

Australian universities engaging international students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A study of multimodal public communications with students

Presenter and Co-Investigator : A/Prof Toni Dobinson, Curtin University

Lead Investigator: Dr Zucheng Zhang, University of New England

Co-Investigator: A/Prof Wei Wang, University of Sydney

Current conceptualisations of engagement

- engagement can be in several interlinked socio-ecological spaces such as home-community, school extracurricular activities and academic activities (Lawson & Lawson,2013)
- engagement is a social practice (Kettle,2021):

In university settings

- Engagement is co-constructed by both the university and the students
- In terms of international students engagement can reflect neoliberalist thinking i.e. customer/consumer (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014)).
- Focus can be on **emotional support** (e.g., making international students feel good) and behavioural management for and by them.
- Call has been made for encouraging international students to reflect on their participation and **be critical** of the purposes of international student education (Kahu, 2014; Zepke, 2018).

Public communications by Australian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Curtin University: university updates, VC video messages

University of Sydney (USyd): university emails, VC Wechat messages

University of New England (UNE): Messages on the web, COVID-19 updates, news reports, Q&A sheets

Note: Most of these communications were not specifically for international students but went out to all students in the majority of cases with USyd being the exception with VC WeChat messages and messages to transnational campuses

Public communications as communicative acts (CAs) (Reich, 2011)

University (multimodal) communicative acts in public communications (arrived at by a pilot analysis)

- Informing
- Requiring
- Advising
- Supporting

Engagement expected from (international) students

- Behavioural
- Emotional
- Cognitive (including critical engagement)

Curtin University example March 26 (inter-rater checked)

Dear Curtin student

I hope this message finds you well and that you are coping with the many changes that are happening in the community right now in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. **Supporting Emotional**

On Tuesday, the Curtin Student Guild met with senior executive staff at the University to discuss ways that we can help support and protect you during these difficult times.....**Supporting Emotional**

We expect to have the majority of our units online so that you can log into Blackboard on Monday (30 March) to access this material....**Informing Behavioural**

To help keep you on track with your study goals, we are now offering financial hardship funds to assist with essential study costs, such as internet expenses.....**Supporting Behavioural**

Please contact [Curtin Connect](#) in the first instance and they will refer you to the service you need..... **Advising Behavioural**

Thank you once again for your patience and loyalty as Curtin responds to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Supporting Emotional**

I wish you and your loved ones all the best. **Supporting Emotional**

Professor Deborah Terry AO

Vice-Chancellor **Supporting Emotional**

Communicative acts and prevailing dimensions of student engagement (Curtin University)

University's communicative acts	International students' engagement	COVID-19 updates in letter form									Video updates		
		4 Feb	13 Feb	21 Feb	13 Mar	16 Mar	26 Mar	1 Apr	3 Apr	9 Apr	Sub-total	20 Mar	27 Mar
Requiring (11)	Behavioural	2	2		5	2					11		
	Emotional										0		
	Cognitive										0		
Advising (26)	Behavioural	1	2		6	1	4	4	1	1	20	3	
	Emotional										0		
	Cognitive					1	1		1		3		
Informing (113)	Behavioural		1				1	3	1	1	7		
	Emotional		1	1							2		
	Cognitive		1		1						2	1	
	Receiving	8	3	5	28	15	13	10	1	13	96	5	
Supporting (101)	Behavioural		10	1	6	2	4	12	7	4	46	3	2
	Emotional		2	5	5	1	5	4	6	3	31	7	10
	Cognitive				1	1					2		
Sub-total		11	22	12	52	23	26	33	17	22	220	19	12

Trends at Curtin University

- ▶ Largest category of CA by the university was **informing (113)** with expected student engagement being just **receiving** the information **101**, engaging **behaviourally** with it **7**, engaging **emotionally** with it **2** and engaging **cognitively** with it **3**. This reached its peak around March 13 (**28**)
- ▶ Next largest category was **supporting (101)** with expected student engagement being **behavioural 51**, **emotional 48** and **cognitive 2**. This reached its peak around April 1 (**16**)

Multimodal social semiotic discourse analysis of video updates (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, Wignell & Tan, 2015) is shown on the next slides

Multimodal analysis of video messages – Curtin University

Video messages

20/03/2020



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=AnTDLeSKlZE&feature=youtu.be>

Multimodal observations

Setting – garden through window. Yellow painted room but subdued to highlight VC more brightly. Paintings and artefacts in the room. Personalised
VC- bright clothing. Warm colours. Suit. Top button undone more casually. Lipstick matches suit. Ear-rings and a tiny pin on her collar softens her image.

Position – slightly to the right of the screen. Again softens her image and can see garden better

Gaze – direct, serious but not stern.

Distance- medium to close shot to begin then at 0.39 secs the camera zooms in (ironically) to head and shoulders when VC says 'one of the measures the community is focusing on is physical distancing'. Pulls back out at 1:13 when stops talking about this topic. Makes it seem very important.

Point of view- horizontal, frontal angle, head, shoulders half of torso. Makes more personalised.

Interpersonal involvement – very high, earnest, concerned.

Delivery-VC pauses on key words e.g. 'hello'...'you'. Gestures with hands when says 'reassure you'

University roles =Advising, Informing but mostly Supporting
Student roles = Behavioural, Cognitive and Emotional

Multimodal analysis of video messages – Curtin University

Video messages

27/03/2020



<https://youtu.be/Fn-RRS7JIKc>

Multimodal observations

Setting – Same room as 20 March. Not so much of outside view visible. Windy day – trees blowing- feeling of turbulence, unsettledness.

VC- brighter – more 'ethnic', multicoloured attire. Cardigan not suit. More informal.

Position- more central than previous. More commanding

Gaze – direct. but seems less serious than 20 March

Distance- Camera zooms in as VC is speaking about Curtin being supporting. Zooms out after she talks about Curtin's 'dedication' at 1:03. Zooms in at 1:35 when VC says 'In these testing times I continue to be humbled by the'

Point of view- horizontal, frontal angle, head, shoulders – closer in than March 20.

Interpersonal involvement - very high, emotional almost, genuine, concerned

Delivery- a lot of gesturing at the beginning. Stops in the middle and end. Very slow and deliberate. Emphasises 'we' and 'you'

University roles =all Supporting

Student roles=Emotional and Behavioural

Communicative acts and prevailing dimensions of student engagement (U of Sydney)


University's communicative acts	International students' engagement	5 Feb	7 Feb	14 Feb	6 Mar	13 Mar	17 Mar	7 Apr	7 Apr to HDR	14 May	Sub-total
Requiring (13)	Behavioural	2	1		1	3	2		4		13
	Emotional										
	Cognitive										
Advising (40)	Behavioural	2	3	1	5	10	4	1	12		38
	Emotional										
	Cognitive					1	1				2
Informing (118)	Behavioural	3	5	6	7	4	9	5	5	5	49
	Emotional										
	Cognitive			1	1				1		3
	Receiving	3	17		7	9	8	4	4	14	66
Supporting (89)	Behavioural	5	2	3	14		4	7	5	3	43
	Emotional	4	3	5	7	6	5	5	4	3	42
	Cognitive					1	3				4
Sub-total 260		19	31	16	42	34	36	22	35	25	260



Trends at USyd

- ▶ Again **informing** CA was most common university engagement (118) with **receiving** 66, **behavioural** 49 and **cognitive** 3
- ▶ **Supporting** CA was next most common (89) with 43 **behavioural**, 42 **emotional** and 4 **cognitive**

Multimodal analysis of video messages – University of Sydney

Video messages	Multimodal observations
<p>18/2/2020</p>  <p>https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/aOT1fkD-Pr6jK5aRhlwd0g</p>	<p>Setting – dark office with a shuttered window, the background subdued to highlight the VC</p> <p>VC – in dark suit, dark blue tie</p> <p>Position – central of the screen, lean slightly to the left</p> <p>Gaze – Direct gaze, serious and worrying look</p> <p>Distance – Medium to close shot</p> <p>Point of view – Horizontal, frontal angle</p> <p>Interpersonal involvement – very high, earnest, concerned</p> <p>Delivery – pauses on key words, gestures with hands to highlight the points to be made every now and again</p> <p>University roles=Informing, Supporting, Advising</p> <p>Student roles=Receiving, Emotional, Behavioural</p>

Video messages

12/3/2020



<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qwZwYHkpEO6LhNAt6z-FYA>

3/4/2020



https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/-zsY_Q-OYfe97ecTYMOIFw

Multimodal observations

Setting – bright office with a shelf featuring books and Chinese artefacts (e.g., Chinese vase), with a heart shaped sign on the left featuring “加油中国 stay strong China” and two lines of Chinese on the right bottom of the screen saying “共抗疫情， 武汉加油” (Fight the pandemic together, Stay strong Wuhan).

VC – in dark suit, violet-red tie

Position – slightly right of the screen, lean slightly backward in a relaxed position

Gaze – Direct gaze, warm and smiling look

Distance – Medium to close shot

Point of view – Horizontal, frontal angle

Interpersonal involvement – very high, earnest, concerned.

Delivery – pauses on key words, Gestures with hands every now and again to highlight the strength and support

University roles=Supporting

Student roles=Emotional

Setting – office with campus views through the window, the background subdued to highlight the VC

VC – in bright shirt suit, grey tie

Position – central of the screen, lean slightly to the left

Gaze – Direct gaze, caring and concerning look

Distance – Medium to close shot to begin then at 0.26 the camera suddenly zooms in to head and shoulders when he says, ‘the university provides financial and scholarship support’. Pulls back out again at 0.36 when stopping talking about this topic

Point of view – Horizontal, frontal angle

Interpersonal involvement – very high, earnest, concerned.

Delivery – pauses on key words

University roles=Informing, Supporting, Advising

Student roles=Receiving, Emotional, Behavioural

Communicative acts and prevailing dimensions of student engagement (UNE)

University's communicative acts	students' International engagement	COVID-19 updates in letter format						News report	Q&A document
		29 Jan	16 Mar	17 Mar	8 Apr	3 Sep	Sub-total	5 May	Trimester 1
Requiring (40)	Behavioural	10	4	7	6	5	32	0	6
	Emotional	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Cognitive	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Advising (9)	Behavioural	0	0	2	3	2	7	1	15
	Emotional	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Cognitive	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	2
Informing (88)	Behavioural	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Emotional	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Cognitive	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Receiving	10	3	12	13	11	49	14	17
Supporting (67)	Behavioural	1	0	4	1	2	8	0	4
	Emotional	2	2	8	11	6	29	11	15
	Cognitive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sub-total		24	11	33	35	27	130	28	65



Trends at UNE

- ▶ Again **informing** was largest CA (**88**) especially **receiving** (**80**) with **cognitive 4**, **behavioural 2** and **emotional 2**
- ▶ **Supporting** CA came in close second at **67** with **behavioural 12**, **emotional 55** and **cognitive 0**

UNE News report image

Photo of President of IMSA accompanying news report

<https://www.une.edu.au/connect/news/2020/05/>

supporting-students-in-the-spirit-of-ramadan



Multimodal observations

Medium shot from a frontal angle indicating viewer involvement and little social distance

Demand gaze with a smile in his face indicating affinity

Clothed in casual sports gear commonplace in Australia

Wearing a moustache reminiscent of a Middle East man, with Arabic-style hanging carpets on the left and the external package of a hamburger inscribed with "Create your own burgers" on the right, as well as an empty delivery box with broken sticky tapes immediately before the hanging carpets, as background

University roles=Supporting

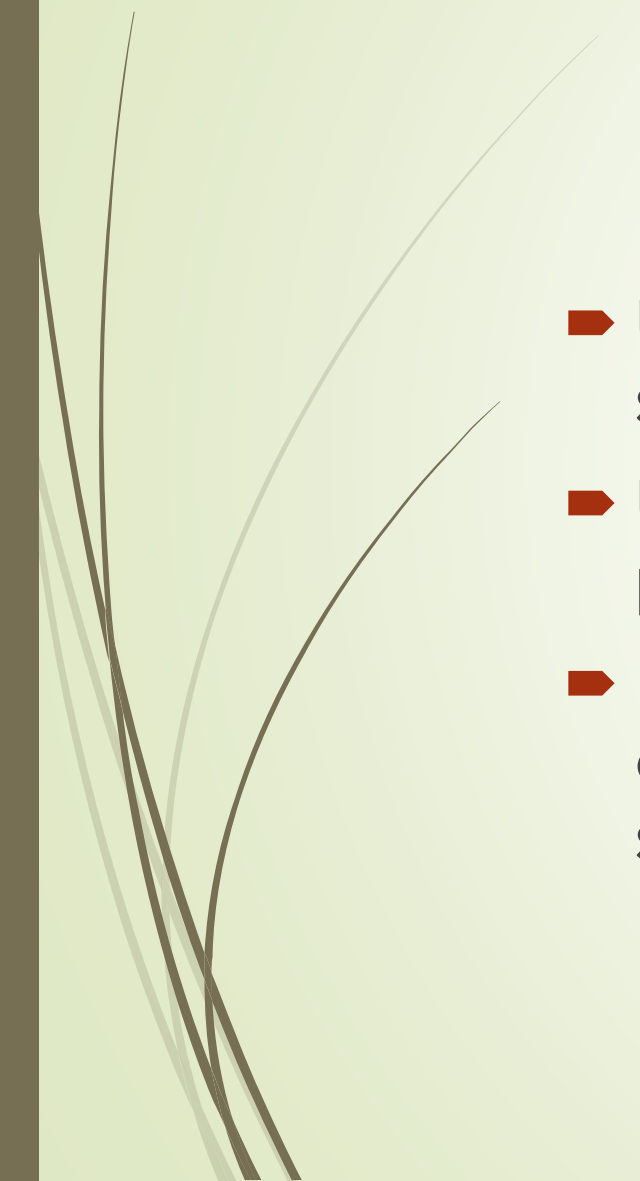
Student roles=Behavioural, Emotional, Cognitive, Receiving

Discussion

- Universities were most involved in informing during COVID-19 initial times with students expected to just receive information or engage behaviourally. This is to be expected in times of emergency
- As time went on the universities' engagement moved more towards supporting students with students expected to engage behaviourally and emotionally. VCs became parent/friend figures e.g. I wish you and your loved ones all the best
- The VCs and staff in public video communications became more casual, more colourful, more emotional, more informal/intimate, more friendly looking (i.e. smiley) with more of the outside world showing through in videos. At USyd videos were even conducted in Mandarin. This all made it more difficult for students (especially international students) to have critical engagement.
- What was conspicuously absent was cognitive engagement in terms of students being encouraged to be critical in their responses
- Of course without student or staff interviews we cannot say that every student engaged with the public communications in the way that we interpreted nor can we be completely sure about the universities' intentions.



SO in conclusion

- **University focus on really informing and supporting students should continue into the future post pandemic.**
 - **Universities should remain “more human” post pandemic**
 - **However, cognitive engagement and, most importantly, critique on the part of students, especially international students, should be more encouraged.**
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