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Academia in a Time of Pandemic: An Australian Perspective

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One of Australia's national myths is that we are a lucky country, insulated from the world's problems by our possession of an island continent rich in natural resources tucked away at the bottom of the globe.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic struck. It seemed at first that our luck might hold; although there were outbreaks of Covid-19, these were traced to specific events, such as unmonitored disembarkations from cruise ships and localised outbreaks in aged-care facilities. Overall, however, Australia weathered its first wave of the pandemic remarkably well; by the beginning of June 2020 we had suffered one hundred and three deaths (out of a total population of twenty-five million) from the virus. On a per capita basis, that performance (0.74 deaths per million) was far better than that of the United States at the same time (three hundred and twenty per million).¹

Much was made of our effective national health scheme, our perceived tradition of pulling together in a crisis, and the creation of a national cabinet to bring together the federal prime minister and state and territory premiers and chief ministers to establish national policy cooperation and coordination to combat the pandemic.

In Australian eyes, the United States has responded very differently, with its wayward president, grid-locked legislative branch, ramshackle and unequal healthcare system and its fifty state jurisdictions all ploughing their own furrows. The narrative of America's systemic failure to respond adequately to the crisis has been reinforced by concurrent crises reflected in the Black Lives Matter movement, the urban disorder sparked by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and by the drama of the presidential election. The overall result has been a portrayal of the United States as a deeply divided and ineffective state, spending much of its energy fighting culture wars and in ideological conflict while so many of its citizens fall victim to Covid-19 and to the systemic and civic failings that it has revealed.

By the end of June, however, the idea of Australia being the lucky country had become decidedly smug. Since then a second wave, focused in Melbourne, has shaken our self-congratulatory mood. By the third week of September 2020 the national Covid-19 death toll had risen to eight hundred and forty-nine (at three deaths per million), a far cry from the United States's toll of five hundred and ninety-eight per million,² yet significant enough to remind Australians that this fight will be longer than what we had imagined in March. Civic cohesion, political cooperation, and frequent exhortations to make sacrifices in the name of Team Australia, we have learned, only get us so far.

Turning to the Australian academic scene, Covid-19 has already had a profound effect, with only worse to come. Teaching and research activities across the sector were shut down in late March 2020 as universities reset their teaching to online delivery and closed down their research infrastructure. Staff and students were locked out of campus buildings for prolonged periods—my own institution, the Australian National University, was closed to non-essential staff for four months between the end of March and late August 2020.

Australian universities now face financial stringency, primarily because of an evaporation of their international student enrolments. In 2019 there were about four hundred and twelve thousand international students studying at Australian universities. Now there is less than a quarter of that number.³ Many international students—nearly forty percent—came from the People's Republic of China.⁴ Although these students are not evenly distributed across Australia's forty-three universities, or across faculties within them, all Australian universities have become dependent on the high fees levied on international students to fund their broader activities.

Australian academics have long seen themselves as part of a globalized profession. Our real and perceived sense of distance from our research bases has helped us become early and keen adopters of whatever technologies can keep us best in touch with our international colleagues and collaborators. We were thus well-prepared for a new world of Zoom meetings and virtual conferences, and even more frequent email contacts, blogs, and e-publication.

Yet our sense of distance has also made Australian academics hungry for face-to-face contact with our colleagues overseas; in healthier times we were enthusiastic conference-goers and organizers, with significant funding support from our universities and grant-giving organizations. Now, however, conference funding has dried up as universities slash their budgets, conferences are canceled on a daily basis, and the CEO of Qantas Airways has declared that his airline will not fly international routes until July 2021 at the earliest.

In my own work I am acutely aware of the costs of Covid-19. As a political historian of interwar America, I rely heavily on non-digitized archival sources in the United States. I have spent every January for the past twenty years in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, and I have given at least one conference presentation a year during the Northern Summer. My current book project, on the impact of the Great War on US political culture from 1918–1941, is heavily reliant on in-person research in a

variety of US archives and will be on hold until the airlines fly again and the Australian National University releases its staff to travel.

I also work as an associate dean in ANU's College of Arts and Social Sciences, with oversight of seven hundred graduate students. I see hundreds of those students, whose research requires international research and fieldwork, forced to recast their projects and postpone their plans while contemplating an academic job market that will provide few opportunities for the foreseeable future. For those of us in the second half of our careers, Covid-19 has been bitterly disappointing; for those who are training for or just beginning their careers the effects of the pandemic may be cataclysmic.

Canceled flight schedules and conferences, and thwarted research plans, in a time of global suffering that has already claimed a million lives seem at first glance to embody the self-centeredness of a first world problem. But in an age and in a world crying out for cooperation and easy exchange of ideas, the impact of Covid-19 on academic life in general, and upon its transnational nature and aspirations, will only worsen over time to the greater impoverishment of research and higher learning across the globe.

Notes

- ¹ Sunanda Creagh, "Cases, Deaths and Coronavirus Tests: How Australia Compares to the Rest of the World," *The Conversation*, June 3, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/cases-deaths-and-coronavirus-tests-how-australia-compares-to-the-rest-of-the-world-139753>.
- ² World Health Organization, "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard: United States of America," <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us>.
- ³ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, "International Student Data 2018," <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2018.aspx>.
- ⁴ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, "International Student Data 2020," https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2020.aspx#Pivot_Table.