



COVID Crisis, Culture Wars and Australian Higher Education

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Abstract

The COVID pandemic has had dramatic effects on higher education worldwide, but the impact has been very uneven. The gap between rich and poor has widened further, aid to education has been cut, and abrupt changes introduced to pedagogy, international student and staff mobility, research laboratories, and institutional bottom lines. Anglophone systems with a high dependence on international students (Australia, Canada, UK, New Zealand) have been particularly affected. In Australia, the fact that the COVID crisis occurred in the context of rivalrous US–China relations influenced how the pandemic was understood and its effects, including in higher education. But the specific context was also influential, including lingering tensions between Australia’s geography and history. A further complication was that higher education had become overly dependent on international student fee income, with higher education becoming Australia’s largest service-sector export. It is argued that the longstanding underfunding of the higher education system, the abrupt closing of international borders, and the impact to the rising US–China Culture War have combined to produce major effects on the higher education system, the results of which will continue for some time.

Keywords COVID · Culture Wars · Australia · Higher Education · International students

The COVID pandemic has had dramatic effects on education worldwide. But the impact has been very uneven. With the worldwide total of COVID cases having reached 259 million by November 2021, and 5 million deaths, some 120 million people, mostly from the most vulnerable sectors of society and residents of rural and remote regions, were thrown back into extreme poverty and the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs lost. The gap between rich and poor has widened further. This has had a dramatic effect on education, with out of school children estimated to have risen from 280 million worldwide in 2018, to 1.6 billion in 2020. Aid to education

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has also been cut, with UNESCO estimates revealing that overall education aid could fall by US\$2 billion by 2022 and might not recover for years. The IMF warned in late February 2021 of what it saw as “dangerous divergence between and within economies” and called for strong policies to counter the trend (IMF 2021; Furceri et al. 2020).

Worldwide, the pandemic exposed several weaknesses in the higher education sector, necessitating abrupt changes to pedagogy, international student and staff mobility, research laboratories, and institutional bottom lines. The current article initially reviews some key effects internationally, before turning to a close examination of effects and consequences in the Australian higher education system, and specific vulnerabilities arising from funding models and internationalisation profile. Drawing on data, policy documents, and analytic studies, the article selects funding of higher education, and fees and rankings, as test sites for the argument regarding financing of the sector, in particular how it affected internationalisation strategies, and rendered Australian universities particularly vulnerable. The rise of US–China Culture Wars is applied to the analysis of Australia–China bi-lateral scientific collaboration, its impact and prospects.

In some systems, assistance was provided to international students who, for a variety of reasons, needed temporary, targeted support. Canada, for example, instituted a scheme offering the prospect of a one-time work permit of up to 18 months, allowing international post-graduate students to work anywhere in Canada (Bhuptani 2021). Other systems withheld support, despite evidence that significant numbers of international students were experiencing difficulties. Support for higher education institutions (HEIs) too, while conditional upon demonstrated need, varied from system to system. In the UK, for example, the government offered £280 million to sustain ongoing research projects, a blend of low-interest loans and grants that could subsidise as much as 80 per cent of international student fee income that had been lost, and emergency loans to those HEIs at risk of bankruptcy (THE 2020a).

While the impact on pedagogy was both widespread and abrupt, the capacity of different systems to respond varied considerably. In the face of health restrictions on social gathering, wealthier higher education systems were able to transition to an online learning mode quite quickly, albeit with difficulty, including significant strains upon academic and technical staff. Poorer systems such as Laos, Afghanistan and Myanmar, for example, lacked both infrastructure such as robust national broadband or Wi-Fi networks, and adequate numbers of well-trained academic and technical support staff, to sustain a swift transition to online learning. In Laos, it was estimated that only 30 per cent of students could access online learning (Faiz et al. 2020; Dawi 2020; Vongsakith 2020). The overall effect was, as Jamil Salmi, and Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit each argued, (among a number of others), highly unequal, widening the gap between rich and poor within and between nations (Salmi 2021; Altbach and de Wit 2020).

The Anglosphere

Anglophone systems with a high dependence on international students (Australia, Canada, UK, New Zealand) have been particularly affected by the COVID pandemic. In the UK, in 2018–2019, for example, of an overall higher education

enrolment total of 2,383,970, international students comprised 485,645 (equivalent to 20.3 per cent). While significantly enriching levels of diversity, this large proportion of fee-paying international students also yielded a substantial income for many HEIs, especially the top-tier Russell Group, including universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Warwick and University College London. (<https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/>) Yet, due to their superior financial position, it was Oxford and Cambridge that were found to be least affected of all UK universities, despite a systemwide halving of the government share of university budgets between 2010 and 2020. (Dolton 2020) Fuelled by a widespread view regarding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, a worrying rise in expressions of anti-Asian and anti-Chinese feelings was reported, with an influential survey reporting that a mere 22 per cent of Britons trusted China to behave responsibly in the world. The same survey found that only 30 per cent supported Chinese students studying at UK universities, and 27 per cent favoured research collaboration (BFPG 2021; Philip 2021). In early 2021, it was reported that almost 200 academics at a dozen British universities were being investigated for allegedly assisting in China's weapons research and development (Dathan 2021).

In the USA, where, by mid-April 2021, total COVID cases had reached almost 32 million, with 576,000 deaths, international student enrolments in higher education totalled around 1.1 million, a little over 5 per cent of the total and a fall of 20,000 from the previous year (Israel and Batalova 2021). Chinese students accounted for 33.7 per cent of international enrolments, and Indian students a further 18.4 per cent. Surveys of prospective international students revealed a rise in health concerns, increasing resistance to online-only pedagogy, rising concerns regarding visa delays and refusals and a 'turbulent political and social environment', and a significant decline in international students' interest, regarding studying in the US (Wan 2021; WENR 2020; Martel 2020a, b; Knopf 2020; US State Department 2021). As in the UK, a troubling spike in anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment became evident, including almost 4,000 incidents of harassment and attack, necessitating passage of the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*, to combat rising racism (Cheng 2021b). The spike in racist incidents occurred after the term 'China virus', popularised by then President Trump, went viral (Rogin and Nawaz 2020; Jalonick 2021; Galloway 2021; Fromer 2020; Pew 2020; BBC 2021, Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). Introduced restrictions on research collaboration barred 3,000–4,000 Chinese graduate students and researchers whose institutions had links to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the visas of a further 1,000 researchers and students were revoked. In parallel were prosecutions of 10 Chinese-American scientists, including MITs Chen Gang,¹ as part of wider moves such as the Justice Department's *China Initiative*, that identified higher education as 'one of our most vulnerable sectors.' (Department of Justice 2020) Moves were also made to close on-campus Confucius Institutes, China's cultural and language organisation, and cancel Fulbright exchanges with Hong Kong and mainland China (Wang and Wen 2021; Welch 2021c; Cheng 2021a; Redden

¹ Chinese names are given in the Chinese form throughout, with the family name first.

2019) Research that involved intellectual property disputes became increasingly framed as national security matters (Cheng 2021b).

Australian Context

Once again, as in the UK and especially the US, the fact that the COVID crisis occurred in the context of burgeoning US–China rivalry influenced how the pandemic was understood and its effects, including in higher education. But although several of these same elements were evident in the Australian case, they were influenced by the specific context, including lingering tensions between Australia’s geography and history. This included the genesis and development of its higher education system, and its regional engagement, as well as wider tensions between seeing the US as its prime strategic ally, and China as its major trade partner, and a major partner in research (Varghese 2018; Chief Scientist 2013). Adding to differences with the UK and the US was the fact that higher education had become Australia’s largest service-sector export, contributing \$40 billion to the nation’s export earnings by 2019, with multiplier effects through the economy (Varghese 2018; Hurley and Van Dyke 2020).

White settlement, that initially gave rise to a number of British colonies, (now states), meant that the earliest universities modelled themselves exclusively on British models, as did their staff: “The German, French and American universities seem to have been beyond the pale” (Smith 2001, 4, see also Sherington 2019; Welch 2021a). But one of the world’s largest per-capita mass migration programme in the decades after WWII led to an increasing acknowledgement of diversity. Strengthened by a non-discriminatory migration policy from the 1970s, this led to a growing recognition of the implications of the country’s location, with all of its major neighbours being from East and Southeast Asia (Welch 2014, 2021a, b). Forty per cent of Australia’s migrants now stem from Asia, and Asian Australians form 14.4 per cent of the total population. Major Asian diasporas exist, of which the Chinese is the largest, with Indian growing rapidly, and Vietnamese also significant. In part due to the bias towards skilled migration in the national migration programme, many current migrants from Asia are highly qualified (Lowy Institute 2021), with data showing that academics working in Australian universities, from China, and from India, each tripled from 2005 to 2015. More than 15 per cent of Australian academics overall are now from Asia, and as seen in Fig. 1, in some disciplines the ratio is much higher (Oishi 2017). Overall, the staff profile has changed substantially from an initially narrowly British, to a vibrantly global.

This context translated into a stronger regional profile among Australia’s international students, than for the US, UK, or Canada. All top ten source countries of international students at Australian universities are East Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian (Ferguson and Sherrell, 2019). Chinese students alone numbered 150,000 and formed 40.5 per cent of total international higher education enrolments in 2018 (Hong Kong included), with South Asia adding a further 28 per cent and Southeast Asia a further 11.7 per cent (Ferguson and Sherrell 2019; Babones 2019). While the rich mix of international students clearly added to cultural depth

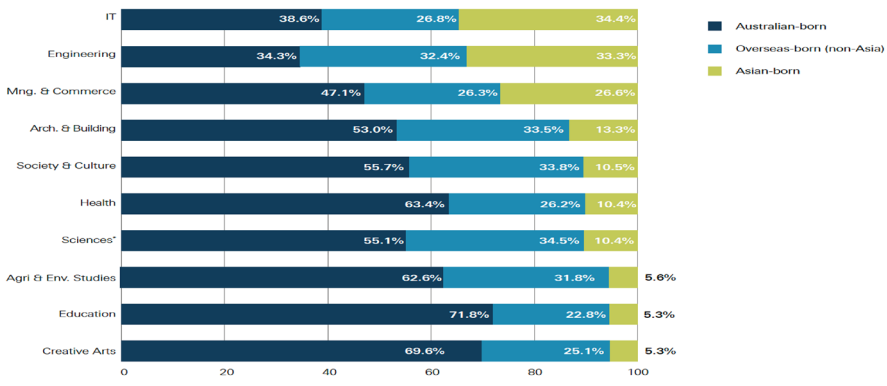


Fig. 1 Australian academics by discipline and birthplace. Source Oishi (2017)

and diversity on campus, their fees also boosted institutional bottom lines, helping to sustain research, especially among the elite Go8 tier of research intensive HEIs.

Twin Pressures: Fees and Rankings

An overtly entrepreneurial approach to international student recruitment prevailed from the mid 1980s, when, after some internal debate, the federal government deemed international education to be an industry (Altbach and Welch 2010; Welch 2012; Babones 2019). International enrolments in Australian universities mushroomed, more than trebling, from 13,700 in 1983 to 42,600 in 1993, and almost doubling in the decade 2008–2018, for example (ABS 1995). Over the same period, international student revenue increased in real terms by 137 per cent (even more among the research-intensive Go8 tier), and in 2019, Australian universities collected A\$10 billion in international student fees (DESE 2020b; Hurley and Van Dyke 2020) (Fig. 2).

This steep rise in both international enrolments and related income was in response to twin pressures. On the one hand, the persistent underfunding of higher education by federal governments pushed universities to diversify their income sources, notably via energetically seeking more and more international students, whose high fees helped shore up institutional bottom lines. Government funding to higher education actually declined from 1996 to 2004, in opposition to OECD trends, and continues to lag its OECD peers significantly (Productivity Commission 2019; Welch 2021b). Total Australian government higher education spending as a proportion of GDP was 0.77 per cent in 2015, compared to the OECD average of 0.98 (UA 2019, p. 14). By 2016, OECD data showed that private expenditure on higher education had increased to 62.2 per cent of the total, much higher than the OECD average of 32 per cent (OECD 2019; McGowan 2018; UA 2019). For Go8 universities, government funding as a proportion of university budgets effectively halved over the years since 1986: from around 80 per cent, to less than 40 per cent in

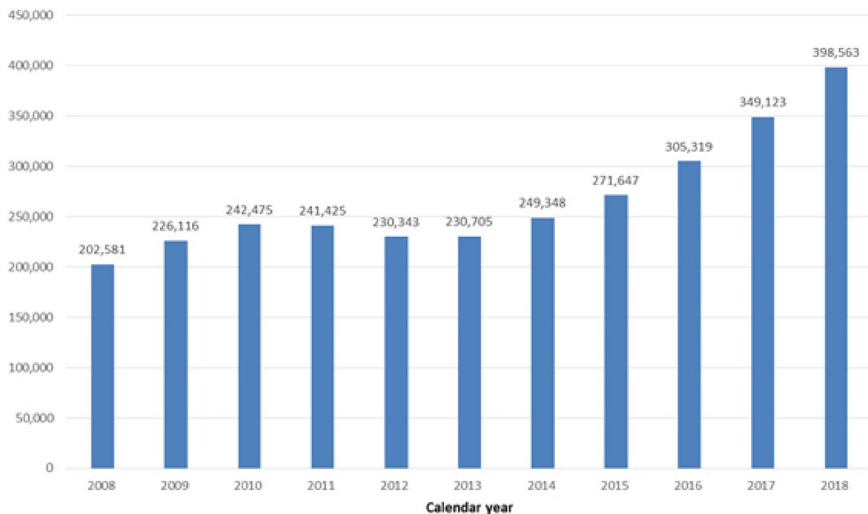


Fig. 2 Overseas student enrolments, Australian universities, 2008–2018. *Source* APH (2019)

2018. By 2018, in some Go8 universities, income from tuition fees, overwhelmingly from international students, overtook income derived from the federal government (Varghese 2018).

In light of this, particularly for the elite Go8 HEIs, the impulse to recruit more and more international students proved irresistible. The response, in the form of a quest for evermore fee-paying international students, meant that by 2019 they formed 32.4 per cent of total enrolments, while average international student revenue as proportion of institutional budgets rose from 15.5 per cent in 2008 to 23.3 per cent in 2017 (Ferguson and Sherrell 2019). In some universities it was significantly higher: the University of Sydney alone earned A\$885 million in international student fees in 2018, accounting for 35 per cent of overall revenue (Purtill and Stockwell 2020; Hurley and Van Dyke 2020, p. 26; Babones 2019). By some measures, international enrolments at the university had reached 50 per cent of the total student cohort by 2020. At the national level, income from international students rose from A\$3.72 billion in 2008 to A\$8.84 billion in 2018, (an increase of 272 per cent). This was more than double the rate of increase in government support over the same period: from A\$13.9 billion to A\$18.3 billion (132 per cent) (Hurley and Van Dyke 2020, pp. 6–7) (Table 1).

The second pressure was at least to maintain, and, if possible, to boost the ranking of the country's universities, on the proliferating array of global university ranking schemes such as Shanghai Jiaotong's *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU), *Times*, and *QS*. In reputational terms, it was particularly important for the system to sustain a significant number of Australian universities within the world's top 100. The ARWU 2020 listing numbered 7 Australian universities among the top 100, the *Times World University Rankings* 2020 listed 6, and *QS World University Rankings* for the same year listed 8 (ARWU 2020; THE 2020b; QS 2020).

Table 1 International student enrolments, higher education, 2002–2019

	2002	2011	2019	2002–2019 (%)
Higher education	124,992	241,440	442,219	354
English language programs (ELI-COS)	58,435	94,853	156,880	268
Non-award	23,518	27,568	48,217	204
Total	206,945	363,861	647,316	313

Some universities maintain their own English language training facility, others use outside organisations

Source Department of Education, Skills and Employment, DESE (2020a)

For a modest sized system, with total enrolments of around 1.6 million, this was an impressive achievement, but the fact that international student fees were such an important foundation of institutional budgets left Australian universities peculiarly vulnerable to any downturn in international student flows. The potential impact was underlined by one estimate in 2020, which showed that more than A\$3 billion of the A\$12 billion that Australian universities spent on research in 2018 came from profits on international students (Norton 2020). This income was particularly critical for the Go8 group of HEIs, that undertake much of the country's research.

The COVID Crisis

Some analysts had been warning for years of the potential problems that the country's high dependence on international student income represented (Altbach and Welch 2010; Welch 2012; Audit Office 2019; Babones 2019). But Vice Chancellors felt they had little choice, if they wished to make up for declining financial support (at least in per-student terms) from government. In order to maintain existing levels of research, including expensive infrastructure, and maintain their leading profile in the global league tables, few other options were available, particularly for the research-intensive Go8 group of HEIs, with the most expensive infrastructure needs. But this left Australian HEIs peculiarly vulnerable to any downturn in inflows of international students.

The global pandemic of 2020 therefore hit Australian universities hard, albeit unevenly. Of the 40 HEIs, seven were identified as being at greatest risk, in large part due to high proportions of international students. The same study predicted losses of international student fee revenue of between A\$10 and A\$19 billion nationally from 2020 to 2023, A\$2.2 billion in 2020, and more in 2021, depending on the duration of bans on international travel (Hurley 2021a; Hurley and Van Dyke 2020). Detailed modelling by Hurley predicted that, if the government-imposed travel bans did not lift before the end of 2021 (at the time of writing, government policy was to maintain closed borders for 2021), overall losses to the system would total A\$13.5 billion from beginning 2020 to end 2021, and A\$19 billion over the period 2020–2023

(from \$40.3 billion in 2019, to \$20.5 billion in 2022) (Hurley 2021b). Given that associated spending on other activities such as accommodation, travel and tourism was estimated at \$2 for every dollar received in higher education tuition fees, the total economic impact of the steep decline in student numbers to the Australian economy was assessed at between A\$30 billion and A\$60 billion, over the same period (Hurley and Van Dyke, 2020, p. 18). Despite staff redundancies, and sharp spending cuts to capital works, travel, and discretionary expenditures in general, the longer-term financial projections were bleak (Hurley 2021a, b).

Chinese Students, Culture Wars, and China–Australia Relations

But the background of international rivalry and de-coupling unsurprisingly influenced how COVID played out, including in the university sector. The context of rising tensions between the US and China, arising from the so-called Trade War, and US pressure on its allies to follow suit, had implications for how COVID came to be understood, including in higher education. Worsening China–Australia economic and political relations, including the arrest of an Australian academic, and later, a prominent Australian journalist in China in early 2021, were part of the wider picture (Albert 2021). The state of the US–Australia relationship was also a factor. As a former Ambassador to China put it in 2020, “Australia is joined to the US’ hip in a way that hasn’t happened since the Cold War” (Raby 2020, p. 130). A final element was a rise in racist incidents (some directed against international students) fuelled to an extent by negative reports from major media outlets (Menchin 2021; Morris et al. 2020).

Mainland Chinese students comprised almost 40 per cent of all onshore international students overall, and in some universities considerably more. This meant that when travel restrictions were hastily introduced in early 2020 to stem the spread of the COVID virus, tens of thousands of students were left stranded abroad, unable to return to Australia after the 2020 Spring Festival (a major annual event, when it is expected that Chinese families gather together in their hometown), to resume their studies. Over 60 per cent of the 170,000 Chinese international student visa holders were outside Australia, a much higher ratio than for the 377,000 non-Chinese international student visa holders (less than 20 per cent) (Hurley 2021a). Unlike the US, Canada and the UK, however, and despite evidence of substantial financial, emotional, and psychological problems among thousands of students, the federal government steadfastly refused to establish a path to enable their return, despite increasingly urgent pleas to do so (ABC 2021; DFE 2021; EduCanada 2020; US State Department 2021; UWN 2021).

The relatively slow vaccine rollout in Australia in 2021 rendered any significant return of international students in the immediate future even more unlikely, further exacerbating the situation (ABC 2021; Hurley 2021b). The federal government, which has constitutional responsibility for quarantine arrangements, did not plan to systematically open borders to international travel until 2022, making the return of all but a few international students impossible (ABC 2021). This had particular implications for the large contingent of Chinese students, who not merely comprised

by far the largest proportion of the international cohort, but also contributed a corresponding proportion of the \$10 billion in international student fees that Australian universities collectively earned in 2019 (Visentin and Bagshaw 2021; Visentin 2021; ABS 2021). In the face of worsening China–Australia relations, it was somewhat surprising, perhaps, that applications from China declined less than expected, (and less than from other countries), still accounting for almost half of the much smaller intake of new international enrolments in second semester (July–November) 2020 (Hurley 2021a, b; Visentin 2021).

Nonetheless the picture in early 2021 already looked bleak. A mere 125,000 international students, many Chinese, had an enrolment date beyond the end of the year, a figure that compared with 580,000 international enrolments prior to the pandemic (Hurley 2021a, b). This had major implications for ongoing enrolments, and, in turn, projected university income. But despite a petition by thousands of international students seeking a travel-ban exemption for international students, and the CEO of International Education Australia pointing out that “Canada and the UK, our two biggest competitors, have kept their borders open for a whole year and are flying international students in for face-to-face teaching in the universities,” the federal government declined to open its borders to international students, even in the face of offers to establish separate quarantine facilities to safely manage such intakes (ABC 2021).

But, occurring after years of worsening Australia–China relations, it was no surprise that the COVID crisis, together with the widespread view that its genesis lay in Wuhan, became politicised, including in higher education (Hurst 2020). It was hard to avoid becoming caught up in the culture wars surrounding competing interpretations of the rise of China (Varghese 2018; van de Wende et al. 2020, pp. 9–10; Raby 2020). Seen from that perspective, the COVID crisis helped deepen the rift in Australia–China relations, with implications for Chinese student mobility, and bi-lateral research collaboration. While universities in general, and many individual academics, numbers of whom had built up longstanding and productive relationships with Chinese colleagues, wished to avoid being caught up in these culture wars, the increasing tendency to view China relations through a security lens downplayed wider diplomatic analysis, including knowledge diplomacy.

Australia’s move to ban travel from China (subsequently closing its borders entirely to all but returning Australians, and in May 2021 to anyone travelling from India, including Australian citizens) in early 2020, while helping to stem potential spread of the virus, was criticized in China. A more significant event, to which China clearly took ‘umbrage’, was the precipitous decision by the Australian government, without first seeking to establish a supportive international coalition, to call for an international inquiry into the origins of the virus (Raby 2020, p. 1). The response was not long in coming: by early 2021, reports emerged of both Chinese state media and education agencies in China warning students to “think twice when considering studying in Australia”, and (despite Australia’s record of success in containing the virus) citing the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, “frequent racial discrimination” and “questionable education quality” (Visentin 2021; Hare 2021). Part of a wider economic strategy by the Chinese government to reduce imports from Australia, the longer impact is uncertain, but as the Chief Executive of the Go8 explained, “it’s

not a positive development... and we are very concerned. ... Either agents are being told not to direct students here or they are being told not to mention Australia as an option for study” (Visentin 2021).

Much Australian media reportage of China often also fuelled worsening bi-lateral relations, tilting significantly in a much more critical direction (Menchin 2021). Accounts of the US–China trade war, for example (now widely recognized as a technology war, and even an ideological war), as well as of China’s attempts to assert sovereignty in the South China Sea, further helped foster the rising climate of anti-China sentiment (Wang and Wen 2021; Welch 2021c). Together with the widespread view among Australians that the virus had begun in Wuhan, China, it licensed a rise in racism, and anti-Chinese (and in some cases indiscriminate anti-Asian) sentiments, among sectors of the Australian population. A 2020 survey jointly conducted by the *Per Capita* think tank, the *Asian Australian Alliance*, and *Being Asian Australian* identified almost 400 racist attacks, most of which had been perpetrated by strangers; around 90 per cent had not been reported to police. A separate survey conducted by the country’s respected Lowy Institute found that almost one in five Chinese Australians had been physically threatened or attacked, and one in three called offensive names (Lowy Institute 2021; Zhou 2021). Despite warnings that “politicians needed to be careful not to stoke anti-Chinese or anti-Asian sentiment”, there is little doubt that the actions of certain political leaders had helped stoke these same anti-Chinese feelings, including against international students (Galloway 2021, p. 14; Koslowski 2020). A 2020 survey of racist incidents revealed that 15 per cent of victims were international students (Menchin 2021).

University campuses, usually thought of as islands of tolerance for diverse views and free speech, could not avoid being infected by the increasing polarisation of opinion. The understanding of the COVID crisis and “the rancorous state of the debate” was stoked by the passage of a new law in early 2021 protecting ‘free speech’ in universities, despite earlier findings from a national review conducted by a former High Court Chief Justice that there was “no evidence of a systemic free speech crisis on Australian campuses” (Hunter 2019, p. 12). The increasing dominance of security perspectives over diplomacy licensed the passage of key legislation, notably the *National Security Legislation* in 2018, and *Australia’s Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act* in late 2020, each of which helped raise the temperature further when discussing China (National Security Legislation 2018; Tyler 2020). The latter, for example, required universities, among other bodies such as state and local governments, to notify the federal government of any arrangements with foreign entities, and empowered the federal government power to cancel any international agreements, without any avenue of appeal (Tyler 2020).

Foreign ‘entities’ included any overseas university in which one of three conditions applied: where the majority of members of the university’s governing body were required to be members of the ruling party; where the education provided or research conducted must adhere to, or be in service of, political principles or doctrines of the government or political party; or where academic staff were required to adhere to or be in service of political principles or doctrines in their teaching, research, discussions, publications or public commentary (Tyler 2020). Although in principle this applied to a number of countries, it was widely understood to be

directed at China. Pushed by an increasingly febrile environment, some major universities commissioned an outside audit of their China relations (Hare 2021; National Security Legislation 2018; Bonyhady 2021a, b).

On-campus Repercussions

Three episodes at different universities, in 2020 and 2021, illustrate the hyper-sensitive climate, in which the COVID crisis unfolded on campus and became part of worsening China–Australia relations. In a somewhat sensationalised episode at the University of Queensland, a student activist who had been outspoken in criticisms of the university’s China ties, and of the Chinese Communist Party, was ultimately suspended for one semester, after a detailed investigation and disciplinary hearing. A formal hearing in May 2020 found that the student, who had been involved in a number of incidents, including violent on-campus altercations between pro-Beijing and pro-Hong Kong supporters, appearing to set fire to a volume of Xi, Jinping’s book on Governance outside a Chinese Consulate, and posing outside the university’s Confucius Institute dressed in protective clothing, had breached university policy. The dispute and related altercations threatened Chinese student enrolments, and in turn, a large proportion of international student fees, from which the University had derived A\$679 million in 2019 (Xiao and Walsh 2021; Bonyhady 2021a, b).

The same ‘hyper-charged’ atmosphere surrounding the COVID crisis, including at universities, helped frame a later episode at the University of Sydney. An edition of the student *Honi Soit* newspaper in early 2021 named two academics at the university who it claimed had not disclosed their links to Chinese foreign talent programmes, such as the *Qianren Jihua* (Thousand Talents) scheme, that encouraged collaboration between mainland academics and those working abroad. When, in the face of criticism, the article was subsequently withdrawn, a furore resulted between students who accused the editors of ‘McCarthyism 2.0’, and their opponents who characterised the article’s deletion as a capitulation to the Chinese Communist Party. Several politicians, including the Minister for Education, then also weighed in with criticisms of the supposed failure to protect free speech. A further incident at the Australian National University, involved an on-campus gallery taking down a suite of works dealing with the coronavirus and the Chinese Communist Party (Bonyhady 2021a, b).

All three incidents underline ways in which the timing of the COVID crisis during a time of increased international polarisation and scientific de-coupling heightened tensions on campus regarding China and Chinese students (Nakazawa 2020; Jalonick 2021). These same tensions, and the increasingly singular emphasis on national security, lay behind calls for a national review of university links with China, and helped justify the visa cancellations of two well-known Chinese academics in 2020, each of whom were Directors of Australian Studies Centres at a major Chinese university, with a long history of developing good relations between the two countries and promoting Australian culture in China (Hurst 2020; Rubinsztein-Dunlop 2020). A string of reports from an influential security institute caught the

government's eye, garnered significant media attention, and helped create a climate that justified the cancellations (ASPI 2017, 2018, 2020).

COVID, Culture Wars, and Scientific Decoupling

The COVID crisis added to international polarization, with countries and HEIs increasingly pushed to choose between two camps: USA or China. This critically included research collaboration, with substantial implications for higher education. As a Chinese-American particle physicist argued, such scientific decoupling would hold major drawbacks for many universities and research systems. More than half of artificial intelligence (AI) researchers in the US were from abroad, for example, and of these, half were of Chinese origin (Cheng 2021a, b, see also Wang and Wen 2021).

A well-established network of scholarly relations with China was by no means unique to the US. It certainly included Australia, where for example, Australian papers co-authored with Chinese colleagues rose from 4 per cent in 1996 to 14 per cent in 2009 (Cheng 2021b; Chief Scientist 2013; Welch 2014; Varghese 2018). Given that international co-authored papers worldwide constituted 35 per cent of all papers published, (for Australia, the ratio was 45 per cent), and China's dramatic scientific rise, increasing constrictions on China–Australia academic relations could impede scientific progress, limit higher education relations between the two countries, and contribute to increased polarisation. In a 2018 speech to the national conference on university governance, Peter Varghese, Chancellor of the University of Queensland (a Go8 institution), and former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), outlined the extent of scientific collaboration between his university and China, pointing to more than 3,000 co-publications. The Category Normalised Citation Impact (CNCI) count of the co-publications was almost three times the world average (Varghese 2018).

Overall, China is now a scientific powerhouse, recently overtaking the US to become the largest source of publications and rising to first in the world in high citation papers in mathematics, with computer science, and Science and Engineering not far behind. China now lies second in both Patent Cooperation and Treaty (PCT) patents and overall citations (Marginson and Xu 2021; Welch 2018; Varghese 2018; NSF 2020). 58 of its leading universities are now listed among the ARWU world's top 500, with Tsinghua (first in the world, ahead of MIT, in high citation papers in those disciplines), ranked at 29 in 2020 (and 15 in the QS ranking). China is now a key knowledge partner for Australia, including in a number of key scientific fields (Chief Scientist 2013; Welch 2014; Laurenceson and Zhou 2020). As of 2018, one in six Australian scientific publications involved a China-affiliated researcher, while of the top 1 per cent of publications, those that involved a China-affiliated researcher grew by 13 per cent (in contrast to co-publications with other key international partner countries, all of which declined (Laurenceson and Zhou 2020).

Overall, it can be said that “China's scientific rise is also shaking the world, albeit more impressive in quantitative than qualitative terms” (Welch 2016, 96). As with its regional neighbours, Australian researchers generally did not wish to be pushed

into choosing between China and the US, but rather wanted to be able to continue productive relations with both sides of what was becoming a rancorous and rivalrous relationship between the two world powers. (Welch, 2021c) But against a background of growing political and trade polarization, with pressure from the US on its allies to restrict intellectual collaboration, the COVID pandemic in Australia, together with some negative media coverage and the ‘unprecedented scrutiny’ resulting from key legislation requiring universities to list all China links, could not help but heighten a climate of fear that scientific collaboration with China was endangering national security and intellectual property (Redden 2020; Times 2021a, b).

The risk, of course, is that the baby may get thrown out with the bathwater. What is clearly needed is greater sophistication in distinguishing sensitive high-tech projects from many others that pose no national security risk. As Denis Simon, a specialist on China’s scientific rise and former senior executive at Duke Kunshan University in Suzhou, put it recently, “To assume a comprehensive conspiracy is too far from the reality” (Welch 2021c, p. 19).

Conclusion

The effects of COVID 19 on Australian universities are likely to be substantial, if uneven, and to persist for some years. Much teaching had to move online from face to face, at lightning speed, affecting both international and domestic students, numbers of whom may well face challenging job prospects, for the next few years. 2021 saw teaching revert from online only to a mix of face-to-face and online, amid growing evidence that students were less willing to persist with online-only learning.

To mitigate what was clearly a major financial impact, building projects were abruptly halted, universities’ infrastructure and consultant costs hastily trimmed, and voluntary redundancy (VR) schemes for academic and administrative introduced. Some Vice-Chancellors threatened that, if VR targets were not reached, compulsory redundancies would be implemented (staff costs represent around 57% of university budgets). The imposition of travel restrictions in 2020 left 170,000 international students stranded overseas, unable to return to Australia. Ongoing travel restrictions, together with the slow pace of vaccination in 2021, with experts predicting that it would not be completed before at least the end of 2022, meant that international travel, including by international students, was unlikely to open again until well into 2022. As a professor of Public Health made clear, “Anything that diminishes Australia’s capacity to achieve immunity and control diminishes out attractiveness [to international students]” (Patty 2021, p. 8). This assessment was reinforced by a survey of some 30,000 prospective international students, which reported that 58 per cent would choose a destination country that was open to international students, “rather than wait for their preferred country to be open” (Hare 2021, p. 12). Together with sharply worsening China-Australia relations in general, and ongoing travel restrictions that prevented international students from either returning from abroad, or commencing studies in Australia, the COVID pandemic heralded a significant decline in international student enrolments, impoverishing Australian universities in much more than the financial sense.

But the wider culture wars surrounding the rise of China, and the US–China ‘trade war’, meant that COVID in effect helped license a second virus, a plague of anti-Chinese racism in the West, as a mainland scholar living in the US explained:

To many in the West, my people are either barbarians whose exotic eating habits attracted new pathogens, or a futuristic race who engineered the virus as part of their plan for global domination (Cheng 2021a).

As the above analysis revealed, the impact of the COVID crisis on Chinese students in Australia (and to some extent Asian students more generally) was significant, if not always acknowledged by government, who parried with discourses of successful multiculturalism. But in a context where diplomatic relations were strained, and increasingly subsumed by discourses of national (in)security, with shrill voices raised on both sides of the culture war over China’s rise, the climate became increasingly polarised (Varghese 2018; Raby 2020). As for international student flows, it was argued by some that the ‘salad days’ are over (Varghese 2020).

But much more than reduced student flows was involved: as the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering pointed out, nations like Australia rely on international collaboration to advance their research and development.’

“These endeavours benefit all nations involved, and the collective progression of scientific and technological enterprise,” the academy said in a statement. “To single out individual nations is inappropriate.” (THE 2020c, p. 7)

The rise of nationalism and nativism in a number of systems around the world, including Australia, and the associated elevation of national security above diplomatic and academic concerns, may well undermine well-established webs of bilateral and international research collaboration, which increasingly sustain much global research output. When one in three of all publications worldwide now results from the collaboration of researchers from at least two countries, with Australia’s ratio even higher, how sensible is it to exclude so many contributions from China, for example, now one of the world’s scientific superpowers (Welch 2016, 2021c; Altbach and de Wit 2021)?

The impact of COVID is a stark reminder that international students are so much more than cash cows for universities. Not merely do they add immeasurably to the vibrant cultural diversity of universities, they “are vital parts of communities. Indeed, many international students are future Australian citizens. It is estimated that between 20,000 to 30,000 international students move from student visas to permanent residency visas every year” a figure that is likely to be an underestimate, since students often gain another form of temporary visa, before attaining PR (Ferguson and Sherrell 2019).

The potential for COVID to curtail staff and student mobility, restrict research collaboration between colleagues in Australia and China, and license anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments is an important, if less publicly acknowledged, outcome, both in Australia and abroad. What is needed to avoid this prospect is a dialogue of civilizations, rather than a clash of civilizations, with the associated

rancorous and rivalrous international relations that threaten international academic mobility and collaboration.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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