

Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry



Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic represented one of the most significant and sustained critical incidents ever faced by the University of Melbourne. Like many organisations, the University had to respond rapidly in an environment where communications were often opaque and Government directions were sometimes unclear, untimely or contradictory. The pandemic required Universities to be adaptive and responsive, shifting to remote working and remote teaching and learning virtually overnight.

The impact on students was significant. Student satisfaction declined nationally as they were denied a typical campus-based university experience. International students were disproportionately affected, with many located outside of Australia following the border closures. Those that remained caught in Australia were unable to access the same safety nets as citizens and became increasingly reliant on food relief and financial assistance from universities and charities.

Throughout the pandemic, University expertise was highly valued and elevated. The University of Melbourne demonstrated leadership in advancing scientific understanding of the virus, informing public policy, and driving pandemic recovery. At the same time, university research faced significant challenges. Lockdowns and social distancing requirements forced many researchers to pause their work, as access to laboratories and other facilities was restricted. Declining student income, exacerbated by universities' exclusion from the JobKeeper initiative, reduced available funding for research.

Australia's experience during the pandemic demonstrated the importance of sustained, long-term investment in research. Institutions currently being planned, such as the Australian Centre for Disease Control, the Australian Institute for Infectious Disease (AIID), and the Cumming Global Centre for Pandemic Therapeutics (Cumming Centre), will play a key role in improving our pandemic and public health preparedness. **It is therefore crucial that the Government significantly increase its funding for research over time to ensure sovereign capability and capacity.**

The establishment of National Cabinet was a significant development, providing a mechanism to coordinate responses nationally. Yet, significant pandemic powers rest with State and Territory Governments. At times, this led to inconsistency and confusion. Organisations such as universities were particularly impacted by this due to their operations across interstate and international borders. To address this, **it is essential that Governments work together to establish and agree a national pandemic plan to ensure a more coordinated and cohesive response in future.**

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Impact on the University

On 22 January 2020, the University convened a critical incident team to address the potential impact of COVID on the University community and its operations. At the time it was notable that there was no Government direction on appropriate response strategies. As a result, the University's focus in the first few months was on preparedness around operating procedures for a range of scenarios. On 16 March, Victoria declared a State of Emergency, and the University transitioned to remote operations on 23 March 2020. The University's incident response formally ran for 919 consecutive days.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the University was significant and represents one of the most substantive and sustained critical incidents ever faced by the organisation. The impact was financial, health-related, experiential, and operational, and continues to shape the University's activities today. UoM has over 70,000 students and 12,500 staff, across multiple locations, including globally. The impact of COVID-19 was therefore enormous given the scale and complexity of this University, akin to a large metropolitan city.

According to the ABS, education sector revenue almost halved over the course of the pandemic from \$40.3 billion in 2019 to \$22.5 billion in 2021. For the University of Melbourne, the financial impact was equally substantial with a ~\$850m loss associated with the pandemic across 2020 to 2023. Universities faced specific challenges as the Federal Government changed JobKeeper eligibility settings three times in 2020 to ensure public universities (and their staff) were ineligible. While the University reported a surplus in 2021 due to a reduction in spending of \$254m and a one-off Research Support Program grant of \$111m (discussed below), results in 2022 showed an operating deficit of \$104m. A deficit is again forecast in 2023 and likely in 2024.

Internal surveys in 2020 and 2021 highlighted a mixed impact on staff. Many staff (particularly women and part-time workers) noted the benefits of increased flexibility, reduced commutes, and an improved work-life balance. However, many

felt a greater sense of disconnection from peers and co-workers, less ability to separate 'work' and 'home', and challenges delivering content to students remotely. For those with school-aged children, extended school lockdowns created stress for staff trying to manage work and supervision of children.

The operational impact on the University was significant and wide-ranging. This included new onsite requirements such as sanitizer stations, ventilation reviews and adjustments, additional cleaning, COVIDSafe wayfinding information, provision of masks and RATs, as well as infrastructure to support and enable remote working, learning and service delivery. These operational impacts were compounded by the Government's slow rollout of vaccines (which did not consider employers as distributors) and failure to prepare for the Omicron outbreak through adequate supply of RATs (the University paid \$2.4m for RATs in February 2022 following a national shortage).

Impact on students

Students' satisfaction with their overall experience fell dramatically in 2020. Nationally, the percentage of higher education students reporting a quality educational experience dropped from 78.5% in 2019 to 68.7% in 2020. Student ratings of learner engagement and learning resources both dropped significantly. Student experience results have begun to recover but the long tail of the pandemic impacts could still be seen in 2022 survey results.

International students were disproportionately affected during the pandemic. Initially, there was significant confusion after the Federal Government banned entry to Australia from 1 February 2020 for foreign nationals who had been in mainland China within the past 14 days. This caused issues for universities with significant numbers of Chinese students and staff.

Eventually, Australia closed its borders to all non-citizens and non-residents, forcing many students to study remotely from overseas or to defer their studies. By the end of 2021, international student commencements had almost halved nationally, and enrolments had dropped by a quarter compared to pre-pandemic levels. This was arguably exacerbated by the federal Government telling students to return home and increased reports from students of race-based discrimination.

Many international students who remained in Australia faced significant financial challenges as they were often in low-paid, insecure employment without access to the same safety nets as citizens (such as JobKeeper or JobSeeker payments) when their jobs disappeared. As a result, almost half of international students reported that their financial circumstances had had a negative effect on their studies in 2020 (compared to 22 per cent of domestic students).

Universities, local governments and charities, were forced to fill this gap. The University of Melbourne offered food relief and financial assistance of up to \$7500 for students facing financial hardship due to COVID. The University also expanded scholarships for international students, connected with offshore students through Study Hubs in several international cities, and offered further counselling and psychological support. At a time of budgetary constraint, these expenses were critical.

Programs such as 'Our Shout', a food voucher program run by the City of Melbourne and Queen Victoria Market and supported by the State and some Victorian universities, provided food vouchers to approximately 10,000 international students. SecondBite provided meals to our students.

Those living in student accommodation experienced additional challenges, as health restrictions did not account for those types of living arrangements. With international students isolated and living in a foreign country, restricted to small studio apartments, and dealing with the stresses of interrupted study experiences, there was a rise in mental health concerns and very little scope for support beyond the University.

Students also played an active role in filling skills shortages during the pandemic. For example, in 2020, the Victorian Government asked medical schools to put forward students for a surge health workforce. Within 24 hours, almost every student in the Melbourne Medical School had signed up, filling a key gap as Australia approached a peak in infections.

Impact on research and the role of universities as sources of expertise

During the pandemic, the University played a major role as a source of expertise for Governments and the broader community. Some examples are provided below:

- In January 2020, scientists from the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity were **the first to successfully grow COVID-19 from a patient sample outside of China**. Sharing this discovery promptly allowed accurate investigation and diagnosis of the virus globally. The Doherty also led a national consortium modelling scenarios of pandemic outcomes to assist policymakers in guiding Australia's way out of lockdowns.
- In 2021, the University launched its website, **VaxFACTS**, which featured a series of simple videos for a public audience providing answers to common questions and concerns about COVID-19 vaccines in Australia.
- The **BREATH research project**, led by the City of Melbourne in partnership with the University and Cbus Property, found that simple changes to ventilation systems significantly decreased the transmission of COVID-19.

- The **Medihood ‘McMonty’**, a personal ventilation hood for use in hospitals, was developed in the first year of the pandemic by [REDACTED]. The device, developed to significantly reduce risks of COVID-19 transmission in hospitals, has since been adopted for use in other clinical areas.
- The Future of Work Lab published a report, led by [REDACTED] revealing **significant changes to working patterns** in regional Victoria since the onset of COVID-19.
- In December 2022, findings from the HILDA Survey were released, revealing that unprecedented emergency income support led to **significant declines in inequality in Australia** with the largest fall in the survey’s 20-year history.

University experts offered advice through media appearances. For example, [REDACTED] made regular appearances in the news, informing the public at a time when misinformation and fear were rife.

Victorian Government restrictions recognised the need to maintain research momentum in key areas that related directly to the pandemic, allowing University staff to provide ongoing care for animals and maintain sensitive equipment, for example.

Nevertheless, research and development faced major challenges. Lockdowns and social distancing requirements meant that researchers had limited access to laboratories and major research facilities, sometimes resulting in major delays. For example, 80% of health and medical researchers reported in a November 2020 survey that COVID-19 had had negative impacts on their research. Many academics also found that their teaching workload grew as curricula and teaching methods were redeveloped for online learning and students required additional support, impacting on their research productivity. While it is difficult to measure, these factors arguably impacted the career progression of researchers – particularly early- and mid-career researchers.

The decision to exclude universities from JobKeeper was compounded by the introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates package in 2020, which stripped \$1 billion per year from the sector through reduced Commonwealth Grants Scheme (CGS) funding. This exacerbated the existing gap between Government funding and the full economic costs of research. While the Government made a one-off payment of \$1 billion through the Research Support Program in 2021, this essentially returned (for a limited time) Government support that had previously been cut from the sector.

The role of universities during the pandemic has highlighted the importance of sufficient long-term funding for all forms of research (basic and applied, STEMM and HASS). The University therefore recommends that the Government commit to significantly increasing its investment in research over time, to build a broad and deep base of expertise.

Future planning

The pandemic has demonstrated it is crucial that Australia invests in greater pandemic preparedness and research. The University is playing its part through the development of the AIID and the Cumming Centre. The AIID is a visionary \$650 million project supported by the Victorian Government, which will bring together Australia’s leading infectious disease experts from the University, the Doherty Institute and the Burnet Institute. This new facility will house the largest critical mass of scientists and public health professionals in the Southern Hemisphere, coupled with state-of-the-art technologies and industry partnerships needed to protect Australia and the Asia-Pacific region from global health issues. The AIID is a response to many critical research infrastructure and capability gaps identified in Australia’s response to COVID-19.

The Cumming Centre will provide long-term mission-based funding to researchers to develop novel platform technologies for therapeutics for pathogens of pandemic potential. This will provide a critical ‘second shield’ to protect society in the event of another COVID-type event. This will be made possible in part by the exceptional generosity of international businessman and philanthropist, [REDACTED] who donated \$250 million to establish the Centre, representing the largest philanthropic donation to medical research in Australia’s history.

The University welcomes the Government’s commitment to establish an Australian Centre for Disease Control, which will improve Australia’s preparedness for public health emergencies. However, beyond the CDC, it is important that a national pandemic plan is developed and agreed to by the Federal and State and Territory Governments. This should involve a clear decision-making framework, including a model for border closures and the use of lockdowns.

Some of the greatest challenges during the pandemic arose from the lack of coordination between Governments, inconsistency in responses, and confusion over where responsibilities lay. National Cabinet helped to coordinate the health responses between the States and Territories. However, this was not without issues. Due to Australia’s federated system, many major decisions were the responsibility of States and Territories. As highlighted by the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, this led to mixed messaging early on and undermined the cohesiveness of National Cabinet. This lack of unanimity caused significant issues for universities that generally work across State and national borders. The University therefore urges the Commonwealth (and National Cabinet) to prioritise the development of a comprehensive, evidence-informed pandemic plan to prevent these issues in future.