

Frequently Asked Questions

How are Australian schools dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic?

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How is Australia dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic?

As of 3.00pm on Monday 24 March 2020, Australia has 2136 confirmed cases of Coronavirus disease. **Eight people have died**, all aged 75 or over.

The **vast majority of Australian cases have been imported**, meaning they have been diagnosed in individuals having recently returned from overseas travel or those who have had contact with a confirmed case. Australia continues to have a **very low level of community transmission**, compared to other countries affected by the virus.

According to the Health Minister, Australia has one of the **highest rates of testing per capita and overall** for Coronavirus disease in the world, having conducted over **160,000 tests by Tuesday 24 March 2020**.

Australia continues to have **one of the lowest Coronavirus test positivity rates in the world** (1.2% compared to USA 13%, UK 5% and even South Korea 3%). According to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), this suggests that Australia does not have as large a proportion of undetected cases in the population, as was likely the case in the USA, Italy and other countries - early detection and control work has been effective.

The Australian Government has also committed \$15.6M in funding for the advancement of testing regimes and development of antiviral treatments. **Australia's research** is forming an integral part of the global response to the pandemic.

Australia's Chief Medical Officer declared the Coronavirus outbreak a 'disease of pandemic potential' on **21 January 2020**, some three weeks before the World Health Organisation followed suit on **11 March 2020**. Accordingly, the AHPPC – the national body coordinating Australia's response - endorsed and activated the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan For Novel Coronavirus (Coronavirus). This has meant that emergency preventative and containment measures, including strict travel bans and self isolation requirements, have now been in place for a number of weeks, and are being adjusted and increased as commensurate with the spread of the disease in Australia.

A National Cabinet has been formed, comprising the first ministers (executive) of all levels of government, with a focus on ensuring uniformity of preventative measures, and consistency of communication. The Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Officer are providing the community with regular updates on the situation in Australia, sometimes multiple times a day.

On **Sunday 15 March**, Australia imposed a precautionary self-isolation requirement on all international passengers arriving from overseas, and announced bans on non essential gatherings. These measures have been strengthened as necessary over the course of the last week.

On **Thursday 19 March**, in an unprecedented step, Australia closed its borders to all non-citizens and non-residents to reduce the number of imported cases, which account for the vast majority of infections in Australia. The travel and entry restrictions which were already in place **had reduced travel to Australia by one third** of the level at the same time last year.

On **Sunday 22 March**, the Australian Government introduced even stricter and more widespread restrictions on social gatherings, effectively shutting down all non-essential businesses and placing the country into the first stage of a lockdown.

All Australians are aware that stopping the spread of Coronavirus will require significant changes to their everyday lifestyle, but that these measures are vitally important to protect society as a whole.

As has been the case in other countries affected by this pandemic, it is inevitable that the number of infections and deaths in Australia will continue to rise over the coming days and weeks. All of the containment measures currently in place are designed to significantly slow the rate of infection so as not to overburden the health system.

I am seeing scenes of panic buying in supermarkets and across the community. Is my child safe in Australia?

Australia is and remains one of the safest countries in the world, especially for international students.

Australian schools are subject to the strictest regulations on welfare and care of international students of any country in the world, and their approach to supporting their communities during this outbreak has been second to none.

Unfortunately, as has been the case in many countries around the world, sensationalist media reporting and misinformation on social media has caused some Australians to feel anxiety about the Coronavirus pandemic. This has led them to purchase a greater volume of daily items such as toilet paper, bread and milk than would usually be expected.

Australia is in the very fortunate position of growing and producing a much larger quantity of food and essential items than required for the size of its population. Supermarkets and government agencies have quickly reassured the community that this outbreak does not jeopardise supply chains for food or any other essential items. Although some items have been subject to temporary shortages, availability has now generally returned to normal levels. In response to the significant demand, supermarkets have altered opening hours to ensure shelves are replenished more frequently with stock.

All levels of government in Australia are working to ensure continuity of social and economic stability.

Individuals, communities, businesses and authorities are having to significantly adjust and restrict their normal day to day practices as part of Australia's collective response to ensure the health of society's most vulnerable.

You can be assured that your child's school is working tirelessly, and relying on the latest advice from peak bodies, government and health authorities to shape and adapt their response to this developing situation.

What happens if there is a confirmed case of Coronavirus at my child's school?

A very small number of schools across Australia have had confirmed cases of Coronavirus disease within their communities. They have all moved quickly to reduce the risk of further transmission to other students, staff and parents.

If there is a confirmed case of Coronavirus disease at your child's school, it is likely that the school will close for a period of time to allow local health authorities to assess the situation and to perform contact tracing - this means identifying staff and students who may have come in contact with the Coronavirus case. Schools will undertake specialised cleaning and sanitising of their facilities to ensure a safe environment for students and staff when it is safe to return to school.

What happens to my child's education if their school closes temporarily?

Unlike many other businesses and industries, Australian schools, especially those welcoming international students, have been dealing with the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic for almost two months now. As the disease spread throughout China, they quickly developed innovative solutions to support Chinese students unable to travel to Australia due to lockdowns and quarantine periods. Schools have used the time since to undertake significant planning to deal with the effects of an outbreak in Australia. School Boards and Leadership teams have taken a very proactive approach to the situation, and are well prepared to ensure any disruption to learning is kept to a minimum.

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As of **Tuesday 24 March 2020**, the advice from the Australian Government is that it is safe to keep schools open.

Many schools have already implemented alternative study and assessment arrangements that maintain the academic integrity of their programs and courses, while providing your child with continuity of study should a temporary closure be necessary. Most students studying in Australian schools have access to technologies enabling them to undertake their studies remotely. Already, several schools have made the switch to a fully digital learning environment to enable students of all year levels to continue their studies from home.

Education Departments in each state and territory are working through procedures and policies to support students in the final years of their education. Schools will communicate with families about these arrangements as necessary.

The Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) recently issued the following statement to schools and providers:

These are exceptional times; as such, where possible we are relaxing the provisions in the ESOS framework in relation to online and distance education to ensure that our overseas students have the best support available to them to continue their studies.

For those schools that have capacity to offer online/distance education opportunities, the school has discretion to allow an overseas student to opt into those online opportunities either while the student is still onshore and not attending (either due to self isolation or as personal preventive measure) or while a student is offshore.

The timing of the school year also works in the favour of Australian schools. Most schools are now only one or two weeks away from the Easter holiday period. This will mean that the disruption to learning, at least for the next month or so, will be lessened.

State and Territory Governments have announced that schools will remain open through to the end of the current school terms. In Victoria, the Easter school holiday break will be brought forward by a few days to Tuesday 24 March.

What happens to my child's accommodation if their school closes temporarily?

Australian schools are highly regulated and subject to strict controls around managing the welfare of international students.

Many independent schools are telling AEAS that their homestay programs continue to operate as normal, even in the event of a school closure. Even under normal circumstances, schools are required to be in constant contact with homestay providers, and the frequency of communication has been increased in order to monitor this rapidly changing situation.

Schools have a range of staff responsible for the care of international students. In particular, the school's International Student Coordinator will be able to provide students and parents with regular updates on any changes to normal arrangements. We recommend you speak to your child's school for contact details of key staff should you not already have these.

Should schools, including boarding facilities, be required to close temporarily, schools are well advanced in their preparations to relocate boarding students into alternative accommodation. Some regional schools are offering safe, healthy boarding environments away from urban centres for city based students. Schools have in place International Student Welfare and Critical Incident Management Policies, which will include responses for managing student accommodation. Given the current official advice is for schools to remain open where possible, AEAS understands that many boarding houses are continuing to operate as normal.

Are schools increasing cleaning to keep students safe?

Australian schools and boarding houses are subject to stringent occupational health and safety measures, including extensive health and hygiene controls. Most schools are cleaned and sanitised to a level far above that required of them by law. In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, many are increasing the frequency and level of health and hygiene practices to ensure the safety of students and staff in schools and their residential facilities.

Schools have indicated to AEAS that these measures include:

- An increase in the frequency and scale of cleaning classrooms and common areas
- Daily monitoring of student and staff health, including temperature measurement
- Increasing access to hand sanitiser, soap, disposable towels, disposable gloves and facemasks where necessary
- Immediate isolation of students or staff with coughs and colds
- Reminding students and staff of their obligation to self report symptoms, as well as advising of medical services available to them
- Ongoing evaluation of the safety of group activities, with an increased focus on social distancing practices.

Schools and boarding houses have undertaken contingency planning to enable the isolation of students or staff showing any symptoms, without compromising the quality of care and support they have come to expect.

My child doesn't want to go to school because they are worried about catching Coronavirus. What can I do?

Before removing your child or asking them to stay home, please contact the school to discuss this decision and receive further advice.

Understandably, many in the community are feeling anxious about Coronavirus and the impact catching the virus might mean for their specific circumstances. Practicing healthy hygiene habits and observing social distancing is the best way to reduce the risk of contracting Coronavirus disease. Teachers are playing an important role in helping students to understand how they can minimise risk.

As of **Tuesday 24 March 2020**, the advice from the Australian Government is that that it is safe to keep schools open.

Current medical advice suggests that cases of Coronavirus disease in school aged children are generally very mild or even asymptomatic. While many schools are taking an extra cautious approach, students and parents should not be concerned about normal school attendance.

In some cases, students with pre-existing medical conditions have considered deferring their studies. Doing this will also require a conversation with your child's school to receive personalised advice, including discussing future study options

What happens if my child gets sick in Australia? Will they receive medical care and who pays?

In the case of students studying in Australia on a student visa (subclass 500), the major Australian providers of Overseas Student Health Care (OSHC) such as Medibank, Allianz, NIB and Bupa have been advising schools that, in terms of cover, OSHC is closely aligned to the Medicare system.

Students on a student visa (subclass 500) are covered by OSHC from the commencement of their visa.

Students studying in Australia on a temporary visa should check with Medicare or their private health insurance provider as to their level of coverage.

The health and wellbeing of students is paramount, and school staff will assist students to seek appropriate medical care if required. Many independent schools have nurses and health professionals working on staff.

Australia does have a well resourced Health System, and all measures to combat the disease are designed to slow the rate of infection in order to not place hospitals under unnecessary strain.

I want my child to come home immediately. What should I do?

Before making arrangements for your child to travel, please contact the school to discuss this decision and receive personalised advice.

Understandably, parents are anxious about the health and safety of their child, especially so far from home. Many families had planned for their children to return home during the upcoming school holiday period.

At this stage, most Australian schools are recommending that international students DO NOT return to their home country at this time. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. In an unprecedented move, on 18 March 2020 the Australian Government issued a DO NOT TRAVEL advisory for the entire world. On Thursday 19 March 2020 further restrictions were announced, preventing the entry of non-citizens and non-residents from 9.00pm on Friday 20 March 2020 until further notice. Individuals choosing to travel at this time will not be covered by travel insurance.
2. The effective closure of international borders by most countries has severely reduced the number of commercial flight options available to travellers. While students may still be able to depart Australia, there is no guarantee as to when they will be able to return to resume their studies.
3. In China, only a handful of airports in major cities are back in operation and accepting international flights. For students from smaller cities and regional areas, this could mean prolonged waiting times to reach their final destination.
4. Most countries have now introduced strict quarantine measures for returning travellers. In China, this sometimes involves isolation in a centralised facility close to the airport of entry. Similar arrangements for quarantining are also in place in Vietnam. Whenever a return to Australia is possible, it is likely that students would be required to undertake another 14 day period of quarantine away from school.
5. Schools are not able to chaperone or monitor students wishing to return home, and therefore cannot guarantee their safety from the point of departure onwards.

If parents still wish for their child to return home, they should contact their school for further information. Most schools will expect students to continue their studies where online learning is available.

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The Australian education sector, including schools, places the care of all international students as a priority. Not only is this regulated, it is a key element of the ethos, values and commitment of schools to their international students and their parents. Australian schools will understand that parents of students currently studying in Australia will be concerned about their child and that this will be heightened by the current difficulties with international travel. They will understand and welcome the need for parents to communicate with them, receive regular communication from the school, and maintain regular contact with their child. Do not hesitate to contact your school's International Student Contact person, if you have concerns.

I was planning to send my child to Australia for schooling in 2021. Do I need to change my plans?

The Coronavirus pandemic is very concerning for everyone. There is great uncertainty, right across the world, as to its likely duration and long term effects.

The reality of the situation, however, is that young people will need to continue their education, just as life will need to return to normality - however that may look - at some point. It will be more important than ever that international relationships, although temporarily disconnected, are quickly re-established and strengthened.

The focus on pastoral care, and supporting the emotional and physical wellbeing of each student is a unique strength of Australian schools. For all of the reasons outlined in this FAQ, you can be assured that Australian schools are doing everything they can to support their students, especially their international students who are far from home.

The good news for parents considering Australia as a destination for their child's education is that, at this time, the vast majority of schools continue to operate. The situation is being managed differently by each school based on individual circumstances, however generally speaking, academic lessons are still being delivered using innovative solutions, and admissions staff continue to process applications for 2021 and beyond.

The timing of the Australian school year will also be of advantage to families considering possible destinations for their child. With best estimates suggesting that most of the world will be dealing with this pandemic for at least the next six months, students choosing Australia for their education in 2021 and beyond will be well placed to commence the new school year without disruption. Unfortunately, this will not be the case in most other destinations, where the application process, and indeed the commencement of the new academic year, which generally occurs in August or September, generally in is likely to be severely impacted.