



NEW ZEALAND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

The hypocrisy of New Zealand universities capitalising on COVID-19

*Universities' plans to capitalise on New Zealand's successful
COVID-19 response promotes unsustainable attitudes and
marketing practices. Instead, universities should pivot to providing
sufficient hardship support for international students currently in New Zealand.*

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Recent media articles¹ have shown that universities are clinging onto the hope of bringing in more international students in 2021 due to successful government efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus and flatten the curve. However, using New Zealand's COVID-19 response as an opportunity to market international education and increase international student numbers

¹ ["Foreign student numbers fall sharply, immigration stats show"](#) (RNZ, 2020); ["Promoting NZ universities to the world 'could help save economy'"](#) (Stuff, 2020).

highlights the hypocrisy of profit-driven universities that are currently not sufficiently supporting international students' hardship in New Zealand. Universities' unsustainable funding models and risk management have resulted in universities' financial issues in the pandemic environment.

NZISA acknowledges the effort and dedication of staff members at universities who are working hard to ensure international students are adequately supported during this difficult time. We also applaud the efforts of some universities in running online sessions for international students such as catch-up cafes to stay in contact with students and hear out their concerns. Despite this, NZISA has received troubling reports from international student representatives that most universities are not sufficiently communicating or engaging with international students. Representatives have cited little to no communications directly from international offices to international students, only generalised mass emails coming from the universities' communications department. Commentary from Lincoln University vice-chancellor Bruce McKenzie in the RNZ article stating that "it is important to get international numbers back up" fails to acknowledge the hardship and support needs of international students currently in New Zealand and only focuses on prospective income. This commercialised approach demonstrates the lack of consideration and compassion for international students.

International students currently in New Zealand are facing a range of issues compounded by the changing global COVID-19 environment – their financial situation has changed drastically due to overseas developments; they have paid international tuition fees in full with no options from universities to obtain refunds; and they are contractually bound to their accommodation arrangements. For these reasons, which are compounded by the lack of options for travel out of the country, international students are prevented from travelling home. While New Zealand is a safe study destination, universities are not ensuring that support is an equal priority for

students. It is not enough to rely on the safety of the country and ignore the support needs of international students in New Zealand. Universities should endeavour to pursue an empathetic approach to student welfare by ensuring international students are both safe and supported – this is especially crucial in these unprecedented times.

The lack of hardship support available for international students from universities is exacerbated by universities' blatant desperation for more funding from the prospective international market while ignoring current students' hardship. Commentary in the articles highlights universities' heavy reliance on international education for funding. In one article, Chris Whelan, chief executive of Universities New Zealand, noted the reliance on international students for “reducing the cost of running universities for taxpayers”, further evidencing universities' ‘cash cow’ attitudes towards international students. As highlighted by former National President Lukas Kristen in 2019, and reiterated by NZISA's 2020 National Executive, to mitigate the risks of a crisis, universities need to be “focused less on marketing and rapid recruitment of students, and more on sustainable growth”.

Universities should focus on mitigating risk by improving their financial sustainability and avoiding overreliance on international education to prop up their income. “Capitalis[ing] on New Zealand's international reputation as being more successful than most at controlling Covid-19” and promoting New Zealand universities to “help save the economy” is not a sustainable economic model and merely encourages the exploitation of international students. As a result of this unsustainable growth, universities have taken an extreme financial hit since the COVID-19 crisis occurred. Despite having experienced this shock to the export education sector, universities are still unwilling to change the practices that have exacerbated the shock in the first place. The sector will continue to be exposed to risks if universities are unwilling to learn and adapt in response to the crisis.

Rather than focusing on increasing international student numbers to make up for their COVID-19 losses, universities should look to other international education destinations that have taken tremendous measures to support their international students. In Australia, various education providers have dedicated funding to assisting international students facing financial hardship: Melbourne Institute of Technology recently invested \$1 million in financial hardship support specific for international students; Monash University has announced a \$15 million Student Compassionate and Hardship Package for students suffering from financial hardship; and Adelaide University publicly acknowledged the severe impacts of COVID-19 on students who are not eligible for government benefits, including international students, and set up support packages for IT access, accommodation, lost income, food, first-year student grants, family support grants and emergency financial grants.

All education providers should focus on providing sufficient support for international students facing hardship in New Zealand during these uncertain times. Such action would be a positive contributing factor towards the future of New Zealand's reputation as one of the top international education providers in the world. In the absence of dedicated support for international students' hardship as has been provided in other study destinations such as Australia, why should future international students choose New Zealand as a study destination when it is evident that our universities are purely profit-driven and are not providing sufficient support for international students facing hardship in this COVID-19 environment?

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