

The sun is rising on Australia as the economy has started to recover from the coronacession.
When will it rise again for the International Education Sector?

Ravi Lochan Singh, AAERI President's address

@AAERI Virtual Convention 2020

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Our sector like all others had not planned on the scenario of such a pandemic. In March when I returned to Sydney from Delhi just before Holi, there were some masks but the virus didn't appear so threatening. Even when India had its first one day lockdown, the impression before us and the students was that the authorities and epidemiologists were in control and that it will all be normal very soon. Australia was possibly better prepared and the advantage of being an island nation with a spaced out population offered it natural social distancing. However, the strategy followed of near-eradication meant that a lot is riding on a vaccine. This is where the Australian strategy becomes challenging for our sector.

In April, AAERI made recommendations to the Australian Government and to the Covid19 Taskforce. This was the very first time that the recommendation was being made that quarantine linked travel for international students be considered as an alternative in the event of a delayed or non arrival of a reliable vaccine. My point here is not to claim a badge for AAERI but to indicate that this is going to be critical as we head into the recovery phase. There will need to be a firm political will. The pilots announced by the Government is only the beginning. If we have to see the new students arrive in Australia by the first intake or even arrive at all, the pilots will first return back over 100,000 continuing students. Considering that this is three times of arrivals that have happened till date since April of any travellers, it is no mean goal. The quarantine facilities will need to be geared up and the process may need to be tweaked a bit to ensure more arrival and accommodation. Pre-travel covid test and post-arrival covid test could be built into the current process and then it is possible that the duration of the quarantine can be broken up between institutional quarantine and self-quarantine. AAERI has since April continued working with the various Australian Departments and has held several interactions and briefings for its members.

Now that the state of Victoria has gone back into a lockdown and there is a second wave, AAERI Australian Chapter has reached out to the AAERI recruited students currently in Australia. Students who are impacted by the pandemic and need assistance with visa extension or even guidance on how to travel back to India are able to reach the AAERI Australian members and that too for free. I believe this is a very positive step recently taken and makes us proud of our members. This when combined with the efforts of the Universities and the local Indian Community has enabled keeping the goodwill of Australia intact. Now we do look forward to the steps by Australian Government to ensure that Australia remains in reckoning for the students from the subcontinent.

- Now on to our thoughts and recommendations...

Post Covid19 Scenario

Is the golden age of INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION over?

Can Australia do anything to keep itself in reckoning?

Is the Golden Age for the International Education sector over?



*“Next few months are likely to transform the fortunes of many institutions. **Some will shut entirely.** If the pandemic drags on, if a vaccine is not forthcoming or if the economic climate becomes particularly bad, then things will get bleaker still. **Politicians will have bigger things to think about than protecting universities.**”*

*“The **first two decades of the 21st century were ones of extraordinary growth** for universities in many countries. **That golden age is over.**”*

But why? Won't the students study online till they can travel?



*“Many **students buy the university experience** not just to boost their earning capacity, but also to get away from their parents, make friends and find partners.”*

“The experience... cannot be replicated through video calls in a parental living room.”

“Despite this, they will face little prospect of lower fees.”

“Universities expect to make more use of discounts (sorry, “scholarships”) to entice foreign students, but they will try not to publicise that.”

Many universities argue that the education students receive will be just as good as it was before the pandemic. It remains to be seen how many students (and parents) will buy this.

So will all Universities lose their appeal to International students in the coming years?



The very top tier are unlikely to struggle for students for long. “If you’re a prestigious institution, people are not going to turn down a hard-won opportunity to earn a diploma that has a lot of brand value, even if earning it turns out to be less fun and more inconvenient than they thought it would be,”

Kevin Carey of New America, a think-tank.

Instead it is likely to be mid- and low-ranking universities that are most at risk, particularly those institutions with less prestigious brands that have nevertheless managed to attract lots of international students

Hey, it can't be that bad... Is there no hope?



Universities have a few reasons for hope.

- One is that prospective students do not have much else to do.
- The other is that in a recession there is normally an uptick in the number of students.

Although recessions tend to boost demand for higher education, as poor job prospects spur people to seek qualifications, revenues may nevertheless fall.

- Government rules will combine with student nerves to keep numbers down.
- There are questions about the benefits to students, too.

Recommendations: What can be done to increase benefits and to make Australia attractive again?

Indicate a definite strategy for the students to be able to travel to Australia:

- With or Without a Vaccine. (Phil Honeywood: *Our industry needs some proof of life. Our students will not defer indefinitely.*)

Increase the “Return on Investment” for an International student.

- Recent reforms announced indicates that the cost of STEM degrees for “domestic students” is being reduced significantly.
- This would mean that in the post Covid era, International students will be paying FIVE TIMES OR MORE than domestic students.

As universities have grown, so too have doubts about the “return on investment”, says Peter Hurley of the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University.

Recommendations:

1. Reduce fees for International students by 25% across the board.
2. Introduce additional year of PSW for larger cities too. “Need to restart the traffic and 2019 scenario of overcrowding outdated”. (Even those coming to three biggest cities be given 3 years while those choosing other cities can have 4 years).
3. Offer PSW also to those undertaking less than 2 years PG Dip or Masters Degrees. Make it in line with Canada, NZ and UK. One year Masters offer better ROI and can increase attraction. UK’s growth is due to them.
4. International students with required locally obtained skills make better migrants than imported manpower. Set aside 25% of the migration quota for graduating students. No shame in offering **study-work-settle** to those who are skilled at a time when Australia focusses on rebuilding economy and wants to bring back manufacturing. This can happen only with skilled manpower and instead of importing them, offer them first to graduating international students.
5. Universities should solely focus on what they do best: Teaching and Research.

It was heartening when we heard this...

I am especially grateful for the way you have taken care of the Indian community in Australia, and especially the Indian students in this difficult time.

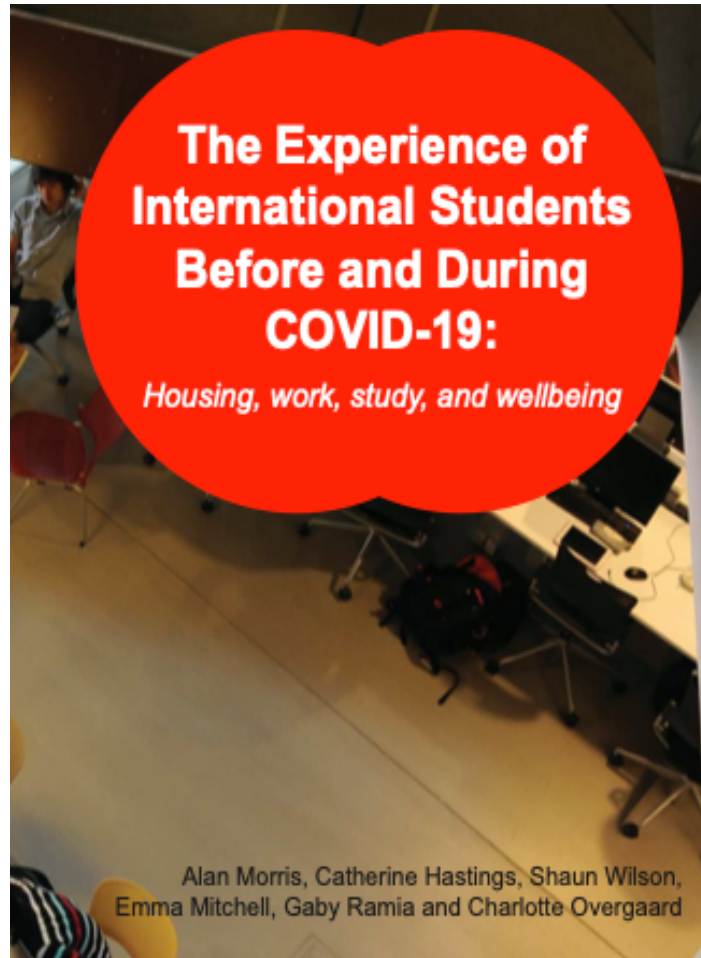
PM Modi

Virtual Summit, June 2020



The students say something else...

Alan Morris (UTS), with colleagues from UTS, USYD and Macquarie University [surveyed](#) international students in Sydney and Melbourne in the private rental market on accommodation and living experiences before COVID-19 and again in June-July.



- *job losses are “dramatic”*: 59 per cent of students surveyed were working before the pandemic but 61 per cent of them lost their jobs
- *rent is harder to make*: a third go without food “quite often” to pay for accommodation. 21 per cent fear becoming homeless
- *paying for study and staying here is a worry*: 44 per cent fear they will not be able to pay for tuition and 35 per cent worry they will have to leave Australia before completing their course
- *help at hand*: 62 per cent say their institution offers financial assistance. But only 13 per cent of providers had reduced fees and 5 per cent had waived them
- *as for government*: “The general feeling was that support from government and relief-providing organisations had not been strong. Fewer than 20 per cent of students felt that the support offered by the Victorian and NSW government was good or excellent, and even less—just 13 per cent—described support from the Federal government as good or excellent. By contrast, around three in ten students (29 per cent) agreed that the support from their country of origin community within Australia was good or excellent.”

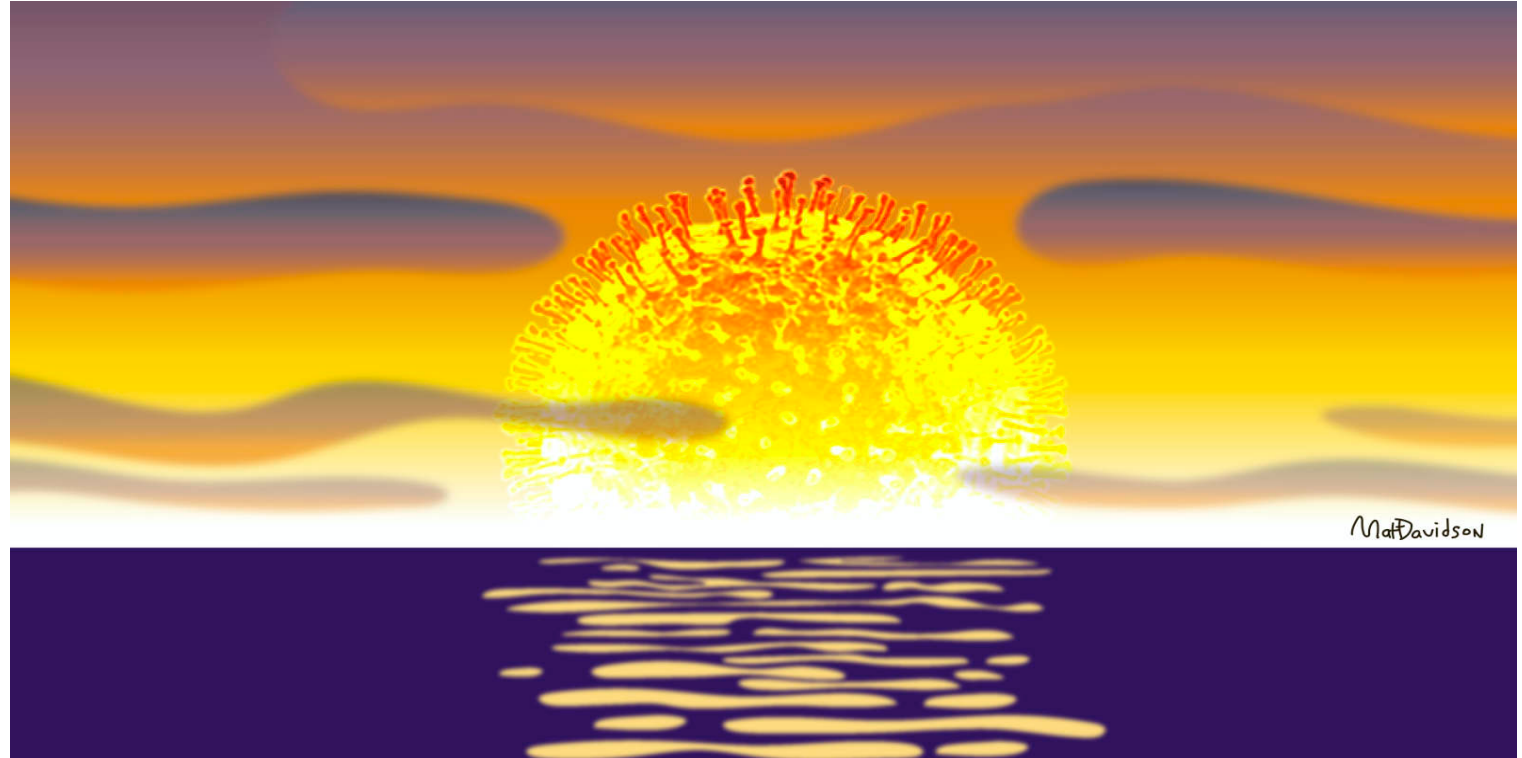
Campus Morning Mail 10th August 2020

Recommendations: What can be done for the currently onshore International students?

All stakeholders (Government – Federal/State and Universities) need to address the findings of the UTS survey ASAP...

- All International Fees for 2021 for continuing students needs to be reduced by a minimum of 25%. The students who are currently studying part of the course in partly online mode should further be subsidised. There is ample evidence now that the experience of studying online is not the same as face-to-face.
- All International students currently in Australia should be offered “one extra year” PSW on completion of the course. This will help with “return on investment” and will also convey the message that the country cares.
- Transport within city on public transport should be made completely free for the next one year. This will help with managing costs. Despite years of lobbying, some states still don't offer the international students transport concessions on public transport as they do for domestic students. (In NSW, the Opal Concession Cards are not issued to International students).

Thank You



- At this convention we have some very fine speakers and they do influence policies. It will be good to hear them and if they could comment on how to increase the ROI for current and prospective students.
- While we discuss and strategize and soak in the convention, I want to thank the three departments of the Australian High Commission (Education, Home Affairs and Trade) who have been a great support and encouragement to AAERI over the years and through this current period. My biggest thanks goes out to my AAERI Executive colleagues who have worked like a team in the interest of the industry.
- Most quotes used in this presentation is from the lead article in THE ECONOMIST dated 8th August 2020. The image used above is of *MATT DAVIDSON / SMH*.
- Copies of the slides are now available on my blog www.ravilochansingh.com and can be referred. I will be able to address any questions by email or otherwise.