

International Student Support Organizations in Japan and Australia: Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract:

While most publications on COVID-19's impact on higher education have focused on problems faced by the stakeholders, this paper emphasizes emerging solutions by civil society groups. As universities and in some cases, the governments are generally considered to be responsible for providing for international students' wellbeing, there has been insufficient attention to alternative support providers, such as nonprofits, charities, and volunteer groups, collectively called international student support organizations (ISSOs). This study uses semi-structured interviews with international students enrolled at universities in Japan and Australia, volunteers and staff at ISSOs, and participant observation of online and in-person events for international students in both countries to examine the civil society response to international students' challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that perceiving a lack of university support and unfair treatment, being unable to travel to the study destination, encountering xenophobia and racism, and experiencing loneliness and mental health issues were common difficulties among international students. The ISSOs in both countries responded to those challenges by modifying their service provision and raising public awareness. However, despite the unprecedented crisis, ISSOs did not advocate for solving fundamental problems faced by international students. These findings suggest that macro-factors in the political and economic environment could play a more significant role in shaping organizational behavior in the nonprofit sector than the pressing issue.

Keywords: *international student support organizations, COVID-19 pandemic, international student security, volunteer groups*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a major disruptor of social fabric globally, and the higher education sector has also been significantly impacted. Both institutions and students had to quickly

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adapt to the “new normal”. International students in particular have experienced massive uncertainty, worsening financial support, and growing isolation that in turn triggered a number of logistical and health-related issues (CISA, 2020; QS, 2020; BridgeU, n.d.; IAU, 2020).

Before the pandemic, millions of international students left their home countries every year to embark on a study abroad adventure; in 2017 alone, their number exceeded 5.3 million (UNESCO, 2019). Even before the global pandemic, international students already faced many issues that could be considered human security threats. Some examples include racism and discrimination, financial struggles, substandard housing, exploitation at work, sexual harassment, uncertainty related to their visa status, and mental and physical health problems. These issues often interplay with each other: for instance, health issues may be affecting their immigration status as students with a positive HIV/AIDS status may be at risk of losing their visas. However, unlike forced migrants such as refugees or even low-income economic migrants, international students may not be perceived as a population in need or at risk and this perception can make their plight more invisible.

This paper focuses on international student support organizations (ISSOs) which are civil society organizations including nonprofits, charities, and volunteer groups that are acting as complementary or alternative support providers for international students. This study examines how ISSOs in Australia and Japan are dealing with human security issues faced by international students during the global pandemic of 2020. It is guided by the question: why are ISSOs in both countries responding differently to security threats? To help answer this question, it also explores the following background questions. What human security issues have been prominent for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic? Which among those issues are new, and which already existed before the crisis? How did the pandemic modify or amplify those pre-existing conditions? What solutions have ISSOs been offering at different stages of the crisis?

Both Japan and Australia are developed democratic OECD nations located in Asia and the Pacific. Another feature that both countries share is being geographically isolated which means among other things that international students are not able to travel as easily as their counterparts studying in Europe. This factor has implications for international students’ adaptation experience, with a potential of aggravating their culture shock (Jackson, 2014). Both countries officially declared their commitment to multiculturalism, although their interpretation of it and related practices differ considerably. Japan’s multiculturalism has been criticized for the absence of centralized immigration and integration policies (Iwabuchi, 2016) and labeled by some authors as “multiculturalism in its infancy” (Nakamatsu, 2014). Despite its longer-standing traditions, the Australian version of multiculturalism does not seem to cope effectively with racism, particularly anti-Asian sentiment (Ho, 2019; Robertson, 2011; He, 2019) nor to break free from the assimilationist past (Allan & Hill, 1995; Reid, 2019). Finally, both Australia and Japan have been actively recruiting international students, with 720,150 international students being enrolled in Australian educational institutions as of September 2019 (ICEF Monitor, 2019) and 312,214 in Japan as of May 2019 (JASSO, 2020).

At the same time, fundamental differences between the two countries lie in their demographics and approaches to international education. First, Australia is an immigrant society characterized by ethnic superdiversity while Japan is predominantly populated by its native ethnic group of Yamato Japanese. Even though both countries are using English in their internationalization strategy, the Japanese language remains the official language and the main means of communication in Japan, while English is still the only official language in Australia and the unifying element of Australian society (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2020). Finally, their approach to

internationalization also differs: Japan is pursuing an “aid-based” approach providing government subsidies to international education programs, while Australia has moved to commercializing its education, “from aid to trade” (Ishikawa, 2011). Comparing both countries could allow us to see the impact of the above-mentioned differences on international students’ incorporation into the host society.

In terms of managing the COVID-19 crisis, the first cases in both countries were confirmed in January 2020 and the governments responded by adopting relatively strict containment policies at the beginning including an international travel ban. Australia reopened to only travelers from New Zealand in October 2020, and Japan reopened to “Student” visa holders around the same time requiring a mandatory 14-day quarantine period guaranteed by their university (IMF, n.d.). The Australian response has been one of the fastest and strictest and has been praised for its effectiveness in containing the spread of the virus (Bremer, 2020) while Japan has been less consistent due to balancing between public health concerns and supporting its pandemic-stricken economy (The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2020; “Japan Governors”, 2020). As COVID-related restrictions and particularly the travel ban negatively affected international students enrolled in Australian and Japanese universities, those practices were criticized by student organizations and certain political parties.

2. International Student Security in the COVID-19 Era

2.1. International Student Security within the Framework of Human Security

The need for a concept emphasizing the security of individuals emerged in the 1980s as a response to insufficiencies in the dominant view on security at the national level (Christie, 2018, p.9). It gained prominence in the 1990s after the publication of the *1994 Human Development Report* by the United Nations Development Program, the Millennium Report of 2000, and the establishment of the Commission on Human Security in 2001 (Adachi, 2020). Since then, the concept has evolved into “second-generation human security” (Kaldor et al., 2018) and has been discussed in the context of different humanitarian crises, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during the recent Ogata Sadako Memorial Symposium (JIB TV, December 2020).

Originally applied mostly to refugees and other groups of concern to the UNHCR, the concept of human security has been expanded to various fields of migrant security (Christie, 2018). Among the first works on international student security is the eponymous book by Marginson and colleagues (2010) discussing the human security of international students in the public domain, including the areas of finances, work, housing, health, personal safety, relations with the government, and the private sphere, encompassing international students’ relations with university staff, family and friends, language issues, discrimination, and racism. The 2010 book framing international student security as a human rights issue was followed by a plethora of studies. This section provides a short overview of the existing literature on international student security.

One of the most important names in the field is Forbes-Mewett whose work examines a wide range of human security issues affecting international students: mental health (Forbes-Mewett, 2019, 2020), unstable finances (Forbes-Mewett, 2006, 2009), vulnerability at work (Forbes-Mewett, 2009), crime (Forbes-Mewett, 2013; Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch & Nyland, 2015; Forbes-Mewett & Wickes, 2018), gender-based violence against international students (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016), student visa cancellations (Segrave, Forbes-Mewett & Keel, 2017), and the role of preparations in

furthering security (Forbes-Mewett, 2011).

Another range of studies examined the role of university policies in supporting or undermining international student security. For instance, Tannock (2018) contrasts universalist principles of equality and human rights in university missions and the reality of nationalist states and commercialized universities treating international students as “cash cows”. He discusses inequality in tuition fees, the attainment gap between international and domestic students, and the growing immigration restrictions making it difficult for some to come to their university studies. The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated this aspect as thousands of international students were forced to study online from their home countries while paying the same tuition fee as for in-person learning in their study destination. Similarly, Hayes (2017) uncovers the ways in which the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK is marginalizing and “othering” international students. Currently, their presence is ambiguous as they are considered a threat, a benefit of some sort, and the unimportant “other” group at the same time. This “othering” is problematic in terms of human security because it is a part of discrimination that is included in the list of problem areas of international student security (Marginson et al., 2010; Marginson, 2013).

A promising area within international student security relates to students’ social engagement with different non-state actors. Some examples include international students’ interactions with their employers discussed in the work by Forbes-Mewett (2009) and by Marmo (2020) in the context of migrants’ exploitation or ‘modern-day slavery’. However, there is a shortage of studies examining the role of civil society groups in the area of international student security.

2.2. COVID-19 Impact on International Students

A growing number of studies examine COVID-19’s impact on international students viewing this rapidly evolving situation on a global, regional, national, and institutional level. Many of those publications target policymakers at universities or governments and tend to refer to international students’ situation in impersonal terms as “international higher education”, “international enrolment” or “overseas student industry” (Birrell & Betts, 2020; IAU, 2020; QS, December 2020). This reflects a pattern of viewing international students primarily as a source of revenues for their educational institutions and local economies and calls for a more humane approach in research as represented by the human security paradigm. Some reports, however, successfully combine big numbers and careful attention to the human dimension and individual hardship (Salmi, 2020).

Other studies attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of the ongoing situation at a single institution from the educator’s (Pappa, Yada & Perala-Littunen, 2020). or student’s perspective (Orendain & Djalante, 2020). Pappa, Yada and Perala-Littunen’s (2020) study find challenges in international student wellbeing in social (desire for human connection, coping strategies and health concerns) and academic areas (affected concentration and motivation, degree-related complications, online learning and supervision). Orendain and Djalante (2020) also discuss six challenges affecting international students in Japan, such as disruption of routines and changing environments, limited access to technology, growing financial concerns, declining mental and emotional health, and impeded productivity, and provide suggestions on how to cope with each of them.

Many publications examining international student experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic focus on its impact on their mental health (Lai et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; Creaton, 2021). They report higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia, and some of them found that stayers (international students who stayed in their study destination) had significantly higher stress

compared to returnees, i.e., those who returned to their country of origin (Lai et al., 2020) due to the lack of social support and microaggressions in the host society, particularly against Asian students (Chen et al., 2020).

Besides academic works and higher education practitioners, international students' situation has become a subject of numerous media articles reporting financial struggles faced by many international students due to the loss of part-time jobs (Imahashi, 2020; Ross, 2020) and calling national governments to extend financial support to international students during the crisis (Aristovnik et al., 2020; "Extend Support", 2020; "Japan's Government", 2020). Other publications reported budget cuts at universities affected by the loss of international student revenue (Quinn, 2020).

3. ISSO Solutions to COVID-Related Problems

3.1. Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviewing, participant observation and discourse analysis as methods of data collection. This research has been approved by the Ethics Subcommittee of the Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University, reference No. 52019566710165 of September 5, 2019. While the initial objective of the study was to examine the social engagement of international students and their daily interactions with civil society groups, the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic pressured this author to shift her focus to international student support during the crisis.

The interviewees were recruited by purposeful sampling, targeting those international students who were actively involved with student support groups and included those enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. As a result, twenty-one in-depth semi-structured interviews were collected in both countries averaging twenty-nine minutes in length. Interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever possible, or online due to the COVID-related restrictions. Participant observation of in-person events was conducted in February 2020 on campuses of four major universities in Sydney and throughout 2020 in Kyoto City at times when COVID-19 restrictions were eased. During the in-person events, event participants also provided seventeen shorter comments, each about four minutes on average. However, most events in 2020 took place online, on Zoom or social media platforms, freely or upon prior registration on the organizational websites. The total number of international student support organizations in the study is thirty in Japan, mainly in the Kansai area, and thirty-two in Australia, predominantly in New South Wales. Japanese higher educational institutions where study participants were enrolled included Kyoto University, Osaka University, Ritsumeikan University, and Kyushu University, while Australian universities in the study comprised the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, the University of New South Wales, and the University of Technology Sydney. All the above universities have a high number of international enrollments.

3.2. Structural Characteristics of ISSOs in Japan and Australia

This section presents an overview of ISSOs in both countries and discusses their similarities and differences. Based on their location, international student support organizations can be divided into on-campus and off-campus groups. The on-campus organizations in Japan are represented by four types: peer support groups for international students, university circles and clubs, alumni networks for both current students and graduates, and ethnic associations on campus. Australian campuses include

the same four types of student support organizations, with some modifications: for instance, circles and clubs are usually called “student societies”, and alumni networks usually include graduates only, not current students. In addition, Australian universities also have so-called “student collectives” focused on advocacy and political activity such as protest marches, and branches of most political parties and religious groups represented on campus. In contrast to Australia, political parties and religious organizations are not present on most university campuses in Japan, with the notable exception of Christian and Buddhist universities. Although the current definition of the ISSOs does not include political parties themselves, their affiliated organizations represented on campus and working directly with students are counted as international student support groups.

Diversity is even greater among off-campus groups involved with international students. Such off-campus organizations in Japan include groups affiliated to local governments, those sponsored by the central government, ethnic associations at the city level, nonprofit organizations or NPOs, grassroots, and informal hobby groups. Meanwhile, Australia does not have international student support groups initiated by local or national governments; however, they have self-organized agencies at the national level such as the Council of International Students Australia (CISA) defining themselves as “the national peak student representative organization for international students” (CISA, n.d.) and the National Union of Students (NUS) where one international student officer is elected every year. In addition, there are also ethnic-based associations on the city level and national level, nonprofits and charities dealing with a range of issues: legal, job-hunting, sexual health, addictions, and mental health.

3.3. COVID-Related Problems

3.3.1. Perceived Lack of University Support and Unfairness

This paper refers to the perceived lack of support because opinions on university support during the crisis may vary considerably depending on stakeholders. While administrative and academic staff may be working hard to deploy emergency online learning, their efforts may not always be seen, understood and appreciated by students. Most interviewees in Australia and Japan, both studying in the country and online abroad felt that their universities did not support them enough during this challenging time and were critical of educational and government institutions to various degrees.

“[It was] frustrating, a lot, because also, you know, from a European perspective, I felt like the campus did not do anything to help, to support students. And you know, they did like a review (*survey, author*) of what you think of your entry in the campus. So, I wrote this all down, but it's not changing anything. And I emailed them also, you know, and they don't care at all. I don't even think they've answered (IS from France, Kyoto, November 10, 2020).

“Well, I didn't get any support from my uni, so I would say no, they didn't support those who stayed in the country” (IS from Nigeria, Sydney, December 22, 2020).

In addition, students in Australia also emphasized the discrepancy between the lack of university support they experienced and their tuition fees that can be four times higher than those of domestic students: “When you come here, you come with an assumption that you will have support in place, because if you're paying so much, you will have people who care for you and look out for you and act in your best interest. You know, they put on the paper like: oh, we support international students but now, we're being told things like: ‘You're going to see a fee hike’, which is ridiculous because international students have no other support. International students are affected financially back home as well. So, it's very unfair to put all those financial burdens on them now.” (IS from India, Sydney,

June 19, 2020).

Perceived unfairness to international students in Australia was also brought up in earlier interviews, not related to the pandemic. One of the issues was the lack of adequate health insurance for international students. This is a fundamental difference between Australia and Japan: Medicare, the publicly funded universal health care insurance scheme covers only nationals of Australia and New Zealand and Australian permanent residents while in Japan, *Kokumin Kenkō Hoken*, the national health insurance scheme extends to all foreign residents, including international students.

“It’s generally about equal rights. I mean, we’re already paying four times the fee at uni, and we don’t have student loans, we pay taxes, and taxes we pay go to fund Medicare but Medicare is only for Australians. What kind of fairness is this?” (IS from China, Sydney, February 22, 2020). Another theme that came up in the same interview is the absence of student concessions, or transport discounts for international students in New South Wales. The interviewee asserted that other Australian states provided such discounts and was planning to organize campaigns in his university to claim them; however, the pandemic came in the way of the activist’s plans.

3.3.2. International Students Left Outside Their Study Destination

Due to the international travel restrictions during the pandemic, many international students found themselves unable to cross the border and return to or enter for the first time their study destination. The number of international students remaining overseas in 2020 reached 500,000 in Australia alone (Salmi, 2020, p. 29) while the exact number of their counterparts in Japanese institutions is unknown. Although there were instances in the past when international students were unable to arrive at their study destination on time due to visa restrictions, technical or logistical issues, it is the first time that this situation has occurred in such significant numbers. These unprecedented circumstances created a number of new challenges for university staff, students and their families.

International students participating in the CISA online event on December 18th mentioned several academic challenges such as time difference, poor internet connections or firewalls preventing them from accessing their virtual classes or study materials, difficulties in staying motivated and keeping up with their studies (CISA, December 23, 2020). Other challenges lie in the social realm such as not knowing their classmates (IS from India, enrolled at a Japanese university, December 12, 2020), or difficulties in communicating with classmates online as they mute themselves or turn their camera off (IS from China enrolled at an Australian university, December 18, 2020). Some returnees reported still having to pay for their apartments or the storage unit fee in the host country (CISA, December 23, 2020) which creates an additional financial burden.

Other challenges included unfulfilled expectations: “I wanted to study in Australia but now, I study in my hometown and cannot go and experience the local culture. I am not using university resources; in the meantime, the tuition fee is not reduced” (IS from China enrolled at an Australian university, December 18, 2020). Due to this mismatch of expectations and reality some international students chose to defer their studies for several semesters thinking that it is not worth paying high tuition for online courses or being unable to study virtually because of the time difference or technical difficulties. However, this temporary solution is also not perfect because of underlying uncertainty: it is not clear when the borders will open again and when the mass return of international students will be possible which delays their graduation and jeopardizes future plans: “I’m waiting and waiting and hoping. The clearer communication would have been better; otherwise, we get the impression that the government simply does not care” (IS from Germany enrolled at an Australian university, December

18, 2020).

Even those students who have adapted quite well to the online study format are still facing difficulties. “Although it’s safe and comfortable to study online from home, the time difference made me stressed a lot actually. I had to keep two clocks at all times and woke up panicked on so many mornings to not miss a class at 5 am my time, it kinda messes with your head” (IS from India, enrolled at a Japanese university, December 12, 2020).

3.3.3. Xenophobia and Racism during the COVID

Previous studies reported instances of xenophobia and racism toward international students during the COVID-19 crisis ranging from stigmatization and microaggressions to open insults and physical attacks (Salmi, 2020; Lai et al., 2020).

“What’s been difficult, was the response from the community as well. Whether it’s be shaming certain countries for this virus, or other very, very hurtful comments from domestic students, telling us not to complain, telling us that we’d be taking jobs away from Australians, and all this sort of quite wild accusations” (IS from Germany enrolled at an Australian university, December 18, 2020).

Even mild forms of unfriendly attitudes may be perceived as the lack of hospitality and trigger emotional response of fear and insecurity, as the following statement by an international student demonstrates:

“I think as someone of Indian background, something that’s prominent in our culture, is how we treat our guests. We always make sure that our guests are well taken care of, and to me, based on that ideology, it really makes me question how Australians treat their guests. Is this what I should expect, or should have expected? Did I raise my expectations too high? It’s definitely scary in that sense because it makes you question your entire connection with the country and with the place. Because it feels like harm, it doesn’t feel safe”. (IS from India, Sydney, June 19, 2020).

International students remaining in Japan during the pandemic also reported increased staring and unfriendly gazes from local residents, which particularly affected those who looked non-Asian.

3.3.4. Loneliness and Mental Health Issues

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness was common among international students and due to its detrimental effects on mental and physical health, academic performance and increased risk of suicidal behavior was considered by certain authors as a human security issue (Marginson et al., 2010). Being aware of this problem, ISSOs attempted to counteract it: “We have seen a shift from more alcohol-related issues towards other challenges like isolation and loneliness. The cultural differences do present a barrier for international students fitting into student residence life, so in many residences our teams are focusing more heavily on student engagement and coming up with more creative event ideas to entice international students to interact with peers” (Nonprofit staff, Sydney, February 7, 2020).

However, once the pandemic hit, many usual forms of social interactions became impossible. The student interviewees have remarked on COVID-19’s negative impact on their friendships due to reduced contacts with people and social activities: “I think it’s also because of the Coronavirus and what it has led to, because we are now being more like shut-ins and not going out that much; at least in my case, I want to stay at home. So, I’ve been avoiding contact with people. So, it has made things very difficult, from the friendship standpoint” (IS from Chile, Kyoto, November 19, 2020). While technology allowed them to stay in touch with their social circle, many found it challenging to make

new friends during the pandemic: “Because of Corona, I can't like go to the learning center where I made friends earlier. I can't go there and just meet new people, for example” (IS from Malaysia, Fukuoka, November 24, 2020).

New students in particular felt extremely isolated during the lockdown and the semester of online studies which also happened to be their first months in the new country: “I was on my own anyway. So, from March to June, I did not meet any people for three months. So, I had to contact online...yeah, the first months were tough” (IS from France, Kyoto, November 10, 2020).

Some felt frustration because their personal mobility was restricted: “Of course, now you cannot go anywhere, you cannot do anything, everything is closed” (IS from Afghanistan, Shiga, December 24, 2020).

Others, however, reported not feeling particularly lonely during the lockdown compared to other times in their lives when the feeling of loneliness was more acute, usually due to their personal circumstances. For instance, a married international student shared that her loneliest moments were the first two months when she was waiting for her husband to join her in Japan, and compared to that time, Corona was much easier to handle (IS from Chile, Kyoto, November 19, 2020). Another international student said that he was feeling a lot lonelier before the COVID during his second semester in Japan when two of his close friends graduated and left the country, and he felt a sharp contrast between their fun time together and his lonely sightseeing after their departure: “At the beginning, this was difficult for me. When I saw some people, they usually come with a kind of group but when I would get to that garden, to that place, to that museum, I was alone. Yeah, that gave me some kind of stress” (IS from Afghanistan, Shiga, December 24, 2020). Yet another shared that the pandemic coincided with other important changes in her life, such as moving from her dorm to a private apartment and the departure of several close friends who graduated and got jobs in other cities: “I do feel lonely, but, you know, because so many things changed just around the time Corona started. I moved here just before everything escalated, so that was a big change in itself. And also, many of my friends left, over the past year, they graduated, or they took on new jobs and moved to a new place. So, it's just like, things naturally changed even without Corona being a factor” (IS from Malaysia, Fukuoka, November 24, 2020).

A small number of interviewees even found it comfortable having much time at home on their own: “I'm a home type, I like to stay at home longer times, you know, doing my own projects, my hobbies, I like designing sometimes and it takes time to do that, so I feel like I need more time at home. I feel like I need more time with myself rather than being open to everybody. So, for me during this COVID time, I don't think that I felt lonely” (IS from Egypt, Kyoto, December 16, 2020). However, even those who self-identified as introverts and did not report any particular discomfort about staying home for extended periods of time found it difficult to adjust to the new mode of study: “Of course at home, you cannot concentrate 100% ...when I am home, I waste a lot of time, you know, watching TV, playing games and stuff like that” (IS from Egypt, Kyoto, December 16, 2020).

Those who suffered from isolation and loneliness during the pandemic found several helpful coping strategies. Some reported increasing the frequency of their online interactions with family and friends back home: “And so, after Corona, though, that caused me to open communication with my family more. And so, now I speak with my family regularly, almost every other day or so. And it was not like that before. I speak to my best friend in California, just the same, almost every day” (IS from the US, Kyoto, November 10, 2020). Others started scheduling online chats with their friends in the host country. Yet others found it helpful to focus more on their research or hobbies that they enjoyed or

found relief in their religion or meditation practice.

The increasing loneliness and changing attitudes from the local community during the pandemic also made some international students question their belonging to the host society and doubt whether their contribution is truly seen and appreciated: “International students have been a strong part of the community through communication, through work, as active members as volunteers and things like that. All of a sudden, they’re just not being supported when this situation hits. I think it puts a lot of pressure on people who have become a part of this society and are self-dependent and don’t rely on anyone. It’s just really hard when you come to a phase when all of a sudden, they make you feel like you’re an alien here. I think it really makes you question how multicultural this place really is” (IS from India, Sydney, June 19, 2020).

3.4. ISSO Solutions

3.4.1. Modified Service Provision

The COVID-19 restrictions have profoundly impacted both on-campus and off-campus student groups. As campuses started to close soon after the semester started, university societies and clubs had to follow and put on hold all their activities which affected both existing members and new students: “In fact, since when I arrived in March, I really wanted to subscribe to the sports club of this university. But one week after I arrived, the campus was closed, so I couldn’t” (IS from France, Kyoto, November 10, 2020).

Social distancing and other sanitary measures related to the COVID-19 prevented ethnic-based groups from gathering in person like in the past: “Before corona, we would meet every couple of months for a party like a potluck party. So, everyone would bring a dish and we’ll just come to hang out and enjoy Malaysian food, home-cooked Malaysian food. So, we haven’t been able to do that this year” (IS from Malaysia, Fukuoka, November 24, 2020).

Other off-campus groups had to scale down their activities: “it’s also because of COVID-19. Because they were doing some actions inside high schools to sensitize and to help children to have a vision, not to stop their purpose of life to what can be imposed by the society and so on. So, there were some projects before, but I never saw something like this since I got inside” (IS from France, Kyoto, November 10, 2020).

Many ISSOs responded by shifting to online event formats; however, it also has limitations, both on the provider and recipient’s sides. First, some organizations could not adapt to the “new normal”. This concerns primarily international friendship associations in Japan, volunteer groups in each city and town established by local governments in 1980-1990s as a part of the internationalization initiative. They used to be very active in organizing sightseeing tours and cultural exchange events before the pandemic. However, they are often dependent on community facilities that were closed to prevent the spread of infection. They also found it difficult to shift to new technology, and as most members are retired or elderly, they are more vulnerable to the virus, and their health concern becomes the priority.

Secondly, the online format of social events did not work for all international students either. Although online events seem the only solution to socialize in bigger groups safely under the circumstances, they appear not as popular as face-to-face events. Some international students reject them, not believing that they can achieve the purpose of getting to know others and making new friends: “I don’t want to participate in Zoom events because I don’t get the point. If it’s just on Zoom, there is no share for me, there is no real interaction. Because the online wall is too thick” (IS from

France, Kyoto, November 10, 2020). Some informal hobby groups shared this skepticism. The member of a Kyoto-based drawing group shared that they attempted to use different software to facilitate interactions between members; Facebook, Line and Discord but nothing seemed to adequately replace in-person gatherings in a café that they used to have in the past, and very few people showed up. However, their infrequent outdoor gatherings with social distancing were moderately successful (Volunteer from Singapore, Kyoto, November 7, 2020).

Other students tried online events but were unsatisfied comparing their feeling to being in class and feeling that the format was not conducive to having natural conversations and establishing friendships: “Sure, Zoom is there, it’s very accessible from wherever you are. However, I think it takes away the impact that you would have otherwise in person. ...there’s this natural hesitance to talk or speak up or interact rather than when you’re in person, you can, you know, just conversation flows a bit naturally. So, it feels a bit stiffer, obviously more distant, of course. Even when you can see people, it’s a bit kind of: how do I establish communication with somebody? It’s a bit different when we’re in person versus on a screen. At least in my experience, you know, whenever it almost has the feeling of being in a class setting” (IS from the US, Kyoto, November 10, 2020).

Other students pointed out the shortage of online events organized by their department or graduate school where new students could get to know their classmates: “There are some online events, I believe. But nothing for master’s students in particular. I wish the uni had organized some zoom event at the start of the semester to introduce people to each other but they didn’t do that” (IS from India enrolled at a Japanese university, December 12, 2020).

However, many ISSOs have been offering online events almost since the onset of the pandemic. Examples in Australia include an online conference on sexual health organized by CISA in cooperation with other actors in June 2020 and a webinar “COVID-19 and Your Visa” held by Redfern Legal Centre on October 15, 2020. Once the spread of infection in Australia was contained, some rules have been eased and other events were offered in a blended or hybrid mode: partly online, and partly on campus with social distancing. An example of such an event is SEXtember offered by Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) from September 14 to 25, 2020. The understanding of sex education in Australia extends far beyond the prevention of unwanted consequences; therefore, SEXtember event encompassed a wide range of topics such as consent, pleasure, queer relationships, online dating, pornography, alternative lifestyles, the intersection of faith and sexual ethics. Some events specifically targeted international students such as “Love Abroad: Unlocking the Australian dating scene” held on September 21, 2020 or were adapted for the COVID times; for instance, “Staying Prepared: Sex and HIV prevention in the era of COVID” on September 25, 2020. Sex education is particularly important for international students coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds because a common understanding cannot be implied.

Similarly, some off-campus groups in Japan switched to online meetings. For instance, KyoTomorrow Academy (KTA) supported by Kyoto municipal government and sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) started offering their free Japanese conversation sessions on Zoom twice a month. They also posted regularly on their Facebook group about job-hunting resources that can be accessed online, such as web tests for job applications, or an online training program in business Japanese allowing international students not only to enhance their Japanese language ability but also practice business etiquette and communication skills in corporate settings. The online sessions spread between January 23, 2021, and March 6, 2021 will cover the basics of honorifics frequently used in business communication, practice writing entry

sheets, practice job interviews, and hold an online meeting with former international students currently working in Japanese companies (KyoTomorrow Academy, January 5, 2021).

Besides online events, some organizations came up with other innovative solutions to support international students during the crisis which can be illustrated by the example of Redfern Legal Centre, a nonprofit organization providing legal services to international students. When they were forced to cancel drop-in consultation sessions due to COVID-19 restrictions, they launched a new app called My Legal Mate providing instant legal information and advice on issues affecting international students including employment, housing, sexual assault, and disputes with education providers. It is available in seven languages (English, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Portuguese, Thai and Vietnamese) and it is downloadable and its use is free for all international students in New South Wales.

3.4.2. Enhanced Advocacy and Political Activism

Although the first cases of the COVID infection were confirmed in January 2020, it was not quite clear yet at the beginning of 2020 that the spread COVID-19 infection would become a global pandemic. Australia was among the first countries to introduce a travel ban against all visitors from mainland China from February 1, 2020, except for Australian nationals and permanent residents who were requested to self-quarantine for two weeks. The travel ban affected all new Chinese students and those who went home on holiday. In February 2020, the absence of Chinese students was already felt on Australian university campuses during the orientation or welcome week. Stands of some student societies at the University of Sydney were empty with a note: “The executive of this group is stuck in China. Shame on Scott Morrison’s travel ban” (Fieldnotes, Sydney, February 18, 2020). The enrolment to other student organizations fell below the expected level: “We recruited about 300 people but that is already under my expectations. I was expecting like a thousand people. But Chinese students couldn’t come back, so I reduced the expected number to 400. I thought, there should be people from other cultures and maybe, some Chinese students would make it back but...We made 400 bags and we got 300 people” (IS from China, Sydney, February 22, 2020).

Besides student organizations, international students’ plight during the COVID crisis also attracted the attention of several political parties. First, the Socialist Alliance and a related on-campus socialist group called Resistance University Sydney framed the travel ban against China as a racist response and circulated a petition on campus to oppose the ban which gathered 5,900 signatures during the welcome week (Fieldnotes, Sydney, February 2020). The following week, Resistance University Sydney held an in-person event at the campus of the University of Sydney where they called on participants to oppose the government decision and criticized the lack of support for international students. At the same time, the organizers admitted that socialist activists were reluctant to bring up the international student issue at first: “They dismiss Chinese students because they say they come from bourgeois backgrounds” (Fieldnotes, February 26, 2020).

Despite their profound dislike of the Socialist Alliance (Tenenbaum, 2001), another leftist party, the Social Equality Party (SEP), and its student chapter called the International Youth Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) also selected the international student issue as a topic for their online event on May 17, 2020 (World Socialist Website, May 19, 2020). While the speakers discussed challenges faced by international students, the party representatives attempted to divert the conversation to the need to create an alternative organization to existing trade unions (Fieldnotes, May 17, 2020). Opposing trade unions as “no longer worker organizations” has been known as their party stance (Socialist Equality Party Australia, 2019). Although many important issues were raised during the

discussion, the event gave an overall impression that SEP was not committed to long-term student support or advocacy for their rights. Rather, they were making use of the international students' plight during the pandemic to promote their own political agenda.

In turn, political parties in Japan also discussed the international students' issue in the context of financial compensations during the pandemic. An opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, proposed financial compensations and tuition waivers for all international students whereas the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partner Komeito proposed to limit compensations to those in need, and the latter proposal was approved ("Japan's Government Approves", 2020). Some Japanese ISSOs posted brief updates of the political debate and main decisions on their website ("Support Planned", April 21, 2020; "Foreigners Are Eligible", April 21, 2020).

In addition, some informal hobby groups also demonstrated their potential for political activism during the pandemic. While the groups temporarily suspended their activities due to the COVID-19 restrictions, their members stayed in touch on social media. One of the members of Kyoto-based group Drink and Draw called on others to meet in person and support the local Black Lives Matter (BLM) march. Originated in the United States in 2013, the BLM movement gained international attention during global protests following the killing of George Floyd in 2020 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Japan also held several BLM protests in its major cities. The group had previously been completely apolitical focusing uniquely on leisure activities; in addition, the member who mobilized others to join the protest was not one of the group organizers. Despite those facts, the mobilization was successful, and about ten group members joined the protest march in Kyoto on June 21, 2020. Besides anti-racism, the BLM march in Kyoto showed solidarity with other causes such as LGBT rights, de-nuclearization, peace, poverty and the need for more stimulus money ("Black Lives Matter", 2020). This example reaffirms the potential of informal groups to be reappropriated for political activism through "consciousness-raising" (Putnam, 2000, p. 149) and illustrates the possibilities of the prevalence of an informal leadership over a formal one during times of crisis and social change.

To counteract xenophobic and racist behavior toward international students during the pandemic, the student organizations started raising awareness of international students' rights and by showing their contribution to the local community. The CISA launched an anti-racism project in collaboration with the key stakeholders in the area, including the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). They encourage international students who experience racist treatment or incidents of discrimination to report them to AHRC and seek professional help if needed. As CISA's President Belle Lim pointed out: "These types of comments are clearly misguided. This is a small but very loud proportion of Australians who [are] disconnected from the tremendous contribution – economically, socially, culturally and diplomatically – that international students bring to this country" (Devi, 2020). Therefore, CISA is also working with different actors to emphasize the contribution that international students are making to Australian society and to build a social license to operate for international education.

Some events have a twofold purpose, both in service provision by offering practical advice to students and in advocacy by spreading the message to decision-makers and the broader community. For instance, the purpose of the online forum hosted by CISA on December 18, 2020 was described as follows: "To raise the voice of and for offshore international students who are currently stranded outside of Australia" (CISA, December 23, 2020).

4. Discussion

This paper identified a perceived lack of university support, being forced to stay outside their study destination, incidents of xenophobia and racism, increased loneliness and mental health issues as the most prominent challenges faced by international students during the pandemic. While students in both Australia and Japan shared their perception of the lack of university support and loneliness, the negative experiences related to studying outside the country of their institution and awareness of xenophobia, racism and unfairness were much more intense in the case of Australia. In line with the existing literature, many international students referred to their COVID-19 experience as “frustrating”, “tough” and “hard”, with the only exception being those who self-identified as introverts and enjoyed having much time alone.

In contrast with the prior studies, for the majority of respondents, their private life events such as breaking up with their partner, being away from their partner or close friends, moving houses or moving to a new city seemed to have a more significant impact on their subjective perception of loneliness than the global pandemic. Also, unlike previous studies reporting significantly higher stress levels among stayers compared to returnees (Lai et al., 2020), this study found that those international students who returned to their home countries during the pandemic still experienced numerous challenges in the areas of academics, social life, and finance, and felt uncertain about the future.

Most of the issues faced by international students are not new; however, the pandemic intensified them, some of them to an unprecedented scale. Although some international students have experienced problems with their student visas in the past or were unable to enter their study destination for other reasons, their number has never reached 500,000 as in 2020 for Australia alone. Similarly, loneliness among international students is far from being a new issue but was aggravated by the lockdown and social distancing policies during the pandemic and associated fears and uncertainty.

The study found that student support groups responded to COVID-related challenges in two main ways: by modifying their service provision and by enhancing their political advocacy for international students. While some ISSOs stopped providing their services to international students due to their own limitations, many responded to COVID-19 restrictions by changing their event formats to fully online or in a hybrid/blended mode, moving from indoor to outdoor events with social distancing, or creating an app instead of providing in-person consultations. The response of some ISSOs demonstrated their keen awareness of international students’ security threats as they were offering timely and appropriate events to meet growing or newly arising needs, such as special events for those stranded offshore or explaining the impact of COVID restrictions on students’ visas. As most challenges were not new but exacerbated by the pandemic and ISSOs had already been working on issues of loneliness, mental health, sexual health, and racism before, they did not need to shift their focus from their original activities but only to modify the format of their service provision to suit the changing circumstances of the pandemic.

This study has sought to answer the question of why ISSOs in both countries are responding differently to security threats. It would be logical to expect that ISSOs in Japan and Australia would respond differently because the issues in both countries are different. For instance, international students in Australia pay much higher tuition and do not receive a universal health cover plan, while their counterparts in Japan pay the same tuition fee as domestic students and are covered by the same health insurance that applies to Japanese nationals. However, student support organizations in Australia did not use the COVID crisis to advocate for lowering tuition fees for international students

or improving their access to healthcare. Instead, they chose to enhance raising awareness of international students' contribution to the local society and cooperate with other actors in the field of international education to build a social license to operate and create a more welcoming environment for international students in the future.

Another finding is that ISSOs in Japan who are normally active in service provision and passive in political advocacy displayed some political activism during the COVID-19 restrictions. Only time will show whether the change will fade away after the pandemic and Japanese civil society groups will go dormant again in terms of political activism or whether the pandemic has acted as a catalyst to encourage these organizations to become more politically engaged.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how international student support organizations (ISSOs) in Australia and Japan responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. It relied on semi-structured interviews with ISSO volunteers and staff in New South Wales and Kansai, international students enrolled at Japanese and Australian universities, and participant observation of online and in-person events in both countries at different stages of the pandemic. Based on these data, the study found that their perceived lack of university support and unfairness, the frustration of staying outside their study destination, their experiences of xenophobia and racism, increased loneliness and related stress and anxiety were the most prominent issues among international students. To respond to these challenges, ISSOs have provided a number of innovative solutions in the areas of service provision and advocacy. However, they chose not to bring up unpopular and controversial issues but to cooperate with the actors in the position of power instead. This paper concludes that although some ISSOs displayed significant changes compared to their typical organizational behavior, such as the rise of political activism, it might be too early to affirm whether the change will affect their strategies post-pandemic. The methodological limitations of this study included the small size of the study population, thus reducing the generalizability of the findings, and also the lack of access to event participants during some online events that prevented an evaluation of the events' effectiveness and international students' satisfaction.

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