

International Students in the Time of COVID-19: International Education at the Crossroads

Catherine Gomes
RMIT University, Australia

Helen Forbes-Mewett
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

International education and the international student experience worldwide have been fractured due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This special issue brings together papers from around the world which not only critically examine the impact a global crisis has on policies, procedures, operations and people around international education but also the unprecedented effects these have on international students themselves. This special issue moreover opens discussion on the future direction of international education policy and practice in order to create the best international student experience possible.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, international education, international students, experience, futures

A few weeks into 2020 the world as we knew it changed as countries around the world took extreme measures to keep populations safe from a new and devastating coronavirus known as COVID-19. COVID-19 became a pandemic with devastating effects on societies, governments and economies around the world as it challenged the normality of everyday life through the disruption of global and local systems in an unprecedented and rapid manner. To contain the virus, countries world-wide resorted to extreme

measures to slow down the spread of the virus of which restricting human movements across international, interstate, intrastate and neighbourhood lines became part of daily life. The outcomes of any kind of restricted movements whose scale from global to neighbourhood have been devastating with national economies, business and personal finances and individual wellbeing at crisis level. Governments and community care groups have worked hard to help their resident populations cope with the health crisis through mass testing and mass vaccination programs as well as welfare assistance for those whose physical and mental health, employment, living arrangements and financial situations have been impacted directly by the virus or by restricted mobility.

While such responses to help resident populations are not surprising, transient migrants such as international students have struggled to cope during the pandemic primarily because of their temporary status in receiver countries. They have been subject to job losses, been unable to pay their rent or buy food for themselves. Meanwhile international students, especially those from China and of East Asian descent have been reporting heightened racism and xenophobia directed their way. Likewise, the pandemic has had an exceptional impact on international education as destination countries and service providers were some of the early casualties of this evolving health crisis due to the loss of international students as a lucrative funding source. The result has been almost daily decisions being made about course delivery options with online delivery being the best possible teaching and learning route in the wake of travel bans, self-quarantine and social distancing in order to limit the spread of the virus on destination country populations.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving crisis, it is one that is revealing how international education and international students have become 'disrupted' in many ways. Thinking through these issues we decided to hold a conference aimed at not only critically examining the impact of the pandemic as a global disruptor on policies, procedures, operations and people around international education but also opening discussion on the direction of future policy and practice in this space.

The conference was titled *Coronavirus and its Impact on International Students: International Education in the Time of*

Global Disruptions. It was held online on 10 February 2021, free of charge and run on volunteerism in partnership with VicWISE - a non-governmental volunteer organisation. It attracted 229 registered participants from around the world who braved differing time zones to listen to 21 presentations discuss the impact the pandemic had on international students in the following areas:

- international student mobilities
- challenges and resilience
- mental health
- institutional and community responses to international students during the pandemic
- student support
- international student experience
- employability
- belonging, inclusion and exclusion.

This special issue features six papers from that conference. These papers provide diverse and important insights to the many issues facing different cohorts of international students during previously unexperienced times. The challenges faced by students and how they found ways to cope during the pandemic provide invaluable information for the purposes of informing policy and practice. We are extremely grateful to the contributors for their scholarship and working with us to produce this Special Issue.

The Special Issue – International Education in the Time of Global Disruptions: COVID-19 and its Impact on International Students - begins with the work of Qi and Ma who examine the impact of Australia's response to the crisis on the Chinese international student experience and their perception of study in Australia. Keeping to the theme of Chinese students abroad, Yu focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on Chinese international student mobility in the US. Her work highlights the role of Sinophobia impacting Chinese student study destination choices. Gomes, Hendry, De Souza, Hjorth, Richardson, Harris and Coombs bring to light the challenges faced by higher degree research (HDR) Students in Australia and their developing resilience dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on their studies and everyday lives. We learn from the authors about how students queued for food while

headlines focused on financial loss to universities due to a drop in student enrolments. Importantly, they also discuss the resilience of these students.

Considering religion and the associated roles of connectedness and belonging, Weng, Halafoff and Barton focus on Chinese, Indian and Russian international students. They contribute new insights in this underexplored aspect of the international student experience. Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett address the issue of mental health of international students during the pandemic. They emphasize the importance of acknowledging students' backgrounds and social value systems in understanding how best to provide support services. Their work suggests that students coming from collective cultures may struggle in an individualistic society like Australia. Bringing further new and pertinent insights to the topic of this special issue, our final paper by Stewart and Bo draws attention to the arrival and quarantine experiences from the Republic of Korea. They present students' views and expectations of Korea as a safe study destination amid the pandemic compared with challenging arrival experiences.

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CATHERINE GOMES, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication. She is an ethnographer whose work contributes to the understanding of the evolving migration, mobility and digital media nexus. As a migration and mobility scholar, Catherine specialises on the social, cultural and

communication spaces of transient migrants, especially international students, their wellbeing and their digital engagement. Catherine's work covers the themes of identity, ethnicity, race, memory and gender. She is a specialist on the Asia-Pacific with Australia and Singapore being significant fieldwork sites. Email: catherine.gomes@rmit.edu.au

HELEN FORBES-MEWETT, PhD, is Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University, Australia. Her work centers around human security, cultural diversity and social inclusion with a particular focus on international students, minority groups and host community responses. Email: helen.forbesmewett@monash.edu