



University of
South Australia

SUBMISSION

COVID-19 Response Inquiry

CRICOS 00121B

Executive Summary

The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry*.

This submission offers a number of practical ideas for a future pandemic response effort as well as commentary on some of the policy decisions made by Government, and their impact on the Higher Education sector, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key health response measures (for example across COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments, key medical supplies such as personal protective equipment, quarantine facilities, and public health messaging)

The interconnection of university health and medical research with statewide clinical services needs to be considered if lockdowns are considered, or definitions of essential services are proposed.

A nationwide network of clean facilities for GMP short run production of vaccines will help to mitigate against supply chain failure

Consideration might be given to the development of a nation-wide app with functionality such as;

- Information on nationwide restrictions with capacity to drill down to State or Territory level restrictions and quarantine requirements;
- Reporting of individual illness status and capability for receiving test results, and storing vaccination status;
- Testing or treatment centre search functionality;
- Advice for travellers – incoming and outgoing – with multiple language and accessibility options.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the impost of having to provide items such masks, air purifiers, gloves etc to members of a very large University community means that funds otherwise allocated to the infrastructure support, teaching, learning and support of students are out of necessity diverted. While it may be impractical and impossible for the Commonwealth to provide funding to mitigate this eventuation, making available some of these key supplies more generally in the community through other outlets, would support any sector.

Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and/or lockdowns (for example mental health and suicide prevention supports, and access to screening and other preventive health measures)

UniSA considers free testing and treatment options to be vital in ensuring equity of access in monitoring and containment efforts. Similarly, a nation-wide mental health service would be instrumental in ensuring this vital support is available in a more equitable way.

Support for industry and businesses (for example responding to supply chain and transport issues, addressing labour shortages, and support for specific industries).

The panic buying witnessed in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic was related in part to a greater perception in the community of 'scarcity'.¹ As well as supporting industry and the supply

¹ David J, Visvalingam S, Norberg MM. Why did all the toilet paper disappear? Distinguishing between panic buying and hoarding during COVID-19. *Psychiatry Res.* 2021 Sep;303:114062. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2021.114062. Epub 2021 Jun 17. PMID: 34175712; PMCID: PMC8520319.

chain and transport issues during a pandemic to ensure the sustained supply of basic goods to the Australian population, of importance is the messaging coming from the Commonwealth and State leaders around supply.

Financial support for individuals (including income support payments).

The impact of the exclusion of the higher education sector from JobKeeper payments, was that the casual staff whose roles could not be performed remotely/in virtual mode, were stood down for lockdown periods. This exclusion does not seem to recognise that the majority of University funding is not from the commonwealth or state government, but reflects student tuition fees which were seriously impacted by COVID and which resulted in significant losses of staff at a time when Universities were pivoting very to new forms of delivery and having to step in to provide social and financial support services to students.

Department of Education data shows that international education is worth \$26.6billion to the Australian economy.² Given the importance of international students to Australia, any future Australian Government response should include support of international students who remain onshore, assisting students who wish to return home, and procedurally facilitating the return of these students to Australia following border openings so that their studies are not negatively impacted. This would include appropriate provisions for international students with regards to their visa status. The pandemic highlighted the financial predicament for international students who remained onshore, and rely on casual work to support their living costs. While some Universities were able to offer small relief payments to international students, this was temporary and varied across the sector. International students should be afforded the same support as that offered to domestic students to ensure the sustainability Australia's international education industry.

Community supports (across early childhood education and care, higher education, housing and homelessness measures, family and domestic violence measures in areas of Commonwealth Government responsibility).

The prevalence of food insecurity increased during Covid-19 exacerbated by the drop of income for some in the community, including those in the higher education sector as outlined above. The higher education sector is unable to provide the basic living needs of its community members who might need support during a pandemic. A holistic response plan that includes Government, providers and other community sectors would be beneficial for future pandemic, or similar, emergencies.

Many returning international students had to go into quarantine on arrival in Australia. Some jurisdictions have invested in purpose built quarantine accommodation which would be suitable for these students. However, future student accommodation buildings ideally would be dual purpose, and designed to act as quarantine accommodation in epidemic situations. In other words, the layout, and in particular the air circulation should be designed with quarantine in mind.

² Department of Education, International Education Data and Research, webpage <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/education-export-income-2021-calendar-year#:~:text=International%20education%20is%20worth%20%2426.6,Australia%20due%20to%20travel%20restrictions.>

³ Kent, K., Murray, S., Penrose, B. *et al.* The new normal for food insecurity? A repeated cross-sectional survey over 1 year during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* **19**, 115 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-022-01347-4>

Additionally, a strategy that engaged creative and health researchers to deliver meaningful interactions within the community could provide mental health benefits as well as supporting local artists and strengthening the connection between arts and health research and practice.

Mechanisms to better target future responses to the needs of particular populations (including across genders, age groups, socio-economic status, geographic location, people with disability, First Nations peoples and communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities).

In the tertiary sector during the pandemic, complying with state or federal based instructions to move into lockdown at pace, impacted many students in different cohorts who were deprived of access to campuses for study purposes. There are students whose living arrangements do not support appropriate 'study from home' spaces (perhaps due to overcrowding, lack of internet, lack of discrete space etc) and who rely on access to campus facilities. Universities can mitigate the impacts on students to some extent, through flexibility in deadlines, support services such as counselling, and access, disability support and support for First Nations students, but alone are unable to provide the very real practical support required by the most vulnerable populations in times of a pandemic.

Many students in these cohorts do not own their own laptop / personal computer, and while Universities can provide a certain quantity of loan laptops, Universities are not equipped to provide every student who needs one, with a loan laptop. A potential mechanism to support these students might include access to Commonwealth funds outside of pandemic conditions, to purchase a laptop, and the amount of which might be added to their HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP loan amount.

Conclusion

UniSA considers the higher education sector to be a valuable resource to the Australian Government and community during a pandemic, or similar, crisis providing academic expertise and research and development.

Ensuring the sustainability of Australia's international education sector requires a coordinated consistent and supportive response with similar considerations for international students as domestic students receive.

Finally, excluding universities from support measures such as jobkeeper constrains the ability of institutions to maintain the necessary staff required for valuable research, and to support students experiencing a range of difficulties.



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