

International students in Australia speak out: “Governments have done nothing to help us”

Our reporters
20 April 2020

Over the past week, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality has spoken with numbers of international students across Australia about the dire circumstances they confront amid the coronavirus pandemic and unprecedented economic slump.

The state and federal governments have refused to provide the estimated half a million international students in the country with any support. Instead Prime Minister Scott Morrison told them to “go home.” Many have said that they are effectively trapped in Australia and face the prospect of homelessness and abject poverty.

A Pakistani student at Victoria University in Melbourne, explained: “I work at Uber eats. I survive on very little money, you wouldn’t believe it. I might get \$300 per week. It fluctuates a lot. Friday, Saturday and Sunday used to be the busiest days, now it has changed.”

He spoke on the conditions of international students in shared accommodation. “I live in a house with five other people. I know some students that are Indian in different areas. Four or five live together and they are all working cash-in-hand jobs. They are offered \$10 an hour when the minimum wage is supposed to be \$20.”

The student said university authorities had done nothing to assist them: “Victoria University just sent a message saying they ‘value’ us, after Scott Morrison’s announcement that we should go home. We sell everything before coming here; we work; we think it will be a dream.”

“We are only allowed to work 20 hours. If you have mental health issues you might get sent back. We come from third world countries and the amount we have to spend is not small. We are treated as cash cows and we don’t have any rights. It was my dream to have a software start-up but even if they like my idea they won’t take it on because I am not a permanent resident. So we just get stuck working as taxi drivers forever.

“Pakistani education consultants mislead you and

misinform you. They tell me that if you sell your land and come here, you will live the dream. They lie and you only realise when you get here what it’s really like, but then it is too late.”

Speaking on the lack of access for medical and health services for international students he stated: “I have international insurance, which you need to get as a student. I got sick not long ago, with cluster headaches. The ambulance took me two or three kilometres and they charged me \$2,000.”

A recently graduated Information Systems student at the University of Melbourne, and originally from China, said the Australian government, “will not help international students. If they don’t have money, it is better to go home, according to Morrison.”

She said that the only help that she had received from the Chinese government was a “pack” from the embassy. It included a mask and several other basic household and food items, but no financial assistance.

The student explained that she had held two casual jobs as a barista and a cashier, but has had no shifts since both the café and shop at which she worked shut. After graduation she had begun looking for full-time work in Australia. She said she was “looking at some graduate programs with big companies, but they are no longer hiring because they are cutting their staff.”

In response to Morrison’s call for international students to “go home” she explained that “one of my friends looked at flights to China and found that the next available flight is at the end of May because the Chinese government is restricting flights from overseas. A lot of Chinese people want to go back home because they don’t have a positive future where they are and want to go home. But they can’t because of the restrictions.”

The IYSSE also spoke with a Masters student in Architecture at the University of Melbourne, who was also from China and wished to remain anonymous. He

explained that he has received no financial assistance from the Chinese government and explained, “Because I am not in China I’ve not received anything. If I were in China, I’d be getting assistance.”

He said Morrison telling international students to “go home” was the “typical reaction from the Australian governments. The government was already complaining that there are too many international students—especially from China—in this country, so they don’t care.”

On the targeting of Chinese students, he said: “It used to be the most right-wing media [in Australia], but recently even the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] really started to target Chinese students.”

He said there was minimal health care support for students, “but I don’t know—if I contract COVID-19 and have to go to hospital—how much money I will have to pay. I don’t know if my insurance will cover this cost.”

A University of Melbourne commerce student from India said that she has not been helped by the Australian or Indian governments. She works at the Subway chain, which has not closed its restaurants, but has not had a shift in over two weeks.

The student said that without work, her financial situation “is not good. I do have some money saved up, but with no income I am spending my savings on regular expenses—groceries, rent, etc. Now, I will not have any money after I use up my savings.”

She explained that Indian citizens can still return to India if they choose but are forced to undergo 14-day quarantining upon arrival. “Even if we go back, it will disrupt our studies. They [the university] are not doing anything about the assessments. They expect us to do all of the assignments and assessments but that becomes impossible if we have to go back.

“The university has a special payment where you can receive a small amount,” she continued, “but you have to show that you are currently facing problems financially. If I approached them now [because of her savings] I wouldn’t get it.”

She added: “We [international students] are just as much a part of the university as the domestic students and they should keep our interests in mind as well. I didn’t pay five times the domestic students’ fees to listen to online lectures which are disrupted, in which the professor’s voice is crackling and where I’m not able to listen to what is being said. They have to do something about this. It’s fine if it goes online but there has to be a certain quality standard.”

Hosseini, a researcher studying Mechanical Engineering

at Newcastle University said: “I have a contract position at the university but I know many friends and fellow students from Iran who have lost their casual jobs and it is a big problem. They can’t go back, they can’t find a job to get paid, plus they don’t get support from the government because they are foreign students. The prime minister has said openly that there will be no support for international students!

“Families back home can’t help either because the currency has dropped 400 percent due to American sanctions. Even if family members back home are working on a salary, their income is not enough to support people living in Australia.”

A student from Zimbabwe studying engineering at Newcastle University said: “I’m talking to friends in the US and the UK about what’s happening here and about what the government is doing to international students and it’s happening there as well.”

Asked whether he is receiving financial support he said: “We are getting no assistance from the government and nothing is coming from Zimbabwe either. I’m lucky enough to have a family which can provide for me, though most people don’t have this. Many people I know have lost their jobs, their main source of income. They haven’t received any substitute whatsoever.”

“There are very few who are wealthy enough to properly support themselves at university. Entire families have had to spend their whole entire savings to send their children here. The courses for us can cost up to \$130,000 to 150,000.”

Commenting on the cost of returning home, he said, “The government has done nothing, we haven’t received any compensation or concession for plane tickets so that we can afford it. I know students who have spent their entire savings just to go back home, plane tickets are like double the price.

“It’s ridiculous that the [universities] get billions from international students and then turn around and say we can’t support you. This could have been prevented, that is the truth. Governments are providing billions and even trillions of dollars to the banks and corporations. Why nothing for us?”



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