

Impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative exploratory research approach was adopted with in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 South Asian graduates who studied postgraduate courses in Australia, and these were used for data collection and analysed thematically.

Findings – The study results highlighted significant positive and negative impacts on employment experienced by this cohort. Positive impact includes gaining employment related to their studies, thus having stability in their employment; negative impact includes difficulties in gaining related-study employment, limited face-to-face networking opportunities and non-renewal of employment-related contracts.

Originality/value – While scholarly articles have focused on understanding the numerous employability-related challenges faced by international students and graduates from South Asian countries, this is the first paper that sets out to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia.

Keywords COVID-19, South Asian graduates, Impact, Employment, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

International education has been a fast-changing and dynamic phenomenon, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia has attracted a large number of international students from China for the past decade, but South Asian students, especially from India, are also seeking international education in Australia. In 2021, there were 358,904 international students studying at Australian universities (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021), compared to 413,958 in 2020; of these former, 30% were of Chinese background, followed by Indians (17%) and Nepalis (8%) (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). Due to the pandemic, the number of international students has declined. International students in Australia are mainly from Asian countries, and they mainly seek international education to enhance their employability and achieve successful employment outcomes and gain discipline-specific knowledge and specialised skills, such as research skills as well as personal growth skills (Singh and Fan, 2021; Singh and Jack, 2018; Huang, 2013; Huang and Turner, 2018).

South Asian (i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and the Maldives) students, especially students from India (one of the biggest exporters of international students), have as their main intention gaining employment, permanent resident (PR) status or citizenship upon graduation in the host country. Therefore, this group are referred to as two-step migration intenders, since they migrate for education and stay for employment (Cameron *et al.*, 2019; Hawthorne, 2014), unlike Chinese international students and graduates. Recent studies (Singh, 2020; Blackmore *et al.*, 2017) have observed that

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Chinese international students and graduates prefer to repatriate to their home country for employment purposes. Some of the reasons include the booming economy in China, family pressure to repatriate, visa status, lack of work experience and discrimination in employment in Australia (Singh, 2020; Blackmore *et al.*, 2017).

Research on South Asian students and graduates in Australia is strongly skewed towards understanding their motivations to study abroad (Cameron *et al.*, 2019; Johnson and Kumar, 2010) and their migration experiences (Hawthorne, 2014). Given that the numbers of South Asian postgraduate students are on the rise in seeking international education in Australia and their intentions are to graduate, work, stay in and migrate to Australia, there is a lack of adequate research understanding the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia (Singh *et al.*, 2023). The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the employment experiences of South Asian graduates who studied postgraduate courses in Australia. The main research question of this study is: "What are the impacts of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia?"

International students and COVID-19

Pre-pandemic, international education was Australia's largest service export, worth \$40.3 bn to the Australian economy (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). However, at the very beginning of the pandemic, in 2020, the Australian Prime Minister strongly suggested that, if international students and graduates were "not in a position to support themselves then there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries." The notion of going home was condemned broadly by higher education-related stakeholders (i.e. students, researchers, advocates for international students and universities) because many international students and graduates were unable to return home due to border closures, and they argued that Australia had a duty of care to all residents who were in Australia (Leask and Ziguras, 2020).

International students and recent graduates, either in Australia or at home in 2020 onwards, have endured serious academic, social and psychological (health and well-being) impacts of COVID-19. For example, all teaching at Australian higher education institutions was moved online (Singh, 2022). International students in their home countries faced teaching issues due to time zone differences. The online lectures, workshops, classes or laboratory work were held during times which were unsuitable for them to attend, and they felt that the workshops were not useful at all (Eri *et al.*, 2021). In addition, international students were unable to engage and develop social interactions with domestic and other international students while learning online (Dodd *et al.*, 2021). Most international students, who are future international graduates, were unsure whether their online studies would be considered as valuable by employers in Australia or elsewhere (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). COVID-19 "has also had a ripple effect for international students in terms of future graduate visa applications" (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1374) to stay in Australia for employment purposes.

One of the main social challenges faced by international students includes serious financial problems because they lost their casual jobs, exhausted their savings and could not pay for their tuition fees and/or living expenses, such as food, accommodation, travel expenses, medical expenses and the like (Dodd *et al.*, 2021; Farbenblum and Berg, 2020; Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). Recent international graduates also faced similar financial experiences. Throughout the pandemic, the Australian government provided a multi-billion-dollar economic stimulus package to its citizens and permanent residents that included "additional allowances paid to full-time domestic students as compensation for lost income from casual work" (Leask and Ziguras, 2020, p. 37). Although international students and graduates pay government taxes while working in Australia, they were left out or "conveniently forgotten" by the government because they were on student and temporary resident visas. And while a number of Australian universities "offered hardship payments to international students

struggling to pay their bills, the government announced a coronavirus relief package for higher education that unashamedly focused on domestic students” (Leask and Ziguras, 2020, p. 37). In this instance, international graduates who were jobless or were seeking employment in Australia were not financially assisted by the government.

International students also faced psychological (health and well-being) challenges during these unprecedented times. Being away from home, family and loved ones, studying online, lacking social interactions, enduring financial hardship and isolated from the world, they were grappling with their mental health (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020). High levels of stress and discrimination as well as feeling insecure in Australia, were endured by international students, especially from Asia (Farbenblum and Berg, 2020), because they reported being “spat at, yelled at with racist slurs, and being told to ‘go back home’ whilst walking down the street; some are afraid of leaving their homes given the circumstances” (Nguyen and Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1375).

Challenges of employment in Australia for international graduates

The role of higher education is to develop human capital that will benefit national and international developments. As such, higher education institutions continue globally as training grounds to develop future generations of talent, leaders and innovators. These institutions are able to develop graduates in order “to make lifelong contributions to their fields and to promote the advancement of their societies” (Campbell *et al.*, 2021, p. 131). Campbell *et al.* (2021) also argue that international higher education provides numerous opportunities to international students, especially from low- and middle-income countries, to develop their employability and enhance discipline-specific knowledge, specialised skills and attitudes that are beneficial globally (Singh and Fan, 2021; Singh and Jack, 2018). Therefore, international students invest in international education, a strategy which is underpinned by human capital development theory. Human capital is an investment in education that has a positive monetary impact in obtaining a good job and high-paying salary (Becker, 1975; Schultz, 1963). As such, human capital refers to individuals acquiring and accumulating educational knowledge and professional skills through formal education (Tomlinson, 2017) for successful employment outcomes. Tomlinson (2017) argues that, with human capital, individuals can leverage a higher level of competitiveness and productivity in the labour market. However, Tomlinson (2008) states that just possessing hard knowledge and limited skills of know-how through a degree programme at a university will not strategically position a graduate for employment in a volatile labour market, especially post-COVID-19. Therefore, Tomlinson (2017) advocates for international students to leverage their social capital and “develop stronger career, cultural and identity capital through internships and other work-related programmes, as well as psychological adaptability and flexibility” (Singh and Fan, 2021, p. 663). Most importantly, international students need to be proactive in interweaving strategies using these capitals to enhance their employability and achieve successful employment outcomes (Singh and Fan, 2021).

However, the return on investment in human capital for international students is not always fruitful. For instance, pre-COVID studies relating to employability and employment are skewed towards understanding Chinese and Vietnamese international graduates’ challenges in Australia. These students and graduates are highly likely to return to their home countries or third countries for employment purposes (Singh, 2020; Tharenou and Seet, 2014). A recent study by Singh (2020) has found that there are several rationales that have “pushed” Chinese international graduates to return home. This includes that those employers are hiring graduates who are on permanent resident (PR) visas or Australian citizens. As a result, Chinese graduates are discriminated against by Australian employers due to their visa status and graduates are unable to work long-term in Australia. Employers also perceive that those Chinese graduates possess low English proficiency, and hence they are unsupportive in employing them. Singh (2020) also finds that Chinese graduates are offered employment opportunities in Australia

that are not equivalent to their qualifications – for example, working as a cleaner or at a restaurant, whereas they had studied business, finance and computer science in Australia. Vietnamese international graduates, too, repatriate to their home country due to professional advancement opportunities, given the substantial economic growth of the country in recent years (Tran and Bui, 2021).

Despite these known employment-related challenges, international students and graduates still take initiatives to improve their employability and employment outcomes in Australia. For instance, Singh and Fan (2021) observe that Chinese international graduates are engaged in their studies in accumulating their human capital: discipline-specific knowledge and transferable skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, presentation, independence and communication. Chinese international graduates also participate in internship opportunities offered by their Australian university and gain part-time work experience in Australia. However, Chinese international graduates may not develop social connections while studying in Australia for employment purposes.

Given that studies are mainly focused on international students' academic, social and psychological (health and well-being) issues during COVID-19 as well as employment-related challenges faced by Chinese international graduates in Australia, there is a gap in the literature in exploring the effects of COVID-19 on employment outcomes of South Asian graduates in Australia. Hawthorne (2014) argues that South Asian students and graduates are more likely to remain in the host countries to seek employment due to the two-step migration phenomenon (i.e. migrate for education and stay for employment). Hence, this study is designed to fill the gap by asking, "What are the impacts of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia?" To the author's knowledge this is one of the first studies to explore the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment-related experiences in Australia.

Methodology

Research approach

As this is an exploratory research study (Creswell, 2013), a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research provides an understanding of how people perceive their actions and how they interpret their experiences in their own words (Silverman, 2006). Therefore, exploring research participants' personal reflections and perceptions (Creswell, 2013) is possible with this approach. A qualitative approach is adopted here to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the employment experiences of South Asian graduates in Australia. Secondly, a qualitative approach is focused on understanding or obtaining a detailed account of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Ezzy, 2002), which in the case of this research is to understand the employment impact of COVID-19 experienced by South Asian graduates in Australia.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with South Asian graduates who studied in Australia to discover their employment experiences during COVID-19. All interviews were conducted via Zoom (online) due to the pandemic (except for one face-to-face – just before the "lockdown") by the author, in English, for between 22 and 49 min. Interviews were digitally recorded via the Zoom function and transcribed verbatim using a professional transcription service. Before the data analysis phase, the author emailed research participants their respective transcribed responses for their verification of content and deletion of any information they did not want to include (McClure, 2003), thus preserving data validity and trustworthiness. All research participants verified their transcripts, and no data were deleted. This study received ethical clearance from the LTU Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC19345).

Participants

Participants were selected based on two criteria: South Asian graduates who had studied a postgraduate course in Australia and who were willing to share their graduate employment perceptions and experiences from during the pandemic. Initial contact was established by the author via LinkedIn. The author sent invitations to participate in the interviews and provided relevant forms (Participant Information Statements, Consent, Withdrawal of Consent), using the author's institutional email. Snowball sampling was also used: South Asian graduates suggested other possible South Asian graduates who fit the criteria (Minichiello *et al.*, 2008). The data reached saturation after 20 interviews, when no new information emerged, and therefore the interviews ceased (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Data were collected from 20 South Asian graduates (11 males and nine females); their demographic details are outlined in Table 1.

In reporting qualitative comments, the following convention is used: SA for South Asian, interview number and other information such as gender, country and occupation.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used technique to address research questions which are geared towards exploring the lived experiences of participants, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). As the research question of this study is to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia, therefore, Van Manen's (1990) thematic analysis approach is adopted to interpret inductively international graduates' employment experiences. This is one of the most robust techniques adopted in qualitative research design, as it stresses "understanding the meaning of experience (by searching for themes) through greater interpretative engagement with the data" (Langdridge, 2007). The author started the coding process manually so that the author was close to the data and had a hands-on "feel", without the intrusion of a computer (Creswell, 2008). The author started reading the transcripts and assigned key words or phrases on the right-hand margin that described what the participant indicated (Tesch, 1990). Selective reading was then undertaken to establish which phrases represented the phenomenon under investigation (Van Manen, 1990), in this case the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment outcomes in Australia. While coding, the author continuously asked the question "What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93), reflecting the research question of the study.

Subsequently, the author grouped similar and redundant codes to a more manageable number (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2008). As thematic analysis is an iterative process (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the author reviewed the list and returned to the data to see if any new codes had emerged (Creswell, 2008; Tesch, 1990). The author highlighted the quotes with different coloured highlighters which supported the codes (Creswell, 2008; Tesch, 1990) and reduced the codes to themes, which addressed the research question. Two main impacts were identified: positive and negative impacts are reported in this paper and suggest a saturation point was reached since no new, emerging information or codes to establish new themes appeared (Creswell, 2008).

Findings

The findings demonstrate that South Asian graduates in Australia experienced positive and negative consequences of COVID-19 in relation to their employment. Positive impact includes gaining employment in the related field of studies and stability of employment. In addition, they also faced negative effects, which included limited face-to-face networking opportunities, study-related employment issues, non-renewal of employment contracts and instability in employment.

Table 1. Demographic details of South Asian Australian graduates

Participant code	Gender	Graduation	Nationality	Employment status	Area of postgraduate qualification/Degree	Organisation
SA1	Male	2018	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Finance/PhD	University
SA2	Female	2001	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Business/Master's	Bank
SA3	Male	2016	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation but not in the field of study	Accounting/Master's	Departmental store
SA4	Male	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Business/Master's	Telecommunications
SA5	Female	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Telecommunications/Master's	Telecommunications
SA6	Male	2018	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Planning/Master's	State government statutory authority
SA7	Female	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Biotechnology and Bioinformatics/Master's	University–Studying PhD and working as a technical assistant
SA8	Female	2018	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Information Technology/Master's	University
SA9	Male	2019	India	Employed right after graduation but not in the field of study	Engineering/Master's	Supermarket
SA10	Female	2016	India	Employed right after graduation but not in the field of study	Education/Master's	Educational related services
SA11	Female	2016	India	Employed right after graduation but not in the field of study	Education/Master's	Kindergarten
SA12	Female	2017	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Accounting/PhD	University
SA13	Male	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Business Information Management/Master's	State Statutory Corporation (Victoria Roads)
SA14	Male	2002	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Business/Master's	TAFE
SA15	Male	2015	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation but not in the field of study	Human Resource Management/Master's	Security
SA16	Male	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Information Technology/Master's	Healthcare
SA17	Female	2018	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Management/Master's	University
SA18	Male	2018	Bangladesh	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Accounting/Master's	Bank
SA19	Female	2019	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Public Health/Master's	Health
SA20	Male	2008	India	Employed right after graduation in the field of study	Accounting/Master's	Energy

Source(s): Author's own work

Positive impact

Employment related to field of studies

Six South Asian graduates with master's degrees secured employment related to their field of studies at postgraduate levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating a human capital return on investment. For example:

I got a job at Telstra as a consultant just a few months back during COVID in April 2020. I applied for it online. It is somewhat related to my Master's degree. (SA 4, Male, India, Business Consultant)

I started applying for jobs online and I got a job at VicRoads as a business analyst. This job is related to my field of study and I started during COVID. I am in the process of collecting points for my permanent residency. (SA 13, Male, India, Business Analyst)

They received a positive outcome within a few months upon their graduation due to two factors. Firstly, graduates received assistance from alumni who were able to guide them in revising their resumes and constantly exploring online job openings. In addition, one female graduate built her connections via LinkedIn with employees at the company where she applied for a position, asking for help with the final interview, and she received assistance that was extremely helpful:

In early 2020, I was placed in Telstra as a graduate network engineer. This is one of the very few companies that are recruiting international graduates. I applied for the graduate program and then had three rounds of interviews and I was lucky to get it. I went to a career session and one of the seniors who works in Telstra provided all the information about how to modify your resume, which website you should refer and it was very useful. I took her advice and I was constantly looking at their career website for when the application will be opening. So as soon as it was open, I applied for it. I also randomly connected with people who work for Telstra on LinkedIn and ask how should I prepare for the final interview. Many were kind to provide me with information and were very helpful. (SA 5, Female, India, Graduate Network Engineer)

Secondly, they were employed through connections. One of the graduates gained employment through her connections with her Ph.D. supervisor based on her research work. She secured a well-paid job as a technical assistant in her research laboratory and appreciated the opportunity provided to her:

My supervisor was very impressed with my research work and I got my PhD application approved and also got a job in a research lab as a Technical Assistant. It is a well-paid job and I really love my work. (SA 7, Female, India, Technical Assistant)

Although the unemployment rate was high during COVID-19 in Australia, these international graduates from South Asia managed to receive job offers in niche industries such as information technology, sciences and business. Moreover, they gained employment that related to their postgraduate studies.

Stability of employment

In this study, although there are five South Asian graduates who are not working in a study-related field, they have received more working hours and they are in stable employment due to working in essential industries such as supermarkets, childcare and security:

I got part-time work at Woolworths during COVID. I get extra shifts because staff members at my department are on leave and one of the guys didn't want to work as he is getting money from the government. He does not want to work there because he was getting the same amount of money by not working. (SA 9, Male, India, Supermarket staff)

Since childcare comes under essential services, they open the care for the kids whose parents are essential workers, so COVID situation did not really impact my work or shifts. (SA 10, Female, India, Childcare staff)

The security industry is very strong and they are recruiting more people actually. All other industries are losing people but they are recruiting more people because, for example, if an office is shut down you need to secure the premises and we need more people now. (SA 15, Male, Bangladesh, Security staff)

Those graduates who have work related to their studies (either they are new or earlier graduates) have no doubt that their employment is secure due to working in essential services during COVID-19, such as information technology (IT), vocational education, government departments and energy:

[There was] Not really an impact, because we are in IT. Without technology without communication, nothing will ever happen. So actually, it did not affect much for us. We just work from home since March 2020, so it is fine for me. (SA 5, Female, India, Graduate Network Engineer)

VicRoads comes under essential services. It comes under Department of Transport, Victorian Government. And my job role is a little bit niche because it is business analyst. It is not operational or processing tasks. (SA 13, Male, India, Business Analyst)

I now manage the trainers who train the trainers at TAFE as the Education Manager. I also deliver international training programs. My job is not at stake as we have moved online. (SA 14, Male, India, TAFE Education Manager)

I am part of an essential service right now. I am in the electricity industry; I have to make sure that everybody is getting their electricity at home and getting their bills on time. So, I think I do have my work right now. (SA 20, Male, India, Subject Matter Expert)

For one South Asian graduate, his job contract was extended during COVID-19 as his managers were approving of his performance:

In COVID-19 situation my contract just got extended – this means they like my work and they wanted me to be on the contract. My managers and directors and everyone have told me the executive director has already signed off. It has been approved now just waiting to sign the letter. (SA 6, Male, India, Planner)

Overall, the COVID-19 situation has been a “blessing” to some South Asian graduates, whether they were working in jobs related to their field of studies or not.

Negative impact

Lack of face-to-face networking opportunities

Many South Asian graduates missed out on face-to-face networking opportunities for career-building connections due to COVID-19. Although there are possibilities of making connections via Zoom or LinkedIn, they prefer face-to-face meetings, as they can build relational and professional relationships with their connections to build their future career outcomes, such as gaining more job opportunities and career advancement in exploring more project options:

During the pandemic I could not do much networking because you cannot meet the person in person for coffee or something. Once this is over, I want to meet people face-to-face to build a professional relationship, as I got my tutoring job by meeting the professor. (SA 8, Female, India, Casual Teaching Staff)

I prefer to meet face-to-face with my connections. We have professional conversation about projects. But these days meeting through Zoom or messaging through WhatsApp is the alternative. (SA 16, Male, India, Web developer)

Many scholars have established that building social capital is important to develop graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2017; Singh and Fan, 2021). Prior to COVID, face-to-face meetings over coffee were a common feature, but during COVID, meeting through

teleconferencing via Zoom or WhatsApp was utilised to make connections with future employers, friends, alumni, supervisors or mentors (Pham *et al.*, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017).

Difficulties in obtaining study-related employment

Due to COVID-19, Australian employers were laying off employees, and therefore recent international graduates in Australia were not obtaining employment related to their studies, indicating underutilisation of human capital. This has frustrated five graduates in this study because they are on temporary resident visas, and it is crucial for them to gain employment related to their studies and to be retained in their jobs before they become eligible for a PR visa. They have full working rights for two years on a temporary resident visa, and they want to make the best of those two years by working in jobs related to their studies, but they have not been experiencing positive outcomes.

I do not think there would be any job now for international graduates. Australia is going into recession, so I do not think there will be jobs at the moment. The first preference will always be the citizen. I do not think employers will focus on international graduates; we are just cash cows. (SA 9, Male, India, Supermarket staff)

There will be few chances for international students and graduates to stay in Australia. No one is clear with the rules and regulations, as it is changing daily. I applied for PwC and I completed three rounds of interviews and then lockdown started. I never heard from them, as they stopped the procedure of hiring completely for an unknown time. No one has control over COVID. (SA 16, Male, India, Web developer)

The employers are not willing to hire you, because you are not permanent here, although you have temporary resident visa which expires in two years. You will just pass three or four interview stages, but the moment they ask you about your visa condition they will just reject you. (SA 17, Female, Bangladesh, Casual Teaching Staff)

South Asian graduates in this study have claimed that one of the main reasons for not obtaining employment in Australia was their visa condition: they had to secure positions related to their studies and be retained in their jobs for two years on a temporary resident visa before they became eligible for a PR visa.

Employment contract not renewed and unstable employment

Funding was reduced in every sector in Australia due to the pandemic. Hence, employers saved costs by not renewing employees on contract. This situation faced several South Asian graduates in this study:

I don't think my contract will be extended further anymore with the COVID-19 situation. They extended till February 2020 only. (SA 16, Male, India, Web developer)

They say all the contracts were frozen because of COVID-19. So, I am not sure what will happen to my contract. I am still waiting. (SA 18, Male, Bangladesh, Analyst)

South Asian graduates who have full-time and casual employment in the higher education sector are also in a dilemma because they are worried about being made redundant. South Asian graduates expressed this:

I am worried, although I am a full-time staff member. It is all about student numbers and as student numbers are shrinking our work will be less. (SA 1, Male, Bangladesh, University Lecturer)

I am continuing teaching online. There is no problem in that. But the university is thinking of cutting down on casuals next semester. So, I do not know whether my job will be there or gone or they will give me good hours or not. That kind of uncertainty still exists. (SA 8, Female, India, Casual Teaching Staff)

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduate employment experiences in Australia. The results have highlighted two main impacts: positive and negative. This current study has made a wider empirical contribution to the graduate employability and international student employment literature, as international graduates in this research were resilient during COVID-19 in locating and sustaining employment as well as “seen as active actors who know how to manage their employability trajectories depending on various aspects of their life” (Pham *et al.*, 2024, p. 4), such as leveraging their social capital via connections and also seeking assistance from alumni. The findings addressed an empirical gap as proposed by Singh *et al.* (2023) that it is important to further study the factors that facilitate South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia. More specifically, this study provided new insights into breaking the stereotypes that Australian employers hold towards international graduates, which is rejecting talented international graduates due to their visa status and perceived that international graduates have low-level English skills (Singh, 2020). In this research study, the findings show that the graduates have gained and sustained stable, secured and uninterrupted employment during COVID-19 due to their exceptional job performance.

Underpinned by human capital theory, these South Asian graduates are employed during COVID-19 upon study completion, regardless of being employed in their fields of studies or not. This is vital to be acknowledged as Marginson (2014) argues that although international students invest a great deal in enriching their human capital via international education, they “often experience acts of discrimination or abuse” (p. 14) from Australian employers (Singh, 2020). However, in this research, their knowledge, skills and capabilities are recognised by Australian employers during difficult times such as COVID-19 with high employment rates, which is commendable.

As observed by Cameron *et al.* (2019) and Rafi and Lewis (2013), South Asian students, particularly Indian students, intend to gain employment in Australia upon graduation, and therefore one of the positive impacts experienced by South Asian graduates in this research study is gaining employment in a study-related field, and they indeed found stability in their employment during the pandemic. This indicates return on investment in their human capital venture as well as leveraging their social capital. Tran *et al.* (2019) report that only 36% could secure full-time work in their field of study in Australia during pre-pandemic times, but South Asian graduates in this research gained employment in related postgraduate studies because they were focused, motivated and persevered in applying for jobs online, confirming Kelly *et al.*'s (2022) observation that graduates have strong personal motivation to find meaningful employment upon graduation.

In addition to being focused and motivated, recent South Asian graduates in this research received information on certain companies that recruited international graduates. They followed the advice from alumni who provided information at career workshops organised by the university. This finding contradicts Singh's (2023) research whereby international graduates have experienced unequal opportunity for accessing employability-related programmes. In this research, international graduates also took initiatives to prepare for interviews by contacting employees of the company via LinkedIn and, to their surprise, several employees responded and were helpful in guiding them to prepare for those interviews. Huang and Turner (2018) explain that international graduates took these initiatives because they have developed self-confidence and understood themselves better after studying abroad. South Asian graduates also received not only employment but Ph.D. opportunities during COVID-19 through their research work being acknowledged by their professors.

Although there are South Asian graduates who are not working in their field of postgraduate qualifications, which highlights the under-utilisation of their skills (Tran *et al.*, 2022), they have been offered more working hours and stable employment because they are working in essential services. International students are inclined to study courses in information technology (IT) and business when studying overseas (Rafi and Lewis, 2013), and for these recent and former graduates who are employed in jobs that are related to their studies (i.e. information technology and business) or are deemed to be essential, such as information technology (IT), vocational education, government departments and energy, which also offer stability in employment. In addition, one South Asian graduate had his employment contract renewed during COVID-19 because his superiors were impressed with his job performance.

However, due to COVID-19, South Asian graduates also faced negative impacts relating to their employment prospects in Australia. They encountered limited face-to-face networking opportunities, setbacks in employment related to their study, and they experienced discontinuation of employment contracts and uncertainty of employment. According to Tomlinson (2017), social capital is a web of connections and networks with friends, family members, colleagues, higher education institutions and social organisations that graduates develop to access the employment market. Chinese international graduates in Singh and Fan's (2021) research did not develop extensive social connections while studying in Australia, indicating that social capital development is a key weakness of international graduates. Nevertheless, South Asian graduates in this research understand the importance of developing and strengthening their social capital for employment purposes, they much prefer face-to-face meetings rather than utilising technology as the medium of connecting with future employers, alumni, friends and the like. During COVID-19, they have missed the opportunity to develop meaningful networks for them to leverage for future career development prospects, such as gaining sustainable job opportunities and career advancement in their field of work.

Visas for international students allow them to work up to 40 h a fortnight, and "graduates are able to stay on in the country for between two and four years with full work rights" (Leask and Ziguras, 2020, p. 36). However, during COVID-19, the biggest restriction in not obtaining employment in the related-study field was the temporary resident visa conditions, and a similar challenge was also experienced by Chinese international graduates in Singh's (2020) study. Employers remain ignorant that those on a temporary resident visa have full working rights for up to two years in Australia. A possible explanation for this may be that employers want long-term certainty through employing someone who is on a PR visa or a citizen of Australia. Blackmore *et al.* (2017) argue that this minimises the complicated administrative procedures experienced by employers in sponsoring international graduates. In addition, employers also have the "perception of fit" notion, which means they have preferences towards candidates who share a similar background (Blackmore *et al.*, 2017). Another reason is that the COVID-19 situation has crippled the Australian economy with high unemployment rates and employers putting on hold the hiring of new graduates. South Asian graduates are sceptical that they and future international graduates will ever be preferred for employment by Australian employers because Australian citizens will be favoured over them. A pre-COVID study also shares similar observations: Tran *et al.* (2020) argued that employers in Australia will prefer local citizens or permanent residents over temporary international graduates.

South Asian graduates employed either full-time or on contract are uncertain about their future employment. Some graduates in this research stated that their employment contracts were not being renewed due to employers cutting costs. COVID-19 has impacted companies' funding significantly. University lecturers employed on a full-time basis in this research are also in a dilemma about their employment security. As international students were not permitted to enter Australia to gain international education (Leask and Ziguras, 2020) during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Australian government did not fund the higher education sector by way of compensation, this situation has imposed economic costs on universities. As a result, academic and professional jobs at universities are more unstable as a result of the pandemic.

Conclusion

South Asian graduates have invested in gaining an Australian higher education degree, and over time this investment has yielded positive outcomes in terms of gaining employment in Australia. Although some have reported gaining employment related to their studies, thus having stability in their employment, there are South Asian graduates in this study who faced difficulties in gaining study-related employment, limited networking opportunities, social capital and non-renewal of contracts. This is an important finding, overlooked in the employment and international graduate research literature as well as by Australian universities and employers. The finding should encourage relevant stakeholders in Australia, including current international students and graduates as well as Australian employers, to ensure that international graduates have a level playing field in gaining successful employment beyond the COVID-19 context. The findings of this research are relevant to the post-COVID-19 context, as there are high proportion of international graduates employed in low-skilled professions specifies that “despite being highly qualified, this cohort of temporary migrants could be exposed to exploitation, vulnerability and deskilling because of financial pressure, precarity, and employer bias” (Tran *et al.*, 2022, p. 10). In addition, with the latest post-study work visa policy, “international graduates are often marginalised in their job search or find themselves in insecure work” (Tran *et al.*, 2022, p. 11). As such, education providers and Australia’s international education sector face challenges because the “employment outcomes of international graduates are indicative of their capacity to deliver on graduate employability promise and vital to their competitiveness in the global education market” (Tran *et al.*, 2022, p. 10). However, IT international graduates have better employment opportunities upon graduation, as compared to other graduates (Tran *et al.*, 2022), which suggests that international graduates need to pick courses that have high employment rates.

Several practical implications arise from these research findings, which are beyond the COVID-19 context and have a longer-term impact on the international graduates’ employment prospects and career development space. First, the role of Australian universities in preparing international graduates’ employability and obtaining successful employment upon graduation has become more critical than ever before because “university marketing often promises prospective students a competitive advantage in the labour market” (Baron and McCormack, 2024, p. 3). As underpinned by the research findings, it is vital for international graduates to attend university career development sessions to gain strategies for successful employment outcomes (Singh, 2023). As such, Australian universities can also create more awareness and opportunities, in gaining study-related work placements for South Asian international students to develop their employability while studying in Australia.

Australian universities can partner with various companies to provide internships or work placement opportunities for international students so that they are able to enhance their employability and employment outcomes. Academic staff members can provide international students with industry contacts or at least guide them as to what jobs are available in their field of studies in the competitive Australian employment market. Australian universities can offer industry mentoring or coaching programmes to international students and leverage these in locating mentors to guide them in their employment journey. Universities can also take the opportunity to educate employers on international students’ and graduates’ visa status, which does provide them with working rights. International graduates do add value to the Australian employment sector due to their diverse experiences and perspectives, as well as their adaptation to the workplace culture (Blackmore *et al.*, 2017).

Second, South Asian international students studying in Australia must also reciprocate and be proactive in utilising the programmes and opportunities provided to them by their respective universities. As underpinned by the findings, South Asian international students did find part-time work in Australia during COVID-19 while studying, but they must have the mindset of obtaining work experiences which are related to their studies. They can leverage their employers’ networks in getting internships or study-related work experience now that post-pandemic the number of placements and internships offered is on the rise and it is face-to-

face. South Asian students can proactively trace employers who have previously hired international students through their alumni friends. Greater engagement in building their social capital through wider networks of friends, alumni, family members, family connections and academic staff members can assist South Asian international students and graduates in gaining successful outcomes.

While this article has focused on both the positive and negative impact of COVID-19 on South Asian graduates' employment experiences in Australia, it also offers recommendations on how these negative impacts can be minimised to support the transition of international graduates into the competitive Australian employment market. First, strong social connections are important for employment. Although South Asian graduates in this study prefer to meet their networks face-to-face, online meetings are a new norm after COVID-19. Therefore, they need to make the effort to e-meet or make connections via Zoom, LinkedIn or other social media platforms. Second, international graduates need to possess work experience in a field related to their studies while studying in Australia. This can be obtained through internships, placements, work-integrated learning and part-time jobs. Australian-related work experience is important because it provides an added advantage to becoming employed in Australia. Employers are looking for international graduates who have work experience related to their field of study, showcasing their knowledge and skills in the field. Third, Australian universities must be aware of the current pandemic situation affecting international graduates' employment outcomes and provide strategies or suitable programmes to educate current international students and graduates on the competitive employment market.

Although these findings have contributed to the emerging literature on South Asian international graduates' employment outcomes, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the findings cannot be representative of all South Asian international graduates, as the responses only reflect South Asian alumni who studied postgraduate courses in one Australian university. Forthcoming research studies may want to involve South Asian graduates from other Australian higher education institutions, as well as globally, such as from the UK, the United States or Canada. Comparative studies could provide a better understanding of the South Asian graduates' employment journey. Second, future research could replicate this study on a larger scale, using a quantitative research design. With a larger dataset, it would be possible to examine the longitudinal impacts of COVID-19 on South Asian international graduates as well as on other international graduates.

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