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Coronavirus

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Coronavirus: more than 4,000 students sign petition to delay start of university

Universities urged to delay start date to help students travelling through China after Australian government's travel ban

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More than 4,000 international students have signed a petition to delay the start of the university semester due to the government's ongoing travel ban on people travelling through China.

Classes at a range of [Australian universities](#) are due to start in February, despite the government's announcement that any foreign nationals who have travelled through China since 1 February will be banned from entering Australia for 14 days.

On Tuesday, the petition started by the general secretary of the University of Sydney's student representative council, Abbey Shi, gathered more than 4,000 signatures, [reported the student newspaper, Honi Soit](#).

The petition asks for classes at Sydney University, scheduled to start on 24 February, to be pushed back to 9 March.

In a statement, the president of the student representative council, Liam Donohoe, said the ban would unfairly disadvantage international students returning for the start of the year.

"This travel ban will significantly disrupt the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, who are central to student communities at the University of Sydney and beyond," he said. "Many of these students are losing out on learning, work, relationships, and communities, and may never return."



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Nearly [100,000 Chinese international students](#) with valid student visas are currently outside of Australia, according to the latest figures from the department of home affairs. Currently, 58,797 Chinese international students are within Australia.

Monash University in Melbourne announced on Friday [it would delay its semester by one week](#), until 9 March.

The president of the National Union of Students, Molly Willmott, told Guardian Australia she supported the delay.

"I haven't seen the petition itself, but I think there are wider issues with the travel ban. A lot of experts have come out and said it was an overstep."

The World Health Organisation said on Friday that [it did not recommend travel restrictions](#), but prime minister Scott Morrison said the ban was based on advice from Australian medical experts.

“What the petition is indicative of is the government making decisions without consulting international students or thinking about the long-term impact it can have on students,” Willmott said.

“What happens when you are quarantining students for two weeks? Are there support services in place to support them in that? It is an incredibly stressful and literally isolating time for students. We have to make sure our student services and counselling services are fully funded and have the right resources.”

Donohoe said that many of the students who had been blocked “haven’t been to Wuhan or other affected areas”, which made the restrictions “particularly callous”.

On Tuesday, it was reported that 70 international students, some of whom had already been en route to Australia when the travel ban was announced, **had been detained** upon arrival at Sydney airport.

The University of Sydney student union, along with the New South Wales branch of the National Tertiary Education Union are organising a protest calling for a “health-based policy response to the coronavirus”, rather than “an approach based on fear and sinophobia”.

A University of Sydney spokeswoman told the Sydney Morning Herald the university had no plans to delay semester but was “aware of the petition and understand the anxiety and concern” of students.

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The university has however extended the period that students can enrol by two weeks - until 9 March - and will let affected international students defer their studies for the semester.

The University of Melbourne also said it would not delay semester, but would “consider special arrangements for students”.

The two universities, and many others, are also offering online replacements for classes.

The chair of Universities Australia, Prof Deborah Terry, said in a statement that universities were “working round the clock” and would “extend the greatest flexibility possible”.

“We want to ensure as little disruption as possible to your studies - so please keep in touch with your university here in Australia as we keep you updated,” she said. “You

are a vital part of our vibrant, warm, global community of students and scholars.”

The president of the University of Melbourne’s student union, Hannah Buchan, said it was important that “no student should be disadvantaged by this travel ban”.

“I believe that universities need to provide more support for students who are affected by the ban, such as extending special consideration, providing online materials for the beginning of the semester for all courses, and providing advocacy and counselling services in different languages,” she said.

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