

Australian universities slash jobs in response to coronavirus travel ban impact

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Tens of thousands of university workers, as well as students, are being forced to bear the burden of the Australian government's reactionary travel ban on all non-permanent residents from China. Chinese international students are unable to begin their studies this year, so university managements are imposing cost-cutting measures, particularly affecting casual academics.

Following the lead of the Trump administration, the Liberal-National Coalition government imposed the travel ban on the pretext of protecting Australians from the coronavirus outbreak in the Chinese province of Hubei, despite the World Health Organisation saying such measures are counter-productive in the global effort to combat the virus.

Last week, the government extended the ban for at least a further week, and further extensions are likely, preventing an estimated 107,000 Chinese tertiary and high school students from entering Australia to start or resume their courses. Even if the affected students could return to Australia this month, they would have to undergo self-isolation for 14 days, as required by the federal government.

As well as severely disrupting the lives and future of these students, the ban is threatening an estimated \$3 billion a year in fee revenue that the universities extract from Chinese international students. Over the past decade, the universities have increasingly exploited international students—often being charged more than \$30,000 a year—as cash cows to offset government funding cuts, leaving the public universities vulnerable to any disruption to what has become their “business model.”

The Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard cut \$2.7 billion from tertiary funding in 2013, initiating a cost-cutting drive that the Coalition

government has intensified ever since, including by a freeze on funding for domestic undergraduate students. As a result of Labor's supposed “education revolution,” international tertiary and secondary school students have become Australian capitalism's second biggest foreign exchange earner, valued at some \$32 billion annually. Universities have been transformed into money-making businesses.

As of last October, there were more than 730,000 international students in Australia, up from 250,000 in 2012, with 28 percent hailing from China. Of the 200,000 Chinese students enrolled in high schools, English language schools and universities, more than half are still offshore, including approximately 85,000 university students. Many may now transfer their enrolments to countries, such as Britain and Canada, that have not imposed punitive travel bans. One industry survey said a third of these students are considering such a shift.

In response to the loss of enrolments, university managements are imposing recruitment freezes, increased staff workloads and sudden deadlines for academics to transform their courses into online presentations that the universities hope can be delivered in China.

The University of Wollongong, for example, has about 1,000 students stranded by the travel ban. Staff members received an ominous email last week from vice-chancellor Paul Wellings announcing an “expenditure control process” across the “full spectrum” of university spending. Wellings provided no detail but warned that “at this stage it is too soon to say with certainty what the scale of this impact will be.”

Most of all, casual teachers at all universities are having their expected teaching hours scrapped, reduced

or postponed, leaving them without income for at least six months. As the result of the decade of funding cuts, poorly-paid casual or sessional staff now do more than half the teaching and research in Australia's public universities, up from 40 percent at the turn of the century.

Repeated trade union-negotiated enterprise agreements at each of the universities have prevented a unified fight back by university workers, helping managements casualise their workforce. Only 6.4 out of every 100 new positions created at Australian universities between 2009 and 2015 were tenured teaching or research jobs.

Various reports suggest up to 80 percent of undergraduate courses in some universities have been taught by a casual academic. By mid-2018, an estimated 94,500 people were employed at universities on a casual basis. This makes tertiary education one of the biggest casualised workforces in Australia, together with the retail, hospitality and service industries.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) which covers academic staff and some professional staff, has written to university vice-chancellors to ask them to guarantee the income of casual university teachers denied work by the travel ban. That is, far from proposing any action by university workers to oppose the massive job cuts, the union is appealing to the same managements that are inflicting the cuts.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes said the union had heard reports of contracts not being issued to casual staff since the travel ban was announced. Academics also reportedly had been given "unrealistic" deadlines of mere days to move entire curricula to "online delivery only."

Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan claims that progress is being made in negotiations with Chinese authorities to allow Australian educational institutions to transmit online courses, but the Chinese government has condemned the travel ban.

The Chinese embassy in Canberra said the government's decision to extend the initial 14-day travel ban by another week was "an overreaction indeed," adding: "The World Health Organisation has repeatedly stressed that it does not recommend putting travel and trade restrictions on China."

Along with casual academics, students, both international and domestic, are bearing the greatest

brunt of the hammer blows to the universities. Their basic right to a first-class education, free to all, is being denied. While Chinese students are most directly hit, thousands of classes will be affected, and conditions will worsen for all students. No doubt there will be moves to increase domestic fees to offset the revenue collapse.

Council of International Students Australia president Ahmed Ademoglu told the media that his members felt "exploited" and would discourage future students from enrolling in Australia. He said international students were aggrieved by the detention of Chinese students at Australian airports.

One Chinese international student told the WSWS: "The travel ban has affected the lives of thousands of students. It has become the government's nationalist dog whistle, although they are still trying to deny it. Undoubtedly, after experiencing many serious crises, the Australian government is planning to take this opportunity to show its 'strength' and 'toughness.' Therefore, those groups without a voice, like international students and workers, have become their best targets..."

"Students' lives in Australia have also been greatly affected. A friend of mine has been told by the landlord that he cannot continue to rent his house, even though he is in good health and is willing to pay the rent when he is not in Australia."

Chinese students and workers were being victimised, he said. "This is a dangerous signal that the capitalist government will use the slogan of 'national interest' to divide us. This will have a devastating effect on society, especially as international relations become increasingly tense and social issues get sharper."



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