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What's Next for Learning Abroad?

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Executive Summary

Much attention has been given to the dramatic impact of Covid-19 on international student numbers.

However, learning abroad (the inbound and outbound mobility of students on experiences up to one year) has also been heavily hit.

This report examines how closed borders, uncertainty and institutional environments are affecting Learning Abroad.

It addresses:

- What institutions have been working on recently.
- The challenges institutions are facing.
- The support they need.
- The changes institutions have/will be making as a result of Covid-19.
- Future risks to Learning Abroad
- Recommendations for mitigating risks to Learning Abroad.

Key Findings

- Staff morale has been heavily impacted (section 1).

- Workloads have been exceptionally high across almost all mobility teams (in spite of students no longer going abroad) (section 2).

- Increased workloads has been from a combination of responding to the initial crisis, managing stakeholders and partnerships, handling extra administration, moving to remote/online work/learning, and managing institutional New Colombo Plan (NCP) programming.

- Learning Abroad faces significant short-term challenges (section 3). This includes uncertainty, impacts on staff morale, working from home, lack of empowerment, concerns for future student demand, managing high workloads and dealing with elements of New Colombo Plan implementation.

- Whilst mobility programs have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, there seems to be some misconception that Learning Abroad teams have less workload. This is not the case.

- Staff need decisiveness, quick decisions and clarity. As staffing is reduced, investment in systems and technology is essential to manage workloads (section 4).

- Some management teams should spend a little extra time reassuring Learning Abroad teams of their importance and (where possible) futures (section 4).

- Institutions have transitioned away from “critical incident response” initiatives (like getting students home) to future-building initiatives (section 5). This includes improving processes, developing virtual mobility options, reviewing third party providers, implementing new technology and shifting their marketing to digital channels.

Notes
Please note that the terms “learning abroad”, “student mobility” and “outbound mobility” are used interchangeably in this report. This is due to the variance in the way institutions talk about “learning abroad” at their institution.

The Coronavirus crisis will be referred to as Covid-19.

Part 1: The Current Situation

1. Practitioner Sentiment

Finding 1: Practitioner sentiment has been heavily impacted.

Learning Abroad is usually an area of high staff satisfaction and engagement.

Covid-19 has taken a heavy toll on that usually high sentiment.

The average sentiment is 5.4 out of 10 (42 of 79 respondents were between 4 and 7 out of 10).

The lowest sentiment was 1 out of 10 (4 of 79 respondents).

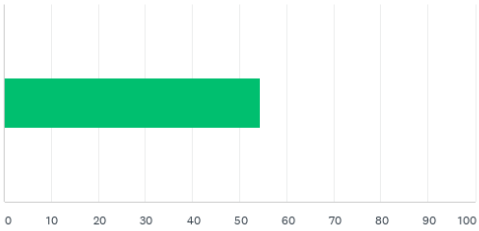
8 out of 79 respondents rated their sentiment as higher that 8 out of 10.

The main reasons sentiment has been impacted are:

- Uncertainty about the future of their work
- Concerns about potential job cuts (or job security)
- Higher than normal workloads
- Additional stress from working from home (and home-schooling children, where applicable)
- Tightening budgets
- Lack of guidance and clarity inside institutions (although there is a wide range of responses, with some staff extremely happy and supported and others, not at all).

These factors (and what to do about them) will be discussed throughout this report.

Q1 (Sentiment check in) How are you feeling about your work in student mobility right now?



In 2016, IEAA ran a “Student Mobility SIG Member Pulse Check”.
It found 71% were extremely positive about their work in Learning Abroad and 97% were mostly happy with their work.

Answer Choices	Responses	
I enjoy my work and I feel motivated to continue working in learning abroad	71.03%	76
I enjoy my work, however it is just a job	4.67%	5
I enjoy my work, but sometimes feel frustrated working in learning abroad	21.50%	23
I am considering a career change	2.80%	3
I am actively seeking a career change	0.00%	0
Total		107

Question typology means these results cannot be directly compared.

However, it is clear that there is a significant impact on staff morale at the present time.

2. What Learning Abroad Teams Have Been Working On

Finding 2: Workloads since March 2020 have been exceptionally high

It seems counter-intuitive that workloads are exceptionally high as learning abroad has been "closed" to student movements since April.

However, Covid-19 has resulted in unplanned work, reduction of team capacity (e.g. casual support being cut) and additional pressures.

Almost all universities have "required" students to come home (although there mostly haven't been effective enforcement mechanisms). This has resulted in a lot of extra work for staff.

Tasks have included:

- Getting students home (including tracking whether or not students have made it home or are remaining overseas).
- Supporting students who have chosen to remain overseas.
- Pastoral care of study abroad students remaining in Australia.
- Managing deferrals.
- Working with providers for the repatriation of students.

There has been a lot of time spent liaising with institutional and partner stakeholders.
Tasks have included:

- Liaising with risk and insurance sections of institutions.
- Managing partner relationships, including clarifying which programs will be on offer.
- Communication with third party providers (particularly in relation to refunds and program cancellations).
- Negotiating balances with partners.
- Communicating decisions about Semester 2, Winter and other mobility program decisions with internal and external stakeholders.

The shift of moving everything online has been a significant additional burden in many ways.
This has included:

- Moving to online work.
- Managing the shift of students to online learning (particularly for inbound students).

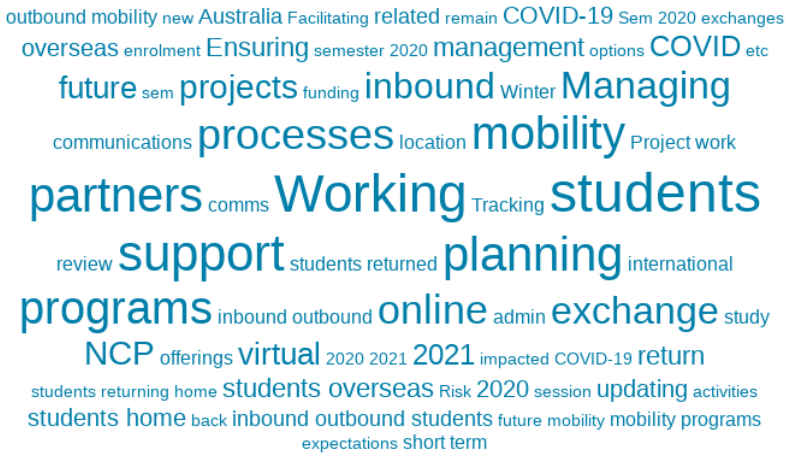
At the same time, there has been a lot of work for Learning Abroad teams to manage New Colombo Plan operations.
Tasks have included:

- Working on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment PSEAH) policy implementation.
- Deferring study tours and other programs (i.e. the logistics of putting these on hold).
- Getting extensions on current NCP projects.
- Working on the 2020-21 Mobility Project round, which has been increasingly difficult due to Covid-19.

Finally, teams and managers have been inundated with a significant volume of extra administrative and management work. This has included:

- Managing team morale.
- Trying to protect teams from job cuts.
- Updating and revising policies and processes.
- Processing refunds and organising hardship funds.
- Starting work on virtual mobility options.
- Dealing with high volume of email (as there has been lots of confusion from students, partners, stakeholders etc).
- Rethinking study abroad marketing for coming six months.
- Dealing with travel insurance claims.
- Processing refunds, data and updating records.

Q3 What have you been your 3 main work priorities over the past 6 weeks?



3. The Biggest Short-Term Challenges

Finding 3: Learning Abroad faces significant short-term challenges

Teams are starting to identify the biggest short term challenges for their learning abroad programs. Some of these are obvious. Others are less intuitive.

Uncertainty

Covid-19 has created almost universal uncertainty across the world. Being part of a travel-based industry, Learning Abroad teams have been particularly hard hit.

It has affected staff morale.

> "Getting everyone to feel motivated about the new reality [has been difficult] - that virtual [mobility] may be the way of the future and that things may never go back to normal."

> "[I've been] Struggling to be motivated and excited about 2021 programming, given the uncertainty and likeliness of further [program] deferrals and disappointing students."

It has also meant that the future of learning abroad is highly uncertain.

> "[I have been] Worried about the sustainability of international programs… about students losing their appetite to travel... [and] job security, as I love what I do!"

The uncertainty over what programs will be able to continue or resume (not to mention how and when that might occur) has increased pressure on teams.

> "Knowing when to start advertising overseas experiences again is a significant challenge."

Staff Morale

The uncertainty, and lack of usual meaningful work sending students abroad, has heavily hit staff morale at many institutions.

> "[I've been focusing on] Supporting staff to feel valued and ensuring they are engaging in meaningful work, not [just] work for works sake."

> "Keeping staff optimistic and focused (while acknowledging the challenges of today's world)."

Working from Home

Like many people who have been forced into remote work, Learning Abroad teams have been equally impacted.

> "Juggling the adjustment of working from home with rapidly evolving personal changes ([such as] people in my household losing their jobs). Absorbing work due to casual staff being cut [has been difficult]."

> "Tech issues working from home!"

> "Managing my children's engagement with schooling as well as my own workload."

Whilst not unique to Learning Abroad teams, uncertainty about the future and increased workloads have compounded the challenge of the transition.

Lack of Guidance and/or Lack of Empowerment

Many institutions have fallen into one of two camps: either they have had too much management input, or not enough.

> "[We've had a] Lack of autonomy in terms of all decisions needing to go through multiple management layers, causing delays and inefficiencies"

> "[Our] office has plans and proposals in place however we are waiting for decisions to be made. We, and the students, are left in limbo."

Experienced managers will know that this balance is hard to get right: staff need to be given decision-making authority, but determining limits and staying on top of conflicting information and miscommunication is challenging in times of crisis.

Concerns About Future Student Demand

Staff are already looking ahead to the future and finding it uncertain.

Earlier pandemics have shown that university-age students are typically the first to start travelling after a major crisis (e.g. SARS, Swine-Flu, MERS). However, other factors are now at play.

Availability of part time work as a funding source, the impact of parental concerns, and restrictions on insurance and program types are all widely cited as potentially impacting future student demand.

> "[We are] Worrying about getting students to be enthusiastic to go overseas again in a time when they may no longer trust us (following travel bans etc)".

> "Student interest may also wane in next year or so due to financial constraints and reluctance to travel - insurance will need to be available for travel to happen."

Managing High Workloads

Whilst mobility programs have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, there seems to be some misconception that Learning Abroad teams have less workload. This is not the case.

> "Almost every partner and student needs a personalised response which takes time, plus having to AUIDF stats and NCP [to manage] as well."

> "Getting appropriate access to colleagues for required meetings in the online space (with everything being done online, people's calendars are very full and scheduling becomes more difficult for groups)."

> "[There is] Not getting enough time to do my own tasks because I am helping/advising/mentoring others in the team."

Stakeholder Engagement

The main “first wave” of Covid-19 hit institutions in the run-up to New Colombo Plan Mobility Program applications for 2021.

This created significant challenges for most universities, particularly when compounded with the cancellation/deferral of existing projects.

Understandably, faculties have been focused to focus on the core businesses of teaching and research. This has left little bandwidth for exploring new learning abroad opportunities in a highly uncertain environment.

> “Getting faculty's involvement in exploring possible programs or making it possible, because they're busy adapting to changes on courses. International mobility is not their priority.”

> “Generating interest from faculties for the next NCP Mobility round has proven a huge challenge. Academics are understandably snowed under with the move to online learning and other core tasks.”

New Colombo Plan Policy and Administration

Respondents acknowledge the importance of the New Colombo Plan to Australian learning abroad and engagement with the region.

However, the timing of Covid-19 was unfortunate and layered new work on top of existing NCP-related work.

> “The PSEAH policy implementation has literally cost us two months of work – we thought we were on track but it has turned out significantly larger than expected.”

> “Managing changes to NCP programs has been a challenge. The logistics of cancelling programs has taken a lot of time, as has applying for variations for future projects. We don’t know where this will all end up, either…”

Q4 What are your 3 biggest challenges right now? This might be what's taking up the most time, what's hard, or what's concerning you the most. Feel free to be as micro or macro as you want. You can be as brief or detailed as you want.

Part 2: The Future

4. What Institutions Need Support With Right Now

Learning Abroad staff need decisiveness, quick decisions and clarity. As staffing is reduced, investment in systems and technology is essential to manage workload.

> "Institutions [need] strong [early] decisions to either proceed or not proceed with mobility…so that administrative work can be easily sorted."

Many staff recognise the exceptional effort their institutions have put in to support them throughout the crisis.

> "My university has been incredibly supportive. I feel that I am being provided enough support."

Emotional Support

Many staff acknowledge that they have had support services made available to them.

> "Staff are already being bombarded with support services for mental health and coping with working from home but most of these are rarely utilised unless there is a major problem."

Adapting to working remotely/online has been one of the largest challenges. As institutions have scrambled to adapt, staff have sometimes felt "left behind".

> "Not having worked from home before, and especially [having to do so] for a long period, I need support in learning how to work efficiently, as part of a team, remotely."

It has been noted by many respondents that management teams have little handle on many of the macro-environment considerations. These environments are constantly evolving.

> "There is very little support we can receive from management when the situation and knowledge is outside of their control.

That said, Learning Abroad teams at some institutions could benefit simply from additional management acknowledgement of what they've been through.

> "[I] would like recognition of how sad and upsetting it is to unpick months of hard work. It's hard not to be able to feel in control and to have lost [the] feeling of being able to provide clear and certain counsel to my students."

This point about management recognition is addressed further below.

Recognition and Guidance from Management Teams

Learning Abroad teams acknowledge the extra strain that management teams are under.

There is widespread recognition of the shifting environment that managers must rapidly adapt to.

Whilst Learning Abroad teams recognise this, they are also in need of some simple reassurance from "higher up" about the future of their programs and roles.

This might not mean managers providing clear, binding answers.

Rather, it's about providing regular reassurance and updates based on their best, current knowledge.

In particular, managers should recognise the significant extra workload that Learning Abroad teams have incurred.

It would also be worth to acknowledge that much of that extra work that staff have been doing is "unpicking" previous work and is not "value adding" per se. This "rework" has been demotivating for staff.

> "Definitely [we need] stronger guidance and decision making from management."
>
> "[We would like] Acknowledgement that whilst it would be good to look for new alternatives to mobility, capacity is still currently stretched. Covid-19 has resulted in institutions looking at new opportunities, which is fantastic, but the workload is still as high as ever."
>
> "For management to move towards a proactive approach to the situation rather than constantly managing situations retrospectively and for decisions to be made and communicated effectively."
>
> "Job security has been a concern - better transparency and more considerate communication from institutional management would be nice."
>
> "An expressed appreciation from Executive that international mobility is a valued, important and supported part of the University.

Investment in Systems and Technology

Learning Abroad teams often feel that they are at the "bottom of the ladder" when it comes to investment in new technology.

Unfortunately, this has been exacerbated by Covid-19-induced reductions in staffing.

Casual budgets have been almost universally erased, meaning staff face higher administrative burdens. Those without decent technology feel that they are slipping further behind.

> "The usual – we are desperate for a new database system. With staffing being reduced, this is more critical than ever."

Q5 What sorts things do you need support with right now?(this might be practical or personal, like better IT support, emotional support, stronger guidance from institutional management etc)

5. Immediate Priorities

Institutions have transitioned away from “critical incident response” initiatives (like getting students home) and are currently focused on future-building initiatives.

This includes:

- Investigating/implementing virtual mobility options and other new programming.
- Improving processes, procedures and websites.
- Implementing new systems (or improving existing ones).
- Training.
- Pivoting their student marketing to digital-only options.

Virtual Mobility and Other Opportunities

Almost every university surveyed is investigating “virtual mobility” to some extent.

> “We are exploring virtual options and how to add the much-needed cultural engagement aspect to make the experience similar to how they would engage face to face.”

Some have already progressed to active student participation (e.g. virtual internships in Malaysia through The Global Student) whilst others are only looking at feasibility right now.

Most institutions acknowledge that “virtual mobility”, in some form, will be part of their program offering in future.

> “Virtual mobility is priority one in order for the whole program to sustain itself.”

> “We have already pivoted to promote outbound virtual opportunities so students can still gain global awareness and an international experience without having to leave their home. We have had to adapt to the rapidly changing global situation and whatever the new normal may be. It is my personal guess that travel and country border restrictions will likely be in place until at least the end of the year.”

Institutions seem most excited about virtual mobility for its long-term potential, rather than as a short-term panacea to keep students engaged.

Virtual experiences seem to offer hope of providing some sort of experience to otherwise immobile cohorts.

> “[Virtual experiences] will help with equity and access issues that can limit the amount of students that have international experiences.”

Improving Processes and Procedures

Where time has allowed, Learning Abroad teams have moved eagerly to improve their processes and procedures.

Several institutions have created long lists of projects that they hope to complete during this period while they are "closed".

This has included creating and updating processes manuals to reduce the risk of corporate memory loss in future.

Other focuses have been:

- Improving risk management processes and procedures.
- Improving reports.
- Reviewing existing Third Party Providers and improving processes for working with them.
- Ensuring student-facing resources are up to date.

> "Now is a great time to be reviewing processes to eliminate waste/touch points and to improve the student experience."
>
> "We will be changing our policy around cancellations and repatriations."

Third Party Providers have also come under scrutiny from some institutions and possibly face more rigorous review processes in future.

> "Some 3rd party providers have proven to be unreliable or not satisfactory in how they have handled the COVID crisis - these providers will be removed from our list of providers."
>
> "[We will take] A careful look at risk, cancellation and other policies [of Third Party Providers]."

Partner Engagement

There has been significant partner engagement across the sector. This has switched from crisis response to future program development.

Many institutions are now in the process of:

- Reviewing their partnerships for relevance and alignment.
- Negotiating balances and updating lapsed agreements.
- Liaising about future and new program options.
- Seeking new partners (particularly in places like the Pacific, which may open up first).

Implementing New Systems or Improving Existing Ones

Several universities are implementing or improving their technology systems – like Terradotta and Ontraport. These institutions have taken the time to do end-to-end reviews of parts of their programs and to recalibrate their systems for future.

Many institutions that lack these systems have been focused on other systems/technology development, such as:

- Precedence databases
- Websites
- Curriculum mapping
- Online training for students and staff

"[We're working on] Improving our online orientation and digital resources."

"We're hoping to finally have time to redevelop our website!"

It is generally viewed that working on developing systems provides the best "bang for buck" for the time invested.

Marketing

Traditional on-campus marketing channels have all but closed. Institutions have been forced to fully move to online marketing and student liaison. This includes:

- Online info sessions
- Online "exchange fairs"
- Virtual consultation sessions
- Establishing "conversion campaigns"
- Reviewing student feedback
- Creating videos

This has been an excellent future-facing opportunity as digital resources are far more scalable than in-person marketing and advising.

Staff Training

There is recognition from many institutions that the crisis has highlighted gaps in staff knowledge, training and continuity.

As such, some institutions have been working on cross training to protect against lost knowledge if roles are made redundant.

Other initiatives have included developing staff training resources, updating processes and learning new skills (such as digital marketing).

Q8 What are the top 5 things you plan to work on in the coming 6 months while student mobility is "closed"?e.g. improving websites, work on stakeholder relations, creating new programs (like virtual mobility), improving technology etc.

6. Risks

Learning Abroad faces a range of short- and medium-term risks. Mitigation strategies for these risks were workshopped with 11 universities and are discussed in Section 7.

Learning Abroad Losing Its Importance to Institutions

Many institutions have concerns that Learning Abroad will drop down the list of institutional priorities in the near term.

> "As universities are heavily impacted by the virus, mobility is likely to drop in further down the list of priorities."

However, the counter argument is that access/participation is now so high at so many institutions that deprioritising it risks impacting the student experience.

Student experience will be critical for institutions in future as they fight for market share during "the recovery".

There are also wider concerns about how much time faculties will have to engage with learning abroad activities.

> "We've seen that mobility [has not been a] priority [for faculties] in recent months as other aspects have taken their immediate attention. In the longer run, it may not be perceived as crucial."

> "[I'm concerned about] not getting the buy in from academics and wider university as they focus on bigger and wider problems."

Teams have also worried about the redeployment of professional faculty staff. This might result in a loss of institutional knowledge around mobility.

On a more macro scale, the recent inward-focusing of the USA has some worried about the potential rise of nationalism around the world.

> "Nationalism and the potential abandonment of internationalisation [concern me]. The university potentially losing interest in mobility as a strategic priority [is also a worry]."

New Colombo Plan

Many universities have come to rely heavily on the New Colombo Plan as a source of funding and momentum for their learning abroad programs.

The NCP is funded through the budget forward estimates, and there has been no indication from Government that it might be at risk.

However, many universities indicated that they were alert to the risk that such a program might make "easy savings" for a Government seeking to improve its budget.

> "Axing of NCP would be terrible."

> "[The] risk to NCP funding levels is concerning as our institution is quite reliant on that funding."

Not everyone feels this way, though.

> “NCP support for future online virtual mobility projects would be helpful. If NCP were cancelled, this may be a loss, but fortunately we have internal funds we can allocate to mobility projects. To be honest we wouldn't miss the significant administrative burden of NCP which gets more complex and onerous every year, and is now deterring many applicants from our institution.”

The New Colombo Plan provides a lifelong boost to the cultural understanding and regional engagement of its participants.

Whilst Governments of all varieties will be carefully looking at their spending, recent geopolitical tensions seem to suggest the Australia would be well counselled to retain its soft-power initiatives.

Impact of the Crisis on Families and Students

It is well documented that parents and families can be key drivers of students’ decision to, or not to, participate in Learning Abroad.

Amongst the greatest short-term risks to Learning Abroad is the impact the crisis may have on the confidence and finances of families that would usually support mobility of their student.

> “The majority of Australians have been financially impacted by Covid-19, which is likely to result in a drop of students being able to afford to go overseas.”

> “Significant reduction in student demand due to financial and personal concerns in the near future after COVID-19”

> “The appetite for learning abroad may change, students and parents may be reluctant.”

> “Drop in student demand - students might feel it is too risky, or if there is less funding, uptake might fall..”

This risk is compounded by the contraction of the global aviation industry, with the threat of significantly higher international airfares in years to come.

> “Affordability of international flights [is likely to be impacted].”

Travel Bans Continuing Indefinitely

Its axiomatic that international travel bans are the greatest impediment to learning abroad at this time. Institutions are pessimistic about when bans might be lifted and what requirements might be in place after that (for both inbound and outbound students).

> “Travel bans and lack of clarity around visa issue options is our main concern.”

> “[There is] No likelihood of student outbound mobility for the next 12 - 18 months.”

> “I think students that can afford to, will want to come to our comparatively safe region but may be stymied by border restrictions and compulsory 14 day quarantine periods. [There’s the possibility that] the industry just falls over and rebuilds itself elsewhere. For example, regions that were once markets may quickly become providers.”

Insurance Coverage and Risk Management for Future Outbound Students

The question of insurance and the risk that institutions are willing to take with their students on learning abroad experiences is a key mid-term risk.

This is because Covid-19 is a “known risk”.

As such, travel insurance providers may be unwilling to cover students should they fall ill with the virus.

This is particularly true in countries with a high cost of medical service, such as the USA.

Both students and institutions are affected by this issue.

Students may be unwilling to take the risk of getting sick overseas.

> “Combined with the risks of going to places that have either been significantly impacted by Covid, the unknown insurance implications are all likely to impact students considering to go away.”

Equally, universities are likely to be reluctant to put their students at risk.

> “Insurance coverage [may be] too expensive or not available when borders do [re]open…”
>
> “[There is] uncertainty…that if students get sick overseas they will receive the medical support they need (not due to insurance but due to health care systems).”

What revised risk management protocols means for programs is unknown.

For example, physical distancing requirements might means students need to be in “single” rather than “twin-share”. This would increase cost and complexity. Such changes to risk management requirements could affect many aspects of programs.

Impact on Staff Morale and Job Security

“Uncertainty” has been described as a key challenge to learning abroad staff (Section 3 above).

This uncertainty has impacted staff morale and confidence in their job security.

> “I'm worried about losing my job and not being able to find another one anywhere in the world in this field.”
>
> “[There’s a risk of a] loss of satisfaction in my job... [that I’m] not able to contribute even if my job still exists in 18 months.”

Some staff have opening questioned “Can our positions be justified if the traffic does not increase for some time?”

These concerns are understandable.

However, it is important to set learning abroad in the context of overall student engagement and experience at institutions.

With more than 1 in 5 students in Australia undertaking an experience, learning abroad has become a key part of the student experience.

It is an expected part of a degree for many students.

Institutions wishing to fend off aggressive online competitors will need to leverage their on-campus student experiences and “value add” services, like leadership, career development and learning abroad.

Program Diversity Affected

The Covid-19 crisis hasn’t affected only Australian universities.

Third Party Providers, overseas organisations and international universities have also been significantly impacted.

It is too early to say how this will affect the availability of program options for students in future.

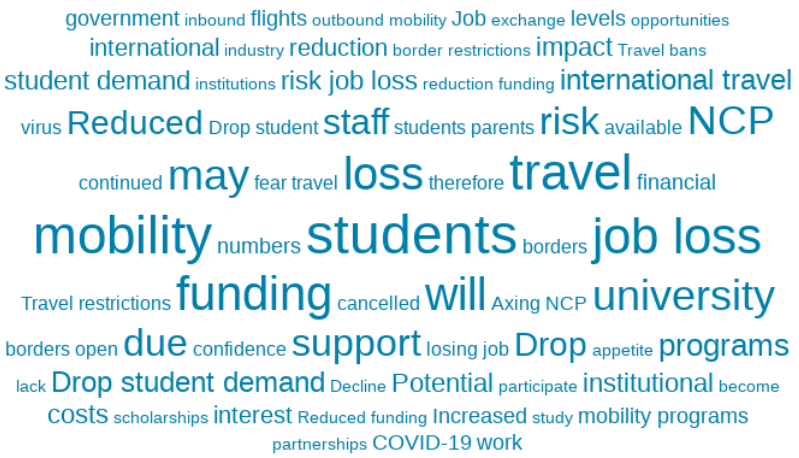
> “[There’s a risk of a] Reduction in choices for students with some TPPs closing or working at a reduced capacity.”

> “I worry that Mobility isn't seen as a necessary program at Universities [both in Australia and overseas]; therefore, our programs may be cancelled. We work a year in advance, so this may mean no work for the next year and a half.”

Coupled with this, not all institutions are confident in the potential of “virtual mobility” to fill the hole left by *actual* international study experiences.

> “We are still seeing considerable demand in student interest in spite of the current global climate. However this may change if programs can only run virtually without allowing students to travel in the long term.”

Q6 What do you think are the 3 biggest risks to student mobility over the coming 12-18 months?This could be on a personal level (risk of job loss) through to national level (drop in student demand, axing of the NCP etc).



Part 3: Taking Action

7. What to Do Now – Tactics

Throughout early and mid-May, The Global Society ran workshops with 11 universities.

The fundamental principle settled on is that many of the challenges and risks above are outside of the control of Learning Abroad teams.

With that in mind, teams should focus on what they *are* able to do.

Improve Systems, Processes and the Student Experience

Most institutions have identified this as an area that they are currently focusing on.

Improving existing systems and processes is an excellent investment in future productivity. It will continue to pay dividends for some time to come.

Institutions need to answer a fundamental question when conducting this sort of review: do they wish to have a *student-centric* process (designed to make things easiest for students) or do they wish to have a *staff-centric* process (designed to streamline processes for university and partner staff).

Both approaches are acceptable, but come with benefits and limitations.

Once an approach is agreed upon, institutions can get into the detail of reviewing their processes. Here are some basic steps that Learning Abroad teams can follow:

1. Conduct a brainstorm to identify all of the “pain points” that students and staff experience as part of a learning abroad experience.
2. Consider the underlying *reasons* for those pain points. Are they things we can change, or not?
3. If yes, map out the steps/projects to improve relevant systems and processes.
4. If no, identify if there are alternative options or workarounds available.
5. Prioritise the solutions: which solutions are most likely to have the greatest impact? Are there any “easy wins” (improvements that yield significant improvements with little investment of time or money?)
6. Schedule time to get started on those projects and tasks.

New Colombo Plan

The New Colombo Plan remains one of the “good news stories” that Learning Abroad teams can continue to leverage throughout the crisis.

The program brings in new funding for institutions (through both the Mobility and Scholarship programs).

It also provides endless success stories, social media fodder and engaged learning abroad alumni (particularly NCP Scholars and Alumni Ambassadors).

Such success stories are hard to come by in tough times, so sharing them widely will be appreciated by staff across institutions.

Leveraging “Fear of Loss”

Humans have a strong in-built fear of loss.

This has been well documented by experimental and social psychologists for over 50 years.

The premise is that once we own something, we can’t stand to lose it. We place an inordinate amount of value on things we own… even if we don’t particularly like them or use them.

We can use this powerful element of human psychology to persuade people to support our Learning Abroad cause in two ways: creating a vision and maximising mental availability.

Creating a Vision

In times of certainty, people are more likely to be drawn to clear solutions, even if they don’t fully agree with them.

This is because the human brain has limited capacity and prefers short cuts (called heuristics) as opposed to constantly processing new information and decisions.

Author Simon Sinek calls this “Beginning with ‘Why’” and contends that “People don’t buy what you do, they buy *why* you do it.

His research and evidence is that organisations that are heavily mission based (in the way that Learning Abroad teams creating globally-conscious graduates) are more successful, memorable and influential than those that just “spruik their wares”.

Now is clearly a time for Learning Abroad teams to create and articulate a clear vision for the future.

A vision should be something that is achievable in a 5 year window. It should be clear and specific. Ideally, someone reading the vision should be able to visualise what it means for them, their students and the institution as a whole.

Once this vision is created, it needs to be clearly and widely communicated across the institution.

Why?

Because once people can see the future of the Learning Abroad program clearly, they will be far less inclined to want to give it up.

Mental Availability

Mental availability is also a strong, well-proven element of human psychology.

The premise is that more we see something, the more we trust it and are likely to choose it…*even if we don’t like what we’re looking at*.

For example, when we walk through a supermarket to choose tomato sauce, we’re confronted by many brands.

We are more likely to choose the brand that we’ve been most exposed to.

Exposure means things we have *tried*, but it also means things we have *seen*. This is why advertising works: we *see* the product often and as a result we’re more likely to choose it.

Given the uncertain times and competing priorities across institution, now is an important time for a massive “mental availability campaign”.

Consider this an “internal marketing” campaign.

Such a campaign should leverage all of the success stories, social media, positive initiatives, statistics, national (and international) research and outcomes of Learning Abroad that we have access to.

Content for a campaign should be regular and consistent. This will build the “mental availability” of the Learning Abroad program in the minds of university staff.

Once there, it grows in importance and (in line with “fear of loss”) is less likely to be downsized or deprioritised.

Institutions that use “large sounding” names for their Learning Abroad programs such as “Global Experience” (as opposed to “Student Exchange” or “Outbound Mobility”) also leverage mental availability. Something that sounds bigger is often perceived to be more valuable in the minds of people we’re trying to persuade.

Appendix 1: Report Method

This report has been compiled from multiple data sources. This includes:

- An online survey of 79 Australian student mobility staff between 6th and 23rd May 2020. This includes the participation of several third party providers and faculty staff members from several universities.

- 11 x two-hour online workshops held with different universities in early- to mid-May 2020 to workshop solutions to the current challenges and potential risks discussed in this paper.

- Discourse Analysis of Mobility Practitioners' Facebook Group conducted in June 2020 covering the period of March through June 2020 (note: no comments from the group have been included in the report – discourse analysis was conducted to cover sentiments, trends and keywords).

Appendix 2: Participating Institutions

Australian Catholic University
Bond University
Central Queensland University
Charles Sturt University
Curtin University of Technology
Deakin University
Edith Cowan University
Federation University of Australia
Flinders University
Griffith University
La Trobe University
Macquarie University
Monash University
Murdoch University
QUT
RMIT University
Southern Cross University
Swinburne University of Technology
University of Adelaide
University of Canberra
University of Melbourne
University of New South Wales
University of Newcastle
University of Notre Dame Australia
University of Queensland
University of South Australia
University of Southern Queensland
University of Sydney
University of Tasmania
University of Technology Sydney
University of Western Australia
University of Wollongong
Western Sydney University
Three Non-University providers