Tertiary student finances under COVID-19

Andrew Norton
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Author

Andrew Norton is Professor in the Practice of Higher Education Policy at the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods.

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Overview

Lost jobs and hours due to COVID-19 restrictions affected the finances of tertiary education students and their families. For domestic students, however, increased government payments left many better off than if COVID-19 had never happened. A strong student labour market in most months since early 2021 has also increased student income. International students suffered longer financial hardship, but by mid-2021 their position had improved significantly.

The first COVID-19 lockdowns starting in March 2020 cut tertiary student jobs. Among those studying full-time in vocational or higher education, and aged 24 years or less, employment fell by 100,000 in three months. It happened again during the August to October 2021 lockdowns in Victoria, NSW and the ACT. Each decline reflected employment concentrated in jobs that cannot easily be done from home, especially in retail and hospitality.

Student jobs are vulnerable to COVID-19 restrictions but recover quickly. In mid-2021 employment for these young full-time students rose to an all-time high of 519,200, before falling again with new lockdowns.

In December 2021 a record 72.5 per cent of tertiary students aged 24 years or less were employed. In December 2019, before COVID-19, the tertiary student employment rate was 65 per cent.

An exodus of international student, working holiday and other temporary visa holders left job vacancies for domestic students and the international students remaining in Australia. Students also benefited from policies that stimulated demand for labour across the economy.

During lockdowns student workers lost pay, but from the end of March 2020 many domestic students were compensated through government programs. The JobKeeper wage subsidy program, and the later disaster payments for those unable to work due to COVID-19 infections or restrictions, often paid more than their wages.

For full-time students in work, median weekly income in August 2020 was $500, nearly 50 per cent higher than a year earlier due to JobKeeper and more hours spent at work. With weekly hours remaining high in 2021, median weekly income exceeded 2019 levels by $100.

The number of student income support recipients increased significantly in 2020, filling financial gaps left by reduced work opportunities and probably less family financial support. The government's Coronavirus Supplement more than doubled basic fortnightly benefit payments from April to September 2020. Reduced Coronavirus Supplements payments continued until March 2021. A small permanent increase of $25 a week in student income support payments began in April 2021.

Especially in 2020 international students were the exception to generally positive COVID-19 student financial outcomes. Like domestic students they suffered significant job losses, but without compensating student income support or JobKeeper assistance. Survey evidence identified economic distress and negative effects on their studies.

By May 2021, however, international student employment rates exceeded pre-COVID-19 levels. From June 2021 international and domestic students were eligible for the same payments if unable to work due to COVID-19 infections or restrictions.

In the first four months of 2022 student employment and job vacancies for common student occupations were at high levels. These favourable conditions, however, will probably not last. Temporary migrants will return to Australia and tighter macroeconomic policy will reduce demand for labour. But in the short term, at least, tertiary student finances should remain better than before COVID-19.

1 Introduction

Tertiary education students have three main sources of financial support – their families, the labour market, and government payments. This paper explores how COVID-19 affected these sources of student finance. Only limited information is available on family finances, but multiple datasets provide insight into the student labour market and government payments. Initial hardship caused by job loss and reduced hours was followed by an exceptionally good period for domestic student finances, driven by government payments and increased labour market income. For international students, the lack of government support in 2020 meant that the hardship phase lasted longer. International students remaining in Australia, however, shared in the labour market recovery and, from mid-2021, government assistance.

2 The student labour market

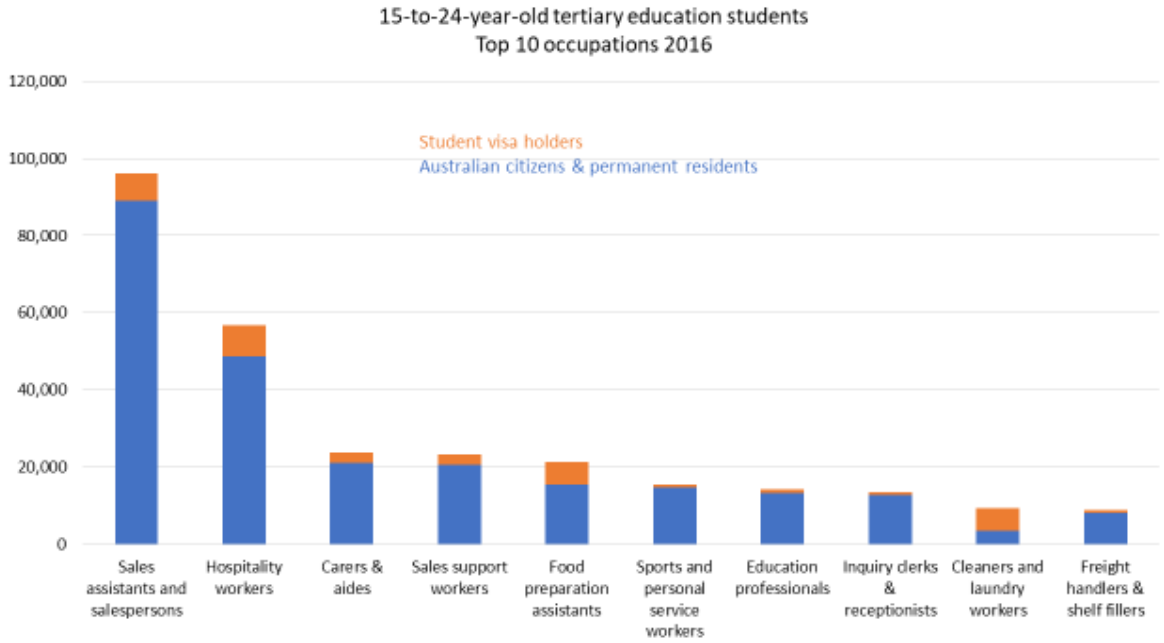
2.1 The rapid decline and recovery of student employment

In early March 2020 477,000 full-time tertiary education students aged between 15 and 24 years were employed, giving an employment rate of 59 per cent (ABS, 2021f, table LM3).[1] Tertiary student employment is concentrated in jobs that require no or quick qualifications and offer flexible hours that minimise clashes with classes. The top ten student occupations shown in Figure 1 made up three quarters of tertiary student jobs in 2016.[2] Many of these jobs were vulnerable to COVID-19 effects. Reduced consumer demand and government controls on big student-employing industries, such as retail and hospitality, led to large staff lay-offs.

[1] 'Tertiary' includes vocational and higher education. This paper only occasionally reports on them separately, as the available data sources either do not distinguish them or do so in ways that undercount vocational students: see Appendix A. The 15-to-24-year-old age group is driven at the lower end by how the ABS presents age categories. While there is a shorter quarterly time series for all tertiary students (ABS, 2021f, table 25a) the upper age limit of 24 years captures this paper's main group of interest, young people typically yet to establish themselves in careers.

[2] Although these figures are now dated, only the census has sufficient detail on student occupations.

Figure 1: Top ten tertiary student occupations



Notes: For Australian citizens and permanent residents only full-time students were counted to identify 'student' occupations. For international students full-time study is normally a visa condition. The 'educational professionals' are mostly tutors. See section 2.6 on an undercount of international student employment.
Sources: (ABS, 2017, 2018, 2019)

During Australia's first COVID-19 lockdowns, between March and May 2020, the number of employed full-time tertiary students aged 15-to-24 years fell by over 100,000, a decline of more than 20 per cent (Figure 2).[3] Rates of employed persons working zero hours are not reported by student status, but for this age group went from 6 per cent in March 2020 to 22 per cent in April 2020 (calculated from ABS, 2021f, table EM1a).

Fears of a prolonged recession, however, were not realised. From August 2020 to January 2021 student employment tracked close to 2019 levels. In February 2021 student employment started significantly exceeding 2019 levels, reaching an all-time high of 519,200 in July 2021. It then declined from August to October 2021 as NSW, Victoria and the ACT imposed lockdowns (Figure 2). Nearly eight in ten of the again more than 100,000 lost student jobs in this period were in these jurisdictions. Lockdown rules were eased in October and November 2021.[4] Re-opening businesses

[3] Retrenchments are not reported by student status but were high in the relevant quarter for 15-to-24- year-olds: (ABS, 2021f, table 29b). In other cases employment relationships were not necessarily completely broken. To be counted as employed the ABS requires a person to have worked or been paid in the previous four weeks. People on the JobKeeper payment discussed in section 5 would satisfy this definition but others affected, for example, by lockdowns lasting more than four weeks would no longer be counted as employed by the ABS, although they and their employer may have a contractual or other agreement that employment will recommence after the lockdown ends. In May 2020 196,000 15-to-24-year-olds did not satisfy the ABS definition of being employed but reported a 'job attachment', compared to 56,000 in February 2020: (ABS, 2021d).

[4] The ABS labour force survey is carried out early in each month, so no significant post-lockdown employment recovery is reflected in the October numbers. For lockdown dates see (ABS, 2021c). Weekly payroll data, which has age but not student status information, shows that for people aged 20 to 24 years the number being paid had increased by mid-October 2021: (ABS, 2022d). The early December survey period missed a surge in COVID-19 cases later in December 2021, which led to people voluntarily staying at home and staff shortages due to workers who had COVID-19 or were close contacts of COVID-19 cases. However, the payroll data for December 2021 does not reveal any unusual patterns.

reinstated or hired tertiary students. In November and December 2021, job numbers recovered to around 2020 levels. In January 2022 student employment levels fell, a usual seasonal event possibly exacerbated by high rates of COVID-19 infection, before another recovery in the subsequent months.

Seasonal factors affect student employment, so results for different months in the same year should be compared cautiously. Students are more likely to work during university holidays, especially in December. Flows in and out of tertiary student status are also important. Tertiary student numbers usually increase in February, March and August as students begin courses. Especially early in the year new enrolments drive up student employment, as people who already have jobs become students. Enrolments decrease in other months as students complete degrees or drop out (calculated from ABS, 2021f, table LM3). People who cease study may keep their student jobs, but stop being employed tertiary students. Where possible, this paper's charts compare the same month in different years to account for seasonal effects.

Figure 2: Number of employed tertiary education students

Source: (ABS, 2022b, table LM3)

Issues with the labour force survey, specifically that domestic students may be a larger share of its sample than usual due to fewer temporary migrants, may exaggerate the student employment trend. Section 2.6 discusses this issue. Despite this statistical concern, the following sections offer multiple reasons for growth in tertiary student employment.

2.2 Macroeconomic factors

Strong tertiary student employment in mid-2021 was consistent with the broader labour market, which reached a (then) record high in June 2021 (ABS, 2022b, table 01). Macroeconomic factors help explain otherwise surprisingly high economy-level employment. These include fiscal and monetary policy stimulus, spending displaced between sectors by COVID-19 restrictions (especially from international travel), and spending surges from people who held outlays down earlier in the pandemic due to activity restrictions and job security concerns (Borland, 2021b; Triggs, 2021).

By June 2021 the retail and hospitality industries, which pre-COVID-19 provided about half of all tertiary student employment in the 15-to-24-year-old age group (calculated from ABS, 2021a), reached total employment above pre-COVID levels (ABS, 2022a, tables 8 and 9). Despite this

rebound the overall young adult employment market still showed some weakness in mid-2021. Employment for the 15-to-24-year-old group, of which students of that age are a part, had mostly recovered but was still slightly down on the corresponding months two years previously, before COVID-19 (ABS, 2022b, table LM3). Occupational data is released quarterly rather than monthly. Narrowing 15-to 24-year-old employment to the top ten student jobs produces the same broad conclusion. For the May 2021 quarter employment in these occupations had largely recovered but was still below the same period two years earlier (ABS, 2021f, EQ07a).

2.3 Employment increases in some occupations

Although COVID-19 -related restrictions at least temporarily reduced employment in major traditional student occupations, COVID-19 linked labour market changes increased job opportunities in other occupations suited to students.

In the 15-to-24-year-old employee group, driver and storeperson jobs were both up significantly between the February 2020 and August 2021 quarters, adding 25,000 jobs between them. This reflects a shift from in-person retail shopping and dining in at cafes and restaurants to online ordering and home delivery. The 'health professional' workforce grew 11 per cent or by 4,600 workers, consistent with COVID-19 related demands on health services. Later-year health students were recruited for vaccination work (Queensland Government, 2021; Victorian Government, 2021). 'Engineering, ICT and science technicians' were up by nearly half or 8,100 persons; based on ABS detailed occupational descriptions this could include people assisting with laboratory testing, driven up by COVID-19 diagnostic demand; and ICT support, reflecting more online work, shopping and leisure (calculated from ABS, 2021f, table EQ07a). Especially in the health and technician occupations, where some prior if incomplete tertiary education may be required or preferred, growth in these occupations helps explain why total student employment was resilient when overall young adult employment had not fully recovered.

Student employment by industry is reported once a year, each August. For 2021 this is past the employment peak and a lockdown-affected month. But compared to August 2019 employment in retail and hospitality was down 1.6 per cent, while employment in other industries was up 7.1 per cent, consistent with a changing occupational profile for young workers (ABS, 2021a).

2.4 Growth in part-time employment

The relative strength of employment for tertiary students compared to other young people is also explained by different trends for part- and full-time employment. Until late 2021 full-time employment for 15-to-24-year-olds was consistently below pre-COVID-19 levels. Typically, around 90 per cent of full-time jobs for this age group are held by people not studying full-time. Part-time employment, by contrast, recovered more rapidly. In the first half of 2021 it exceeded pre-COVID-levels, before lockdowns again reduced numbers (ABS, 2022b, table LM3).

An earlier rebound in part-time rather than full-time employment may reflect employer caution in economic conditions that, while generally better than expected, were uncertain due to government policy, consumer reactions to COVID-19 prevalence, and disrupted global supply chains. (Although this uncertainty was not reflected in increased rates of casual employment overall.[5]) Full-time tertiary students need time to study, and so labour market shifts to part-time work suit them.

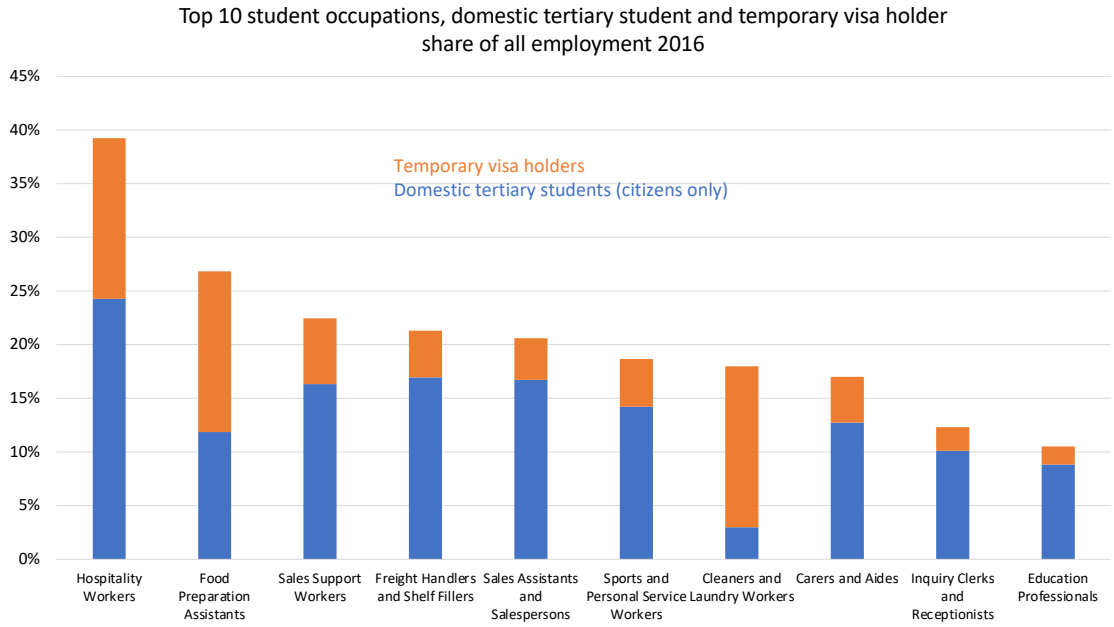
[5] Using no paid leave entitlements as a proxy of casual work. In August 2021 the casual employment rate of 15-to-24-year-old full-time students who had completed Year 12 (there is no direct question on post-school educational level or institution) was, at 69 per cent, lower than in any of the preceding seven years (calculated from ABS, 2021a). A downward trend was also evident in August 2020. Casuals being more affected by lockdowns than other staff is part of this, but if the ABS sample is reliable the 2019 to 2021 change is more driven by an increase in those with paid leave (+29,600) than a loss of casual jobs (-13,900). Overall rates of casual employment are also below pre-COVID-19 levels (ABS, 2022b, table 13).

Jobs they could not apply for if only available as full-time positions are possibilities when offered part-time.

2.5 Fewer migrants

Net overseas migration turned negative from the June quarter of 2020, dramatically reversing annual net positive numbers that normally exceed 200,000 (ABS, 2021g, table 13). Migration lifts total employment by increasing demand for goods and services, and so the loss of migrants may have reduced total demand for student labour. Many migrants, however, work in jobs with relatively low demands for qualifications or experience, the same labour markets that suit domestic students. International students, working holiday visa holders, graduate visa holders, some skilled visa holders, along with the secondary applicants of temporary visa holders (typically their partners and children), are in this category. As of 2016, Figure 3 shows temporary visa holders were present in all the top 10 student occupations reported in Figure 1, and were very significant in three: hospitality workers, food preparation assistants, and cleaners and laundry workers.

Figure 3: Top 10 student occupations, reliance on students and temporary visa holders



Note: Temporary visa holders include student, working holiday, temporary graduate, temporary skilled, bridging, and a number of smaller temporary visa programs.
Sources: (ABS, 2017, 2019)

Others have made similar observations about the implications of migration. Economists identify it as one factor explaining employment difficulties for young Australians between the global financial crisis and 2019 (Borland & Coelli, 2021). The Reserve Bank Governor has noted the top occupations for temporary migrants (Lowe, 2021, p. 9). These overlap significantly with the top student occupations.

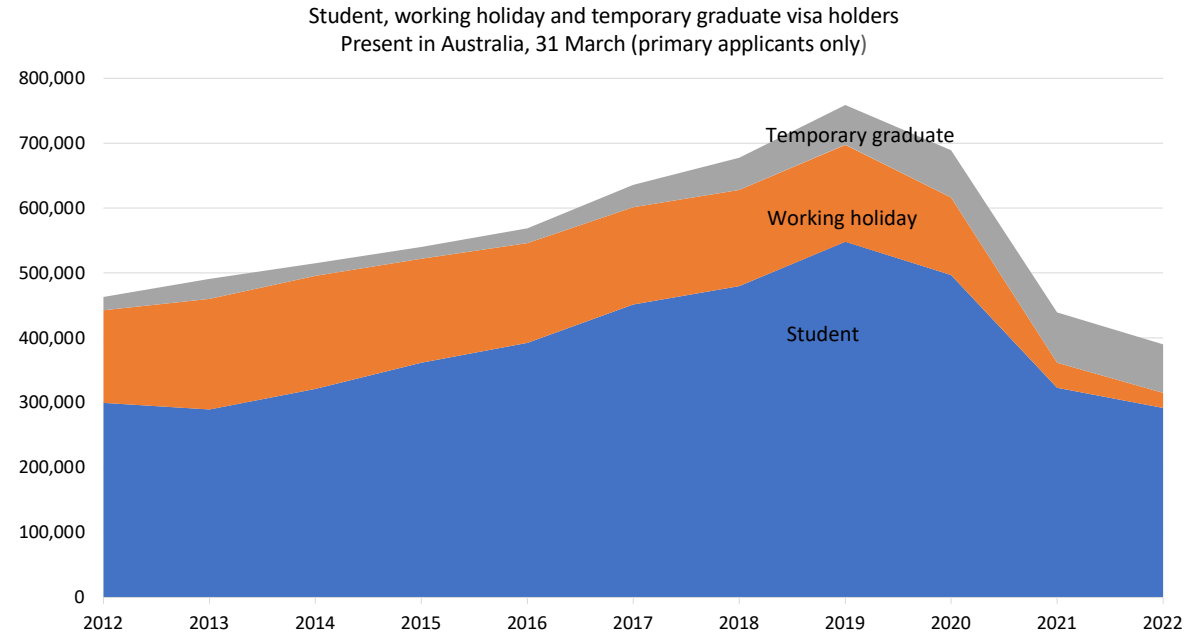
Assessing trends in the temporary migrant labour force competing for employment with domestic students is not straightforward. Migrant numbers in Australia are reported regularly, but not all temporary migrants with work rights want employment. In May 2019, for example, 56 per cent of international students reported not being in the workforce.[6] Further complicating the

[6] That is, not employed or unemployed based on ABS definitions discussed in section 2.7: (ABS, 2021b). A May survey understates the proportion of international students who work at some time during a year. As noted in section 2.1 there are annual cycles in work, with employment rates typically higher over summer when fewer

analysis, due to COVID-19 bridging visa numbers are significantly higher than usual (DHA, 2022a). People on bridging visas typically have the same work rights as their preceding substantive visa, but visa statistics do not report at this level of detail. The partners and children of primary applicant visa holders often have work rights, but the number is also not published.

To show the general trend, without purporting to exactly quantify how many temporary migrants are in the labour force, Figure 4 reports the primary applicant population for the two largest temporary visa holder groups in the 2016 data, student and working holiday, and the temporary graduate visa, which has expanded significantly since 2016. This visa allows former international students to remain in Australia and work for varying periods. Their difficulties in finding employment matching their skills (SRC, 2022; Tran et al., 2019) make them relevant to the student labour market. Figure 4 shows that resident visa holders in these groups increased significantly to their peak in 2019, with student and working holiday visa holders driving the subsequent decline. Between March 2019 and March 2021 their total numbers fell by 319,000, or 42 per cent, with a further net loss of nearly 50,000 by March 2022.

Figure 4: Trends in key temporary visa group populations in Australia



Source: (DHA, 2022a)

Although a decrease in international student numbers lessens labour market competition for domestic students, it makes strong student employment numbers harder to explain. The labour force survey counts tertiary students generally, not just domestic students. In May 2020, for

students have classes. For international students university holidays lift a 40 hour fortnightly cap on paid work normally imposed by their visa. See the annual December employment spikes in Figure 2 and Figure 6. The ABS Characteristics of Recent Migrants survey in November 2019, when many students would have finished exams, found that 48 per cent of international students were not in the labour force, eight percentage points lower than in May that year. 57 per cent of international students said that they had worked since they arrived: (calculated from ABS, 2020). Other sources produce slightly higher figures. In a 2017 survey 60.5 per cent of international undergraduates and 71 per cent of international postgraduates reported labour market income: (Universities Australia, 2018, pp. 19, 21). Research focused on international students outside the public university system found that 62 per cent had worked in the last 12 months: (Australian Survey Research, 2021, p. 25). See also section 2.6 for a discussion of possible under-reporting of work.

example, the ABS Education and Work survey identified 51,000 fewer employed international tertiary students than a year earlier, 7.6 per cent of the total May 2019 full-time student workforce (ABS, 2021b, all ages). Student employment should fall unless domestic students replace departing international students.

A one-for-one international/domestic student job swap seems unlikely. This would require that all jobs continue with none taken by people other than tertiary students. Realistically, domestic students would not take some jobs vacated by departing international students. Under-award wages are a common problem in industries with significant student employment, but an especially big issue for international students.[7] In one survey three-quarters of international students reported below-award wages, often due to fears about visa cancellation that are irrelevant to domestic students. Survey evidence shows that many international students wrongly believe that taking cash-in-hand or below-award wages is illegal. They rightly believe that working more than 40 hours a fortnight during semester breaches a visa condition.[8] International students do not want to trigger investigations that might reveal actual or assumed non-compliance with the law. English language issues also make complaining more difficult (Farenblum & Berg, 2020). But despite a falling international student population, during much of 2021 total student employment significantly exceeded 2019 levels (Figure 2).

2.6 Temporary migrants and ABS surveys

While strong overall employment numbers, reduced labour market competition, more part-time jobs and COVID-19 driven growth in some occupations all provide plausible reasons why domestic student employment might have grown, issues with ABS sample surveys may exaggerate the trend (Borland, 2021a). With fewer temporary migrants living in Australia the citizen and permanent resident share of the approximately 50,000-person labour survey sample will increase. Maintaining the sample's age distribution would expand domestic student representation. Domestic students have higher reported employment rates than international students, 63 per cent compared to 41 per cent in May 2019, so their greater sample share would push up estimates of student employment (calculated from ABS, 2021b).

A more longstanding issue is that the labour force survey underestimates total international student employment. ABS surveys that separately identify international students always report lower total populations than immigration data.[9] Some international students are excluded from the survey because respondents must reside in Australia for 12 months or more, or plan to do so. Student visas are linked to course lengths, so not all student visa holders qualify for the survey despite holding Australian work rights.[10] For those that do, the ABS advises that language issues, mobility, and residential accommodation arrangements may also contribute to an international student under-count.[11] International students who are surveyed may, for the reasons discussed in section 2.5, not report jobs that involve law breaking to a government agency such as the ABS.

If domestic students take international student jobs that were previously invisible to the labour force survey this will also increase identified, although not actual, student employment.

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[7] One analysis suggests that 35 per cent of employees in the accommodation and food services industry are paid less than the minimum wage and 17 per cent in retail (Wilkins, 2020, p. 79).

[8] Although this rule has temporarily been relaxed: (DHA, 2022b).

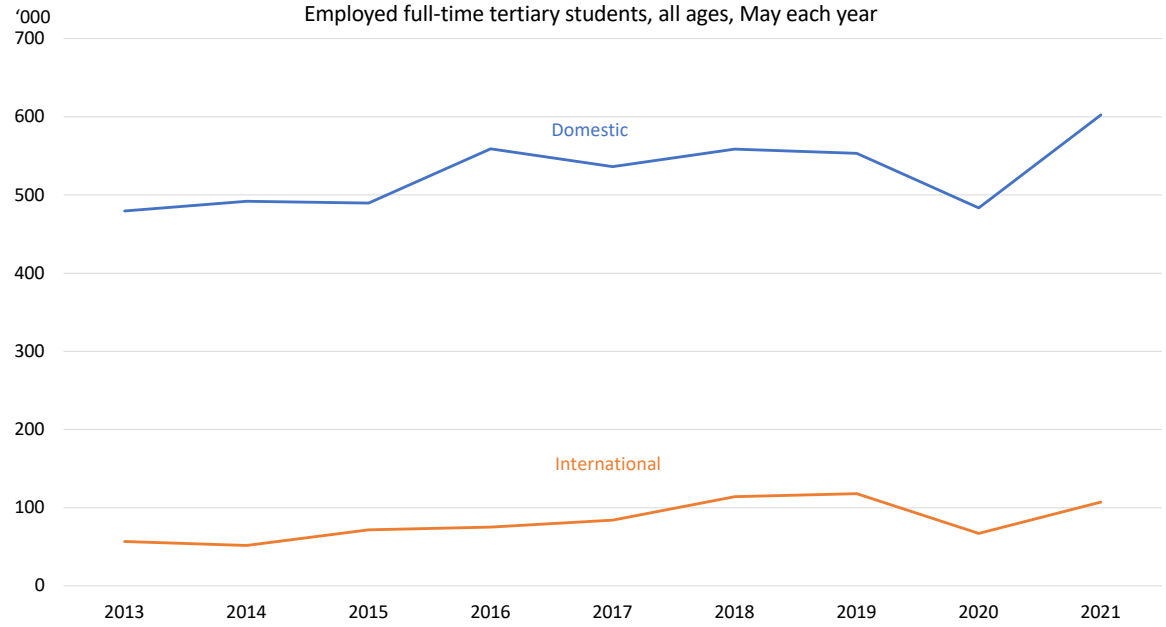
[9] For example, in May 2019 ABS Education and Work reported 371,200 international students. Immigration data from June 2019 reports 482,909 international students present in the country: (DHA, 2022a), (ABS, 2021b).

[10] Similar issues affect working holiday visa holders, with the added complication of their initial visa being for exactly 12 months. They can apply for a second working holiday or another visa, but historically their average stay is eight months (Phillips, 2016). The labour force survey will significantly undercount their presence in occupations popular with students.

[11] Personal communication from the ABS.

While international students are under-reported, the ABS Education and Work survey, which distinguishes international and domestic students, supports the conclusion that domestic student employment was above pre-COVID-19 levels in May 2021 (Figure 5). Note that this data includes students of all ages, rather than the 15-to-24-years age group used elsewhere, and that for other survey methodology reasons vocational students are undercounted (Appendix A).

Figure 5: Full-time student employment by domestic and international status



Note: 'Domestic' is Australian and New Zealand citizen students only. The data source does not consistently report permanent residents as a distinct category.
Source: (ABS, 2021b)

2.7 Student willingness to work

The hypotheses explored to date assume that employment levels are driven by job availability. This is a necessary condition of employment growth, but students must be willing to work. At the employment peak of July 2021, 74.1 per cent of students were in the labour force, then an all-time high in a time series that began in 1986 (ABS, 2022b, table LM3), although in recent years international students have held the participation rate down.

Participation rates are entangled with job availability. Plentiful jobs attract people who would not otherwise be counted as in the labour market. To be counted a person must hold a job or be actively looking for one and available to start. People who would like a job but have not recently searched for one are not classified as participating in the labour force.

While employment opportunities brought students into the labour market, closed campuses in 2020 and 2021 may also have opened up work options for tertiary students. Remote learning reduced time spent commuting and increased flexibility in when academic work was done. Students could accept shifts that otherwise would have clashed with campus commitments. An ABS survey question on whether, in the last 12 months, study or training affected labour force participation found a small downward trend in COVID-19's first year. In February 2021, 28 per cent of full-time students responded that their studies affected their workforce participation, compared to 31 per cent in 2020 and 35 per cent over the 2016–2018 period (calculated from ABS, 2021h).

2.8 Employment rates

In 2021 student employment rates – the proportion of all students who are employed – persistently exceeded both 2019 and 2020 levels, even when lockdowns lowered total employment between August and October (Figure 6). This is due to trends in both the denominator (departing international students reducing the total population of students), and numerator (unusually high employment levels except during lockdowns). The usual seasonal spike in December, as students get summer jobs, in 2021 produced a record tertiary student employment rate of 72.5 per cent. In the first four months of 2022 the rate was around 70 per cent, ten percentage points or more above pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019.

An improved balance between tertiary students and student jobs does not just benefit domestic students. The Education and Work survey distinguishes domestic and international students from 2013. It shows that both groups had higher employment to population ratios in May 2021 than in any other year over the 2013 to 2021 period (calculated from ABS, 2021b).

Figure 6: Tertiary student employment rates

Source: (ABS, 2022b, table LM3)

2.9 Can student employment rates stay high?

A leading indicator of employment trends, the National Skills Commission internet job advertisement count, shows that at least until April vacancies for the top ten student occupations in 2022 were more than double their 2019 levels (calculated from NSC, 2022).

Although student job opportunities are currently plentiful, the factors driving up student employment may not represent major long-term structural changes that benefit students.

As government budget deficits and inflation replace offsetting COVID-19 effects as top policy priorities, fiscal and monetary policy will do less to push up total employment. With Australians now free to travel overseas, and with local industries and services open again after lockdowns, many COVID-19 driven changes to consumer spending will fade out.

Where changed expenditure patterns may be permanent, such as more online ordering and delivery and less in-store retail or dine-in hospitality, this could change the occupational profile of student employment without greatly affecting aggregate numbers.

When employers become more confident about the future they may convert jobs from part- to full-time, making them less attractive to full-time students. Although part-time employment

remains strong, the proportion of 15-to 24-year-olds in full-time employment returned to pre-COVID levels in late 2021 and has remained there.

A general unknown for tertiary education, however, is whether forced remote learning triggered long-term change in student study preferences. If so, this may increase student labour market flexibility.

With Australia's borders open again, international labour market competition will increase in 2022, although Figure 4 shows no fast recovery in temporary visa holder numbers. In the international student market, an increase in commencing student numbers has been offset by falls in continuing student numbers (DESE, 2022a).

Current tertiary students will, however, benefit from job incumbency. While the 15-to-24-year-old full-time student labour force has high turnover, with a little over one-in-five who have worked in the last year losing or leaving a job in a non-COVID-19 year, few students are dismissed from a continuing position (calcuated from ABS, 2021h). Except for temporary or seasonal positions, students can usually keep jobs they want.

3 Family support for students

Personal labour market income is not enough for most full-time students to support themselves. Prior to COVID-19, median full-time student earnings were $340 a week, too little to live comfortably if renting (calculated from ABS, 2021a). Even at recent record employment levels, each month around 30 per cent of tertiary students aged 15 to 24 years are not in the paid labour force.

For tertiary students to finance themselves other support is needed. Especially for younger tertiary students this assistance comes from their families. In 2017 more than 80 per cent of domestic higher education students under the age of 20 received family support, with the proportion at 62 per cent for full-time domestic undergraduates overall (Universities Australia, 2018, p. 24). COVID-19-related restrictions could therefore affect students through reduced family income.

No publicly available data source records how the finances of families with tertiary students were affected by COVID-19. Figure 7, however shows that parents living with full-time students aged 15 to 24 years (which includes school students) in their household experienced increased rates of not working as COVID-19 restrictions hit the labour market in the March and June quarters of 2020. This was most significant for female parents, reflecting their occupations (Coates et al., 2020, p. 22) and greater childcare and home schooling responsibilities. For those in work, the proportion of men but not women in couple families reported a slight increase in low hours, below nine, at work (calculated from ABS, 2021e).

Unemployed or under-employed parents moving onto social security benefits may have been one cause of an increase in dependent Youth Allowance recipients, discussed further in the next section. This would indicate an increase in financial difficulties. Employed family members of domestic tertiary education students were also potentially eligible for the JobKeeper wage subsidy program or disaster payments if unable to work (these programs and how they affected students are discussed in section 5). The parent generation of tertiary students, people aged 45 to 64 years, received JobKeeper at rates exceeding their share of the pre-COVID-19 workforce (Treasury, 2021a, p. 52).[12]

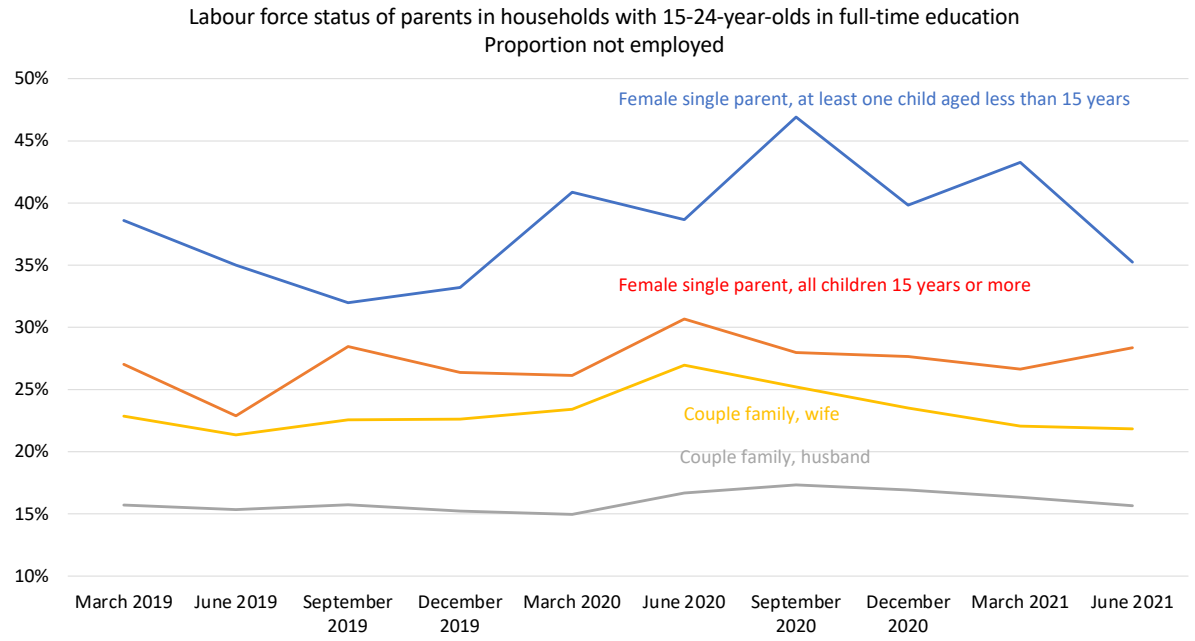
As with student employment, the parent labour market improved as COVID-19 shocks eased (Figure 7). Except for female single parents with a child under 15 years recovery started by the September 2020 quarter, with rates of not working in the pre-COVID-19 range for all groups by mid-2021.

International students also rely on family support. In 2017, 82 per cent of international undergraduates received money from their parents or other family members (Universities Australia, 2018, p. 25). Another survey found that for 69 per cent of international students their family was their main source of income (Morris et al., 2020, p. 52). A third survey found that, of those receiving

[12] This age range includes 73 per cent of mothers and 79 per cent of fathers of 15-to-24-year-old full-time students: (ABS, 2021e).

assistance from their family, 43 per cent received less due to COVID-19 effects on family finances (Hastings et al., 2021, p. 9).

Figure 7: Labour force status of student families



Note: The sample included too few male single parents for analysis.
Source: (ABS, 2021e).

4 Student income support

After family support and labour market income the largest source of student finance for living expenses is the student income support system. The main programs are Youth Allowance for students up to 24 years, Austudy for mature age students, and ABSTUDY for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Student income support is only available for full-time students.

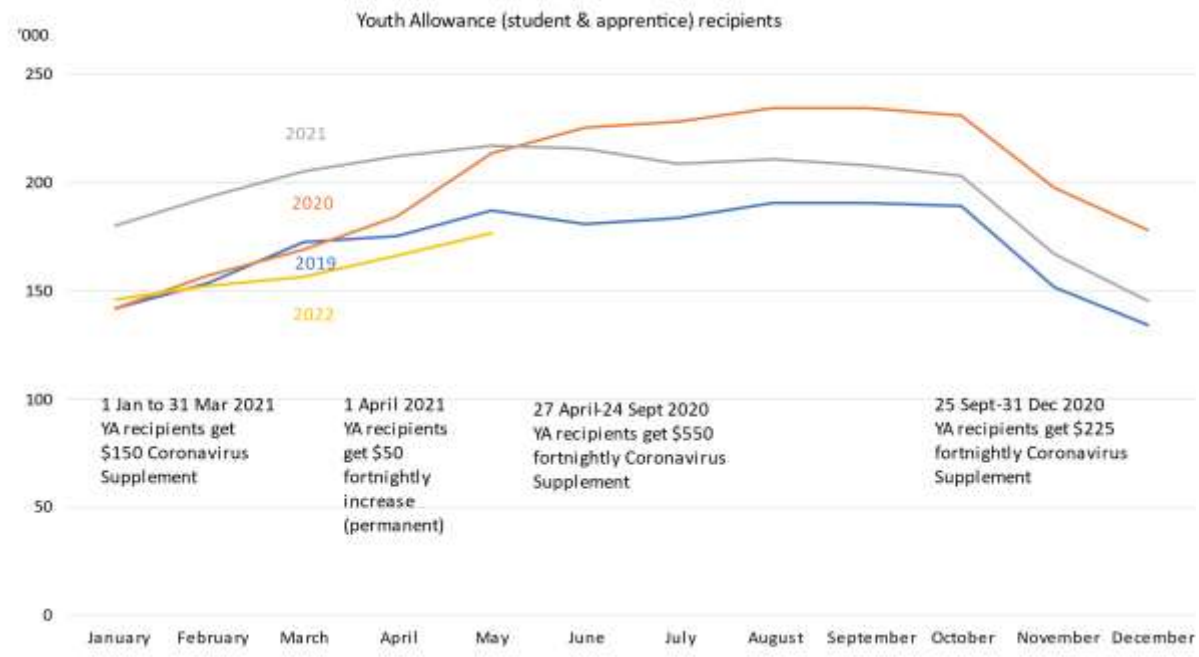
Student benefits are modest. As of March 2022, for a student living with their parents the maximum basic Youth Allowance rate is $367 a fortnight. If living away from their parents the rate is $530.40.[13] Students aged less than 22 years are typically classified as 'dependent' and face a personal and parental income test. Under the personal income test, they lose benefits on earnings of over $452 a fortnight.[14] Under the parental income test, students lose benefits if their parents earn more than $56,137 a year. The means test is not applied for students whose parents receive social security benefits. Students over the age of 22, and sometimes younger than 22 due to their prior work history or family situation, are classified as independent. This exempts them from a parental income test but a partner income test and an assets test apply, along with the same personal income test as dependent students. Austudy parallels independent Youth Allowance in its rules and standard payments. ABSTUDY is similar to Youth Allowance but with some differences in entitlements.

[13] Students on Youth Allowance may also be eligible for Rent Assistance. They can also receive a twice-yearly Student Start-up Loan of $1,132. This is repaid as an income-contingent loan.
[14] Students can take advantage of an 'income bank', so that in fortnights when they earn less than $452 the balance can be carried forward up to $11,300. This allows students to earn more than $452 in some weeks without losing their benefits.

Student income support recipients as of March 12, 2020 were among the early beneficiaries of COVID-19 support payments, receiving a $750 economic stimulus payment.[15] Subsequent COVID-19 related social security measures made Youth Allowance significantly more financially rewarding than previously. As shown in Figure 8, from 27 April to 24 September 2020 Youth Allowance recipients received an additional $550 a fortnight Coronavirus Supplement, more than doubling their basic payment. Supplementary payments at lower levels continued until 31 March 2021. From April 2021 basic income support rates were increased permanently by $50 a fortnight.

As Figure 8 also shows, Youth Allowance recipient numbers increased significantly during 2020. In March 2020 recipient numbers were slightly down compared to 2019, suggesting that 2020 may continue a medium-term decline (Figure 9). This trend quickly reversed itself as COVID-19 spread. By August 2020 Youth Allowance recipient numbers were 23 per cent higher than a year earlier. Austudy and ABSTUDY recipient numbers, reported quarterly rather than monthly, also increased significantly during 2020 (DSS, 2021).

Figure 8: Monthly Youth Allowance recipients

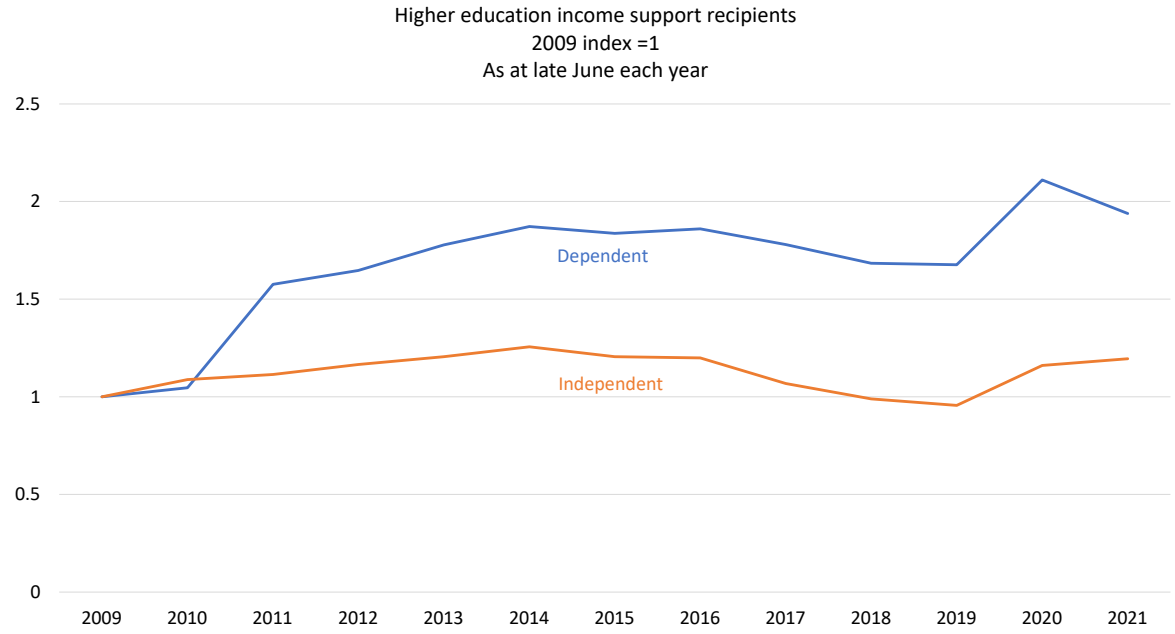


Note: Includes vocational and higher education. As at June each year the higher education share of recipients is around 83 per cent.
Source: (DSS, 2022b)

Higher education-only student income support data as at late June each year, provided to the author by the Department of Social Services, indicates that growth between 2019 and 2020 was slightly higher in the dependent category, but that independent (including all three payment types) recipient numbers continued to increase at least until late June 2021 (Figure 9).

[15] (Klapdor, 2020).

Figure 9: Independent and dependent higher education income support recipients



Note: Dependent is the Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY dependent categories, Independent is Austudy plus the Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY independent categories.
Source: Supplied by the Department of Social Services

The eligibility criteria for independent student income support benefits are tied tightly to the current labour market. With decreased employment more students could satisfy the personal income test and fewer students were precluded by their partner's income.[16] However, total numbers did not quickly fall back as employment opportunities returned. Independent Youth Allowance data is not regularly updated, but Austudy recipient numbers remained elevated for their time of year at least until December 2021 (DSS, 2022a).

The sharp decline in employment for 15-24-year-old tertiary students between March and May 2020 (Figure 2, page 4) increased the number who could satisfy the personal income test for dependent Youth Allowance or Abstudy. Their age and work histories made them less likely than older students to receive support from the JobKeeper wage subsidy program, discussed in section 5, making the student income support system their next-best option. However, they still needed to satisfy a parental income test. The prior taxation year income version of the test was not affected by events in 2020, so the most obvious mechanism for increased student eligibility is more parents receiving social security benefits.[17]

As Figure 7 showed, parents of students lost work during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The relationship between not working and being on unemployment benefits is weaker than often assumed, since people can work some hours without losing their benefit and be unemployed but ineligible for benefits due to their assets or their partner's income (Coates et al., 2020, p. 26). For

[16] At the time of the 2016 Census, 25 per cent of full-time tertiary students aged between 22 and 40 years reported a registered or de facto marriage: (calculated from ABS, 2017).
[17] A later year of parental income can be used if their reduced income is likely to last two years. Given that long-term income loss would be hard to prove for COVID-19 related job losses, especially after JobKeeper was introduced, a transition to benefits is a more plausible main driver of increased dependent student income support receipt.

the parent generation of 15-to-24-year-olds, mostly aged 45 to 64 years in 2020, their August JobSeeker peak was 60 per cent above March 2020 recipient levels (DSS, 2022b). An annual review of parent income in September and October each year, along with students completing courses, explains the sharp decline in recipient numbers during the final quarter of the year (Figure 9).[18]

Another potential explanation for an COVID-19 increase in student benefit recipients is that, in a normal year, not all students who meet the eligibility criteria for benefits apply for it. The payments are not enough to live on, require reporting of personal income every 14 days, and involve intrusive inquiries into the finances of parents or partners. Nine hours a week in a minimum wage job pays as much as at-home Youth Allowance and avoids Centrelink. From March to May 2020 many students lost their jobs or worked zero hours, while the Coronavirus Supplement significantly increased the value of benefits. This flipped the work/benefits choice in favour of student income support. While 2021 Youth Allowance recipient numbers remained above 2019 levels, plentiful jobs at times during 2021, and the end of the Coronavirus Supplement on 31 March 2021, again changed the work/benefits trade-off and possibly pushed Youth Allowance numbers down again. High student employment rates in the first few months of 2022 (Figure 6) may explain why Youth Allowance recipient numbers are down on previous years (Figure 8).[19]

5 JobKeeper and Disaster Payments

Although employed students lost market earnings due to COVID-19 lockdowns or other restrictions they did not necessarily lose income. The JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme, followed later by the COVID-19 Disaster Payment and the Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment, often paid them more than their previous wages.

Employed students were entitled to the COVID-19 JobKeeper wage subsidy, which ran in various forms from 30 March 2020 to 28 March 2021, if they personally met eligibility criteria and their employer met projected revenue decline criteria, which varied by industry type and prior firm revenue levels.

Temporary migrants, including international students, were not eligible for JobKeeper. Domestic full-time students had to be 18 years old or more, disqualifying up to 4 per cent of domestic undergraduates in early 2020 (DESE, 2022b, table 2.2).[20] Casual employees needed 12 months or more of employment on a 'regular and systematic basis' (Australian Government, 2020). ABS statistics suggest that this rule excluded at least 21 per cent of working full-time students aged 18 to 24 years (calculated from ABS, 2021a).[21]

Industries that employ large numbers of students made significant use of JobKeeper. In August 2020, to use the two largest student employing industries as examples, 35 per cent of 'accommodation and food services' and 26 per cent of 'retail trade' employees received JobKeeper (Treasury, 2021a, p. 54). As a rough guide to student receipt of JobKeeper, industry-level rates were

[18] (Services Australia, 2022).

[19] During 2020 some student income support eligibility criteria were also temporarily relaxed including the new residents waiting period for social security benefits (Services Australia, 2020a) and the assets test (Services Australia, 2020b).

[20] There was an exception for individuals who were independent under social security law. See section 4 for how this applies to students. The age recorded in enrolment data is at 31 December in the prior year, so by the time JobKeeper was announced some students recorded as age 17 had already turned 18, and more would do so as the year went on.

[21] This an approximate figure based on ABS Characteristics of Employment data. In addition to the normal sampling issues the analysis has the following issues: 1) there is no filter for citizenship or permanent residence as is required for JobKeeper, as a proxy I used born in Australia or arrived 10 or more years ago; 2) the proxy of no entitlement to paid leave was used to indicate casual employment, but about 10 per cent of respondents do not know if they have this entitlement or not; and 3) there is no information on whether the employment relationship was 'systematic and regular'.

applied to employment numbers of 18-to-24-year-old students in those industries, and then discounted by 21 per cent to remove ineligible casual employees. This produced an estimate of 97,000 18-to-24-year-old students in receipt of JobKeeper, or 23 per cent of employed persons in this age group (calculated from ABS, 2021a; Treasury, 2021a).

Especially in its first phase, between 30 March 2020 and 27 September 2020, JobKeeper was generous for students. It paid all eligible employees a flat payment of $1,500 per fortnight, compared to 2019 median fortnightly earnings of $680 for full-time students (calculated from ABS, 2021a).[22] Between 28 September 2020 and 3 January 2021 employees who normally worked less than 20 hours per week received a lower payment of $750 per fortnight, with this further reduced to $650 for JobKeeper's final stage between 4 January 2021 and 28 March 2021. For these later phases employer and employee entitlements to JobKeeper were reassessed against the eligibility criteria, reducing JobKeeper recipient numbers (AIHW, 2021; Treasury, 2021a, pp. 8-9; 2021b).

Students who worked and received student income support could get both JobKeeper and their benefit, but JobKeeper payments counted towards their benefit's income test. This may explain why during the June and September quarters of 2020 the proportion of Youth Allowance recipients receiving no payment increased from the usual approximately 3 per cent to 8 per cent (DSS, 2021).

From June 2021 the COVID-19 Disaster Payment assisted people unable to work due to COVID-19-related restrictions. It was phased out as states and territories reached vaccination targets, ending entirely by December 2021 (Klapdor & Lotric, 2022).

The Disaster Payment had broader eligibility criteria than JobKeeper. The employee needed a connection to a Commonwealth-declared COVID-19 hotspot that prevented them working, but there was no separate employer eligibility requirement. International student visa holders as well as domestic students, all employees regardless of job duration or casual status, and 17 year olds as well as older workers were eligible for a Disaster Payment. The general payment rates were $750 a week for people working more than 20 hours a week, $450 a week for those working up to 20 hours, and $200 for those on income support (Klapdor, 2021; Services Australia, 2021a). The COVID-19 Disaster Payment was time-limited to lockdowns, rather than initial eligibility leading to payment until a set date under JobKeeper.

As of late October 2021, 575,740 people aged 17-to-24 years had received a Disaster Payment (Services Australia, 2021b). The ABS labour force survey does not support calculation of a precise Disaster Payment support rate, but this number is equivalent to 30 per cent of working 15-to 24-year-olds in June 2021.[23] Based on data from preceding years, 30 to 40 per cent of working students not also on income support would have received the $750 disaster payment, with the rest receiving $450. Average payment duration was 8.7 weeks.

In the July to October 2021 period 38,834 student income support recipients received a Disaster Payment, equivalent to 38 per cent of those reporting earnings in June 2021, with an average payment duration of 7.4 weeks (DSS, 2021; Services Australia, 2021b).[24] For working students on income support the Disaster Payment was less generous than JobKeeper. Many income support recipients would have received $450 rather than $200 a week except for their benefit. For the 16 per cent of working income support recipients reporting earnings of less than $125 a week, however, the $200 Disaster Payment left them better off (calculated from DSS, 2021).

Since August 2021 a Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment has been available to people unable to work due to state government COVID-19 isolation rules. As with the COVID-19 Disaster Payment

[22] This uses 2019 figures to remove the effects of JobKeeper. The earnings are for full-time students aged 15-to-24 years who have completed Year 12.

[23] The figures are not directly comparable due to different age ranges and time periods. June 2021 employment was chosen as the comparison point as some Disaster Payment recipients would have ceased being counted in the labour force survey after June due to not being paid by their employer for four weeks or more.

[24] Initially student income support recipients were not eligible but this was changed in late July 2021: (Klapdor et al., 2022).

17-year-olds and international students are eligible. Income support recipients, including those on student payments, are ineligible. People with remaining sick leave or liquid assets of $10,000 or more are also ineligible. The payment is $750 a week, with a lower rate of $450 a week for those working less than 20 hours a week introduced in January 2022 (Klapdor et al., 2022). As of early May 2022 1.43 million individuals had received this payment (Australian Government, 2022). Tertiary student receipt rates are likely to be high. Their key demographic, people aged 20 to 29 years, are significantly over-represented in COVID-19 infections (Department of Health, 2022) and only 43 per cent of working full-time students have sick leave (calculated from ABS, 2021a, August 2021 figures). The payment is scheduled to conclude on 30 June 2022.

The $450 and $750 disaster payments are both above the median pre-COVID-19 labour market income of $340 a week (calculated from ABS, 2021a) or the later two stages of JobKeeper when converted to weekly amounts ($375 and $325). The COVID-19 Disaster Payment was also tax free, an additional benefit for students whose total annual incomes exceed the tax-free threshold. As salary income JobKeeper was taxable, as are Pandemic Leave Disaster payments and income support payments if combined with sufficient other income to exceed the tax-free threshold.

6 Early access to superannuation

As part of its COVID-19 response the government relaxed the usual rules on early access to superannuation. Australian and New Zealand citizens and permanent residents were eligible for two payments of up to $10,000 each, one before 1 July 2020 and the second between 1 July 2020 and 31 December 2020. For domestic students, the main eligibility criteria were being made redundant or loss of at least 20 per cent of their hours (Treasury, 2020c). Many students met these conditions (section 2.1), but approved payments are not reported by domestic student status. Obviously any withdrawal came at a cost to retirement savings.

Student visa holders could access one superannuation payment of up to $10,000 prior to 1 July 2020, if they had held their student visa for 12 months or more and were unable to meet their immediate living expenses (Treasury, 2020b). The 12-month rule was a reference to the visa requirement that students have sufficient funds to support themselves for their first year. In 2019-20 $505 million was approved for release under this scheme, although the amount paid depended on available superannuation balances (ATO, 2020). As international students work limited hours in generally low-paying jobs most would not have accumulated a $10,000 balance.

7 Financial consequences of COVID-19 for students

For students ineligible for JobKeeper or student income support parts of 2020 were much more financially difficult than they would have anticipated before March that year. Employment opportunities dropped significantly in a short period of time. For international students losing jobs or hours left them in an especially vulnerable situation. Until June 2021 they were not eligible for the major Commonwealth COVID-19 support payments for employees. A July 2020 convenience sample survey of temporary migrants found that 37 per cent of international students had sought emergency support and 14 per cent had housing issues (Berg & Farenblum, 2020, pp. 37-38). The amount of superannuation approved for release to student visa holders suggests that at least 50,500 applications were approved.

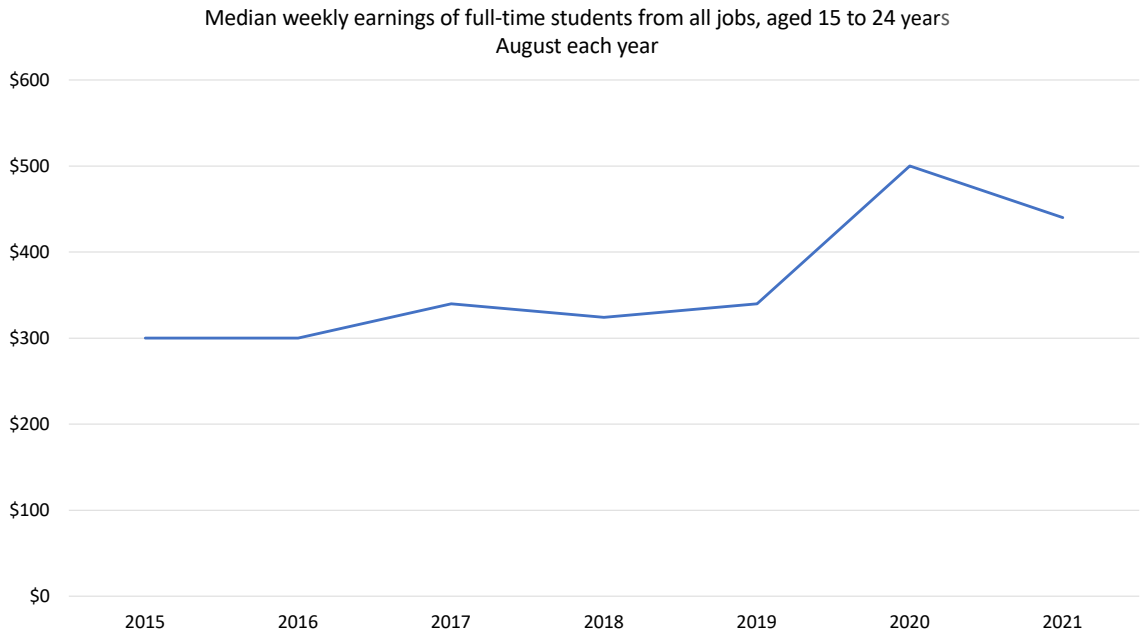
For many domestic students, however, the COVID-19 crisis turned out to be financially beneficial. Employed full-time students aged 15 to 24 years who had completed Year 12 had median weekly all jobs earnings of $500 in August 2020, $160 more than in the previous year (Figure 10). The higher median was driven by the share of students reporting weekly income of $600 or more jumping from 19 per cent to 40 per cent (calculated from ABS, 2021a).

JobKeeper inflated the wages of a significant minority of students in 2020, contributing to the $500 median weekly wage shown in Figure 10 (the program was scaled back the month after the

survey). Later versions of JobKeeper and the disaster payments paid less per week for shorter time periods, but still increased income for some students through to June 2022.[25]

Increased income was not, however, just due to government payments. The proportion of employed students aged 15 to 24 years working 20 or more hours a week increased by nearly 10 percentage points in 2020 compared to 2018 and 2019, while the proportion working fewer than 10 hours declined (calculated from ABS, 2021a). Increased hours of work are reflected in August 2021 median all-jobs student weekly earnings of $440, down $60 on 2020 without JobKeeper but still $100 more than in 2019 (ABS, 2021a).[26]

Figure 10: Median weekly earnings of full-time students



Note: Completed Year 12 filter applied.
Source: (ABS, 2021a)

For domestic students the student income support system filled gaps in JobKeeper eligibility and the labour market recovery. By the September 2020 quarter recipient numbers across the three programs were 65,000 or 28 per cent higher than a year earlier, reversing a downward trend for Austudy and Youth Allowance. While some employed student income recipients lost employment earnings during the initial COVID-19 downturn, few could have experienced reduced total income for the year.[27]All were eligible for the Coronavirus Supplement and some for JobKeeper.

[25] JobKeeper was paid by employers and so was counted in wage and salary income recorded by the ABS Characteristics of Employment Survey. The survey questionnaire instructed respondents to include it (ABS, 2021a, methodology). The Disaster Payment was not paid by employers and was not mentioned in the survey questionnaire. However, some respondents may have included the money they received.

[26] August 2021 was a lockdown month in Victoria, NSW and the ACT. This may have introduced upward biases into median wages by reducing the proportion of hospitality and retail workers in the sample. However, the monthly ABS surveys on hours worked for employed 15-to-24-year-olds shows that of those who were working the proportion reporting 20 hours or more was 5 percentage points lower than the preceding month and lower than any subsequent month up to April 2022: (ABS, 2022b). This would have produced a downward earnings bias.

[27] A lower than usual proportion reported earnings in mid-2020. In the Youth Allowance program, for example, 32 per cent reported income in June 2020, down from the more usual 37-38 per cent at that time of year (calculated from DSS, 2021a).

The Coronavirus Supplement more than doubled student income support benefits. For students living at home, full-rate weekly payments in the first phase of the Coronavirus Supplement increased from $152 to $427 a week. At a reduced rate, the supplement continued until the end of March 2021. Including the early economic stimulus payment of $750, a student continuously on Youth Allowance from March 2020 to March 2021 would have received over $9,000 in COVID-19 related bonuses. Debate over the adequacy of social security benefits, triggered by the transition back to old rates, led to a permanent increase of $25 a week in student income support payments.

Significantly increased government payments plus the labour market recovery in the last months of the 2020-21 financial year could have resulted in more full-time students paying tax than is usual. For the 2021-22 financial year the JobMaker policy announced in the October 2020 Budget increased the low income tax offset from $445 to $700 (Treasury, 2020a, p. 18). This increased the effective tax-free income threshold from $20,542 to $21,885, providing a modest increase in student disposable income.

The very different financial support given to domestic and international students is reflected in polarised results on a higher education Student Experience Survey question about whether their financial circumstances negatively affected their study (Figure 11). With many domestic students enjoying increased market and government income, the proportion reporting that their financial circumstances negatively affected their studies fell from 26 per cent to 22 per cent. Subject pass rates for commencing bachelor degree students went up slightly between 2019 and 2020 (DESE, 2022b, table 15.4).

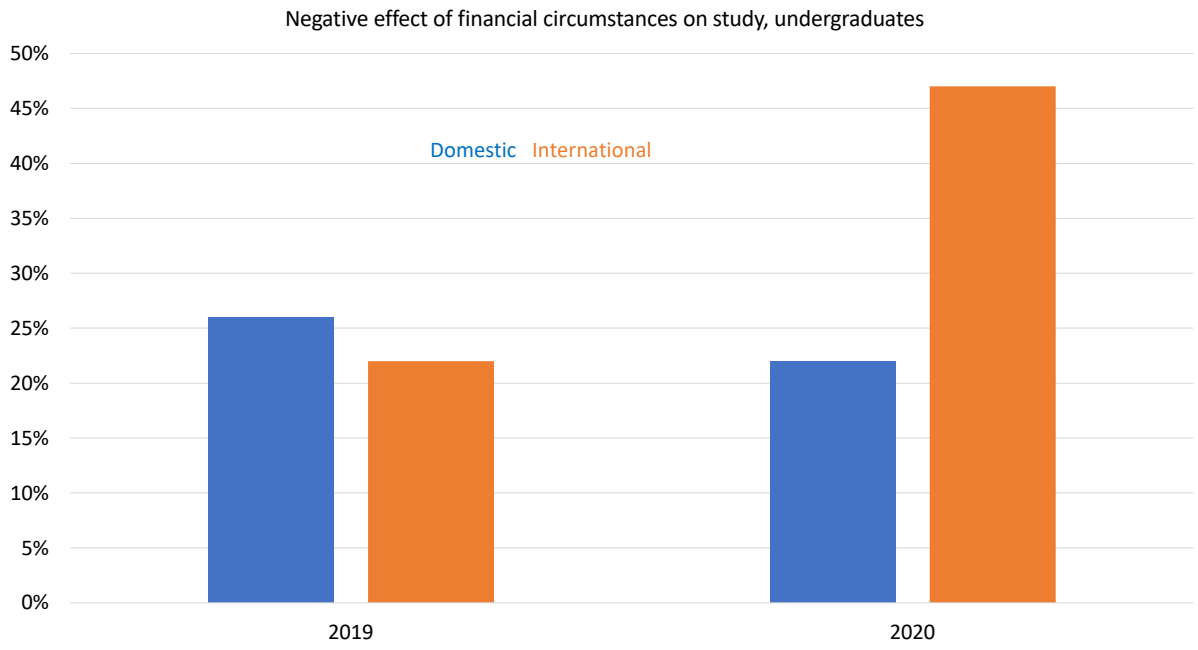
International students, by contrast, became more likely to say that their financial circumstances affected their studies, with the proportion reporting negative effects increasing from 28 per cent to 47 per cent (Figure 11). However, their commencing bachelor degree subject pass rates also went up in 2020 compared to 2019 (DESE, 2022b, table 15.5).[28] For international students in vocational education the results were as expected, with subject fails up from 13 per cent in the 2017 to 2019 period to 16.7 per cent in 2020 (calculated from NCVER, 2021b).[29]

In 2021 and 2022 the situation of international students improved. In May 2021, the Education and Work survey reported a 23 percentage point rebound in international student employment rates on a year earlier, to 52 per cent (calculated from ABS, 2021b, but noting the data issues discussed in section 2.6). Although the lockdowns from August 2021 again affected international students, from June 2021 they were eligible for disaster payments if unable to work. In early 2022, in response to workforce shortages, the government temporarily let international students work more than 40 hours a fortnight during semester (DHA, 2022b).

[28] This seems to contradict the survey result. The pass/fail statistics are commencing bachelor degree students while the financial circumstances figures are first and later year undergraduate students. Average marks may have suffered even if fails did not increase. Another possibility is that although financial problems created distracting stress for a substantial minority, restricted opportunities to work or socialise created more time for study for a majority of students.

[29] Of subjects passed, failed and withdrawn.

Figure 11: Effects of financial circumstances on study



Source: (SRC, 2021a)

While Youth Allowance recipient numbers are trending down (Figure 8), without lockdowns many jobs suited to students have been restored. At least until temporary migrants return in large numbers these labour markets will be tight. In theory, this should lead to wage increases (Lowe, 2021, pp. 14-16). Reserve Bank analysis shows that for 'contact-intensive industries', a classification that includes the major student employers, the rate of workers moving jobs has increased to above pre-COVID-19 levels. Historically, people who change employers have higher rates of wage increases than those who stay with their employer (Black & Chow, 2022).

The ABS wage price index, which measures changes in hourly wages not due to changes in tasks or worker characteristics, shows that in the year to March 2022, hourly wage growth excluding bonuses in 'food and accommodation services', the second largest employer of students by industry, was a little above the national average, at 2.6 per cent compared to 2.4 per cent (calculated from ABS, 2022c). While food and accommodation industry wage levels are increasing, employers are not yet offering significantly higher hourly pay to attract workers in a tight labour market.

This wage price index figure excludes bonuses, which the hospitality industry is paying at unknown levels through sign-on and retention bonuses (Brandel, 2022; Sharples, 2021). These can benefit student workers, but possibly reflect an employer belief that labour shortages are temporary problems requiring short-term incentives rather than long-term higher hourly wages. At least for a while, however, it will be hard for employers offering below-award wage jobs to attract workers.

As employers resisting hourly wage increases suspect, current labour market conditions will probably not last. The factors producing recent peaks in student employment are, or could plausibly turn out to be, the consequence of COVID-19 factors that will pass. But until they do, more students will find jobs, and their average incomes will be higher, through additional hours, being paid at least the award rate, and possibly also receiving wage increases and bonuses. The international students who remain in Australia are sharing in these benefits.

Overall Student Experience Survey student satisfaction results for both international and domestic higher education students were significantly worse for 2020 than preceding years (SRC, 2021b). For many students, online study was a poor substitute for a campus experience. But

financially, contrary to early fears, domestic students were, on average, better rather than worse off due to COVID-19.

Appendix A: Comparing sources on tertiary education enrolments

As Table 1 shows, ABS Education and Work survey data records significantly lower enrolments in vocational education institutions and courses than administrative sources.

One key difference is that the ABS Education and Work survey is of persons while the vocational administrative data is of enrolments. The ABS is therefore not counting multiple enrolments. As its survey instrument focuses on the highest qualification, where students have been enrolled in both vocational and higher education only the latter will be recorded. The analysis in Table 1 is restricted to Certificate III or above enrolments in vocational education, to focus on career-oriented courses and avoid counting short courses in first aid or responsible service of alcohol that students might commonly take in addition to their main course of study.

Table 1: ABS Education and Work compared to administrative data, Australian citizens/domestic students aged 15-24 years

	DESE higher education statistics 2019	VOCSTATS 2019	Education and work (previous year, 2019 as reported in 2020)	Difference between administrative and survey data	Ed & work as % of VOCSTATS or DESE
Higher education students (diploma +)	600,091		636,200	-36,109	106.02%
Diplomas		71,725	50,000	21,725	69.71%
Cert III/IV		389,363	209,500	179,863	53.81%
Apprentice/trainee		179,404	155,000	24,404	86.40%
TAFE Cert III to diploma		219,891	165,900	53,991	75.45%
Other institution Cert III to diploma		213,355	47,600	165,755	22.31%

Notes: Except for apprentices and trainees, Education and Work data is derived from a question about study in the previous year, i.e. asked in May 2020 about the previous calendar year of 2019. The apprentices and trainee data is as of May 2019. ABS is Australian or New Zealand citizen while NCVER and DESE data is domestic students, which includes permanent residents as well as citizens of the two countries. DESE does not have full coverage of the higher education sector as only those institutions receiving Australian government financial assistance report their enrolments. A full but only irregularly reported enrolment count from the higher education regulator indicates that in 2017 the DESE numbers missed 15,000 domestic students. For ABS and NCVER data a not attending school filter was applied.

Sources: (ABS, 2021b; DESE, 2020, 2021; NCVER, 2021a; TEQSA, 2019)

While ABS Education and Work should get a lower count of vocational education students than administrative data due to its highest qualification rule and a single count of persons, the discrepancies shown in Table 1 are sometimes very large, with the Education and Work numbers being only half or a quarter of the totals recorded in administrative data. A likely reason is the wording of the question asked: 'What type of educational institution or organisation [was name/were you] studying at last year?', with the answer options '1. Secondary school/Technical college 2. University/Other higher education institution 3. TAFE/Institute of Technology 4. Other organisation'.

This wording seems to not prompt respondents to think about the non-TAFE registered training organisations that administrative data shows that they attend. As can be seen in Table 2, less than half of students attend a TAFE. Of the more than 4,000 registered training organisations only 64 use exactly either of the explicitly mentioned titles of TAFE or Institute of Technology, although institute (611) and technology (114) appear in more totals. The most commonly used other words in RTO titles are 'training' (1469), college (841), 'education' (512), 'school' (356) and 'academy' (302) (data from the training.gov.au website). For the Education and Work 'TAFE/Institute of Technology' option the students reported are three-quarters of the administrative total, while for 'other institutions' the total is only 22 per cent (Table 1). This seems to be the cause of a significant under-count of vocational education students in Education and Work, which misses changes in vocational educational policy and terminology ('institute of technology' and 'technical college' are less common names than in the past).

Table 2: Types of institution attended by vocational education domestic students, 15-24 years, 2019

	TAFE institutes	Universities	Schools	Community education providers	Enterprise providers	Private training providers	Total
Advanced diploma	2,019	2,466	18	69	3	1,440	6,018
Diploma	31,119	7,915	103	1,668	635	24,272	65,707
Certificate IV	37,080	4,739	279	1,731	763	33,943	78,545
Certificate III	149,666	11,865	463	8,234	5,935	134,662	310,818
Total	219,891	26,982	864	11,707	7,334	194,314	461,088

Note: Although a not attending school filter was on, some students were nevertheless being taught by a school.
Source: (NCVER, 2021a)

The questions used by the ABS for tertiary students vary between surveys. For the monthly labour force survey the question is: 'Are you currently a full-time or part-time student at a TAFE, university or other educational institution?'. For the 2016 Census, the question is 'What type of educational institution is the person attending?', with the options under the heading of 'tertiary education' being 'Technical or further educational institution (include TAFE colleges), University or other higher educational institution, Other educational institution' . None of these wordings prompt the full range of vocational education providers, but they may be interpreted more broadly and count a larger number of students.

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