

Scholarship students and COVID-19

by Karen McNamara, Olivia Dun, Carol Farbotko, Celia McMichael and Fanny Thornton

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Quiet university campuses have become the norm under COVID-19 restrictions (Credit: Karen McNamara)

Tertiary education scholarships for individuals from developing countries to study in Australia are a core component of [Australia's development policy](#). In 2020, prestigious Australia Awards Scholarships (AAS) are being offered to [1,985 individuals from 50 countries, at a cost of \\$280 million](#). Administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as an aspect of [Australian foreign policy's focus on soft power](#), the [aim of the AAS](#) is to contribute to the socio-economic development of these countries through learning and skills development. How have AAS students in Australia been faring since COVID-19 border closures and social isolation measures were put in place?

During interviews with Pacific Islander AAS students in May 2020 (as part of our [Transformative Human Mobilities in a Changing Climate](#) project), we briefly diverged to also ask respondents about the impacts of COVID-19 on themselves, their family and their studies. We asked what the challenges have been, how they have coped, and what assistance they identify they need. The six university students we interviewed were keen for their stories to be heard. These students experienced the following impacts of COVID-19: financial insecurity, disruptions to studies and learning, interrupted family connections, and challenges to emotional and psychosocial wellbeing.

Financial insecurity was a pressing concern for these students interviewed. Often AAS students bring their family with them to Australia, and the allowance that comes with the AAS can be insufficient to cover all living costs for the whole family. Partners of students frequently find work in Australia to supplement the scholarship income. During the COVID-19 shutdown period, however, many jobs have been suspended or lost. One student explained that his wife works as a cleaner to support their family (including six children) but lost half of her income as a consequence of the shutdown. This has left the family in a difficult financial position.

Most university campuses around Australia have closed (completely or partially) to comply with social distancing measures, and many courses have transitioned to online delivery. This has been particularly challenging for these students as they are missing participatory and engaging face-to-face learning opportunities. Valuable in-person social interactions with peers and lecturers have disappeared. All students interviewed expressed this concern, as highlighted by one:

When we started having this online lectures and seminars, it was a big struggle for not only me but people from the Pacific. We are more used to face-to-face, verbal teaching, and our lives revolves around this kind of approach, so it's really affecting me in the first place. I was just lost.

Family separation has been another challenge. The family of one student had planned to join him in March 2020 to live in Australia until he finished his studies in mid-2021. With borders closed, this planned family reunion is now impossible:

My family's back home, yeah, I'm here alone... wife and four children... We were planning for them to come this year but then with all this pandemic going on, it's just hard...

Emotional and psychosocial wellbeing challenges were also expressed. All students interviewed grappled with the difficult decision, before the border closures, of whether to return home or to stay in Australia to continue their studies. Some students indicated that it has been difficult to remain in Australia, especially while their families are back home amidst so much uncertainty brought about by COVID-19.

It's kind of affecting me sort of emotionally, psychologically, and uncertainty feelings, wondering what will happen. It's a pandemic, and then thinking about families back home, children and all of this.

Sometimes it's hard to get up and have that motivation to do your work... affecting me mentally and physically, I've barely been out, sometimes I find it a bit stressful to be in the same room the whole time.

It's a bit different, we are not in our county, it's really hard for us...

These students interviewed, and their families, have responded to their new challenges in two key ways: managing finances carefully and relying on their support networks. In terms of finances, their focus has been on covering household essentials, including food and electricity. Leaning on support networks in Australia, as well as talking with family and friends back home, have been ways for students to manage stress during these difficult times:

Stay close together, encourage each other to keep going, share with each other if we have some issues.

Some of these students interviewed indicated that reliance on their own networks and resources has not been sufficient to respond to the multitude of challenges they face. In light of this, they provided two recommendations for the Government and universities to further support them during this time. As one student put it:

Why are we not looked after because it's the Australian Government that brought us here and I think that we should be properly looked after in situations like this?

The first recommendation was financial support through scholarship top-ups in times of crisis:

Some sort of financial support that could activate in time of unexpected crisis affecting students or family [of] students particularly. That would be a nice thing. Because the traditional thinking of having the spouse find a job to support the family is unable to maintain in economic crisis.

The second recommendation related to improved communication, outreach and pastoral care. Some students interviewed noted that universities needed to provide clearer guidance about options to defer studies or to complete studies from their home country (if return travel was possible). Additionally, checking in on the wellbeing and welfare of students was deemed important and had occurred to some extent and was adequate for some students, but others felt that it was limited or delayed.

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for crisis-proofing the AAS, as well as the broader Australia Awards within which it sits, in order for it to live up to its stated aims. Both the Australian Government (which sponsors the students concerned) and the university sector (which hosts them) must fulfil their duty of care, even as health, economic or other shocks emerge. The sufficiency of financial support, communication and pastoral care provided as part of the AAS, in ensuring student wellbeing, warrants close consideration. With adequate support, students would be better able to focus on the skill- and knowledge-building aims of the program.

Both DFAT and the university hosting these students have been approached for comment.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.

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