

Open for business

How education agents and Australian schools are working together to help the school sector bounce back from COVID-19.

With the COVID-19 outbreak now in its third month, few countries remain untouched by the virus. Each day brings new, unexpected developments, and the scientific community has been divided about the virus' likely course.

While the number of new confirmed cases in China has slowed over the past week, the economic and financial impact upon Chinese and Australian businesses is only now starting to be seen.

Australia's trading relationship with China is of enormous economic importance. Last year, international education made a \$35bn contribution to Australia's GDP. There are over 260,000 Chinese students enrolled in Australia across all sectors, and around 12,000 attending Australian schools. Accordingly, COVID-19 has presented the international education industry with unprecedented logistical, moral and regulatory challenges.

The outbreak initially occurred in Wuhan, Hubei Province, and spread across China during the Lunar New Year holiday period. Around the world, governments and health authorities ramped up protective measures, ranging from Do Not Travel advisories and mandatory quarantine periods, to complete border closures.

The Australian Government's response, in particular, restrictions on travel to and from China, and the enforcement of self isolation periods have been challenging for the education industry. The measures attracted considerable media attention throughout Asia, both positive and negative. Some international students voiced their dissatisfaction at their treatment in Australia via social media and in the press. Thankfully, this has been balanced by many positive stories emerging from Australian schools about the way in which they have managed the return of students who had been in China or travelled to China during the school holidays. Most school sector students had returned to Australia prior to the implementation of the Government's travel ban, meaning they could undertake their quarantine period in either their homestay family or through other arrangements put in place by their school. The vast majority of these students are now back at school and it is great news that the remaining students enrolled in Years 11 and 12 are now permitted to return to Australia. They will also be required to undertake a 14 day period of self isolation.

In China

With Chinese authorities yet to announce a firm date for people to return to work and school, many families are still confined to their homes to reduce the risk of person to person transmission. Many school students are now participating in the government curriculum through online learning across the country.

AEAS has been in close contact with key school sector education agents across ten major cities in China. Most offices remain closed with staff working from home, and although agents are mostly optimistic about their ability to manage the short term impact upon their business, a prolonged disruption is likely to have more severe consequences. In particular, there is growing concern about the impact of COVID-19 on their mid-year study tour businesses.

With a large number of cities effectively in lockdown, agents have reported an increase in enquiries and contact through online channels such as TikTok and WeChat. Many are now reviewing the importance of

online marketing channels to service new and existing clients. Families also appear to be making plans for life after the outbreak. Many are using the time at home to contact agents and consider their options, although anecdotal evidence suggests they are reluctant to finalise decisions based only on online consultation, and are waiting to confirm until the situation settles.

In some ways, COVID-19 has offered agents an opportunity to test new marketing channels, and by doing so, future proof their businesses. A number of agents indicated that they would now adjust their marketing mix based on the success of these measures.

While it is difficult to predict when the situation may return to normal, agents remain generally confident about the market outlook post COVID-19 and are anticipating a possible surge in school applications in the months following.

At this time, school sector agents are focused on maintaining strong partnerships with schools, stressing the importance of regular and clear communication on place availability and application processes at Australian schools over the next few months for students from China. Agents have requested information from schools about any potential changes to admissions procedures or timelines. They are keen to reassure their clients that delays in testing and submission of applications will not jeopardise their enrolments, and that normal business will resume as soon as it is safe to do so.



In Australia

In Australia, thousands of students were preparing to return to school after the Christmas and summer holiday period as COVID-19 began to spread. Many international students had already returned, or were making their way back to Australia, as the first cases were confirmed here.

Australian schools responded quickly to the challenges presented by COVID-19. Dealing with young people, the majority under the age of 18, means that schools, unlike tertiary providers, carry much higher welfare responsibilities for all of their students.

Australia's highly regulated international education industry is one of its strengths and a key marketing advantage. Legislative requirements around quality assurance; stringency of duty of care and welfare arrangements; and measures to promote course progression give confidence to families their children will be well cared for socially, emotionally and academically. Australian schools have one of the best reputations among the top destinations for international students.

To avoid an unnecessary delay to the return of their students to normal school life, St Catherine's School in Sydney organised serviced apartment accommodation for 16 international boarders just around the corner from the School's Waverley campus. Here they were able to complete their 14 day period of isolation. During their stay they were cared for by a member of the boarding staff, had access to medical services, and plentiful supplies of food and drink were delivered daily.

To ensure the girls didn't miss any schoolwork, they were all equipped with access to the school intranet, allowing them to progress their studies without disruption. Director of Community Relations, Marilyn Rickard, said 'it was the school's expectation that the girls would continue with their study during what would have been normal school hours. This has been a most difficult time for everyone and we have been most impressed with the way the girls and their families have embraced the quarantine period and its associated requirements.'

On the Gold Coast, Saint Stephen's College embraced technology to enable international students to continue learning despite quarantine and isolation requirements. Using an innovative live streaming service, their international students have been able to maintain a digital presence in the classroom, ensuring they didn't fall behind in their classwork. Year 12 student Selina Heo, who had recently returned from Mainland China, says she's extremely grateful to still be able to join classes from the comfort of her room.

'Being isolated from society can definitely cause some troubles for us, especially for the current Year 12 students who are facing very important exams and cannot afford any delay in learning,' she said. 'I need to keep a safe distance as this is important but I do not want to miss out on the learning progress. I think Saint Stephen's are doing all that they can for us to create a fair study environment. We are all very satisfied and grateful.'

With over 120 international students, John Paul College in Brisbane had the enormous task of reassuring its homestay families their students would be safe and well looked after. Understandably, community concern about the spread of the virus was running high as students returned for the start of the 2020 school year. John Paul's International Engagement Manager, Allan Dam said 'Our homestay families were very understanding and supportive of our international students during this difficult time. They not only looked after them but also updated the school regularly on how their students were going at home especially with their study progress. It was beautiful to see how our international students received great support from their peers and homestay friends.'

A common theme among all schools' experience, has been the flexibility and understanding with which international students have approached these challenges, and their willingness to undertake and comply with any measures necessary to reestablish a sense of normality for all.

Schools are also taking a flexible approach to dealing with enrolments and enquiries during this time. Delays in visa processing, postponement of testing, and travel restrictions have added extra levels of complexity to the enrolment process, however schools are keen to reassure agents and families they are doing everything they can to offer support.



At Launceston Grammar in Tasmania, Registrar Carolyn Roney has been offering student interviews and consultations via Skype. 'We continue to welcome applications and enquiries from Chinese students, and will look at all means by which to support our agents and prospective students to achieve their study ambitions,' she said.

In Victoria, Billanook College has continued to process applications for 2020 and 2021 throughout the COVID-19 outbreak. The College's manager of international programs, Steve Lingard, said 'we look forward to receiving many more applications from agents on behalf of Chinese students and their families in anticipation that regular flows of students can soon resume.'

Carey Baptist Grammar School also has places available for international students in 2021. Julianne Brandon, the Director of Community Engagement said, 'we value the contribution our overseas students bring to the Carey community and we look forward to receiving applications from students seeking entry in Years 10 and 11.'

While this article covers only a few examples of many from around Australia, they perfectly demonstrate the commitment of Australian schools in caring for their international students, even in times of difficulty. Families considering sending their children to Australia can rest assured that Australian schools are very much open for business and will go above and beyond to ensure the wellbeing of the students in their care. We look forward to welcoming many more international students to Australia as soon as possible.

About AEAS

AEAS has been an industry leader in the provision of high quality assessment services for international students since 1985. AEAS offers essential services for international students and Australian and English medium schools around the world that enrol them. Testing is designed specifically for international primary and secondary school students. The assessment includes tests for English language proficiency, mathematical reasoning and non-verbal general ability. The AEAS School Preparation Course and the Official AEAS Test Preparation Course are available in China and Australia, and will be available in Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand and Hong Kong soon. AEAS events for Australian schools are held in key international markets annually. www.aeas.com.au

