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Universities brace for lasting impact of coronavirus outbreak

While much harm has been done by epidemic, institutions could use crisis to sharpen strategies and practices in areas such as internationalisation and e-learning, experts say

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The impact of the deadly coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 is likely to reverberate across global higher education long after the outbreak is eventually brought under control, experts have warned.

In the most affected areas, universities face the prospect of losing an entire semester or more. In China, where the health emergency started and where most of the cases have occurred, institutions – including foreign branch campuses – have called a halt to in-person teaching. Administrators in Hong Kong universities, which are among the most internationalised in the world, have been frank in their assessment that a return to normal teaching in early March is “unlikely”.

Travel bans have prevented hundreds of thousands of Chinese from returning to universities where they were studying or were due to begin courses.



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Meanwhile, thousands of young Chinese with their sights set on overseas education have been hindered by the cancellation of standardised tests and by a lack of outbound international flights to attend campus tours and interviews.

Hamish Coates, a professor at Tsinghua University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/tsinghua-university>)'s Institute of Education, told Times Higher Education that "the first priority is for institutions to care for the people involved – students, faculty, staff and the communities we serve. This is a human situation."

"People are fighting hard now, but the war on the virus will be won and life will go on," he said.

Nevertheless, thoughts are turning to the outbreak's longer-term implications for the 2020-21 academic year and beyond. Undoubtedly, the landscape of Asian higher education could be fundamentally changed, and possibly for the better, in some ways at least.

Researchers racing to develop treatments and cures for patients have become heroes to the public and the media. The medical and scientific response to the epidemic has been "excellent, reinforcing the safety and wealth of higher education systems", Professor Coates said.

"The role of higher education has been magnified quite considerably," he said. "There will almost certainly be a resurgence in interest in scientific learning. The medical profession is essential at this time, as is the education of the public."

Professor Coates also saw a potential for improvements in online teaching, which, in the face of campus closures, was now a necessity instead of an option.

Like many educators based in Asia, Professor Coates has been working remotely. In his case, he is physically in Melbourne but teaching students from around the world who are enrolled at Tsinghua in Beijing. In just a few weeks, his university has shifted into almost fully digitised operations.

"Higher education will be more interconnected, and I don't just meaning flying people around and putting them in concrete towers," he said. "Online learning is the big winner from this – across all education levels; so proving quality now is at centre stage."

Todd Maurer, a Los Angeles-based education consultant, said Chinese universities' use of online education had grown after the Sars outbreak. "Whether that was because of the trends in technology is hard to say. But once people get used to a certain modality, they become more inclined to use it," he said.

“There could be greater opportunities to expand online offerings as a result of this crisis. It will be worth questioning the extent to which the online experience within universities may stick.”

Diana Laurillard, chair of learning with digital technologies at the UCL Institute of Education, said the outbreak could even improve Chinese students’ views of online learning. Having long regarded distance education as “very second rate”, the Chinese authorities now understood its potential, she said; and in a culture where students were not known for speaking up, online techniques could encourage engagement.

“Every student has the chance to ask a question in an online webinar,” Professor Laurillard said. “That’s not the case in a lecture. The online space can be much less of a challenge than face-to-face.”

Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that China’s substantial investment in internationalising its top universities will be affected by the graphic news images shown around the world, depicting overflowing hospital wards, quarantined cities and shuttered campuses.

The country was on course to educate at least 500,000 international students this year, and it has invested heavily in recruitment from the developing world in particular.

Anna Esaki-Smith, co-founder of research consultancy Education Rethink (<https://www.education-rethink.com/>), told THE that the disruptions in China “have brought a chill to a sector whose very core is rooted in global mobility”.

“What’s harder to measure is how students and their families globally are interpreting the headlines, and how that will manifest itself in terms of determining student flows,” she said. “When it comes to university study abroad, the decision-making process for students can be a long one, as it involves planning, financial resources and alignment with longer-term academic and career aspirations.”

Alan Ruby, senior fellow at the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy at the University of Pennsylvania (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-pennsylvania>), told THE that “there will be a deterrent effect, especially on international students. The choice of destination for study abroad is influenced by perceptions about personal safety. The virus, and the response to it, is a reminder that health services and hygiene standards are not what some students are familiar with.”

Futao Huang, a professor at the Research Institute for Higher Education at Hiroshima University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/hiroshima-university>), called on China to respond to the Covid-19 crisis by making its universities more attractive to global students and researchers.

Chinese institutions' goals and missions should not be so focused on "national economic development or serving political ideological needs", he said. Instead, they should devote more effort to educational programmes and research that benefited "human welfare worldwide". Professor Huang added that the internationalisation of programmes should not be limited to science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, but must also include openness in the humanities and social sciences.

On the flip side, many countries have become increasingly dependent on international fees paid by mainland Chinese students, the majority of whom are now unable to travel. The disruptions may force these governments and institutions to rethink their globalisation policies.

Australia and New Zealand have been hit particularly hard. Not only are they heavily reliant on Chinese income, but they also have academic years that begin in late February – a date many Chinese students missed, including the newly enrolled.

There was a similar issue in Japan, Professor Huang said. Many Chinese students recruited by Japanese universities might not be able to start classes in the new academic year, which begins on 1 April. "It is likely that many private universities would not be able to charge sufficient tuition and fees from Chinese students," he said. "It would largely affect the operation of some private universities in Japan."

If quarantines and travel bans continue through the middle of the year, there will be further knock-on effects on the northern hemisphere markets of the US, the UK, Canada and Europe.

Professor Huang advised that "overseas universities will need to make more efforts to diversify the composition of inbound international students in terms of their countries of origin". He gave as an example the rising number of Vietnamese students at both Australian and Japanese universities in the past decade.

To counterbalance a dependence on Chinese students, overseas universities could consider options such as establishing branch campuses in South-east Asia or the Middle East, or providing distance learning to students in emerging nations.

Professor Laurillard, however, argued that the long-term risk to the financial model of higher education in, for example, Australia, remained low, even if online education does become more commonplace in China.

"I don't think it would influence the business future of universities," she said. "Students who come and pay big fees expect a lot of interaction with academics. If you end up creating great online versions of your courses, they'll still travel to Australia."

According to Mr Ruby at UPenn, “the financial impact at the institutional level will be shaped by how dependent an institution is on tuition revenue and how big the Chinese student population is at that campus”.

“Most of the [Chinese] students who have started their studies will want to return – effectively delaying the revenue stream, which will create some cash flow problems no doubt,” he said. “For the commencing students, some will ‘melt away’ as the quarantine period lengthens.”

Other experts saw potential silver linings for Western systems that lent heavily on Chinese students. Duncan Bentley, deputy vice-chancellor of Melbourne’s Swinburne University of Technology (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/swinburne-university-technology>), said the outbreak was “honing our capability in crisis situations”.

“We’re already ahead of the game; and if we rise to this occasion, it’ll keep us at the cutting edge of cross-border delivery,” he said.

Professor Bentley said Australian international educators had learned from past crises, including the Sri Lankan civil war and the Sars outbreak. “Supporting our students wherever they are in the world, with the best possible support – we’re getting better at it,” he said. “This will give Australia a continuing and competitive advantage in the international market.”

Mr Maurer said the outbreak could help to identify weaknesses in Australia’s online infrastructure and foster the development of a “more blended model” in which face-to-face teaching was infused with distance learning techniques.

“If Australian universities discover through this crisis that they don’t have some of that responsive infrastructure, it might behove them to start thinking about building some of it,” he said.

However, as long as the epidemic continues unabated, it will be impossible to know how long the disruptions will last.

“How the virus outbreak develops over the next few weeks and months will indicate whether the financial losses being experienced in the sector are recoupable, or if the implications will be more severe and long-lasting,” Ms Esaki-Smith concluded.

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