

### 3 ways the coronavirus outbreak will affect international students and how unis can help

Written by Catherine Gomes, Associate Professor, RMIT University

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The 2020 academic year is off to a rocky start. Instead of the usual excitement that comes with a new semester, university students, particularly Chinese students still offshore ( [more than 100,000, or about 56%, of Chinese students](#) ) and those who have just returned, face uncertainty.

On January 30, the World Health Organisation declared the new strain of coronavirus a [public health emergency of international concern](#)

The Australian government responded by imposing a [travel ban](#) on any foreign national from entering or transiting in Australia until 14 days after leaving, or transiting through, anywhere in mainland China.

People who have travelled to mainland China recently or who have been in close contact with a confirmed case of novel coronavirus are also being asked to self quarantine for 14 days.

### How have universities responded?

Universities have been swift to respond in an inclusive manner by [reassuring Chinese students](#) in particular they will be welcomed back with little disruption to their studies.

But the details have varied. Monash university is [postponing the start of its semester](#) by one week. Others, such as the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales and Queensland University of Technology are asking Chinese students to [enrol later or defer](#) while some are [rescheduling summer exams](#)

Most universities haven't shifted their semester dates. They are telling students coming from China to self-isolate and not come to campus for 14 days. Others are offering [online courses](#) specifically for students stuck in China.

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There are several ways responses to the coronavirus can impact international students – Chinese or otherwise

## 1. Moving courses online isn't simple

All Australian universities can communicate with students, and provide access to course material, online. Many encourage instructor-student interchanges in virtual classrooms managed through learning management systems such as Canvas.

While these are excellent resources for students in Australia, the [157,000 international students still in China](#) may not be able to access them. The [Great Firewall of China](#) prevents Chinese access to popular global platforms such as Google and, increasingly, to virtual private networks (VPNs) which would be able to bypass the firewall.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*The coronavirus outbreak is the biggest crisis ever to hit international education\*\*\*](#)

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Online education in itself is a contested space. Previous research has shown online learning and flipped classrooms (where students do some online self-learning prior to later face-to-face classes) have [mixed results](#) both generally and in specific disciplines such as [medicine](#) .

This is because designing online learning experiences is a [complex exercise](#) that requires resources, thought and time. Given the short period academics have to build additional resources, it is a challenge for even the best academics to create a productive and effective online learning environment.

## 2. Studying overseas is expensive

The cost of studying in Australia is not cheap. Annually, an undergraduate international student

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[may spend anywhere](#)

between A\$20,000 to \$45,000 for their degree. They will spend an estimated \$9,150 to \$18,600 for living expenses if they stay in Australia for 15 weeks.

While institutions have concentrated their attention on Chinese international students, other international students are also victims of the coronavirus fallout. Delayed progress could mean many international students have to extend their stay in Australia. It's still unclear whether the government will help reimburse these expenses.

### 3. The first few weeks are important for socialising

The first few weeks are crucial in a student's journey and need to be spent on transition and socialisation.

Our [research](#) has found international students consider the friends they make in the host country to be their replacement family. Friends provide the support structures students feel they need while away from home.

New international students [make friends with people](#) at the beginning of their study journey in Australia. Often these friendships are with other international students who they meet at international student orientations organised by their respective institutions.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*Why international students need to make Aussie friends\*\*\*](#)

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New Chinese international students who are under quarantine will not be able to take part in such activities. Students living in institutional residential halls have support [structures in place](#), but what about students who have no one to check on them and to make sure they are alright?

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International students leave their families and support structures behind. The added uncertainty and fear around the virus is not a great way to begin the transition period. An isolation period could potentially exacerbate stress for students.

## What universities should do to help

We are in unprecedented territory. It is heartening to see universities doing their best to help students in such uncertain times. But how we help international students after this health crisis is over is equally important.

It's crucial universities provide academic advice and support to students feeling left behind in their courses. They must also strengthen services for distressed students affected directly or indirectly by the coronavirus outbreak.

Universities and the government should provide support to the broader student cohort, including transitioning late international students to classes mid-semester. If not managed and communicated properly, this can impact on the socialisation and group-work aspects of courses.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*We need to make sure the international student boom is sustainable\*\*\*](#)

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Universities also need to support their academic and student support staff. They are at the front line managing the fallout. They will still be dealing with the consequences of the crisis once the outbreak is well and truly over.

The way forward should be based on respect and empathy. The way we respond to this crisis will not only have impact on our students, but will also reflect who we are as a nation.

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*This article previously implied 56% of all international students were still in China. This has now been corrected. The advice from the Australian government has also been updated.*

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**Read more** <https://theconversation.com/3-ways-the-coronavirus-outbreak-will-affect-international-students-and-how-unis-can-help-131195>