

Coronavirus Offerings and Job Losses: University Reliance on China Bites

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It was predicted, warned against and is happening. Universities fattened by the Chinese student market are now in a state of financial shock, cutting losses, trimming courses and doing what over managed institutions do best: remove working productive staff while preserving the gouty managerial class. COVID-19 was but a catalyst for something that was already deep seated, a doomsday scenario for universities with management structures keen to make a killing from one traditional source. There were other incentives to do so, of course: falling government investment in education, an increased interest in finding sources of private income.

No better example of this is present than Australia, a country indulgent and intoxicated with the seemingly endless number of Chinese payers (for that is what they are) coming in for an education often delivered on the cheap, corners roughly cut and admission standards adjusted. (This is particularly the case regarding language requirements.) COVID-19 began in China, and from China, the constriction in supply from manufacturing to education is being felt. Industries are facing storms. Airlines are cancelling flights and grounding aircraft; desperate equity selloffs are taking place.

Gita Gopinath, writing for the International Monetary Fund's Blog, [makes the following point](#) on consequences arising from the virus: "In addition to this sectoral effects, worsening consumer and business sentiment can lead to firms to expect lower demand and reduce their spending and investment. In turn, this would exacerbate business closures and job losses."

In the tertiary and broader education sector, incomes are falling. "I have already lost a lot of work from the coronavirus outbreak, and will continue to lose more if it isn't under control soon," laments Luke C on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's [Facebook Messenger](#) page. One Tim O, who claims to be a doing sessional work at a university, [expresses](#) a similar attitude on the same forum. "If coronavirus gets bad and the university shuts down or provides fewer tutorials, I could be left jobless. That would lead by income to be cut by a total of approximately \$750 a week. It would be devastating for me."

Casual staff at the University of Queensland in the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education are feeling the pinch, [having lost 17 weeks](#) of work even as Chinese students were warned of failing courses if they did not cough up their semester fees on time. "About half our students are from China," Francine Chidgey, a casual teacher in ICTE's employ, [explained](#) to *Guardian Australia*. "I've been told that I won't have teaching shifts for 17 weeks. About 40 of my colleagues are in the same position, with others receiving only one

or two days' work per week, and occasional relief work.”

Deeper considerations are at play here. COVID-19 has presented university management with a grand razor and a distraction. The consequences of myopic decisions can be minimised. The University of Tasmania, for one, is taking the lead in making use of the coronavirus. Where there is catastrophe, let there be opportunities; where there is darkness, let there be a venal hope. Now is the time to clean the stables, count the losses, make cuts.

The timing was, as ever with these things, immaculate, [given the plea](#) from Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison to employers across the spectrum “to support your workers, by keeping them employed. Hold on to your people, because you will need them on the bounce back on the other side.”

University of Tasmania's Vice Chancellor Rufus Black had other ideas in mind when penning his [letter to staff](#). The university, he argued, was “working against powerful forces” in seeking sustainability but an “overreliance on China as a market for international education and what is now emerging as a pandemic” necessitated drastic decisions on course offerings. (The number is to fall from 514 to 120.)

“Thanks to the good work of our teams responding to the issue, the majority of our students in China and subject to travel restrictions have started to study with us. But as we know the spread of the illness continues to shift. We have a long way to go in dealing with this issue and its consequences will last well beyond this year.”

Reading such justifications requires an abundant degree of scepticism. Management-speak is a nasty sort of agitprop and should be treated as such. It sees the removing of competent staff as necessarily expedient while it deflects from its blunders. The letter from Black, for instance, speaks of the reaction to COVID-19 as part of a broader pattern of planning that was already in the works, but was simply hurried along in somewhat violent fashion. “In the face of it we are not making enough progress to be the right size to be sustainable even in the short time.”

Black also inadvertently reveals the *mens rea* of the university managerial class, that concept of criminal guilt lawyers of the British legal tradition are so fond of. University planners were aware that an overreliance on the Chinese market was dangerous, a “known strategic risk”.

The university's press release on Tuesday packages the slashing of jobs and the reduction of courses as part of a vision, as astigmatic as it might have been. The point being made here is that such reductions were always on the table, factored and measured. There was a “redesign” of the university's “course architecture”, one designed to “remove much of the complexity” of what was being offered. This is crude code for job cuts, staff losses and, as is the norm, the continued thriving of the vampiric handlers at the top end of the management spectrum. They won't be offering their heads on the platter of accountability any time too soon.

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