

Australian coronavirus travel ban blocks thousands of Chinese students

By Eric Ludlow
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On February 1, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a two-week travel ban on foreign nationals returning to Australia from China. The measure followed an Australian Health Protection Principal Committee assessment that there was an “increased risk posed from travellers from all of mainland China” in spreading the novel coronavirus that broke out in Wuhan, China last month.

The reactionary ban on travel does not apply to Australian citizens, permanent residents and their immediate family. However, those able to return to Australia are forced to undergo 14 days of isolation in quarantine on Christmas Island—one of Australia’s immigrant detention centres.

The Australian travel restrictions were announced after the US imposed a ban on travel on foreign nationals who had entered mainland China within the previous 14 days. According to the *Guardian*, some British universities are warning international students travelling to China that they risk being quarantined upon returning to the UK.

With many overseas Chinese nationals travelling to China to celebrate Lunar New Year with family and friends, the timing of the ban has left tens of thousands unable to return to work and studies in Australia. Over 106,000 of the 189,000 Chinese international students in Australian tertiary education institutions are currently unable to return to Australia, under conditions in which the academic year is due to begin within weeks.

Despite the coronavirus being largely restricted to Hubei province, the blanket ban by the Morrison government affects any foreign national trying to enter Australia from mainland China.

Wang Xining, the deputy head of mission of the Chinese Embassy in Australia, criticised the Australian government’s decision and the escalation to level four “do not travel” advice for all of mainland China. He told the *Age*: “The World Health Organisation didn’t recommend any restrictions over international travel and trade. ... Actually, it opposes such measures.”

Chinese students, who make up around 10 percent of

Australia’s international student population, now confront the possibility of missing classes, having to defer and even losing their visas due to the ban.

Some Australian universities, the including University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Macquarie University, University of New South Wales, Queensland University of Technology and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, have said that students will be able to defer their studies without penalty.

Other universities, such as La Trobe, University of Tasmania and University of Sydney, have said that classes will resume and affected students will be able to participate online.

Phil Honeywood—CEO of the International Education Association of Australia and former Victorian Liberal government tertiary education minister—has been appointed chair of a Global Reputation Taskforce. The taskforce, which established last month, warned that the Australian education industry that uses international students as an a lucrative source of revenue faces an \$8 billion hit from the coronavirus crisis.

Honeywood said: “The challenge will be the extent to which the government of China is willing to facilitate online learning and video-based teaching by Australian schools and universities into China. In the past the government of China has not viewed online learning as good as face-to-face classroom-based learning.”

One Chinese nursing student at UTS told the *Sydney Morning Herald* through WeChat: “The school of medicine only starts in February every year. If I miss it, I will be delayed for one year. ... Australia also proposed that schools provide online teaching, but I think this is impossible. We can’t access Google in China, we can’t open foreign websites and the quality of online teaching is very unstable.”

Monash University has delayed the start of semester by one week. There are calls for other universities to push back their start dates. As of Monday, over 11,000 students had signed a petition on the Chinese website WJX calling for the University of Sydney to delay the start of semester two

weeks, pushing it back from February 24 to March 9.

The petition was started by Student Representative Council (SRC) general secretary Abbey Shi. SRC President Liam Donohoe told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the petition is “a means to an end. What’s ultimately more pleasing is getting the outcome that we want.”

Donohoe said that a planned protest yesterday afternoon outside the Department of Immigration office would “express our solidarity to not just Chinese students, but all Chinese people who’ve been affected.” He condemned the ban as “Sinophobic,” noting that many University of Sydney students and SRC student office bearers would be affected by the ban.

SRC general secretary Shi told the University of Sydney’s student newspaper *Honi Soit* that, “Most students that have been trapped in China understand the virus and are taking preventative methods way more carefully than the institutional instructions.”

Speaking with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), a Sydney law student, who wanted to be identified only as Ritsu, explained that he was meant to return to Australia this week.

Ritsu told the ABC that as soon as he heard about the US travel ban, he knew Australia would follow suit. “I have absolutely no idea what will happen from here” he said. He described the travel ban as an “excuse for racism.”

Many students’ travel arrangements are being restricted despite posing no threat of spreading the virus. Ritsu has not been outside his apartment in Xiaogan—50 kilometres from the centre of Wuhan—for almost two weeks.

Ritsu has already enrolled in classes and paid the exorbitant tuition fees required of international students for this academic year. “I feel anxious every day and am constantly checking my emails for updates from my uni but they have only given out very general advice,” he said.

Unable to begin a planned internship with a research centre, Ritsu is worried he may have to suspend his legal studies.

Another international student, Ray, spoke with the ABC. She is currently in quarantine at home in Beijing. Ray expressed anger at the Australian government and called the travel ban a “poorly thought out knee-jerk reaction to follow the US.”

Ray said deferring her studies will be disastrous. “I’m a law student, so many units have iron-clad pre-requisites,” she said. “This means if I miss one semester, I might as well have missed the whole year.”

Many of Ray’s friends are unsure how long they can continue paying rent. Ray also told the ABC she is concerned about finding a paid job in Sydney if the travel ban is extended: “It’s already extremely difficult to find a

job in Australia as an international student, even if you are already doing really well academically.”

Some international university students’ Australian visa status could be under threat due to anti-democratic, minimum attendance requirements.

University of Melbourne student Jessica Xu will face isolation of up to two months if she returns from Wuhan on February 26 as planned. She told the *Age*: “I’m worried about my life, about my studies. Study abroad is not cheap, so I’m just afraid I cannot study in Australia this year.”

Post-graduate student Mengting Chen is also in Wuhan. She does not know whether to pay her tuition fees for this year, which are due one day before the travel ban ends.

Speaking with the *Age*, she said, “Me and my roommate have already booked an apartment for our next semester. We have to pay the bond, and the rent for the first month, and now we can’t get back to Melbourne on time.”

Xu told the *Age*: “If I can’t get back for March, I’ll have to delay all those plans for one year: graduation, graduate study, then my future career would be delayed for a year.”

Asked if students would receive refunds on tuition fees and universities would be covered for lost revenue, Australian Minister for Education Dan Tehan cautioned: “Let’s wait and see what happens over the next fortnight, over the next month.”

Some Chinese Australians have said they have been subjected to racial profiling as a result of the ban. Speaking with the ABC, Jono Gu said he saw racist graffiti on walls in Melbourne and a driver shouted at him to “go home” while he was wearing a face mask. “It’s all adding to an atmosphere of increased racial tension,” he stated.

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