



## THE LONG READ

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# ON THE SYLLABUS: LANDLOCKED DOWN UNDER



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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN AUSTRALIA HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO TRAVEL HOME SINCE MARCH 2020. A FEW FROM THE UAE AND OMAN TALK ABOUT THE CHALLENGES — AND THE BLESSINGS

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ome has not been a flight away for international students in Australia. In mid-March 2020, the country took the unprecedented measure of slamming shut its international borders in response to the rapidly spreading novel coronavirus. Since then, many international students haven't been able to visit their loved ones back home.

"Australia will be ready for take-off, very soon" once the country reaches 80 per cent full immunisation — possibly by early November — announced Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 1 October. But travel restrictions are set to ease only for Australian citizens and permanent residents.

Australia has been an attractive destination for international students, but the impact of Covid on its international education sector has been huge. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that for the year, up until June 2021, export revenue from international education was down by 28 per cent from the previous year.

There was a 9 per cent decline in student enrollments from the Middle East last year. In 2020, there were 16,119 student enrolments as against 17,739 in 2019, according to a spokesperson for Australia's Department of Education, Skills and Employment. International students from the Middle East studying in Australia contributed \$642m in 2020 to the Australian economy, a 22 per cent decline on the equivalent contribution in 2019 (\$819m).

Many Gulf countries offer generous government or corporate scholarships for students to study in Australia. But countries like Oman have removed Australia and New Zealand from its scholarship destinations for 2021-22. It has advised current students studying online to transfer to universities in other countries — the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada — because they can't return to Australia.

I spoke to two students each from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman on how the Australian border closures and lockdowns have impacted their living, learning and working experience in Australia. What did they miss the most in the past 18 months? Were they aware and prepared for the enormity of the situation that would unfold, when they arrived in Australia last February?

**There is a deep ache in my heart and all emotions come to the fore**

**When I speak to my family'** Sweta Susan Mathew had heard about the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, but had thought it was limited to China. When she boarded the Sydney-bound flight from Dubai in February 2020, little did she know that within weeks of her arrival, Australia would be in lockdown.

"I was shocked. It was scary. Prior to this, I had only been on short educational trips with university friends and tutors. I had never fathomed, even in my wildest dreams, that I would be locked up in a house in a new city, I knew very little about," says Sweta, who is a very social person. The restrictions meant that she couldn't meet other students and enjoy the campus life she had envisaged.

"I had heard that Australians are very friendly and easy-going people. One of my motives of coming here to pursue a Master's degree was to experience another lifestyle and culture. I would have preferred more face-to-face teaching as online learning experience isn't the same, especially in a course like architecture. It involves a lot of sketching and drawing for which student-teacher interaction and on-the-spot feedback is very important", says Sweta, who was born in India, but grew up in Dubai.

She says, "The current lockdown which began on 25 June has really hit hard. It almost coincided with our university vacation. I was so looking forward to exploring the bush and beaches. The natural landscape here is in sharp contrast to UAE. Few minutes out of the inner-city suburbs and one can see beautiful fields and native birds — flocks of cockatoos and rainforest lorikeets. In Dubai, it is skyscrapers, buzzing malls and a vibrant night life."

For now, Sweta is pining to return home to meet her parents and younger brother, and her many friends. "It's the first time I have been away from them for such a long stretch. There is a deep ache in my heart and all emotions come to the fore when I speak to my family. My parents encourage me to soldier on and make the most of this opportunity, but even as they are saying that to me, I can actually see the worry on their faces," she adds.

She would like to go home, only if she is assured that she can return to Australia to complete her degree and get some Australian work experience. "My biggest motive to get vaccinated was to be able to travel home as soon as Australia opens its international borders," says Sweta.



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Sweta Susan Mathew

**Even when Australia opens its borders, I will wait to see how things unfold before hopping on a plane'** Salim Nasser Salim Al Khadhooiri came to Australia from Oman on a scholarship to study petroleum engineering and then switched to material science and engineering. He completed his degree in September 2020 and was amongst the fortunate ones to immediately get a job in his field of study.

"If I hadn't got the job, I would have re-

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turned home even though I really wanted to stay here," says Salim. "The uncertainty of the pandemic was overwhelming. Most of my friends returned on a one-way ticket to Oman last April-May. They chose to continue their studies online. Some were really homesick, others were influenced by their parents wanting them to return, and yet others loved the idea of being with family and still be able to study for an Australian University degree. Some students, who were pursuing degrees in chemical or petroleum engineering, returned because



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Preshya Pushparaj

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Jui Varghese

they had better job prospects in the Middle East."

For Salim, who has four sisters, it has been lonely since his friends left last year. "In Oman, it is like one big extended family, but here emphasis is on privacy and individualistic lifestyle, which means we sometimes don't even know who is living next door. Having said that, here I have been exposed to people from many nationalities and cultures and that has greatly added to my life experience unlike in Muscat, where we always

interact with people with similar thinking and norms."

He misses meal times with his family and often wakes up imagining the aroma of his mother cooking Shuwa (a slow-cooked marinated lamb delicacy) and baking Omani Malouf (flatbread made with dates).

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and I understand that at this stage in my life, it is important that the choices I make are based on reasoning and not driven by emotion," says Salim, who loves the people, place and the pace of life in Australia.

One of his sisters is pursuing a law degree from the United Kingdom. She has been able to visit their family as UK border has been opened. He says, "Even when Australia opens its borders, I will wait to see how things unfold before hopping on a plane. I don't want to leave Sydney and find myself locked out in Oman, unable to return."

Before the pandemic, airlines ran about 2,000 international flights in and out of Australia each week, carrying about 850,000 passengers. Currently, there are only about 200 commercial international flights a week. Planes are typically only 5-15 per cent full, according to the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia.

**We always talk about how life is easier back home in Dubai'** Jui Varghese had arrived in February 2020 from Dubai to pursue a Master's degree in Australia. She had just found a house and moved in, when the very next day Sydney went into lockdown.

"I was grateful that it happened after I had moved in, and I was sharing the house with a college mate from Dubai. Finding accommodation, which we liked and was close to amenities, had proved very difficult. I had never been house hunting before. We walked through lanes and by-lanes to get a feel of the neighbourhood in various suburbs," says Jui, who's had a very pampered upbringing. She was brought up by her grandparents in India and would spend her holidays with her mother in Dubai.

Walking to places was something totally alien to her. "In Dubai, we always drive no matter how close or how far the place is due to the heat. Life is very easy as everything is available everywhere any time of the day or night. In Sydney, most businesses are open for a limited time during the day and it took me a while to get used to it. We always talk about how life was easier back home in Dubai," she adds.

Like most international students, she wanted to work 20 hours a week permitted under the student visa regulations,

to meet her daily expenses. "It has been really difficult to find work. Retail and hospitality sectors, where most international students find work, have been hit hard by Covid restrictions. As international students, we face an added barrier of not having local experience, a condition laid by many businesses," says Jui. She has coped well with the lockdown, reading books and watching Netflix. But she laments not having the opportunity to experience Australia and meet people from different cultures.

"Sydney is a melting pot of cultures, but our interaction has been largely limited to other international students. I do hope that my Master's degree in architecture from a prestigious Australian university will add value to my portfolio. It doesn't come cheap, at \$84,000 for the two-year course," says Jui, who can't wait to see her mother and vice versa.

According to the Australian Government's Study Australia webpage, an undergraduate Bachelor's degree costs \$20,000 to \$45,000 and Master's degree costs \$22,000 to \$50,000 per annum. (This does not include high-cost courses such as veterinary and medical degrees.) During the current lockdown, international students have been able to access support provided by the Australian Federal, state and territory governments, and education providers.

**I like the anonymity here. Apart from my few friends, no one knows me'** Preshya Pushparaj arrived in Sydney from Muscat in February 2020. She considers herself lucky to have entered the country before the borders closed. Many international students were forced to remain in their home country and study online.

She says, "I didn't realise the enormity of the situation. I thought the travel restrictions would end soon and life would return to normal. My initial plan was to return to Muscat for the summer vacation (December-January). One day, I opened Google Earth and began looking at the map of Australia, this huge island continent, and began scrolling back to Muscat. It suddenly dawned on me that how far I had come. It was frightening as everything familiar seemed so far away. The people and places I loved could only be reached by an aeroplane — or on a cruise ship!"

Information and advice regarding travel to Australia and the student visa process can be accessed on [StudyAustralia.gov.au](http://StudyAustralia.gov.au)

(Neena is a journalist based in Sydney.)

She didn't feel stuck when the state of New South Wales and its capital, Sydney, had zero Covid-19 cases and life was business as usual. "It was almost like the pandemic didn't exist. But the past few months of lockdown have been really difficult. I will soon be completing my degree, but sadly I will only be getting my degree and not the whole experience of studying in Australia. It has been frustrating because I haven't been able to execute all the plans I had made when I chose Sydney for higher studies," she adds.

Preshya is thankful that she has been in a safer situation compared to people in many other countries. "I am hoping that in the long run, I can look back at this period in my life as a rewarding experience given all that could have gone wrong."

She has enjoyed the independence and free-spirited lifestyle Australia offers. "In Muscat, everyone knows everybody else. Even if you go out with friends, their parents would know your parents and it is like one big family. I like the anonymity here. Apart from my few friends, no one knows me."

Preshya definitely wants to go back home, but only when she is assured that she can return to Australia. "My mom worries about me a lot as my parent would. Sometimes, she will ask me to return as soon as I finish my degree. But then I have to make her see the bigger picture and my career prospects here. I, too, am worried about my mother as she is a frontline healthcare worker. We have these difficult conversations every few days."

With different countries recognising different Covid vaccines for entry, she is unsure when the whole family can get together again. "Our family is spread across three countries: my mother is in Oman, my father and younger brother are in India, and I am in Australia. We can't plan anything for the future so we are just taking one day at a time. Hopefully, we will have a reunion in the not-too-distant future. Until then, I am keeping a tight lid on my pent-up emotions."