

Chapter 10

Government Responses to the Pandemic and Their Effects on Universities



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Abstract For universities and colleges around the world the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption, which has created new challenges and possibilities, as well as amplifying existing trends. This chapter focuses on several dimensions of the pandemic-related disruption that affected universities and their students in many countries and has had widespread impacts on operations and teaching. The chapter examines some dimensions of government policy that widely affected universities: focussing on two main dimensions of those policies that temporarily reduced student movement, and those that involved a direct reduction in investment in public university education. It explores some of what government responses have meant for university operations, and the delivery of their teaching, and implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning. Focussing on the case of Australia as example of government policy responses that did little to address the specific issues universities faced resulting from the pandemic, and instead the government response was guided by ideology and reflected an attachment to using competitive mechanisms and market dynamics. The actions of the Australian government appear extreme compared to many jurisdictions, such as in many countries in Europe and in the United States, yet they align with their recent approach and their adherence to the New Public Management. That the pandemic significantly affected higher education policies is unsurprising, nonetheless examining how this occurred is instructive.

Keywords Higher education policy · Emergency online learning · Closed campuses · New public management

10.1 Introduction

As the chapters in this book reveal, 2020 altered much about how universities interact with their staff and students. From a rapid shift to online delivery to the widespread forced closure of campuses for many months during 2020, and measures

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such as social distancing and closed borders, affected universities. Whilst many of the impacts were consequence of public health responses not specific to universities, others resulted from changes directly aimed at higher education provision. Many governments around the world were presented with a dilemma in 2020: how to support their higher education systems when faced with other competing policy priorities that emerged rapidly throughout the early days of the pandemic.

Universities bring together a large number of students into what is often a small campus area, and so are affected by social distancing rules to a large extent. They are also often significant (and at times large) public institutions, often relying on some form of government funding, which became scarce in many places as the events of 2020 unfolded. The pandemic diminished available resources at precisely the moment when economic disruption increased demand for education. The dilemma of support was made all the more challenging in the face of questions about the mission and role of universities and changing expectations about delivery modes and quality.

This chapter examines some dimensions of government policy that widely affected universities: focussing on two main dimensions of those policies that temporarily reduced student movement, and those that involved a direct reduction in investment in public university education. It explores some of what government responses have meant for university operations, and the delivery of their teaching, and implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning.

How governments dealt with the universities within their borders, and how higher education policy changed during 2020, reflects longer standing trends in the approach by governments. Whilst there are significant politico-economic dimensions that are beyond the scope of this chapter attention here is on one key trend in the operation and management of higher education that has been widely embraced, although often reluctantly, being the New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991). Whilst NPM has been particularly expressed in universities reflecting Anglo-European traditions in their structure, organisations and norms, it is seen in many countries around the world. Specifically, it is where governments seek to steer at a distance and hold public universities to account through performance and outcome assessment, as well as promoting the use of market and competitive mechanisms to facilitate this (Brown, 2010; Marginson, 1993, 1997). Guided by the strictures of policy to meet the aspirations of government, as well as being influenced by significant commercial and fee activity, universities have come to be managed as complex businesses, alongside their identity as public entities, in ways that conform to tenets of NPM.

Divergent government approaches reflect the expression of NPM in higher education, and more broadly how interventionist countries are in their universities. The provision of financial surety during 2020 when universities were faced with tough choices and fewer student enrolments, reflects how governments invest and the local politics around setting tuition fees (Garrizmann, 2016).

Alongside examples from around the world of key impacts on students unable to attend campuses and governments faced with difficult funding choices for higher education, this chapter explores the case of Australia during 2020. Australia is of particular interest because of its strong embrace of NPM in higher education that has

shaped public debate and policy prescriptions, before the pandemic and throughout it (Croucher & Lacy, 2020). Central has been discussion of the cost of ensuring Australia's universities remain financially sustainable, and the role of international education fees in this. Whilst these tensions are not new, the pandemic has served to exacerbate them and has revealed institutional points of weakness in Australian higher education: reliance on temporary academic labour, uneven and immature online delivery, and growth and budgeting models with a high reliance on fragile revenue sources, primarily the fees from international students. These are challenges that are seen to a greater and lesser extent in many countries, and how universities and governments have responded to them is telling, especially the extent to which higher education has been left to the whims of the market.

Australia provides an interesting case as the government policy responses did little to address the specific issues universities faced resulting from the pandemic, and instead their response was guided by ideology and reflected an attachment to using competitive mechanisms and market dynamics. The actions of the Australian government appear extreme compared to in many jurisdictions, such as in many countries in Europe and in the United States, yet they align with their recent approach and their adherence to NPM. That the pandemic significantly affected higher education policies is unsurprising, nonetheless examining how this occurred is instructive.

10.2 Government Responses to the Pandemic and the Role of the New Public Management

As higher education has massified (Trow, 2007) in many countries it has seen the rise of many high participation systems, being where a very high proportion of a given age cohort complete higher education (Marginson, 2016). This has in turn required that governments must necessarily devote focus and resources to managing higher education institutions, including often making significant public investments to sustain and grow provision. Whilst there is a diversity around the world in high participation systems, many have developed in wealthy countries where a broad neoliberal-informed political approach is evident. This is an approach where government policies favour particular forms of free market capitalism and deregulation, and where there is an emphasis of national fiscal balance and continued efforts to reduce public spending. This has often gone hand in hand with the implementation of public sector policies and approaches that fall under the canopy of NPM.

Where NPM has become embedded, it has framed the approach to higher education, coming to dominate in many places in the Anglophone world, as well as throughout much of Europe. For higher education, NPM policies often come hand in hand with stronger leadership and managerial structures with a reduced role for collegial structures and internally representative bodies. Expenditure is managed through narrow outcome indicators focussed on 'outputs' rather than on initial resource allocation where there is a high degree of trust this will deliver on specified aims. At

the fore is an emphasis on performance and the measurement, assessment and monitoring of research and teaching activity. Finally, evaluation of academic institutions and disciplines has been formalised and developed, partly in order to make decisions on accreditation and partly as an instrument to improve performance in management, research and teaching (Paradeise et al., 2009; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012; Taylor, 2017).

Whilst NPM polices and approaches have meant specific forms of performance management and accountability, they have also often promoted the perception by government and politicians that there should be stronger academic autonomy, although this has often manifested as institutional autonomy rather than the autonomy of the individual academic. This is a function of the emphasis on managing outcomes through vertical steering, where institutional leaders have a strong degree of autonomy over institutional strategy and internal resource allocation. This may be tempered by standardisation and norms within a national higher education context, including through regulatory and other government-imposed requirements, as well as by participation of *inter-* and *supra-*national actors for higher education, such as in the European Union (EU).

At times governments have enacted polices and approaches that support instructional autonomy in different ways and that cut against the vertical forms of steering inspired by NPM. In particular there has been an emphasis on what is termed network governance, with policies

that encouraged the inclusion of stakeholders in academic affairs, on institutional boards and decision making on research funding, thus widening the networks of actors involved in decision making and opening up for the introduction of non-academic criteria, principles and preferences in such processes. (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2013, p. 116)

Examining the response of governments to the challenges brought by the pandemic can be informed by the relative influence of NPM, as well as elements of network governance, their interplay and sometimes conflicting purposes.

The pandemic provides some useful insight into how NPM is expressed through government policy responses. Effects came both from policies that have directly impacted higher education provision (chiefly as unintentional consequences of public health responses), as well as resulting from reduced capacity for government to invest in higher education (following the broader the economic impacts of the pandemic). In many countries there is emerging evidence that direct policy intervention, and at times reduced investment, have affected universities in distinct ways. Nonetheless, the extent and nature of these effects varies significantly between countries and overtime, with a spectrum of impacts: some institutions face existential questions whilst others have markedly improved their positions. Given the complexity of the pandemic's impacts, the analysis here will focus on two of the main policy impacts that are seen in the large, wealthy, advanced high participation systems. These are, first, policies that have temporarily reduced student movement, and second those that have involved a direct reduction in investment in public university education.

10.3 The Experience of Closed Campuses and Reduced Movement of Students in Different Countries

In the first category of policy responses that this chapter examines are those government mandated actions to promote ‘social distancing’ that have stopped staff and students physically attending campuses and so prohibited delivery of education in a face-to-face mode. Measures include policies such as the widespread use of temporary ‘stay at home’ and shelter-in-place orders, sometimes styled as ‘lock downs’, as well as the closure of *intra-* and/or *inter-*national borders that have the effect of excluding some students from physically attending campuses, classrooms or lab-based education. Given the localised nature of many of these government mandated rules, higher education providers have been subject to overlapping national, regional and local policies.

During March to June 2020 the use of such orders was widespread at different times in many parts of the world, notably in North America, Europe and many Asian countries, including China. For example, many of the large U.S. states with major university systems were subject to stay at home order during much of 2020, with for example campuses in the University of California System closed from March 14 with face-to-face class not resuming until 2021, with students switching rapidly to “remote learning” (UC Davis, 2021). This was a pattern followed by many universities in North America, Europe and Asia as a response to successive waves of the pandemic and the associated health measures. Whilst the shift to remote and online learning was widespread for higher education institutions in 2020, so too was a return to at least some face-to-face learning by the end of 2020, as rates of vaccination against the COVID-19 disease were deemed sufficient to enable campus activity. Notable examples include the C9 universities in China, which are the leading research intense universities in the country, rapidly moved to online learning in March 2020 and had a full return to campus a semester later (Coates et al., 2022) after the widespread deployment of Sinovac.

Alongside localised shelter-in-place orders which shut campuses was the effect of temporarily closed borders and changes to visa arrangements for students. Subsequently the number of international enrolments at many universities around the world fell due to limitations on the number of flights available as well as the closure of consulates and embassies around different countries. For example, in the United States the number of international enrolments fell by 43% during the 2020–2021 fall semester (Adedoyin et al., 2021; June, 2020). Many students also decided to defer their studies during 2020 (Fisher, 2020). This was a pattern repeated across the world. For example, the number of international enrolments (where students study in a country for which they are not a citizen or resident) initially dropped significantly in many of the Anglophone countries during the early months of 2020. Both Canada and the United States initially suffered enrolment reductions but when campuses and borders opened, they came to increase their share of the international flows. In contrast, the United Kingdom declined in its share overall, whilst more markedly Australia’s share of the international movement reduced by around 11% during 2020

(IDP, 2021). This was due to the extended border closure in Australia that prohibited international students from entering the country.

Universities in different countries responded to these challenges in many ways, depending on local context, though some common responses were seen in major institutions. To address the barriers for student physical attendance, many (and likely most) universities extended their online offerings, “emergency online learning” as it was styled by some, with two notable features. The first was the rapid pace that universities moved to fully online delivery (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Despite most universities having significant Learning Management Systems (LMS) and other online tools in regular and widespread use, campus education delivered with a face-to-face component is still the preference for public education providers worldwide (e.g. IDP, 2021).

Universities across Europe provide a good example of the challenge this presented for many, with the assessment by some commentators that their education systems were unprepared for emergency online learning (Marinoni et al., 2020; cf. Zawacki-Richter, 2021). Teaching largely moved to digital platforms as stay at home orders came into effect in many EU countries during March and April 2020. The European University Association (EUA) estimated that 95% of universities moved to distance learning at some point during 2020. The speed that this occurred for many required adaptations to their learning milieu, with a common assumption in institutions that it would only last weeks before returning to previous modes, necessitating “emergency solutions” (Irien, 2021). The EUA found that despite having online repositories in place and other supports for digitally enhanced learning and teaching, many academics had not taught online before the pandemic, with for example the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey finding that 70% of academics had never taught online prior to the 2020 (EUA, 2020, p. 3). This was an experience likely mirrored elsewhere.

Whilst higher education was not always at the forefront of the publicly announced policy deliberations—in contrast to primary and secondary education and the impact that it would have on school students were front and centre—governments in most advanced systems largely elected to chart their own course. One exception is China, where leading universities were part of a major effort to transition to online learning whilst incorporating a change in courses offering, with the introduction of university wide auditing (for example 25% of all Tsinghua students), with more than 40,000 students having participated, as well as “Clone Classes” delivered to students at universities in China that remained under strict lockdown due to being located in the initial epicentre of COVID-19 (Wong et al., 2022). The Chinese response follows its increasing investment in education infrastructure, including for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Education Action Plan 2016 seeks a “proactive and exemplary” role for the Chinese education sectors as well as China’s Vocational Education Action Plan 2020–2023. It is notable, however, that despite these initiatives in China, face-to-face delivery returned as the primary mode in the C9 (which are the large well-resourced research universities). It remains to be seen whether the Chinese attempt to foster large scale online education will be successful in the short run, or whether it will prove unfeasible, and unpopular with students. This pattern of a rapid shift to online,

followed by student indicating a preference to return to face-to-face delivery, was not confined to China, and surveys of student attitudes and preferences have indicated as such (IDP, 2021).

10.4 Public Subsidies

The second category of policy responses examined here capture a change, and in some cases a reduction, in public funding for public universities that has resulted from the pandemic. Where governments have had reduced taxation and other revenues matched with greater expenditure in many areas (such as health and welfare spending), this has amplified the need for prioritisation and policy trade-offs. Governments have been forced to assess their priority for funding higher education, where universities have at times been a lesser priority. Nonetheless, in some countries government funding for universities was maintained or increased even where universities overall saw a decline in revenue due to lower fee or other income.

Many institutions in South America and Europe had to contend with significant reductions in their public funding allocation where governments reduced their outlays or refused to provide support to universities to meet revenue shortfalls, either through existing programmes or temporary targeted funding measures (Al-Samarrai et al., 2020). This was evident in a diversity of countries, including Brazil, the United Kingdom (Ahlburg, 2020), throughout countries in the Middle East (Kawamorita et al., 2020), and Australia, as the case below illustrates.

Despite the reduction in public financing for many universities, there were some notable examples of growth in government subsidies for students. For example, in the United States during fiscal year 2020 per student funding in state systems increased by an average of 2.9% for public universities. In many areas financial aid for students was also increased during 2020 (IPEDS, 2021). Even where governments increased or maintained funding, universities still often had to contend with an overall reduction in their budgets. For instance, in the United States many major public universities in the state education systems suffered significant reductions in funding despite an increase government funding, which in large part came from a reduced revenue from non-tuition sources. For example, public four-year colleges contended with a reduction of 12.5% in the 2020 fiscal year (IPEDS, 2021; June & O'Leary, 2021). These cuts had significant affects, with many part-time academics losing their employment as the work force was reduced, with some by more than half. There is evidence that job loses disproportionately affected women (McMillen, 2021).

Here the narrative of neoliberalism and the NPM is more evident when governments took a more hands-off approach, continuing to steer at a distance, despite the fact that the pandemic is unlikely to have improved the position of many institutions and certainly caused a short-term crisis. There were few examples of structural change to higher education policies (though the Australian case explored below is one example to the contrary), and a preference for short-term funding solution if at all. Whilst it is too early to tell at the time of writing what the full effect has been

on higher education finances, the early indication would seem to correlate that the response from government mirrors their broader approach to higher education policy making. The next section explores some of these issues in greater detail through the Australian example.

10.5 The Australian Government, Universities and the Pandemic During 2020

Australia provides a useful case study that reflects trends occurring in other countries and shows how NPM has affected universities. During 2020 Australia was one of the most successful of the advanced economies in reducing the effect of COVID-19 on the healthcare system, with relatively fewer hospitalisations and deaths per capita than many countries (Hopkins, 2021). This was in no small part thanks to the country's 'island' status, allowing it to tightly control borders and the movement of people. The Australian government also initiated widespread stay at home measures during March 2020 and one state, Victoria, was also 'locked down' for much of the latter part of the year. This affected Australian universities in a similar manner that it did for many different countries around the world. Students were not allowed to attend face-to-face education due to the widespread stay at home orders, and closed borders meant that international students travelling to Australia were not able to enter the country, although many commenced their studies online with the promise of later attending face-to-face.

For the Australian universities this meant a rapid shift to online education as detailed throughout this volume, although this was not enough to maintain growth in the enrolment of non-resident international students who were barred from entering. This affected universities due to the reduced revenue expected from international students electing to either study elsewhere instead accepting delivery of their course online, or for some deferring their enrolment on the hope they would be able to complete the full course on campus. Universities Australia, the peak lobby organisation for universities in the country, estimated that the reduction in revenue was in the order of \$4 billion during 2020, although recent analysis has shown this was closer to \$1.8 billion (Larkins & Marshman, 2021). By mid to late 2020 universities appeared to be facing a significant revenue shortfall.

The widespread reduction in economic activity and furloughing of a large proportion of the Australian workforce prompted the Commonwealth government to introduce short-term financial measures. The largest of these schemes was the *JobKeeper* policy (ATO, 2021). This provided eligible employers and employees with a wage subsidy. Initially public universities were eligible for this programme, but its regulations were amended by the Treasury several times to reduce the chance that they would qualify. Whilst commentators have suggested that the *JobKeeper* policy was not likely the best means to provide short-term support to universities it is striking that the government refused to implement another scheme that could provide short-term

certainty for public universities (Norton, 2020). This decision was one of several signals of how the government intended to deal with the various immediate challenges that the universities faced in 2020. From the outset, the Education Minister and federal administration indicated that international students would not be treated differently to other foreign nationals travelling to Australia for the purpose of tourism or business. Initially some Chinese international students were able to transit through a third country, many through Thailand, to enter Australia when it closed the border to China in February 2020, but such arrangements did not continue long and only a minority of those intending to travel to Australia during 2020 were able to benefit from this temporary policy. When Australia decided to only permit residents to enter the country in March 2020, the government signalled there would not be any special arrangements for international students who were enrolled in Australian universities and yet to arrive. Moreover, it signalled that there were to be no special arrangements for those international students who were already in Australia when shelter-in-place orders were implemented. Excluded from access to welfare, many international students came to rely on support from their university or from charity when they could not work due to lockdown. This exposed the reliance many had on work that was contingent and precarious ('off the books' and without a basic employment contract), and the consequences this had for these students (Soans, 2021).

Universities in Australia were quick to reduce the number of temporary academics employed on a 'casual' basis and made many permanent staff redundant, contracting their overall operations. By the end of 2020 most of the 37 comprehensive public universities reduced their staff numbers, with total job losses in Australian higher education estimated to be between 17,000 and 40,000 individuals (Littleton & Stanford, 2021; Universities Australia, 2021). Many of the job losses came as face-to-face teaching ceased for the second semester 2020.

The main response from the government to the growing predicament of the universities was to unveil the *Job-ready Graduates* package of policies in June, 2020. This proposed to change the funding arrangements for teaching, as well as modify various requirements attached to eligibility for funding. The government's stated intention for the proposals was to change the way that public funding is provided to public universities. The government announced publicly that 27,000 'extra' domestic places would be created by 2021, with a growth in subsequent years, to expand the educational opportunities for residents affected by the pandemic and assist in Australia's economic recovery. A discussion paper issued alongside the announcement of the *Job-ready Graduates* policy stated that it increases the share of cost paid by the government for courses that "produce higher public returns or which contribute to identified national priorities" (DESE, 2020, p. 23). Despite this rhetoric of the policy being substantively new in its aims and design, it was to be the latest in a similar series of attempts to change the basis on which domestic students were provided a public subsidy, following adjoining proposals that the government failed to legislate in 2014 and 2015. The government had managed to implement some changes in 2017 to, in-effect, reduce the number of publicly supported undergraduate places it provided to Australian residents, which was the only major change since the announcement of

a voucher system for undergraduate subsidy in 2008 (Croucher & Waghorne, 2020, p. 196–197).

The most important change that the *Job-ready Graduates* policies proposed was that the government would now set a maximum teaching grant for each university in its funding agreement, with a different subsidy amount depending on the course area in which a place was offered as set out in the legislated funding guidelines. Crucially, the government changed the subsidy amounts for many areas of study to significantly increase the proportion that students contributed through the HECS-HELP scheme (which is the primary loans scheme through which Australian students pay fees for their university education) and reduce the amount paid for by general public subsidy. The relative amounts that students contributed for different areas of study has remained similar since the introduction of the HECS student loans in the early 1990s. Generally, students have contributed a high proportion of the total funding provided to universities for disciplines in science, technology, medicine, engineering, commerce and law, whilst providing a lower amount for initial teacher education, social sciences and nursing (Chapman & Nicholls, 2013). The *Job-ready Graduates* policies significantly changed these relative contribution amounts for some courses in particular humanities degrees required a larger contribution from students than they had previously. Despite the stated purpose of these changes to incentivise students to study in areas that the government deemed necessary to support Australia's economic recovery (DESE, 2020), there was little transparency in the rationale for preferencing science and technology. These areas did not match the likely job prospects of graduates (National Careers Institute, 2020). Nor would the change in relative fees likely succeed over the long term as a means to incentivise students, as it was contravened by the evidence for how students have selected areas of study in Australia. Since the introduction of HECS students do not appear to have taken the price of a course into account, it has not affected demand. In short, the government proposed a system that was unlikely to achieve its stated aims (Chapman & Nicholls, 2013).

The *Job-ready Graduates* policy also meant the universities which would now have to decide the mix of places they were prepared to provide within the cap also incentivised by the relative amount of funding they would receive. This presented a risk of potentially perverse incentives for universities to provide more places than those for which they would receive higher subsidies, but they only receive the student contributions for additional places and generally these would be insufficient to cover their costs. The maximum amount of public subsidy is likely the determining factor how many student places a university can sustainably provide.

An increase in the number of student places was one of the major reasons the government proposed the rise in the average student contribution level and a decrease in the average government subsidy level. Yet, overall, it seems unlikely that these additional places will be provided on the current policy settings, as there is little transparency in how the estimated additional number of student places is to occur and based on the previous (Warburton, 2021). What the policy has done is change the basis on which university students are supported in Australia to provide a less coherent system for subsidy, with a weak justification for preferencing some areas,

focussed narrowly on a particular conception of 'jobs'. This incoherence is suggestive of the way that the government approaches higher education policy in Australia.

The government eventually short-term support to the challenge that the major research universities in Australia faced that came from the impact on the research workforce that a projected reduction in revenue was likely to have, and whether institutions could continue to employ research-only academics, and predominantly those in the biomedical sciences. The government made a one-off increase in block grant research funding of one billion Australian dollars. This provided funds which were sufficient to ensure that job losses for many research staff were minimised. However, the government did not provide additional funding after 2021.

Much of the response of government to the challenges of 2020 for Australian higher education appears born of the immediate crisis. However, the government also elected to make significant other changes to higher education policy that appear less rooted in the immediate response.

The universities responded rapidly to the introduction of the government policies. Lockdowns and border closures meant a quick move to online education. This had the effect of changing how universities could deliver education, with fewer international students, and how education was received and understood. The reduced number of international students also caused a revenue crisis for many universities. Most Australian universities are public institutions funded through grants from the Commonwealth government along with a student contribution made through the HELP deferred tuition loan scheme, but they have also come to rely on international student fees to support much of their activity that is not funded by public sources. This reduction in international student revenue meant universities had diminished capacity. Like many Australian businesses, universities faced the prospect of shrinking their workforce for the foreseeable future and by mid-2020, it was clear they were going to have to make significant changes to their operations. The Australian case provides an interesting example of a government response to the challenge of the universities.

10.6 Government Responses and Their Effects

In thinking about the implications of the pandemic, and how this has affected countries' higher education policies, some observations of the distinct approaches by government during 2020 can be made. The pandemic, in amplifying current trends and tensions for universities, also does so for higher education policy. This suggests two things that are pertinent to higher education policy. The first is that the pandemic, like other major crises, provides the opportunity to undertake new initiatives that would normally not be publicly popular or politically possible. The second is that it strains resources and requires a reprioritisation of policy prescriptions. This is more pertinent to democratic representative systems where electoral politics influences the actions of government, but is likely a feature in all countries but those suffering under the most despotic of regimes.

Commentators have observed that the pandemic has served to amplify tensions within national higher education policy contexts (e.g. Witze, 2020). Those countries for which NPM is dominant in the mode of operation of higher education institutions have seen government responses that reflect its core tenants. In those countries where government has elected to steer at a distance and promote market mechanisms for higher education it has been reluctant to provide direct support for higher education institutions. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) note that many governments, including those in Australia and in the Westminster tradition, are in the ‘Public interest’ model, where much of what government does is about arbitration and reconciliation for competing interests within a country. In higher education in Australia, this is the case, with universities positioned as an independent actor responsible for their own interests, despite their public status that endows both resources and social licence to operate. The message from government to Australian universities in 2020 was that in enjoying significant autonomy and acting as self-determining institutions, they were ‘on their own’. Whilst government rhetoric was largely aimed in Australia at the value that higher education presented the actions of the government suggest that this rhetoric was hollow indeed.

Where governments have been slower to take an NPM approach to higher education policy, and to some extent throughout Europe, government support for universities has been more direct. The extent to which politicians were willing to prioritise higher education and directly intervene is perhaps revealing of the broader perception of the public role in supporting education in these countries. Even where there has been an increasing use of market mechanisms and attempts to steer at a distance, this did not preclude direct intervention and supportive rhetoric.

The pandemic has revealed weaknesses in higher education policy and the implications for universities. In some jurisdictions it is evident that despite the high degree of autonomy universities enjoy, even where they are still expected to perform to government criteria, they have struggled to be able to contend with the consequence of 2020, especially where they were faced with decisions over which they have had little control. The closure of borders has significantly affected some institutions that rely on the international student market, in particular in Australia and the United Kingdom. It has illustrated the consequences that NPM has brought with it—casual labour, uneven and immature online delivery, tenuous revenue sources—have been exacerbated by the government response.

10.7 Implications for Universities

The challenge that pandemic has brought for many universities, and the role of government in ameliorating or exacerbating these, brings various implications for how education is delivered into the future. It has highlighted that where there are significant constraints on resources universities must innovate in how they will provide education and other services to students, or be in peril. Whilst on one level it appears the autonomy that universities enjoy in many countries may not have been

eroded as result of the pandemic, their purpose has been more open to question, especially where there are expectations of their need to engage outside actors, and to meet the expectations of government. This has implications for their teaching and learning, and other functions of universities.

To a greater or lesser extent, many universities were left to chart their own course during 2020. Whilst some governments were willing to make significant investments online, or support universities to raise funds to do so, this level of intervention came with expectations and constraints which make innovation harder in the long run.

Early predictions that the online education revolution was finally here due to the pandemic seem a little hasty after the events of 2020. Many students have been vocal that they want much of what being on a campus offers and that what they expect out of their higher education does not always translate well to the online environment. The initial promises that massive open online courses would replace the need for campuses have not so far come true.

The issue here is not whether there is an important role for online education, nor that what students want out of their ‘campus experience’ cannot be delivered in other ways, as the pandemic so vividly demonstrated. Rather, it is that we likely do not yet know the optimal balance between what students expect and how the different elements of an education can be reimagined without the physical location. Many of the motivations for study—such as future employment, intrinsic interest, finding a sense of self or purpose, social experience or the search for a partner—are not easily unbound from campuses. Working out how students can seek and receive a combination of these things without physical proximity is a challenge.

This has implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning. For the successful ascension of online learning, it will be crucial to get the pedagogical models right, ensure learning gain is consistent and that strong student engagement is supported. However, there is also a need for this to fit with the wider questions around the student experience. Public policy for universities is not remote from many of these questions as the pandemic has demonstrated. How universities can respond depends on the actions of their governments in many ways, and these are not always immediately obvious.

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