

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT COURSEWORK MASTER'S DEGREE

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ABSTRACT

Coursework master's degree programs are rapidly growing and there are growing cohorts of international students in these programs globally. This study focuses on international students enrolled in three construction management related coursework master's degree programs in an Australian university. The research aims: (i) to examine factors influencing the students' decision in pursuing their coursework master's degree; and (ii) to explore the challenges they have encountered while abroad. Data was collected using an anonymous online structured survey questionnaire. The results show that the detected heterogeneity in the respondents' responses is dependent on the respondents' country-of-origin to a greater extent than their gender. The key factors affecting their decision-making are global reputation and university ranking, and career advancement opportunities; and the key challenges are lack of access to student housing or accommodation and limited job opportunities for international students. The findings reinforce the importance of providing employability and career advancement support and academic and social support services in tertiary institutes' strategic international student marketing, recruitment and retention agendas.

Keywords: Construction Management; Decision Making; International Students; Master's Degree; Student Experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, there are two main types of master's degrees, namely course-based (taught) and research-based (Haidar 2024). Course-based master's degrees are based on structured courses taught through teaching and learning activities such as lectures, seminars and laboratory work. Research-based master's degrees, on the other hand, require students to carry their own research project in a specialized field of study. The former, course-based master's degrees or commonly known as coursework master's degrees are rapidly growing around the globe and are attracting students from increasingly diverse backgrounds (Jung, 2021). Glazer-Raymo (2005) asserted that coursework master's degree education embraces the capacity to continually evolve as a highly adaptable and affordable credential globally, which is fuelled by globalisation, privatisation,

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accountability, and changes in the demographic composition of graduate students. Accordingly, there are growing cohorts of international students in coursework master's degree programs in universities worldwide because of the internationalisation of higher education that promotes cross-border mobility of students (Jung & Li, 2020; Li & Jung, 2023). For example, coursework master's degree programs have witnessed a significant growth over the past few decades and are of immense importance to the Australian higher education (Edwards, 2011). International students in coursework master's degree programs make up around 50% of total enrolments in the Australian higher education sector between 2019 and 2024 (Department of Education, 2025). Authors have urged the need to treat master's degree students as a specialised group, which is characterised by more diverse and internationally mobile student body, to better support them in their learning journey (Calikoglu, 2018; Li & Jung, 2023; Valls-Figuera et al., 2023; Walsh & Tucker, 2011).

This study focuses on international student body enrolled in three construction management related coursework master's degree programs in an Australian university, where these programs are experiencing a surge in enrolments post the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to explore international students' decision making in pursuing a coursework master's degree and their learning experiences. Using anonymous online questionnaire for data collection, the specific objectives are: (i) to examine factors influencing the students' decision in pursuing a coursework master's degree; and (ii) to explore the challenges they have encountered while abroad. The quantitative statistical analysis in the present study has considered the students' gender and country-of-origin in identifying critical factors and challenges across the respective groupings. These are two demographic variables play an important role in students' decision making to study abroad and their learning experiences in host country (e.g., Jung & Lee, 2019; Valls-Figuera et al., 2023; Van Mol, 2021). With the global trend of international students studying a coursework master's degree in Australia and in many other countries, the findings shed light on our understanding of students' decision-making processes and their concerns while studying abroad, which have implications for tertiary institutes' international student marketing, recruitment and retention strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

International student experiences have been widely examined in the literature. The previous studies can be broadly classified into two main groups. In the first group, a considerable number of studies have examined the motivations of international students to study abroad and their choice of destination. The second group of studies explored on international students' learning experiences abroad, especially on the challenges they faced in their new academic and social environment. Correspondingly, there are systematic review studies based on these collections of studies. For example, Ha et al.'s (2023) review is based on a collection of 46 empirical studies on factors driving international students' choice of Australia as their host country for high education. The top five most frequently reported factors in their collection were career opportunities and life experiences, quality education and qualification, cost of study and living, migration prospect and policy, and reputation of tertiary education institutions and academic staff. Oduwaye et al. (2023), on the other hand, performed a trend analysis of challenges faced by international students based on 175 articles published over 21 years. They grouped the reported challenges into four categories, these are sociocultural, academic, economic and

psychological challenges, of which sociocultural and academic challenges have been well-covered in the literature. Another recent systematic review of 43 publications between 2010 and 2022 revealed that the five key themes and trends in international student mobility research are: (i) betterment of life; (ii) policy of the host country; (iii) role of institutions; (iv) return to home country; and (v) social, economic, environmental, individual and cultural factors (Gutema et al., 2024). Most of the scholarly work, however, has concentrated mainly on higher education in general with key focus on undergraduate education. Additionally, for postgraduate education, authors have mainly explored the learning experiences of doctoral students and there are few studies focused on master's education (Jung, 2021). Authors claimed that coursework master's degree is one of the least understood or researched academic levels in higher education, despite it is becoming the key credential continuing education to the professions (Drennan & Clarke, 2009; Edwards, 2011). Table 1 summarizes the factors influencing students' decision to pursue postgraduate education in the literature, noting that most of the respondents in these studies were international students and some studies have set the focus on coursework master's degree. Also, it is noted that some of the studies on coursework master's degree adopted a qualitative approach using interview data (e.g., Jung & Li, 2020; Wang & Shan, 2007), and there is a mixture of studies from English and non-English countries. It is worth noting that the top ranked factors from this collection of studies on postgraduate education are dissimilar to the studies of overseas higher education that did not specifically focus on postgraduate education. For example, the latter studies have reported career opportunities and cultural experiences as top factors (e.g., Ha et al., 2023; Hung & Yen, 2020), however, career advancement, personal development and self-improvement topped the list in Table 1 with high number of occurrences in the literature.

Table 1: Factors influencing students' decision to pursue postgraduate education

Factors	References	Country/Region
Career advancement opportunities	Espinoza et al. (2025); Li and Jung (2023)*; Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Gazo et al. (2022); Jung and Li (2020)*; Wu (2020); Jung and Lee (2019)*; Calikoglu (2018); Wiers-Jenssen (2018); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014); Walsh and Tucker (2011); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Chile, Hong Kong, Spain, UK, South Korea, Finland, Australia
Enhancement of future academic prospects	Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Li and Jung (2023)*; Gazo et al. (2022); Jung and Li (2020)*; Lin et al. (2022); Wu (2020); Jung and Lee (2019)*; Calikoglu (2018); Wiers-Jenssen (2018); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014); Walsh and Tucker (2011)	Spain, Hong Kong, Taiwan, UK, South Korea, Finland, Norway, Australia
Personal development and self-improvement	Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Li and Jung (2023)*; Gazo et al. (2022); Lin et al. (2022); Jung and Li (2020)*; Wu (2020); Jung and Lee (2019); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Spain, Hong Kong, Taiwan, UK, South Korea, Australia
Quality of higher education	Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Lin et al. (2022); Jung and Li (2020)*; Wiers-Jenssen (2020); Calikoglu (2018); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Spain, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Norway, Finland, UK, Australia
Home country education experience	Espinoza et al. (2025); Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Lin et al. (2022); Wu (2020); Jung and Lee (2019)*; Wu (2014)	Chile, Spain, Taiwan, UK, South Korea

Factors	References	Country/Region
Location	Valls-Figuera et al. (2023); Lin et al. (2022); Jung and Li (2020)*; Calikoglu (2018); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014)	Spain, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Finland, UK
Cost	Jung and Li (2020)*; Wiers-Jenssen (2020); Wu (2020); Calikoglu (2018); Moogan (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Hong Kong, Norway, Finland, UK, Australia
Family influence	Espinoza et al. (2025); Wu (2020); Jung and Lee (2019)*; Moogan (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Chile, UK, South Korea, Australia
Friend influence	Lin et al. (2022)	Taiwan
Migration opportunities after graduation	Wiers-Jenssen (2020); Calikoglu (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Norway, Finland, Australia
Personal interest	Jung and Li (2020)*; Wu (2020)	Hong Kong, UK
Safety of host country	Wiers-Jenssen (2020); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Norway, Australia
Exposure to different cultures	Wu (2014); Wang and Shan (2007)*	UK, Australia
Education policy of host country	Wiers-Jenssen (2020); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Norway, Australia
Past working experience	Espinoza et al. (2025); Valls-Figuera et al. (2023)	Chile, Spain
Gender	Gazo et al. (2022); Lin et al. (2022), Jung and Lee (2019)*	Spain, Taiwan, South Korea
Age	Jung and Lee (2019)*	South Korea

NB: *study that specifically focussed on coursework master's degrees

2.1 CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Next, Table 2 summarizes the challenges faced by postgraduate students. Some of these studies have been considered in Table 1 since such studies examined both factors and challenges in the subject area, similar to the present study. While the list of challenges seems short in comparison to those discovered in the systematic review by Oduwaye et al. (2023), it is rather consistent with their findings that academic and sociocultural challenges were most reported in the literature. Of these, the top cited challenges are academic and study pressure, sense of social isolation and cultural shock as evidenced in the literature listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges faced by international postgraduate students

Challenges	References	Country/Region
Academic and study pressure	Pappa et al. (2020); Calikoglu (2018); Moogan (2018); Wu (2014); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Finland, Finland, UK, Australia
Sense of social isolation	Pappa et al. (2020); Yu and Moskal (2019); Calikoglu (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)*	Finland, UK, Australia
Cultural shock	Wu (2020); Yu and Moskal (2019); Calikoglu (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)*	UK, Finland, Australia
Financial hardship	Lin et al. (2022); Pappa et al. (2020); Jung and Li (2020); Calikoglu (2018)	Taiwan, Finland, Hong Kong
Language barrier	Yu and Moskal (2019); Moogan (2018); Wang and Shan (2007)	UK, Australia

Challenges	References	Country/Region
Racial discrimination	Yu and Moskal (2019); Calikoglu (2018)	UK, Finland
Mental health issues	Pappa et al. (2020); Moogan (2018)	Finland, UK
Physical health issues	Pappa et al. (2020); Moogan (2018)	Finland, UK
Access to student housing or accommodation	Calikoglu (2018)	Finland
Homesickness	Wang and Shan (2007)*	Australia
Limited job opportunities for international students	Calikoglu (2018)	Finland

NB: *study that specifically focussed on coursework master's degrees

2.2 CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

There is a wealth of literature on construction management (CM) education in various aspects. Aliu and Aigbavboa (2021) opined that CM education had attracted a great interest from different stakeholders because of its role in nurturing the future generation of construction professionals and project managers. However, an area of concern is gender disparity in CM education (Burgoon et al., 2025). Despite the calls in the past decades for more diversity in the male-dominated construction industry in which women are seen as untapped resource in addressing workforce shortages and improving diversity in the industry (Hickey & Cui, 2020), university CM degree programs struggle to attract and retain female students to fuel the demand of construction professions (Choi et al., 2022). Correspondingly, there are studies on students' choice of CM degrees, especially from female students' perspective (Oo et al., 2018), which focused on undergraduate CM degree programs. However, little is known about students' choice of CM-related coursework master's degrees, and this study aims to address this research gap in a case study setting that specifically considers the students' gender along with their country-of-origin in the analysis.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a single case study research design in achieving the research objectives. Data was collected using an anonymous online structured survey questionnaire. This facilitated the data collection process in an efficient and timely manner from the targeted population (Oo et al., 2018). A purposive sampling method was adopted to reach the targeted population, i.e., the current students in construction management-related coursework master's degrees. A case university in Australia was chosen because it offers as many as three construction management-related coursework master's degrees, of which one is a double coursework master's degree program. The case university is one of the renowned Australia's global universities with large population of international students, which was about 40% of its total enrolments in 2023 (Department of Education, 2023). Additionally, these three programs are experiencing a surge in international student enrolments post the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of current international students in these degree programs was as high as 324 across different study years when the survey questionnaire was distributed. While international students are required to enrol on a full-time study mode due to their student visa requirements, the recorded number of international students may include students who were on program leave and thus unreachable in the recruitment process.

Various recruitment strategies were adopted to maximize the survey response rate including: (i) the survey invitation link was distributed via the university current students' website and student weekly newsletter along with a reminder in subsequent week's newsletter; (ii) the survey was distributed in the middle of the teaching term when students were generally less busy to encourage participation; and (iii) a sufficient time frame of 4-week was allocated for data collection. Additionally, the survey questionnaire was kept short and simple to maximize the survey response rate. There were only two sections in the questionnaire with the main section on the list of influencing factors and challenges adapted from the literature along with a background section on demographic questions. Some other influencing factors and challenges from the relevant literature in the higher education context (e.g., Ha et al., 2023; Oduwaye et al., 2023) were also adapted in the questionnaire. A pilot study was performed to ensure clarity of the questionnaire, and the required changes (i.e., rewording, adding or deleting items) were addressed prior to data collection. The respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions on the subject matter based on a seven-point Likert scale. In total, there were 47 complete responses usable for the data analysis, representing a response rate of 14.5%. While the response rate was low, it was considered satisfactory and adequate when taking into consideration some students might not willingly share their learning experience, regardless of the setting being used to conduct this study. Indeed, it should be noted that similar studies that specifically focussed on coursework master's degrees have adopted interviewing approach with a rather small cohort of 10 (Wang & Shan, 2007) and 70 (Jung & Li, 2020) respondents, which seemingly indicated the challenges in recruitment of study participants and data collection.

4. RESULTS

Table 3 shows the demographic profile of the respondents with a rather even number of male (55 %) and female (45%) respondents. About 80% of them are from China (42%) and India (40%). Majority of them (77%) completed their undergraduate degree in their home country, and the current master's degree was the first postgraduate degree pursuit for almost all respondents (96%). About two-thirds of respondents were working on full-time, part-time or casual basis.

Table 3: The demographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographic characteristics		Respondents	
		Freq.	%
Gender	Female	21	44.7%
	Male	26	55.3%
Home country	China	18	41.9%
	India	17	39.5%
	Others	8	18.6%
Country completed undergraduate degree	Australia	10	21.3%
	Home country	36	76.6%
	Others	1	2.1%
Is current master's degree your first postgraduate degree pursuit?	Yes	45	95.7%
	No	2	4.3%

Demographic characteristics		Respondents	
		Freq.	%
Current employment status	Employed full-time	7	14.9%
	Employed part-time	11	23.4%
	Casual worker	16	34.0%
	Do not have a paid job	13	27.7%

On the gender grouping, Table 4 shows the mean and ranking of the respondents' perceived importance of 17 factors affecting their decision to pursue a master's degree. Some factors were not applicable to all respondents, and they were given an "N/A" option in the questionnaire. Nonetheless, the recorded frequencies for all factors are 41 and above (out of 47), signifying that these factors were relevant to most respondents. There is little variation in mean scores between the male and female groups, ranging between 4 and 7 for all factors. The Mann–Whitney U test results show that there is no statistically significant difference in distribution between male and female groups for all the 17 factors at $p < 0.05$ significance level, i.e., gender difference is statistically insignificant. It also noted that the recommendation from agency and influence of family and friend were of least importance for both gender groups (i.e. ranked bottom on the list).

Table 4: The mean and ranking of the respondents' perceived importance of factors affecting their decision to pursue a coursework master's degree according to gender

Factors		Male		Female		Sig. (p-value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
F1	Quality of higher education in Australia	5.653	7	6.050	1	0.401
F2	Global reputation and ranking of university	6.077	2	6.000	2	0.873
F3	Recommendation from student recruitment agency	4.423	16	4.833	14	0.552
F4	Family influence	4.826	14	4.550	16	0.664
F5	Friend influence	4.400	17	4.263	17	0.838
F6	The major of the postgraduate or master's degree program (CPM, PD or both)	5.923	3	5.667	7	0.401
F7	The flexibility of the course design of the postgraduate or master's degree program	5.040	11	5.300	9	0.666
F8	Current job experience or employment	5.250	9	5.294	10	0.827
F9	Career advancement opportunities	6.115	1	5.810	4	0.335
F10	Specialized job opportunities based on postgraduate or master's degree major	5.760	4	5.810	5	0.982
F11	Your undergraduate or bachelor's degree major	4.731	15	4.950	13	0.644
F12	Post-undergraduate working experience	5.583	8	4.778	15	0.146
F13	Personal development and self-improvement	5.692	5	5.905	3	0.662

Factors		Male		Female		Sig. (p-value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
F14	Prospect of obtaining professional body certification	4.840	13	5.350	8	0.418
F15	Enhancement of future academic prospects	4.880	12	5.200	12	0.875
F16	Exposure to different cultures	5.680	6	5.250	11	0.286
F17	Migration opportunities after graduation	5.160	10	5.714	6	0.319

^a Scale: not at all important (1), low importance (2), slightly important (3), neutral (4), moderately important (5), very important (6), extremely important (7)

^b Mann–Whitney test of difference between male and female

Table 5 shows the statistics of male and female groups' perceived level of difficulties in dealing with potential challenges. Similarly, the respondents were given an "N/A" option, and it is evident that some potential challenges were not applicable to all respondents, and the recorded highest and lowest frequencies are 32 and 42, respectively. The challenge that recorded the lowest frequency is family pressure (C10), indicating that the respondents' family were generally supportive of their study even if this challenge was applicable. In terms of mean scores, male group recorded lower mean generally that range between 2.762 and 5.455, with the corresponding female group's mean scores of 3.278 and 5.889. While the female group's mean scores are leaning towards the higher score, the range of the mean scores from both groups is very similar, i.e., around 2.6, signifying comparable variability in their responses. Indeed, it is noted that the mean scores of most factors for both gender groups are on the 'easy' side of the scale (i.e., below 4), suggesting that the respondents were settling in well as international students despite the challenges faced, and had access to university student support services if required (i.e., this challenge ranked bottom of the list for both gender groups). In consistent with preceding results in Table 4, the Mann–Whitney U test results show that there is no statistically significant difference in distribution between two gender groups for all the 16 challenges at $p < 0.05$ significance level. This further affirms that gender difference is statistically insignificant.

Table 5: The mean and ranking of the respondents' perceived level of difficulties in dealing with potential challenges faced by international students according to gender

Challenges		Male		Female		Sig. (p-value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
C1	Cultural shock	3.409	11	3.667	11	0.619
C2	Racial discrimination	3.294	14	3.889	7	0.405
C3	Unfamiliar food options or diet	2.762	16	3.278	16	0.335
C4	Language barriers	3.400	12	3.824	9	0.497
C5	Sense of social isolation (loneliness)	4.381	5	3.667	12	0.269
C6	Homesickness	3.857	9	3.765	10	0.954
C7	Physical health issues (e.g., insomnia)	3.316	13	3.857	8	0.439
C8	Mental health issues (e.g., depression)	3.600	10	3.375	15	0.545
C9	Academic and study pressure	4.609	4	4.526	5	0.888
C10	Family pressure	4.000	7	3.467	13	0.350

Challenges		Male		Female		Sig. (<i>p</i> -value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
C11	Financial hardship	4.381	6	4.167	6	0.811
C12	Access to university student support services	2.952	15	3.438	14	0.185
C13	Access to student housing or accommodation	5.000	3	4.765	2	0.624
C14	Limitation on permitted number of working hours on student visa	5.300	2	4.647	4	0.326
C15	Limited job opportunities for international students	5.455	1	5.889	1	0.946
C16	A balance between academic and personal life activities	3.870	8	4.722	3	0.312

^a Scale: extremely easy (1), moderately easy (2), slightly easy (3), neither easy nor difficult (4), slightly difficult (5), moderately difficult (6), extremely difficult (7)

^b Mann–Whitney test of difference between male and female

In repeating the analysis with the respondents' country-of-origin, Table 6 shows the respective results on the respondents' perceived importance of factors affecting their decision to pursue a master's degree. The mean scores of the India group are generally higher and varying between 4.500 and 6.588 with a range of 2.088, compared to the corresponding China group's mean scores of 4.235 and 5.941 and a range of 1.704. The Mann–Whitney U test results show that there are statistically significant differences in distributions between China and India groups on six factors at $p < 0.05$ significance level. These factors are F1, F6, F7, F10, F11 and F12, which are mainly related to the master's degree program quality, program major, course design and specialized job opportunities.

Table 6: The mean and ranking of the respondents' perceived importance of factors affecting their decision to pursue a coursework master's degree according to their country-of-origin

Factors		China		India		Sig. (<i>p</i> -value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
F1	Quality of higher education in Australia	5.118	5	6.353	3	0.010
F2	Global reputation and ranking of university	5.941	1	6.353	4	0.195
F3	Recommendation from student recruitment agency	4.471	12	4.625	16	0.825
F4	Family influence	4.313	15	4.733	15	0.655
F5	Friend influence	4.235	16	4.500	17	0.772
F6	The major of the postgraduate or master's degree program (CPM, PD or both)	5.059	8	6.588	1	0.002
F7	The flexibility of the course design of the postgraduate or master's degree program	4.235	17	5.938	8	0.008
F8	Current job experience or employment	5.071	6	5.125	14	0.922
F9	Career advancement opportunities	5.529	2	6.412	2	0.062
F10	Specialized job opportunities based on postgraduate or master's degree major	5.000	9	6.353	5	0.012
F11	Your undergraduate or bachelor's degree major	4.471	13	5.647	10	0.027

Factors		China		India		Sig. (p-value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
F12	Post-undergraduate working experience	4.429	14	5.750	9	0.037
F13	Personal development and self-improvement	5.235	3	6.118	6	0.110
F14	Prospect of obtaining professional body certification	4.500	11	5.471	13	0.170
F15	Enhancement of future academic prospects	4.533	10	5.588	12	0.168
F16	Exposure to different cultures	5.125	4	6.118	7	0.140
F17	Migration opportunities after graduation	5.063	7	5.647	11	0.322

^a Scale: not at all important (1), low importance (2), slightly important (3), neutral (4), moderately important (5), very important (6), extremely important (7)

^b Mann–Whitney test of difference between China and India

Next, Table 7 shows the results for the identification of critical challenges according to the respondents' country-of-origin. In terms of mean scores, China group recorded a rather narrow spread of scores between 3.000 and 5.000, compared to the corresponding India group's scores of 1.222 and 6.417 (i.e., range = 5.194). In contrast to mean scores reported in Table 5 (according to gender), the recorded mean scores clearly show a greater variability in the responses when the respondents' country-of-origin was taken into consideration. The Mann–Whitney *U* test results also show that there are statistically significant differences in distributions between China and India groups on two challenges at $p < 0.05$ significance level. These challenges are language barrier (C4) and limited job opportunities for international students (C15). Along with the detected statistically significant differences in Table 6, the findings credibly show that the respondents' country-of-origin attribute has a role in their perceptions of levels of difficulty in dealing with potential challenges.

Table 7: The mean and ranking of the respondents' perceived level of difficulties in dealing with potential challenges according to their country-of-origin

Challenges		China		India		Sig. (p-value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
C1	Cultural shock	3.529	12	3.083	13	0.346
C2	Racial discrimination	3.706	10	3.250	11	0.461
C3	Unfamiliar food options or diet	3.000	16	2.727	14	0.707
C4	Language barriers	4.882	2	1.222	16	0.000
C5	Sense of social isolation (loneliness)	3.882	7	4.273	5	0.642
C6	Homesickness	3.813	9	4.000	7	0.711
C7	Physical health issues (e.g., insomnia)	3.438	14	2.429	15	0.308
C8	Mental health issues (e.g., depression)	3.500	13	4.000	8	0.637
C9	Academic and study pressure	4.824	3	3.692	10	0.135
C10	Family pressure	3.667	11	4.167	6	0.407
C11	Financial hardship	3.867	8	4.800	4	0.216
C12	Access to university student support services	3.438	15	3.167	12	0.616

Challenges		China		India		Sig. (<i>p</i> -value) ^b
		Mean ^a	Rank	Mean ^a	Rank	
C13	Access to student housing or accommodation	4.706	4	5.538	2	0.170
C14	Limitation on permitted number of working hours on student visa	4.000	6	5.462	3	0.065
C15	Limited job opportunities for international students	5.000	1	6.417	1	0.030
C16	A balance between academic and personal life activities	4.500	5	3.692	9	0.341

^a Scale: extremely easy (1), moderately easy (2), slightly easy (3), neither easy nor difficult (4), slightly difficult (5), moderately difficult (6), extremely difficult (7)

^b Mann–Whitney test of difference between China and India

5. DISCUSSION

Despite the importance of this master's degree type in Australia in many ways, including its national economic benefits (McCowage et al., 2025), little is known about international students' experiences in Australian universities (Edwards, 2011). The key findings are discussed below. Firstly, the results detect heterogeneity in the respondents' responses, echoing the necessity to cater for diversity of coursework master's degree student cohorts as affirmed in the literature (e.g., Li & Jung, 2023; Valls-Figuera et al., 2023). The detected heterogeneity is dependent on the respondents' country-of-origin to a greater extent than their gender. The results show that the differences in responses between the male and female groups for the influencing factors (Table 4) and potential challenges (Table 5) they faced are statistically insignificant. Indeed, it is rather surprising that the respondents' responses are not gendered, which contrasts with some previous findings on the gender role in master's education and study abroad decision making (e.g., Jung & Lee, 2019; Van Mol, 2021). It is also worth noting that the major of master's degree is not on the list of top ranked factors influencing the female respondents' decision making (see Table 4) as expected, even though the major in the degree programs is construction management related. Regrettably, the discipline has been experiencing difficulties in the recruitment for female students in construction management undergraduate degrees in the past decades due to the gender stereotype in the construction industry (Oo et al., 2018), which seems to be of less concern to female master's students.

On the other hand, the results show that there are statistically significant differences in responses between China and India groups for six influencing factors (Table 6) and two potential challenges (Table 7). In consistent with many country-specific studies, international students' country-of-origin attribute has a role to play in their study abroad motivation, decision-making and learning experiences (e.g., Calikoglu, 2018; Jung & Li, 2020). Indeed, the results are representative and credible since students from China and India are the top two nationalities for recorded enrolments in master's degree by coursework in Australia (Department of Education, 2025). A credible example with statistically significant difference between the two nationality groups is that challenge of language barrier is least difficult for Indian students, which ranked last on the list (Table 7). Contrastingly, language barrier is top critical challenge for Chinese students abroad, which has also been shared by Chinese postgraduate students in Australia in an interview study by Wang and Shan (2007). Turning into the two key challenges for both groups, it is not surprising that the respondents found it very challenging in accessing student

accommodations, as inadequate student housing provision has been a rooted problem facing by international students in Australia (Zhu et al., 2024). Challenges associated with international students' common career concerns of limited job opportunities reported in the literature have been captured as well in the present study (see Table 2). Collectively, while it is expected that the detected heterogeneities in responses are underpinned by intricate nature of individual students, the findings clearly suggest that an assumption of homogeneity among international students of different nationalities would be unjustified to accommodate their diverse expectations and demands in master's degree education.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the emerging body of knowledge on coursework master's education, which has been experiencing rapid growth globally with an increasingly diverse student body. It focuses on international student cohort in three construction management related master's degree programs offered by a university in Australia. The results show that the detected heterogeneity in the respondents' responses is dependent on the respondents' country-of-origin to a greater extent than their gender, echoing the necessity to cater for diversity of coursework master's degree student cohorts in future studies on this student body. Also, the results suggest that the influencing factors and challenges on career opportunities and advancements are intertwined. Thus, care and support pertaining to this aspect are of critical importance for international students since they tend to seek job opportunities both during and after completing their CM-related degrees.

While the findings can broaden the general understanding of the key issues examined, there are limitations that prompt future on master's education. In accommodating the diverse expectations and demands in master's degree education among international students, future studies should aim to recruit respondents across diverse master's degree programs from different tertiary institutes to enrich the knowledge base on this student body. In addition, future studies could explore the causes of challenges faced by international students in exploring the student support services required to improve their learning experiences abroad. Lastly, future studies should consider the international students' demographic profile in the analysis and associated modelling attempts.

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