6 Australian universities engaging international students during the COVID-19 pandemic

A study of multimodal public communications with students

Zuocheng Zhang, Toni Dobinson and Wei Wang

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 impacted Australia, and Australian universities in particular. Each of the states in Australia was affected differently due to state government approaches and measures in place in the state. Although the number of infections was relatively small in the first wave of the virus in world terms, the pandemic was still disruptive educationally. Teaching moved to online delivery at short notice while a large number of international students became stranded overseas. With these developments, the importance of international students to Australian universities was made very apparent, not least at the monetary level. Universities stepped up their engagement (Kahu, 2013) during the uncertainties of the COVID-19 disruptions to showcase their understandings of, and responsiveness to, international students' needs. This was set against a backdrop of literature already calling for a re-humanising of university academics and their intersubjective experiences with students (Gilmore & Warren, 2007).

University public communication channels are important vehicles for connecting with international students. Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, these channels became unprecedentedly crucial in higher education settings, so it is useful to consider how they have worked as platforms for engaging international students.

In this chapter, we conceptualise student engagement through public communications as situated discursive practices, with a view to identifying the roles and responsibilities universities construct for themselves, and for international students, through their public communication channels. We selected three Australian universities of different locations and standing as our data source, including one metropolitan university in Western Australia (Curtin University) and two in New South Wales, namely the prestigious University of Sydney (USyd) in metropolitan Sydney and the

University of New England (UNE), located in regional Australia. Our aim was to answer the following two research questions:

1. What types of engagement in university public communications with international students were prioritised during the period of COVID-19 in the three Australian universities?
2. How can a situated discursive practice perspective on university public communications help us understand more about the nexus of roles and responsibilities involved in student engagement?

Conceptualising engagement as situated discursive practices

Engagement as a concept has been variably interpreted in educational contexts, which, accordingly, shape conceptualisations of engagement. The most common conceptualisation has been in the schooling context. Here engagement is defined by some as "student participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of potentially measurable outcomes" (Hyde et al., 2017, p. 447). In the schooling context three dimensions of engagement were identified by Hyde (2017):

- Behavioural engagement which involves students in on-task participation in regular educational activities
- Emotional engagement which refers to students' sense of belonging to the school and of being supported at school
- Cognitive engagement which involves students reviewing and reflecting on their learning

Engagement is also recognised in higher education settings as an essential contributor to student experience. It is often conceptualised slightly differently in this context, however. One measurement of engagement in higher education at universities is the Student Experience Survey (SES), funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. Learner (student) engagement is viewed in this survey as one of six aspects of students' experience of higher education. It measures students' preparedness for academic study, sense of belonging to their institution and participation in their study as individuals or with peers (SES, 2020). This view of engagement is specific to this survey, however, taking a fairly narrow university reductionist view of engagement to be able to measure and evaluate student engagement, most likely for marketing purposes.

In this study, while we accept Hyde's categorisation of student engagement into Behavioural, Emotional and Cognitive, we also take the view that engagement is holistic. That is, the student, the institution and the broader sociocultural environment are in constant interplay to shape engagement. Students are not acting alone in their Behavioural, Cognitive

or Emotional engagement. The educator, the learning environment and the learner attributes constitute the conditions or antecedents for student action, which leads to various consequences (Kahu, 2013; Kettle, 2021). Student engagement in education is thus a socio-ecologically complex phenomenon (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) and any study of engagement needs to consider both the student and the institution, for example, international students and their university, to achieve a nuanced understanding of engagement practices.

The conceptualisation of engagement as a two-way, co-constructed event can be investigated by examining university public communications to students. Universities have employed public communication tools to achieve varied purposes, in particular internet-based communications for educational, social and marketing goals and objectives. Often cited examples include university websites (e.g. O'Halloran et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2020), prospectus (Askehave, 2007), university "About us" texts (Giannoni, 2018) and university presidents' messages (Teo & Ren, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a crisis for governments, institutions and individuals, imposing the need for universities to react and respond to all students and to enact new initiatives. One of these is communicating new ways of teaching and learning at a time of precarity. Naturally occurring interactions such as public communications in universities are therefore situated discursive practices. When we analyse these practices from the engagement perspective, we are guided to describe, in a more explicit way, the roles and responsibilities of both the university and the student.

Communicative acts (Clark, 1996; Reich, 2011), as an extension of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), are also useful for the description of the university's construction of its roles. Communicative acts provide tools for analysing instances of communication in terms of participant roles, actions and conditions associated with the enacting and interpreting of participant roles and actions. These acts are concerned with the more "social" aspects of people's communicative exchanges than Austin's original conception of speech acts because they "explain how the agency of addressees is implied by the performance of many communicative acts" (Reich, 2011, p. 1349). That means the way in which a speaker/writer uses an overtly intentional sign/signal to solicit cooperation from the audience is highlighted. These communicative acts can also be used in the analysis of co-acts of the audience in response to the speaker/writer's communicative behaviours that involve use of gestures, facial expressions and other multimodal semiotic systems. These signs/signals denote something about the world (representational meaning) and position the audience in the interaction with another person or thing (interactive meaning), creating a structured semiotic whole (compositional meaning). When dealing with multimodal texts we need to explore how all of these meanings are realised in the various modes. These modes can include words, pictures, sounds, colours, images, gestures, gaze,

camera position, perspective, lighting effects and posture. These come together to create a multimodal experience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004). For example, images shot at different camera angles can engage or disengage viewers in socioculturally recognisable ways (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), constructing roles for the producer and the audience. The process of international student engagement through public communications involves the university communicating messages through certain repertoires of communicative acts. The students, in turn, are solicited to co-act or engage with these communicative acts either behaviourally (e.g. doing routine/expected academic and extracurricular duties), emotionally (e.g. developing a sense of community, belonging) or cognitively (e.g. reviewing/reflecting on events, practices, goings on).

This conceptualisation of engagement as situated discursive practices allows us to examine the roles the university constructs for itself and the dimensions of engagement that the university provokes in its students, specifically its international students (the focus of this study). As will be shown in the Method section (see Table 6.1), we adapt Hyde's (2017) categories of student engagement and add the communicative acts displayed by the three selected Australian universities to construct a framework for providing a more holistic view of engagement practices in university public communications to international students.

Table 6.1 Taxonomy of communicative acts and dimensions of student engagement

University communicative acts	Requiring: University making commands on international students or giving them instructions
	Advising: University putting itself in the role of consulting international students
	Supporting: University providing moral support (e.g. showing empathy to international students) and material help (e.g. offering hardship scholarship)
	Informing: University producing information or imparting government information to international students
Students' engagement with the communicative acts	Behavioural: Students complying with the standards set down by the communication and adjusting their behaviour in accordance with what is communicated to them
	Cognitive: Students as thinking beings considering, critiquing, evaluating and questioning the information in the communications
	Emotional: Students having affective reactions to the communications, for example, showing a sense of belonging
	Receiving: Students as just receptors of the information without being expected to undertake other active engagement, i.e. behaviourally, cognitively or emotionally

Method

Research design

The study reported in this chapter uses a multiple-case study approach. Case study is often thought of as a method but, in fact, it is an approach that focuses on an object of inquiry in a natural context that is unique and bounded (Casanave, 2015). A case study investigates one group or institution in depth (Simons, 2009) with the goal of understanding a phenomenon exemplified by the institution (Swanborn, 2010). This chapter describes a multiple-case study (Stake, 2006) in which three institutions were investigated with regard to their engagement of international students through their public communications with these students. The study allowed us to consider different university circumstances to identify possible variations across universities and different discursive practices.

Data collection and analysis

The data, including COVID-19 information webpages, international student webpages, news/events webpages, and/or vice chancellor's video and text messages, and the ways in which they were obtained, were different for each university under investigation. However, what the datasets have in common is that they are all multimodal communications that took place between the universities and their international students enrolled at the start of the pandemic and were designed to support students in their day-to-day dealings with the new learning and teaching situation brought about by COVID-19 disruptions. These texts were chosen because they were dynamic and changing during the period under study and because students had more reason to attend to these texts and engage with them regularly, as a result. They provided support for students and became "go to" online documents for guidance at a time when there was chaos in many educational situations.

The conceptualisation of engagement as situated discursive practices described earlier, and a preliminary analysis of a sample of data, led to a taxonomy of both the communicative acts exhibited by the three universities and the dimensions of students' engagement. The taxonomy is summarised in Table 6.1.

When analysing the linguistic texts, we categorised each sentence (signalled by a full stop or semi-colon) as a meaning unit and coded it as one of the communicative acts of Informing, Advising, Requiring or Supporting by the university, and one of the Behavioural, Cognitive, Emotional or Receiving dimensions of the students' engagement with the university communications. The results of the coding for each of the three universities was tallied and reported as separate case studies in the Findings section.

The coding process was not straightforward as meanings are notoriously context-bound. This is particularly true of the analysis of the Informing communicative act and the distinction between Cognitive and Behavioural engagement. Advising and Requiring are also blurred concepts that can only be interpreted when we know who is doing the advising and what power they hold over the advisee. We thus used both the context to help determine meaning, and specific wordings to assist in determining what communicative act was being performed.

For example, we coded "Arrangements will vary from course to course and may depend on whether you are a new student or continuing student" (USyd, 2020) as University Informing: Student Receiving because the sentence is merely an announcement. Similarly, the next example "I am writing today [to] update you on the work we are doing to help you commence your studies with us if you are unable to join us here on campus for the start of semester 1" (USyd, 2020) is explicitly targeting international students (see the word "you") who are participating in their otherwise routine academic activities. The word "reconsider" in the example "For any private trips planned to China, we strongly urge you to reconsider and check the up to date advice from DFAT here (www.dfat.gov.au/)" (UNE, 2020) indicates cognitive processes on the part of international students. While the word "check" may sound like Behavioural engagement, in the co-text of "reconsider" it acquires a sense of cognitive undertaking and is thus not coded as Behavioural engagement. In the next example, "To protect the health of the Curtin community, staff, students and visitors are requested to: maintain good personal hygiene, including regular handwashing" (Curtin University, 2020), the university requirement is disguised in the wording "requested". The wording "Special arrangements" in the example "Special arrangements are currently in place for the UNE Regional Study Centres at Coonabarabran, Gunnedah, Moree, Narrabri, Inverell and Tenterfield" (UNE, 2020) indicates the university's extra effort to support and provide the students with a sense of affinity through the regional study centres, hence the coding of the university's communicative act as Supporting and the students' engagement as Emotional.

We analysed the videos and/or images using concepts in multimodal discourse analysis (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For the images in the three case studies described in this chapter, including photographs and screenshots from videos, six aspects were considered. These included (1) the setting of the photograph or video; (2) the angle of the shot (high, low, eye-level) to decipher viewer power; (3) the gaze (demand or offer gaze) to indicate the level of engagement (demand as high level of engagement while offer as no or low-level engagement); (4) short-, medium-, or long- shot to indicate social distance/affinity; (5) frontal versus oblique angles to indicate viewer involvement; and (6) the actor's gestures, attire and environment used to convey mood. These analyses were linked with the analyses of the linguistic texts to identify the interplay between the

different modalities and describe the effect of the interplay in constructing communicative acts and dimensions of engagement.

Inter-rater reliability procedures

The first author developed a heuristic coding scheme based on an analysis of his university dataset, including communicative acts and dimensions of engagement. The criteria for this coding scheme were then shared via email with the co-authors who applied the coding scheme to their own university dataset. All the coding was discussed at several Zoom meetings and the coding scheme was tweaked where necessary. The refined coding scheme was then applied by each author to review their own university dataset. Where uncertainties or discrepancies from the original coding arose, they were discussed by the three authors together before each author tallied their own results for reporting in each respective case study.

Findings of the three case studies

The case of the University of New England (UNE)

Background and data sources

UNE is a regional university in New South Wales, Australia, with a student population of over 22,000, among which a small proportion are international students (UNE, 2021). UNE has experienced a less severe COVID-19 disruption than many of its Australian counterparts, at least regarding the mode of teaching, because online teaching has for many years been the predominant mode of course delivery at this university. The university responded to the crisis swiftly, including creating a COVID-19 information webpage as early as 29 January 2020, providing a targeted webpage for international students with relevant support information, and reporting international students' life experiences in news and events reports. For the study described here, three sources of public communications were collected as data: One news report featuring UNE and the International Muslim Students Association (IMSA) helping Muslim students and international students; one Supporting Information for International Students document, which included a list of student questions and university responses to the questions; and four messages selected from the university's COVID-19 information webpage from 29 January 2020 to 3 September 2020.

The COVID-19 information webpage was designated for providing advice to the UNE community, information on the pandemic, and university plans and actions, all of which were updated regularly (hence this information will be referred to hereafter as updates). The information on this designated webpage consistently took the form of a letter featuring salutation, information and signature by the vice chancellor (VC) or

chief operating officer (COO). The updates may be roughly divided into three groups reflecting the stages of the university's management of the pandemic, namely, the initial stage (29 January to 8 April 2020, during which there were nearly daily or weekly updates), a relaxation stage (10 April to 11 June 2020, during which weekly updates were made but the same message was reproduced with a change in dates and the wording "Current as of … . (the date of the last update)"), and a transition to new normal/return to campus stage (12 June to 3 September 2020, when data collection was terminated). The earlier updates were signed by the COO until the middle of March 2020, when they began to be signed by the VC. The wordings were also different. For example, the updates signed by the COO bear the wording "This message has been provided by Professor … . | Chief Operating Officer, UNE" while those signed by the VC have the wording "Authorised by Professor … ., Vice Chancellor and CEO". The updates signed by the VC also tended to be longer as there was more information and detail in these updates.

Findings from the linguistic texts

The findings from the analysis of the communicative acts and dimensions of engagement in the three types of linguistic texts are summarised in Table 6.2. The largest, and second largest, counts of communicative acts are Informing (88) and Supporting (67), respectively accounting for 39% and 30% of the total of 223 counts of communicative acts. Requiring (40) and Advising (28) communicative acts take up a much smaller proportion of the total counts, at 18% and 13% respectively. The linguistic texts were therefore mainly used to inform international students and provide them with support.

The number of communicative acts seems to change over time. The number is notably higher at the critical stages of the pandemic (e.g. 33 and 35 instances on 17 March 2020 and 8 April 2020 respectively) than at the initial earlier stages (e.g. 24 and 11 instances on 29 January 2020 and 16 March 2020 respectively) or the later/transition stages (e.g. 27 instances on 3 September 2020) of the pandemic. There might have been a variety of reasons for the change observed in the number of communicative acts, but the status of the pandemic at any specific point in time may be an important reason, that is, there was more information to disseminate and more support to provide during the critical stage of the pandemic than in the other less critical periods.

Regarding engagement, Receiving comes first with the largest count (80), followed by Behavioural engagement (77), Emotional engagement (58) and Cognitive engagement (8). The Informing: Receiving combination is the most prevalent, suggesting that this dimension of the nexus of university-student interactions was accentuated. Behavioural engagement tended to feature together with Requiring and Advising communicative acts, while Emotional engagement kept company with Supporting

Table 6.2 UNE's communicative acts and dimensions of engagement in the linguistic texts

University's communicative acts	International students' engagement	COVID-19 updates in letter format						News report	Q&A document	Subtotal	Total
		29 Jan	16 Mar	17 Mar	8 Apr	3 Sep	Subtotal	5 May	Trimester 1		
Requiring	Behavioural	10	4	7	6	5	32		6	38	40
	Emotional										
	Cognitive	1	1				2			2	
Advising	Behavioural			2	3	2	7	1	15	23	28
	Emotional								1	1	
	Cognitive				1	1	2		2	4	
Informing	Behavioural							2	2	4	88
	Emotional								2	2	
	Cognitive		1				1		1	2	
	Receiving	10	3	12	13	11	49	14	17	80	
Supporting	Behavioural	1		4	1	2	8		4	12	67
	Emotional	2	2	8	11	6	29	11	15	55	
	Cognitive										
Total		24	11	33	35	27	130	28	65	223	223

communicative acts. Cognitive engagement is minimal in all three types of texts, which imparts a sense that this dimension of engagement was not prioritised in the university public communications.

Findings from the images

Of the three types of texts analysed for UNE, the news report is the only one accompanied by an image, which was a photograph of the IMSA president inserted into the upper half of the webpage featuring the news report. It was published on 5 May 2020 in the news and events section of the UNE webpage, reporting on the IMSA supplying free Iftar to Muslim and other international students during Ramadan with the assistance of UNE's International Office and the local community. The image is reproduced as Figure 6.1.

This image engages international students on all three dimensions: Behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively. The demand gaze, tempered with the smiling face and open mouth, creates a sense of affinity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Behaviourally, the empty delivery box, shown to be in proximity to the advertising slogan for making one's own burger in the background of the image in the broader context of the news report about preparing free meals for international students, may index meals taken and to be prepared, thus creating a space for behavioural participation. The salient contrast, as indicated in the represented agent's Middle Eastern appearance (moustache) and Aussie outfit, and between the traditional Arabic artefact (hanging carpets) and the rather contemporary image of a hamburger, invites Cognitive engagement, prompting questions such as *Who is this man? What is he doing or wanting me to*

Figure 6.1 President of IMSA gazing and smiling at viewer.

Source: www.une.edu.au/connect/news/2020/05/supporting-students-in-the-spirit-of-ramadan).

do? Where is this man located? What does he have to do with the burgers and the empty box behind him?

Emotional engagement is immediate in the image, which matches the title of the news report "Supporting students in the spirit of Ramadan". The linguistic text and the image therefore mutually enhance each other. As noted earlier, Cognitive engagement does not feature prominently in the linguistic text of the news report. In the visual text, however, Cognitive engagement appears to stand out. The several salient pairs of contrast displayed in the image in Figure 6.1 may serve to invite viewers to think about food in light of the remarks by the President of IMSA in the news report "[Ramadan is] an opportunity to appreciate the joy food brings us, to remember the less fortunate who live without food security throughout the year". As such, the visual text complements the linguistic text by constructing a Cognitive dimension of engagement in the multimodal news report.

The case of Curtin University

Background and data sources

Of the 57,784 students enrolled at Curtin University in 2019, 25% were international students (Curtin University, n.d.). Public communication with these students during the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions took many forms, but these two types of texts were found to be the most interesting: (1) The COVID-19 written online updates to students from the VC, which appeared at varied intervals during the disruptions to university classes, and (2) short videos of the VC speaking to students during the same period. These communications were not specifically for international students. All students were treated as one entity, except where one video was aimed at international students in Curtin's offshore campuses.

Findings from the linguistic texts

Findings from the analysis of the selected linguistic texts over the COVID-19 period are summarised in Table 6.3.

The most common university role in the communication types examined between February and April 2020 was Informing staff and students about what the COVID-19 situation meant for their university course (45%). This included communicative acts that just informed students of changes (40%) and those with which students were expected to engage behaviourally (3%), cognitively (1%) and emotionally (1%). The second most common role that the university took on with all students was a Supporting role (41%), with the VC's written updates and supportive videos engaging students emotionally (20%), behaviourally (20%) and cognitively (1%). Like in the UNE dataset, Cognitive engagement was

Table 6.3 Curtin University's communicative acts and student engagement

University's communicative acts	International students' engagement	COVID-19 updates in letter format										Video updates		Total
		4 Feb	13 Feb	21 Feb	13 Mar	16 Mar	26 Mar	1 Apr	3 Apr	9 Apr	Subtotal	20 Mar	27 Mar	
Requiring	Behavioural	2	2		5	2					11			11
	Emotional										0			
	Cognitive										0			
Advising	Behavioural	1	2		6	1	4	4	1	1	20	3		26
	Emotional										0			
	Cognitive					1	1		1		3			
Informing	Behavioural		1				1	3	1	1	7			113
	Emotional		1	1							2			
	Cognitive		1		1						2	1		
	Receiving	8	3	5	28	15	13	10	1	13	96	5		
Supporting	Behavioural		10	1	6	2	4	12	7	4	46	3	2	101
	Emotional		2	5	5	1	5	4	6	3	31	7	10	
	Cognitive				1	1					2			
Total		11	22	12	52	23	28	33	17	22	220	19	12	251

much lower than either Behavioural or Emotional engagement in the Curtin dataset. The third most common university role was Advising (10%), with students advised to engage behaviourally (9%) or cognitively (1%), although this role was sometimes difficult to distinguish from Requiring because of the power relations between the university and the students. In other words, the VC's advice was sometimes a thinly veiled requirement, and this was determined through inter-rater discussion. Requiring was only 4% and this was all Behavioural.

The early phase of restrictions (February 2020) was mostly focused on the university Informing students (44%) and students either Receiving this information (36%) or engaging behaviourally (2%), cognitively (2%) or emotionally (4%) with it. This was followed by the university providing a Supporting role (40%) and designing updates to engage students emotionally (16%) and behaviourally (24%).

In March 2020, Curtin University placed emphasis on Informing students (57%), with some updates promoting Cognitive (1%) or Behavioural (1%) student engagement but mostly engagement being Receiving of information (55%). The university also played a Supporting role (25%), with the number of Supporting communicative acts rising from February 2020, but still less than Informing acts. Supporting updates encouraged Behavioural (12%), Emotional (11%) and Cognitive (2%) student engagement. Advising was the third most common role taken on by the university (16%), with updates designed to engage students behaviourally (14%) and cognitively (2%).

April 2020 figures for COVID-19 cases reflected Western Australia's early stabilisation of the pandemic (stable phase) unlike other states in Australia. The university's role in the VC's updates was mostly Supporting in this phase (50%); engaging students behaviourally (32%) and emotionally (18%), although Informing was also common throughout the April 2020 updates (40%), but not nearly as much as March 2020 (57%). The majority of this was students just Receiving information (33%) or expected to engage behaviourally with it.

Overall, the VC's communications became much more supportive in April 2020 after being mostly focused on Informing in February and March. Her linguistic style changed to letter style and incorporated salutations and closings. For example, in the written updates of 4, 13 and 21 February 2020, salutations and/or closings were absent. In the written updates of 13 and 16 March 2020, there were supporting closings: "Kind Regards, Professor Deborah Terry" and "Professor Deborah Terry AO, Vice Chancellor". By 26 March 2020 the VC was including both a salutation and a closing statement of support in her written updates, starting with "Dear Curtin student" and closing with personalised, intimate expressions, for example "I wish you and your loved ones all the best. Professor Deborah Terry AO. Vice Chancellor," or "Best wishes, Professor Deborah Terry AO. Vice-Chancellor," or a combination of the two, for example "Once again, I wish you and your families all the very

best during these challenging times. Best wishes, Deborah Terry AO".
She used the first person singular ("I") and plural ("we") and the second
person "you" in the updates from 26 March 2020 onwards, creating a
much less formal tone and a feeling of concern.

Findings from video messages

Only two video messages or VCTV events were analysed due to avail-
ability. Key multimodal observations in the videos are noted after
Figure 6.2.

In the video update of 20 March 2020, the VC is portrayed in a yellow
painted room, which is subdued to highlight the VC more brightly.
Paintings and personalised artefacts are in view giving the impression of
an organised, controlled, historical environment that can be trusted to
inform and advise, but there is a glimpse of the outside garden through
the window suggesting that the university is also in touch with the
outside world and therefore capable of understanding and supporting
students in their lives outside of the university. Vertical and horizontal
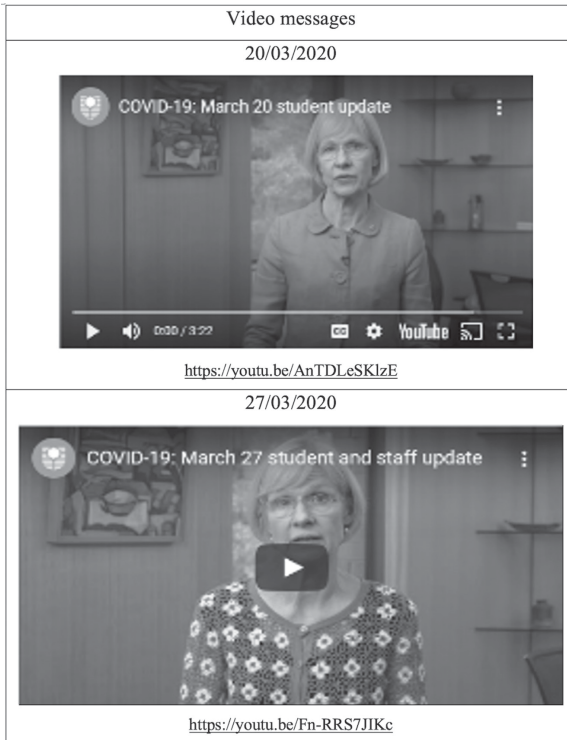lines in the room enforce impressions of rigidity and strength while the

Figure 6.2 VC addressing viewers on two separate occasions.

curved lines of the plants outside, sunshine, the VC's position slightly to the right of the screen (allowing the garden to be seen), a bright warm coloured suit with top button undone casually, matching lipstick and a tiny brooch on her collar (with earrings) again soften the scene, giving her a more supportive image. She is looking directly at the camera in a serious but not stern fashion, at a medium to close range with the camera occasionally zooming in when she says something that needs to be particularly noted, that is, "one of the measures the community is focusing on is physical distancing". The point of view is horizontal, frontal angle, head, shoulders half of torso, again making the announcement more up close and personal. She evokes high interpersonal involvement, appearing earnest and concerned and pauses deliberately on key words such as her opening phrase, "hello" and "you". She also responds paralinguistically with gesture when she says things such as "reassure you". Overall, these orchestrated effects serve to emphasise the fact that the university is playing a role as a strong institution that can inform and advise students, but at the same time be a mother ship supporting its students.

In the video update of 27 March 2020, similar effects have been used, but this time the feeling is overwhelmingly one of support rather than information or advice giving. The setting is the same solid, conventional room but there is a slightly bigger view of the outside visible (a more turbulent scene with trees blowing), which matches the sense of the university being in touch with the "real world" at a time when COVID is upsetting everybody's lived experience. The VC is more brightly and informally dressed in the 27 March video wearing an ethnically designed cardigan, possibly to appeal to the Curtin Malaysian campus students who she was also addressing. Her position on the camera is more central than in the previous video and her gaze is once again direct but slightly more serious than in the 20 March video. The camera zooms in as the VC is speaking about Curtin being supportive and as she becomes more deferential, saying, "In these testing times I continue to be humbled by the …". The point of view is slightly closer than 20 March, but still a horizontal, frontal angle, head and shoulders. Her interpersonal involvement is once again very high, emotional almost, indicating genuine concern for students. This is accompanied by a lot of gesturing at the beginning of the video especially when she says "we" and "you" and delivery is slow and deliberate, giving the audience the sense that they are being addressed personally.

Overall, the multimodal aspects of the VC's video messages were crafted to complement the linguistic components and communicative acts of Informing, Advising and Supporting, with the latter being foremost in the 27 March video update. This ensured Behavioural, Cognitive but mostly Emotional engagement on the part of the students.

The case of the University of Sydney (USyd)

Background and data sources

The USyd relies heavily on significant international student revenue. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, in 2018, domestic students at USyd accounted for 62% and international students 38%, of which 71% were born in North-East Asia (China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, Russian Far East and Siberia) (The USyd, 2018). At the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, the university employed a series of public communication channels to engage its staff and students, including an official online "gateway" for all information relating to COVID-19 (www. sydney.edu.au/study/coronavirus-infection-university-of-sydney-advice. html), the VC's frequent written updates in the form of letters directly to staff and students (www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/01/28/ coronavirus-infection-university-of-sydney-statement.html), and the VC's video messages to Chinese international students in Mandarin Chinese on the University of Sydney Centre in China WeChat official account (e.g. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/aOT1fkD-Pr6jK5aRhIwd0g).

A preliminary examination indicates that the USyd COVID-19 website just served as an information platform in response to the pandemic and that engagement with students was not obviously observed. Engagement was more apparent in two types of texts: (1) COVID-19 updates from the VC for students in letter format at varied intervals during the different phases of the disruptions (from 5 February to 14 May 2020) and (2) video messages featuring the VC speaking in Mandarin Chinese to Chinese international students (from 18 February to 3 April 2020). These texts were selected as the data for analysis as shown below.

Findings from the linguistic texts

Findings from the analysis of nine COVID-19 updates in letter format from the VC to students are summarised in Table 6.4. The VC tended to provide emotional support to the affected students by using a personalised form of communication. For example, all the updates were in the form of a letter, starting with "Dear students", and ending with "Yours", VC's first name and then formal signoffs. The most common role that the university played during this period was Informing students about the current situation with COVID-19 and their university course (45%). This could be broken down into university communication that students were just expected to Receive (25%), and information students were expected to engage with behaviourally (19%) and cognitively (1%). The second most common role that the university took on during these three months was Supporting (35%). The VC's written updates were designed to support students and get them to engage behaviourally (17%), emotionally (16%) or cognitively (2%). The third most common university role, evident in

Table 6.4 USyd's communicative acts and student engagement

Wcommunicative acts	International students' engagement	COVID-19 updates in letter format									Subtotal	Total
		5 Feb	7 Feb	14 Feb	6 Mar	13 Mar	17 Mar	7 Apr	7 Apr to HDR	14 May		
Requiring	Behavioural	2	1		1	3	2		4		13	13
	Emotional											
	Cognitive											
Advising	Behavioural	2	3	1	5	10	4	1	12		38	40
	Emotional											
	Cognitive					1	1				2	
Informing	Behavioural	3	5	6	7	4	9	5	5	5	49	118
	Emotional											
	Cognitive			1	1				1		3	
	Receiving	3	17		7	9	8	4	4	14	66	
Supporting	Behavioural	5	2	3	14		4	7	5	3	43	89
	Emotional	4	3	5	7	6	5	5	4	3	42	
	Cognitive					1	3				4	
Total		19	31	16	42	34	36	22	35	25	260	260

the VC's updates in letter format, was Advising (15%), with students advised to engage with the information contained in these letters behaviourally (14%) or cognitively (1%). The least common university role in the VC's updates in letter format was Requiring, with students expected to engage behaviourally (5%).

With regard to the different phases of the COVID-19 outbreak, February 2020 (the early phase) saw the university's role as mainly providing information (53%) and support (33%) to the students. With the Informing by the university, the students were expected to just Receive the information (57%) and engage behaviourally (40%) or cognitively (3%). With the support provided by the university, the students were expected to engage behaviourally (45%) or emotionally (55%).

March 2020 (beginning of the critical phase) saw the rapid spread of COVID-19 in Australia. With confirmed cases being identified on USyd campus, all the units of study were moved online. The VC's updates in this month were clearly longer than those in other months. Out of the 260 instances of communicative acts in these nine letters, 66 were in February, 112 in March and 82 in April/May 2020. While the total number of engagement instances nearly doubled in March 2020, the university's roles were still Informing (40%), Supporting (36%) and Advising (19%), all of which were noticeably higher than those in the earlier phase.

April/May 2020 saw the easing phase of the pandemic in Sydney. The university's roles in April/May 2020 continued to be Informing (46%) and Supporting (33%). Students were expected to Receive information without further engagement (58%), or engage behaviourally (39%) or cognitively (3%) with it. The students were also expected to engage with the support provided by the university behaviourally (56%) and emotionally (44%).

A personalised and intimate style was used in the updates, with the use of salutations and closings when providing the latest information and offers of firm support, the use of the first person singular "I" and plural "We" when demonstrating the actions taken by the university, and the use of second person "you" used in every possible circumstance to engage closely with the students. In addition, only high or medium modality words (e.g. "must", "should", "will") were used across all the written updates to demonstrate the strength of support and the certainty of information that the university was providing during the rapidly changing situation.

Findings from video messages

It was a unique practice for a VC of an Australian university to speak directly to Chinese international students in their own language (Mandarin Chinese) using WeChat, a social media platform widely used by the students in their home country. The VC's talks were featured as a series of video messages about 1–2 minutes each, highlighting the key

information that students needed to know. Three of the video messages (see Figure 6.3), delivered between 18 February 2020 and 3 April 2020, by the VC in Mandarin Chinese, were selected to compare and contrast the differentiated discursive strategies taken by the VC in response to the changes amid the pandemic.

Video 1 (18 February 2020) was the first video message delivered by the VC at the very outset of the pandemic. It features a dark office setting with a shuttered window, while the background is subdued to highlight the VC, who is in a dark suit and a dark blue tie. He has a serious and worried look with a direct gaze during his delivery. He is positioned at the centre of the screen, while leaning slightly to the left. The distance of the shot is generally medium to close with a horizontal and frontal angle. The interpersonal involvement with the audience is very high, earnest and concerned. During the delivery, he pauses on key words and gestures with his hands to highlight key points every now and again. In this video message, the university roles are mainly Informing, Supporting and Advising, while the student engagement is Receiving, Emotional and Behavioural.

Video 2 was delivered on 12 March 2020, when the pandemic was spreading widely in China and Wuhan became the first city to be put into lockdown. The setting of the video is a bright office with a shelf featuring books and Chinese artefacts (e.g. a Chinese vase). A heart-shaped sign on the left of the screen features "加油中国" (stay strong China) and two lines of Chinese on the right bottom read "共抗疫情，武汉加油" (Fight the pandemic together, Stay strong Wuhan). The VC is in a dark suit with a violet-red tie. He is positioned slightly to the right of the screen, and leans backward in a relaxed position, while he directs his gaze and has a warm, smiling expression. The distance of the shot is medium to close, with a horizontal and frontal angle. The interpersonal involvement with the audience is very high, earnest and concerned. During the delivery, he pauses on key words and makes gestures with his hands to highlight the university's strength and support every now and again. In this video, the university role is mainly Supporting, while the student engagement is Emotional.

Video 3 was delivered on 3 April 2020, when the lockdowns were easing in both Australia and China. The setting of the video is an office with campus views through the window and the background is subdued to highlight the VC. The VC is in a bright shirt and a grey tie. He is positioned at the centre of the screen and is leaning slightly to the left. He has a direct gaze and a caring and concerned look. While the distance of the shot is medium to close, at 0.26 minute (of the video) the camera suddenly zooms in to his head and shoulders when he says, "the university provides financial and scholarship support" and pulls back out again at 0.36 minute when he stops talking about this topic. The point of view is at a horizontal, frontal angle. The interpersonal involvement with the audience is very high, earnest and concerned. During the delivery,

Video 1: 18, February 2020

你们可以选择整个学期都在网上学习

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/aOT1fkD-Pr6jK5aRhIwd0g

Video 2: 12 March 2020

加油中国
Stay Strong China

Dr Michael Spence
Vice-Chancellor
00:08 /01:36

同学们，我们正常通过你们
dear students, we are all there in touch.

共抗疫情
武汉加油

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

Video 3: 3 April 2020

希望你已经适应在线学习的方式，

Dr Michael Spence
Vice-Chancellor
00:05 /01:29

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/-zsY_Q-0Yfe97ecTYMOlFw

Figure 6.3 VC speaking to international student viewers in Mandarin Chinese.

he pauses on key words. In this video message, the university roles are mainly Informing, Supporting and Advising, while the student engagement is Receiving, Emotional and Behavioural.

Multimodal aspects of the VC's video messages were well prepared to complement the linguistic messages that the VC was delivering. The settings of the videos are all in an office with different outside backgrounds, linking the internal setting (the office) to the outside world, including the Sydney campus (e.g. 3 April 2020) and China (e.g. 12 March 2020). The VC's attire and facial expressions are well matched to the settings and the linguistic information that he is delivering, highlighting the changes of emphasis during the pandemic and the support provided by the university. In the first video message (18 February 2020), when the pandemic broke out in China, the setting of the video, as well as the VC's attire and his way of speaking, underlines the seriousness of the situation and the possible support provided by the university. Along with the development of the situation, the VC's attire becomes more informal, with casual bright red and light blue ties replacing very formal dark blue ties. The video settings are also brighter and more open to the world outside. All of this, including the VC's use of Mandarin Chinese in the video messages, indicates the endeavours made by the university to engage international students in a deeper and more effective manner.

Discussion and conclusions

We began the study by asking how Australian universities engaged their international students amid the COVID-19 pandemic and how a situated discursive practice perspective could shed more light on university and student engagement. Our case studies of the engagement practices of the University of New England, Curtin University, and the University of Sydney, through their public communications, indicate that all three focal universities displayed high levels of pastoral care for their international students. This is attested in the large number of Informing and Supporting communicative acts observed in the communications of the universities and the larger number of such communicative acts at critical stages of the pandemic. The focus of the universities, through the communicative efforts of key academics such as the VCs, indicates a university stance which values connection, greater intimacy and caring, which is in line with the literature which calls for a re-humanising of university academics and their intersubjective experiences with students (Gilmore & Warren, 2007).

However, other roles included in Cognitive engagement, such as promoting thinking, critiquing and reflecting, were downplayed by all three universities. This is evident in the minimal Cognitive engagement instances identified in the linguistic and visual texts. While a calibrated degree of action is to be expected in these extraordinary times of an unprecedented, urgent, high-risk situation, where rules need to be conveyed

and obeyed for the safety of all, and where student mental health is at stake, this stance still challenges the accepted role of universities as encouragers and promoters of critical thinking, in particular, during a crisis situation. This critique resonates with Zepke's (2018) call to take student engagement beyond prevailing neoliberal practices of focusing on engagement for practical ends (e.g. pastoral care to enhance student emotional experience), to encourage students to be reflexive of prevailing practices and to ask questions about purposes and values of engagement. What will be interesting to see is if the universities continue their Informing, Requiring, Advising and Supporting stances post COVID-19 circumstances, at the expense of encouraging and stimulating more Cognitive student responses. Just as the Australian public is now resenting the "big brother" approach of the Australian government to lockdowns and raising their voices against the Informing, Advising, Requiring and Supporting messages coming through to them from all spheres, students may find their critical voice once they tire of COVID constraints or when the crisis subsides.

Our study also demonstrates that the perspective of situated discursive practice provides a viable way of analysing student engagement in naturally occurring interactions forming the basis for important engagement practices at Australian universities. By analysing public communications with international students, in terms of communicative acts and dimensions of engagement, we are able to specify the roles and responsibilities that are constructed for the university and, in particular, the international student in the nexus of their interactions. This critical discourse analysis explicitly highlights how engagement involves both the university and the student in a joint undertaking, which has immediate and far-reaching consequences (Kahu, 2013; Kettle, 2021) and provides insights at the ground level into the ways in which multimodal communication can be used to achieve different communicative ends.

Multimodal texts in the form of photographs and video messages have value added to many dimensions of meaning, in particular, interpersonal and compositional meanings. At a time when student engagement was pivotal, universities opted even more for these powerful multimodal texts to combat the educational disruptions and uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There may, of course, be a more practical reason for the use of video messages at USyd and Curtin University, where larger numbers of international students mean there is more at stake for the universities and therefore a higher level of investment on their part is required. USyd obviously has a greater share of Chinese students and, therefore, while efforts to communicate with all international students on their campus were made, Chinese students, in particular, were extremely well supported with multimodal material translated into their first language. The videos show these universities attempting to reach out to international students in an unprecedented empathic way, highlighting the capacity of Australian universities to develop a human face, with the

professional and personal entangled with one another and the university becoming more of a "moral guide", something normally associated with educational institutions in Asia (Phan, 2008, p. 6) and a role with which many international students from Asia would be familiar. It will be interesting to interview international students from Asia about their reactions to these efforts.

In this chapter, we have demonstrated how three Australian universities employed a range of texts, communicative acts and multimodal resources to engage students, and particularly international students, through public communication channels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using multimodal discourse analysis, we made visible the tacit discursive strategies and practices that can be used by universities to connect with their students. It seems VCs can become more than just figure heads and enact integral communications directly with students, showing empathy and understanding for students' experiences in the process. This greater focus on directly supporting students in more explicit and accessible ways should not be dismissed when COVID-19 is relegated to the backbenches of experience. Hopefully, these explicitly informing and supporting approaches can also be complemented by the more cognitive approaches expected of a university once the conditions of urgency subside.

References

Askehave, I. (2007). The impact of marketization on higher education genres: The international student prospectus as a case in point. *Discourse Studies, 9*(6), 723–742.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.

Casanave, C. P. (2015). Case studies. In B. Paltridge, & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource* (pp. 119–135). Bloomsbury.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge University Press.

Curtin University. (n.d.). *Curtin University student statistics 2015-2019*. https://planning.curtin.edu.au/stats/student_stats.cfm.

Giannoni, D. S. (2018). An investigation of value claims in academic and corporate "About us" texts. *Applied Linguistics, 39*(3), 328–351.

Gilmore, S., & Warren, S. (2007). Emotion online: Experiences of teaching in a virtual learning environment. *Human Relations, 60*(4), 581–608.

Hyde, M. (2017). Creating inclusive schools. In M. Hyde, L. Carpenter, & S. Dole (Eds.), *Diversity, inclusion and engagement* (3rd ed., pp. 395–409). Oxford University Press.

Hyde, M., Carpenter, L., & Dole, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Diversity, inclusion and engagement* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 758–773.

Kettle, M. (2021). Conceptualising the complexity of international student engagement: Antecedents, actions and accomplishments. In Z. C. Zhang, T. Grimshaw, & X. S. Shi (Eds.), *International student education in tertiary*

settings: Interrogating programs and processes in diverse contexts (pp. 107–124). Routledge.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Lawson, M.A., & Lawson, H. A. (2013). New conceptual frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3), 432–479.

O'Halloran, K. L. (2004). *Multimodal discourse analysis: Systemic functional perspectives*. Continuum.

O'Halloran, K. L., Wignell, P., & Tan, S. (2015). Online university branding: A multimodal social semiotic approach. In G. Rossolatos (Ed.), *Handbook of brand semiotics* (pp. 280–327). Kassel University Press GmbH.

Phan, L. H. (2008). *Teaching English as an international language: Identity, resistance and negotiation*. Multilingual Matters.

Reich, W. (2011). The cooperative nature of communicative acts. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43*(5), 1349–1365.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.

Simons, H. (2009). *Case study research in practice*. Sage.

Stake, R. F. (2006). *The art of case study*. Sage.

Student Experience Survey (SES). (2020). *2019 student experience survey: National report*. www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/ses/ses-2019/2019-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=6486ec3c_2

Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case study research: What, why and how?* Sage.

Teo, P., & Ren, S. (2019). Marketization of universities in China: A critical discourse analysis of the university president's message. *Discourse & Communication, 13*(5), 539–561.

The University of New England [UNE]. (2020). *Previous updates*. www.une.edu.au/coronavirus-information-old/previous-updates.

The University of New England [UNE]. (2021). *Why choose UNE*. www.une.edu.au/study/international/why-choose-UNE.

The University of Sydney [USyd]. (2018). *Cultural and linguistic diversity at the University: A discussion paper*. (Internal unpublished document).

The University of Sydney [USyd]. (2020). *A message from the Vice Chancellor on 7 February 2020*. https://communications.sydney.edu.au/link/id/zzzz5e3cc68070434849Pzzzz5d92c3b5c3d65072/page.html.

Zepke, N. (2018). Student engagement in neo-liberal times: What is missing? *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(2), 433–446.

Zhang, Z. C., Tan, S., Wignell, P., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2020). Addressing international students on Australian and Chinese university webpages: A comparative study. *Discourse, Context & Media, 36*, 1–13.