

# Studying Abroad during a Pandemic

## CHALLENGES AND EXPERIENCES OF RESILIENCE AMONGST INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND DURING COVID-19

This report presents research on international student wellbeing in New Zealand in 2020, at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines the various challenges international students encountered during the pandemic and the responses of resilience they exhibited during these times. Based on 17 one-on-one interviews with international students at the University of Auckland, this report confirms that there are already a number of challenges that international students can face with adapting to life in New Zealand, which can be magnified during times of crisis. The University of Auckland has also framed these challenges in terms of how it responded to the pandemic. In turn, international students have applied a range of coping strategies to manage times of uncertainty. Going forward, higher education institutions should look to evolve future pandemic response plans to consider the many ways international students can experience and respond to an on-going crisis such as COVID-19.

### KEY MESSAGES

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- ◆ As visa-holders and newcomers to New Zealand, international students are a distinct and diverse group at universities. As a result, they can face many unique challenges when adapting to life in New Zealand.
- ◆ International students experienced and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways, although the pandemic has most notably exacerbated many pre-existing challenges and created a range of new and complex issues given these students' precarious disposition.
- ◆ As their educator and visa sponsor, the University of Auckland played a role in framing how international students experienced the pandemic, helping some students while amplifying the problems of others.
- ◆ International students used a number of coping strategies to exhibit their resilience and strength as a response to the pandemic and the University's support services.
- ◆ Going forward, higher education institutions must consider the various ways international students can experience and respond to a crisis in developing future pandemic response plans. This includes centring international student voices while focusing on the University's own resilience as an institution.

## CONTEXT

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The COVID-19 pandemic had major economic, health, and wellbeing implications on a global scale. Given its geographic isolation and swift action to impose lockdowns and border closures, New Zealand saw relatively low case numbers and deaths from the virus in 2020. However, despite the country's success in mitigating the spread of the virus, the pandemic was still a disruptive experience – particularly for members of the international student community.

Along with the rest of the country, international students at the University of Auckland endured the struggles of COVID-19. Beyond that, international students also faced their own unique challenges during this time. As visa-holders and newcomers to New Zealand, these students came into this pandemic already in a precarious position. International students do not have voting rights nor do they have access to government support services or lower domestic university tuition fees. As newcomers, they often do not have the pre-established support networks in place to help them settle. Linguistic and cultural differences can also pose as a challenge to building a life in a new country. As a result, international students have been regarded as a vulnerable group, where crises such as pandemics can make the experience of studying abroad even more complex and challenging (Chen et al., 2020; Firang, 2020).



Empty Auckland motorways during Level 4 Lockdown. Photo: Erin Stieler

In addition to the virus's impacts on international student wellbeing, COVID-19 caused drastic changes in higher education. Lockdowns forced all teaching and learning to be moved online with little notice. In addition, the widespread closure of borders prevented thousands of international student enrolments, leading to great financial shortfalls that are projected to impact university budgets for years to come. This pandemic thus created a setting where both the University of Auckland and its students were faced with stress due to these adjustments.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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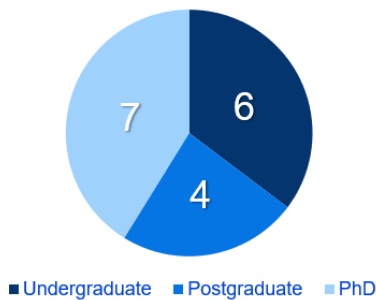
This project aimed to explore the various ways in which international students as a diverse group experienced and responded to COVID-19. In particular, it looked to examine how international students at the University of Auckland navigated the complex realities of being visa-holders and newcomers in New Zealand during these times. This research has aimed to answer three key questions regarding the international student experience during COVID-19 pandemic:



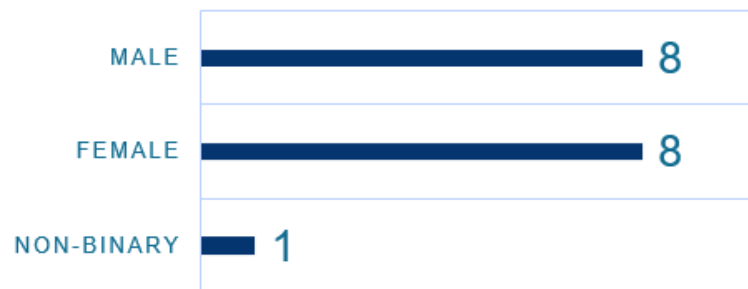
This project conducted 17 in-depth one-on-one interviews with international students enrolled at the University. The participants were a diverse group, representing a range of programmes, genders, and nationalities.



### ENROLMENT



### REPORTED GENDER IDENTITY



Interviews were conducted in English and ran for roughly an hour. Interviews were either held in-person or over Zoom, depending on the COVID-19 restrictions. Three participants were based overseas at the time of the study. Interviews took place from May to August, where participants were interviewed over the span of three distinct level restrictions.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19

According to literature, international students may face a number of unique challenges when adapting to life in a new country. In New Zealand, international students can encounter financial concerns, loneliness, linguistic and cross-cultural difficulties, and racism and discrimination (Anderson, 2014; Johnson, 2008; Sawir et al., 2008, 2009; Scheyvens et al., 2003; Ramia et al., 2013). The interviews revealed many of these issues among participants, although the experiences were variable in that some participants encountered such issues and others did not.

Any challenges that students faced were made more complex during the pandemic, where participants had to continue building a life in a new country in the context of a crisis. However, in addition to the implications of their migrant status, participants experienced the pandemic based on their own individualised circumstances. These likely played a role in the challenges each participant encountered. For instance, those in need of financial support likely encountered more financial challenges during the pandemic. Likewise, participants of marginalised identities more likely experienced discrimination while those with special learning needs may have had more academic struggles during lockdown.

The interviews revealed **five key categories** where participants experienced challenges, as summarised in Figure 1. These were areas where participants discussed facing challenges in pre-pandemic times, where such challenges either did not go away or were made more complex since COVID-19.



**Figure 1:** Five key categories of challenges faced by participants during COVID-19

In terms of **financial concerns**, many participants were already burdened with the high cost of living and tuition before the pandemic. Some experienced stress with trying to find part-time work to fund their expenses while balancing employment with their studies. Since the pandemic, many students have lost income due to lockdowns. With online learning, some participants have also felt a reduced quality in education while still being charged full tuition fees.

“ *Before the lockdown, I found a part-time job in a restaurant. And then because of Covid, they didn't put me on any shifts because their business has been affected*

-Female postgraduate student,

“ *[ADHD] makes it difficult to function even in a normal academic setting. And then having to deal with that in lockdown where I had zero supervision, where I had no reason to even get out of bed in the morning*

-Female undergraduate student, United States

For **academic challenges**, studying university material in a different language, culture, and with special learning needs can already be difficult. Since COVID-19, the movement to online learning has made it difficult for some participants to stay productive and receive specialised learning support. Border closures have also added stress, disrupting postgraduate research plans to conduct fieldwork abroad and preventing students based overseas from returning to New Zealand.

Participants also expressed challenges with **building and maintaining a sense of community**. Creating connections can already be difficult due to cross-cultural and linguistic differences. Some participants also encountered discrimination, affecting their ability to form relationships with locals. Since COVID-19, reducing in-person contact has made it more difficult to build connections. Participants overseas have also expressed frustration about not being allowed back in the country, feeling like they have been excluded as members of the New Zealand community.

“ *We might not have that black book or permanent residency. But we still can contribute to the economy. We're still part of New Zealand. We live there [...] And then, just like that, [we are] being sort of tossed away*

-Male undergraduate student, Norway

“ *My brother has cancer [...] And he has to travel to Thailand for his chemotherapy. But because the border was locked also, he couldn't access that. And that made me so concerned*

-Male PhD student, Cambodia

Concerns regarding **family and housing** have been magnified due to COVID-19. Bringing one's family to New Zealand can be a challenging experience due to the need to balance studies with family responsibilities. Likewise, coming to New Zealand without one's family can be difficult due to homesickness. However, the pandemic has made both situations more complex, where border closures and lockdowns have affected participants and their families both near and afar.

Lastly, **future planning** has become more complicated. Renewing student visas was already a bureaucratic and expensive process. COVID-19 has made this experience more stressful due to delays, border closures, and fears of contracting the virus. Participants based overseas are uncertain of when they can return to New Zealand, while those leaving for home are unsure of whether they can return. Participants also have anxiety over increased competition for employment in a limited post-pandemic job market following graduation.

“ *My concern is what should I do if I'm in a situation and catch Covid, and they remove my visa and send me home?*

-Male PhD student, Vietnam

## THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

COVID-19 drastically changed university life for all members of the University of Auckland community. Yet for international students, these rapid adjustments often led to radical changes. In addition to the daily experiences of navigating life in a new country, international students had to adjust to the changes brought by the University's response to COVID-19. Many participants received support from individual lecturers, supervisors, and staff during this period. However, most issues participants faced were on an institutional basis, where the University had to quickly adjust to the conditions of the pandemic. On a systemic level, the University's solutions could not cater to all students' needs, particularly the diverse circumstances of many of its international students. Some participants reported feeling left behind in the University's COVID-19 response, where the **issues listed in Figure 2 below** exacerbated or created new challenges in addition to ones already faced as a result of the virus.



Craccum magazine cover, Thomas Fink-Jensen, Issue 12 2020

Refusal to reduce tuition fees despite online-only education	Needless bureaucracy with hardship fund applications	Recycled lecture material and outdated e-learning systems
Lack of flexibility for study plans affected by COVID-19	Lack of repatriation support for students needing to go home	More empathetic communication and pastoral support needed

**Figure 2:** Issues in the University's pandemic response as reported by participants

For many participants already struggling financially during the pandemic, the University's hardship fund bureaucracy and its refusal to reduce tuition fees exacerbated these **financial challenges**. In addition, the lack of flexibility for academic programmes and the outdated e-learning systems only inflamed **academic challenges** for those whose studies were already affected by the switch to online learning and border closures. Other issues, such as the lack of repatriation and pastoral support, created emotional and mental stress for many participants already facing a difficult time abroad. As a result of many of these challenges, participants turned to a range of coping strategies for resilience.

## STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19

In response to the challenges faced by the pandemic and gaps in the University's services, international students exhibited a great amount of strength and resilience during this time. While most still sought support from the University, participants also used coping strategies that enabled them to get through these difficult times both independently and with the help of support networks. Such strategies were also used in pre-pandemic times to navigate the challenges of adapting to life in a new country. However, as revealed through the interviews and outlined in **Figure 3** below, these strategies proved to be especially useful in the context of the pandemic.



**Figure 3:** Coping strategies used by participants for resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic

The most common coping strategy used was **building community**, where participants relied on social networks to maintain wellbeing during the pandemic. Some participants **reached out to friends for tips and tricks** on how to manage stress and anxiety during lockdowns. One participant recalled **moving in with his friends** in time for the second lockdown as he was lonely during the first one. Other participants offered support to students in need, where one utilised his position of leadership as a graduate teaching assistant to **provide pastoral care to his students**.

Practicing **self-care and management** was also common. Some participants tried to manage their expectations of the University, which often involved **looking after their own needs** after not receiving sufficient support. Other participants applied self-care strategies during lockdowns, such as **finding hobbies or eating well and exercising** to manage mental and physical health. Furthermore, some participants used lockdowns as an opportunity for self-development, such as **taking online courses to build skills** to give them a competitive edge in the post-pandemic job market.

“ *The job market is now squeezing so you now have time to build up and to sharpen your skills. [...] I also try to apply for some jobs to see what skills and qualifications I lack. I sharpen my skills to study for that kind of thing. I think it’s helpful for me to try to overcome those kinds of situations so when it’s all over, I have everything in hand.*

-Male PhD student, Vietnam

Some participants used **activism and advocacy** as coping strategies. This largely pertained to frustration over the University’s refusal to lower tuition fees, which involved **writing emails to the Senior Leadership Team and drafting petitions**. Other students joined movements to fight against common issues international students face, such as participating in **Black Lives Matter protests** to support students of colour or joining **international student associations** to share concerns about wellbeing during the pandemic.

“ *I think it’s our natural optimism to just try to see what happens. I think from the start of the year, I had that sort of mentality [to] just don’t think about the future too much because things can change really quick. [...] I’m just trying to do as best as I can in school right now and figure it out later.*

-Male postgraduate student, Philippines

Lastly, many participants looked to maintain **hope and optimism** in this period. Some reflected on **lockdowns providing valuable time** to finish projects, spend time with loved ones, and appreciate nature. Others reflected on **lessons learned from the first lockdown**, where they felt more confident to manage the challenges they may encounter in the second lockdown during this study period. Meanwhile, other participants **accepted the uncertainty** of the pandemic by choosing not to worry too much about the unpredictable future.

## DEVELOPING A PANDEMIC RESPONSE PLAN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The international student community encountered a range of challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where many had to utilise their own coping strategies to navigate these issues. Given the role of universities in shaping student experiences, these institutions must evolve their pandemic response plans to better support international students.

While there is no single path to building a more inclusive pandemic action plan, listening to international student voices and acknowledging the many ways a student can experience a pandemic can shed light on the kinds of challenges international students can face, how they respond to a crisis, and their expectations from the University as both their visa sponsor and education provider. This can be done by the University considering the following resilience concepts:

- ◆ **Politics of resourcefulness** (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012), where international students are not just included, but centred in the process of developing an effective wellbeing agenda for pandemics.
- ◆ **Institutional resilience** (Béné, 2018), where the University would focus on building the collective resilience of its multiple interconnected structures, rather than relying on the resilience of students.
- ◆ **Resilience thinking mindset** (Shah et al., 2019), where the University would examine and critique its systems to locate inequalities and gaps in services that cause student challenges in the first place.

Considering the above would encourage a proactive and adaptive approach to crises. Doing so would evolve the University's services in entering a new era of pandemics that can manage diverse student challenges and needs.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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- ◆ Universities play a critical role in shaping international student experiences during a crisis, exacerbating many pre-existing challenges and creating new issues for an already vulnerable group of students.
- ◆ Universities must consider their impact on student experiences when developing future response plans for crises such as pandemics.
- ◆ International student voices should be centred in the process of evolving an effective wellbeing plan for future pandemics, where the unique challenges of this distinct group of students are acknowledged.
- ◆ Universities must also focus on their resilience as multi-layered institutions, where gaps and inequalities must be identified and fixed at each level in order to prevent challenges from arising in the first place.

## SOURCES

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This report has been prepared by Erin Stieler, The University of Auckland, New Zealand. It is based on Erin's MA thesis (supervised by Prof Andreas Neef and Dr Ritesh Shah), and references the sources on the following page.



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