

# In Global Conversation

## International Students in a COVID-19 World

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on many aspects of university leadership and operations worldwide, with the new academic year turning thoughts to international student recruitment. We ask Vice Chancellors in Australia, Canada and the UK what impacts they have seen, and how those will influence the future in their markets. This month, we are *In Global Conversation* with Professor Margaret Gardner, Professor Feridun Hamdullahpur and Professor Mark Smith.

### Australia



Professor Margaret Gardner, President and Vice Chancellor of Monash University

Professor Margaret Gardner AC has extensive academic experience, having held leadership positions in Australian universities throughout her career, including at Monash University, RMIT University, University of Queensland and Griffith University. Professor Gardner is Chair of the Group of Eight Universities and CASE Asia-Pacific Regional Council, and a Director of Infrastructure Victoria and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. In January 2020, Professor Gardner was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia for her eminent service to tertiary education through leadership and innovation in teaching and learning, research and financial sustainability.

### Canada



Professor Feridun Hamdullahpur, President and Vice Chancellor of the University of Waterloo

Professor Feridun Hamdullahpur has been an engineer, educator and leader over the span of his over 35-year career in research and higher education. President Hamdullahpur has served as the sixth President of the University of Waterloo since 2010. His current focus at the University of Waterloo is expanding its lead in innovation, building on Waterloo's long-standing and emerging strengths in co-operative education, research, entrepreneurship and equity. The President continues to serve in many roles on committees and boards including as Chair of the Waterloo Global Science Initiative. The President was named a Specially Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2018.

### UK



Professor Mark Smith, President and Vice Chancellor of the University of Southampton

Professor Mark Smith joined Southampton in 2019 from Lancaster University where he was Vice-Chancellor for eight years. He plays a role in various sector bodies including as the current Chair of UCEA, a member of the HESA and HEFCW Boards, chairing the latter's Research Wales Committee. He is the Senior Independent Member of the Council of the EPSRC, a Council member of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group and a Trustee / Board Member of Jisc. He is also a Professor of Magnetic Resonance, a Member of the Ampère Society's Prize Committee and a Fellow of the Institute of Physics. Mark was awarded a CBE in 2019 for his services to Higher Education and Research.



## We know that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the international student market. How exposed is your national higher education market and what does it look like for 2020-2025?

**Margaret Gardner:** "COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the importance and contribution of the international student market to the overall quality, vibrancy and reputation of Australia's higher education sector. Modelling from Universities Australia shows that Australia's universities could lose \$16 billion in revenue between now and 2023. The impact of this particularly hurts Australian universities' capacity to undertake world-leading research. Estimates suggest that between \$3.3 and \$3.5 billion of universities' research activity annually could be at risk. It is important to recognise that losing an annual intake of international students will result in multiple years of revenue loss, due to the fact that most international students engage with Australian universities over a three-year period. Further, the longer that borders are closed, the more challenging it becomes to maintain international students' engagement for future years as well. It ought to be noted that the loss of international students extends beyond higher education, into the wider economy as well. Of the \$40 billion that international students contribute to the Australian economy, close to \$23 billion directly flows into local economies, which creates some 260,000 jobs across our nation."

**Feridun Hamdullahpur:** "It is important to clarify that the international student market remains the same or is growing, even with the impacts of COVID-19. Given the rise in middle-class income in the countries who are sending over students, and the inability of their domestic universities to educate them all, there will still be a demand. Ultimately, we need to determine how to align our institutions to build a bridge with those markets abroad, during the pandemic and beyond. COVID-19 has made building that bridge more difficult for many reasons, from travel restrictions to the infrastructure restrictions of some regions to ensuring a quality remote learning experience."

The real question is, how do we as a nation ensure the safety of our country from an increase in COVID-19 cases while allowing our incoming international students to come and take part in a rewarding educational experience on campus? It is a tricky balance that institutions are facing as we continue to navigate working with our government partners and meeting the expectations of our students. Many universities were doing online learning to one degree or another before the pandemic – Waterloo itself has had decades of experience offering classes online. We were nonetheless faced with a stark need to ramp up our ability to offer hundreds of courses through remote learning, including traditionally in-person labs. We are also quite aware that receiving an international education is multi-dimensional. Students are coming to another country not only to receive a quality education, but also for all the benefits and experiences that come from an international education, such as learning a new culture and building new contacts. We recognize these challenges and we are making efforts to meet those needs now, and long into the future."

**Mark Smith:** "It is quite variable across different universities, although generally exposure is very high. At Southampton, we are in the middle of the pack in terms of typical exposure if we look at the impact of COVID-19 on international students. However, it is important to see this impact in the context of longer-term trends, rather than as just short-term reactions. For 2019-2020, we were seeing almost explosive growth in international student numbers, both in undergraduate and postgraduate entry. The issue at the time that many universities were grappling with was how to cope with such rapidly expanding numbers. While there has indeed been a suppression of numbers due to COVID-19, it has been off the back of such a massive uplift, so where we are likely to end up is actually not too far from what we would have expected of overseas student numbers, perhaps two or three years ago."

However, international education is not just about the degree, it is about the broader perspective and experience that the education gives you – which has only been made clearer by the pandemic. In the summer, we offered our international students the chance to choose between learning purely online, or to have the option to come over to the UK at some point if travel allowed. The response was very clearly in favour of on-site and in-person learning. Even now, as we start recruitment for the 2021-22 academic year, I can tentatively say there is no sign of there being significantly less interest from overseas. Of course, many factors can change how people see the UK, but based on current outreach, prospective students are still very interested in coming to the UK. A long-term trend saw uplift in interest from India, and that has further accelerated under COVID-19, with applications up on last year due to the perception of the UK's position.



If we look a few years into the future, what will likely be a more important driver in international student recruitment, is the UK's position on post-work study, and the global perception of the UK's attitude to visas and being welcoming. This is an important consideration for the student market, as it echoes the global perception of the country and in turn impacts international talent recruitment."

## What long term strategies are you adapting or adopting to mitigate the impact on operations?

**Margaret:** "From the outset of the pandemic, universities have been implementing a range of strategies to mitigate the impact on operations, both in the immediate and long-term. These include delaying uncommitted capital works; a rationalisation of course and subject offerings to ensure viability over the longer term; reviewing non-salaried expenditure in areas such as the use of consultants, entertainment and travel; recruitment freezes and pay increase deferrals; and the challenging task of reviewing and minimising employee costs, resulting in significant job losses. Depending on the scale and profile of the university, some of these strategies will see them cope with the impact of the pandemic in the immediate to medium-term horizon. However, in the absence of government support and in the uncertain context of border closures and the impact of subsequent outbreaks, those longer-term challenges still remain. To that end, universities have been accelerating efforts which were already underway, around the growing provision of online education, international research collaboration using digital platforms, greater flexibility with remote working, and transnational education delivery with local in-country partners. Across Australia, universities are reflecting on what it is that they do well, and how to do those things better, while simultaneously pursuing new opportunities that will enable them to succeed, both during and well beyond the pandemic."

**Feridun:** "We have taken numerous actions to ensure our operations and processes are robust, including hiring hundreds of online learning assistants who are adapting our in-class lessons to online, enhancing our student services across the board, and reconnecting with all of our 7000 co-op employer partners. However, longer-term there are two important aspects of operational activity that COVID-19 has revealed for universities. The first of which is the changing nature of the workforce, particularly in the increase of working from home. We have to consider what challenges and opportunities that creates, both in the size of the workforce and its composition; what roles are essential to our operation and serving our students? The second thing we've seen in adapting to this massive change is the consideration of the physical nature of our campuses. By this I mean, how do we ensure that we are operating efficiently as a university from a support level. We have seen many changes in this arena, for example in offering hybrid counselling services."

We also need to see what modified class sizes will mean for our University master plan. We can also see that research itself, and the ongoing support of researchers at all levels on campus, will need to be maintained on the University campus as it continues to grow. The pandemic certainly put pressure on the ability of our researchers to reach their labs and offices in order to continue their work, so ramping up those operations in a safe manner, with an eye on long-term success, was absolutely vital."

**Mark:** "Currently in Southampton, we are focusing on thinking about the perception and positioning of what the advantages of studying in the UK are. You can definitely say that online is a great tool, and that there will be a big shift to providing a high-quality blended mix where on-line services play more of a role. However, I think that the type of person who wants to come to a Russell Group university in the UK, comes because of that university's ability to give them the full experience. Learning purely online loses that in-country international dimension that is so critical. COVID-19 has shown us very clearly, that despite technology and quality online products, there is a very significant market that still wants to have the travel element and the on-campus experience, which they see as a key part of what they are buying to study abroad. Online will play a strong role going forward, but the message we have received from our students is that a wholesale shift to online delivery would be a loss. That has given us the confidence to carry on the strategies we have in place in support of the international student market, encouraging us to continue in that direction. We are also learning that the on-campus experience will be changed for those individuals permanently, with an inevitable blended approach, as students are much more used to the online resources and control that it gives them over their own learning."



**International students play a critical role beyond the classroom, and the financial implications extend into the broader economy. What support is your government putting in place in recognition of the broader impact on the national economy, and from your perspective is there more needed?**

**Margaret:** “While there is recognition of the important contribution of international students, and many positive elements to the Government response thus far, there is a need for a more proactive approach to supporting international students as the pandemic continues to unfold. In the Australian context, both state and federal governments have been engaged in supporting international students. The Federal Government has introduced a series of visa changes that make it easier for international students to be granted visas when lodged in locations outside Australia, as well as enabling those studying online outside Australia to have their studies count towards the requirement for a post-study work visa. Meanwhile, state governments together with universities, have provided substantial support packages for international students in the way of immediate financial relief. Moving forward, a nationally consistent approach is needed to ensure that all international students feel welcomed and supported to learn and thrive in Australia. Importantly, state and federal governments, along with universities, must continue working closely together to safely return international students back onto campuses, as and when health guidelines permit. Planning is underway to support this work through a pilot “secure corridors” initiative. Moreover, ensuring that there are sufficient employment and work-related opportunities for international students must also be a key consideration in the context of economic recovery planning.”

**Feridun:** “International students contribute so much to our local and national economies, but they also make us a more vibrant and innovative society. The Canadian and Ontario governments understand the significant benefits of our international students. They also recognize the unique challenges that students face with the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have enacted several temporary policy changes that reflect this. For example, the Government of Canada has expanded eligibility for Post-Graduate Work Permits, which recognises that students may have their in-person instruction reduced due to COVID-19, makes allowances for online delivery, and ensures that those who start programs from their own country of origin will still be eligible regardless. The Government of Canada has also made temporary changes to allow international students to continue working if their studies are reduced or paused, should their permits allow. The University of Waterloo is working closely with all levels of government to make sure that international students are supported and their pathways to education remain open.”

**Mark:** “One of my past roles was as Chair of the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group at the Office for Students. One of the key things that we published on and evidenced to a government select committee was on the nature of the model in place for funding research in the UK – which was acceptable as long as you understood the consequences. Overseas student fees play a role in underpinning the sustainability of the UK research endeavour, which means that a potentially volatile income stream underpins that. When stable, it works well – but when you experience volatility, for example in this COVID-19 context, it makes the fundamental model much more fragile and exposed. The current pandemic, and resultant impact on international students, has made that that exposure much more real. If we don’t want that fragility, the UK Government will need to think carefully about that dependence and how to shift the model – this is an interesting catalyst for discussing a new direction. It has highlighted the knock-on effect of finances and loans in universities and research facilities – and it has made it clear that this is not sustainable long-term in its current form.”

**Universities are full of intelligent people from diverse backgrounds, who are constantly asking the big questions and striving to do better despite the challenges. With that in mind, what opportunities and innovations lie ahead for international student engagement and global partnerships?**

**Margaret:** “Crises such as these prompt us to re-examine the foundations upon which universities are built and to consider our fundamental purpose in serving society. While the means by which we deliver certain activities will shift and evolve and the needs of our societies become more complex, there are certain missions that will undoubtedly endure. In that respect, the world’s great universities have always been committed to an ambition that is global, both in outlook as well as in practice. They comprise campuses of diverse student communities from various parts of the world, and they are steeped in deep connections between institutions that traverse borders. As was the case before the pandemic, universities will need to offer a greater variety of educational offerings, particularly online, that can meet the aspirations and needs of



students and organisations from across the world, for creativity and innovation through education and research that meets global challenges. Where we may have previously considered international students as those desiring an experience abroad earlier in their academic life, universities can and must provide offerings for working professionals, and those with wider lifelong learning aspirations. Universities will also be required to forge new and different global partnerships with each other and with industry, by harnessing technology and developing the capability of local workforces to deliver the highest quality education and research.”

**Feridun:** “As institutions that are dedicated to the free movement of knowledge and learning, we must continue to emphasize our dedication to internationalization. At the same time, we also need to re-evaluate how reliant we are on international student tuition in order to support our everyday operations and growth. Given the unreliability of geopolitical pressures, changes in government and unseen global challenges, it is unsustainable for a modern university to put so much financial reliance on one particular revenue source.

Beyond the changes that institutions can make to their financial forecasts to try mitigating potential shifts in international student mobility, we should also focus on diversifying our sources of international students, rather than relying on one or two countries for the bulk of these students. The benefits of doing so will be extraordinary, for our campuses, for our community and for our innovative potential. We can begin this process by exploring existing partnerships with institutions abroad – especially so we can start developing brand recognition in new markets through student exchange, which can then naturally be expanded on. This will be invaluable in avoiding a sizable capital investment in trying to quickly expand a university’s brand into a new nation.”

**Mark:** “Although universities have been developing social media strategies and electronic communications directly for overseas students for some time, the level and sophistication of this approach has greatly increased under lockdown. We have seen much more of a coordinated effort to reach out and communicate directly with overseas students. One of those examples has been the ability to hold virtual open days, which have been very engaging and have greatly increased over the recent months. I also think that the idea of having a physical presence in key markets will be re-examined, as 'hedging one's bets' on different sides of borders could have real advantages when travel is more restricted.”

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## Get in touch

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