

Australia’s Crisis Responses During COVID-19: The Case of International Students

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ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global international education sector has been fraught with multiple, intensifying stressors, which have severely affected international students’ lives and study. Host government policies on international education can make a critical difference for this vulnerable population during the pandemic. Australia’s crisis response policies during the pandemic have been closely tracked and vigorously discussed amongst Chinese international students. This study examines how Australia’s crisis responses addressed the needs of international students during the pandemic, and how these policies impacted Chinese international students’ experiences and perceptions of studying in Australia. We collected qualitative data through interviews with Chinese international students, parents and migration agents, virtual ethnography on WeChat, and analysis of Australia’s policy responses. Our thematic analysis highlights participants’ experiences and views of Australia’s crisis responses in the four areas of financing, third-country transit, visas and immigration, and pandemic management. We discuss these findings in relation to the historical context of Australia’s higher education funding reforms during the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: COVID-19, Australia, Chinese international students, crisis response, international education, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

International education is Australia's third largest export industry. A total number of 720,150 international students were enrolled across various education sectors as of September 2019. In the 2018-2019 financial year, international education contributed \$37.6 billion to Australia's economy (DESE, 2019). As the country's largest service-based export, international education supported 240,000 jobs and stimulated growth in the tourism, hospitality and real estate market.

The catastrophic episodes of the COVID-19 pandemic have disturbed established patterns of operations in the international education sector. It has jeopardized international students' lives, disrupted their migration and careers, and posed serious risks to their physical and mental wellbeing. In Australia, outbreaks of COVID-19 have been seen across states and territories, with the most severe episode in 2020 being a second wave in the state of Victoria, which resulted in a lengthy lockdown between July and September. By the end of 2020, Australia recorded 28,811 confirmed cases, and 909 deaths (ABC, 2021). The pandemic has suspended overseas student mobility, disrupted international students' study, career and immigration aspirations, and curbed the growth of related industries in Australia.

Host government policies on international education can make a critical difference for this vulnerable population during the pandemic. This paper adds to the few studies that have researched international students' perceptions of Australia's policy responses during the COVID-19 epidemic. With a focus on Chinese international students, this qualitative study combines policy analysis, virtual ethnography, and interviews to explore two research questions: How have Australian policies responded to the needs of international students during COVID-19? How have these policies impacted Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions of studying in Australia? We collected and analyzed three datasets, including Australia's 2020 policies on international students during the COVID-19 crisis, Chinese international students' discussions of Australian policies in WeChat groups, and semi-structured interviews with 30 Chinese international students, parents, and migration agents.

Overall, the participants consider the Federal Government's crisis response to international education during COVID-19 as "offloading responsibilities" or passing the buck to other parties such as state governments in Australia. We provide analysis of participants' views and experiences of four policy domains. These include financial care, third-country transit, visas and immigration, and pandemic management. We discuss these findings in the historical context of Australia's higher education funding reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, and in relation to Jayasuriya's (2021) critique of the higher education regulatory state in Australia. We argue that Australia needs to broaden its vision for international education, especially during a humanitarian crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19

A series of recent studies has been published on international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Australia, studies related to international students during COVID-19 have focused on the impacts of the outbreak on the general economy and critical industries (Grozinger & Parsons, 2020; Bairagi, 2020), student wellbeing and support (Watson & Barton, 2020; Martin, 2020), and racism and disadvantage (Berman & Paradies, 2020; Tran, Bui, & Balakrishnan, 2020). International research beyond the Australian context covered multiple areas including travel and (im)mobilities (Hu, Xu & Tu, 2020), racism (Wu, Qian & Wilkes, 2020), mask wearing choices (Ma & Zhan, 2020), mental health issues (Lai et al., 2020), and online learning (Day et al., 2021).

While existing research examines the impact of the pandemic on international students' experiences, the issue of how national and local responses to the crisis have mediated international students' perceptions and experiences remains under-researched. A few relevant studies have emphasized the Federal Government's inadequate support for international students in Australia. For example, Nguyen and Balakrishnan's essay (2020) describes the multiple hardships that confront international students during the pandemic and calls upon the Federal Government to provide better support to benefit both international students and Australia's international education sector. Berg and Farbenblum's (2020) survey study of migrant workers and international students from 120 countries found that respondents experienced exclusion, inequality, and discrimination in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. They consider Australia's inadequate support for temporary migrants during COVID-19 "as unAustralian, selfish, greedy and money oriented" (p. 51). The authors criticize the Federal Government's crisis response for damaging the country's reputation as a multicultural society that welcomes internationals. Berg and Farbenblum's (2020) argue that Australia's lack of support for temporary migrants has breached its international human rights obligations to a population it strongly encouraged to invest in studying and working abroad.

Building on this body of literature, our study offers an in-depth and historically situated analysis of Australia's crisis responses in relation to international students during the pandemic. Using Australia as an example, this study will provide insights into how government policy responses during humanitarian crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may affect how international students perceive and experience a host country of international education. Such insights are important for producing more tailored policy responses to inform crisis management of reputational risks and practical implications at national, state, and local levels.

THE ECONOMIC RATIONALE FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

It is within the historical context of Australia's higher education reform in the 1980s and 1990s that the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for international education must be considered. The COVID-19 pandemic has

become a long shadow crisis. Such a crisis happens suddenly, develops rapidly, poses critical and widespread problems, and “almost inadvertently” triggers an institutional or political crisis (t’Hart & Boin, 2001). For Australia’s higher education sector, COVID-19 has surfaced the deep institutional crisis associated with a predominately market-based and economic rationale for international education.

The mid-1980s saw the Commonwealth Government’s economic restructuring extend a previously limited export scope to include specialized services, including education. Accordingly, funding for higher education institutions has been significantly reduced, leaving universities to generate more of their own revenue through, for example, actively recruiting international students for commercial gain (Harman, 2006). The economic driver of Australia’s international education was especially evident in policies from 1985 to the early 1990s that heavily focused on the marketable export of higher education services (Harman, 2006).

The Dawkins Reforms since the late 1990s have remoulded the higher education sector in Australia. The last three decades have witnessed a plunge in government funding for the higher education system from 80% in 1989 to less than 40% in 2019, lower than the average of OECD countries’ public investment in tertiary education (Horne, 2020). In July 1988, the Commonwealth Government released *Higher Education: A Policy Discussion Paper*, commissioned by John Dawkins, then Minister for the Department of Employment, Education and Training, Australia. The document proposed an array of reforms including increasing enrollments and reintroducing fees. With the aim of expanding Australia’s highly skilled and educated workforce through the university education of more school leavers, the Dawkins Reforms outlined an enrollment target rise from the then 340,000 to 625,000 by 2000. The paper also recognized a consequent funding gap of \$900 million to \$1.2 billion by 2001.

This shortfall, according to the paper, was not to be covered by government funding, but through encouraging HEIs to source non-Commonwealth funds (Dawkins, 1987). In August 1988, the Federal Budget supplanted the higher education Administration Charge with an annual Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), a domestic student loan program. HECS enables domestic students to defer their tuition repayment to the government until their income reaches a certain repayment threshold (Bessant, 2002). Full-time equivalent domestic students in “Commonwealth Supported Places” (CSPs) are funded through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS). The CGS pays tuition subsidies for students directly to higher education providers. Each CSP requires a student contribution funded through HECS, previously known as the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP).

In 1990, the Australian Federal Government instituted full fees for all international students. In 1998, Roderick West was appointed by the Howard government to conduct an inquiry into higher education policy and financing. The recommendations made by West led to deregulation and partial privatization of universities. This further escalated marketization of higher education, and shrinking of public funding for universities (Duke, 2004; Manathunga, 2017).

Since the early 2000s, after a decade of diminished Commonwealth funding and expanding domestic enrollments, the revenues from international student fees became critical for HEI operations (Horne, 2020). In 2019, Australian universities reported \$10 billion from international student fees, bringing the sector a profit margin of AU\$2.3 billion. More than half of the AU\$12 billion that Australian HEIs invest annually into national research and development was covered by international student fees (ABS, 2020). International doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows account for 37% of all doctoral and postdoctoral researchers who support Australia's research and development (Horne, 2020).

Viewing from the history of higher education reform in Australia, the higher education sector had already been in crisis before COVID-19 struck in early 2020. Jayasuriya (2021) argues that Australia's challenges in higher education is a systemic crisis involving "the difficulty of the political management of tuition fees and expanding participation in the higher education system within the context of constrained public funding" (p.584). In 2018, international onshore student revenue constituted an average of 26.2% of all universities' revenue in Australia. Australia universities' over-reliance on international student fees has been a direct result of the state's higher education reforms since the 1980s, which have "facilitated the marketization of higher education both inside and outside the sector" (p. 11). Over the last few decades, the regulatory frameworks of international education, migration and employment have intersected to create the higher education regulatory state in Australia (Jayasuriya, 2021). Domestic and international criticisms have been pushing the Federal Government to adopt a broader vision for international education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative study combines policy document analysis, virtual ethnography and interviews to explore two questions: How have Australia's crisis responses addressed the needs of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic? How have these policies impacted Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions of studying in Australia? This study was initially inspired by the phenomenon of Chinese international students transiting and quarantining in third countries in early 2020 to re-enter Australia. Chinese international students were the first group of international students who have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis and accordingly by Australia's first set of travel policies. Their continuous engagement with pertinent Australian policies throughout 2020 is the focus of this study.

Between February and November 2020, three datasets were collected and analyzed interactively. These include: 1) Australia's 2020 policies on international students during the COVID-19 crisis, 2) Chinese international students' discussions of Australian policies in WeChat groups, and 3) semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including 20 Chinese international students, three parents and seven migration agents. The student interviewee cohort includes 8 undergraduates and 12 postgraduates. As the pandemic unfolded rapidly and unpredictably, data collection heavily depended on the timing of

policy issuance and virtual discussions, and the availability and good will of participants for interviews.

A rough procedure applied to the process of data collection and analysis in this study, while the actual research process reflected increased messiness of qualitative research, especially during a crisis (Mason, 1996). We tracked and collected a range of Australia's federal and state/territory policies in 2020 that have direct impact on international students' experiences. In the meantime, we engaged in virtual ethnography to observe international students' views of these policies in WeChat groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, being online has become a routine mode of being, knowing and doing. Virtual ethnography accounts for the ways that social interaction and information reproduction have changed online over a shifted structure of time and space (Hine, 2000; Shumar & Madison, 2013). Through virtual ethnography, we identify possible participants for initial interviews, although many other interviewees were recruited using the snowballing technique.

Initial policy document analysis and observations of WeChat group discussions revealed a breadth of information that sensitized our perspectives for interviews. Non-participating observation was conducted in six WeChat groups. These groups sprung up as a response to Australia's restrictions to travelers from China issued on 1 February 2020. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to explore Chinese students' perceptions and experiences in relation to four major areas of influence. In particular, the interview questions focused on how these policies affected students' financial circumstances, travel and mobility, visas and immigration, and healthcare needs during the pandemic.

We interviewed 30 participants including Chinese international students (n=20), migration agents (n=7) and Chinese parents (n=3) via audio calls. Most of our student interviewees were studying with universities in the State of Victoria and a few with New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. This accounted for Victoria being the most severely affected by the pandemic among all Australian states and territories in 2020. At the time of this research, 20% of the student interviewees (n=4) were physically based in mainland China and 80% (n=16) were onshore in Australia. Of these student interviewees, nearly two thirds (n=12) had detoured through third countries including Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia to return to Australia. The interviews with parents and migration agents were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The Chinese language data was coded first, and then selected quotes that represent salient themes were translated by the authors into English.

Thematic data analysis occurred throughout the research process. Initially, descriptive coding identified the specific content of the policy documents that relates to international students, as well as relevant WeChat group comments and individual interviews. Focused coding was then applied to synthesize the impact of the policies on international students' perceptions and experiences. At last, theoretical coding focused on how the federal policy responses can be understood via the conceptual lens of the offloading strategy.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S CRISIS RESPONSES

The year of 2020 was strewn with Australian federal and state-level policies that have affected international students during the pandemic. Table 1 shows the key Federal Government policies and outlines their key decisions relevant to international students. In this section we discuss the impacts of these federal policies on Chinese international students' experiences and perceptions about studying in Australia. We also provide a concise summary of the key international student support schemes offered by State government policies to enable a comparative lens in the discussion. Findings show that the Australian Federal Government's crisis management of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic has been regarded by the participants as "offloading its responsibilities". An overall sense of disillusionment with the Australian Federal Government manifested across all three datasets. Findings also show participants' mixed perceptions about studying in Australia, which relate to their different treatments by the Federal, State and local governments, universities, charity groups and communities.

No Financial Support

A salient theme concerns the lack of financial support for international students from the Federal Government. Financial self-supporting is expected of Australia's international students during regular times. Nevertheless, the pandemic-triggered lockdowns, business closures and economic recessions deprived many international students of their part-time job incomes. For some, their economic situations further deteriorated as the pandemic impacted upon the revenues of their families overseas. Berg and Farbenblum (2020) found that the Federal Government failed to fulfil its obligations for temporary migrants under international human rights law, and its moral obligations to these community members who it had encouraged to live, study and work in Australia. Similarly, participants in our study also considered the lack of financial support from the Federal Government as offloading its responsibilities. During the pandemic, the Federal Government offered two main types of economic support packages to Australian citizens and residents, including JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments. However, international students were denied access to both types. Many international students, especially those in Victoria, experienced financial difficulties to varying degrees. As one student commented:

I was disappointed at how little support has been provided to international students during the year, especially at the federal level. The duty-free shop I worked in was temporarily closed on 15 February [of 2020] , and permanently closed after several weeks. I lost my part-time work. The income had covered part of my living expenses in Melbourne before the lockdown, rent, water and electricity. Then I wanted to find some work delivering food orders but could not even land an electronic bicycle. They were all rented out. (Student, Mei)

Table 1: Australian Federal Government Policies for International Students During COVID-19

	Travel and Mobility	Financial Support	COVID-19 Treatment	Immigration and Visa
Policy Title	- <i>Novel Coronavirus FAQ: Advice for International Students (DESE, 1 Feb, 2020)</i> - <i>Border closure to all non-residents (PM, 19 March, 2020)</i>	No.	- <i>COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions (DESE, 6 Feb, 2020, 1st version)</i>	- <i>Temporary relaxation of working hours for student visa holders (Dept. of Home Affairs, 4 April, 2020)</i> - <i>2020-2021 Migration program planning levels (Dept. of Home Affairs, 10 Oct, 2020)</i>
Key Policy Decision	-Chinese travellers to enter Australia via third-country quarantine and transit.	No.	-Free testing and treatment at public medical facilities for international students (except in Northern Territory) -Privacy of immigration status not guaranteed.	-Relaxed work limitations for student visa holders in critical industries (age and disability care, health-related services, and agriculture sector). -Reduced skilled immigration; and increased global talent and business investment immigration.

Without financial support for international students from the Federal Government, the responsibility has fallen to students' families, universities, communities, and state and local governments. In some cases, valuable assistance was offered by local community members: "I was lucky. My landlady offered a few months free stay – no rent at all. She also allowed me to leave all my stuff there until July" (Student, Ying). Most students transferred all their financial burden back to their parents: "I have to rely on my parents for more financial support, which puts a lot of pressure on them" (Student, Mei). As a parent revealed,

We have been paying our daughter's tuition and part of her living cost, as we believe in the value of a quality overseas education. However, as she lost her part time work in Melbourne due to the lockdown, we had to once again, provide all her living costs. The problem is our own income has also decreased during the outbreak. (Parent, Hang)

State and local governments have offered much-needed support, although the packages vary (see Table 2). As one student remarked, “I was out of the tough times thanks to the international student financial support from the Victorian Government” (Student, Li). Most states offered a few months’ moratorium on tenant evictions and some banned rent increases. Table 2 shows a list of state and territory packages for international students.

Another student said: “I received food support from the Victorian Government and the university subsidy. The university subsidy is the best, with a good amount. It really helped, very timely. Applicants just needed to submit their bank transactions and the reasons” (Student, Zu). However, financial subsidies at the university level differed immensely. In some universities, international students were largely left unattended:

I paid my tuition and living expenses by myself through [my] part-time job since I came to Australia, but the lockdown significantly impacted my income. I have been studying in [University Name] for six years but am now very disappointed with it. It offered inadequate financial support to international students both in terms of tuition and living support. My application was rejected even when I had only AU\$300 in my bank account. Also, I am very disappointed that the university never provided partial travel funding for students who took a detour back to Australia. I am very envious of my friends whose universities offered travel grants. (Student, Wei)

Some students regarded their university’s unwillingness to reduce the tuition fees as unfounded. One student said: “the university argued that online teaching will be of similar qualities. However, most of my fellow students, international or domestic, have been disappointed at the actual quality. Also, we have not been able to use any campus facilities” (Student, Qu). Many Australian universities’ reluctance to compensate international students has exposed the “key fragilities and vulnerabilities” of higher education regulation and funding, especially the universities’ substantial reliance on revenues from international student tuitions (Jayasuriya, 2020, p. 11).

Quarantine in Third Countries

The first crisis response of the Federal Government to the COVID-19 outbreak regards its initial travel guidance to travelers from China. While many Chinese international students understand countries’ need for border control and travel restrictions during the pandemic, many were confused and disappointed by the first travel policy issued by the Australia Federal Government on 1 February 2020 regarding COVID-19 control. This policy has rendered Chinese international students’ mobility experiences in early 2020 different from other international students. In early February, the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment released Novel Coronavirus FAQ: Advice for International Students, which explicitly required Chinese international students wishing to return to Australian universities to observe a 14-day quarantine period

in a third country, so as to avoid their visas being cancelled: “If you are an international student and travel to mainland China, you will not be able to enter Australia until 14 days has passed since you left mainland China” (Version 1, DESE, 2020, p. 7).

Table 2 State and Territory support packages for international students

State/Territory	Policy	Support for International Students
Victoria Over \$45m	International Student Emergency Relief Fund (Study Melbourne, 29 April 2020).	Emergency Hardship Support Program (Australia Red Cross, 2020) Free meals and groceries support program Local councils provided diverse support (Study Melbourne, 2020).
Queensland \$15 m	Queensland International Student Crisis Assistance Package (Study Queensland, 19 May 2020).	Online job portal and free online training Mental health support Emergency assistance for those facing hardships. Tuition support, care-packs, meals and other living expense payments.
South Australia \$13.8m	International Student Support Package (Study Adelaide, 2020).	Emergency cash Rental relief scheme International student support network Financial and emergency assistance.
Western Australia Over \$1.5 m	StudyPerth Crisis Relief (Study Perth, 2020).	Emergency provision of food or shelter \$500 emergency payments.
NSW \$20 m	A series of supports listed by Study NSW (15 May 2020).	Free accommodation scheme: 12-20 weeks for international students in need App-My Legal Mate with multilingual services 24/7 international student support service via the NSW Government COVID-19 hotline Access to Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) Scheme.
Tasmania \$3 m	Supports listed by Tasmanian Government (22 Apr 2020).	Emergency cash Rental relief scheme. International student support network Financial and emergency assistance.
Australian Capital Territory \$450,000	Supports listed by ATC Government (4 Apr 2020).	Support international students who impacted by COVID-19 and in hardship through Red Cross.
Northern Territory	Care packages (Baker, 1 May 2020).	Care packages.

Chinese international students found this travel policy ambiguous and misleading. The original Version of this policy included an example of a successful detour taken by a Chinese international student to Australia via Malaysia. Subsequently, several hundreds of Chinese students embarked detours via Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia. However, this travel example was excluded from the second version of this document, and international students were recommended to check border restrictions and health-related regulations before travelling to Australia (DESE, 2020). Despite the uncertainty, mass detours took place over the coming weeks (Ma, 2020).

Our observation of the WeChat groups immediately following the ban showed highly anxious cohorts of Chinese international students. Of the six WeChat groups we observed, each included up to 500 people. The student cohort ebbed and flowed, depending upon successful entries into Australia. The most heated discussions occurred before 20 March 2020 when Australia closed its borders to all. Over time, the focus of their chats shifted from the initial attempts to understanding the policy requirements and its implications, to testing and exploring the feasibility of third country entry-quarantine-transit to Australia, and then to sharing travel experience and strategies, as well as reflections on their trips. Students who adjusted rapidly were mostly those in their last year of study with upcoming internship plans and graduation matters to attend to in Australia.

The first group of international students returning to Australia via these detours arrived on 16 February 2021. Simon, a travelling senior undergraduate student, accepted our interview while self-quarantining in a Thailand hotel, as a compulsory transit to return to Australia:

Well, it was not exactly a full ban, isn't it? The policy provided an example of going through Malaysia, later deleted though. Anyway, as this travel regulation was imposed with little notice, hotel booking became rather difficult due to the large demand. The fares also soared. Thailand requires a health check certificate to board the plane and nobody told me that at first. The FAQ document released by Australia was full of unclear and mixed messages, which was very stressful. The first thing when I wake up every morning is to check the official information and media reports, as well as social media discussions. (Student, Simon)

The poorly considered travel policy triggered business activities to deal with costly travel routes and hotel quarantine packages customized for international students and advertised via social media:

At the same time, you receive other fake messages on Facebook and WeChat about which transit countries are the most convenient and safe portal to go through in terms of the local requirements, costs and virus spread. On social media, some migration agencies take advantage of the mixed, vague, and fake messages of the policies to encourage students to travel. (Student, Si)

Students felt that the 14-day transit policy showed a lack of respect and consideration for the third-party countries: “I feel that the south-eastern Asian countries via which we have transmitted from have shared quite some burden for Australia” (Student, Xiu). Some students found that Australia’s own onshore pandemic control measures matured rather late. The first cases of COVID-19 in Australia were confirmed in late January 2020 in Melbourne and Sydney, but for a student who arrived in mid-February, the actual quarantine measures and mechanisms at the major Australian airports were, “not even there” (Student, Yang). After self-quarantining in interim third countries for two weeks, some Chinese international students arrived in Australian airports to find that no health checks and registrations that are critical in tracing COVID-19 cases and preventing community infections were conducted, and international travelers could “walk out the airports freely after clearing the Customs as usual” (Student, Pei).

Tightening Visa and Immigration

The Federal Government’s change of visa and immigration policies during 2020 has frustrated the career and immigration aspirations of many Chinese international students, as well as their wellbeing. In early April, Australia’s Prime Minister told all international student and visitor visa holders: “As much as it’s lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time ... to make your way home” (ABC News, 2020). This comment was regarded as “cold” and portrayed Australia as a fair-weather friend. As one student notes: “the Federal Government did not care about international students. They have never given serious thoughts to our plights, let alone offer practical help. Mr Morrison’s cold comment shows that he only cares about money” (Student, Lei). Soon after Morrison’s speech, a policy entitled Temporary Relaxation of Working Hours for Student Visa Holders was issued, which said:

Due to exceptional circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to ensure the supply of critical services, the Department of Home Affairs and Australian Border Force will take a flexible approach to student visa holders working beyond their usual work limitations, but only in specified industries. (Department of Home Affairs, 2020, n.p.)

These specified industries include age care, disability care, and health care services that are considered ‘critical industries’ during COVID-19. As one nursing student said: “many nursing students like myself were drafted as health care back-ups. On the one hand, it is about being responsible for society; on the other hand, as inexperienced nursing students, we were also concerned about ourselves” (Student, Fang).

Another important change to visa and immigration policies has dealt a heavy blow to existing CIS and potential applicants. The October immigration policy changes prioritized the business investment immigration stream and skilled immigrants through the Global Talent Program. International students and

temporary workers applying through the general skilled immigration stream were therefore negatively impacted. One student lamented: “one important factor that led me to study in Australia was the opportunity for immigration. But this year, the immigration policies have become so unfriendly to skilled immigrants. Studying in the UK and Canada are now more acceptable” (Student, Ke). A parent echoed this view: “my child wants to immigrate to Australia. Originally, we fully supported her decision. Now that the immigration requirements have changed again, we have suggested that she return to China or study in the UK, Canada or Hong Kong” (Parent, Geng).

States to Manage the Pandemic

A high level of confidence in Australia’s capacity to manage the COVID-19 pandemic has been reported by the interviewees in general, who regarded Australia’s battle against COVID-19 in 2020 as successful. For Victoria-based students, the State Government’s pandemic control measures, especially after July, were viewed mostly in a positive light. One student stated with relief: “thanks to the Andrews government, whose decisive policy of a second lockdown, curfew and compulsory mask wearing gave me hope about Australia’s crisis management capacity” (Student, Wei). As students commented:

The lockdown went smoothly, with compassionate rules, still allowing people to shop for groceries. The effects of increased policing and fines alone were limited. The good thing was most people obeyed the rules, which gave me hope of returning to face-to-face learning. (Student, Zu)
I think the second lockdown in Victoria was an excellent example for combatting COVID-19 whilst still giving people some space and flexibility. I was impressed by the mandatory measures such as shopping once per day per family, wearing a mask everywhere and the curfews. To be honest, I don’t like curfews because I love running at night. But I totally supported and obeyed the measures because reducing the infection of COVID-19 is everyone’s concern. (Student, Ke)

Nevertheless, they viewed assistance as primarily the efforts of state and local governments and communities. As one student put it, “it seems that the Federal Government mainly offered lip service to combatting COVID-19” (Student, Li). Another student said: “I was really concerned about how Australia would handle the pandemic. One reason was that the Prime Minister did not do much of a job to help people affected by the forest fire” (Student, Jie). The Black Summer bushfires from December 2019 to January 2020 were the most destructive Australia has ever recorded. Morrison’s lack of commitment during the historical disaster, “including taking a family holiday to Hawaii at the height of the fires and a reluctance to clearly link the bushfires to climate change”, received severe public criticism (Bromfield & McConnell, 2020, p. 10). Earlier calls by fire chiefs for adequate federal resources and national leadership and coordination to deliver effective bushfire management had gone unheeded by the Federal Government (Walter, 2020). Societies cope with extreme situations and occurrences in various

ways, and the government decision-making and actions play a key role in changing the dynamic patterns of a crisis and the severity of its consequences (McConnell, 2020). The management of a crisis cannot overlook the psychological effects on communities and how political choices mediate the perceptions and practical implications of severe episodes (t'Hart & Boin, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Australia's federal-level international student policies during the global crisis of COVID-19 extended a parochial, neoliberal approach exclusively in line with national interest. A review of its key policy decisions in 2020 unfolds a dark picture: telling international students who cannot support themselves to "make your way home" despite global travel restrictions (ABC News, 2020); steering international students to quarantine in third countries before entry to Australia; excluding international students from the social security measures of JobKeeper JobSeeker subsidy; relaxing student visa holders' work restrictions but only for those filling the labor shortages in essential industries with higher health risks; slashing skilled immigration quotas to prioritize business investment and global talent immigration. Despite some compensatory measures taken by state and local governments, uneven university support, and the good will of communities, the multiple federal policies have intersected to undermine Australia's reputation as a global and regional leader.

The picture turns gloomier once presented against the historical backdrop of how international education has contributed to Australia's economy and higher education sector during the last three decades. Since the mid-1980s, a shift from aid to trade has prioritized economic incentives in international education in Australia (Adams, Banks & Olsen, 2011). Over the last three decades, the Australian Federal Government has increasingly withdrawn from funding public universities and left universities prospecting for non-public sources and revenues, of which international students constitute a significant percentage. An increasingly financialised political economy has driven higher education reforms that wedded Australia's higher education sector to financialized capitalism in international students' home countries (Jayasuriya, 2020). The financial flows in the form of international student fees based on high savings rates from these countries have indirectly but effectively "served to manage the Australian higher education policy crisis", especially before the COVID era (Jayasuriya, 2020, p. 10).

The picture gets darker still. The social exclusion and inequity experienced by international students in Australia forms a stark contrast with the crisis responses of some other Western countries such as the UK, Ireland and New Zealand. These countries have included international students in their national support mechanisms, including unemployment payments, wage subsidies and housing support (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020). Likewise, the higher education systems in these countries are also partially dependent on the financialized capitalism of international education, thereby rendering them fragile to the neoliberal political economy, as in Australia (Jayasuriya, 2021). Nevertheless,

their COVID-19 policies to support international students have demonstrated a capacity and commitment to break out of a narrow national focus that characterize leadership in a global humanitarian catastrophe.

How countries live up to their values is critical to their global reputation and soft power. Australia has a range of soft power strengths. Nevertheless, ill-considered policies have also caused much international and domestic criticism, especially in areas such as climate change, asylum seekers and foreign aid. The list has extended to include its treatment of temporary migrants including international students. Australia needs to push for a broader vision for international education that enhances its international engagement not only for economic gains, but also for effective communication of Australia's democratic and inclusive values.

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