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Rethinking Student Wellbeing through a Decolonial Lens: Insights from International Students' Experiences in Cairns

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Abstract

International students in Australia encounter numerous challenges, including financial insecurity, social isolation, and cultural adjustment. While resilience research often emphasises individual psychological coping, such approaches are grounded in Western-centric frameworks that overlook collective and relational dimensions. This study examines how international students in Cairns, Australia's major regional study hub, develop and sustain informal networks of solidarity that enhance resilience in everyday life. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through an online survey conducted via Google Forms, which featured open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share stories about social support, belonging, and coping mechanisms. Responses from participants from diverse cultural backgrounds were analysed thematically to identify patterns of mutual support and collective adaptation. The findings reveal that informal networks, such as friendship groups, cultural associations, faith-based communities, and digital platforms, serve as vital sources of emotional, social, and practical resilience. These networks foster reciprocity, trust, and shared responsibility that transcend institutional limitations. By situating resilience within communal and culturally grounded contexts, this study contributes to decolonial resilience scholarship and offers insights for universities and policymakers seeking to strengthen inclusive support systems in regional education settings.

Keywords: International Students, Resilience, Informal Solidarity, Social Capital, Decolonial Resilience, Thematic Analysis.

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1. Introduction

International students significantly contribute to Australia's higher education sector, enhancing not only the national economy but also the cultural and social diversity of local communities (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Sawir, 2013). Despite these contributions, they face complex challenges, including financial insecurity, limited job opportunities, social isolation, and difficulties with cultural adaptation, all of which adversely affect their well-being and sense of belonging (Duangpracha, 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2024).

Although considerable attention has been devoted to international students' adaptation, most studies continue to privilege individual coping strategies and psychological adjustment, underpinned by Western-centric psychological frameworks of resilience that conceptualise resilience as an individual trait or capacity to bounce back from adversity (Heng, 2018; Luthar et al., 2000; Rayyan et al., 2023).

This perspective risks oversimplifying the resilience of international students by overlooking the collective, relational, and cultural aspects of their experiences, particularly for those from non-Western backgrounds who may rely more heavily on community-based, interdependent support systems. Consequently, the literature often fails to acknowledge the importance of informal solidarity networks through which resilience is demonstrated, particularly in regional areas where institutional support may be less developed than in major cities.

This gap calls for a decolonial re-examination of resilience that incorporates diverse epistemologies, care practices, and communal strategies used by international students in their daily lives. In regional cities like Cairns, where social cohesion and intercultural engagement are crucial to community wellbeing, understanding these informal networks offers valuable insights into local inclusion and global mobility. Therefore, this study explores how international students in Cairns develop and maintain informal networks of solidarity that enhance resilience. Using qualitative data from an online survey with open-ended questions, the research highlights collective coping mechanisms and relational practices that support everyday adaptation. The study aims to:

- Examine the forms and functions of informal solidarity networks among international students in Cairns;
- Analyse how these networks contribute to resilience through mutual care, trust, and reciprocity; and
- Contribute to decolonial resilience scholarship by reframing resilience as a collective and culturally embedded process, rather than merely an individual psychological attribute.

Although there is growing recognition that resilience is socially embedded, current scholarship remains dominated by individualised, Western-centric frameworks that fail to fully capture collective, relational, and culturally rooted forms of resilience, especially in regional settings. This theoretical bias narrows

understanding of how communities sustain tourism livelihoods through informal solidarity networks, mutual support, and place-based social relations that operate beyond formal policies and market systems. Empirically, this gap hides the everyday practices through which regional communities manage institutional fragmentation, economic insecurity, and uneven support from governance structures. To address this, the study highlights informal solidarity networks as a key yet underexplored mechanism of resilience in regional Australia. It promotes a relational and context-aware approach that views resilience as a collective governance and social process, not just an individual trait.

2. Literature Review

Resilience has become a central concept in understanding how individuals and communities respond to challenges, disruptions, and uncertainties. However, mainstream resilience research, particularly in the context of international students, has predominantly drawn on Western psychological paradigms that frame resilience as an individual trait or coping capacity (Fullerton et al., 2021; Leipold & Greve, 2009; Martin et al., 2013; Ploner, 2017). In parallel, theories of social capital and informal networks offer a critical lens for understanding how community ties and everyday practices of support shape resilience in multicultural and transnational settings (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Bankston III, 2014; Bernier & Meinzen-Dick, 2014). This literature review examines these two interrelated perspectives to establish the theoretical foundation for this study.

Relational and Decolonial Resilience

The concept of relational resilience questions the traditional notion of resilience as an individual psychological attribute. Instead, it understands resilience as emerging through social relations, interdependence, and shared meaning-making within communities (Daiute, 2013; Jordan, 2004; Pauwelussen, 2016). This view shifts attention from internal traits to external relationships, highlighting how individuals draw strength from families, peers, and communities to navigate adversity (Afifi, 2018; Walsh, 2011). In multicultural contexts such as international education, relational resilience is demonstrated through acts of mutual care, emotional support, and collective adaptation among students facing common challenges (Saha, 2025; Ungar, 2014).

A decolonial resilience perspective challenges the Western-centric, individualistic foundations of resilience discourse. It argues that resilience is culturally situated and rooted in local epistemologies, emphasising community practices and non-Western values such as collectivism, spirituality, and reciprocity (Glynn & Cupples, 2024; Weaver, 2022). Both decolonial and relational resilience perspectives converge in their critique of individualism, highlighting care, solidarity, and interconnectedness as essential sources of strength (Atallah et al., 2022; Aw et al., 2023; Lam & Trott, 2024). This framework invites a rethinking of resilience as a socially produced and contextually grounded process, shaped by cultural narratives and collective practices rather than universal psychological traits.

Recent research underscores the significance of relational resilience among internationally mobile populations, particularly international students, who often face precarity, limited support, and unequal access to resources (Gomes, 2022; Mulvey et al., 2024). Scholars posit that resilience in these students is fostered through collective coping strategies rather than individual psychological traits, especially in contexts with fragmented welfare and employment protections (Samaraweera, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). This body of work advocates for resilience frameworks that align with lived experiences in regional and non-metropolitan areas, where social interdependence and informal networks are vital (Bristow & Healy, 2014; Rockenbauch & Sakdapolrak, 2017). By adopting a relational and decolonial perspective, this study contributes to the scholarship on international students' resilience within broader socio-spatial and governance frameworks.

Social Capital and Informal Networks

Social capital theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how relational and decolonial forms of resilience operate in daily life. Social capital refers to the resources embedded within social networks, such as trust, reciprocity, and mutual support, that individuals can mobilise to achieve goals or cope with difficulties (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Nooteboom, 2007). Studies consistently show that international students rely on peer networks, co-ethnic and cultural associations, faith-based groups, and informal mentoring relationships to navigate social isolation, language barriers, insecure employment, housing precarity, and limited institutional responsiveness (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Neri & Ville, 2008). These informal networks facilitate both bonding social capital, strengthening ties within cultural or linguistic groups, and bridging social capital, fostering cross-cultural connections that enhance belonging and integration (Doucerain et al., 2022; Lee, 2013; Tuominen et al., 2023). Beyond practical assistance, these networks cultivate emotional and social resilience by fostering a sense of community, trust, and shared responsibility (Hawken et al., 2023; Rockenbauch & Sakdapolrak, 2017; Ungar, 2011).

Importantly, research focusing on regional and non-metropolitan contexts shows that informal networks are even more vital where institutional support structures are weaker, and opportunities for social integration are fewer (Eklinder-Frick et al., 2011; Rutten & Boekema, 2007). In such environments, international students often develop collective coping strategies that replace formal services, reinforcing reliance on peer-based and community-driven support systems (Adeyoyin, 2024; Pascua, 2023). However, much of this literature remains mostly descriptive, emphasising outcomes such as wellbeing and adjustment without fully theorising informal networks as resilience mechanisms embedded within broader governance and policy frameworks. This study builds on existing research by conceptualising international students' informal support networks as relational resilience infrastructures that actively address structural and policy limitations in regional Australia, thereby promoting a more integrated and theoretically supported understanding of resilience beyond metropolitan and institution-centred frameworks.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate how international students in Cairns establish and maintain informal networks of care and solidarity, which contribute to their resilience. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and social interactions within their unique cultural and institutional contexts (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Seamon & Gill, 2016). The study focused on capturing the nuanced, relational, and culturally embedded forms of support that shape students' adaptation, rather than quantifying resilience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. The survey employed open-ended questions designed to elicit reflective narratives on social support, belonging, and coping strategies. Participants were asked to describe how they sought help, maintained friendships, and engaged in cultural or community-based activities that fostered resilience. The online survey format allowed respondents to answer at their convenience, providing access to students with varying schedules and preferences (Mondal et al., 2018; Muley et al., 2021). The survey link was disseminated through student associations, community organisations, and cultural/religious networks, ensuring broad participation across different backgrounds and study levels.

Participants and Sampling Criteria

A total of 47 international students participated in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diversity in demographic and educational backgrounds (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Campbell et al., 2020), reflecting the multicultural composition of the international student community in Cairns. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- a) **Ethnicity/Nationality:** Participants represented diverse regions, including Asia, the Middle East, South America, Africa, and Europe, to capture cross-cultural variations in understandings of care and resilience.
- b) **Study Level:** Participants were enrolled in various academic programs, including Certificate 3, Diplomas, Undergraduate, and Higher Education (Masters and PhD) levels, to reflect different institutional experiences.
- c) **Study Duration:** Participants must have valid student visas with at least one year of study in Australia, ensuring sufficient exposure to academic and social adjustment processes.
- d) **Length of Stay in Cairns:** Participants must have

The word frequency analysis further identified the top 25% of the most common words, which were then colour-coded to cluster terms of similar meaning (Table 1). For instance, words such as support, helped, giving, and share were highlighted in green to indicate their conceptual similarity.

Table 1- List of Top Quartile Words based on Weighted Percentage

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)	Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
support	662	1.88	positive	215	0.42
events	583	1.39	education	167	0.41
community	638	1.32	habits	57	0.40
activities	659	1.17	information	229	0.39
organisations	477	1.04	easier	34	0.38
social	297	0.99	messaging	192	0.36
changes	525	0.84	share	164	0.36
helped	381	0.83	structured	372	0.36
living	261	0.82	harmony	186	0.35
others	96	0.81	learning	163	0.35
knowledge	509	0.80	manage	132	0.35
friends	205	0.77	platforms	45	0.35
cultural	177	0.73	transportation	128	0.34
gatherings	326	0.71	belonging	79	0.33
giving	522	0.70	homesickness	30	0.33
moving	480	0.67	local	100	0.33
people	345	0.67	whole	202	0.33
challenges	79	0.62	working	204	0.33
groups	87	0.61	WhatsApp	29	0.32
connected	211	0.60	adapt	77	0.31
study	197	0.59	means	157	0.31
provide	173	0.58	related	164	0.31
experiences	191	0.56	think	255	0.31
regional	264	0.54	university	58	0.30
foreign	170	0.49	process	207	0.29
happened	188	0.47	topic	84	0.29
international	174	0.47	build	132	0.28
world	167	0.46	family	138	0.28
networks	51	0.45	relationships	66	0.28
country	103	0.43	resources	261	0.28
interaction	247	0.42	condition	154	0.26

Through iterative coding and comparison, patterns of interaction and collective coping were identified. Key themes, such as reciprocal care, trust, and belonging, as well as collective adaptation, emerged, reflecting the interconnected and socially embedded ways in which international students cultivate resilience through informal networks and shared experiences.

Interpretive Coding

Following the development of the word frequency table, interpretive coding was employed to deepen the analysis and capture the nuanced meanings within the qualitative responses (Ahmed et al., 2025; O’Kane et al., 2021). Using the colour codes from the word frequency table, interpretative codes were developed to analyse the rich and varied responses from 47 international students. Initial codes originating from cells of the same colour were reorganised into subthemes consisting of short phrases rather than single words, thereby summarising the complexity of participants’ experiences.

This interpretive coding approach aimed to uncover the underlying intricacies and relational meanings expressed within the data (Sugiharti, 2025). The resulting interpretative codes were subsequently clustered into five primary themes: Reciprocity and Mutual Aid, Digital Belonging and Online Communities, Cultural Anchors and Faith-Based Support, Resilience through Shared Struggle, and Decolonial Learning of Resilience. Each primary

theme represents the essence of multiple related subthemes, capturing fundamental ideas and conceptual relationships central to the lived experiences of international students in Cairns.

Primary Themes	Subthemes	Initial Free codes
Reciprocity and Mutual Aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mutual care Practices of reciprocity Collective assistance Sympathetic gestures Friendly checking-in 	support, community, helped, others, giving, groups, connected, provide, share, university, build, relationships
Digital Belonging and Online Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual support Digital communities Accessing resources Online networks Relational resilience across distances 	information, social, messaging, harmony, platforms, belongings, WhatsApp, friends, people, world, networks, interaction, family, resources, transportation
Cultural Anchors and Faith-Based Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective identity Cultural engagement Shared traditions Religious representatives Common values 	events, activities, organisations, cultural, gatherings, local, related, regional, foreign, international, country
Resilience through Shared Struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coping mechanism Experience-based decisions Winning from adversities Building flexibilities Getting stronger 	positive, habits, changes, living, moving, challenges, experiences, happened, easier, homesickness, working, adapt, process, condition.
Decolonial Learning of Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptive strategies Navigating challenges Intellectually focused Acquired skills Resilience and Transformation 	education, knowledge, study, structured, learning, manage, whole, means, think, topic

Figure 2- Primary Themes and Subthemes

5. Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile

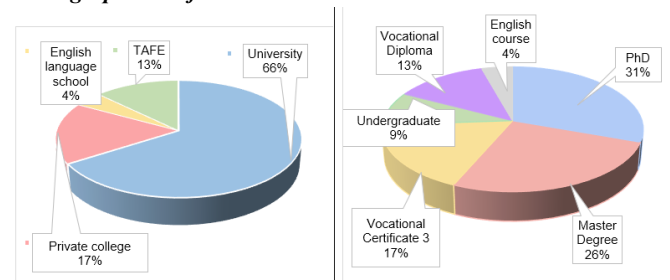


Figure 3- Students’ Educational Institutions (left) and their Levels of Study (right)

The study involved 47 international students, primarily enrolled at universities (n = 31), with others studying at TAFE institutions (n = 6), private colleges (n = 8), and English language schools (n = 2). In terms of study level, 15 participants were PhD candidates, 12 were master’s students, 8 were enrolled in Certificate III vocational programs, 6 were in diploma courses, 4 were in undergraduate programs, and 2 were in English language courses.

The students participating in this study were residing and studying in Cairns, representing 21 nationalities across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, as depicted in Figure 3. The largest group was Indonesian students (n = 14), followed by participants from India, Colombia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines (n = 3 each). Smaller numbers came from Papua New Guinea, Iran, Japan, and Nigeria (n = 2 each), as well as single participants from Poland, Slovakia, Kenya, Pakistan, Malaysia, South Korea, China, England, Brazil, Ecuador, the United States, and Sri Lanka. This diverse composition reflects Cairns’ position as a multicultural regional education hub attracting students from various global backgrounds.

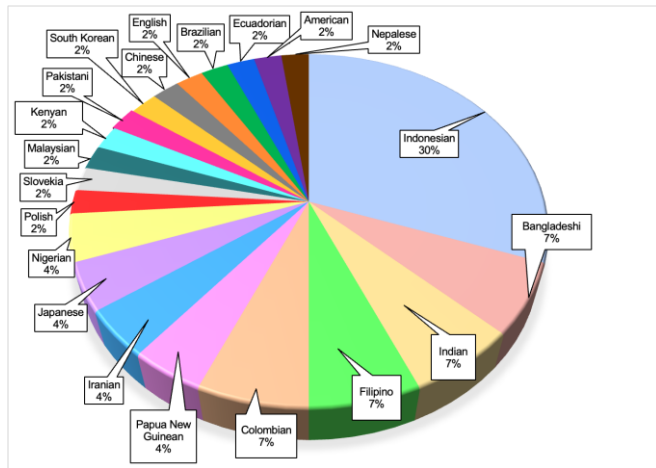


Figure 4- Nationality Distribution of International Student Participants in the Study

Overall, the participants' demographic diversity, spanning different cultural, institutional, and academic contexts, provides a rich foundation for understanding the varied forms of resilience and informal solidarity among international students in regional Australia.

Primary Themes

The primary themes identified in this study are clearly separate but connected in real life. Their overlap reflects the experiences of international students, who see practices of reciprocity, shared struggle, and collective coping as occurring simultaneously rather than as separate steps. Themes like "Reciprocity and Mutual Aid" and "Resilience through Shared Struggle" are deliberately linked, reflecting different parts of the same relational resilience rather than just repeating the same idea. This structure recognises the complexity of the subject while keeping the ideas clear. The thematic analysis revealed five interrelated themes that illustrate how international students in Cairns develop resilience through informal solidarity networks. Each theme reflects both relational and decolonial dimensions of adaptation, highlighting the collective and culturally embedded nature of resilience.

"We Help Each Other Out": Reciprocity and Mutual Aid

Participants frequently described acts of mutual support within their peer networks. This included sharing housing and meals, visiting sick friends, and providing emotional support during periods of stress, reflecting the relational enactment of resilience, in which adaptation is achieved through cooperative relationships rather than isolated self-management (Ungar, 2011). These practices were often rooted in cultural expectations of collective responsibility and interdependence. For example, Asian and South American students reported frequent communal meal preparation, while African students emphasised shared accommodation arrangements as a survival strategy.

While reciprocity often took material forms such as sharing accommodation, food, or job information, it was also expressed through everyday acts of care. As one participant noted, "Sometimes it wasn't about money. Just having someone check on

you or help translate a message made a big difference" (Japanese student studying Certificate III Aged Care). These collective strategies align with social capital theory, demonstrating how trust and reciprocity generate tangible and emotional resources that help international students navigate uncertainty (King et al., 2019; Putnam, 2000). The emphasis on communal responsibility resonates with collectivist cultural logics, situating resilience within socio-cultural rather than individualistic frameworks (Järvelä, 2023; Kitayama & Salvador, 2024).

Digital Belonging and Online Communities

Informal online platforms emerged as critical lifelines for participants. WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram functioned as virtual extensions of social capital, enabling participants to exchange resources, information, and emotional support across dispersed networks. These findings align with Ellison et al. (2007), who argue that online engagement reinforces both bonding and bridging capital in transient communities (Ellison et al., 2007). From a resilience perspective, such digital platforms illustrate what Hall and Lamont (2013) describe as adaptive social infrastructures, allowing students to mobilise collective agency and belonging despite geographic mobility (Hall & Lamont, 2013).

Cultural Anchors and Faith-Based Support

Many participants relied on religious communities and cultural associations as sources of emotional, social, and practical support. Examples included Indonesian, Indian, and Filipino student communities that organised communal events, celebrations, and informal mentoring and sharing. These findings align with the decolonial notion of culturally situated resilience, which rejects the assumption that coping is culturally neutral (Amo-Agyemang, 2021; Atallah et al., 2018). Instead, students' reliance on faith and cultural communities reaffirms the embeddedness of resilience in collective memory and heritage (Cheng & Sikka, 2025; Holtorf, 2018). Such spaces foster continuity, meaning-making, and moral guidance, which are key components of relational resilience (Doehring, 2015; Ryff, 2014).

Resilience through Shared Struggle

Participants' narratives of enduring financial instability, racism, and work exploitation through collective reflection reveal resilience as a shared moral project. These collective narratives transform individual hardship into communal learning and empowerment, mirroring findings from Murray and Zautra (2011) that resilience often emerges through mutual support under adversity (Murray & Zautra, 2011). Shared experiences of hardship fostered a sense of collective endurance, particularly among students facing similar visa and employment pressures. One participant explained, "We all had different backgrounds, but the problems were basically the same. That's why we stuck together" (Brazilian student studying Diploma of Early Education). This theme also engages with critical resilience studies by Chandler & Coaffee (2016) and Joseph (2018), which warn against depoliticising resilience as mere personal adaptation (Chandler & Coaffee, 2016; Joseph, 2018). Instead, students' shared struggle represents a subtle form of resistance to structural inequalities, reinforcing their sense of agency through solidarity.

Decolonial Learning of Resilience

Finally, students' reflections highlight the importance of interdependence, mutual care, and relational accountability, challenging the standard Western view of resilience as self-reliance. This finding embodies what decolonial theorists such as Tuck and Yang (2012) and Mignolo & Walsh (2018) term epistemic disobedience, which is the act of rearticulating knowledge from non-Western, communal worldviews (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Through this reinterpretation, international students engage in a decolonial learning process that redefines resilience as a collective and culturally grounded practice, rather than a personal, psychological concept.

Taken together, the themes show that resilience among international students in regional areas is neither purely individual nor fully collective, but relational, uneven, and dependent on timing. Informal networks support coping and continuity, but their success depends on broader structural and institutional factors.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how international students in Cairns, a major regional education hub in Australia, develop resilience through informal networks of solidarity. Moving beyond Western-centric frameworks that emphasise individual psychological coping, the findings reveal resilience as a collective and culturally grounded process. Through thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: reciprocity and mutual aid, digital belonging, cultural and faith-based anchoring, shared struggle, and decolonial learning of resilience. These interconnected forms of social support demonstrate how students draw on collective care, trust, and mutual responsibility to navigate everyday challenges of financial strain, social isolation, and cultural adjustment.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution

Theoretically, the study advances the decolonial understanding of resilience by challenging Western-centric models that privilege individual coping and self-reliance. It reframes resilience as a collective, culturally rooted, and dynamic process, aligning with relational and decolonial frameworks that recognise interdependence and community-based adaptation. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for universities, community hubs, and policymakers in regional education settings. Supporting informal networks, such as cultural groups, faith-based organisations, and digital communities, can enhance the well-being and integration of international students. Institutional policies that recognise and engage these informal systems of care can foster more inclusive and sustainable student support ecosystems.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its sample size and reliance on self-reported survey data, which may not capture the full depth of participants' lived experiences. While accessible, the use of an online survey also limits opportunities for in-depth probing and contextual understanding. Future research could employ in-depth

interviews, longitudinal designs, or ethnographic methods to explore how informal solidarity evolves over time and across different regional settings. Comparative studies between metropolitan and regional contexts would further illuminate how spatial and institutional dynamics shape the collective resilience of international students.

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