

Summary

Since the 16th of March 2020, Australia closed its borders as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Since then, Brazilian International Students with current visas, who were in Brazil on holidays/family visits or to resolve personal affairs found themselves unable to complete their education journey in Australia as planned.

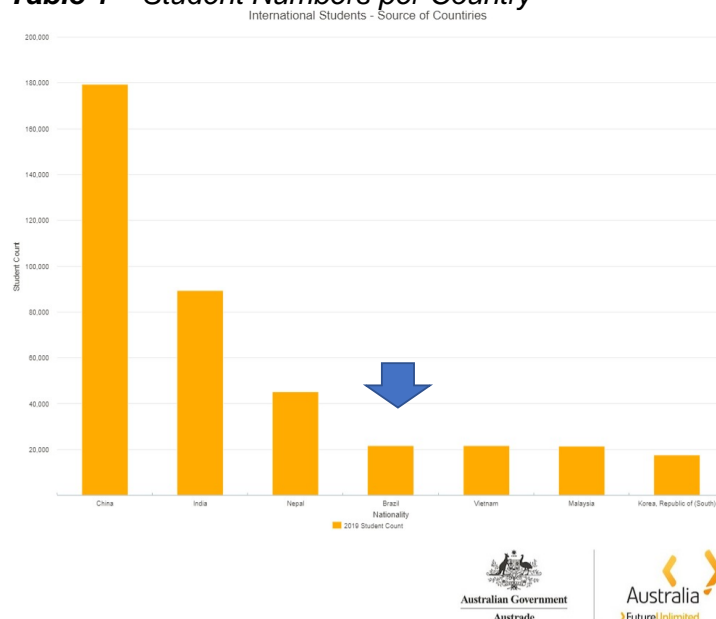
1.Introduction

This paper highlights the many challenges Brazilian International students are facing while they wait for the opportunity to return to their education journey in Australia. In 2019 there were over 27,000 Brazilians enrolled in Australian education institutions. Like other international students, many of them were seriously impacted by Australia closing its borders. Since March 2020, they living under high uncertainty such as completion of their education, reunion with family members, work, financial commitments, amongst others.

ABRISA was contacted by a group of 240 students and requested to present their concerns to the Australian Government. As highlighted above, the issues go beyond the completion of their education journey. In presenting their issues, ABRISA would like to highlight that Australia has been one of the favourite destinations for Brazilian students because of what the country can offer from a cultural perspective and quality of life.

Brazilian International Students understand and respect the decisions taken by the Australian Government and are willing to adhere to all required protocols and requirements needed to ensure public health and safety, including measures related to quarantine upon their return to Australia.

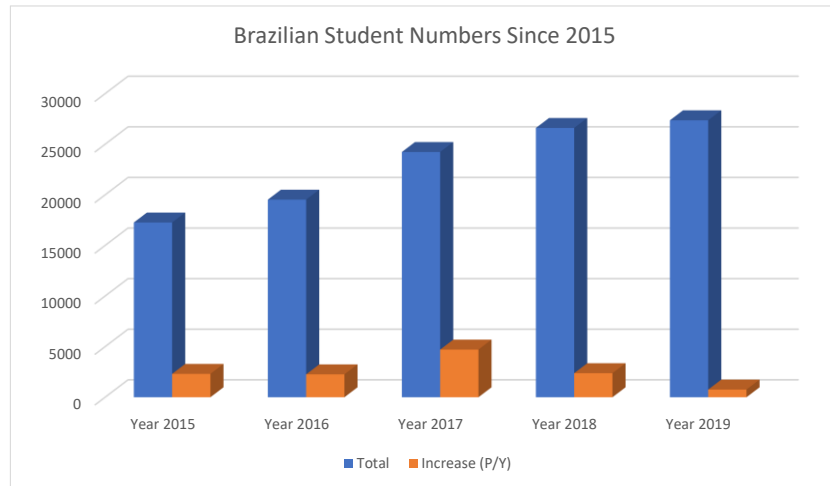
Table 1 – Student Numbers per Country



1.Brazilian Students - Australian and Victoria Data
 Department of Education and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade data indicates Brazil is amongst the top 5 countries of origin. This indicates that Australia is considered by Brazilian a country of choice for investment in their English and technical qualifications.

Since 2015 the number of Brazilian students significantly increased, reaching 27,366 in 2019. Australia is becoming a favourite destination for Brazilians and makes Brazil a great education export partner.

Table 2 – Department of Education Data – National Numbers



The re-opening of the borders to international students (with due compliance of all safety regulations) is not only an opportunity for them to resume their education, but it is a critical step to assist in the economic recovery of one of our largest export industries.

There is recognition by the Government the education industry and international students contribute \$40 billion annually and support 250,000 jobs calls for greater support for the international student community.

Australia is a major destination for international students interested in learning English or in enrolling in higher education. The actions the Federal and State governments take to support these students during the pandemic are being closely observed overseas and will substantially shape the perception of the Australian education market in the next few years.

2. Issues Faced by Brazilians International Students Abroad

ABRISA understands there are currently over 2000 International Brazilian students unable to return to Australia (SBS data). ABRISA has been contacted by International Students currently waiting for the opportunity to return to Australia.

ABRISA issued a questionnaire to a small group of them to establish their locations key issues faced.

Students Waiting to Return

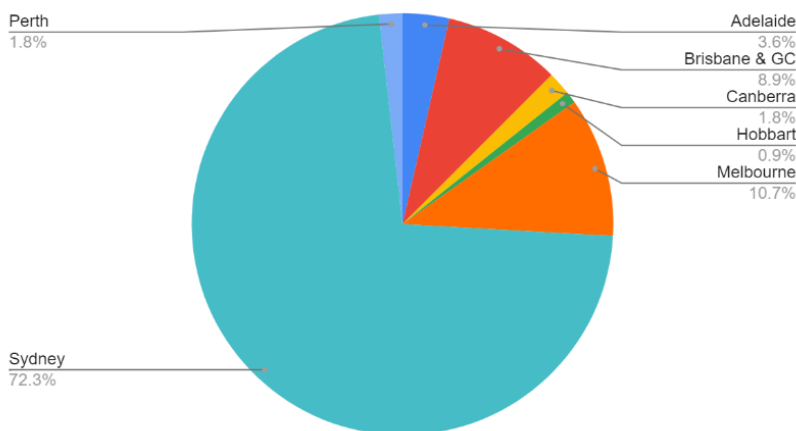


Table 3 – Location of Students in Australia - Data Collected from a survey with Students in Brazil

The reasons for visiting Brazil immediately before or just before COVID-19 struck, varied from family visits, resolution of personal affairs, and health reasons. For most students, their visit to Brazil was to be short (2-3 weeks) – they have now been away for over 4 months and left incomplete studies, belongings, and some cases, family members back in Australia. The need to return to Australia is, therefore, more complex than simply completion of their education, and include financial obligations (e.g., rental) and reunion with family members.

Whilst these students are cognizant of the difficulties faced by State and Federal Governments to control the spread of COVID-19, most students have no clear understanding of the prospect of their return. They would welcome and appreciate a clear channel of communication. Furthermore, through this channel, they would like to have the opportunity to outline their issues to State and Federal Governments.

To assist them in this process, ABRISA issued a survey to more than 140 of these students, and through their responses, selected the top 10 issues raised them, as follows:

| Issue | Description |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Family Isolation | There are several Brazilians who have been separated from their partners over the past 5 months. |
| Education - Adults | Students did pay for the English and cultural immersions and are not receiving the same level of quality even if they continue online via Brazil. |
| Education - Children | There are families with children enrolled in Australian schools. This is a significant cost and they are unable to have their children attending school in Brazil for this period. -Refer to appendix 1 for details. |
| Financial Burden | The respondents to the questionnaire are facing a significant financial burden with expenses in Australia, Expenses in Brazil, and no income. |
| Rental and Other Contracts | Most students are in rental agreements or a party to rental agreements. In one specific case, the property is being sold with the student's personal belongings still inside the house. |
| Health Issues | As a general rule, students opt to have private cover in only one country. Therefore, students in Brazil have no health cover as their insurance is specific to Australia. |
| Home Dwellings | Given the intended short nature of their departure, most have personal goods left behind without access to these. |
| Business | People have started businesses in Australia and cannot continue these businesses. |
| Employment | There are temporary workers under the 482 and old 457 visas who cannot return. |

| Issue | Description |
|---|--|
| Cost Recovery on Investment made | Students abroad are not able to work neither in Brazil not here in Australia (20 hrs). Staying in Brazil limits their ability to recover costs incurred during the pandemic. |

3. Key Questions Raised by Brazilians International Students Abroad

5.1 Legislation Framework for Return

- *As to-date there has not been a single student receiving a positive outcome from Home Affairs to return to Australia under an exemption basis, we would like to understand the criteria used for accepting an exemption request.*
- *If the issue relating to the cost of meeting the health protocols and students are willing to pay for it, what impedes such a return?*
- *What is the Government position regarding the timing for accepting students to return to Australia?*
- *Considering that COVID-19 is a virus, we will need to learn how to live with it, and other countries (Canada and United Kingdom) have opened their borders under such a premise, will Australia adhere to this model?*
- *Is the intended National Pilot program, to allow students to return, covering only students at universities? If not, is the Government considering the financial viability of private schools that could close due to lack of students?*
- *Outside the pilot program, is there any other proposal for international students to return?*
- *If students are in countries outside Brazil, would this positively impact their chances of returning?*
- *So far, students have “lost” more than 4 months of visas. Would the Government have any plans so these students can recover from the lost period they have been overseas?*

5.2 Possible return Criteria - Other Capital Cities

- *How soon will classes resume face to face? In particular in areas outside of Melbourne?*

5.3 Financial Burden (School Fees, Rental, etc)

- *There are Brazilian International Students in Brazil who continue to pay for their schools, rent, utilities (water, energy, telephone) and Tax in Australia without any opportunity to earn an income. How can we recover this time from a Visa perspective?*

5.4 Mental Health Related Issues when Overseas

- *The mental health of these students is being affected very drastically with anxiety, stress, and depression. We have a new mother giving birth in September 2020 and people with health problems who do not have access to private health as their health coverage is in Australia.*

3.1 Visa Related Issues when Overseas

- *Will students who have lost the validity of their respective visas, due to not being able to return to Australia, be able to enter without the current visa? Many students had intentions to continue their studies. How are these issues be addressed?*

- *Some students are more than 8 weeks without studying, breaking a student visa condition imposed by the student visa while their partners remained in Australia. How does the government view such a situation?*
- *Students who are outside of Melbourne were not able to take up Victorian Government student assistance. At the same time, they are doubly paying for rental, health care, and other expenses. How can the government assist in these cases?*
- *What about the students whose visas are now no longer valid and who have re-applied from outside Australia? Some are on the A/B bridge visa right now - can they return?*

2. Key Pledges of Brazilian International Students

The Minister for the Department of Education Skills and Employment made some key announcements highlighting the following:

- a. The Australian Government will recommence granting student visas in all locations lodged outside Australia. This means when borders re-open, students will already have visas and be able to make arrangements to travel.*
- b. International students will be able to lodge a further student visa application free of charge if they are unable to complete their studies within their original visa validity due to COVID-19.*
- c. Current student visa holders studying online outside Australia due to COVID-19 will be able to use that study to count towards the Australian study requirement for a post-study work visa.*
- d. Graduates who held a student visa will be eligible to apply for a post-study work visa outside Australia if they are unable to return due to COVID-19.*
- e. Additional time will be given for applicants to provide English language results where COVID-19 has disrupted access to these services.*

Brazilian International Students and education providers welcome these measures and acknowledge the efforts of the Government in this moment of high uncertainty. In addition to these concessions, the Brazilian International Students requested that:

1. Considering they were not able to complete their education journey with the same level of quality and immersion, an additional visa period is granted, free of charge, covering the period they have had to stay away from Australia due to the border restrictions.
2. Considering the financial stress and additional unplanned costs they've incurred due to the border restrictions:
 - a. They are allowed to work additional hours (more than 40 hours per fortnight) to enable them to recoup losses for at least six months upon their return to Australia.
 - b. They are exempt from the quarantine fees.
3. There are unintended consequences of Job Keeper, as most temporary visa holders are excluded from it. Would the government consider a level playing field for all workers, irrespective of visa conditions? Or, could the Government open an exception for key sectors of high labor demand such as Supply Chain, Health, Community care as an example?



ABRISA – Advocacy Paper – Brazilian International Students

4. They are given the right to attend additional training at a reduced cost that will assist them in better transitioning to where jobs are available such as supply chain and health.

ABRISA and also most students in the situation described above are willing and prompt to collaborate with the Australian Government in the areas of communications, information, and more important alternative solutions that can resolve this situation and reinforce the goodwill and reputation Australian Education Sector has with international students.

Appendix 1– “Carlos Gomes” – Narrative

The case below is to highlight the complexities in the life of a temporary resident who still cannot return to Australia. Carlos “a fictitious name” is on a Bridging Visa and still in Brazil. He volunteered to present his personal experience disclosing how his life plans are currently on hold while waiting to return to Australia.

- It has been almost 4 months since the borders were closed. In addition to financial losses, absence from studies, work, and family, we are all suffering extraordinary emotional damage. While repairing all of this damage is a complex matter, allowing temporary residents to safely return addresses Australia’s health concerns, enables the start of healing and gives us the ability to add to Australia’s economy. We will help strengthen the response by making ourselves available for research or other control procedures.
- As a student, I started the investment and the administrative part of my company in Australia and was about to start the operation. A simpler operation, but the first step for the business that I intend to invest in anticipation of a Visa approval (today I am on a Bridging Visa).
- **Key questions and dilemmas on what to do next:**
 1. What I have already invested is lost or I can go back and contribute to the economy and job creation in Australia?
 2. Should I break the current rental contract? Breaking my lease contract implies paying the rent until another tenant enters or the lease ends. I become accountable for moving my personal belongings and do not have anyone to support me with this. I am forced to identify a paid third party to support such a move and incur storage costs which I can ill afford.
 3. Do I suspend or cancel the enrolment of my children in Australian Schools? How to repair the gap that is being created between the children who are having the right to study there, in person, and those who are being prevented from returning? It goes far beyond the financial reimbursement of what we paid for studies, but rather, that the children are without the right to study. The registration process also requires documents, proof that are in Australia. Is it fair for children to pay for it?
 4. Do I cancel my phone plan and internet services provisions contracts? Do I cancel the health insurance, car insurance?
- If the answer to the questions is yes, and carry out the activities to cancel my commitments could decrease my expenses, but it would not solve my problems in terms of not losing my daughters' year at school.