

Is 2022 going to be another 'Groundhog' Year?

Ian Bofinger

February 2022

Finishing the COVID-disrupted examinations in early December 2021, I was feeling grateful that the past 2 years of interrupted studies would be over and a return to normality would happen in 2022. What is considered "normal" for tertiary studies has also changed during the pandemic – and a return to campus doesn't necessarily spell a return to the traditional teaching paradigms of pre-2020. As such we are left to consider the notion of whether things will ever be the same?

After almost two years of phasing in and out of remote online learning, most AMPA students and staff were looking forward to farewelling the notion of the off campus, "Zoom University" and hopeful of a return to face-to-face practical studies on campus and a sense of stability in 2022.

On December 15, 2021, the NSW government chose to phase out all lockdown measures as the State reached a double vaccination rate of 95% of the adult population. *Delta* as well as *Omicron*, a new variant of COVID-19 decimated the state. The NSW government website data shows that COVID-19 infections went from less than 10 cases daily in early December 2021 to over 92,000 daily cases in early January 2022.

In AMPA's case, there was a direct correlation of these figures and the 2022 recruitment data generated from the Customer Management System (OAS). In November 2021, new student information in the OAS, which is monitored daily, indicated that 2022 would see an overall growth of over 25% on 2021 student figures. Staffing plans and capital works initiatives were then designed around this encouraging data.

In late December and early January an unexpected number of new students started to defer their offers for later in the year. International students were finding it difficult to get flights and visas and the interstate and regional domestic students indicated that they were concerned about relocating to Sydney whilst the epidemic was appearing to be out of control.

AMPA's student demographics consist of approximately 10% international, 15% interstate, 35% regional and only 40% Sydney metropolitan. The impact on approximately 60% of the new and returning student population who are not permanently based in Sydney was significant.

Continuing students from Western Australia and Queensland stated that they would rather stay online due to the uncertainty of return travel communicated by the state premiers. New students chose to defer until Trimester 2, 2022. As ABC News reports, "Western Australia has delayed its planned border reopening indefinitely as the rest of the country grapples with the greatest spread of COVID-19 since the pandemic began. Premier Mark McGowan said the revised hard border would come with more exemptions for compassionate reasons. However, he warned further restrictions would be considered over the next month as the state reviews the impact of the Omicron variant in the eastern states. The changes, due to start from February 5, have dashed the hopes of families and friends hoping to reunite after being separated by some of the toughest border controls in Australia."

AMPA's regional students, who had relocated to Sydney for the 2021 academic year, have mostly returned to on-campus face-to-face studies in 2022 but many of the potential new students have chosen to defer their studies rather than access the hybrid teaching models. Anecdotal data recorded by the recruitment team indicated that after 2 years of *Zoom-based*

studies to complete their NSW High School Certificate (HSC), the thought of commencing their tertiary music and dance studies online was not desirable but the notion of relocating to Sydney during the pandemic as reported daily on the news was equally unacceptable for many students and their families.

Instead of preparing for a return to on-campus studies for 2022, AMPA staff were reminded of the 1993 movie “Groundhog Day” in which Bill Murray portrays Phil Connors, a cynical television weatherman covering the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, who becomes trapped in a time loop, forcing him to relive February 2nd repeatedly. Every day starts the same way: An alarm clock changes from 5:59 to 6 a.m. The radio plays Sonny and Cher singing “I Got You Babe.” Wake up, do the same things, go nowhere, go to bed... This was reminiscent of our tertiary life in 2020 and 2021 but were we heading back to this exclusively remote, off-campus study model once more in 2022?

In August 2020 a report produced by Ernst & Young Global predicted the number of international students in Australia would never return to its 2019 levels. Instead, it predicted a total revenue loss of \$6bn by 2030. The shortfall could force the closure or merger of smaller institutions and would mean 50% of non-research staff would be out of work, the report said.

Ernst & Young’s global head of education, Catherine Friday, said the pandemic had “exposed the overreliance on on-campus learning and international students in Australia’s higher education system”. This generalised notion appears to be true for many tertiary degrees but the benefits of on-campus practical studies in music and dance is contradictory to this statement. The individual, personalised mentor relationships that are fostered in the tertiary performing arts training have been almost impossible to replicate in the hybrid online models that were utilised to deliver the practical units during 2020 and 2021. The experience gained by being a part of an ensemble in a professional dance studio or of performing music on the stage under lights and industry standard sound, compared to that of working with a laptop in the student’s garage or lounge room, can’t be underestimated.

During the pandemic, AMPA had the opportunity to develop some high-quality online materials for the exclusively academic units such as the Music History stream. In these units the structured preparation of all of the multimedia prepared for the online delivery such as in-house recorded videos, commercial video segments, music scores, audio recordings and historically significant archival materials, have further enhanced the student learning experience. This has also reduced the on-campus study load to only 3 days/week for each student and has further minimised the risk of travelling to campus on public transport.

As Friday (2021) notes, “There is so much financial strain in the sector right now and such uncertainty about ongoing income and revenue streams that it’s reasonable to suspect that there might be university closures or some sort of merger activity in the market.”

While it will take time, AMPA continues to slowly lure back students from overseas. As Jackson (2022) states, “We have reached a milestone with the reopening of our borders, but the sector will take time to recover.”

Australian universities are hoping the return of international students and face-to-face learning will help the decimated sector “snap back” from COVID restrictions, but some are warning the industry is in a perilous position. Since the pandemic, the number of international student visa holders has fallen by 205,854 – or 33.5% – with the sector losing at least \$1.8bn in revenue in the first year alone, according to Universities Australia.

The full picture for enrolment and commencement numbers for both international and domestic students will not be known until March 2022, but the minister for immigration, Alex Hawke, announced that since late November 2021 a total of 56,000 International Students

have arrived in Australia. He also states that demand for Australian study visas has been particularly strong, in recent months, with more than 50,000 overseas student visa lodgements since late 2021. Visa grants to International Students are flowing as a result of the Minister directing the Department to allocate additional resources to processing the visas of International Students.

In the movie 'Groundhog Day', Phil uses his predicament to grow as a person. He takes up French, ice sculpting and even piano. The good news is that, by now, we are getting better at taking life a day at a time and maybe there is still hope for tertiary studies in the performing Arts.

Thankfully, with a mix of low attrition and late registrations, AMPA has been able to begin 2022 with a viable student cohort. The year also began with the hybrid model of both on-campus and online studies as originally planned. This has also been in part possible due to the decline in the daily NSW COVID-19 infection numbers. It now looks as though 2022 will not be a repeat of the lockdowns of the past 2 years. Instead, the positive developments that have been gained from adversity in the realms of hybrid models of study will continue to enhance the learning experience of the students at AMPA.

References

Hawke, A. 2022 *Australia welcomes return of international students and backpackers* <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/AlexHawke/Pages/australia-welcomes-return-of-international-students-and-backpackers.aspx>

Higher Education Educator, 2021 *Australia NSW to welcome back some international students* <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/nsw-to-welcome-back-some-international-students/278777>

Friday, C. 2021 *University Disruption Will Continue Beyond COVID-19* https://www.ey.com/en_au/covid-19/university-disruption-will-continue-beyond-covid-19

Jackson, C. 2022 *Looking down the barrel': Australian universities face nervous future post-Covid* <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/30/looking-down-the-barrel-australian-universities-face-nervous-future-post-covid>

JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>

Motherwell, S. (2022) *Here's who can enter WA after February 5 and what they need to do after arriving* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-21/wa-hard-border-restrictions-approved-traveller-list/100772308>



Professor Ian Bofinger is the Executive Dean and CEO of AMPA, the Australian Academy of Music and Performing Arts