

SYDNEY MET COVID-19 RISK MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

1. INTRODUCTION

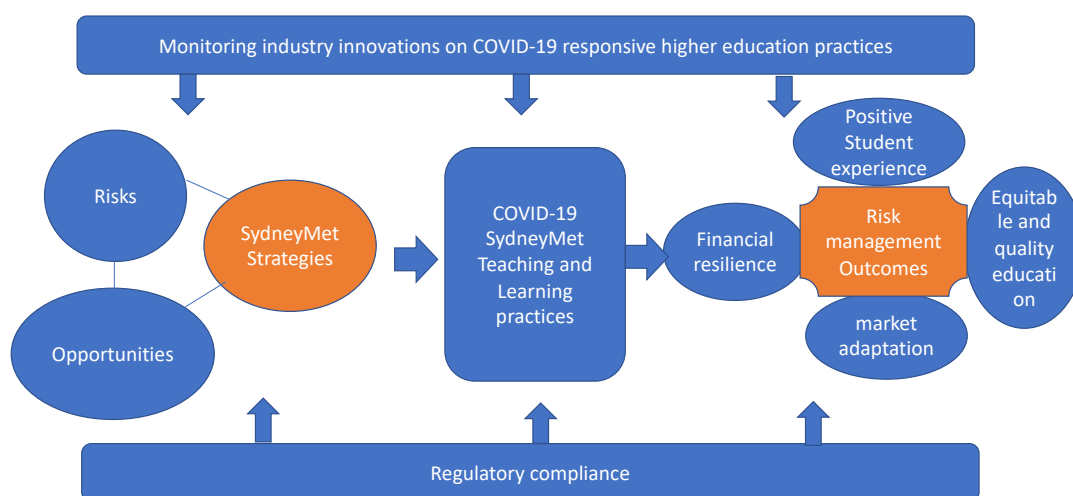
COVID-19 is having an unprecedented impact on institutions and in particular educational institutions globally. While it seems the acute phase of this pandemic may be short-lived, there is still a fair bit of uncertainty around the longer term prospects, with the strong possibility that the educational sector may be affected beyond this year.

In Australia the pandemic has inflicted huge damage to the education sector. The traditional classroom setting has been rendered impossible by social distancing measures. Travel-related restrictions have currently affected nearly 800,000 international students in Australia.

In 2021 and beyond, restrictions are likely to eased, but broader restrictions might well be continued. Getting new international students to Australia may not be as easy as it was in the past.

Studies of impact and speculations are emerging, and so are early responses in the education sector. There are views which see post COVID-19 scenario as an opportunity to transform teaching and learning practices away from excessive focus on lecturesⁱ. At SydneyMet, we see that COVID-19 Pandemic has created both risks and opportunities. This COVID-19 Risk Management and Response Framework (Figure 1 below) maps out likely risks and opportunities, and then outlines strategies for response in line with available regulatory guidance and industry practices.

Figure 1. SydneyMet's COVID-19 Risk Management and Response Framework



This framework will be updated every three months to make SydneyMet strategies up to date with the changing situations of COVID-10 pandemic, any regulatory provisions that may be issued, and industry innovations in teaching and learning practices. This Framework will be implemented in congruence with the College's Risk Management Plan (SydneyMet File number H.6.15.03/2018, current version).

2. COVID RISKS TO SYDNEYMET

Our assessment shows that SydneyMet will experience the following key risks at the time of its anticipated commencement in early 2021:

2.1 Reduction in off-shore international students:

Due to continuing restrictions on international travel, the inflow of international students to Australia is likely to decline, at least for the next few years. This will also affect the SydneyMet's number of incoming international students.

2.2 Increased health risks to student and staff:

Our students and staff will continue to experience an increased level of health risk until a point when the pandemic is totally exterminated from around the world.

2.3 Increased level of anxiety and mental stress among students and staff:

Until the pandemic is fully contained, our students and staff will continue to have the risks of fear, anxiety, mental health disorders.

2.4 Some disruptions in revenue flow:

As students face financial difficulty, SydneyMet is likely to face some disruptions in the flow of revenue.

2.5 Reduction in face to face contact and lively campus environment:

With social distancing measures likely to continue in some form, the lively campus environment will remain suppressed. This will result in fewer face to interactions impacting social bonding and community building.

3. FINANCIAL IMPACT

The major risk facing SydneyMet is of reduced student numbers, leading to a reduction in revenue. Our primary obligation here is to ensure financial viability in a changed educational climate.

Fortunately, SydneyMet's very conservative forecast for student numbers in the first two year (=2021-22) has already allowed for operating with student numbers greatly below capacity. In other words, we have budgeted for a difficult situation such as the one we now face.

Specifically, our sensitised budget envisions only 50 students (headcount) in Year 1, less than 25% of capacity. For Year 2 this rises to 100 students: less than 50% of capacity. Even in Year 3 we have assumed student numbers of only 150: less than 70% of capacity. Because we have budgeted for viability with these extremely low numbers, this major Covid-19 risk is substantially mitigated.

4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE POST-COVID-19 PERIOD

4.1 Diversification of markets away from large student supplier countries:

There is now a growing realisation among educational policy makers and industry leaders that a high degree of reliance on a small number of countries is not an ideal marketing strategy for education providers of Australia.

4.2 Teaching students offshore at lower costs and in larger number:

Complying with the regulatory advice, we will investigate making our courses available to international students who wish to study from home. Online offshore students could be charged lower fees. This will expand our market as we can teach larger number of students online.

4.3 Online teaching:

While SydneyMet has begun with a plan for 100% face-to-face learning, the current pandemic challenges us to adopt more flexible methods. A social-distancing environment will require a mixture of face to face and online approaches to teaching and learning. This provides an opportunity for SydneyMet to develop creative and innovative approaches which can expand students' learning horizons. It will push us to more fully utilise the potential of new technologies such as the enhanced use of Moodle for enhancing education.

5. OUR STRATEGIES

Our three goals as stipulated in the Strategic Plan are: Academic Quality, Equitable Practice and Social Impact. In the post-COVID-19 period or during the crisis, our online focussed strategies of teaching and learning will aim to deliver all three goals.

5.1 Extensive and high-quality online learning platform:

In the immediate aftermath of COVID-19, SydneyMet will need to expand robust online teaching systems and capabilities. Integrating Moodle with Zoom and Microsoft Teams, we will aim for a seamless online learning experience for students. This should include both synchronous and asynchronous classes. We will maintain an up to date virtual library system as students do not have the capacity to access the physical library. We will run intensive capacity building training for both teaching faculties and student support service staff to manage the COVID-19 responsive teaching and learning practices. We will need an in-depth orientation to students on online teaching systems.

5.2 Continuous monitoring of student source country policies on online teaching credit recognition:

Our marketing team will continuously monitor this and identify areas to be targeted for marketing. For instance, Chinese Service for Scholarly Exchange has recognised online courses of some of the Australian higher education providersⁱⁱ.

5.3 Real-time and up to day COVID-19 information hub:

SydneyMet will have a specialised COVID-19 information hub at its website for students to readily gather authentic information on risks, responses, and opportunities. This includes direct links to key government websites including Department of Health, Department of Education, and others.

5.4 COVID-19 responsive student data management:

Detailed recording of students' participation including any changes in student involvement in learning, as advised by Department of Educationⁱⁱⁱ:

"The department is encouraging the use of flexible arrangements, that otherwise would be considered non-compliant with the ESOS Act, for students directly affected by the travel and quarantine restrictions."

In alignment with this and any new regulatory advice, SydneyMet will maintain accurate records of the students on the respective student files.

5.5 Flexible fee-paying arrangements for students studying onshore:

SydneyMet will announce a financial relief package to students which includes flexible fee paying arrangements, increased number of instalments for payment, and 20% additional scholarships.

5.6 One-on-one online counselling and psychological Services for students in need:

To overcome loneliness, psychological disorders and also COVID-19 contraction because of physical distancing and home isolation measures, we will organise one-on-one online counselling for students in need. This helps students and SydneyMet to remain focus on the health and welfare of the students and smooth running of teaching and learning system.

5.7 Self-isolation arrangements:

By complying government rule, if needed, SydneyMet will assist with and accommodate self-isolation arrangements for newly arrived students.

5.8 Awareness on health check facilities:

Students will be advised to appropriate health check facilities by the government

5.9 Online campus gathering:

SydneyMet will regularly hold online gatherings of staff and students – such as orientations, SydneyMet day, new year eve celebrations and so on. We will use and adopt new online meeting technologies to make these events lively.

5.10 COVID-19 risk management action team:

Led by the PEO, this team will comprise the Dean and senior staff members of SydneyMet. This team would meet every week to review and discuss actions to be taken as per the framework.

6. ACTION PLAN

Considering the most likely scenario of continuing impact of the Pandemic, our tentative action plan to implement the above-mentioned strategies for the first year will be as follows (to be implemented from the first month of CRICOS registration of SydneyMet):

Time	Action
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Month 1	Orientation to key staff on SydneyMet COVID-10 Risk Management and Response Framework; Formation of a COVID-19 action team. Immediate risks interventions started.
Month 2	Development of detailed procedures and action strategies by the action team. Specific risks factors are defined further, and ranking matrix is developed.
Month 3	Full-fledged risks management system becomes operationalised, contributing to outcomes.
Month 4 and onwards	Monthly review and revision of risk management framework in the light of new risk situation and necessary adjustment of risks management action plan.

7. APPENDIX

This section will add reviews of key regulatory advice from TEQSA and other related government agencies.

7.1. TEQSA Guidance on Online Classes

“TEQSA is continuing to be flexible in its approach to regulating standards 8.19 and 8.20. TEQSA understands that providers may not be in a position to offer courses via face-to-face delivery. If providers switch to an online delivery model, TEQSA expects that providers maintain accurate records on the student file. As long as students remain enrolled with their provider and the assessment requirements of the course allow it, TEQSA will be flexible on the location of the student, the mode of delivery, and accept that minimum face-to-face teaching requirements may not be met at this time. Providers should assure themselves that such arrangements maintain assessment and quality standards, and are appropriately documented. Not all courses will be suited to online learning. Providers should continue to ensure students receive appropriate learning support via its online delivery model and are able to achieve learning outcomes.”

ⁱ For example, Professor Stephen Parker AO, who is the National Sector Leader (education) at KPMG Australia has said: “Let 2020 mark the death of the dull lecture” (<https://home.kpmg/au/en/home/insights/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-education-sector-transformation.html>)

ⁱⁱ This includes UNSW online courses: <https://www.covid-19.unsw.edu.au/information-students#special-arrangements>

ⁱⁱⁱ COVID-19 – information for VET, ELICOS and higher education providers
https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/covid19_information_for_vet_elicos_and_higher_education_providers_1.pdf