

# The Dramatic Effects on Australian Higher Education of the Pandemic and the Uncertainty about Future Directions

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## Australian higher education prior to the pandemic

This short essay is a reflection on the effects of COVID-19 on Australian higher education. It is important to begin by briefly describing aspects of Australian higher education prior to the pandemic. Australian higher education was thriving in terms of the common measures of effectiveness. Australian universities were generally believed to be of high quality under the quality assurance oversight of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, TEQSA and they enjoyed a strong reputation in Asia. An international student industry had been built to the point where around one third of students enrolled in Australian higher education were international students, most studying onshore in Australia. Most of these students were ethnic Chinese, the majority were from the People's Republic of China.

There was much to be proud of. Australian universities had risen in the various international rankings schema, particular the Group of Eight research-intensive universities. Australian universities featured in the top 50 and top 100 of most reputable rankings schema. A ‘virtuous circle’ had been created in which international student revenue helped fund university research, this

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research helped lift universities' international rankings and, in turn, high international rankings attracted waves of international students to study in Australia. International students studying in Australia made a significant contribution to the Australian economy, through tuition fees and living expenses, with education being Australia's third largest export (after iron ore and coal, and excluding contributions to the economy from accommodation and living expenses while in Australia). Higher education was also believed to contribute significantly to Australia's standing and respect in the region and represented a form of soft diplomacy. Campuses were highly cosmopolitan in character and the major cities were enlivened and energised by their international student residents who were living in purpose-built student accommodation in the heart of the cities.

Australian higher education was certainly enjoying its moment in the sun. There were concerns, however, that Australian universities were over-reliant on international student fee revenue and especially over-reliant on students from the PRC. There were also other concerns expressed periodically that international and domestic students were not well-integrated on campus, that international students whose first language was not English weakened academic standards and that universities were overlooking the needs of domestic students in their pursuit of international revenue — the latter belief being somewhat ironic given that international fees were in effect subsidising the participation of domestic students for whom the government regulated tuition fee is below the cost of teaching delivery in a number of fields of study. There were also concerns that international students were being exploited while in Australia, including through some being driven to work in the 'black economy'. Some Australians viewed international higher education as a migration program in disguise.

With hindsight, a 'reset' was probably inevitable for international higher education in Australia, but no-one imagined how quickly this would take place. Prior to the pandemic, there was speculation that the most significant threat to international higher education lay in the political relationship between Australia with the PRC, should the relationship sour for any reason and student flow be restricted. The chances of this happening were perceived to be low, nonetheless Australian universities were seeking to diversify their international student recruitment, especially within India and South America. The PRC however remained such a ready and stable source of academically well-prepared, talented and hard-working students. The incentives to diversify were not strong when a single country of origin was so fertile.

## The pandemic and its short-term effects

With the onset of the pandemic near the beginning of the 2020 academic year, the Australian government moved quickly to close Australia's borders. International students became stranded — some were stranded off-shore and unable to get to Australia, some were effectively stranded in Australia and unable to return to their home countries, some became stranded while in transit to Australia. Domestic students became increasingly reluctant to travel interstate to attend university with growing concerns about the prospect of state border closures.

Universities were forced to move quickly to teach via 'dual delivery': that is, online for those students unable to attend campus and face-to-face for those students able to be on campus. As the crisis deepened, teaching and learning moved more towards fully online, though not in all Australian states for the border controls in some states made them nearly virus-free. Two Australian states, Victoria and New South Wales, had lengthy lockdown periods during which face-to-face teaching was banned by the state governments. In the universities previously less oriented towards online or distance delivery, there was a steep pedagogical and technological learning curve as staff pivoted their teaching materials and class formats to fully online delivery, including fully online assessment.

Understandably, the student experience suffered and student expectations were not always met. Commencing undergraduates were hard-hit, as were final year students who required completion of in-person practicums to qualify for professional registration. The national findings from student evaluation of teaching and their overall experience in 2020 are sobering, with a major downturn in students' rating of their university experience. The universities with the largest drop in satisfaction were those in the states with lockdowns, those with higher proportions of international students and those with higher proportions of school-leavers (who were clearly seeking a vibrant on-campus experience).

Some international students deferred or withdrew and new international enrolments were down markedly in 2021 given the uncertainty about when borders might re-open in Australia and Northern hemisphere nations moving more quickly to reopen for students. Looking to 2022, international demand remains down in Australia but so too does domestic demand for higher education — among other factors, it appears that students who have been frustrated with online senior schooling fear more of the same if they were to commence university studies in 2022. Whether these students will later contemplate

undertaking higher education is unclear.

Many international students rely on income from casual work while living and studying in Australia. This work is often in hospitality industries. With lockdowns, these employment opportunities collapsed, leaving many students without adequate financial support. Some universities provided significant financial aid and food packages for international students who were in financial stress.

Higher education was deeply politicised during the pandemic. The federal government introduced a Job-Keeper Payment Scheme to assist businesses significantly affected by the pandemic to retain and support their staff. Universities were deemed ineligible for the Job-Keeper scheme, a perplexing decision given the massive drop in university revenue and the subsequent redundancies and loss of jobs, especially for casual and fixed-term appointees. The unspoken logic behind the government decision, in simple terms, was that universities had exposed themselves to this risk and deeming them ineligible for Job-Keeper payments would apply an overdue corrective to the setting of university priorities and budgets.

The Australia government seized the opportunity to suggest that university reliance on international students was distracting universities from giving proper attention to domestic students and domestic economic priorities and labour markets, even going further to imply that universities were creating risks of foreign interference in Australia. The pandemic provided the opportunity for the federal government to usher in perceived reforms, some of which reflect a slight turning away from the internationalisation of higher education that had been hard won over decades and which previous governments had actively supported. What was once seen as a virtue of Australia's higher education system became perceived as a risk to be mitigated.

Overall, the economic effects on universities have been catastrophic and the job losses extensive. The campuses in the areas that had lengthy lockdowns have suffered a devastating loss of on-campus food and retail services with these businesses becoming unviable. This will take some time to restore once students and staff return to campus. The commercial student housing providers have suffered greatly too, with Melbourne in particular having had over 18 months of very low rates of occupancy.

But there is a glimmer of good news. Many universities have experienced an uplift in research output that is due, perhaps, to lockdowns limiting the previous opportunities for personal activities and thus focussing academics' minds on their research. As well, there may be possible efficiencies in working

from home, such as less travel time and fewer meetings. Many academics are commenting on how productive they have been during the pandemic.

## **What of the longer-term effects? What will be the ‘new normal’**

This essay thus far has sketched the history and the more obvious impacts on the pandemic, albeit imperfectly. But there are deeper effects too. While it remains too soon to predict the future shape and character of Australian higher education, it’s evident that a search for new meaning and relevance is underway in Australian universities.

### ***The economic recovery of Australian universities***

The full economic recovery of Australian universities will take many years. Fortunately, most universities went into the pandemic with healthy balance sheets. But the losses in revenue and the costs of redundancy programs are massive for many (but not all) universities. Future investment in building programs is extensively curtailed. Everywhere there is a predictable quest for efficiencies with the slashing of programs and in some cases curriculum and research areas. The motto often cynically attributed to management thinking of ‘never waste a crisis’ rings true in Australia.

### ***New notions of international education***

The pandemic has generated a rapid and unpredicted tipping point in attitudes towards international education and the robustness for the markets. The most obvious and unsurprising impact has been to trigger new debate on the reliance of the Australian higher education industry on international student revenue and the lack of diversity in Australia’s international student markets. International education will take a long time to recover in Australia and may not ever return to 2019 levels. Universities are having ‘size and shape’ deliberations as they attempt to plan or foresee the new ‘steady state’. Some universities are likely to shrink in size. Some universities are considering delivery programs in key Asian destinations, perhaps in collaboration with local providers, in an effort to ‘future proof’ their operations, offer less costly options for students and potentially develop more altruistic, nation-building stances for neighbouring countries.

### ***Modes of teaching and learning delivery***

The trend towards online learning has been accelerated by the forced adoption of online modes in 2020 and 2021 for many universities and the growing acceptance by both staff and students that online higher education is feasible and can be effective. Interestingly, some faculty have become ‘converts’ to online delivery, admittedly because this may offer convenience in their daily work patterns. Students are indicating that they want options: to attend classes in person or attend them by Zoom in real-time. Flexibility is a key expectation.

It appears to the case that many graduate programs having flipped to fully online will remain fully online or near fully online. These are important attitudinal trends. It must be said, however, that much of universities’ online pedagogies precipitated by the pandemic have been commonplace face-to-face teaching modalities crudely delivered by Zoom technology. What we don’t know yet, is whether more sophisticated, bespoke online teaching and learning methodologies will emerge at scale.

Faith in the value of the on-campus co-curriculum experience for undergraduate students has been very strong in Australia for a long time. It is likely that students will now spend less time on campus, raising questions about how universities might marry highly flexible teaching delivery with co-curriculum attractions to draw students to campus. We can expect to see innovation in teaching and learning delivery.

### ***The reform of the assessment of student learning***

Universities that were in full lockdown were faced with conducting end-of-semester examinations online if they were to provide students with the opportunity to progress in a timely fashion through their degrees. This was a somewhat troubling experience for academic and professional staff who were accustomed to large-scale, in-person, invigilated examinations — which of course have offered (relative) ease of student identity verification and limited possibilities for cheating. With the successful conduct of online assessment and much assessment innovation during the pandemic, it is possible, hopefully, that a return to campus for learning will not mean a return to as many time-limited, invigilated examinations. There is genuine potential for enduring reforms in the character of student learning, with benefits for all.

### ***The higher education workforce and the work patterns of staff***

The pandemic may affect the character of the academic workforce in a number of ways. First, there have been some unfortunate career effects for early career academic staff with labs being disrupted and conference attendance limited. Hopefully, time will mitigate these reduced opportunities. Second, the pandemic has re-focussed attention on the casualisation of the academic workforce, particularly in relation to teaching activities. We can expect to see serious efforts to reduce casual appointments and create more secure forms of employment.

In many industries in Australia where staff have been working from home during lockdowns there is evidence of a mood shift in relation to attending the workplace. Universities are experiencing these effects too for staff whose roles do not require in-person attendance. More flexible work conditions seem a natural development. Some faculty may now desire to teach from home by Zoom rather than attend campus and assume a right to do so. How personal decisions of this kind might be managed within an overall university teaching and learning strategy (and philosophy) remains to be seen.

## The dramatic effects on Australian higher education of the pandemic and the uncertainty about future directions

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### **Australian higher education was thriving prior to the pandemic**

- Many Australian universities featured in the top 50 and top 100 of the reputable rankings schema.
- A ‘virtuous circle’: international student revenue helped fund research, this research helped lift universities’ international rankings and, in turn, high international rankings attracted waves of international students.
- One third of students enrolled in Australian higher education were international students, most studying onshore in Australia. Most were ethnic Chinese, the majority were from the PRC.
- International students made a significant contribution to the Australian economy, through tuition fees and living expenses. Education was Australia’s third largest export.

- But there were concerns about over-reliance on international fee revenue and especially about over-reliance on students from the PRC.
- Concerns too that international and domestic students were not well-integrated on campus, that international students weakened academic standards and the needs of domestic students were being overlooked in the pursuit of revenue.
- Universities were seeking to diversify their international student recruitment, (eg. India and South America) but the PRC remained a ready source of academically well-prepared, talented and hard-working students.
- **With hindsight, a ‘reset’ was probably inevitable for international higher education in Australia**, but no-one predicted how quickly, and the manner through which, this would occur.

#### **The pandemic had obvious short-term effects ...**

- The Australian government moved quickly to close Australia's borders. International students became stranded — some were stranded off-shore and unable to get to Australia, some were effectively stranded in Australia and unable to return to their home countries, some stranded while in transit to Australia.
- Universities were forced to move quickly to teach via 'dual delivery': online for those students unable to attend campus and face-to-face for those able to be on campus.
- As the crisis deepened, teaching and learning moved more towards fully online. Two states, Victoria and New South Wales, had lengthy lockdown periods during which no face-to-face on-campus teaching was permitted.

- A steep pedagogical and technological learning curve as staff pivoted their teaching materials and class formats to fully online delivery, including fully online assessment.
- The student experience suffered and student expectations were not always met. The national findings from student evaluation of teaching and their overall experience in 2020 are sobering, with a major downturn in students' rating of their university experience.
- The universities with the largest drop in student satisfaction were:
  - \* those in the states with extended lockdowns;
  - \* those with higher proportions of international students;
  - \* those with higher proportions of school-leavers (who were clearly seeking, but not getting, a vibrant on-campus experience).

- Some international students deferred or withdrew and new international enrolments were down markedly in 2021 given the uncertainty about when borders might re-open in Australia and Northern hemisphere nations moving more quickly to reopen for students. Looking to 2022, international demand remains down in Australia **but so too is domestic demand for higher education.**
- Many international students rely on income from casual work while living and studying in Australia. With lockdowns, employment opportunities collapsed, leaving many students without adequate financial support. Some universities provided significant financial aid and food packages for international students who were in financial stress.

- Higher education was deeply politicised during the pandemic. The federal government introduced a Job-Keeper Payment Scheme to assist businesses significantly affected by the pandemic to retain and support their staff. Universities were **deemed ineligible** for the Job-Keeper scheme, a perplexing decision.
- The unspoken logic behind the government decision, in simple terms, was that universities had exposed themselves to this risk and deeming them ineligible for Job-Keeper payments would apply an overdue corrective to the setting of university priorities and budget setting.
- The pandemic provided the opportunity for the federal government to usher in perceived reforms, some of which reflect a slight turning away from the internationalisation of higher education that had been hard won over decades and which previous governments had actively supported.

- International higher education, once considered by many to be a virtue of Australia's higher education system, became perceived as a risk to be mitigated.
- Overall, the economic effects on universities have been catastrophic and the job losses extensive. Some campuses have had a devastating loss of on-campus food and retail services with these businesses becoming unviable. This will take some time to restore once students and staff return to campus.

**What of the longer-term effects? What will be the ‘new normal’?**

A search for new meaning and relevance is underway in Australian universities.

***1. The economic recovery of Australian universities***

- The full economic recovery of Australian universities will take many years.
- Future investment in building programs is extensively curtailed.
- There is a predictable quest for efficiencies with the slashing of programs and in some cases curriculum and research areas.

***2. New notions of international education***

- Renewed debate on the reliance of Australian HE industry on international student revenue and the lack of diversity in international student markets.
- International education will take a long time to recover in Australia and may not ever return to 2019 levels.
- Universities are having ‘size and shape’ discussions as they attempt to plan or foresee the new ‘steady state’. Some universities are likely to shrink in size.
- Some universities are considering delivering programs in key Asian destinations, perhaps in collaboration with local providers, in an effort to ‘future proof’ their operations, offer less costly options for students and potentially develop more altruistic, nation-building stances for neighbouring countries.

### ***3. Modes of teaching and learning delivery***

- The adoption of online learning has been accelerated by the forced adoption of online modes in 2020 and 2021 for many universities and the growing acceptance by both staff and students that online higher education is feasible and can be effective.
- Some faculty have become 'converts' to online delivery, admittedly because this may offer convenience in their daily work patterns.
- Students are indicating that they want options: to attend classes in person or attend them by Zoom in real-time. Flexibility is a key expectation.

- Many postgraduate programs having flipped to fully online will remain fully online or near fully online.
- Much of universities' online pedagogies precipitated by the pandemic have been commonplace face-to-face teaching modalities crudely delivered by Zoom technology. What we don't know yet, is whether more sophisticated, bespoke online teaching and learning methodologies will emerge at scale.
- Faith in the value of the on-campus co-curriculum experience for undergraduate students has been unsettled. Students will likely spend less time on campus, raising questions about how universities might marry highly flexible teaching delivery with co-curriculum 'attractions' that draw students to campus.

**5. The higher education workforce and the work patterns of staff**

New attention to the ‘casualisation’ of academic work, particularly in relation to teaching activities: we are seeing new efforts to reduce casual appointments and create more secure forms of employment.

In many industries where staff worked from home during lockdowns there are mood shifts in relation to willingness to attend the workplace.

**Universities are experiencing these effects, too, especially for staff whose roles do not require in-person attendance.**

More flexible work conditions seem a natural development. Some faculty may now desire to teach from home by Zoom rather than attend campus and assume a right to do so. How personal decisions of this kind will be managed within an overall university teaching and learning strategy is unclear.