

Frequently Asked Questions

How are Australian schools dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic?

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How is Australia dealing with the Coronavirus disease pandemic?

As at 19 March 2020, Australia has around 630 confirmed cases of Coronavirus disease, which have resulted in six deaths thus far. The vast majority of Australian cases have been imported, meaning they have been diagnosed in individuals having recently returned from overseas travel or that have had contact with a confirmed case. Australia has a low level of community transmission, compared to other countries affected by the virus.

Australia's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Brendan Murphy, declared the Coronavirus disease outbreak a pandemic almost two weeks before the World Health Organisation followed suit. This means that emergency preventative and containment measures, including strict travel bans and self isolation requirements, have already been in place in Australia for a number of weeks.

Australia's response to the pandemic is being led by Australia's Health Protection Principal Committee (HPPC), which has the responsibility of coordinating and advising national, state and local governments and their associated health authorities. A National Cabinet has been formed, comprising of the first ministers 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.

All Australians are being asked to observe strict social distancing measures, with bans on non essential gatherings of more than 100 people now being enforced, and further restrictions likely to be introduced soon. All Australians are aware that stopping the spread of Coronavirus will place significant restrictions on their everyday lifestyle.

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 slow the rate of infection so as not to overburden the health system.

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

Australia is and remains one of the safest countries in the world, especially for international students, and Australian schools are subject to the strictest regulations on welfare and care of international students of any country in the world. Their approach to supporting students during this pandemic has been second to none.

Unfortunately, as has been the case in many Western countries, sensationalist media reporting has caused many Australians to feel anxiety about the Coronavirus disease pandemic. This has led to some stockpiling of daily items such as toilet paper, bread and milk.

Australian supermarkets and government agencies have quickly reassured the community that this outbreak will not jeopardise supply chains for food or any other essential items. Any temporary shortages of groceries is a result of supermarkets struggling to refill shelves as quickly as they are emptied, which is why many have now altered opening hours and are limiting the number of customers in store at any one time.

All levels of governments in Australia are working to ensure continuity of social and economic stability. The 'laid back' nature of Australians means the vast majority are going about their business as normal while still observing increased hygiene practices and social distancing measures.

Individuals, communities, businesses and authorities understand that although fighting the Coronavirus disease pandemic will require significant changes to our lifestyle, a considered, orderly and collective response will be necessary 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 already 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?

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 stuck at home or in lockdown, and they 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.

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.

State and Territory Education Departments are working through procedures 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 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.

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

Australian schools are highly regulated, and very experienced in the management of international student welfare.

The vast majority of schools tell 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 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. 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 changing their hygiene practices to protect students and staff?

Australian schools and boarding houses are subject to stringent occupational health and safety regulations, 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 Coronavirus disease, many are increasing the frequency and level of health and hygiene practices to ensure the safety of students and staff in residential facilities.

Schools have indicated to AEAS that these measures include:

- Increasing the frequency and scale of cleaning in 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.
- Immediate isolation of students or staff with coughs and colds.
- Reminding students and staff of their obligation to self report symptoms.
- Advising students and staff of medical services available to them.
- Re-evaluating 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 disease. What should I do?

Understandably, many in the community are feeling anxious about Coronavirus and the impact contracting the disease 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 Thursday 19 March 2020, the official government advice in Australia is that schools should remain open and are therefore safe for all in attendance. Current medical advice, **including that of Australia's Chief Medical Officer and the HPPC**, 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 may consider deferring their studies.

Before removing your child or asking them to stay home, please contact the school to discuss this decision and receive further 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 advised schools that OSHC is closely aligned to the Medicare system. You can view more information about OSHC by **clicking here**.

Students on a Subclass 500 student visa 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?

Understandably, parents are anxious about the health and safety of their child, especially so far from home. Many families had already made plans 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. On Wednesday 18 March 2020, the Australian Government issued a DO NOT TRAVEL advisory for Australians covering **all** countries. 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.

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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 period of quarantine away from school.
5. Schools are not able to chaperone or supervise 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.

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.

Should I change or postpone my plans to send my child to Australia?

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 is that young people will need to continue their education, just as life will need to return to normality at some point.

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 and as per the advice of the Australian Government, 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, and admissions staff continue to process applications.

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 (generally in August or September), is likely to be severely impacted.