

## Differential Impact of COVID-19 on Student Experiences in Australian Higher Education: International vs. Domestic Students

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian Higher Education (HE) faced unprecedented challenges, prompting a reassessment of student experiences. This study examines the pandemic's nuanced effects on international and domestic students, considering regional variations among international cohorts. Utilizing data from the Student Experience Survey (SES) conducted during 2019-2021, the study elucidates disparities in learner engagement, learning resources, skills development, teaching quality, and student support. Findings reveal a significant decline in overall educational experience during the pandemic, with international students disproportionately affected. While both groups experienced drops in key dimensions, domestic students showed a partial recovery in 2021, contrasting stagnant experiences among international counterparts. Regional analyses show diverse impacts, with Eastern European and North-East Asian international students witnessing rebounds, while disparities persisted for others. This study emphasizes tailored interventions to support vulnerable student groups and foster inclusive HE environments amidst ongoing disruptions, emphasizing equitable access and regional considerations in policy and practice.

### Full paper

#### Introduction:

The global COVID-19 outbreak prompted a rapid transition to remote learning in HE worldwide (Crawford et al., 2020; Khan, 2021; Gouda, 2020; Bromfield and McConnell, 2021; Stoney et al., 2023; Qi and Ma, 2021; Farbenblum and Berg, 2020), raising concerns about its impact on student experience (Kimaru et al., 2023; Bao, 2020; Osborne & Hogarth, 2021; Maqableh and Alia, 2021). The presence of international students in Australian HE added complexity, with COVID-19 exacerbating their challenges due to travel restrictions and visa uncertainties (Qi and Ma, 2021; Farbenblum and Berg, 2020). This highlights the need for research on the pandemic's effects on their experiences, crucial for fostering resilience and responsiveness in Australian HE and beyond (O'Shea et al., 2021; Aristovnik et al., 2020). This paper explores how COVID-19 shaped student experiences in Australian HE, focusing on differences between international and domestic students during 2019-2021, while also examining variations based on international students' regions of origin, recognizing their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

## Analytic approach

The study draws upon data from the Student Experience Survey (SES), the largest survey of Australian HE students, conducted by the Social Research Centre for the Australian Department of Education. Analysing responses from 2019 to 2021, the sample comprises 624,035 students, with 208,734 from 2019, 206,616 from 2020, and 208,685 from 2021, representing 39 Australian HEIs. The SES offers insights into five key areas: skills development (SD), learner engagement (LE), learning resources (LR), student support (SS), teaching quality (TQ), and overall educational experience (OE).

Initially, we track the evolution of HE students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, adjusting for various student-related factors using multiple linear regression models:



Here,  $E$  represents a measure of student experience or OE,  $\alpha$  is the intercept,  $Int$  indicates international student status,  $W_t$  represents the pre-COVID year 2019 and the COVID impacted years of 2020 and 2021,  $C$  encompasses control variables including student factors,  $\beta$  coefficients are to be estimated, and  $e$  is the regression error.

We then explore how pandemic effects on educational experiences may vary based on students' international status and time periods, incorporating interaction terms  $Int \times W_t$ :



Lastly, we investigate differences among students from various regions of origin ( $Int_{Region}$ ), expressed as:



## Findings

### Student Experience Trends During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our analysis of student experiences before and during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals significant shifts. Overall, there was a notable decline in all focus areas during the pandemic, particularly evident in 2020, with slight improvements in 2021. While learner engagement and learning resources suffered substantial declines, skills development and teaching quality showed less pronounced decreases. However, student support exhibited a worsening trend, indicating ongoing challenges in providing adequate support amidst the pandemic.



### Differential Effects on International Student Experiences

Our analysis reveals distinct patterns in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international and domestic students. From 2019 to 2020, international students consistently reported inferior experiences across various dimensions, experiencing more significant declines compared to domestic students. While there were slight improvements for domestic students in 2021, the experiences of international students remained stagnant or worsened, widening existing disparities. This highlights the persistent challenges faced by international students throughout the pandemic.



### Regional Disparities in International Student Experiences

Examining regional disparities among international students unveils diverse trends across various regions of origin. From 2019 to 2020, significant declines were observed among international students from Eastern Europe and North-East Asia, while some regions experienced rebounds in 2021, such as Eastern Europe and North-East Asia. However, disparities persisted, with certain regions continuing to face declines in specific dimensions. For instance, while Eastern European and North-East Asian international students witnessed improvements, international students from Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa experienced declines in most areas. These findings emphasize the importance of considering regional factors in addressing the diverse experiences of international students during the pandemic, indicating ongoing challenges despite some improvements in certain regions.

### **Implications**

This study advances theoretical understanding of student experiences during crises, emphasizing dynamic adaptation within HE institutions and among students, while extending existing literature on differential impacts. It underscores the need for targeted interventions to address diverse student needs, especially for vulnerable groups like international students, with recommendations for governments to allocate funding and implement regulatory measures for inclusive learning environments. HE institutions must invest in flexible teaching methods, technology integration, and robust student support mechanisms, emphasizing collaboration among stakeholders to promote student success and resilience through evidence-based strategies. Translation of research findings into actionable strategies is essential.

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