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International Students, COVID-19, and Heightened
Vulnerabilities: Policy Solutions to Support a
Precarious Workforce

This report has been written for The Future of Work Lab by

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ABOUT THE INTERNSHIP

The Future of Work Lab hosts talented Master's student interns who lead projects across a range of future of work issues. The interns produce policy reports covering pressing and timely topics in this area. Our interns are trained in advanced analytical, research and report-writing skills as well as collaboration, teamwork and interpersonal skills.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the existing social and economic vulnerabilities of international students working and studying in Australia (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.62). Already at risk of marginalisation from a history of dramatic and exclusionary changes in immigration policy (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.62), international students living in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis have been recognised as one of the most disadvantaged and hard-hit groups by the pandemic (Weng et al., 2021, pp.39). The culmination of intensifying stressors and the government's lack of appropriate policy reform has drastically disrupted international students' lives, education, and careers, impacting their economic viability as student-workers, and altering their perception of Australia as a favourable study destination (TESQSA, 2021, pp.5).

In consideration of international students' decreasing prospects of working and studying in Australia, this report maps the policy-induced inequalities experienced by students pre and post pandemic, with specific focus on their precarious position within the labour market. It argues that Australia's current policy measures do not adequately address international students' longstanding rightlessness or alleviate their social and economic vulnerabilities. This report will hence provide a basis for further study on mitigating the precariousness of international students in Australia, through improved policy reforms during times of crisis and efforts of recovery.

This report initially discusses the historical context of temporary migrant policies in Australia to provide a foundation for its further analysis. It demonstrates how migrant students' have become increasingly commodified within the labour market with a reduction in bargaining power and enforced institutional protections (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.64). Drawing upon a wide range of literature and secondary data, this report next explores students' experiences of exploitation within the workplace, arising from poor working conditions, wage theft, and from the threat of visa cancellation (Howe, 2018, pp.422). It establishes how the government's longstanding lack of adequate regulation and support has proven a weak foundation upon which their stability then suffered the consequences of in the height of the pandemic. Examining the impact of pandemic-related policies on international students' accumulative experiences of job loss, financial hardship, and overall wellbeing, this report discusses the impact of economic and emotional scarring on students' prospects in Australia (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020b, pp.40).

The conclusion reached in this report is that international students' treatment in Australia is a fundamental injustice that urgently needs to be resolved through the implementation of critical policy reforms. To achieve this, this report presents these key recommendations to relevant policy makers and regulatory agencies:

1. The permanent removal of the limit on working hours for migrant students across all sectors.
2. The incorporation of international students (and other temporary migrants) within Federal social support measures, including wage subsidies and housing assistance.

3. Increased funding to the Fair Work Ombudsman to the extent that it becomes adequately resourced and serves international students more effectively in enforcing work rights.
4. The adoption of a co-regulation approach within the Fair Work Ombudsman to include community-based representative groups for temporary migrants, unions, and international student-workers.
5. The implementation of a safeguard within the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, in partnership with the Fair Work Ombudsman, to not cancel an international student's visa if they have breached its terms due to workplace exploitation.
6. Greater enforcement of penalties for employers who breach compliance with the Fair Work Act 2009 through exploitative conduct, and an increase of penalties. This should include the broadening of legislation to penalise employers who knowingly influence a temporary migrant worker to breach their visa terms.
7. Increased competency of the wage redress process for international student-workers who have experienced underpayment or mistreatment in the workplace, including an improvement of its accessibility and time efficiency.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the largest groups of temporary visa holders and a de-facto low wage workforce, international students in Australia have already endured limited work rights, insecurity and instability (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.486). During COVID-19, the multifaceted challenges experienced by many international students were exacerbated by their exclusion from almost all public welfare, their loss of casual work, by discrimination and by political rhetoric (Weng et al., 2021, pp.39). The shocking absence of such supportive infrastructure is evidenced in then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's infamous commentary comparing "good times" when it was "lovely to have visitors" to "times like this" in which temporary migrants should "go home" if they could not support themselves (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.486).

Despite Australia being a prominent destination for migrant students since the 1950s, and overseas education being its fourth largest export valued at A\$40.4 billion in 2019 (DESE, 2021), Australia's treatment of international students during the pandemic has brought up questions regarding its long-term desirability as a destination for international tuition and work (Weng et al., 2021, pp.39). The key questions surround the pandemic and its subsequent policies' scale of impact on international students and institutions within the sector, as well as future consequences and considerations for the sector as a whole. (TESQSA, 2021, pp.2).

Reflecting on the past and current situation confronting international students, this report analyses policies affecting international students within Australia's labour market and

higher education sector, and discusses the overall impact of these on students' employment prospects.

Section 1 of this report explores and interprets the contemporary features of international tuition, work and its regulation in Australia. Providing the historical context of this issue, it details the shift from social and economic inclusion to the increased marketisation of student migrants (Tham et al., 2016, pp.4).

Section 2 examines the challenges encountered by international students during COVID-19. It reviews various studies covering students' prevalent experiences of financial hardship, loss of work and social exclusion in relation to Australia's state-induced lockdowns and lack of welfare support for the demographic. It discusses how pandemic-related policies have led international students to feel an overall sense of dissatisfaction with Australia's treatment of them (TESQSA, 2021, pp.17).

In consideration of student experiences throughout the pandemic, Section 3 explores the potential long-lasting, scarring effects of migrant policies on students' general wellbeing and economic security, accounting for widespread employment gaps and individuals' inability to pay for essential needs. It also suggests projections for the higher education sector if policies remain unchanged, student capacity to undertake overseas education decreases and revenue from the international student market diminishes (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.1).

The report will conclude by proposing several recommendations to Australian policy

makers and regulatory agencies to avoid future marginalisation of international students and erosion of employment rights (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.67).

SECTION 1: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

PRE-COVID

This section explores the historical context of overseas tuition in Australia and the conditions of precarious work experienced by many international students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

AUSTRALIAN IMMIGRATION POLICY

The landscape of Australia's immigration policies have developed drastically since the 1990s as international education has become increasingly instrumental to Australia's economic growth (Spinks & Koleth, 2015, pp.5). Australia has been able to control its immigration policies to align with its changing national interest throughout the past couple of decades (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.63).

In accordance with the White Australia Policy before 1973, immigration practices excluded individuals on the basis of race and nationality (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.63). These practices became more socially inclusive from 1973 to 1996, as multiculturalism and the liberalisation of public policy emerged as new interests for the Labor Government's immigration program (DIBP, 2015, pp.51). The risks of temporary migrants experiencing poor working conditions were relatively low under this immigration policy, as it focused on permanent residency and standardised protections enforced by the award, conciliation and arbitration systems (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.64). Further strengthened by unions, temporary migrant workers had a substantial

amount of mobility within Australia's workforce with strong bargaining power (Wright & Clibborn, 2020, pp.42).

Australia's national interest underpinning its immigration policy shifted again in 1996 toward a more neoliberal approach, with the newly elected Howard Government announcing that there would be a greater preference for skilled migration over the family stream (DIBP, 2015, pp.71). Subsequent governments maintained and expanded these reforms to make it easier for migrants to become permanent residents, which included the weakening of standardised testing obligations and eligibility requirements in the labour market (Wright & Clibborn, 2020, pp.42).

The prioritisation of labour efficiency and economic return has led to an increased intake of temporary migrants like international students, who contribute substantially through the payment of upfront, unsubsidised fees and labour market participation (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.63). Conversely, other immigration categories considered unprofitable due to their lower labour market participation or higher welfare assistance have been scaled-down, like in the case of family immigration, or forcibly discouraged like asylum seekers (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.63).

Prior to the pandemic, the power of unions to enforce award standards had weakened from decades of policy changes, and had become particularly low in the job sectors where international students were concentrated (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.64). Along with weak political incentives and the power of employer groups to discount employer compliance, international students had become disproportionately dependent on the Fair Work

Ombudsman to enforce legal standards, which lacks the resources to do so effectively (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.65). Together, these factors have decreased the mobility and agency of migrant students within the labour market, and increased the likelihood of workplace exploitation (Wright & Clibborn, 2020, pp.46). International students' position is consequently linked to the commodification of overseas tuition that designates their value in Australia as a source of commercial income (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.5).

THE FACTS AND FIGURES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

As one of the most sought-after destinations for overseas tuition, Australia had seen an exponential rise of international students pre-pandemic (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.489). Australia's intake of migrant students enrolled in higher education, vocational courses and English language courses had grown from a total of 93,722 in 1994 to 956,773 enrolments in 2019 (DESE, 2019).

Migrant students made up 27.1% of all Australian higher education enrolments in 2019 (DESE, 2019), and on a global scale, Australian tuition brought in 7% of the world's international students in 2017, which ranked them the third most population destination for migrant students behind the US (18%) and UK (8%) (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.489). Evidently, overseas education had generated a high-growth, high-yield multinational market, with Australia becoming increasingly dependent on student contributions amid decreasing government funding and a static domestic market (Fronek, 2021, pp.2).

International tuition was utilised to expand undergraduate teaching courses, sustain national research programs and contribute to the job market as Australia's largest source of skilled migrants postgraduation (Horne, 2020). However, despite the country's reliance on international tuition and students' economic participation, migrant students have been vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace and deficient of supports (Auranen & Nieminen, 2010, pp.3).

Australian Government
Department of Education, Skills and Employment

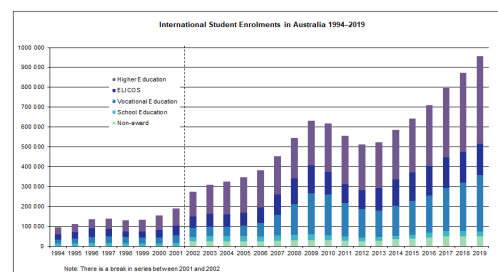


Figure 1: A chart compiled by the Australian government department of education, skills, and employment (DESE, 2019), sourced from the DESE, CRICOS and the Australian Department of Home Affairs. This chart displays the number of international student enrolments in Australia from 1994 to 2019.

THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WORKFORCE

Australia's contemporary immigration provisions have framed how international students interact with the local labour market, with the effect of restricting their job opportunities, bolstering the bargaining power of employers and dissuading international students to report exploitative experiences in the workplace (Howe, 2018, pp.417). Ranked as the most expensive country for international students to study at, especially in the major cities of Sydney and Melbourne (HSBC, 2013), most students strive to engage in paid work. Although Australia's visa conditions require international students to prove that they have

some financial self-sufficiency, through confirming they can afford their first year of tuition and living fees in their visa application, this threshold is low enough that students without an additional income will eventually need to find employment (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.6).

While migrant students are legally subject to Australia's employment regulations and are equal with all other employees under the Fair Work Act, 2009 (Cth), they encounter widespread legal and economic precarity which both signifies and reinforces their position as non-citizens whose value is commodified (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.5). Migrant students' precarity in the workforce has been largely driven by two interrelated visa conditions: the 40 hour per fortnight cap on working hours during the semester, and the practice of visa cancellation and deportation for those who breach their visa conditions (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.7). These work restrictions, coupled with their common characteristics of limited work experience, local networks, and social entitlements, increases the likelihood that migrant students will struggle to access secure work (Howe, 2018, pp.423).

This is further compounded for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds who may have difficulty adapting to a new culture, and from lower socio-economic families where there is an increased financial pressure to secure employment (Howe, 2018, pp.423). When students do find paid work, it is typically low skilled, entry-level, and easy to replace in the labour market, thus there is pressure to retain their jobs (Howe, 2018, pp.423). Set by a weak foundation of policy, these factors heighten the vulnerability of migrant students and increase

their unwillingness to report workplace exploitation (Howe, 2018, pp.422).

The precarious status of migrant students in the Australian labour market is supported by numerous studies detailing their experiences of exploitative workplaces (Howe, 2018, pp.426). This is primarily practiced through the endemic of wage theft, poor working conditions, and discrimination. Campbell et al (2016) explore the specific conditions encountered by migrant students in hospitality as an exploitative industry typified by pervasive underpayment, health and safety risks and poor practices consonant with casual employment such as lack of worker bargaining power and job insecurity (pp287). Utilising in-depth interviews with a Melbourne migrant student sample, Campbell et al discuss how poor work experiences can be clustered into different segments, differentiating 'ethnic' workplaces as more hazardous when compared to a 'mainstream' context (2016, pp.293).

More widely, Farbenblum and Berg's National Temporary Migrant Work Survey (2017) examines the responses from 4,322 temporary migrants from a vast range of nationalities and jobs across Australia to demonstrate the depth of employer non-compliance with labour laws. The study found that 43% of the international students surveyed earned a wage of \$15 per hour or less and 25% were paid at \$12 an hour or less (Farbenblum & Berg, 2017, pp.6). Beyond a reduced hourly pay rate, wage theft also manifested in the denial of leave, overtime or superannuation, cashback payments to employers, unpaid traineeships and incorrect job classifications (Fels & Cousins, 2019, pp.17). Berg & Farbenblum extrapolated that

most of these students recognised that they were being paid less than the minimum wage and that their employers were not complying with labour laws, but were more likely to be dependent on maintaining employment and coerced by unscrupulous employers (Farbenblum & Berg, 2017, pp.8).

As a systematic issue strengthened by the normalisation of exploitative practices and a lack of student-worker agency, the existing research suggests that international students made up an already immensely vulnerable workforce prior to COVID-19 (Campbell et al, 2016, pp.283). These vulnerabilities exposed by the systems in place have only been compounded by the effects of the following pandemic and state-wide lockdowns.

SECTION 2: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID

This section examines the changing experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, detailing the immediate effects of job loss, financial difficulty and economic and social exclusion.

AUSTRALIA'S COVID CRISIS RESPONSE

Following the World Health Organisation's proclamation of COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020, the Australian Federal Government implemented a range of measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including the enforcement of a national lockdown, business closures and social distancing practices (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.491). Alongside these protocols, the government introduced welfare support payments, including the JobKeeper and JobSeeker entitlements which provided wage subsidies to workers who

experienced job loss until March 2021 (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.491).

International students and other temporary visa holders were explicitly barred from these packages, with the main responsibility of support shifting to relief efforts from students' families, communities, charitable organisations, educational institutions and state governments (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.8). The only direct Federal support for international students was a A\$7 million allotment to the Australian Red Cross to distribute one-off payments and counselling to temporary migrants needing emergency support. This was derived from a total of A\$200 million given to charities and community groups through its Community Support Package (DSS, 2021). Moreover, international students' only workplace 'relief' was the government's temporary relaxation of their 40 hours per fortnight limit for 'essential' work in industries most affected by the pandemic, such as in hospitality and health care (Home Affairs, 2021). These measures will remain in place until at least June 2022 and were provided under the condition that student-workers will continue to meet their study requirements (Home Affairs, 2021).

When international students were not needed to fill labour shortages, businesses were incentivised to keep their Australian citizen staff over temporary migrants as they did not receive wage subsidies for the latter (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020, pp.491). Short of wage subsidies and adequate Federal financial support, international students were one of the hardest hit groups during the pandemic, facing difficulties in retaining employment and maintaining a basic standard of living. These crisis policies worsened international students'

precarious position in Australia, exacerbating their economic and social vulnerabilities during a time of heightened instability.

IMPACT OF COVID ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WORKFORCE

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in Australia at the beginning of 2020, international students' participation in the labour market has been significantly impacted by the government's crisis responses (Qi & Ma, 2021, pp.94). The implementation of state-wide lockdowns most prominently in Melbourne by the end of March 2020 and throughout 2020-2021 disrupted international students' mobility, study, and career aspirations (Qi & Ma, 2021, pp.95). Lockdown laws, business closures and economic recessions led to severe levels of job loss among international students, as industries with the highest concentrations of students were some of the most directly impacted, such as hospitality, retail and accommodation (Qi & Ma, 2021, pp.100).

In their Australia-wide online survey of 5000 migrant students and recent graduates, Farbenblum and Berg (2020a) identified that 57% of respondents lost their job and 16% experienced a significant reduction of work hours (pp.492). This widespread job deficiency is reiterated by Hastings et al.'s (2021) sample of 7,084 migrant students across Sydney and Melbourne, who found that 61% of respondents had lost their job and a further 25% experienced a decrease in work hours (pp.10). Rates of job loss varied across different demographics, with students who worked in the hospitality sector being 2.5 times more likely to experience job loss when compared to other industries, and with those working in hospitality prior to the pandemic more likely to be from working-class

families and studying an undergraduate or non-university degree (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.17).

Despite the pandemic's significant impact on the international student workforce, and notwithstanding Prime Minister Morrison's suggestion to "go home", 80% of international students remained in Australia by mid-June 2020 (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020a, pp.493). Most students faced major practical barriers to returning to their country of origin, involving the border closures of home countries and transit countries, the inaccessibility of flights out of Australia, the fear of contracting COVID-19 overseas and the risk of jeopardising their studies (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020a, pp.493).

Open responses to these challenges have been expressed in Farbenblum and Berg's (2020a) survey, with many respondents emphasising their frustration toward the government for assuming that they could easily leave Australia for the duration of the pandemic (pp.494). The international student workforce was hence critically impacted by COVID-19, with a significant proportion of students unable to retain their jobs and essentially remained stranded in Australia left to withstand their precarious economic position, without access to adequate protection provisions (Foley et al., 2021, pp.469).

IMPACT OF COVID ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ECONOMIC SITUATION

Migrant students' increased experiences of job loss led to widespread financial difficulties which were escalated by the government's crisis response and further deteriorated as the pandemic carried on (Qi & Ma, 2021, pp.96). Prior to the pandemic, many students were already in precarious financial situations with

low-income sources derived from employment, family allowances and personal savings, and this dropped even further during the pandemic (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.10).

Comparing the experiences of migrant students pre and during COVID-19, Hastings et al.'s longitudinal survey (2021) found that 54% of respondents had an income of \$499 or lower per week in 2019, and this income had declined at an average of 23% by mid-June 2020 (pp.10). 28% of students surveyed lost over half their income during the pandemic, and this increased financial vulnerability was more likely experienced by students from a poorer home country, a lower social class, and students enrolled in an undergraduate degree without a scholarship (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.10). Moreover, for the 47% of students reliant on family allowances, 43% experienced a further deterioration of financial support as COVID-19 affected the incomes of their relatives overseas (Qi & Ma, 2021, pp.100).

The exacerbation of students' financial stress led to an incapacity to pay for some living costs, with Farbenblum and Berg's survey (2020a) identifying that 30% of migrant students responded that they were unable to afford meals, and 48% stated that they could not afford rent at some point between March to July 2020 (2020a, pp.495). International students' access to healthcare was also impacted, with 14% of respondents unable to afford a doctor visit, and 9% unable to afford essential medicine (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020a, pp.495).

Driven by the pandemic and Australia's crisis response, these extensive financial difficulties indicate that Australia has failed to meet its legal obligations to many students under international human rights law (Askola et al.,

2021, pp.9). In consonance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Australia has a binding responsibility to maximise available resources to ensure that non-citizens gain full realisation of the right to social protection and can meet their minimum essential needs (Askola et al., 2021, pp.10). The lack of measures Australia has implemented in response to international student's financial difficulties indicates the unpreparedness of its institutions to respond reasonably and proportionately to students' vulnerabilities (Askola et al., 2021, pp.12).

IMPACT OF COVID ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SOCIAL EXCLUSION

For many international students, COVID-19 concerns, job loss, financial difficulties and separation from families intersected with experiences of racism to place substantial strain on individual's mental health (Fronek et al., 2021, pp.3). Experiences of racism directed toward Asian students was prevalent in the community as conspiratorial misinformation about China spread and COVID-19 was politicised at the federal level (Fronek et al., 2021, pp.3). According to the Asian Australian Alliance's Racism Incident Survey (AAA, 2021) which addressed 541 racist occurrences during COVID-19, 35% of cases consisted of racial name calling and 60% were physical and verbal threats such as being coughed on. Other incidents involved the deliberate avoidance and exclusion of Asian people (AAA, 2021). Whilst these types of incidents did not affect all international students, most students were conscious of the government's COVID-19 policies and the divisive social climate that developed during the crisis and were negatively

affected by the circulating discourses (Fronek et al., 2021, pp.3).

This was heightened by shifts in the education sector to online learning, particularly prevailing during Greater Melbourne's lockdowns (TESQSA, 2021, pp.17). Online learning prompted an overall decline in student experience and engagement in addition to lower academic performance and outcomes (TESQSA, 2021, pp.18). For international students already separated from communities abroad and lacking community engagement in Australia, online education further diminished students' sense of connectivity and social inclusion during the pandemic (TESQSA, 2021, pp.18). Collectively, migrant students' experiences of social and economic marginalisation has been dramatic. The pandemic significantly disrupted the academic process for international students, leaving many without the adequate means of support and bearing the long-lasting effects of this on their prospects as both students and workers (Fronek et al., 2021, pp.1).

SECTION 3: LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID

This section will project the potential long-term effects of pandemic related policies and scarring experiences during the pandemic upon international students' future conditions. It will also anticipate the emerging developments for the international education sector, if the current trends following from the COVID-19 disruption continue, and policies remain unchanged.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The upheaval of COVID-19 has impacted migrant students' financial and emotion implications of studying abroad in Australia, with diminishing financial situations limiting the viability for some students to continue their studies, and long-lasting distress decreasing the likelihood for students to recommend Australia as a study destination (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020b, pp.40).

In their online survey of 6,100 temporary visa holders across Australia, including 5000 international students, Berg and Farbenblum (2020b) identified that 80% of respondents believed that their financial state would not improve in the following 6 months (pp.40). Within this, a further 57% of students considered that their situation would worsen in 6 months, and this negative outlook could prompt students to retrieve funds set aside for tuition (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.42). It is also predicted that international students will increasingly take on new debt to maintain their studies and stay in Australia, with 51% of respondents already indicating that they have debts they are unable to repay (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.42). These financial situations will likely force some migrant students to discontinue their studies, placing their visa at risk of cancellation, and exposing them to an increased prospect of deportation (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.42).

These situations will have scarring effects for international students already in financial difficulty, hindering the pace of their capital accumulation by decreasing their capacity to complete their educational goals and limiting their employability prospects (O'Keeffe et al., 2021, pp.4). Moreover, migrant students' experiences of precarious employment may

worsen in the future, if trends of increased market deregulation, tuition fees and levels of unemployment persist (O'Keeffe et al., 2021, pp.13).

Evidently, the cumulative economic, social and emotional impact of international students' experiences during COVID-19 has soured perceptions of Australia. According to Farbenblum and Berg's (2020b) survey, 59% of student respondents who resided in Australia during the pandemic were less likely to recommend the country as a study destination (pp.47). Many migrant students expressed a sense of injustice at their exclusion from government support despite their significant economic contributions to Australia, and predicted that it will struggle to attract more students (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.56). This shift in the reputation of Australia's education industry, alongside a reduction in migrant student numbers, will likely result in long-term economic consequences for the sector (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.56).

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION SECTOR

Exacerbating existing pressures for universities and other educational institutions, the pandemic has led to shifting long-term impacts on international student numbers, revenue allocation, organisational and educational practices (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.1). The number of migrant students in Australia during the period of January-March 2022 was 440,129, a change of -15% from the January-March 2021 period, and a 58% reduction from the pre-pandemic, January-December 2019 total of 756,610 students (DESE, 2022).

The decline of migrant students was most impactful within the higher education sector, with university revenue falling by A\$2.4 billion in 2020, down 6% from 2019, and for the first time since 2009 (Hurley et al, 2021b, pp.7). This trend of decreasing student capacity and preference for studying overseas can be attributed to various intersecting factors, including the heightened international travel restrictions during the pandemic, Australia's reputation as a study destination, and unaffordability (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.1). Multiple analyses predict that the significant impact of border closures will reverberate across 2022 and 2023 and will take an absolute minimum of 3 years to rebuild (TESQSA, 2021, pp.5). This is because international student pipelines are multi-year, with commencing students constituting several years of future enrolments (TESQSA, 2021, pp.5).

As revenue from international tuition has been a vital part of how the tertiary education sector funds its institutions, especially for its larger research-intensive universities over the last 30 years, it is likely that publicly funded universities will face the greatest challenges in adjusting to a decline in revenue (Hurley et al., 2021a, pp.18). To compensate for this decline, it is predicted that university workforces could be restructured to reduce their proportion of permanent, higher paid academics and increase their intake of fixed-term and casual workers employed to teach and research (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.3).

Moreover, with a reduction in government research funding and fewer international revenue sources, new academics may have less opportunities to develop research and progress their careers, and Australia could

consequently lose its expertise in specific fields (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.4). As the education sector has been forced to move courses online or offer dual-delivery programs, there has been an accelerating development of advanced modes for online delivery (TESQSA, 2021, pp.3).

This increased online capacity may allow Australia's most prominent universities to provide courses to international students without the need for residence and student visas (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.2). Online courses will contribute to an increasingly competitive landscape as international education providers seek to maintain their revenue base (Croucher & Locke, 2020, pp.2). Overall, these projections and concerns raise questions about how to ensure that the Australian education sector remains attractive to migrant students, and how to encourage more students to study and work in Australia.

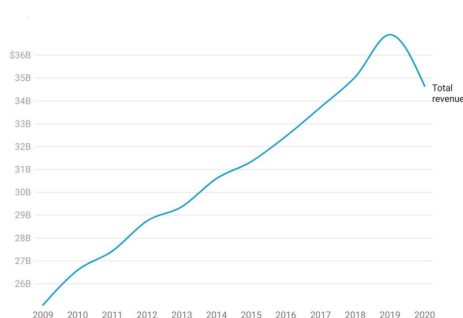


Figure 2: A chart compiled by the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University (Hurley et al., 2021b), sourced from the DESE and University Annual Reports. This chart displays the total revenue from Australian higher education institutions between 2009-2020.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has explored the key policy-induced inequalities encountered by international students before and during COVID-19, with

specific focus on students' experiences in the labour market. It has shown how temporary migrant policies have transformed over the past couple of decades in Australia from a focus on permanent residency and firmly enforced institutional protections for migrant workers, to a prioritisation of labour market efficiency and an increased intake of temporary migrants (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, pp.64).

Australia's rising intake of international students corresponded with its growing reliance on international tuition and students' participation in the labour market, and their widespread exploitation in the workplace signified how their value has been commodified (Hastings et al., 2021, pp.5). With a deficiency of supports, a significant proportion of students have been shown to experience wage theft, poor working conditions, and a reluctance to report exploitation under the threat of visa cancellation (Howe, 2018, pp.422).

Accounting for international students' already precarious conditions pre-pandemic, this report demonstrated how they became one of the most hard-hit groups during COVID-19 (Weng et al., 2021, pp.39). From this, it identified the economic and social impacts of limited work rights, pandemic-related policies, and the overall social climate on international students' wellbeing at the time. Migrant students' accumulative experiences of job loss, financial difficulties and emotional hardship were then discussed in relation to their potential impact on students' decreasing prospects (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020b, pp.40). As an ongoing issue influencing international students' economic viability as student-workers in Australia, the long-term consequences of COVID-19 on students was also projected to affect the

education sector through the reduction in their numbers and depletion of revenue (TESQSA, 2021, pp.5).

As evidenced, Australia's treatment of international students in the labour market and wider society has differentiated them as a disenfranchised class (Wright & Clibborn, 2020, pp.52). This fundamental injustice needs to be transformed through the implementation of structural policy reforms.

To address exploitative workplace arrangements and to ensure that migrants students are financially and socially supported in Australia, relevant policy makers and regulatory agencies must consider reform inclusive of:

1. The permanent removal of the limit on working hours for migrant students across all sectors.
2. The incorporation of international students (and other temporary migrants) within Federal social support measures, including wage subsidies and housing assistance.
3. Increased funding to the Fair Work Ombudsman to the extent that it becomes adequately resourced and

serves international students more effectively in enforcing work rights.

4. The adoption of a co-regulation approach within the Fair Work Ombudsman to include community-based representative groups for temporary migrants, unions, and international student-workers.
5. The implementation of a safeguard within the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, in partnership with the Fair Work Ombudsman, to not cancel an international student's visa if they have breached its terms due to workplace exploitation.
6. Greater enforcement of penalties for employers who breach compliance with the Fair Work Act 2009 through exploitative conduct, and an increase of penalties. This should include the broadening of legislation to penalise employers who knowingly influence a temporary migrant worker to breach their visa terms.
7. Increased competency of the wage redress process for international student-workers who have experienced underpayment or mistreatment in the workplace, including an improvement of its accessibility and time efficiency.

APPENDIX



Australian Government
Department of Education, Skills and Employment

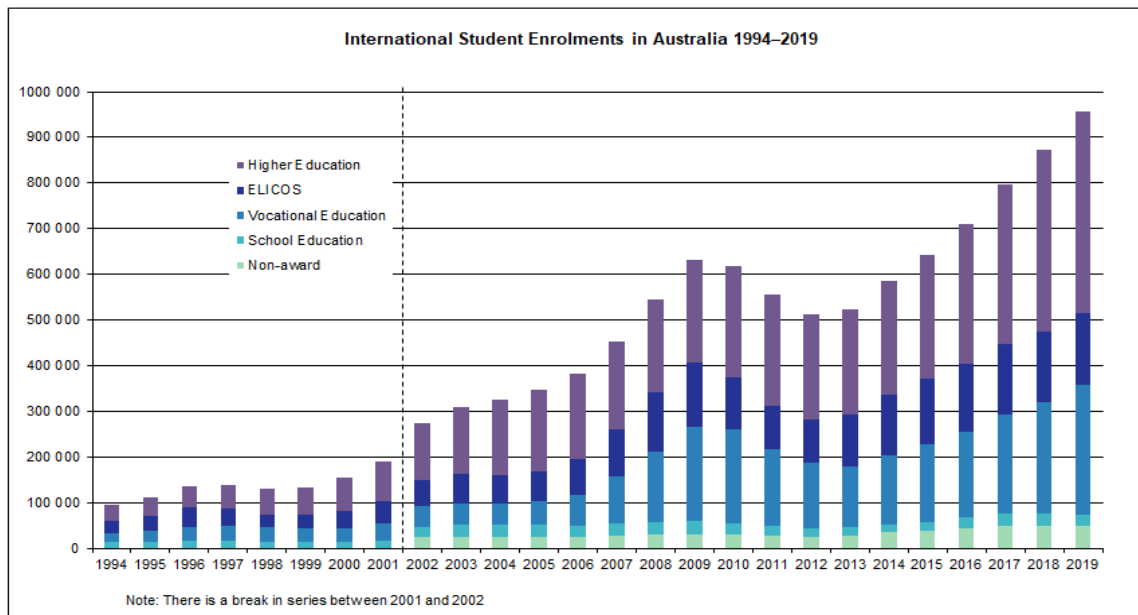


Figure 1: A chart compiled by the Australian government department of education, skills, and employment (DESE, 2019), sourced from the DESE, CRICOS and the Australian Department of Home Affairs. This chart displays the number of international student enrolments in Australia from 1994 to 2019.

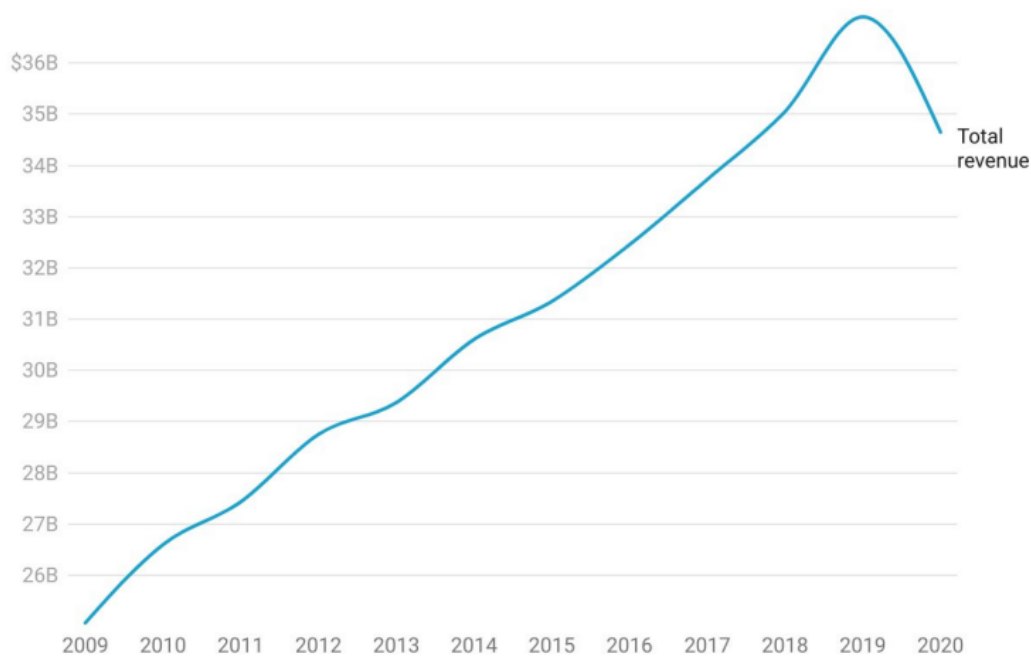


Figure 2: A chart compiled by the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University (Hurley et al, 2021b), sourced from the DESE and University Annual Reports. This chart displays the total revenue from Australian higher education institutions between 2009-2020.

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