

# **International Students and COVID-19: A timeline of social and wellbeing impacts in Melbourne's Inner East, 2020**

**Inner East International Students and  
Inclusion Partnership**

**Report prepared by Kate Jeffery  
February 2021**

## The year in summary

The following table presents the key events and actions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The impact of these events and actions on international students as identified by the IEPCP Partnership for International Student Inclusion is discussed in detail in the body of the report.

*The Inner East Primary Care Partnership wishes to acknowledge and thank our partners in the International Student Inclusion Partnership for their contributions to the Partnership and this Report, and Kate Jeffery, for her leadership. We acknowledge the support of the Victorian Government.*



*We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and other peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land on which our work in the community takes place. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.*

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# International Students and COVID-19: A timeline of social and wellbeing impacts in Melbourne's Inner East 2020



January	Coronavirus identified	New international students arriving in Australia	Public Health restrictions including event cancellations start in Victoria	Impact of coronavirus becoming apparent	Universities start to prepare responses	Existing students returning to Australia	
February	Enrolled students and newly commencing students from mainland China unable to travel to Australia			Public Health restrictions in Victoria increase	“Countries of concern” list increases		
March	Pandemic declared by WHO	International arrivals required to self-isolate for 14 days	State of Emergency declared in Victoria – 16th March	Bans imposed on Australians travelling overseas	Universities step up preparations for campus closures and remote learning	Many international students lose employment	International students excl'd from Fed Govt employment support benefits
April	International students told they “should return home if they are unable to support themselves” by the Prime Minister			Universities implement hardship packages	International students included in Work for Victoria jobs program	Victorian Government establishes International Student Emergency Relief Fund	
May	Community organisations, migrant peak bodies, Local Government and community members reach out to international students providing food, rental assistance, emotional and practical support						
June	Evidence of the significance of the damage to the higher education sector continues to emerge			Universities announce big deficits, deep funding cuts and staff redundancies	Reports of racism towards Chinese students in particular emerge		
July	Greater Melbourne enters a second lockdown	Plans for safe return to campus for second semester suspended		Federal Government announces changes to visas to support re-enrollment	COVID 19 case numbers in Greater Melbourne continue to rise		
August	Stage 4 lockdown implemented in Greater Melbourne				Closure of retail and inhouse dining in restaurants and cafes		
September	Roadmap for easing of restrictions in Victoria released		Stage 4 restrictions in Greater Melbourne extended to mid-October		Release of research findings detailing the impact of the pandemic on international students in Australia		
October	Lockdown restrictions in Greater Melbourne start to ease			Vic. Gov. announces expansion of the extreme hardship support program in partnership with the Red Cross and Brotherhood of St Laurence			
November	Restrictions in Greater Melbourne continue to ease	Travel between Greater Melbourne & regional Vic reinstated	Students continue to access support from food relief programs in high numbers	Employment opportunities start to re-emerge	Fatalist of five food delivery drivers in 3 months reported	Underage international students studying in secondary schools face the prospect of not returning home for the extended school break	
December	Restrictions continue to ease increasing opportunities for socialization and employment			Online learning continues for most tertiary students		Opportunities for the safe return of international students in 2021 being explored	

## Background

Monitoring of media reporting and the emerging evidence base was a key component of the Inner East Primary Care Partnership's *International Students' Inclusion Partnership* project during 2020. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges and stressors faced by international students adapting to life and study in Melbourne's Inner East catchment creating a crisis situation for some and poor mental health experiences.

This timeline is set out to provide a record of the emerging challenges for international students as the pandemic took hold. Responses by the university sector are also included - although this is incomplete - the higher education sector continued to adapt to Victorian Government COVID-19 restrictions and to provide support for international students as the year unfolded.

This paper is a companion to the IEPCP International Student Inclusion Partnership Project report.

## January 2020

The first of the students to face the challenges around COVID-19 were students from mainland China: newly arrived (commencing) students and returning students; in particular, those who had returned home for the Lunar New Year celebrations.

As the coronavirus began to spread internationally, Lunar New Year celebrations in China were cancelled. From 23 January, lockdowns began to be imposed, first in Wuhan, the epicentre of the virus, and other major cities in Hubei Province, which left students from the province unable to travel within China, or to return to Australia to continue their studies.<sup>1</sup> Students from Wuhan arriving after this date had mostly travelled to Australia from other parts of China.<sup>2</sup>

Media and social media reporting have highlighted the devastating impacts on residents of Wuhan and neighbouring cities of the coronavirus crisis during the lockdown.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters., "Coronavirus deaths, infections rise as Wuhan shuts down outbound travel", Sydney Morning Herald, 23 January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Webb, C & Sakkal, P, "Two dozen students arrive in Melbourne from Hubei, with five from Wuhan, in past week", The Age, 30 January 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Zhao, I, Walsh, M & Bang Xiao, "Coronavirus traps Wuhan residents in a real life horror movie as Chinese city locks down", ABC News, 24 January 2020.

Cunningham, M, "Life for the Australians trapped in Wuhan as coronavirus death toll rises", The Age, 28 January 2020.

ABC Four Corners program, Coronavirus, reported by Sean Nicholls and screened on Monday 24 February 2020, highlighted the harrowing circumstances of the lockdown for residents of Wuhan.

An advisory warning urging Australians to reconsider travel to China was subsequently issued by the Australian Government.<sup>4</sup>

On 29 January, the Australian Government announced plans to evacuate more than 600 Australian citizens and permanent residents in Wuhan. This did not include student visa holders.<sup>5</sup>

In Melbourne, social and economic impacts of COVID-19 were growing, with the cancellation in late January of Chinese New Year celebrations in Box Hill, in the Inner East catchment area, with organisers citing "cultural and commercial reasons and out of respect for the difficulties currently being experienced by many people".<sup>6</sup> There were also reports of a dramatic downturn in customers for local restaurants, cafes and other businesses in Box Hill, Glen Waverley and Doncaster, and also Chinatown in central Melbourne,<sup>7</sup> and growing reports of racism directed at people of Chinese or Asian background.<sup>8</sup>

The reasons for early impacts on business activity and cultural events in Melbourne were multilayered and complex. However, Chinese Australians and other community members with prior experience of the SARS epidemic in 2003 were aware of the risks that this novel coronavirus could present to Australia and local neighbourhoods, and began to stay away from public places.

The Victorian Government issued the first of alerts for the novel coronavirus on 24 January 2020, recommending that all patients presenting to health services with fever and respiratory symptoms should be asked about their travel history and whether they had had close contacts with anyone who had travelled to Wuhan, China in 14 days before they became unwell.

On 31 January, the Victorian Chief Health Officer (CHO), Professor Brett Sutton, advised that all people who had visited Hubei province should stay at home and avoid public settings until 14 days after leaving the province. Anyone who had been in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 was also advised to stay home until 14 days after their last contact.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bagshaw, E, "'Reconsider your need to travel': Australia issues warning on Wuhan", The Age, 23 January 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Roy, E.A, & Doherty, B, "Australian coronavirus evacuees to be quarantined on Christmas Island", The Guardian Australia, 29 January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, M, "Coronavirus alert for more than 170 passengers on Melbourne flight", 30 January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Cowie, T, "'Better to stay home': Customers desert Box Hill amid coronavirus fears", The Age, 3 February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Zhao, I, "Coronavirus has sparked racist attacks on Asians in Australia — including me", ABC News, 1 February 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Health, Victorian Government, 31 January 2020 (updated from 29 January after WHO declaration of public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020).

**University responses:** Monash University announced a delay of two weeks in the commencement of semester one and postponement of Orientation Week, to accommodate students who were delayed or unable to travel to Australia.<sup>10</sup> Monash also announced cancellation of exams scheduled for 3 February, affecting more than 4000 students,<sup>11</sup> and asked students returning from China not to use public spaces.<sup>12</sup> These events marked the widening impact of COVID-19 on domestic and international students in higher education institutions in Victoria.

## February 2020

Enrolled students and newly commencing students from across mainland China were unable to travel directly to Australia from 1 February, following the announcement by the Australian Government of a ban on entry to Australia for people who had left or transited through mainland China. This followed the declaration by the World Health Organisation of a global health emergency of international concern on 31 January.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese students who were in transit at the time of the announcement of the ban on travel from China reportedly had their visas cancelled by Border Force officials.<sup>14</sup>

Other students from mainland China opted for alternative pathways to travel to Australia to begin or resume their studies. After official advice that it was permissible, many Chinese international students chose to transit to a third country to wait out a 14 -day quarantine period before travelling to Australia. Students expressed anxiety about the expiration of their approved student visas if they did not return to Australia (which would impact on completion of courses), the disruption to their education, the status of fees they had already paid, and the impact on their capacity to apply for graduate working visas should they not be able to travel to Australia. Applications for these visas can only be made onshore, within Australia.<sup>15</sup> Students continued to arrive during February via third countries, including senior high school students, under further exemptions announced by the Federal

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<sup>10</sup> ABC News, "Monash University delays classes for Melbourne students due to coronavirus", ABC, 31 January 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Carey, A, "Monash Uni cancels 900 exams, disrupts 4000 students to counter virus", The Age, 30 January 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Webb, C & Sakkal, P, "Two dozen students arrive in Melbourne from Hubei, with five from Wuhan, in the past week", The Age, 30 January 2020.

<sup>13</sup> ABC News, "Australians told not to travel to mainland China due to coronavirus threat, border restrictions tightened considerably", ABC, 1 February 2020

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, J, "Chinese students arriving in Sydney reportedly detained after coronavirus travel ban", Guardian Australia, 4 February 2020

Fowler, M, "Visa response has damaged Australia's international reputation: students", The Age, 13 February 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Fang, J & Zhao, I, "Coronavirus ban sees students head for third countries to see out quarantine period", ABC News, 12 February 2020

Government.<sup>16</sup> Returning students also had commitments to landlords for payment for rental accommodation and to employers in their places of work.

Travel restrictions were imposed more widely in mainland China during February, further limiting the capacity for students to leave China. Flights were cancelled and travel to neighbouring countries became increasingly more difficult.

It was reported that there were more than 100,000 students, 56 percent of Australia's Chinese students, stranded "offshore". Federal Education Minister, Dan Tehan, assured students that the government was doing "everything we can" to ensure students can either study online or study remotely. The Government, he said, was keen to protect the reputation of Australia's higher education sector; that international education was "absolutely one of the key sectors when it comes to Australia's exports".<sup>17</sup>

**University responses:** From mid-January, universities had begun dealing with the challenge of supporting international students unable to return from China, reaching out to students stranded overseas to provide support and to establish capacity for online learning. Keeping students engaged with the university would allow students to continue to progress with their academic courses, with the hope also of eventually returning to Australia. This was not without challenges; while universities have well developed systems for remote learning, transitioning from face-to-face options to online learning can be complex, particularly for this cohort of students. Firewalls maintained by the Chinese Government prevented access to many platforms.<sup>18</sup> It was reported in the weeks that followed that the Chinese Government had agreed to remove these restrictions.<sup>19</sup>

Further Victorian public health restrictions became necessary. On 11 February, the Victorian CHO advised that all people who had been in mainland China (excluding Hong Kong SAR, Macau, and Taiwan) should "self-isolate if they were in mainland China on or after 1 February 2020, when the risk of human-to-human transmission across many provinces of mainland China was identified to have significantly increased". The CHO also advised that students and teachers who had travelled to mainland China should not attend school or university until 14 days after leaving mainland China.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Yang, S, Zhao, I & Brooks, S, "Students from China begin arriving in Australia after coronavirus quarantine time in third countries", ABC News, 24 February 2020

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, M, "Coronavirus travel ban sees Chinese students miss start of university, Australian tertiary sector scrambling", ABC News, 4 February 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Hope, Z & Sullivan, E, "Australia push to remove online firewalls for trapped Chinese students", The Age, 7 February 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Zhou, N, "China to relax its internet restrictions for 100,000 students hit by Australia's coronavirus travel ban", Guardian Australia, 13 February 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Health, Victorian Government, 11 February 2020 (updated 4 February 2020 alert).

With wider transmission beyond mainland China, on 25 February, the Victorian CHO broadened the list of countries of concern for risk of the coronavirus to include Iran, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand. Meanwhile, northern Italy was experiencing a growing crisis of coronavirus infections.<sup>21</sup> By this time, international students from Italy and other European countries were encountering problems flying to Australia, with flight cancellations and rising airfares. By 28 February 2020, concern about rising global numbers led the Australian Government to activate the country's emergency plan response for a pandemic.

## March 2020

March was a time of dramatic escalation of events, in Australia and globally, with fast rising numbers of infections and increasing urgency to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. A pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO), international borders were closing and local communities, dealing with growing anxiety and fear, were in lockdown.

As late as 9 March, universities were reported as not expecting to close campuses, although Monash University and others had put contingency plans in place in case this became necessary.<sup>22</sup> Just weeks later, campuses and schools in Victoria had closed, and Victorians were in Stage 3 lockdown. The economic shocks that followed were severe. International students returning to Australia to begin or continue their studies arrived to a situation of increasing uncertainty and rapid change.

The timeline of change was dramatic. By 10 March, all of Italy was in lockdown. On 11 March, WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic; warnings were being issued in Australia that severe restrictions were pending<sup>23</sup>. The Victorian Government indicated that mass school closures and industry shutdowns were 'inevitable'.<sup>24</sup> On 15 March, the Australian Government announced that anyone arriving from overseas would be forced to self-isolate for 14 days. Physical distancing was mandated, and large gatherings were banned, just a week after more than 86,000 fans had attended the Women's T20 World Cup final at the MCG.<sup>25</sup>

A State of Emergency was declared by the Victorian Government on 16 March.

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<sup>21</sup> Besser, L, "What's it like in Italy's coronavirus epicentre", ABC News, 26 February 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, J, "Coronavirus: Australian universities say campus closures unlikely", Times Higher Education, 9 March 2020

<sup>23</sup> Sadler, Ryan, B & Scott, S, "Coronavirus means mass gatherings and sport events are being cancelled. How much difference will it make?", ABC News, 13 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Doherty, B, "Coronavirus: mass school closures and industry shutdown on the cards, says Victoria's premier", Guardian Australia, 11 March 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Borys, S, "Coronavirus quarantine enforced for all people entering Australia, lockdowns on the table", ABC News, 15 March 2020.

On 17 March, the Australian Government placed a ban on Australians travelling abroad and by 20 March, Australian borders were closed to all non-citizens and non-residents. The rapid rate at which these changes occurred left many stranded.

On 22 March, the Victorian, ACT and NSW Governments announced they were proceeding with a more comprehensive shutdown of non-essential services over the next 48 hours. Victoria brought forward school holidays to allow for planning for remote learning.<sup>26</sup> This had immediate social and economic impacts, with closure of businesses and workplaces and sudden unemployment facing many sectors.

**Responses by the universities to the pandemic:** Universities stepped up their preparations for campus closures and remote learning.<sup>27</sup> On 16 March, Monash and Swinburne universities informed their students that all classes were transitioning to online learning.<sup>28</sup> Swinburne, for example, paused all on-campus coursework teaching, including lectures, teaching labs and tutorials, from Tuesday 17 March to Friday 20 March, with online delivery commencing from 23 March.

**Impacts on international students:** Students were expressing growing concerns and anxiety about the changed environment that they were facing, including fears of contracting the coronavirus, the need for up to date information and adjusting to online learning.<sup>29</sup> International students newly arrived to commence studies at the universities faced significant challenges as the pandemic escalated. Those who came after navigating the travel restrictions had arrived at the time when the university campuses were shutting down and moving to online teaching. This included some students who had travelled to a third country for 14 days in mandatory isolation before coming to Australia. For some students this meant was just three days orientation on campus before transition. Monash University Manager for International Student Engagement, Param Arputhanathan, highlighted the nature of social isolation for newly arrived students: “they may not know anyone, they probably do not know their neighbours, they may not have even had the opportunity to explore their neighbourhood. Some students in shared housing may not even know their housemates or know them very well”. While those with good internet connections could keep in contact with family and friends back home, not all had students had good internet connections, which added to their sense of isolation in a new country.

With the forced transition to remote learning, the world for new students was reduced to a screen, connecting into the university online to see what is happening, without the wider

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<sup>26</sup> Greene, A, "NSW, Victoria and ACT jump the gun on PM's indoor venue crackdown with early state-wide shutdowns", ABC News, 22 March 2020.

<sup>27</sup> McGowan, M & Knaus, C, "Australian schools and universities preparing for shutdowns over coronavirus", Guardian Australia, 13 March 2020.

<sup>28</sup> AAP, "Wave of schools and universities shut as Victorian coronavirus cases surge overnight", Seven News, 17 March 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke, B, "Australia's international students are anxious about experiencing COVID-19 away from home", SBS News, 23 March 2020.

context of familiarity with the university, the campus and other students, academic teaching styles, and face to face meetings with lecturers and tutors. In normal circumstances, newly arrived students would have had the opportunity to get to know the university, their local neighbourhood and Melbourne more generally. There would have been orientation activities, which would have allowed new students to have the opportunity to meet other students, develop friendships and to join clubs and societies. This was now transitioning to virtual form.

The impacts on new students also included the lack of opportunity to strengthen English language skills through interaction with other international students and domestic students, and the wider community. Students living on campus in university residences have had personal and practical support of campus staff to help them through transition to online learning and access to basic needs. For example, soup kitchens have been provided by Monash Sports staff to students living on campus. For students living out in the community, the situation is more complicated.

**Responses by the universities:** Monash University had responded to the risk of new students abandoning their courses by having staff contacting each new student to follow up and check how they were coping. Some students felt compelled to return home whilst able due to their changed situation, but for others, the contact with staff was critical to keeping new students engaged with their courses and giving them someone they could contact for support. Swinburne and Deakin also consistently and proactively reached out to their students. At Deakin, this was through the international student advisors as well as individual staff members. Swinburne's Peer to Peer mentoring and study groups have also ensured ongoing contact to break down social isolation and maintain engagement. Key orientation events, including the Swinburne World Kitchen had to be postponed.

Universities also provided technical support to help alleviate the problems students were facing with internet access. The capacity to connect into online learning was problematic for some, with uneven access to internet connection and changes in the way in which courses are delivered.

### **Loss of employment**

Students returning to Australia to resume their studies faced additional challenges. For many, the main issue was loss of part time employment. First year students will have guaranteed family financial support, in accordance with the requirements of the student visa. Continuing students frequently rely on income from casual employment to supplement their living costs. The financial hardship from loss of employment was compounded by their exclusion from Federal Government income support.

On 13 March, the Federal Government had announced that casual workers would be eligible for a payment of about \$280 per week Sickness Allowance if they could not go to work or had to self-isolate. This did not apply to international students or other temporary migrants

with work rights.<sup>30</sup> International students who were casual workers and contracted COVID-19 or had to self-isolate were also excluded from NewStart (rebranded as JobSeeker) welfare payments while out of work.<sup>31</sup>

The JobKeeper wage subsidy program announced by the Federal Government on 30 March to keep employees who had been stood down connected to their place of employment explicitly left out Australia's temporary migrant worker population, including the estimated 570,000 international students in the country. Their exclusion was widely reported and contested. The Government's position met significant opposition, from political parties, the union movement, peak migrant organisations, and community-based organisations.

*"I would argue temporary visa holders need to get some sort of support if they are stuck in Australia and they can't go home and can't find work. People cannot be left with nothing, no income to survive. People also need to be supported as a public health issue."*

Peter Mares, lead moderator Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership and adjunct fellow at Swinburne University of Technology<sup>32</sup>

*"Permanent residents and citizens are being protected, but international students who are providing frontline help, carrying out voluntary work are not being protected in any way whatsoever".* Former Melbourne University international student<sup>33</sup>

Mass closures of workplaces, retail, hospitality, and entertainment venues resulted in widespread loss of employment for international students. The loss of casual employment left many who relied employment on to supplement themselves and their family financially, without adequate or any source of income. Restrictions on the number of hours international students could work were temporarily changed and expanded, but only for those working at supermarkets and as health workers.

Students studying for medical, nursing, and allied health professions were then invited to join the Victorian health workforce to help combat COVID-19. Other states followed Victoria's lead.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bonyhady, N, "Many casuals to lose hundreds from coronavirus isolation measures", Sydney Morning Herald, 14 March 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Worthington, B, "Billions of dollars pumped into coronavirus-hit economy in bid to stave off recession, Scott Morrison announces", ABC News, 12 March 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Doherty, B, Taylor, J & Karp, P, "'Left with nothing': Australia's migrant workforce face destitution without coronavirus safety net", Guardian Australia, 1 April 2020.

Martin, P, "Coronavirus welfare payments to begin but fears grow for international students and those on work visas", ABC News, 24 March 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Arora, A, " 'We also need financial aid': international students seek government help as COVID-19 spreads", SBS Punjabi, 17 March 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Truu, M, "International medical students eager to join new plan to bolster coronavirus health workforce in NSW", SBS Australia, 1 April 2020.

Without a financial safety net for many, stories of hardship began emerging.<sup>35 36</sup>

*"It's just very scary because you don't have a support system. It's a roller coaster that everyone is going through- you feel very isolated".*

Student from Oman on the emotional toll of losing work and being so far from family in home countries.

*"Of course our parents are there to help us out, but how long should we take money from them? How do we pay those bills? How do we pay the rent?"* Swinburne Master's student from India challenging the perception that students should rely on their parents to bankroll their living and study expenses. He had lost his job in door-to-door marketing.

*"I'm just like, really scared right now. If I don't pay my school, they can tell the government and then I guess they can kick me out".*

Brazilian student in Melbourne who lost his job as a barman reported his fears of being unable to afford his weekly rent and his tuition at a training college. He pointed out that family in Brazil were also struggling financially due to the impacts of the coronavirus and were not well placed to help him.

*"We are very worried. We are stuck, we cannot leave Australia and do not have the money to survive here. We come here and pay student fees and taxes, so I think the government should give us a little help".*

Student from Columbia. Students are struggling to buy food, she said. Students are relying on food from restaurants; she and others were also struggling to pay rent.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Stayner, T, " 'You feel very isolated': International students warn of livelihoods at risk without welfare safety net", SBS News, 25 March 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Barro, C, "Coronavirus leaves international students stranded, cashless and needing a lifeline", The New Daily, 25 March 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Patty, A, "Foreign workers falling through the cracks". Sunday Age, 29 March 2020.

## April 2020

As calls to include international students and other temporary migrants in Federal Government subsidies gained momentum<sup>38</sup>, the response from Prime Minister Scott Morrison was blunt: **"it's time to go home."**

**"If they're not in a position to be able to support themselves, then there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries."**

The Prime Minister added: "... all students who come to Australia in their first year have to give a warranty that they are able to support themselves for the first 12 months of their study. That is a requirement of their visa when they come for that first year so that is not an unreasonable expectation of the government that students would be able to fulfil the commitment that they gave."<sup>39</sup>

However, the requirement to have sources of income to be independent applied only to first year international students, and not to the vast majority of the international student population. Many students are enrolled in university degrees of three or four years in length and are eligible to enrol in secondary degrees once completed. Under the student visa rules, international students can work to supplement their living costs.

The Council of International Students Australia (CISA) said that the Prime Minister had left many students with "no hope". "Due to lockdown enforcement in many countries, lots of international students are not able to (return home) at the moment, leaving them struggling every day. (The) Government is forgetting to consider... (that) their lives are here, education and (concerns) if their visas will get extended." They also pointed out that there were consequences for the future of Australia's international education sector: "...why should international students consider coming here when the present students are treated this way?" They also criticised the transactional nature of the Prime Minister's comments. "It's disappointing to see international students being disregarded. There is a lot beyond monetary matters that needs to be considered and addressed which should not be shrugged away".<sup>40</sup>

*"... the remarks made (by the PM) are very discouraging for all students who are struggling daily and were hoping for some support from the government"* Council of International Students Australia (CISA).

*"It's hurtful, divisive and does nothing to help stranded students...."* National Union of Students (NUSA)

<sup>38</sup> Parajuli, A, "Universities step up to help international student affected by COVID-19 amid calls for federal help", SBS Nepali, 2 April 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Burgess, K, "Coronavirus: International students should go home if they can't support themselves: PM", Canberra Times, 4 April 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Gibson, J & Moran, A, "As coronavirus spreads, 'it's time to go home' Scott Morrison tells visitors and international students", ABC News, 3 April 2020.

*"It's not that easy 'to just go home'.... what he's said worries me a lot and brings a lot of uncertainty to my future, to study in Australia isn't exactly cheap- and it would be such a loss of money. Is he going to refund every single student who hasn't completed their course?"*  
International student from England<sup>41</sup>

*"International students contribute a lot to the Australian economy. For example, we pay very high tuition fees for the university. So during this critical time, international students should get support from the government."*  
Olena Nguyen, Australian Federation of International Students<sup>42</sup>

The International Education Association of Australia highlighted the contribution international students make to the Australian economy and to the higher education sector, stressing that it needed to be a 'two-way street'. "We can't take \$39 billion a year off students and not expect to give something back in an unprecedented crisis such as this. Not only do they pay expensive tuition fees and rent and spend on food and entertainment, but we are also happy to use them as cannon fodder for many low skilled and part time jobs that many Australians have resisted doing in the past". Universities Australia also urged the government to extend support.<sup>43</sup>

Ben Doherty writing for the Guardian Australia pointed out that the exclusion of international students and other temporary migrant workers from Federal Government support belied the PM's claim that "we are all in this together", arguing that there are humanitarian and moral imperatives for taking a broader view of who is 'Australian' during this extraordinary time.

"Australia has a moral obligation to the people it has invited to be part of this society. It is not reasonable to welcome people to the country in times of plenty and prosperity only to banish them when things become difficult.... If it is true that "we are all in this together", everyone here must be "we"<sup>44</sup>.

There was also a clear public health imperative to not leave anyone out during a pandemic, exposing both the students and the wider community to higher risks of transmission and vulnerability. These concerns were widely shared by the Migrant Council of Australia, the Migrant Worker Centre, and the Victorian Multicultural Commission, among others.

**Responses by universities:** the higher education sector stepped up support for their students. Hardship support packages for students were immediately offered by each of the

<sup>41</sup> Chewon, S, " 'It's not that easy to just go home' Int'l student said in response to PM Scott Morrison's comments", Meld Magazine, 8 April 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Truu, M, "Peak body says Australia's international education system must be a 'two-way street'", SBS News, 3 April 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Millar, R & Schneiders, B, " Plea to help foreign students sacked due to pandemic", The Age, 4 April 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Doherty, B, "Australia's coronavirus relief exclusions prove we are not all in this together", Guardian Australia, 23 April 2020.

universities in the Inner East. At **Swinburne**, philanthropic partners and staff contributed over \$650,000 to the Swinburne Student Emergency Fund, to provide one-off grants of up to \$1,000 to international students experiencing financial hardship during the coronavirus pandemic. This was quickly oversubscribed. Swinburne has ultimately made more than \$5million available to the Student Emergency Fund. Additional practical support was also provided including accommodation support, health and wellbeing, food programs, extensions for fees and census date deadlines, and IT support for remote study (free laptop loans, access to free software and apps).<sup>45</sup>

**Deakin University** announced a \$25million hardship fund for international students impacted by COVID-19, in addition to targeted support including individual case management for international students.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, **Monash University** launched a Student Compassionate and Hardship Package of up to \$15million, comprised of an emergency grants scheme of up to \$500 for students in immediate need; payments of up to \$7,000 for students in Australia who were experiencing financial hardship and payments of up to \$5,000 for students who had incurred reasonable costs due to the original inbound travel bans in China, Iran and Australia. As with Deakin and Swinburne, Monash also offered students comprehensive practical support for their emotional wellbeing and capacity to study off campus. The initial \$15million allocated to emergency relief was doubled to \$30million in May.

Universities and higher education institutions across Australia had collectively committed more than \$110 million to hardship support funds for their international students by April 2020. This, the sector argued, should be complemented by a national hardship fund. "...it should be a whole of community humanitarian aid package. This should not just be providers but also governments and philanthropic foundations" (CEO International Education Association of Australia).<sup>47</sup> Monash University Vice Chancellor, Margaret Gardner urged the Federal Government 'to step up': "In a global crisis, when people across the world find themselves in economic strife they could not begin to expect, compassion and active assistance is the answer – not slamming the door in their face."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Swinburne Media, "Swinburne committed to supporting vulnerable students through COVID-19", Swinburne University of Technology, 6 May 2020. The Swinburne Student Emergency Fund is for both international and domestic students who are experiencing significant hardship.

<sup>46</sup> Deakin University, "Deakin announces up to \$25 million in hardship support for international students", Media release, Deakin University, 9 April 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, F, "Universities spend \$110 million to support international students", The Age, 12 April 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Ross, J, "Time to go home, Australian PM tells foreign students", The Times Higher Education online, 3 April 2020.

Adverse comparisons were drawn with targeted national government support for international students in comparable countries, including New Zealand, Ireland, Canada and the UK.<sup>49</sup>

**Victorian Government Response:** international students were specifically included in the \$500 million Work for Victoria jobs program and other programs such as rent relief. In late April, the Victorian Government announced a \$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund, which would provide up to \$1,100 each for students who had lost income due to COVID-19. The relief fund, to be administered by Study Melbourne, would complement, and extend hardship programs offered by the universities, TAFES and other higher education providers.<sup>50</sup> However, this emergency relief funding did not become available until mid-May.<sup>51</sup>

IEPCP project partners at the universities reported positive feedback from international students that this State Government support was available, even from individual students who did not need hardship relief.



The queue for emergency food relief at a Southbank charity in Melbourne. *Credit: Penny Stephens* Published in The Age, 28 April 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Millar, R & Schneiders, B, "Australia gets a poor score on international students", The Age, 29 April 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Carey, A, "Struggling international students to get state government lifeline", The Age, 28 April 2020  
Victorian Government, "Emergency support for Victoria's international students", Media release, 29 April 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Dexter, R, "Victorian international students still waiting for crisis support", The Age, 17 May 2020.

## May 2020

The increasingly dire circumstances of many international students was becoming apparent. Community-based organisations, migrant peak bodies, mainstream health services, local councils, and community members proactively reached out to support international students, providing food, assisting with rent, and providing emotional and other practical support. Despite national bans on evictions, international students were reporting notices to vacate from landlords.<sup>52</sup> **Foodbank Australia** reported record demand for food, with temporary visa holders and international students being most need.

*"There's an unprecedented spike in demand for food relief. It's confronting. People have had such an economic shock.... they are really struggling at the moment and looking for the most basic of human needs, food and groceries."*<sup>53</sup>

*"We had a group of students present to one of our food banks on the weekend who hadn't eaten for a week. We are seeing right now across the country is an extreme impact on that cohort of university and college students. We are very, very concerned about their welfare at the moment."*<sup>54</sup> Brianna Casey, CEO, Foodbank Australia



[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[Pinterest](#) Volunteers from a Sikh temple in Melbourne prepare food deliveries. Photograph: Tracey Shelton/AFP via Getty Images. Published in Guardian Australia 15 May 2020.

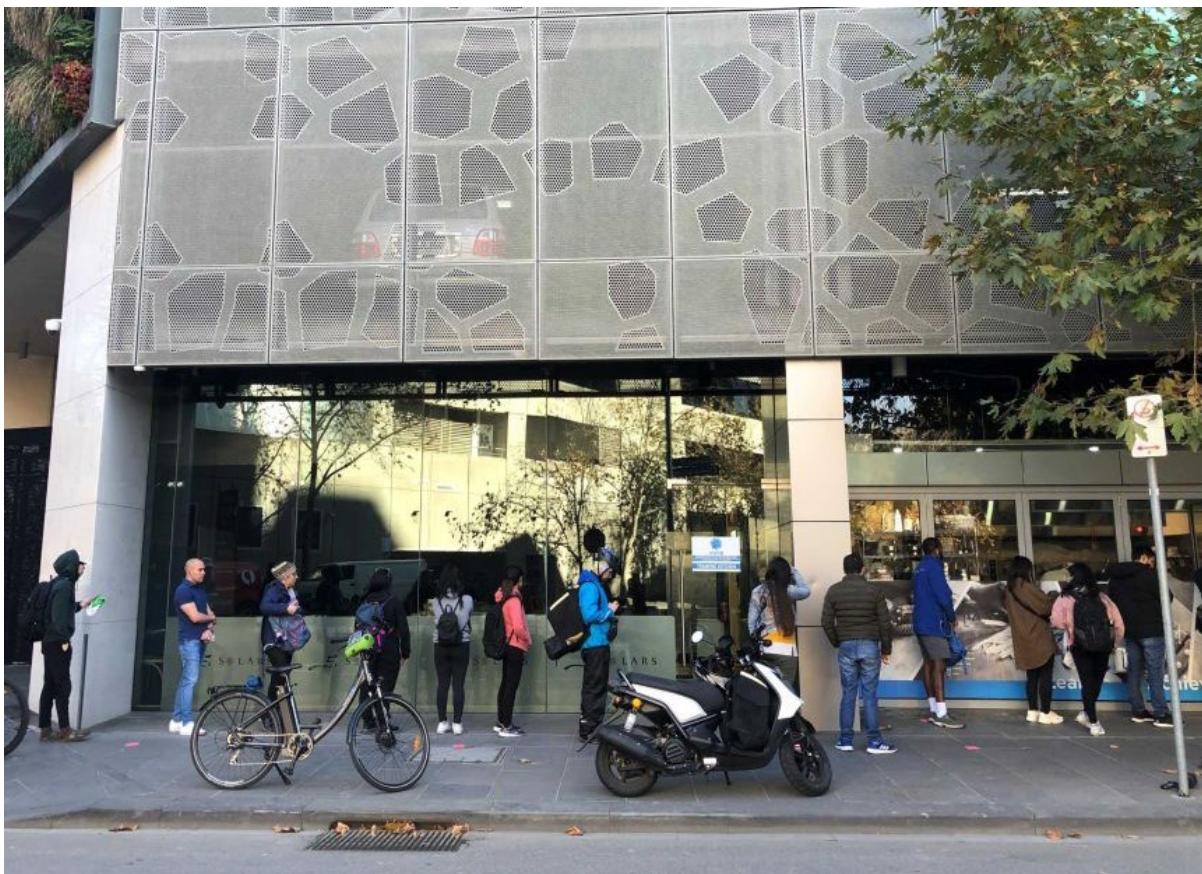
<sup>52</sup> Kinsella, E, "International students in hardship due to coronavirus a 'looming humanitarian crisis', advocates say", ABC News, 17 May 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Schneiders, B & Millar, R, "Emergency food aid skyrockets", Sunday Age, 3 May 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Henriques-Gomes, L, "Stranded without support, international students across Australia rely on free food to survive", Guardian Australia, 15 May 2020.



Friends of Nepal Association give a helping hand. Published in The Sunday Age 3 May 2020.



International students wait to collect free meals from the Melbourne City Institute of Education's kitchen at Southbank. (ABC News: Michael Gleeson) Published online 17 May 2020.

**Melbourne City Council's *Our Shout*** \$200 food voucher program for vulnerable international students to buy food at the Queen Victoria Market was oversubscribed, with 17,000 applications in 36 hours. The scheme was originally targeted for 1,000 students.



International students line up for the Our Shout food voucher scheme outside the Melbourne Town Hall on Monday. Source: Getty Images AsiaPac. Published by SBS New 3 June 2020.



Nepalese international student Sajar Limbu at Melbourne Town Hall on Thursday with some of the vouchers. Credit: Penny Stephens. Published in The Age 28 May 2020.



Silvia from Gazza's Gourmet Seafood at Queen Victoria Market accepts a food voucher from Ms Wendy Huang, international student at Monash University. Credit: Paul Jeffers. Published in The Age 17 May 2020.

*"Emotionally, it's just very heart-warming to receive the support, because so far, to be honest, I'm quite disheartened by the federal government's response.... not all international students come from an affluent background. Many of us come here with a lot of hope and a lot of dreams, and in order to fulfil our dreams we have sometimes even borrowed money or had to try really hard to support ourselves."* Wendy Huang, Master of Social Work student at Monash University

*"[Morrison] essentially said 'you're not welcome in this country any more. We're very happy to take your money. We're very happy for you to participate in our economy, to do the work that generally people don't want to do ... to be our mail delivery people, to be our food delivery people, to be the ones who come and serve our citizens hand and foot. But apart from that, now that we're all in this crisis, you guys can all go and – excuse my language – but you can all go and bugger off.' "*

David Bogi, Master of International Journalism student from India.<sup>55</sup>

Families and communities in home countries are often in debt, borrowing to support international students studying in Australia. They are not able to provide help with the coronavirus impacting their own communities and family income (Bwe Thay, Migrant Program Coordinator, Swinburne University)

<sup>55</sup> Alcorn, G, " A huge hit': foreign students may shun Australia after their treatment during COVID-19 crisis", Guardian Australia, 14 May 2020.

Melbourne City Council funding was matched by the Victorian Government, with universities also contributing, to enable all applications to be honoured.<sup>56</sup> But not all students could be easily reached, and grave concerns were expressed about those who had disengaged and lost connection with their educational institution.

**Mental health support was becoming increasingly urgent**, with the pandemic compounding the emotional challenges unique to international students.<sup>57</sup> This was a consistent message also from IEPCP health partners and other stakeholders in the International Student Inclusion Partnership Project who were meeting monthly.

**Universities:** By mid-May, inability to return to Australia from international students stranded offshore was increasingly raised as an issue. ABS released data showed that Australia had experienced a significant fall in numbers of international students arriving in Australia in March (see tables below).

Overall, 18 percent of student visa holders remained offshore as of the end of March. Almost 68,000 students from mainland China had not been able to return. Some 7,000 students from India had not been able to travel.

The Morrison Government indicated that consideration was being given to lifting border restrictions to allow overseas students to come to Australia for second semester.<sup>58</sup>

Universities were also canvassing options for returning students to resume their studies in Australia and for new students who had delayed their enrolments to finally arrive. While student welfare was the major consideration, the loss of income from international education was directly impacting on the viability of the university sector itself, with research and staff employment at risk.

No public university had qualified for JobKeeper under Federal Government guidelines.<sup>59</sup> Changes to the JobKeeper eligibility criteria in early May excluded public universities from benefiting from the scheme.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Lucas, C & Miller, R, "High demand forces Capp to cap plan to hand food vouchers to students", The Age

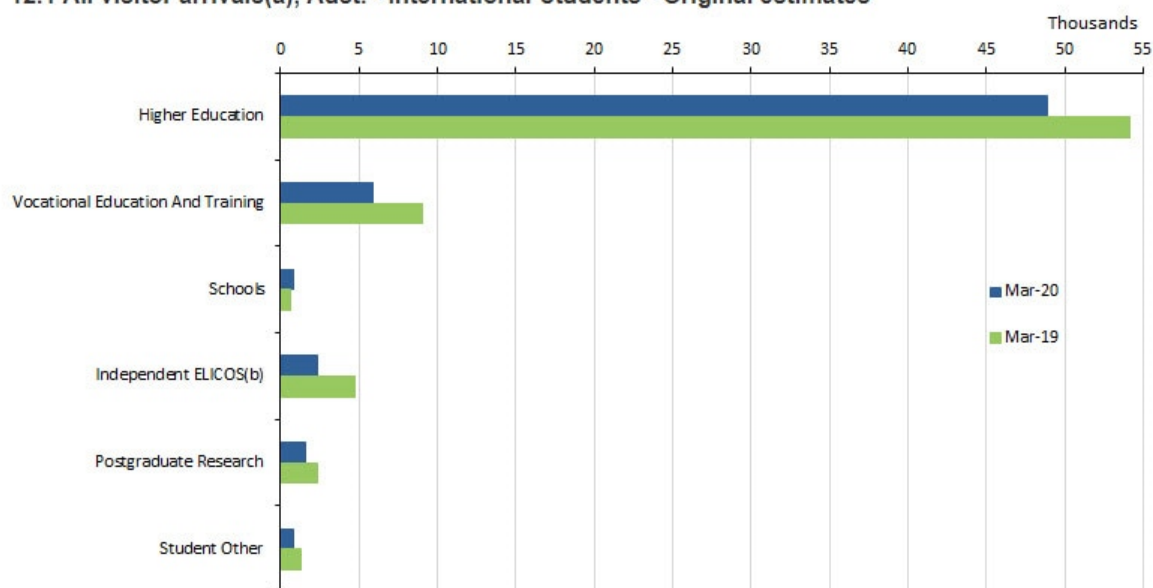
<sup>57</sup> Soong, H & Procter, N, "COVID-19 increases risk to international students' mental health. Australia urgently needs to step up", The Conversation, 4 May 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Acharya, M, "Australia records a significant drop in arrival of international students due to COVID-19", SBS Hindi, 11 May 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Mannix, L & Hunter, F, "Universities urged to bring back international students as researchers face huge job losses", The Age, 20 May 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Karp, P. "Australian universities angry at 'final twist of the knife' excluding them from jobkeeper", Guardian Australia, 4 May 2020.

### 12.1 All visitor arrivals(a), Aust. - International Students - Original estimates



(a) Includes short-term (less than 1 year) and long-term (1 year or more) visitor arrivals.

(b) English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Published by SBS Hindi 11 May 2020.

**Table 2: Country of citizenship of student visa holders on 29 March 2020**

Top 10 countries	In Australia	Outside Australia	Grand Total	% Outside
China	109,523	67,919	177,442	38%
India	105,514	6,974	112,488	6%
Nepal	56,186	1,761	57,947	3%
Vietnam	21,221	3,213	24,434	13%
Brazil	20,161	2,959	23,120	13%
Malaysia	18,658	1,843	20,501	9%
Colombia	18,281	2,136	20,417	10%
Indonesia	16,900	1,820	18,720	10%
Korea, South	16,557	1,937	18,494	10%
Philippines	17,345	1,131	18,476	6%
Others	168,259	33,740	201,999	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>568,605</b>	<b>125,433</b>	<b>694,038</b>	<b>18%</b>

Department of Home Affairs. Published by SBS Hindi 11 May 2020.

International students were also voicing their concerns about the implications for their studies and future career trajectories if they were unable to return for semester two.

*"I don't feel engaged, I feel more comfortable studying on campus.... I think I will defer for a semester if this travel ban continues."*

Student from Shanghai unable to return to Melbourne for her studies.

*"I had everything planned out for when I was meant to go back and I don't know when I'm going to get a job- the job market is really, really bad and it was already hard enough for international students".*

Law student from China, who also expressed the frustrations of trying to work across time zones for online studies.<sup>61</sup>

## June 2020

The **damage to the higher education sector of COVID-19 continued to emerge as a crisis in Victoria**. It was reported the universities were 'reeling' from the loss of international students due to the pandemic. Swinburne announced a likely deficit of \$150 million over the next three years, and that that deep staff cuts were pending. This followed announcements by Deakin University that 400 staff positions would be made redundant, while Monash University reported a \$350 million shortfall in 2020, with worse predicted to come in 2021. Monash has been identified as one of three vulnerable universities in Victoria due to numbers of international students.<sup>62</sup> Deakin University reported losses of between \$250 million and \$300 million in 2021.

*"As a result of COVID-19, Monash has faced its largest annual reductions in revenue in the university's history, and it is likely that next year will be worse."*

Margaret Gardner, Monash Vice-chancellor

*"There is a possibility that involuntary redundancies may be required in coming months to meet the changing environment we are now facing, including significantly reduced student numbers and less capital investment."*

Professor Linda Kristjansosn, Swinburne vice-chancellor

Collectively, it was estimated by Universities Australia that Australian universities could lose \$16 billion in revenue over the next four years as travel restrictions make life difficult for international students.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Farhart, C, "International students rethinking plans to study in Australia if not allowed to return by second semester", SBS News, 22 May 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Carey, A & Heffernan, M, "Swinburne staff warned of job cuts as universities' COVID-19 woes grow", The Age, 3 June 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Houghton, N & Hall, A, "Universities could lose \$16 billion with international students locked out by coronavirus", SBS News, 4 June 2020.

The wider losses to the Australian economy had been earlier calculated by the Mitchell Institute to be in the range of \$30-\$60 billion due to the loss of each six-monthly intake of international students. It was argued that this could equate to the hit to the economy of the same scale as when Australia lost its entire car manufacturing industry.<sup>64</sup>

Domestic students were also expected to lose out in these circumstances, with cutbacks to staffing and resources, course availability, and potentially higher costs of education to follow. Income from international education has subsidised the entire operations of the universities, a point often overlooked. Wider impacts on Australian society were also highlighted, with funding cuts likely to adversely affect Australia's research capacity. The Australian university sector has been increasingly reliant on fees from foreign students to fund research and development, unlike other countries where tuition fees largely covered teaching costs, according to Australian National University vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt.<sup>65</sup>

Deteriorating relations between Australia and China led to an explicit warning from China's Ministry of Education that students should reconsider plans to travel to Australia because of 'incidents of discrimination' targeting people of Asian descent.<sup>66</sup> While many Chinese international students defended Australia as a safe destination for students,<sup>67</sup> rising incidents of racism and discrimination during the pandemic had been widely reported. A survey by the Asian Australian Alliance in April reported 12 incidents a day in the first two weeks of April.<sup>68</sup> IEPCP Partner organisations also highlighted the expressed fears of international students about being singled out during this time. Racism is a longstanding challenge faced by international students in Australia.<sup>69</sup>

International students interviewed by ANU honorary lecturer, Angela Lehman, confirmed their concerns about racism, and identified three things they believed Australia needed to focus on to better support international students in the recovery phase:

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<sup>64</sup> Carey, A, Hunter, F & Heffernan, M, "Loss of international students set to blow \$30b-\$60 b hole in economy", The Age, 17 April 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Carey, A, Prytz, A & Heffernan, M, "Bursting the foreign student bubble set to hobble Australian research", The Age, 5 June 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Kuo, L & Murphy, K, "China warns students to reconsider travel to Australia for study", Guardian Australia, 5 June 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Xiao, B & Yang, S, "Chinese international students defend Australia as a 'safe' educational destination", ABC News, 10 June 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Zhou, N, "Survey of COVID-19 racism against Asian Australians records 178 incidents in two weeks", Guardian Australia, 17 April 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Tian Yang, " We don't need China to tell us Australian racism exists – just ask international students", Guardian Australia, 15 June 2020.

**Australia must be more welcoming.** Students commented that the Prime Minister's statement that they should 'go home' had made them feel unwelcome.

Comments by Labor Senator Kristina Keneally calling for a reset to Australia's immigration program and priority to 'Australians first' was also mentioned as contributing to what they saw as rising anti-foreigner sentiment. Students reported discrimination in employment during this time.

**International students are integrated into Australian society:** students were looking to be active contributors integrated into local communities as part of the experience of living here. This is already happening, with students volunteering and being tourists. They are also represented as frontline workers in high-risk environments, for example, as health care workers during this pandemic. Eastern Volunteers, an IEPCP partner to this project, has recruited significant numbers of international students during Covid-19 to assist with outreach to vulnerable communities. There is a strong desire and willingness to feel included and connected to Australian society.

**The government needs to signal its support through clear policy.** International students would like acknowledgement of the contribution they make to Australia by Australian leaders; that Australia recognises the importance of international students, and they are a welcome and supported part of the Australian community. Government support for the welfare of international students was regarded by the students as important. Inflexibility around temporary graduate visas during this crisis was cited as evidence of a lack of value for international students and drew adverse comparisons with what other countries were doing to protect their foreign students at this time.<sup>70</sup>

*"Definitely, there is a growing anti-immigrant sentiment here. The talk from people in the Australian government that we should be "getting our jobs back for Australians" is constructed in a way to inherently disadvantage people like me, or immigrants. Because it is government policy it will infiltrate across the country and it's hard to tackle that on an individual level."<sup>71</sup>*

**Universities:** As numbers of active COVID-19 cases decreased in Australia in May and early June, and restrictions eased in Victoria, campus services were gradually reopening. Students could access university sports facilities and gather in small groups, observing social distancing.

Universities were progressing with arrangements for Semester 2, scheduled to begin in the first week of August, including planning orientation activities for current and new students.

Plans were also being actively considered for the safe return of international students, subject to community safety needs.

<sup>70</sup> Lehmann, A, "'I love Australia': 3 things international students want Australians to know", The Conversation, 12 June 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Lehman, 12 June 2020.

Research by Victoria University's Mitchell Institute highlighted how entwined international students were with local economies, due to concentrations in select suburbs. This study shows that impacts from the loss of international students' enrolments extends beyond the universities themselves, negatively affecting local businesses and communities. Student residential addresses were clustered in suburbs close to the main higher education campuses, for example, Clayton (in the City of Monash) for Monash University, and Burwood (covering the City of Monash and City of Whitehorse) for Deakin University. Affordable housing and good public transport links also allow students to live in suburbs well beyond university campuses, which spreads the impact of loss of spending on retail, entertainment, and housing.

The Mitchell Institute calculated that with over 120,000 student visa holders still outside Australia, this translated into 13,000 fewer people living in inner Melbourne, for example. The travel bans also prevent new students replacing those who have completed their studies; for every six months international students cannot enrol in courses, the study showed, between 110,000 and 140,000 international students will not commence their courses.<sup>72</sup>

A pilot scheme involving a chartered flight to bring stranded students from China was approved for the ACT for July. Finding solutions to border closures was considered crucial, given the dramatic fall in enrolments by international students for second semester.<sup>73</sup>

The Guardian Australia reported that the plan was to apply only to the Australian National University and the University of Canberra, and would give preference to postgraduate students, honours students or students enrolled in the final year of their undergraduate degree. Students would still undergo the required two weeks of compulsory quarantine.<sup>74</sup>

By late June, a second wave of rising rates of community transmission of COVID-19 were causing major concerns in Victoria. **On 30 June, the Victorian Government announced the reintroduction of Stage 3 lockdown restrictions for ten postcodes in the north and western suburbs of Melbourne.**<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Hurley, P, "Interactive: international students make up more than 30% of population in some Australian suburbs", The Conversation, 15 June 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Karp, P, "Up to 350 international students to return to Australia under pilot scheme", Guardian Australia, 17 June 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Zhou, N, "Coronavirus Australia latest: the week at a glance", Guardian Australia, 19 June 2020.

<sup>75</sup> ABC News, "Victorian coronavirus stay-at-home orders reimposed across Melbourne hotspot suburbs", ABC News online, 30 June 2020.

## July 2020

International students, and students generally, were facing uncertainty and anxiety once more, as the **Melbourne metropolitan area entered a further six-week lockdown with Stage 3 restrictions across all suburbs.**

This again had implications for the safe return to campus learning for Semester 2, for socialisation, for health and sense of safety and particularly, the emotional wellbeing of students.

The Stage 3 lockdown occurred just as it was being reported that the Federal Government was preparing to address key issues that had caused international students' significant stress. This was believed to include changes to visas, such as fee waivers for students forced to extend their stay in Australia because of the pandemic, and clarification about qualification of online studies for post-course work rights.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile a survey of students in China conducted by Swinburne University indicated that only 40 percent of students who had previously intended to study overseas would proceed with these plans, while under 50 percent of students who had studied overseas would return to their courses after borders were open.

For those who had studied in Australia previously, reasons for not proceeding with studies overseas included life being more convenient at home and not having to endure hardship as a foreign student. Media reporting of discrimination and abuse, and deterioration in diplomatic relations between Australia and China were cited as deterrents for students who had planned studies in Australia.<sup>77</sup>

As of 7 July, Australia was proceeding with plans to allow international students to return, with the approval of the Federal Health Minister.<sup>78</sup> Just days later, with rising numbers of transmission in Victoria, these plans were deferred due to "heightened uncertainty about the containment of COVID-19".<sup>79</sup>

The Victorian Government had continued to negotiate with the Federal Government during this time to find ways to allow students stranded overseas to return to studies in Victoria, "when it is safe to do so".

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<sup>76</sup> Ross, J, "Australia set to ease virus visa hardship for foreign students", Times Higher Education online, 3 July 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Zhang, M, "Students heed their government's warnings against studying in Australia", The Conversation, 6 July 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Karp, P, "Australia to allow international students to return before all state borders open", Guardian Australia, 7 July 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Hunter, F, "Unis 'press pause' on pilot plan to bring back international students", 9 July 2020.

*"I had to study the last entire semester online and the next one too is going to be taught remotely. My degree is very difficult, and I am struggling to cope up with online classes because they are not sufficient. Please tell us when and how we can return so that we can go ahead with our lives. This speculation around our return has started to affect my mental health."*

Postgraduate landscape architecture student at Deakin University, stranded in Nagpur in India.<sup>80</sup>

This changed situation also brought into focus what this could mean for students and the universities and hopes of recovery over coming months. Emergency hardship funds from universities had now been exhausted, although the Victorian Government emergency relief program continued to process applications. The hope that these funds could tide students over temporarily as the economy recovered was now in question. Students who had gained casual employment as cafes and restaurants and other hospitality venues re-opened, had now become unemployed once again.

International students were continuing to rely on assistance from community organisations to meet daily essential needs.

*"I've got three kids. They don't speak English so they're relying on me. [We have] one laptop for the kids from school."*

Master's scholarship student from Indonesia studying in Melbourne, worried about the emotional toll on his family due to the six-week lockdown. The family has been relying on emergency food relief from the Kasih Project.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, on 20 July 2020, the Federal Government announced changes to student visas. These changes included:

- The government will recommence granting student visas, allowing travel to Australia as soon as borders reopen.
- International students will be able to lodge an additional student visa application free if COVID-19 prevented them completing study under their original visa.
- Current student visa holders studying online outside Australia due to COVID-19 will be able to use that study to count towards the Australian study requirement for a post-study work visa.

According to Group of Eight universities' interim chair, Margaret Gardner, Vice-Chancellor of Monash University, "this will ensure students who have been forced to study offshore due to travel restrictions will still have access to post-study work rights."<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Aurora, A, " Coronavirus border restrictions: How long will international students have to wait to return to Australia?", SBS Punjabi, 9 July 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Henriques-Gomes, L, "International students turn to foodbanks as casual work dries up in second Melbourne lockdown", Guardian Australia, 15 July 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Karp, P, " Australia to restart granting visas to international students to lift struggling university sector", Guardian Australia, 20 July 2020



International students stranded overseas welcomed these changes but wanted more certainty about timing of their ability to travel to Australia to take or resume their studies. SBS reported that students from Latin America had been campaigning for change, concerned about the expiry of their student visas.

*"The idea is to travel as soon as possible because it's frustrating for us, knowing that our dreams were paused by COVID. We already paid the school fees, airline tickets, we're just waiting for the borders to open and for the government to allow us entry."*

International student from Columbia stranded in the USA. <sup>83</sup>

**Throughout July, numbers of confirmed cases of COVID-19 continued to rise.**

**Victorian Government Response:** on 23 July, amid concerns that the spike in the number of transmissions of COVID-19 in Victoria was being driven by employees in insecure work, the Victorian Government announced payments of \$300 for people who needed to isolate after testing for the coronavirus while awaiting their results. A further payment of \$1,500 was available to assist those who did not have leave entitlements but needed to self-isolate for 14 days. **These payments were available to all Victorians regardless of visa status.**<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Flores, C & Truu, M, "International students welcome visa changes, but say more certainty is needed", SBS News, 23 July 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Department of Health & Human Services, "Supporting Victorian workers to get tested and stay home", 23 July 2020, Victorian Government.

## August 2020

On 2 August, with rapidly increasing numbers of positive COVID-19 cases in metropolitan Melbourne, the **Victorian Government declared a State of Disaster and introduced a Stage 4 lockdown in Melbourne, for a period of six weeks**, until 13 September.<sup>85</sup>

A total of 671 new COVID-19 cases in Victoria, most in metropolitan Melbourne, were announced on this day. **On 5 August, Victoria recorded 725 new coronavirus cases.** This was ultimately the peak of the second wave in Victoria but highlighted the seriousness of the situation particularly in the northern, north west, and south west suburbs of Melbourne.

The introduction of the Stage 4 Lockdown was immediately followed by closure of retail, restaurants, and cafes, except for take away food. Industries and activities deemed non-essential also had to close. Movement was restricted to a 5-kilometre radius from place of residence, outdoor exercise was allowed for one hour each day, and shopping for food and other essentials was limited to one person per household per day. A curfew from 8pm-5am was also mandated. Wearing of masks was already compulsory. Melburnians could only go out for work, medical care, and caregiving. The second lockdown was forecast to result in the loss of an estimated 250,000 jobs.<sup>86</sup>

International students in Melbourne who had gained work were once again left without an income source. Students interviewed by the Guardian Australia spoke of their distress, and sense of desperation: <sup>87</sup>

*"It's just one year left and so I feel like if I give up on my education, all my effort is for nothing.... I wish the government could have a little bit of compassion."*

IT student from Incheon, South Korea, who has lost her job as a cleaner and could no longer get help from her family at home.

*"I don't know what's going to happen. We don't have money and we don't know how we are going to pay rent for next month."*

Oli, 19, first year international student from Ghorani, Nepal<sup>88</sup>

The evidence of adverse impacts on international students across Australia was growing beyond anecdotal observations.

A survey conducted by University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and Sydney University of international students living in private rental housing in Melbourne and Sydney before and

<sup>85</sup> Murray-Atfield, Y & Dunstan, J, " Melbourne placed under stage 4 coronavirus lockdown, stage 3 for rest of Victoria as state of disaster declared" , ABC News, 2 August 2020, updated 3 August 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Towell, N, "Jobs devastation as state's economy goes into deep freeze", The Age, 3 August 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Henriques-Gomes, L, " 'If I give up, all my effort is for nothing': international students thrown into lockdown despair", Guardian Australia, 12 August 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Henriques-Gomes, 12 August 2020.

during the pandemic found that already precarious situations had been made much worse. Students were first surveyed in late 2019, and again, in July 2020.<sup>89</sup>

Key findings included:<sup>90</sup>

- Six in ten students who had been in paid work when the pandemic began had lost their jobs.
- 29 percent of respondents had gone without meals since the lockdown started, up 22 percent prior to lockdown.
- 26 percent had pawned or sold something for money, up from 12 percent.
- 23 percent compared with 11 percent pre-lockdown were experiencing problems paying electricity bills in time.
- 23 percent had asked community organisations for help, up from 4 percent.
- 15 percent of students had lost jobs had found a new one. Almost two-thirds of those who still had a job had their hours cut, most by about 50 percent.
- financial support from families decreased for just over four in ten students; only 12 percent said it had increased.
- Half reported trying to negotiate a rent reduction: 22 percent received a reduction and 31 percent received a reduction or a deferral. Almost half were unsuccessful.
- Six in ten agreed or strongly agreed financial stress was affecting their studies. Over half reported financial difficulties and 44 percent worried they might not be able to pay tuition fees.
- Just over a third worried they might have to leave Australia before completing their studies.
- Respondents did not feel governments had supported them. State government support was rated good or excellent by 17 percent, and only 13 percent felt that way about federal government support.
- Just under a third of respondents said they felt lonely before the pandemic, but 63 percent felt lonelier since the pandemic.

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<sup>89</sup> Morris, A., Hastings, C., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G. & Overgaard, C. (2020). *The experience of international students before and during COVID-19: Housing, work, study and wellbeing*. University of Technology Sydney

<sup>90</sup> Morris, A., Hastings, C., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G. & Overgaard, C., " 'No one would even know if I had died in my room': coronavirus leaves international students in dire straits", *The Conversation*, 13 August 2020.

*"Yeah, we are worrying (about paying the rent) and like we emailed to our agency to make discount or something like that, but they said it's hard for them, an agency and landlord too, because the landlord has a mortgage... and everybody's struggling and so for now they don't have any discount... so we are worried because before that, before this current thing, we had our part-time jobs and the three of us have now lost our jobs."*

International student studying at university in Melbourne, talking about her failed attempt to have rent reduced.

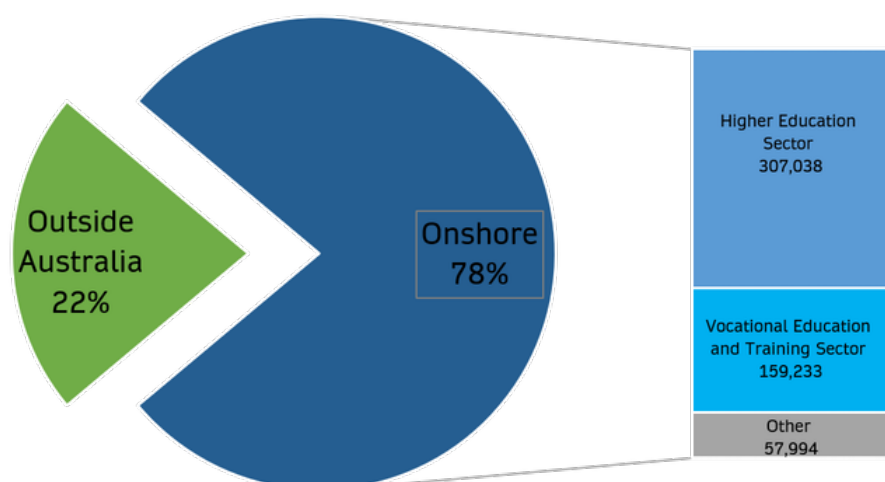
*"I think no one would even know if I had died in my room if it wasn't for a month when my landlady would come and ask for rent. Other than that, no one would even know."*

Unnamed international student <sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere it was reported that the number of international students seeking legal advice about tenancy issues had more than doubled during the second lockdown. <sup>92</sup>

Department of Home Affairs data showed that some 524,000 international students, 78% of all student visa holders, were living in Australia as of 24 August 2020. <sup>93</sup>

### Number of student visa holders who are currently onshore and offshore



Source: Department of Home Affairs. Provided by Lehmann & Sriram

<sup>91</sup> Morris et al, The Conversation, 13 August 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Heagney, M. "International students flock to legal services as they struggle to pay the rent in Melbourne", Domain.com.au, 24 August 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Lehmann, A & Sriram, A. "4 out of 5 international students are still in Australia- how we treat them will have consequences", The Conversation, 31 August 2020.

## Student visa holders in Australia

Numbers and percentages still in Australia on August 24 2020

Higher education	307,038	73%
VET	159,233	91%
Postgraduate research	24,603	78%
Schools	16,777	78%
English language courses	12,157	68%
Foreign affairs or defence	3,764	81%
Non-award	682	25%
Other (not specified)	11	5%
TOTAL	524,265	78%

Source: Department of Home Affairs. Provided by Lehmann & Sriram.

## September 2020

On 6 September with numbers of new COVID-19 cases dropping but still persistently high, the **Victorian Government released a road map for coronavirus restrictions** informed by modelling of projected numbers of COVID-19, **extending much of the Stage 4 stay at home restrictions to mid-October**. Some restrictions would be eased under a stepped process tied to a target number of new cases in the community; a daily average of between 30 and 50 new cases by September 28 and fewer than five by late October. This was aimed at eliminating community transmission and preventing a further hard lockdown at Christmas.<sup>94</sup> Melbourne residents needed to stay within 5 kilometres of their homes and were still only be able to leave home for shopping, exercise, care-giving purposes or permitted work. The city's night curfew starts at 9:00pm rather than 8:00pm, and residents can exercise for up to two hours a day, up from one hour. 'Social bubbles' were permitted, allowing single people to nominate another person to visit.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> ABC News, "Daniel Andrews reveals Victorian roadmap out of Melbourne lockdown and stage 3 coronavirus restrictions", ABC, 6 September 2020.

<sup>95</sup> Kinsella, E & Handley, E. "Melbourne's coronavirus restrictions roadmap: The five steps from stage 4 lockdown to 'COVID normal'", ABC News, 6 September 2020.

The extension of the Stage 4 lockdown until mid-October intensified psychological and financial impacts on international students<sup>96</sup>. By this time, rapidly increasing numbers were relying on assistance from community and charitable organisations for food relief and emotional support.

In Melbourne's eastern suburbs and across the city, local faith groups, local councils, migrant communities, business owners, neighbourhood houses and local service groups continued to provide emergency food relief and other forms of support. For example, the St Tom's Hope project at St Thomas' Anglican Church in East Burwood partnered with the Rotary Club of Box Hill Burwood to provide free meals and groceries, in close collaboration with Deakin, Holmesglen and Box Hill Institutes. Local Community Health Services: Access Health & Community, and Carrington Health contributed resources to this project.



St Tom's Hope Source: St Tom's Hope Facebook page, 6 September 2020

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<sup>96</sup> Kinsella, E, "International students going through 'hell' trying to survive Melbourne's coronavirus lockdown", ABC News, 21 September 2020.

The Sikh Gurdwara in Blackburn, the Sri Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha Temple, was providing around 300 meals per day to international students by September 2020.



Source: Whitehorse News

Partnerships were negotiated with Vinnies and other organisations by higher education International Student Advisers to provide vouchers for food and other essential items. Cooked meals were also being provided by the Victorian Parliament House kitchen.



Meals provided through Victoria's Parliament House kitchens are being handed out to international students in need at St Peter's Eastern Hill Anglican Church. (ABC News: Billy Draper)<sup>97</sup>

More evidence of the adverse impacts of the pandemic on international students was being documented, with the release of a major study by UTS and UNSW researchers for the

<sup>97</sup> Kinsella, E, "International students going through 'hell' trying to survive Melbourne's coronavirus lockdown", ABC News, 21 September 2020.

Migrant Worker Justice Initiative. The researchers surveyed more than 6,100 temporary migrants including around 5,000 international students in July 2020.<sup>98</sup>

Reinforcing earlier studies, the survey found that:

- Respondents had not left Australia because either, it was not possible to do so (flights unavailable, border closures in home country or key transit countries, internal domestic travel restrictions, or flights being unaffordable), or they could not risk losing investment in studies and life in Australia.
- Most suffered critical loss of income from loss of work and/or diminished family support.
- Many could not meet basic living needs.
- Over half (58 percent of international students in the survey) believed their financial crisis would substantially worsen in the second half of 2020, with a substantial proportion of international students believing they would run out of funds by October 2020.
- Current sources of financial support were inadequate to meet their needs.
- The wellbeing of respondents had been compromised at home and at work (abuse and violence in the home had reportedly increased during COVID-19; many temporary migrants encountered exploitation at work during the pandemic)
- Experiences of racism were widespread among respondents.
- The cumulative financial, physical, and psychological impacts carried significant reputational damage to Australia's higher education and tourism markets<sup>99</sup>

Writing in *The Conversation*, the researchers reported that the statement by Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, telling temporary migrants to return home, left **respondents feeling abandoned and unwelcome**, with many using “stark, dehumanising language” to describe how they felt:

- Like we don't exist
- Aliens who don't belong here.
- Inanimate objects
- Discarded, unimportant and expendable.
- Garbage
- Dirt

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<sup>98</sup> Berg, L & Farbenblum, B (2020). *As If we aren't humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*. Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, Sydney.

<sup>99</sup> Berg & Farbenblum, 2020, pp.6-9.

**Thousands of respondents expressed anger and distress at the lack of Federal Government support during this time.** Many felt used as a revenue stream, exploited as a source cheap labour and as ‘cash cows’ for the higher education sector. **Social and financial exclusion was also exacerbated by experiences of racism:** many “recounted harrowing experiences of racist attacks: being punched, kicked, shoved and deliberately spat at or coughed on by passers-by as well as a range of xenophobic slurs”. For many participants, their experiences during the pandemic “had destroyed their sense of belonging in Australia and changed their perceptions of the country and its leaders”.<sup>100</sup>

*“I think it isn’t well appreciated in the Australian community that the UK, Ireland, Canada and New Zealand have all extended wage subsidies and, in many cases, other supports to temporary visa holders. Australia really is a global outlier in this callous treatment of temporary visa holders. That was also mentioned in quite a number of responses. They’re aware they chose Australia over other viable options as a study destination and they’re aware other countries have behaved quite differently.”*

Interview with the Guardian Australia, Associate Professor Laurie Berg, highlighting the comparison between the Australian Government’s response to the needs of temporary migrants including international students: <sup>101</sup>



International student, Alissa from Indonesia, picks up a supplies package and free meal from Melbourne restaurant Tian38. One in six international students in Australia have received emergency food relief since the start of the pandemic, a survey suggests. Photograph: Chris Hopkins/The Guardian

<sup>100</sup> Farbenblum, B & Berg, L, “ ‘Garbage’ and ‘cash cows’: temporary migrant describe the anguish of exclusion and racism during COVID-19”, *The Conversation*, 17 September, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Henriques-Gomes, L, “‘Callous treatment’: international students stranded in Australia struggle to survive”, *Guardian Australia*, 17 September 2020.

*“Living in Australia for 35 years now, food security was never something I could fathom would cross my thoughts.”*

Chef and Tian38 restaurant owner Alan Chong who was providing free meals to international students during the pandemic, most young, in their late teens or early 20s.<sup>102</sup>

**From 28 September, Melbourne moved to the second step of the roadmap after reaching an average daily case rate of 30-50 cases over the previous 14 days.** The night-time curfew was ended, but residents still had to remain within 5 kilometres of their homes and were only allowed to leave home for the four permitted reasons. Higher education campuses and schools remained closed.

## October 2020

Melbourne was expected to move to Step 3 of the roadmap from 26 October, if the state recorded fewer than five new daily cases and five ‘mystery cases’ with unknown community transmission, on average over a two-week period. The strict lockdown continued. Hospitality and retail restrictions remained for much of October, continuing to limit employment in the sector that many students relied upon.

Foodbank released their annual Hunger Report for 2020 on 12 October. The agency reported that demand for food relief had substantially increased, as previously reported: whereas in 2019, 15 percent of Australians experiencing food insecurity were seeking food relief at least once a week, this had now doubled to 31 percent. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic had launched some population groups into food insecurity for the first time. Almost a third of those seeking food relief had never experienced it before. The newly food insecure groups which had emerged because of the pandemic were the casual workforce and international students.

*“For newly food insecure Australians, COVID-19 has been a catalyst for a chain of negative events of which a shortage of food was just a part. As bills pile up and income dwindles, stress and unmet physical needs are likely to cause a decline in mental health.”*

International students were in an extremely difficult position, the authors observed:

*“Due to their visa status, international students are largely ineligible for government assistance even though many ...depend on the very jobs that were the first to disappear with the onset of the pandemic”.*

Many are unable to return home, and unable to seek support from families who may be struggling themselves. Two in five charities (39 percent) had seen an increase in the number of international students seeking food relief since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Henriques-Gomes, 17 September 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Foodbank (2020). *Food insecurity in the time of COVID-19*: Foodbank Hunger Report 2020. Foodbank.org.au

With funding from the Victorian Government through Study Melbourne and support from sponsors, Foodbank launched a pop-up pantry store in Melbourne for international students that opened on 21 October.

A purple poster for the Foodbank International Student Pop-up Store. At the top, there are illustrations of various food items: a green apple, a red chili pepper, an orange pumpkin, a yellow banana, a green broccoli, and a red bell pepper. In the center, the Foodbank logo is displayed, consisting of a white square with the words 'FOOD BANK' and arrows pointing in and out. Below the logo, the text 'FOODBANK' is written in large white letters, followed by 'INTERNATIONAL STUDENT' in large orange letters, and 'POP-UP STORE' in large white letters. A horizontal orange line separates the title from the main text. The main text, in white, asks if the reader is an international student struggling to access food and invites them to the pop-up store for free access to fresh and culturally diverse food, fruit, and vegetables. Below this, the location 'WHERE: 230 LaTrobe Street, Melbourne' is listed in white. The cost 'COST: FREE with your Student ID' is listed in white. The request 'PLEASE BRING: A shopping bag' is listed in white. The phrase 'ALL INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WELCOME!' is written in large orange letters. At the bottom, the website 'FOODBANK.ORG.AU/STUDENTS' is written in large white letters.

**FOODBANK**  
**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT**  
**POP-UP STORE**

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**Are you an International Student in Melbourne struggling to access food? Come along to Foodbank Victoria's International Student Pop-up store and enjoy FREE access to fresh and culturally diverse food, fruit and vegetables**

**WHERE: 230 LaTrobe Street, Melbourne**

**COST: FREE with your Student ID**

**PLEASE BRING: A shopping bag**

**ALL INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WELCOME!**

**FOODBANK.ORG.AU/STUDENTS**

Further research by Victoria University's Mitchell Institute provided an updated analysis of issues caused by the pandemic that impacted on international students and the international education sector.

Key findings were:

**Australia is facing the dual problem of fewer international students and a drop in the number of international students living in Australia.**

- **Applications for international student visas had “collapsed”**, falling by approximately 80-90 percent over the same time in 2019. In particular, there was a dramatic drop in applications where the applicant was outside Australia. Normally, these applications would replace students who complete their studies and return home.
- **There were an estimated 210,000 fewer international students living in Australia** than would otherwise be expected at this time. From March to October, there was an overall reduction of around 75,000 in the numbers of currently enrolled international students. As of 25 October 2020, there was approximately 135,000 enrolled international students outside Australia, and 400,000 international students onshore.
- **The longer travel restrictions remain in place, the greater the losses** associated with the international education sector. There has now been a compromised intake for semester one 2020 and a missed intake for semester two. It was likely there would be another missed intake for semester one of 2021. A 50 percent decline in numbers of international students onshore by July 2021 was projected should travel restrictions remain.
- **The pipeline of international student enrolments has been severely disrupted:** many international students begin their studies in Australia in English language courses before progressing to higher education.
- **Impacts extend well beyond the higher education sector:** international students contribute significantly to the local communities in which they live. An estimated 57 percent of the revenue associated with international education comes from expenditure on goods and services in the wider community: on housing, travel, and goods and services.
- **In Melbourne, there was around 64,000 fewer international students living in the city by October due to the coronavirus pandemic.** The localized impact of this is significant: the research shows that rental vacancies rates had increased in key suburbs where international students typically live. While Melbourne’s CBD is most affected, Clayton (7.8 percent), Box Hill (5.7 percent), Burwood (5.3 percent) and Malvern East (9.8 percent) were most impacted in the eastern suburbs.

**International students are more than just an export revenue stream: for many Australians, they are neighbours, friends, partners, tenants, colleagues, classmates, and customers.** Hundreds of thousands of international students have had their studies and their lives disrupted by the pandemic. In the absence of Federal Government assistance, many have had to rely on handouts. It is clear, Hurley concludes, that many are struggling.<sup>104</sup>

In late October, Victoria emerged from 112 days in strict lockdown: some restrictions were eased on 19 October, with the main transition from Step 2 (Stay Home) to Step 3 (Stay Safe) from 28 October 2020, with no restrictions on the reasons for leaving home. On 26 October,

<sup>104</sup> Hurley, P (2020). *Coronavirus and international students*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Victoria had recorded no new cases of coronavirus for the first time since 9 June, achieving the targets set in the roadmap for eliminating community transmission.

Restrictions remained for Melbourne residents in travelling outside the metropolitan area, and a 25 kilometre radius applied for travel within. However, under Step 3, restaurants, cafes and hotels and most retail could reopen, albeit with restrictions. Opportunities for socializing increased, again with restrictions. Schools could return to face-to-face learning, while for higher education and training, learning from home was still in place for most.<sup>105</sup>

Melburnians remained cautious.



Melody Mak (above). Credit: Luis Enrique Ascui. The Age 30 October 2020.



Allyson De Guzman Credit: Luis Enrique Ascui. The Age 30 October 2020.

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<sup>105</sup> Andrews, Daniel, Statement from the Premier- 26 October 2020, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

International students, Melody Mak and Allyson De Guzman stroll Bourke Street, bubble tea in hand. "Look at us right now," laughs Ms Mak. "Hello!" They had lunch out. They are excited to be young, alive, free. "Lockdown was sad, it was sad," Ms Mak says. "It was really depressing. Mentally, it was a bit hard."

Both are international students. They lost their jobs in restaurants at the start of the pandemic. They didn't qualify for JobKeeper. Ms De Guzman had to withdraw some of her superannuation to pay the bills. "For international students ... there is really not much help." That's why the shopping trip is largely window shopping only. "We try not to spend, as we don't get money," Ms De Guzman says. "But it's nice just to see people."<sup>106</sup>

By late October, most emergency relief funding through the higher education sector had been exhausted, although eligible students could still access support through the Victorian Government international student emergency relief fund and Victorian Government-funded grants to community-based organisations. In addition, in early October, the **Victorian Government had announced an expansion of extreme hardship support**, through a partnership with Australian Red Cross and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. This \$50 million program was targeted at providing support for temporary and undocumented migrants who did not qualify for Commonwealth support or the International Student Emergency Relief program. This included graduates and other students.<sup>107</sup>

As retail and hospitality began to open, international students were again finding employment. However, access to university campuses was still largely restricted, and semester exams were to be conducted online. Special provision was made for students who had difficulties doing exams from home.

Plans were being made for online orientation for the limited number of new international students who had enrolled. Students who needed to complete face-to-face work experience placements to graduate were still in limbo as many workplaces and community venues remained closed.

## November 2020

Further easing of restrictions were announced on 8 November, with Victoria recording no new cases of the coronavirus for the ninth day in a row. Melbourne's 'ring of steel' preventing travel from the metropolitan area to regional Victoria was dropped, as was the 25 kilometre radius for moving beyond suburb of residence. Social gatherings within private households were slightly eased, while outdoor gatherings in public places were still restricted to 10 people from different households. Libraries and community venues could

<sup>106</sup> Mannix, L, "Melbourne is open, but not back- we're still grieving", The Age, 30 October 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew, Daniel, Doubling Hardship Support for Victoria's Most Vulnerable, Media Release, Victorian Government, 1 October 2020.

now reopen, while recreation and entertainment were opening, albeit with restrictions on numbers. Advice for higher education was to continue learning from home 'if you can'.<sup>108</sup>

The Foodbank Pop-Up Pantry was reportedly **assisting 2000 international students each week** by early November, as students continued to seek food relief to supplement their living costs.<sup>109</sup> Media continued to report the challenges international students were facing, including **overcrowded shared housing**. Not-for-profit charity 300 Blankets, which delivered care packages of fresh food during the pandemic, indicated that households that have requested assistance were usually occupied by two to six people, but believed there were often more students staying, which was not disclosed.

"But you can see that it's very, very packed houses. All of these international students are either from India or Nepal. That's the ones that we've been getting."

Susan Hendra, vice-president of not-for-profit charity 300 Blankets<sup>110</sup>



Most international students that 300 Blankets has helped live in "packed" houses. (Supplied)  
Published by ABC News 28 November 2020.

While students were beginning to find employment once more, work opportunities could be precarious and high-risk. In Melbourne as in other cities across Australia, home deliveries of

<sup>108</sup> Dunckley, M, "What the latest coronavirus restrictions mean for Victorians", The Age, 8 November 2020

<sup>109</sup> Hall, B, "Free supermarket feeds 2000 international students a week", The Age, 9 November 2020

<sup>110</sup> Salim, N, "COVID-19 pandemic sees international students unable to return home, surviving on free food", ABC News, 28 November 2020.

meals from cafes and restaurants surged during the pandemic.<sup>111</sup> Already an industry with high numbers of temporary migrants and international students, new delivery riders included those who had lost other employment and were 'very desperate' for work. The Council of International Students Australia (CISA) expressed concerns that students and temporary residents riding for food delivery app giants were being put in physical danger (Belle Lim, CISA President). Five fatalities in three months brought home the risks to food delivery riders.

In response, Swinburne University initiated a targeted road safety awareness program for food delivery riders in conjunction with other partners, to be launched in early December.<sup>112</sup>

"I have dealt with several critical incidents. At a previous institution there was a young man who lost a leg and who faces his future in a wheelchair. I had another student who broke both wrists, and I know of several [critical incidents] in which no other vehicle was involved."

Desma Smith, Associate Director, International Student Advisory & Support, Swinburne

She does not believe the students are given enough safety training and local traffic knowledge and feels this makes them unacceptably vulnerable: "I can drive down the street and see a delivery driver and pretty much pick whether it's an international student or not. You can sort of see whether there's a local knowledge or local wisdom, or guesswork going on."<sup>113</sup>

Desma Smith has been a contributor to the IEPCP international student partnership project.



<sup>111</sup> Feng, L, "Food delivery driver numbers surge due to coronavirus but many struggle to earn minimum wage", ABC News, 17 June 2020.

<sup>112</sup> Tuohy, W, "University moves to protect food delivery riders after five killed on roads", The Age, 28 November 2020.

<sup>113</sup> Tuohy, W, 28 November 2020.

Civil engineer and master's student Utkarsh from Indonesia is an Uber Eats delivery rider who appears on a safety podcast created by Swinburne University to help keep its international students safe as they work in the gig economy. *Credit: Luis Enrique Ascui The Age* 28 November 2020.

Food delivery riders were frontline workers during Melbourne's extended lockdown, undertaking sometimes dangerous work, and at risk also of exposure to the coronavirus from the households to whom they delivered.<sup>114</sup>

International students were being encouraged to take up fruit picking through the Work for Victoria program, as the state experienced a significant shortfall in the agricultural workforce. While this industry has been known for worker exploitation<sup>115</sup>, international students also faced disconnection from their contacts in Melbourne, and leaving rental accommodation for insecure work. For some, however, this was an urgent opportunity to gain employment. Study Melbourne provided information and advice to students.

Meanwhile, underage international students studying at secondary schools across Australia faced the challenges of not being able to return to family in home countries for the extended school break.<sup>116</sup> Partners in the IEPCP International Student Inclusion partnership project also expressed concerns about graduates who would be unable to return home after the end of the academic year. Continuing students also faced ongoing separation from families in home countries.

Further changes to Melbourne's coronavirus restrictions were announced on 21 November, significantly relaxing the rules for socializing, indoor and outdoor, for leisure and entertainment, and for hospitality and retail<sup>117</sup>. By 25 November, Victoria had recorded no new coronavirus cases and no active cases of the virus.

Orientation for the much smaller intake of onshore international students was conducted online by the higher education institutions.

## December 2020-January 2021

On 6 December, Victoria moved to "COVIDSafe Summer" restrictions, that progressively widened opportunities for socialisation and employment, including a return to work for

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<sup>114</sup> Howard, J, "Danger for delivery: cyclists put their lives at risk for your convenience", *The Age*, 30 November 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Collins, L, "Australian fruit picking exploitation claims prompt push on protections against 'modern slavery'", *ABC Riverland*, 6 November 2020.

<sup>116</sup> Faa, M, "COVID border bans leave international students facing lonely Christmas in Australia", *ABC Pacific Beat*, 12 November 2020.

<sup>117</sup> Ilanbey, S & Mannix, L, "Impossible Christmas suddenly possible as restrictions ease in Victoria", *The Age*, 22 November 2020. See also Andrews, Daniel, Statement from the Premier- 22 November 2020, Department of Health and Human Services.

office workers.<sup>118</sup> Victoria's run of 61 days with no local community transmission of the coronavirus did not end until 31 December after the spread of the virus into Victoria from an outbreak in the northern suburbs of Sydney. Border closures were then introduced, which impacted on travel interstate.

A report from the national Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency highlighted the **unhappiness of a significant proportion of students with remote learning**: a lack of academic engagement, less time overall in class, isolation from their peers, and IT issues. Some students mentioned not wanting to use their video in online classes "because they were ashamed about the appearance of their homes, or the presence of family members, after they were suddenly forced to take all classes from home". Lack of access to libraries was also cited as a significant concern.<sup>119</sup>

Much of the conversation in December and into January 2021 centred around the potential return of international students and ways this could be achieved safely.<sup>120</sup> Offshore international students themselves were questioning the motivations of the Federal Government, highlighting the damage that exclusion had caused.<sup>121</sup>

"But why would we recommend Australia when other countries, like the UK, Canada, and New Zealand, are actually helping international students and other temporary visa holders through this crisis? They wanted us to come here, but in a crisis, we feel abandoned. It is deeply hypocritical. They cannot welcome us with one breath and with the next, tell us to go home or starve. Education may be a major export industry, but we are not cash cows. We are people, no different from citizens, who need support during this unprecedented event. And we deserve better than this."

Diana Olmos is an international student community organiser with the Sydney Alliance. She had migrated from Columbia to study in Australia.<sup>122</sup>

Other media articles reported on the choices now being made by some students to switch to other countries, like Canada and New Zealand, that had been proactive in supporting the international student cohort during the pandemic.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> McMillan, A & Fox Knob, S, "Victoria hits 36 days without any new COVID-19 cases", The Age 5 December 2020

<sup>119</sup> Zhou, N, "Up to 50% of university students unhappy with online learning, regulator finds", Guardian Australia, 2 December 2020.

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Ziguras, C & Alves, T, "How unis can use student housing to solve international student quarantine issues", The Conversation, 5 December 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Olmos, D, "Australia wants international students to study here, but abandoned them during the Covid crisis", Guardian Australia, 14 December 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Olmos, D, Guardian Australia, 14 December 2020.

<sup>123</sup> Arora, A, "Indian international students are finding Canadian reality better than the Australian dream", SBS Punjabi, 14 December 2020.

**The return of enrolled students still stranded offshore** also dominated much of the media reporting into January.<sup>124</sup> Media also reported on the departure of international students, due to their experiences during the pandemic.<sup>125</sup>

The main obstacle to the return of international students was quarantine capacity and the priority for repatriating stranded Australian citizens and permanent residents in countries with rapidly rising rates of coronavirus transmission.<sup>126</sup>

Applications for the Victorian Government's International Student Emergency Relief Fund closed on 31 December. However, from 1 January 2021, international students were able to apply for the Extreme Hardship Support Program, even if they had previously received assistance through the International Student Emergency Relief Fund, continuing the Victoria Government's support for international students.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> See Yang, S & Wibawa, T, "International students petition for return as Daniel Andrews says it will be 'incredibly challenging' to bring them back in 2021", ABC News, 20 January 2021.

Fowler, M, "'My future and my life are there': International students speak of life in limbo", The Age, 17 January 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Arora, A, "Nearly 13000 Indian international students depart Australia while hundreds wait to return", SBS Punjabi, 15 January 2021.

<sup>126</sup> Visontay, E, "Exclusion of international students jeopardises Australia's future global standing – universities", Guardian Australia, 19 January 2021.

<sup>127</sup> See Study Melbourne <https://www.studymelbourne.vic.gov.au/news-updates/international-student-emergency-relief-fund>

For ongoing support see

<https://www.studymelbourne.vic.gov.au/help-and-support/support-for-students-coronavirus>