

# Indonesian International Students in Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Coming Out Stronger?

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Australia is a sought-after destination for international students, including from countries of the Global South such as Indonesia. Prior to the pandemic, the tertiary education of international students was its second largest export. At the onset of the pandemic, Australia's Prime Minister told international students they should return home immediately, warning them that they would not be supported by the government if they chose to stay. Throughout 2020 and 2021, Australian media outlets offered shocking reports and images of international students who had lost their homes and were queuing at soup kitchens. Experts feared that these images and the overall treatment of international students would do long-lasting damage not only to the education sector but also to Australia's people-to-people relations overseas.

In this article, we explore the destinies of postgraduate students from Indonesia during the pandemic in Australia. As Indonesia's closest neighbor, Australia is the preferred destination for Indonesian students studying abroad and Australia has targeted Indonesia as a growth market in recent years. Based on qualitative interview data, we offer a picture of how this cohort of international students "muddled through" the pandemic. We ask what damage may have been done by the Australian government's closure of its international borders and strict pandemic restrictions to its reputation as a welcoming country and center of educational excellence. What consequences might there be for this vital Indonesia–Australia relationship, in particular, and for the future of student and broader university engagement between the two countries? Our findings show a much more optimistic outlook than expected.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; International Students; People-to-People Relations; Scholarships; Soft Power

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## INTRODUCTION

*“As much as it’s lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time ... to make your way home.”*

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, ABC News, 3 April 2020

(Gibson & Moran, 2020)

*“International education is a vital part of Australian society. It brings many economic, cultural and social benefits to our people and businesses.”*

(Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia was the third most popular international education destination in the world. Over the last four decades, the tertiary education sector grew to become Australia’s second largest export earner after mining. The story of educating international students in Australia is often heralded as a success, building on more than seventy years of educational movement into the country, particularly from the Asia–Pacific region. Since the beginning, this educational exchange has had both a commercial and transactional dimension, as well as a geopolitical imperative in relation to Australia’s place in the world. A key focus of this paper is to try to understand the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic-related restrictions impacted on international students’ day-to-day lives, and, beyond that focus, to investigate the potential for damage to Australia’s reputation as an attractive destination for international students. Any potential loss in Australia’s “attractiveness” is not only associated with inevitable financial losses, but also with losses in Australia’s soft power in the Asia-Pacific region. As we explain in more detail below, special focus is directed to postgraduate students from Indonesia, which Australia has targeted as a growth market in recent years.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Australia began welcoming both privately funded and scholarship students to Australia, mostly from Southeast Asia and South Asia, many of whom were awarded scholarships funded by the Colombo Plan (Gomes, 2022; Oakman, 2004; Purdey, 2015). The Colombo Plan was a regional economic and social development initiative from a group of Commonwealth nations to provide assistance to developing countries, both in the transfer of physical capital and technology and in developing skills by training students. As historians have revealed, for Australia, the early emphasis in this exchange was closely connected to an aid and development imperative arising from a diplomatic focus on ensuring stability within the region (Oakman, 2004). Beneficiaries of such government-funded programs were then, and are still today, expected to return to their home countries after their studies to assist in economic, infrastructure, and social development. As Purdey (2015, p. 115) has written elsewhere, Australia’s first program of educational assistance for Indonesians included a small number of fellowships first offered in late 1948, following a goodwill mission to meet the leaders of the republican movement. The first fellows arrived in December the following year. As David Lowe (2003) has described, Indonesia’s strategic importance in the region and this existing relationship meant it was immediately designated a key participant in the Colombo Plan, even though

it was not a member of the Commonwealth. In the first decade of the program in Australia, Indonesians made up one of the largest cohorts, peaking in 1955/1956 with an intake of 220 students out of a total of 675 Colombo Plan arrivals (Auletta, 2000). We argue that this special relationship first established in the post-war years lasts until today, carried through in Australia's present-day scholarships program, the Australia Awards. Whilst these government-funded programs now account for a tiny portion of Australia's international student enrolments, they remain important instruments for bilateral diplomacy with its regional partners, including Indonesia, which will be described in more detail below.

In the decades since the early student arrivals, various factors ushered in significant changes in the approaches of Australia's higher education sector and of the government towards international students. These factors include geopolitical shifts, economic development in students' countries of origin, and, most significantly perhaps, deregulation of Australia's higher education sector in the late 1980s (Croucher, 2015). As successive governments reduced the public contribution to the sector, universities became increasingly dependent on international students' fees. In the years prior to the pandemic, overseas student fees were the largest source of revenue growth for Australian universities, growing as a proportion of total revenue from 17.5% in 2010 to 27.3% in 2019 (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021).

By the time the pandemic hit, education had developed into a very strong export market that was highly professionalized and deeply embedded within Australia's domestic economy. From 2010 to 2019, overseas student enrolment across all levels in Australia grew at an average rate of 10% year on year (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Despite this massive growth, critical voices regarding the poor treatment of international students grew louder, too, as not enough was being done to ensure international students were receiving a quality experience (Arkoudis et al., 2019). Ignorant of such criticism, by the end of 2019 and just before the pandemic hit, 440,000 international students, mostly from China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Indonesia, were enrolled in Australian universities (Ferguson & Spinks, 2021). In that year, education services to full-fee-paying international students and their related expenses brought in AUD 40.3 billion (Gomes, 2022; Marshman & Larkins, 2021). As one expert has pointed out, this dependency meant that after two years of the pandemic and huge associated losses to the market, "there's no other way to fill the gap" (Peter Hurley, quoted in Kelly, 2022).

The importance of international students to Australia goes beyond their financial contributions to the nation's universities; it also derives from their potential as people who will one day be the leading thinkers and social, business, and political leaders and decision-makers in their home countries, and, as such, the shapers of people-to-people relations with Australia for generations to come. It is, therefore, crucial to understand how Australia's COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and border closures impacted the cohort of international students who lived through it and their outlook on Australia, not only to better comprehend the outcomes for these individuals, but also for the future of the international education sector and Australia's reputation more broadly.

## COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS

COVID-19 arrived in Australia in February 2020, just as the academic year was about to commence. On 1 February, Australia placed restrictions on arrivals from China, which severely affected international students from China and Hong Kong, many of whom had not yet returned to Australia from Chinese New Year holidays at home. With these students no longer permitted to enter the country, Australian universities and other educational institutions were forced to turn to online teaching and learning to deliver their courses to students stranded overseas (Amelia et al., 2021). As scholars have pointed out, for students in China this was not a simple shift, with many facing considerable difficulty in accessing their online courses because of China's Great Firewall (Hope & Sullivan, 2020).

As COVID-19 spread and was declared a pandemic, Australia closed its international borders on 19 March 2020 to all non-citizens and non-residents. Universities halted their onsite operations entirely as the country entered a nationwide 'stay at home' lockdown. For international students in Australia, the lockdowns meant that many who were reliant on income from casual and part-time employment in hospitality and retail were now in a precarious position. In early April 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told international students and other visitors to return to their home countries, as his government needed to focus its attention on its own citizens and residents (Gibson & Moran, 2020). Only those temporary visa holders with critical skills in assisting with the pandemic, such as doctors and nurses, were offered exemptions. International students who had lost the casual work on which they relied to earn enough to cover rent and household expenses, including food, faced severe problems. Media images of long queues of international students outside city food banks during the initial six-week long national lockdown made their precarity highly visible (Carey & Carlson, 2022). Unable to cover their rent, some international students faced eviction, and the cancellation of international flights meant that some literally had nowhere to go (Power, 2021). According to Andrew Hughes, a marketing lecturer at ANU's Research School of Management, such images were causing significant damage to "brand Australia" (quoted in Sas, 2022).

After the national lockdown was lifted in late May 2020, the situation for students for the remainder of that year and into 2021 differed greatly, depending on which Australian state they were living and studying in. Between June 2020 and November 2021, the severity and duration of 'stay at home' orders varied from state to state and between urban and regional areas with each state. During these 18 months, Victoria's capital Melbourne experienced more and longer lockdowns than other states (approximately 38 weeks in total), followed by New South Wales (approximately 26 weeks in total). For the other states and territories with significant numbers of international students, lockdowns were minimal in Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, while in Western Australia they were hardly used at all in 2021. Given that Melbourne and Sydney host the largest numbers of international students in the country, it is not surprising that the overall reaction of international students was extremely negative.

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In our study we sought to survey a range of Indonesian postgraduate students from across different Australian states and universities, including those who experienced long periods in lockdown. Our findings from in-depth interviews with Indonesian students revealed a much more positive outlook on student resilience than media reports and initial research have indicated. We have structured our analysis around the examination of students' financial situation, issues arising from the closure of the international borders, student-supervisor relations, resilience, and expected long-term impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns. As will be shown, while all students admitted that the pandemic caused a massive disruption in their lives, depending on their class background, their scholarship conditions, their family situation, and their overall embeddedness within the Indonesian community in Australia, some students faced the pandemic with much more resilience than others. While this finding does not undermine general criticism of how poorly some international students were treated in Australia during the pandemic, it urges us and future research endeavors to pay more attention to intersectional positions, as not all international students were affected by the pandemic in the same way.

### **MORE THAN EXPORT DOLLARS**

When researching the impacts of the pandemic on international students in Australia, our interest is twofold: It is focused first at the micro level, of impacts on the personal and the intimate, and second at the macro level, of impacts on Australia's regional and global reputational standing. Given the position and status of the cohort of students chosen for this study, we will argue that these two foci are intrinsically connected.

Firstly, we sought to understand the impacts (financial, emotional, and social) at the individual level on Indonesian postgraduate students who either stayed in Australia or returned to (or remained in) their home country for 2020 and 2021. To do this, we engaged in 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with students to examine their motives for studying abroad and the impacts of the pandemic on their studies and general wellbeing.

The second broader aim of this study was to test the proposition that Australia's higher education industry has not only provided a boon to its domestic economy in export earnings, but also to its standing internationally. Over the past decade, in various reports and white papers issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016; 2017; 2022a,b), the Australian government has consistently pointed to and sought to leverage the soft-power dividend of this growing cohort of alumni of Australian higher education institutions (Purdey, 2015). Through our qualitative sample of in-depth interviews, we aim to understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 related ruptures to this soft-power dividend and the potential reputational damage to "brand Australia" in both the short and longer term.

The focus for this study is on postgraduate students from Australia's closest neighbor, Indonesia. While students from Indonesia do not form the largest nationality cohort of international students in Australia, it is their primary overseas destination, with 20,000 Indonesians studying in Australian institutions in 2019 (Australian Embassy Indonesia, 2020), of which over 13,000 were in tertiary education (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Of significance for

the focus of this study, more postgraduate students from Indonesia currently hold scholarships under the Australian government's Australia Awards program than students from any other country. Also, Australia is the second most popular destination after the UK for recipients of the Indonesian government's premier scholarship program, Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (*Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan*, LPDP). Recipients of these scholarships are marked out as already high-achieving individuals and future leaders in their respective fields in academia, policy, and business in Indonesia.

## INDONESIA-AUSTRALIA RELATIONS

Our study of Indonesian students in Australia is directly connected to our broader interest in questions of Australia's place in its region and the world and in people-to-people linkages as a soft-power dividend (Missbach & Purdey, 2015). Australia's relationship with Indonesia is frequently described by Australian politicians and diplomats as the most important of its bilateral relationships – a priority friendship in the Indo-Pacific region (Morrison, 2020). For many decades before the recent signing of the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA 2020), people-to-people links forged through the presence of Indonesian students in Australia and of Australian tourists in Indonesia have been vital, in part because of the absence of any significant trade relationship (Lindsey & McRae, 2018).

In recent years, as Indonesia's middle classes have expanded with its improving economic status, the number of young people seeking enrolment in foreign universities as full-fee-paying students has increased, as has the number on government-funded scholarships. Australia's long and close educational connections with Indonesia, combined with the high international ranking of many of its universities have driven demand, as has its geographical proximity to Indonesia. Although there are currently fewer students from Indonesia studying in Australia than the much larger cohorts from China and India, the relative youth of Indonesia's population and that nation's growing demand for a skilled workforce signal a significant potential demand for higher education in the coming decade. As Australia's higher education sector looks to lessen the risk of over-exposure to China's massive market, the sector itself and the Australian government anticipate that the momentum generated by the IA-CEPA will make Indonesia a vital market for Australian universities (Austrade, 2020; Austrade & Australian Unlimited, 2019).

Our study focuses on postgraduate students, recognizing their particular status within Indonesia's higher education and public service sectors (both current and future), and their roles as influencers of policy and preferences related to Australia as both an education destination and more generally for ongoing people-to-people connections. By concentrating on Indonesian postgraduate students, we hope to make some preliminary observations about any consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for this vital bilateral relationship and for the future of student and broader university engagement between the two countries.

## SCHOLARSHIPS AND SOFT POWER IN THE REGION

While the origins of Australia's international education industry reach back to the influx of students under the Colombo Plan scholarships program, today full-fee-paying students make up the large majority of those coming to Australia. However, students coming to Australia for postgraduate study from countries such as Indonesia and other Asia-Pacific countries, particularly those undertaking PhDs, are most likely to do so with a scholarship provided by their own government or by the Australian government. In a very small number of cases, scholarships may be offered by philanthropic programs or by the universities themselves.

Most Indonesian postgraduate students in Australia are recipients of a scholarship from either the Australian or Indonesian government, from competitive and highly sought-after programs, such as the Australia Awards and Indonesia's LPDP. The LPDP was established in 2012 to create the nation's future leaders and professionals in various fields and to invest in strategic research and human resources to support Indonesia's development. Applicants must include an essay on how they will contribute to Indonesia once they have completed their studies. Priority fields include engineering, science, agriculture, law, economics, finance, medicine, religious affairs, and socio-culture, and awardees are able to choose from a limited selection of universities in several countries around the world, including Australia.<sup>1</sup> Since they were established, eligible universities in Australia have made distinct efforts to target students with LPDP scholarships, including tailoring their postgraduate offerings to match the priorities of the award.<sup>2</sup> Australia has been the second most popular overseas destination for LPDP awardees, with 386 enrolled in its institutions as of 31 December 2020 (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan, 2020).

The Australia Awards scholarships for postgraduate study in an Australian tertiary or higher education institution are administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as part of its development assistance, with a focus on countries in the Indo-Pacific and in line with the particular partner country's needs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a). As of October 2021, the Australia Awards program reported 211 Indonesians undertaking postgraduate study in its universities (approximately 24% for doctoral degrees) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a).<sup>3</sup> Both the Indonesian and the Australian postgraduate scholarship programs cover tuition and a stipend, although recipients frequently report that the LPDP stipend is less generous than that provided by Australia Awards. This is especially the case for those accompanied by family members, who

1 The Decree of the Minister of Finance (KMK) No. 18/KMK.05/2012, dated 30 January 2012, designated LPDP as a government agency and its scholarships program commenced in 2013 (<https://lpdp.kemkeu.go.id/en/tentang/visi-misi/>).

2 Australian universities on the LPDP eligibility list are very proactive in tailoring their offerings for prospective students (e.g., <https://www.monash.edu/international/global-partnerships/international-sponsor-relations/lpdp-priority-areas-and-monash-courses>; <https://www.rmit.edu.au/study-with-us/international-students/apply-to-rmit-international-students/fees-and-scholarships/scholarships/lpdp-rmit-scholarship>).

3 With the suspension for new arrivals into the Australia Awards program during the pandemic, in February 2022 Australia Awards reported the current number was 156 students currently in Australia, with 30% doctoral students (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a).

usually need to rely on income from casual work to support their needs. Although selection criteria and procedures differ for LPDP and Australian Award awardees, both scholarship programs make it mandatory for recipients to return to their home country after graduation, at least for a number of years, in order to avoid ‘brain drain’.<sup>4</sup>

Successful awardees are, needless to say, high achievers, and in Indonesia’s case, the vast majority are employed within either the higher education sector with the status of public servant, or in other sections of the public service (Saputra, 2018). As previous studies have shown, once they return home, graduates of these scholarship programs play significant roles in their institutions (Purdey et al., 2015). As alumni of their universities and scholarship programs, they also play ongoing roles in promoting Australia’s reputation as a “world class education” provider and as a desirable country to study and live in (Anggoro, 2022). These long-standing educational connections between the two countries are frequently noted and drawn on by representatives of both countries when they refer to the depth of the bilateral relationship (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022a). In December 2020, at the Australia Awards Alumni presentation, the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Gary Quinlan, acknowledged the importance of this cohort: “Australian alumni in Indonesia make a significant contribution to Indonesia’s development and help our two countries to understand each other better ... Alumni play a crucial role in deepening cooperation between Indonesia and Australia” (Australian Embassy Indonesia, 2020). Similarly, in his address to the Australian Joint Houses of Parliament in February 2020, President Joko Widodo referenced the long-standing bilateral links in educational exchange, noting: “Our youths today are the leaders of tomorrow. Investing in the young generation will further strengthen the Indonesia-Australia partnership” (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020; Widodo, 2020). Our study sought to test such positive viewpoints, and to examine how COVID-19 may have altered these assumptions among a cohort of Indonesian students who studied and lived in Australia during the pandemic.

## METHODOLOGY

From January until February 2022, we conducted 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Indonesian postgraduate students who were enrolled in an Australian higher education institution during the pandemic (2020–2022) either as PhD candidates (71%) or as master’s by coursework students (29%). They were either currently studying or had recently completed their studies. The students were based in various Australian states and also in Indonesia. While we conducted most interviews online, we were also able to meet some interlocutors in person. We issued a call for participants through an Australia–Indonesia youth network, but the majority of interviewees were found through snowballing, with one interviewee suggesting others. This has meant that our sample is composed of clusters of students from a

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<sup>4</sup> For most programs, it appears that a graduate is required to live and work in Indonesia for two years for every year on an overseas scholarship plus one.



particular university, or from a particular discipline.<sup>5</sup> When this became apparent, we actively sought out additional participants from different institutions and disciplines where possible. There is some gender bias in our sample towards women (71%).<sup>6</sup> The interviews attempted to undertake a “whole-of-life” approach, wherein we sought to learn not only about the students’ experience of the pandemic, but also to understand their motivation for undertaking postgraduate study overseas, their family background, and employment commitments at home and in Australia (Purdey, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In contrast to media reports focused largely on the difficult situations for many international students in Australia during the pandemic, our study revealed a somewhat positive picture of how Indonesian students dealt with the challenges they encountered in this period. We do not see our findings as a corrective to the overall negative media reportage, but rather as adding nuance to the critical discourse on the situation of international students in Australia and to demand a more refined approach to understanding the needs, characteristics, and coping strategies of international students. In this paper, we offer a preliminary general overview.

In general, a number of co-created/co-selected themes emerged across the series of interviews with the students: income, borders, student–supervisor relationships, support networks, and family. The two main variables that appeared to have influenced the experiences of our participants during the pandemic are based on:

- a. family status (married, children; accompanied to Australia or not). Students who were accompanied by family felt more settled, secure, and less anxious than those who were single or whose immediate family members were in Indonesia.
- b. progression in degree prior to pandemic (that is, the number of years they had been studying before March 2020). Students who were preparing to begin fieldwork when lockdowns were imposed and borders closed and those who had just arrived to start their studies experienced the most disruption and anxiety. They faced the need to pivot and adjust within a rapidly changing environment, including shifting their research focus online.

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5 These universities and discipline areas also reflect the data in relation to current Australia Awards scholarship recipients (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a). Our sample includes students from various universities, including the three universities with the most Australia Awards scholarship holders – University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, and Australian National University.

6 This bias towards women awardees mirrors the Australia Awards distribution in 2020 and 2021 (56% female) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a; 2022a,b).

7 Sample questions included: Where are you from?; Why did you want to study abroad?; Why choose to study in Australia?; What did you know about Australia before enrolling in your course?; How did you support yourself during lockdowns?; What resources did you have access to?; If you returned to Indonesia before completing your studies, what have been the challenges/ benefits?; Has your view of Australia/Australians changed?

### **Finding 1. Scholarships Shielded From Significant Financial Hardship**

During the lockdowns, none of our respondents who held scholarships during the pandemic reported significant additional financial hardship<sup>8</sup>, with one exception relating to the need to seek assistance on a short-term basis to cover some medical costs. In this case, the situation was rectified once the student understood how to access relevant benefits available to her as part of her award. Whilst some students took advantage of university offers of food parcels and similar handouts, none admitted to relying on them to get by. On the contrary, some students provided help to others, and a reduction in their living expenses during lockdowns meant that some were able to add to their savings. The sense of community among Indonesian students was generally high, often expressed through sharing meals and other offers of help.

The partners of students who were accompanied by a spouse sought some kind of casual or part-time work both before and during the pandemic. Some students also worked in casual employment to earn extra income. Generally, this work was not greatly inhibited during the lockdowns, as most were employed in sectors deemed 'essential work', such as cleaning and delivery services, rather than in hospitality, retail, and tourism, which were the hardest hit sectors. The casual nature of this work, however, meant that most were ineligible for government assistance offered during the first national lockdown. Of note here is the fact that, whilst most spouses are also professionals, most do not seek to work in their own fields while living in Australia, preferring to work in jobs with flexible hours to give them the time they need to care for their families. For a few spouses, the pandemic-induced shift to virtual workspaces meant that they could continue to work in their jobs 'in' Indonesia and contribute to the family income (see Finding 2b below).

Universities were supportive and offered students assistance when needed, including counselling, which some informants made use of. Students mentioned receiving vouchers (for books and coffee) and hampers during the pandemic, and, whilst they appreciated this gesture from their universities, our respondents did not deem it essential. Some acknowledged that their particular situation was not the norm for all international students, for example:

I think I would have to acknowledge again my privilege for getting the scholarship and being stable regarding income ... but for a lot of my friends who were not Australia Awards scholarship awardees, they had to struggle.

### **Finding 2. The Border Closure Had Different Impacts**

The sudden closure of international borders had varying impacts on the personal lives of our respondents, with an individual's family status and situation having the

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<sup>8</sup> Here, we would note that for some years prior to the pandemic, international students in Australia – including scholarships awardees – have noted coming under significant financial stress to cover rising cost of living expenses, especially related to accommodation costs. These pressures vary depending on the city in which students are living and have changed over the course of 2020-2021. For example, Melbourne and Sydney saw huge reductions in rental costs during this period, especially in locations in which international students lived, whilst in the regions and smaller cities, such as Canberra, these costs have continued to rise.

most significant bearing. The two main impacts were that it either kept families apart or allowed families to remain together.

a. Kept families apart

Only one of our sample of participants was separated for any length of time from their immediate family. In this case, the student had originally intended to return to Indonesia from time-to-time for long periods to carry out field-work in Indonesia, rather than relocating the entire family to Australia. When the borders closed and this plan was no longer possible, the student reported heightened anxiety and stress and a profound negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. In the end, a special and rare dispensation was sought from the university and granted, allowing the student to return to Indonesia and continue their studies online.

Most interlocutors expressed sadness at having been disconnected from their parents and their extended kin networks during the pandemic, particularly when any of these people fell sick or passed away while they were in Australia. Social media, particularly video calls, allowed for intense exchange and communication. A high number of our respondents reported deaths of family members during this period, particularly during Indonesia's devastating COVID-19 Delta wave in July–August 2021. Not being able to attend funerals and conduct religious rites in Indonesia was seen as a significant personal loss.

b. Allowed families to remain together (“Blessing in disguise”)

In an unexpected finding, a number of respondents described how, for their specific family configuration, the closure of borders was a “blessing in disguise”, because it meant that their visiting spouses were “trapped” with them in Australia and did not return to Indonesia as initially intended. As noted above, when many workplaces shifted online in 2020, spouses were able to continue to work in Indonesia from their Australian homes, particularly if they were academics or had their own businesses in Indonesia.

It became a blessing for us because everything was online ... including in Indonesia. That's why until now my husband is still here.

This student also reported being able to concentrate more on her career and studies as their spouses were there to help with the children and household and provide emotional support. Not being separated from their immediate family members at this time greatly assisted with mental health wellbeing.

Significantly, for those with family and ongoing commitments outside of their studies, such as home schooling and additional income generation, it also allowed for flexible work schedules:

We want to make the best of it.

Respondents reported that they adopted better time management practices during the lockdowns, resulting in high levels of productivity for some.

I could join an international conference in Europe ... I even collaborate with a European researcher, and we are working together on a paper. It is more productive.

Some made a greater effort to prioritize and free up time for self-care, meditation, and friendships:

During the pandemic ... there were times when I was very low ... I've tried yoga, it has been working ... walking religiously ... a lot of Zooming with friends in Jakarta ... That's how I survived the lockdown.

### **Finding 3. Shift to Online Learning Resulted in Different Challenges and Impacts**

Participants spoke about experiencing anxiety, largely due to uncertainties in relation to their research/study planning in the early stages of the pandemic. Fieldwork and data collection were particularly complex issues for our interlocutors, most of whom are doctoral students in Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) completing a large research project on an Indonesian case study relevant to their field. As the seriousness and longevity of the pandemic emerged, it became increasingly unlikely that students enrolled in Australian universities would be permitted to carry out fieldwork overseas (including those who were citizens of the country that was the site of the fieldwork). After an initial period of uncertainty and accompanying levels of significant anxiety, during which they needed to redesign their methodological approaches to make online data collection (surveys, targeted interviews) viable and to adjust ethics applications, students opted for very pragmatic approaches and were highly functional and efficient. In most cases, the students drew on their existing networks, knowledge, local connections, and language capacity. For those who had to break into new areas involving qualitative research, not being there in person meant they needed more time to forge personal connections via social media to elicit useful data. Some introductions were facilitated by local assistance in the field, but frequent follow-up was deemed essential to build and keep good rapport with informants.

Once you have a good relationship with a person you can WhatsApp them anytime ... but you need to meet them first.

Whilst they acknowledged that there were negatives associated with “missing something” that they might have been observed because they were not “on the ground” or “in the room”, all our Indonesian PhD student informants were working on Indonesia-related research and admitted to having good insights from their previous experiences in working, researching, and studying in the general fields they were investigating.

The methodological adjustments made necessary by the restrictions on travel for fieldwork research offered room for reflection, which became an even more important part of the dissertation; in some cases, it led to the publication of short pieces (blogs, op-eds). Moreover, some students reported finding a clearer focus for their dissertation by making their research COVID-19-relevant, which made their contribution timely and positioned it well for impact.

Those seeking to undertake research using archival or textual materials located in Indonesia experienced more difficulties. The extent to which such resources are available in digital formats online remains limited. Several of these students, and those collecting qualitative data for which there was no online option, engaged local researchers to gather the material. Their universities offered specific funding to cover these costs. Of those students who still had time remaining in their degree programs, some expressed the hope that they might yet undertake in-country fieldwork before completion.

**Finding 4. A Key Relationship for Doctoral/Higher Degree Research Students Continues to Be With Their Supervisor(s).**

Unlike undergraduate students or those doing a master's by coursework, research students have a unique and close connection to university academic staff and their networks. The supervisor performs not only research guidance and teaching roles, but also mentoring, both personal and professional, and acts as a gateway to university services. In longitudinal studies of doctoral students (such as Purdey et al., 2015), the relationship between the supervisor and doctoral student is highlighted as often the most significant connection the overseas student forms during their time in Australia and is most likely to continue after they return home. Given the challenges facing not only students, but also their supervisors and other support staff in the universities during the pandemic, this relationship was more important than ever for international students. One respondent described feeling a sense of solidarity between student and supervisor as “we are all in this together” and an awareness of the shared limitations brought by the pandemic. For a few of our respondents, changes to supervisors were another source of anxiety, although this was not necessarily due to the particular impacts of the pandemic. Students reported some difficulties meeting with supervisors and getting to know colleagues in person, but this was largely short-lived and occurred in the early stages of transition to online learning practice. On the whole, we heard from students that the online environment allowed for frequent and regularly scheduled contact with supervisors.

**Finding 5. Resilience**

Generally speaking, resilience refers to both the process and the outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. Being resilient does not mean the avoidance of stress, but rather the capability to make use of a diversified arsenal of successful coping strategies that enable a person to work through difficulties and stress. The participants in our study are all high achievers and have undergone many rounds of competitive selection processes to be granted prestigious scholarships. This success has provided them with a special kind of ambition, which we argue contributes to their resilience and the way they struggled through the pandemic. With so much at stake, they were also driven to “not lose face”, which meant that failure – aborting their tertiary studies at their Australian university prematurely – was not an option for them.

Our interviews revealed that their resilience also had many other additional sources. Most students were well-connected either through religious groups (for Muslims, *pengajian*, and for Christians, church), which were a source of great support, especially in dealing with homesickness and during religious celebrations such as Ramadan/Iftar, when some students set up food exchange chains and online religious activities, such as sermons, prayers, and singing. Additional networks mentioned by our interlocutors included Indonesian student associations (*Perhimpunan Pelajar Indonesia Australia*, PPIA) and the scholarships programs themselves (LPDP or Australia Awards), as well as university-specific graduate student associations. Some students referred to these networks in kinship terms (“*Our new family*”). While most students we interviewed were very much drawn to Indonesian friendship circles – many had Indonesian housemates – for support and comfort, a few specifically sought to make friends with non-Indonesian peers, either other international or Australian students.

These networks and the personal drive of the individual students meant they were highly resourceful, accessing support and taking advantage of programs offered by their universities and scholarships program, as well as government and community organizations in their local area. As briefly mentioned above, many were also a source of such support to and for others, volunteering to provide food packs and offering emotional and financial assistance to others in various ways.

I managed by volunteering a lot. I would go to church and volunteer ... I kept myself busy.

Beyond their immediate environment, all our respondents also spoke of providing emotional support, public health advice, and financial aid to family members at home in Indonesia.

Sometimes they [family in Indonesia] shared hoax information and I countered them with news from credible sources.

### **Finding 6. Inconsistency in Australian Government Messaging Over Borders Led to Confusion and Anxiety**

Although inconsistency in Australian government messaging relating to border closures led to confusion and anxiety, in general our participants agreed that the strict rules were necessary: “it keeps us safe”. They pointed out that exemptions to the strict rules were possible for some businesspeople and visiting celebrities, and some of them expressed a wish that specific exemptions for international students might have been granted so that they could leave Australia and return after short family visits in Indonesia, particularly in cases where family members had passed away. Some observed that international students had been largely neglected in the national conversation, despite repeated reference to their importance to the education sector.

At the time when international students can't enter Australia, last year the Australian Open was still organized, right? For me and for other students it was

unfair ... I have many friends who can't go back and who are separated between families and it's not easy for us ... we don't have a problem with the restrictions because it keeps us safe, but the problem we, my friends in Brisbane, have is that it is inconsistent and it's neglecting the needs and necessities of the international students.

I actually agree with the Australian government for the restriction because it keeps us safe, and it keeps us going. But we know that we lost many people, our loved ones, and we can't go back.

Nonetheless, in discussion on this issue, students also referenced the Indonesian context, explaining that they felt safer being in Australia than in Indonesia and weighed the risks of returning to Indonesia.

Of course, I'm homesick, but we think more practically because is it possible to come back if we go to Indonesia? So, we calculate any possibility and I think the wise option is just to keep here until I can at least finish important stages, important chapters.

All were vaccinated and grateful for Australia's free vaccination programs and that they were permitted to access this at the same time as Australians. They noted that Australians were also disadvantaged by the border control and mobility restrictions ("everybody experienced it"). As one respondent put it,

Covid? I don't know what the worry about it is. Just a pandemic. We are not living in a war ... we have our health. We can get through it.

Despite the many upheavals caused by COVID-19, the specific cohort under study here appears to have got through the pandemic relatively well, despite early anxieties, a number of personal sacrifices, and the need to keep adapting their studies in what was a rapidly changing environment. Our interlocutors found studying in Australia challenging, noting the need to apply a high level of critical thinking to reach supervisors' expectations. However, many of the academic difficulties they cited were not related to the pandemic impacts in particular and are consistent with the experiences of previous cohorts.

Compared to alarming reports of students suffering significant financial hardships during the pandemic, the cohort under study here was financially much more secure and not reliant on casual and part-time work in sectors impacted by lockdowns. The relative financial security of this cohort appears to have been an important difference in comparison to that of more precarious, self-funded international students who remained in Australia during this period. In the two years of the pandemic, students accompanied by their family had far more settled and stable experiences than those who were alone or apart from family at this time. In addition, responsive and supportive universities, high levels of pastoral care from supervisors and other staff who adopted a flexible approach to the constantly shifting conditions, were also key to positive outcomes for our research-only cohort. In general, we would argue that all our interlocutors managed to emerge from their experiences of the past two years

in a position of strength and with positive sentiments towards their institutions and Australia.

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Whilst the experiences of this cohort of higher degree students enrolled in Australian universities during the pandemic would indicate minimal to no reputational damage to Australia in practical terms, the higher education sector is concerned about what it will take to reinvigorate these connections into the region after a gap of two years with no new arrivals. During this period, the Australia Awards program and LPDP were suspended, and in-country recruitment efforts were not possible. There was a well-founded concern within the higher education sector that prospective students would choose to take up opportunities elsewhere (Arora, 2021).

Our study shows that Australia was not always our interlocutors' first choice for their studies. All agreed, however, that it was the most pragmatic choice in terms of length of program, distance to Indonesia, quality of education, and safe environment. We would argue that as international mobility returns to pre-pandemic levels and scholarship programs and recruitment resume, the same pull factors will take effect, perhaps with some added emphasis. All our respondents reported that, if asked, they would encourage their colleagues, family, and friends to undertake their studies in Australia. As leaders in their respective fields, be it in the academy, policy, or business, this alumni cohort will be of significant importance in rebuilding the connections lost between these Indonesian institutions and Australian universities over the past two years.

### **A CONTINUING DEPENDENCY PROBLEM?**

Those closely observing Australian universities' growing dependence on international students for some time had already been critical of what they believed to be a highly risky business model. The pandemic exposed and aggravated the risks of this model many times more than predicted. In September 2021, the Australian government's Provider Registration and International Student Management System (PRISMS) database showed that commencing international student enrolments for 2021 fell by 24% compared to 2020 and by 41% compared to 2019. For all international enrolments, numbers fell by 13% compared to 2020 and by 17% compared to 2019 (Austrade, 2020; Marshman & Larkins, 2021). With more dropouts and fewer new enrolments, many university managers feared that the pandemic might have damaged the business model beyond repair (Dite, 2021). In 2020, Australian universities lost 5.1% of 2019 revenue (Duffy, 2021). Without replenishing the number of new incoming international students, universities are expected to lose between AUD 16 billion and AUD 19 billion by 2023. Moreover, with Australia's main market competitors – the UK, Canada, and the United States – opening to international students as early as June/July 2020, the higher education sector feared significant losses to their market share (Hurley & Hildebrandt, 2021).

On 15 December 2021, after months of mixed messaging, Australia's border was finally opened to international students and some workers subject to quarantining and vaccination requirements. Within weeks, however, as Australia became



overwhelmed by the COVID-19 Omicron variant and infection rates not seen at any time during the first two years of the pandemic, significant shortages within a stretched workforce and pressure on vital supply chains led to yet another shift in the government's rhetoric about international students.

In an attempt to help those industries facing worker shortages, in January 2022 the Australian government announced a visa fee rebate of AUD 600 to students and backpackers entering Australia in the following two to three months (Hitch, 2022). This policy targeted approximately 150,000 students and 23,500 working holiday-makers holding visas to enter Australia, but who had remained outside the country. The federal government also removed the restriction on student visa holders that limited the number of hours they worked to 20 hours (Boscaini et al., 2022). While welcomed by business operators and some students, academics and student associations criticized this policy, arguing that the main focus of getting students back into the country should be on their studies rather than on filling shortages in Australia's casual workforce.

Will COVID-19 prove to be a turning point for Australia's international education sector? Or will this opportunity to learn lessons from the experiences of students and institutions pass unnoticed, with stakeholders returning to their pre-pandemic focus on expansion and growth? Catriona Jackson, CEO of Universities Australia, is among those who are hopeful that a simple reset might yet be possible for the Australian market and that "the fundamental appeal of an Australian education remain[s] as strong as ever: excellent universities, high vaccination rates and an enviable lifestyle" (quoted in Kelly, 2022). When students began to return to campuses in February 2022, for some of them it was for the first time in two years. The centers of Australia's major cities, devastated during the long lockdowns, are once again enlivened by the return of many international students. In the short term, universities are quietly optimistic that numbers will return to near normal levels in the second half of 2022. This all remains to be seen, as do the medium- to longer-term implications of Australia's long border closures and restrictions on migration for its once dominant and thriving international education sector.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shed light on the challenges faced by international students in Australia during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Given that international students are a very diverse cohort and a highly socially stratified group of people, we have sought to offer a targeted examination of a particular cohort: postgraduate students from Indonesia. Most of them were holders of government-funded scholarships and, as such, occupy positions of influence within the crucial bilateral relationship between Australia and Indonesia. While the scholarship holders might be only a small fraction of Australia's international student cohort, they are part of the drive within its universities and government to build important connections with Indonesia, including with its future academic and political leaders.

While the media and some scholars studying international students in Australia (and in many other Western countries) have presented justifiably alarming reports about the poor treatment of international students, our findings, albeit from a very

specific sub-group of international students, have offered a different picture. We do not see this as a contrast to these reports, but rather as a complement to the experiences they represent. Instead of offering a representative sample, which would require more research funding for data collection, our sample is rather an indicative exploration and an initial mapping of a very specific sub-group of international students. We argue that it is important to take into account the often highly individual reasons and motivations behind students' decisions to study in Australia and the difficulties in generalizing the impacts of the pandemic experience on this very important group of temporary migrants to Australia.

While our analysis offered a surprisingly positive picture, we are aware that these findings must be related to the overall scenario faced by the Australian education sector, which currently faces many challenges in creating sustainable models for its financial future while also meeting the fundamental educational expectations of preparing domestic and international students for the future. While it may be tempting for Australian universities to simply go back to their old model of living off the fees brought in by international students, this moment in time (the ending of the pandemic's acute phase in some countries) could provide a crucial opportunity to create institutions of higher education that do not depend to the same extent on fees from international students.

Our findings reveal that, whilst financial security was the single most important factor in protecting our respondents during this period, also critical was the comfort and support provided by family, community networks, and the pastoral care and professional support offered by their universities. We would argue that, in combination, these elements provided our students with a high degree of resilience in the face of significant challenges. Whilst it is not possible to replicate these conditions for all international, or indeed domestic students, financial precarity is a concern that predates the pandemic and will most likely continue beyond it. This study, however, contributes to existing evidence (Kent, 2021) showing that students with a strong emotional support base and with good connections into local communities, be they diaspora-based, faith-based, or other community links, are likely to have the best outcomes.



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#### **DISCLOSURE**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.