

Abstract

With international students comprising over a quarter of its student population, Australia is vulnerable to global shocks. The initial impact of COVID-19 was to prevent thousands of Chinese students from traveling to Australia for the new academic year. The unfolding lockdown, a shift to online teaching, and collapse of part-time work are affecting international students deeply. However, universities have transitioned to online operations quite seamlessly, which might bring lasting cultural change to their operations.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Australian Higher Education

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Higher education has been one of Australia's top three exports for over a decade. In 2019, Chinese students contributed A\$12 billion to the Australian economy. The presence of international students generally, and of Chinese students in particular, has literally and metaphorically enriched campuses, classrooms, and research laboratories. International student visas allow students to work up to 40 hours a fortnight, and graduates are able to stay on in the country for between two and four years with full work rights. As a result, local communities have benefited from access to an enthusiastic, flexible, and diverse casual workforce. COVID-19 has put all of this at risk.

The movement of students from China to Australia prior to COVID-19 represented one of the largest education flows that the world has ever seen. In 2019, Chinese students comprised 28 percent of Australia's total international student population. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in China came at the worst possible time for students from that country, as the academic year in Australia commences in March. At the time when Australia imposed restrictions on travel from China, there were more than 100,000 students there who had been accepted to study in Australia in 2020, but who were no longer permitted to enter the country. As the crisis unfolded in January and February, it quickly became clear that only a very small percentage of those students would be able to start the semester as planned. People were just starting to understand the personal cost for students, and the economic cost for institutions, of COVID-19. For students unable to leave China, the impact of the crisis on their lives was magnified beyond the immediate impact on their families, friends, and lifestyle. It was likely to be much longer-term, affecting their future plans for a professional career. For institutions, the economic cost was estimated to be in excess of A\$3 billion.

Early Days—Chinese Students Stranded

Some Chinese students did manage to enter Australia by spending two weeks in transit in a third country. By the time the semester started, though, many remained in China, some studying online, others having deferred, hoping for a mid-year commencement.

Australian universities worked hard to meet the needs of all three groups of students, including providing discounted fee tuition for those taking online classes in China; reorganizing on-campus teaching so that students who arrived later in the semester would receive the support they needed; delaying the start date of the semester; providing fee refunds and deferred payment; supporting students to resolve visa issues; resolving accommodation and employment arrangements; and offering dedicated support services for Chinese students. The latter included extended academic and welfare support, counselling, special helplines, and coronavirus-specific information guidelines.

Nevertheless, the crisis had an immediate devastating effect on both Chinese students and institutions. It caused major disruption to students' study, accommodation, part-time employment, and life plans, as well as mental wellbeing. Students and institutions

scrambled to manage the situation day by day, and week by week as the health crisis escalated.

Increasing Intensity—Studying under Lockdown

As the health impact of COVID-19 intensified in Australia in the following weeks, the crisis changed the lives of all students and staff. All teaching moved online. All study abroad by Australian students and travel by faculty was abruptly canceled. International students in Australia found themselves isolated and grappling with a new mode of study, and many lost the part-time work that they relied on to pay rent and buy food. Some returned to their home country, either deferring their studies or figuring that if they must study online, they may as well do that from home where costs are much lower and they are close to their loved ones.

At this point, a multibillion dollar economic stimulus package was released, including additional allowances paid to full-time domestic students as compensation for lost income from casual work. However, despite the fact that international students also lost their casual employment, the prime minister announced that if international students “are not in a position to support themselves then there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries.”

This “go home” response was broadly condemned by student groups and those in the education sector, who pointed out that many students are not currently able to return, and argued that Australia has a duty of care to all residents. The international education community, who had for years been working to have international students treated as an integral part of educational institutions and communities, was appalled at this callous disregard for their welfare.

State and local governments, and many businesses, have stepped up to provide moral and material support to international students, and the international students’ peak body (an elected group of students representing the interests of international students) has appealed to consular missions to provide additional support to their students in Australia. And while a number of institutions 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.

Looking Ahead

For Australian international higher education, the future undoubtedly looks very different now than it did three months ago. Australia’s borders will almost certainly be closed until after the beginning of the second semester in July, when many international students commence, so numbers will fall further. Significantly reduced enrollments of international students in the short to medium term will profoundly reduce class sizes and the teaching workforce, particularly at the master’s level. Around 46 percent of Chinese students are studying a postgraduate master’s program by coursework, many of them in business schools, which will be hardest hit.

The surprisingly smooth transition from on-campus to online teaching was made possible by huge investments in learning management systems and digitization of administrative services in recent years. While the take-up of some online systems in the past has been patchy, this crisis has forced the entire system to experiment with the new affordances of remote engagement, both for teaching and for institutional operations. Universities are planning to also deliver the second semester online, in order to serve new international students who will have to begin their studies offshore, and expecting that social isolation will continue in Australia for some time, although hopefully less intensely. ▲

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