



Virtual Café Session

Facing the challenges, fronting the future

29 September 2020

A summary report prepared for AIEC by  **Edified**

Background

In late March and early July 2020, Edified conducted surveys of international education professionals across Australia and New Zealand to better understand the impact that the pandemic, border closures and lockdowns were having on individuals and teams. Key themes emerged from the surveys that were visualised and illustrated in preparation for the AIEC virtual café. This document contains highlights, consolidated comments and breakout room ideation from the session.

2020 – the year COVID19 turned the world on its axis. For the international education sector this really has been a confluence of events that has caused unthinkable disruption. Its been a roller coaster ride of ups and downs, highs and lows, fears and insecurity, and we've often felt like there is no end in sight.

Yet out of adversity we've seen incredible empathy and compassion drive support for our students hit hardest by the loss of jobs and the stresses of isolation. We've innovated virtually overnight and proved organisations can change and be flexible. We reimaged our workspaces and shifted our expectations The pace of change has been both exhausting and stimulating. We've had to farewell colleagues and have woken up at 3am worrying about our own uncertain future. Yet despite all of the obstacles and challenges, we are still in this together.

Edified conducted surveys of industry stakeholders in late March and early July to gauge sentiment and better understand the impact that the unfolding pandemic crisis was having on us personally and collectively. The year was thematically illustrated for participants to visualise the range of emotions and uncertainty faced by the education sector.



Virtual Café

Edified created breakout sessions for AIEC Virtual Café participants and identified four key pillars of the international education sector, including Recruitment, Partnerships, Student Services and Careers to provide a framework to breakout session discussions. These were identified as four critical areas that individuals, teams and our collective energy should address and apply with a sustainable lens in order to build our capacity and capabilities for the future. 20 breakout rooms tackled these critical issues. The ideas and responses generated have been detailed for industry stakeholders to collectively understand what needs to shift as we learn, adapt and adopt initiatives for a new normal.



**Sustainable
Recruitment
& Channels**



**Sustainable
Partnerships
& Products**



**Sustainable
Student Services
& Support**



**Sustainable
Careers in
International
Education**

Edified moderated a group discussion and collected feedback on two central questions:
As individuals and as a sector...

How do we become better, improved and future-proofed?

What needs to be left behind to enable us to survive and thrive?

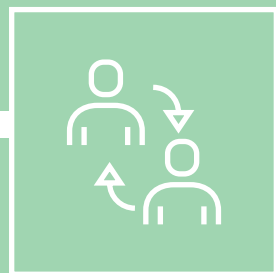
Breakout Session Summary

This document contains the output of the Virtual Cafe workshop for those readers who may not have attended.



To Achieve Sustainable Recruitment Outcomes for the Industry:

- Improve Online Capabilities
- Enhance Communication Channels
- Embrace Continuous Innovation
- Understand the Disruption to Recruitment Channels
- Understand Risk and How to Manage it
- Improve Brand and Destination Positioning



To Achieve Sustainable Partnerships & Relevant Products:

- New Flexible Models are needed
- Leverage Opportunities Online and across International Partnerships
- Collaborative Thinking is Needed
- Advocacy, Regulations and Quality Assurance are Critical
- Understanding Student Motivations and Expectations



To Achieve More Sustainable Student Services & Support:

- Focus on the Needs of Students
- Connect and Engage with Greater Frequency
- Increase Virtual Offerings
- Informed Curriculum Development
- Embrace the Challenge of Personalisation and Automation



To Achieve Greater Sustainability in Careers in International Education

- Reinvention of Working Arrangements and Roles
- Stay Connected and Networked
- Be Driven by Digital
- Create Space for Innovation
- Develop Resilience



Sustainable Recruitment & Channels





Sustainable Recruitment & Channels

BREAKOUT ROOM SUGGESTIONS AND IDEATION

Improve Online Capacity and Capabilities

- Adoption of online by international students and by families raises the question of how we deliver on quality and effective engagement online.
- Institutions should be flexible to adapt to the changing situation and make things easier for our students.
- Improve the messaging of how to work online and understand the issues in each market with access and infrastructure.
- The prospective student experience can be improved, even if it is only virtual, and there are good software platforms for these connections.
- Some students are disciplined at online whilst others need much more support. Time zones will remain a challenge.
- Staff and students are now becoming familiar with many more technology platforms and the nuances of each.
- More in depth conversations online and through the phone which should lead to better outcomes.
- Curation of content effectively across different platforms and technology makes a difference.
- Learn from the challenges that were faced by students when we pivoted to online learning.
- Students are required to have a lot of trust in education agents and universities. There are still issues with document security and IT that need to be overcome.
- Keeping students motivated and engaged, particularly with applied programs and VET studies will be a challenge.

Enhance Communication Channels

- Communicating and creating positive narratives around the achievements made because of COVID-19 impact.
- Students are looking to us to provide some certainty on what the future may look like.
- Encouraging students through telling students' stories and sharing 'coping' stories and putting these troubling times into a more positive perspective which builds resilience.
- Listen to what students want when designing short-term solutions for now, followed by longer term strategy.

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Sustainable Recruitment & Channels

Understand the Disruption to Recruitment Channels

- As an industry, education agents are a backbone to a variety of student recruitment efforts. Their businesses may struggle to survive and we are not ready for that disruption.
- How do we leave behind massive road shows with low ROI – whilst we may still need to do them, is there a better way?
- Many of us acknowledge that virtual expos aren't as effective as face to face ones. Let's invest in better platforms.
- If we invest in virtual roadshows instead of face to face events, can we allow for a more personalised one-on-one service with students and parents, where online visibility will be appreciated.
- We need to leverage the alumni channel and enable more effective use of alumni and friends and family who have already experienced studying and living here.
- We need a long-term focus and commitment into a defined set of diversity markets, where we can build relationships with longevity and ROI in the long run.
- It's time we act more responsively to the market demands that we haven't been anticipating.
- The shift to increased virtual recruitment models has been a positive from COVID, particularly our ability to capture leads digitally, which is positive for the environment.
- Let's keep pursuing and building current relationships and re-imagine them online and remotely.
- Keeping close to partners and sharing support is vital to ensure they are kept engaged and we continue to engage.
- We may have longer hours or time shifts due to time zone differences as we shift to more virtual engagement, but we'll have less travel. These trade offs need to be acknowledged and supported.
- Students have more willingness to embrace online studies and this will require an adjustment to our programs.

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Continuous Innovation

- Pricing and value proposition will need to be addressed for the online offer. Should we think about online as a pathway to on-campus which will provide students and institutions with a creative hybrid approach?
- Is online the new TNE? If so, TNE tends to be priced differently and our pricing strategy needs to be carefully considered weighing up value and quality.
- Everyone on the planet has been affected by one thing and now everyone has to use digital engagement tools to function. Let's look for the positives and new options that fall out of the restrictions. Innovating and adapting to new tech and to the volume of new tech.
- We need to go deeper than just diversification, with governance-driven diversity metrics and goals.
- Diversification is much talked about but needs to be even more our collective and individual focus moving forward, from diversified markets to diversified discipline areas.
- Let's focus on long-term relationship building for our partnership models to build presence in targeted markets.
- How do we use partnerships and credit offerings to support students to start overseas in-market and then come to Australia for shorter periods of time to offset the economic hardships across key source markets?
- Let's embrace new products and platforms and not shy away from new ways of doing things.
- Can the industry offer tasters or Virtual micro credentials to entice prospects?
- Increased flexibility, while retaining academic rigor, around recognition of alternative admission pathways to offset the pipeline impact to traditional pathways.

Can the industry offer tasters or Virtual micro credentials to entice prospects?



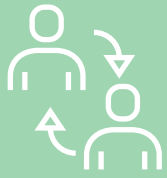
Sustainable Recruitment & Channels

Understand Risk and How to Manage it

- As an industry, we need to manage risk more effectively and better planning for risk and impact
- How can we build resilience in our markets? Move from price-based competition to brand and reputation-based market engagement.
- Recruitment teams have to look at student retention and focus on keeping students.
- Ultimately, we'll need to shift from a strategy of growth as a key driver to a more balanced strategy that considers costs as well as revenue.
- We need a long-term roadmap, as opposed to short-term pivots, and commitment to diversification strategy.
- Consider the context of pre-COVID market conditions. Was a market contraction already going to happen, but COVID expedited this?
- Diversification objectives – let's have a true commitment to diversification to build resilience and a balanced portfolio of markets at an organisational level.
- We need an equity agenda- course or provider choice for international students is based on capacity to pay not academic or outcomes focused.

Improve Brand and Destination Positioning

- Nation-brand building must ensure there's a rebuilding of our reputation across all sectors.
- Change the message to more powerful stories based on human impact not volume outcome.
- Utilise current students to tell stories of success, their challenges and the shared lived experience.
- Student experience must be a focus and we need to invest in this.
- We can maintain engagement by using student ambassadors and peer to peer engagement.
- Delivering authenticity of product via new voices from students to alumni and agents.
- C19 has highlighted our reliance on selling of 'place', yet we need to get better at selling 'product', and offer Masterclasses and tasters that resonate.
- Price competitiveness needs to be considered across online and face to face.
- Focussing on quality conversation with targeted groups will yield quality outcomes.
- Let's shift the political agenda and discourse away from being measured on \$\$ value and instead on the outcomes and benefits that the sector delivers.
- Engagement has been positive in terms of sector collaboration. Let's keep it up!



Sustainable Partnerships & Products





Sustainable Partnerships & Products

BREAKOUT ROOM SUGGESTIONS AND IDEATION

New Flexible Models are needed

- Micro-credentials are the future.
- Flexibility should be recognised by the government.
- We need flexibility to adapt to market changes and match the needs of the market with relevant products.
- Development of a sustainable pricing model, in light of the flexible delivery models that will be created.
- New models for internships and WIL will be needed.
- Students need options to pick-and-choose study components from a range of partners to make up a degree, and our regulations need to recognise this.
- Tailored local products delivered in markets. This will necessitate a change to models of offshore delivery that are dependent on staff traveling from Australia for delivery and QA.

Leverage Opportunities Online and across International

- Partnerships will be key in developing transition points for students to prepare for their on-boarding and deepen their social connection.
- Peer connections will be key going forward. Let's build peer to peer/student to student connections to bridge on and offshore cohorts.
- How might we partner overseas to utilise online as a pathway to reduce costs and deliver quality pathways.
- Partnering for virtual mobility for domestic students to access unique courses that aren't widely available onshore, like Islamic Finance.
- Virtual mobility offerings have been developed to ensure students have a global experience despite the travel restrictions. This is something that should be continued and has the potential to open up international experiences to a wider set of domestic students.
- Offshore-based Regional Managers will be important for continued relationships with partners, and providing on the ground support and feedback to teams onshore.
- New avenues of cooperation can be opened up with sponsors and offshore governments around the ability of Australian and NZ institutions to deliver quality online offerings that previously had not been well-recognised.
- Online can potentially become more affordable and attainable for students from lower socio-economic families.
- Greater collaboration with international partners for students to study at partner institutions and bring back guaranteed credit to our universities should be a focus moving forward.



Sustainable Partnerships & Products

Collaborative Thinking is Needed

- We need to promote Australia as a whole rather than the piecemeal effort that is apparent.
- Can we invest in new products and services together?
- Can we co-invest in Australian English language testing centres?
- Can we co-invest in online products nation-wide?
- How do we develop products that will give us an edge in the global market?
- Need Study Clusters to be working collaboratively together where feasible.
- Multilateral partnership arrangements (more than 2), potentially creating joint degrees.
- An online onboarding program would be useful, particularly if there is a common framework that can then be tailored by institution.

Advocacy, Regulations and Quality Assurance are Critical

- Government needs to be willing to adapt and supportive of new models of delivery, recognition and sectoral responsiveness.
- Some courses are not well suited to online delivery like allied health and hospitality. We need to invest in those areas to ensure we can bridge the online delivery gap.
- We need to remain focussed on students' ability to attain professional accreditation / registration.
- Foreign interference legislation may influence our partnerships. We need to understand the ramifications.
- There is a need for domestic partnerships to continue to build and allow greater advocacy for the industry and specifically international students.
- Evaluation is needed around the value of international students, partnerships, and products rather than just dollar amount to the industry.

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Sustainable Partnerships & Products

We need to consider what will the workplace look like and craft our delivery, models and content to support that.

Understanding Student Motivations and Expectations

- What are students seeking and are we providing it for them?
- We need to redevelop our products based on demand. Our programs and products need to anticipate what students will need, not what students once needed.
- We need to consider what will the workplace look like and craft our delivery, models and content to support that.
- Adaptation of the student experience to an online environment is vital. Let's learn what has worked and improve on it.
- We need to adapt to a hybrid approach with smaller groups coming together online and in person.
- Build value-add from the home country perspective, from institutions to alumni to industry.
- Refine existing products to meet the needs of diversity student cohorts will be a focus in 2021 and beyond.
- Virtual mobility is a good lead activity in this area. Short programs that are customised to meet student expectations and experience.
- We need effective communication of and delivery on the promise of the student experience.

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**Sustainable
Student
Services
& Support**





Sustainable Student Services & Support

BREAKOUT ROOM SUGGESTIONS AND IDEATION

Focus on the Needs of Students

- We should be listening to students' expectations now more than ever in order to identify their needs. What service priorities are there for us to deliver?
- Focus on what actually matters to the students instead of providing what we think is best.
- Don't lose sight of student needs once things go back to normal!
- We will need a continued focus on student wellbeing and new services like rental advisory.
- Our likely future will be a 50/50 blended learning approach. Students must feel like they are in the classroom.
- Connectivity is fundamental to all activities to support access - not all students can use camera or have bandwidth to connect.
- Ensure our campus facilities meet the needs of a post COVID world, like ensuring we change to sensor taps in washroom facilities.
- Increased focus on mental health this year has been a positive and important step that continues to be a focus going forward, but constrained institutional resources and staffing might mean it is difficult to advocate for resources in this area.
- Student welfare and hardship has been highlighted this year - how can we ensure going forward that students are supported but also able to sustain themselves?

Connect and Engage with Greater Frequency

- Join student-oriented communication channels and listen to the students about their challenges and needs.
- New collaborative approaches to student support and events are needed, particularly as staffing is reduced.
- Peer interaction will be critical. Greater peer to peer / student to student connections on and offshore and leads to connecting and engaging with students more frequently through various social channels.
- There is more reliance on the provider and agent for timely information and more intensive student support.
- Community support has been a positive - how do we leverage that and keep the goodwill flowing?
- Diversify our interaction with students, by unlocking Alumni support, connecting with current students, connecting parents with parents.

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Sustainable Student Services & Support

Increase Virtual Offerings

- Can we select a common discipline, trial an introductory course (bridging course) nation-wide which could get them into first year of many different universities?
- Invite overseas students into our classrooms (virtually) while we're in this period of non-travel. We need ambition that these connections will enhance our attractiveness as a destination!
- What online models and blended approaches work best? Lets look to supplementing online with study centres, using offshore offices for this purpose.
- We need a collective upgrade in technology and more use of education technology products, especially for student support and connection, yet our platforms are disparate.

Informed Curriculum Development

- Co-design a curriculum which is agile enough for various institutions to adjust to their requirements such as a 6-month undergraduate certificate done overseas which could reduce student costs.
- Challenges we collectively face are the development costs; most have had to come up with short term solutions and not necessarily invested in a longer-term strategy.
- Recognise that virtual support and L&T is trial and error for many institutions. As an industry, we should share best practice and approach carefully with a strong focus on engagement.
- Central multi-university shared service models will no doubt be a focus moving forward, but not without controversy.
- Credentialing for quality – we do not want a race to the bottom.

Recognise that virtual support and L&T is trial and error for many institutions. As an industry, we should share best practice and approach carefully with a strong focus on engagement.



Sustainable Student Services & Support

Embrace the Challenge of Personalisation and Automation

- Online engagement needs to be hyper-personalised. If it's done poorly, it looks very transactional. Leave standard inquiries and replies for automation to free up resources.
- Our current technology and investment may not be able to work through complex situations. There remains a need for initial face to face connections to help students network and make friends in person.
- Its challenging to connect students who have not met face to face and built relationships. Using gamification and interactive online platforms to encourage students to connect outside the classroom will be needed.
- Tracking and tracing apps will need to be improved.
- There is a need for government bodies to continue to assist students to become self-sufficient and with the tools to be successful graduates.
- We should be attempting ways on extending pre-departure and orientation information past week one and provide continued access.

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**Sustainable
Careers in
International
Education**





Sustainable Careers in International Education

BREAKOUT ROOM SUGGESTIONS AND IDEATION

Reinvention of Working Arrangements and Roles

- Flexible working arrangements and working from home should stay.
- We need professional development for how to network remotely in an efficient and supported way.
- We should leave behind the traditional team and departmental silos.
- This is a great opportunity to break old cycles, to innovate and try new ideas.
- Encourage a culture shift, such as admissions teams to focus on students as customers and take more accountability relevant to student outcomes.
- Set aside time in our week for upskilling activities and engaging in professional development.
- Staff need to be able to cross-skill and stay in international education even if their specific role is impacted by cuts occurring across the sector.
- The pandemic has pushed everyone to be better and broader and more adaptable.
- Let's leave behind redundant jobs in manual data entry that can and should be automated.

Stay Connected and Networked

- We are stronger by working together as a sector and supporting each other by sharing ideas and solutions.
- Formalise connections and regular communication across departments beyond the immediate pandemic context.
- Support programs such as mentoring programs as a regular feature of our sector.
- Connect with colleagues as often as possible. Phone colleagues for a chat outside of scheduled Zoom meetings.
- Keep planning events for a face-to-face future which will return!
- Be willing to get involved and don't wait for others to make the connection.
- Keep LinkedIn up to date and reach out to people from different sectors.
- Help each other!

Support programs such as mentoring programs as a regular feature of our sector.



Sustainable Careers in International Education

Be Driven by Digital

- Automate manual process efficiencies wherever possible.
- There will be a greater need for new jobs such as digital designers, leadership in digital environments, digital fluency, data analysts to help us make sense of the data we see.
- Universities will hire less and contract more digital specialists.
- Digital should be part of everyone's job.

Create Space for Innovation

- Be adaptable - move out of your comfort zone, adapt to new technologies and look at challenges as an opportunity to grow.
- Open new communication channels between different organisations within the education sector. Agents, students, institutions and government (at different levels) talking, building and improving the sector together.
- Learn from other industries and apply these innovations to education.
- Learn from our students about how to innovate.
- Create an 'innovation network' as part of IEAA.

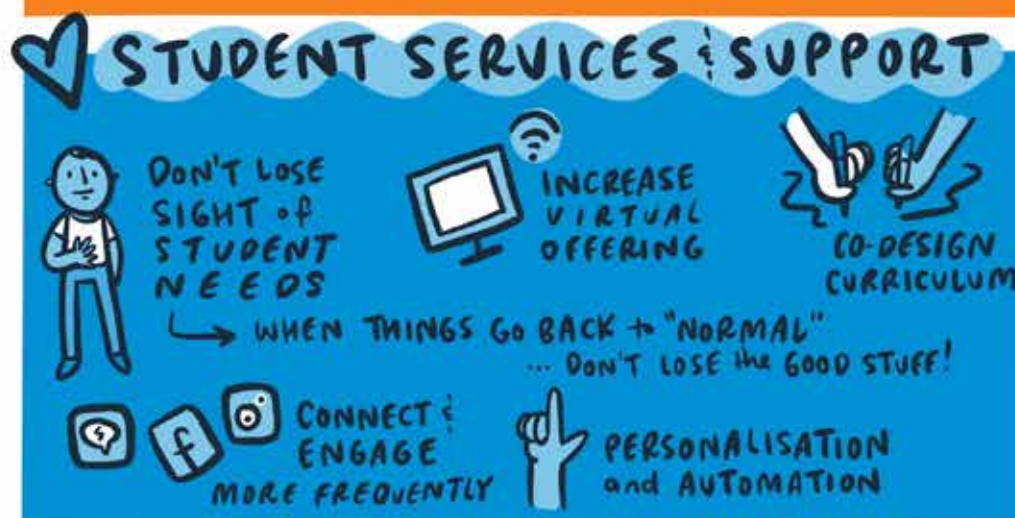
Develop Resilience

- Do things outside your job description.
- Focus future professional development program topics on mental health, resilience, mindfulness and adaptability.
- Recognise and reinforce the value of transferable skill.
- Let colleagues and peers know when you're struggling.
- Share how you are feeling and show support for each other.
- Be willing to roll up your sleeves and go beyond what's expected of you.
- Be willing to take a risk. Don't give up!

Focus future professional development program topics on mental health, resilience, mindfulness and adaptability.

The collective ideas generated during the breakout sessions were visualised and illustrated. Edified acknowledges and thanks all Virtual Café participants for their openness, honesty, creativity and collective passion for our industry.

VIRTUAL CAFE: FACING the CHALLENGES, FRONTING the FUTURE



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For further resources, recordings and videos of this AIEC Virtual Café session, please head to: <https://aiec.idp.com/aiec-facing-the-challenges>

If your team would benefit from engaging Edified in team resilience and results-driven projects, please find us at: www.edified.com.au



**Never again should we say or hear
'that can't be done' or 'we can't
move that quickly'. We know we can.**

AIEC Virtual Café Participant