Engaging both international doctoral students and academics in discussing the future of the doctorate in Australia</li> </ul>
4.	International students' segmentation in relation to establishing an appropriate business plan for each segment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, segmenting each country as per the potential of each market in the international education sector (e.g., India, China, the Middle East), the languages that these countries are speaking, the</li> </ul>



Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
		<p>needs of Australian multicultural affairs, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing appropriate business plans to approach potential additional international students from the more profitable countries</li> </ul>
5.	Increasing the effectiveness of student services through an updated CRM system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking into consideration that CRM systems are manipulated and managed by human beings rather than working automatically to satisfy their needs</li> <li>• Assessing and reviewing data integration into the CRM system from time to time to ensure that it is updated and that it matches current circumstances in real time</li> <li>• For example, if during Covid-19 international students needed assistance to obtain travel exemptions, once such exemptions are</li> </ul>

Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
		no longer applicable, the CRM system must be updated accordingly
6.	Assessing and analysing students' behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, analysing how many current students applied for scholarships with other universities, applied for a leave of absence (LoA) from their study and their reasons for doing so, and (without infringing confidentiality) the wellbeing reports provided by the university counsellors for the purpose of assisting their students</li> <li>• Assessing and analysing the above mentioned examples and other examples that can help universities to know the satisfaction levels of their students and to work on prompt solutions to assist the students and also to retain them</li> <li>• Changing the way that Australian universities deal</li> </ul>

Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
		with their students by building on andragogical principles of student agency and autonomy and by supporting their effective decision-making
7.	Linking the Australian higher education sector's CRM to that of the Australian immigration system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building resonances and synergies between these crucial Australian government agencies</li> <li>• Using the information generated by these resonances and synergies to update their policies and practices in real time to reflect the Global Satisfaction of International Students in Australia (GSISA) to retain the students' contributions to the Australian GDP</li> <li>• Appointing an Advisory Board from the Australian HEIs to discuss the effectiveness criteria related</li> </ul>

Item number	What to do?	How to do it?
		to the government CRM system

*Note.* Adapted from Bergeron (2004) by Hisham Bakr (2023) to align and propose the new conceptual framework for customer relationship management at Australian universities.

CRM can support sustainable development and economic growth, not only in individual organisations, but also in government departments and related government initiatives. In Table 6.1, I presented the elements of a proposed conceptual framework for CRM and Australian universities. I argue that implementing such a CRM framework will contribute to Australia's sustainable development and economic growth, as well as retaining and potentially extending the value of international students' contributions to the Australian GDP through both direct and indirect expenditure by those students. In doing so, it will hopefully render the international students' experiences more positive and productive than they are currently for many students.

### ***6.5.3. Developing an Integrated Conceptual Framework for Customer Relationship Management, University Social Responsibility and Corporate Social Responsibility***

Having proposed a conceptual framework for CRM and Australian universities, in this subsection I develop a broader conceptual framework that integrates CRM, USR and CSR. I do so because such an integration provides a more comprehensive, rigorous and robust means for analysing the combined macro and micro levels of government systems, university policies and procedures, and international students' individual

experiences. I see this as a crucial step in putting forward a credible counternarrative to the current international education system in Australia.

I contend that CRM must be at the centre of the integrated conceptual framework as it links USR – represented in the principles needed to reshape the Australian universities – and CSR fundamentals of an ethical and positive role that must be integrated into the CRM system.

At the outset, I need to refer to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that called on countries to begin efforts in 2015 to achieve the 17 SDGs. These goals address the needs of people in both developed and developing countries. In scope, the agenda addresses the three dimensions of sustainable development: social economic and environmental (United Nations, 2015). Hence CSR is highly correlated with the 17<sup>th</sup> SDGs of the United Nations given that Meseguer-Sánchez et al. (2020) concluded that CSR must address social, economic and environmental issues. In turn, CSR must include most if not all of the 17 SDGs.

In Figure 6.6, the 17 SDGs build on the previous eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, which proposed: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combatting HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development (Fukuda-Parr, 2004).

**Figure 6.6**

*Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*



*Note.* Source: Picture reprinted from United Nations (2015).

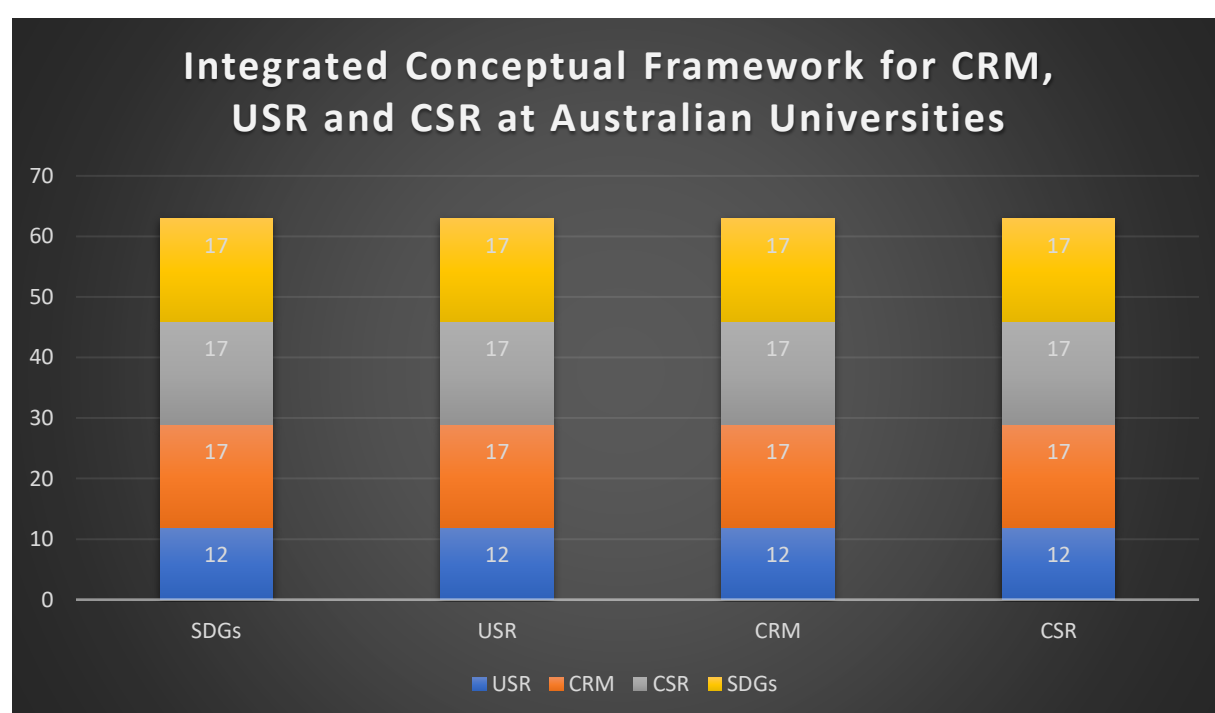
In addition to important aspects related to peace, justice and effective institutions (Kinzelbach et al., 2022), the mobilisation of the means of implementing these goals is crucial. This mobilisation includes financial resources, technology development and transfer (e.g., CRM) and capacity-building, in addition to the role of partnerships (United Nations, 2015).

Of the 17 SDGs represented in Figure 6.6, I contend that any university must include Goals 1 to 5, Goals 8 to 12 and finally Goals 16 and 17 in their CSR. I note also that Goals 6, 7, 13, 14 and 15 are not easy to implement in universities. However, implementing some or all of them in the university's CSR plan can be considered a differentiation strategy and makes a distinctive marketing position for any university.

In seeking to link the SDGs with Australian universities, I wish to highlight the broader – indeed, global – networks of meaning-making and power that help to frame and influence the intentions and outcomes of those universities that in turn contribute to framing and influencing their international students. The SDGs also help to envisage the proposed integrated framework for CRM, USR and CSR that is depicted in Figure 6.7.

**Figure 6.7**

*An Integrated Conceptual Framework for CRM, USR and CSR*



I represented the levels of USR in blue, CRM in orange, CSR in grey and SDGs in yellow. This integrated conceptual framework is built on how many inclusions of the 17 SDGs are included in each of the three macro level concepts in this study. For instance, as shown in Figure 6.7, USR must integrate with all 17 SDGs, and it must include a minimum of 12 SDGs to be considered to have a strong USR role. The 12 SDGs that should be included relate to reducing poverty and hunger, enhancing the good health and wellbeing of their students, providing quality education,

promoting gender equality, assisting with providing decent work to their students to contribute to economic growth, focusing on industry innovation trends and orientations to influence the infrastructure of industry, reducing inequality, considering the university's social responsibility contributions towards sustainable cities and communities, and demonstrating responsible consumption and production.

Furthermore, Figure 6.6 indicates that CRM and CSR must support USR in terms of implementing the minimum of 12, and as close as possible to the maximum of 17, of the SDGs. This perspective provides an enlarged understanding of the mission and vision of Australian universities, and links their remit with much wider considerations than their institutional boundedness would suggest. In different but complementary ways, USR, CSR and CRM must work together as a single, integrated framework to give life and substance to the SDGs.

A key corollary of this proposition is that Australian international education can be seen as a microcosm of the SDGs. Similarly, international students can be seen as a litmus test for Australian universities' commitment to, and effectiveness in, implementing the SDGs. From that perspective, if international students feel disempowered and helpless, it is unlikely that the university is enacting one or more SDGs successfully or sustainably. This proposition is not intended to privilege the voices of international students disproportionately, but rather to argue that ensuring a close alignment between a university's USR, CSR and CRM and its commitments to its international students is likely at the same time to contribute to its obligations regarding the SDGs (and also to its other students).

This section of the chapter has explored diverse links between CRM and international students at Australian universities. After briefly revisiting the conceptualisation of CRM from the standpoints of Chapter 3 and current literature, the focus shifted to proposing a conceptual



framework for CRM and Australian universities, followed by selected ideas for developing an integrated conceptual framework for CRM, USR and CSR, informed by their potential and desirable separate and combined contributions to Australian universities helping to fulfil the 17 SDGs. The intention has been to generate a rigorous and robust framework for analysing those universities' provision of international education against the backdrop of CRM, USR, CSR and the SDGs. The further intention of doing so is to ensure that supporting the success and wellbeing of international on-campus students is 'front and centre', rather than an 'optional extra', for Australian universities.

## **6.6 Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has been the second of two data analysis chapters in this thesis, presenting my collated evidence to address the first research question in this study: "What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?".

The synthesis of my response to this research question is presented in greater detail in Chapter 7, as well as my response to the study's second research question. At this stage, it is relevant to note that the three macro level concepts constituting the study's conceptual framework – USR, CSR and CRM – provided a set of valuable and viable analytical resources for identifying the wider significance of my autoethnographic experiences as an international on-campus student at an Australian university reported in the previous chapter. In particular, I contend that the thematic extrapolation used in this chapter generated some useful ideas for reimagining the provision of international education in Australia in ways that are more empowering and transformative than was my

situation, and than was the case with many other international students in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Having presented evidence to support my response to the second research question in this chapter, I turn in the next and final chapter to present the conclusion to the thesis.

## **Chapter 7: CONCLUSION**

### **7.1 Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 1 stated the background to the study, discussed the complex interplay between the macro and micro levels of analysis, and articulated and explained the two research questions to be answered.

Chapter 2 explored the research problem with which this thesis was concerned by presenting a critical review of selected literature about relevant key issues related to this research. This included: an exploration of the multiple contributions that international students made and make to the Australian economy pre- and during the Covid-19 pandemic; the conditions that international students, including doctoral students, faced in Australia during the pandemic; and the complex links between mental health and the experiences of international students (also including doctoral students) in Australia during the pandemic.

Chapter 3 built on the literature review that was presented in Chapter 2 by outlining the concepts that contributed to the study's conceptual framework. These concepts were organised into two clusters. At the macro level, the intersection of university social responsibility (USR), corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer relationship management (CRM) was explored. At the micro level, connections among liminality, marginalisation and mental health as they apply to international doctoral students in Australia were explored. The chapter also highlighted different kinds of relationships within and between the two levels of concepts.

Chapter 4 built on those earlier chapters by assembling the methodological resources used in this study to address the two research questions. Those methodological resources were clustered around the following sections in that chapter: the interpretivist research paradigm; the qualitative research orientation; the autoethnographic research

method; data gathering; data analysis; ethical and political considerations; and research quality and trustworthiness.

Chapter 5 presented my response to the study's first research question by analysing my autoethnographic experiences as an international doctoral student at an Australian university. Those experiences were organised around three distinct time periods: before my arrival in Australia; during my doctoral study in Australia (which included an analysis of five critical incidents related to my study); and post-Covid-19. This analysis was also informed by the three micro level concepts in the study's conceptual framework: liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns.

Chapter 6 provided information to address the study's second research question by examining the broader relevance and significance of the individual autoethnographic experiences presented in the previous chapter. That examination drew on thematic extrapolation to use USR, CSR and CRM, as the macro level concepts in the study's conceptual framework, to propose ideas for an alternative and hopefully more empowering vision of international education at Australian universities.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusion to the thesis. Section 7.2 synthesises my responses to the study's two research questions. Section 7.3 articulates the asserted contributions to different forms of knowledge by the thesis. Section 7.4 puts forward some targeted recommendations for policy and practice arising from the study, while Section 7.5 concludes the chapter.

## **7.2 Some Answers to the Research Questions**

The study's first research question, which was explored in Chapter 5, asked: "How did I experience my doctoral study as an international on-campus student at an Australian university, and how did my experiences reflect my family's and my liminality, marginalisation and mental health

concerns?”. This research question was addressed by means of dividing my selected autoethnographic experiences into three distinct time periods – before my arrival in Australia, as an international on-campus doctoral student at my Australian university during the Covid-19 pandemic and what is hopefully the post-Covid-19 period. My experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student were clustered around five critical incidents related to an unexpected trip in an ambulance to a hospital soon after my arrival in Australia, a very large number of unsuccessful job applications, one particular unsuccessful job application, the loss of my mother and then of my elder brother in Egypt, and my repeated delayed reunion with my wife and our son in Brisbane. These autoethnographic experiences and critical incidents were analysed by reference to liminality, marginalisation and mental health, the three concepts composing the micro level of the study’s conceptual framework.

More specifically, my experiences as an international on-campus doctoral student at my Australian university were inextricably associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which was identified and announced very soon after my arrival in Australia. Clearly, the pandemic changed the lives of billions of people globally, and millions of people in Australia, and I am certainly not claiming a special significance of my experiences in that context. At the same time, Chapter 5 mapped a series of consequences of Covid-19 at international, national and institutional levels that exercised a profound effect on my life and my doctoral study for the past three years. Essentially, I lost two close members of my family, I lost a reliable and responsible job in Egypt and have been unable to replace it with sustainable employment in Australia, and my doctoral study was seriously disrupted because of being unable to pay the tuition fees at particular points in my candidature. Moreover, for my family and myself, our lives in Australia have been characterised by liminality, marginalisation and mental health concerns. This has been in spite of the well-intentioned support of several individuals at our current place of residence and at my

Australian university. Nevertheless, these negative experiences have resulted from the interplay of several systemic forces, including Australian national and state/territory policies during the pandemic, university procedures and practices, and employers' recruitment strategies.

The study's second research question, which was explored in Chapter 6, asked: "What do my doctoral study experiences indicate about the university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility and customer relationship management of Australian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic?". This research question was addressed by means of applying thematic extrapolation to an analysis of the critical incidents presented in Chapter 5 and selected current scholarly literature, clustered around USR, CSR and CRM, the three macro level concepts in the study's conceptual framework. The discussion highlighted a significant disjuncture between USR at the micro level of individuals and groups, who were often genuinely committed to implementing USR, and at the macro level of institutions and systems, that often exhibited practices that ran counter to enacting USR effective. The analysis then moved to discussing CSR in relation to four extrapolated themes – shared value, stakeholder satisfaction, sustainable development and strategic leadership – intended to underpin an alternative and more individually empowering and institutionally sustainable provision of international education by Australian universities. Finally, I proposed a new conceptual framework for CRM that then led to a proposed broader, integrated conceptual framework linking CRM, USR and CSR with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The rationale for associating these three concepts with the SDGs was to highlight the wider, global significance of particular actions by individual Australian universities related to enhancing the success and support of their students generally, and of their international students more specifically in the context of this study.

More broadly, addressing both these research questions has demonstrated the highly varied but equally dramatic and in many ways permanent changes wrought by Covid-19. Responding to Research Question 1 illustrated significant personal and professional effects on my family and me, and also on thousands of other international on-campus international students at Australian universities during the past three years. Engaging with Research Question 2 revealed how the pandemic shone a light on pressures and tensions in Australian university funding and governance that had been decades in the making, and that underpinned an unsustainable higher education system in this country. Perhaps we can hope that lessons to be learned from this situation will create opportunities to rethink this situation and to chart a different and hopefully more effective future for Australian universities.

### **7.3 Contributions to Knowledge**

The next section of this chapter focuses on the policy and practice implications of the study's findings. In this section, I highlight the study's asserted contributions to two distinct forms of knowledge: methodological and theoretical.

#### **7.3.1 *Contribution to Methodological Knowledge***

Here I present a number of claims about the study's contribution to methodological knowledge. In particular, I contend that this thesis exhibited a novel and innovative approach to enacting the autoethnographic research method on several different fronts, as follows:

- Combining evocative and analytic autoethnography (when they are often used separately and even in opposition to each other)
- Drawing on a realist ontology (when generally an idealist ontology would be applied)

- Engaging in both data analytic techniques that extended across the two research questions and techniques that were specific to each research question
- Considering both the convergences and the divergences between critical incidents and thematic extrapolation, the two research question-specific data analytic techniques
- Comprehending the ethical and political considerations of this autoethnographic study through the complex and ongoing interplay between the micro level of my individual experiences and the macro level of the forces framing and constraining those experiences
- Conducting continuing critical self-reflexivity as one means of enhancing the study's research quality and trustworthiness.

### **7.3.2 *Contribution to Theoretical Knowledge***

I contend also that the study has made a number of contributions to theoretical knowledge. Firstly, I assert that the two pairs of clustered concepts – USR, CSR and CRM at the macro level, and liminality, marginalisation and mental health at the micro level – were separately and together confirmed as contemporary and productive conceptual lenses for addressing the study's two research questions, and that accordingly they are likely to generate theoretically rigorous findings if applied in other empirical contexts.

Secondly, in Chapter 3 I noted that Dahlsrud (2008b) distilled 37 distinct definitions of CSR. Yet I noted also that the majority of those definitions, and many such definitions since then, have presented a potentially restricted understanding of CSR, one that appeared to underplay the ethical obligations that CSR assigns to organisations if those obligations are at risk of reducing the organisation's profits. By contrast, and on the basis of my responses to both the research questions



of this study, I argue for a new, 38<sup>th</sup> definition of CSR that takes those ethical obligations very seriously, as follows:

CSR is the core value of an organisation (such as a university), and its obligation to the practice of supporting the communities both locally and globally is paramount. Socially oriented organisations must prioritise and implement the win-win-win business approach (outlined in the next section of this chapter) and encourage collaboration or alliances between organisations (including universities) to generate benefits for both them and the communities that they serve. Green CSR is not an optional extra or a choice; on the contrary, it is an organisation's obligation to generate sustainability, customers' or clients' and employees' loyalty, and social, economic and environmental influences for both stakeholders and communities. Furthermore, CSR assumes a particular form when enacted in universities, including being aligned with, and helping to enact, their charter to create and disseminate new knowledge that improves the lives of their students, stakeholders and communities.

#### **7.4 Recommendations Arising from the Study**

There are several specific recommendations for action that I consider can be distilled from my autoethnographic experiences, including the five critical incidents that I underwent, recounted in Chapter 5. However, given this study's primary location in the business and management scholarly disciplines, I have clustered my overarching recommendations around two specific sites of combined policy and practice, based on my responses to both research questions in the study.

#### **7.4.1 A New Triple Win (Win-Win-Win) Business Approach and Strategy (WWWBAS)**

The win-win-win business approach and strategy is the integration of the following key ideas: (1) innovative and creative ideas in the organisation that may formulate another (2) extensive integration with the (3) CSR role to create a positive impact on the (4) communities as a crucial factor in the business (5) sustainability and in delivering (6) benefits for all parties by the completion of collaborations or alliances among organisations.

This recommended win-win-win new business approach can be understood and implemented from several different perspectives. For example, at the level of an individual university, the triple win can be seen as forging an alliance among international doctoral students, their supervisors and the university management whereby their interests are convergent rather than divergent. In the case of an emergency situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than treating international doctoral students as individual cases, this alliance would strive for collective and sustainable solutions that would benefit all parties.

#### **7.4.2 A New Model for Universities' Sustainable Development (UsSD)**

I recommend also that the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic should lead to a new approach to funding and governing Australian universities. From this perspective, rather than positioning them as de facto corporations that must compete individually in the higher education market place for scarce students, they must be supported as members of an institutional collective with the enhanced strength and sustainability that such a collective can generate. Such an approach involves moving the USR, CSR and CRM functions of universities from the macro level to the national (and international) systemic level,

whereby national and state/territory governments perceive Australian universities (and their students) as significant assets rather than as liabilities. This recommendation demonstrates the significance of including the SDGs in the proposed new integrated conceptual framework aligning CSR, USR and CRM: the SDGs enrich otherwise individual and potentially parochial concepts and gives them a global significance that in turn emphasises the importance of individual university policies and practices, including those related to their international students. In this regard, sustainable development moves to a higher plane of activity intended to maximise support for and valuing of universities at large as well as for and of their individual students.

## **7.5 Chapter Conclusion**

When I was in Egypt, preparing to travel to Australia for the first time to commence my doctoral study at an Australian university, I could not have predicted the changes to my life and that of my family that the next three years would bring. I realise that, despite the loss of two close family members and a period of considerable anxiety and stress, other people – including other international students – in some cases endured even more distressing challenges than I did. Nevertheless, I assert that my experiences have been, and in many ways continue to be, debilitating and even traumatic.

I have argued throughout this thesis, and in the preceding sections in this chapter, for the broader significance of my autoethnographic experiences. In that vein, thousands of international on-campus students, including doctoral students, were profoundly affected by the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in important ways government and university policies and practices failed to support them. Hopefully, new ways can be found to ensure more comprehensive and sustainable support strategies for such students in the future, and those strategies

can be implemented and strengthened regardless of whether we are faced with a global emergency. The two clusters of recommendations outlined in the previous section are intended to contribute to such an outcome.

At a personal level, writing this thesis has changed me profoundly. While this is likely to be true of many – perhaps most – doctoral students, in my case the micro level autoethnographic experiences and critical incidents recounted in Chapter 5, and the macro level thematic extrapolation reported in Chapter 6, have provided me with new understandings of myself, of my family and friends, of fellow international students and indeed of humanity as a whole as we continue to live our lives and to learn always new lessons about the world and ourselves, including during and hopefully after a global pandemic.

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