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The impact of COVID-19

on behaviours and values within
the Australian student market



September 2021

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Australians, particularly on students but what changes in behaviour from recent times will stick and which ones will slip?



To explore this further, Open Universities Australia (OUA) undertook exploratory research in August /September 2020.

Our objectives were to:

- Understand how attitudes and behaviours associated with higher education (and type of study) have changed as a result of COVID-19
- Identify whether current attitudes and sentiment towards education will stick or slip once current restrictions ease
- Understand how prospective students are feeling, preparing for study and how decision making and preferences may have changed
- Identify any role microcredentials and short courses may play as viable alternatives to higher education degrees in the current climate



Who did we speak to?

COVID-19 has help to shape new kinds of students which we haven't seen before.

Prospective students who may be considering study. These people may be employed but working harder and worried about their future job prospects in the face of a potential downturn or unemployed due to current COVID related circumstances.

Current students who are working full-time but now have greater resources available for study (time) or under employed who may be taking advantage of government funding to study with the hope of future employment.

Year 12 students facing less restricted entry requirements for university (no ATAR) which creates unprecedented demand for places.

Our methods

We spoke to 36 Australians (even mix of gender) via Focus Groups across Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane who were aged between 17 and 51 years.

Anthropologists and psychologists have emphasised the importance of values in understanding cultural and behavioural change. Values are the guiding beliefs and attitudes that inform our decisions and actions.

People are rarely conscious of their values. Values must instead be inferred, in the context of a person's broader life. For this reason, we used several ethnographic and interpretative techniques to identify our participants' values.

Rapid ethnography was used which involved: a written homework exercise, semiotic and linguistic analysis to infer meaning to stated words, and object elicitation.

All names have been changed and images are representations only.

Overarching take-outs



People consider further study to be a way of **'future proofing' themselves.** Study is thought to be an opportunity to change, pivot and improve their current position given difficult times.



Online learning had not been ideal for current students; the speed of transferring from on-campus to online learning has impacted their perception of the quality of the education experience.



Remote working and less face to face contact meant that COVID had created a **'proof of concept' of online study for prospective students.**



Year 12 students forced to study online are considering Bachelor degrees but their **preference is for an on-campus experience.**

Current and prospective students had been significantly impacted by COVID, with shifts to their daily lives and routines, including work and study. But the way individuals had handled and reacted to the situation and the mindset they took varied, with some key differences observed based on their study situation.



Results

Prospective students



Prospective students are non-school leavers, aged over 19. These students have bounced back and were generally feeling positive. They were focused on what they could achieve in the future, and ways in which they could change their current situation (career and life).

Before COVID-19

Their jobs were secure and stable, their lives were busy, and they were able to effectively provide for themselves and their family.

COVID-19 hit

Employment was lost or reduced, many saw their lives changed and they needed to re-evaluate their circumstances. Some people used the pandemic to re-evaluate their careers.

The pandemic directly impacted motivations and aspirations toward further study. Disruptions to work and life was the trigger to consider study. People are seeking out skills and study options that are transferable and would help them to 'recession proof' themselves.

Prospective students spoke about a lack of clear information to help them effectively

assess implications for study on their time. They wanted clear information about how many hours study would take so they could evaluate how to fit into their lives.

6 months into COVID-19

Prospective students were positive about the future, with many looking towards study to put them on the right path.

COVID had created a 'proof of concept' of online for many people, they felt that online study was something that could be managed. However, some were still unsure if practical courses could be delivered and if key benefits, like networking, could be achieved online.

Flexibility remains vital for this group with people perceiving that the benefits of online study were courses being 'on demand'.



I didn't think you could get that sort of connection online; I am really surprised about how much I am enjoying it. Lana (50)



BEN

—
Sales,
32, Melbourne

Meet Ben

Ben sells technology to travel and airline companies. While he is lucky to still be working full time, he has had more time to think about what he would like his life to look like ongoing.

Due to the pandemic, Ben is more focused on building new skills to continue to evolve and grow, especially as the job market hardens. Self-direction has become more important with the decision to create the life he wants.

“I haven’t had a tertiary education that’s been immediately provided by anyone other than the company or industry I’m working in. Having that choice and being employable in a broad range of industries other than one excites me”



COVID-19 has changed my view to study online. I had only ever considered on campus. But we are moving away from being in the centre of the city to the blue mountains, which is beyond a reasonable commute. **Andre (36)**



I’m always going to be involved in art, but not something that’s financially lucrative. No one studies arts for money, so I decided to diversify my skills. **Faye (30)**

What will stick and what will slip for Prospective Students?

COVID-19 has resulted in new work and study behaviours, and shifting values. Some of these behaviours have been assimilated into existing values (lifestyle shifts) while others (transformations) are a result of shifts in individuals' hierarchy of values.

Lifestyle shift



New behaviours which are assimilated into values and highly likely to stick around in the future. (Sticky behaviours)

- Finding alternative ways to make money
- Joining new online communities

Transformative shift



The change in value hierarchies corresponded with five new behaviours that will endure. (Sticky behaviours)

- Seeking out skills and study options that are transferable and recession proof
- Evaluating (and undertaking) a change in career and work trajectory
- Flexible working arrangements
- Increased emphasis placed on living arrangements, home space and surroundings
- Preference for on-demand courses for further study

Snap back



Behaviours not related to people's values and are likely to snap back post COVID. (Slippery behaviours)

- Lack of motivation/unable to complete set goals
- Working more due to unclear boundaries or demand for work (essential services)
- Decreased work or work halting due to forced closures
- More equitable division of household / caring labour e.g. homeschooling, childcare and cooking

Mindset shift



For some, the experience of lockdown and the COVID-19 world had resulted in changes in their hierarchy of values. Some values had become more important, while others lost salience. (Sticky values)

- Increased security especially in being able to provide for family
- Increased self-direction - more focus on building new skills to continue to evolve and grow, especially as the job market hardens.
- Decreased stimulation as more value on quality time spent with family and less value on stimulation through social life and work

Results

Current students

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Current students are generally worried about future study particularly for study that required a high level of interaction, counselling and assessment.

Before COVID-19

Current students had already assessed life and career, had made the choice to study and start adding new skills. They were already on the path towards securing a better career and future.

There was emphasis placed on being able to prove value and worth to employers.

COVID-19 hit

Some people wanted to make the most of the time to study, but for others the pivot to studying online was a challenge. Many spoke about low motivation for study. Those who were working and studying online from home spoke of diminishing motivations due to a lack of 'third space' – a physical or mental space to get into 'study mode'.

The current study experience and sudden pivot to online was causing a less than desirable student experience for many. Online learning had not been ideal for current students who expressed concern over recycled course content or course content which had become irrelevant in the COVID-19 context.

The move to online had disrupted learning. The changing nature of assignments were not as fulfilling or helpful to solidifying knowledge and live streaming of lectures meant less flexibility for some people.

Other students spoke of increased difficulty with asking questions and receiving a response in an adequate timeframe and the lack of online forums reduced the ability to bounce ideas off fellow classmates.

6 months into COVID-19

Current students were more worried about the quality of their education, and what the future holds for their planned career outcomes. Many were questioning the value of the education they were currently receiving, especially the way learning was being delivered and what they may have missed out on as a result.

Adding to concerns, online study was not seen as impactful and effective as on campus. This was especially true of those with more practical study components who needed interaction with people / patients / students. They worried about theory-only study and the implication on their careers.



JANEY

—
Operations Manager,
29, Melbourne

Meet Janey

Janey is currently finishing her honours year for the Bachelor of Psychology. COVID-19 has meant her full-time job working in community health has ramped up significantly.

The increased stress and demands on her time meant she hasn't been able to self-care like she used to.

“The online stuff is challenging for me. I'm sitting at the desk all day working and then it hits 5pm and I have to study. When working in the office, you had the drive home to cool down and then you're moving into a different space. The visual change can shift you from one thing to another.”



*You wonder whether you're seen as valuable by a future employer, and how you overcome that, whether you can find another kind of study that you can do to compensate... I've wanted to add extra strings to my bow. So that's something I'm concerned with. **Thomas (32)***

What will stick and what will slip for Current Students?

Lifestyle shift



New behaviours which are assimilated into values and highly likely to stick around in the future. (Sticky behaviours)

- Adoption of health mental health practices into work / study routine
- Incorporating learning and development into routine (podcasts, e-books, brain training)

Transformative shift



The change in value hierarchies corresponded with five new behaviours that will endure. (Sticky behaviours)

- Finishing coursework more quickly, increasing course loads, adding additional courses (short courses)
- Seeking out skills that are transferable and recession proof

Snap back



Behaviours not related to people's values and are likely to snap back post COVID. (Slippery behaviours)

- Studying more (due to increased time / no social obligations only)
- Moving from campus to online study
- Decreased motivation to study
- Working more due to unclear boundaries or demand
- Decreased work or work halting due to forced closures for work

Mindset shift



For some, the experience of lockdown and the COVID-19 world had resulted in changes in their hierarchy of values. Some values had become more important, while others lost salience. (Sticky values)

- Security has become more important as a result of COVID-19, particularly in terms of work security and providing for family
- Increased self-direction – Due to the pandemic, more focus on choosing to make the most out of a negative situation and obtain new skills.

“ I've done quite a few short courses to complement my long course this year... One of the benefits of this time has been the absolute avalanche of courses that have been available and available really cheaply if not free, which is unbelievable. **Hayette (49)** ”

Results

Year 12 students



Year 12 students are being significantly affected by COVID-19 –with our participants in Victorian feeling particularly demotivated and affected but reported continuing with their plans.



Before COVID-19

These students were excited about a key milestone year in their lives, the completion of a key study milestone and a last year with their friends.

COVID-19 hit

COVID 19 impacted this group the most in terms of transition to online study, impacts to social life and missing out on milestones.

The pandemic resulted in a difficult learning experience for Year 12's, who felt socially withdrawn and distracted while studying. Many cited distractions, loss of motivation and heightened anxiety. The online format was conflated with this lack of motivation.

This group were mourning the loss of a milestone year and what was meant to be their "last year of freedom". They spoke of missing out on attending school functions like formals, graduation and muck up day, being able to get up their driving hours or go for their driving test and attending 18th birthday parties.

6 months into COVID-19

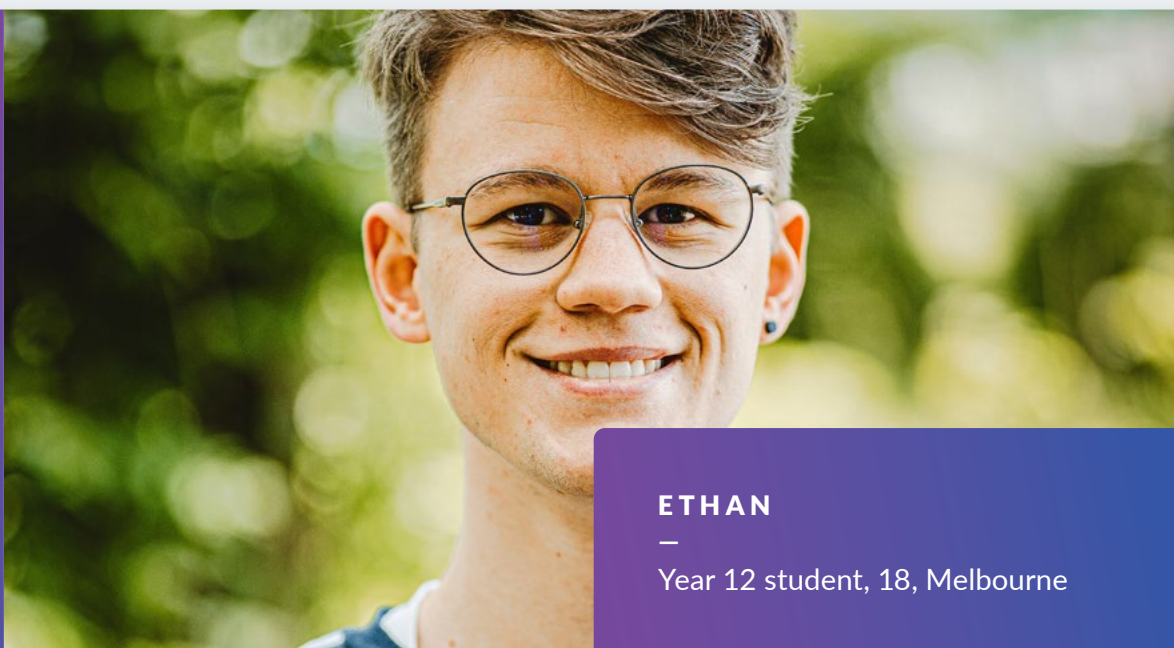
This group was worried about university entry requirements and was unsure of what next year would look like. They did not yet have the tools to pivot and were likely to continue with their original plans. Year 12 students felt there was not enough information available from universities about what next year could look like for them.

While student participants from Sydney and Brisbane were feeling down, Melbournians were more worried about their future education prospects, as everyday restrictions were still prominent at the time of interview.

Despite the changes to their learning experience and uncertainty this year, undergraduate degrees were still considered by this group. However, whilst these students wanted to make the most of the social and on-campus experience they were still likely to study next year if the shift to online learning was to persist.



*We want just a little bit of something. You let us go to school together, you let people go to sporting events, let us go to the formal in a bigger venue. **Female (18)***



ETHAN

—
Year 12 student, 18, Melbourne

Meet Ethan

Focused on completing Year 12 under restrictions in Melbourne, Ethan is having difficulty finding information about what future study will look like.

“There’s a lot of anxiety about our studies – there’s nothing solid for us to rely on.”

What will stick and what will slip for Current Students?

Most new study behaviours that were undertaken by Year 12 students would snap-back, these behaviours were not aligned with their values or a result of changing mindsets.

Snap back



Behaviours not related to people's values and are likely to snap back post COVID. (Slippery behaviours)

- Lack of motivation to study
- Not paying attention to online classes
- Not completing set work
- Being distracted by the home environment
- Reduced social interaction

About the Research



This research exploring the impact of COVID-19 on behaviours and values within the Australian student market was commissioned by OUA in partnership with a Melbourne based agency, Forethought Market Research Consultancy. Research was conducted during August and September 2020.

Forethought has a formulated approach to understand what aspects of behaviour are temporary and what are enduring based on fundamental changes to individuals' values. A tailored design was applied to understand what will 'stick' and what will 'slip' post COVID-19.

The research framework is based on the Rokeach Value Survey (1973), Joel Robbins (2004; 2005; 2007) work on values and cultural discontinuity and Marshall Sahlins (1985; 2004) work regarding cultural change and continuity.

Forethought and OUA acknowledges that current behaviour is atypical and while it is important to understand, future strategic investment should not be based on temporary shifts in behaviour. Values are typically long-term phenomena. If new behaviours do not relate to individual and/or cultural values, they will not be enduring, instead these behaviours will 'snap back'.



To explore new partnership opportunities

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