



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 2021 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA (Chair), Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response

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Select Committee on the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response

Opening statement

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I am pleased to provide an opening statement to assist the Committee in understanding the experience of The Australian National University during the recent COVID-19 outbreak in the ACT.

Over the past two years, the management of the pandemic has provided an opportunity for ANU, a Commonwealth institution, to work closely with the ACT Government. The overall relationship between the University and the ACT Government is stronger now for the collaboration that has occurred due to the pandemic. I would like to recognise senior staff in the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate for their open communication and willingness to engage.

While ANU enjoys strong relationships with the ACT Government at operational levels, a stronger understanding of the strategic position of the Chief Health Officer, who is the primary decision-maker on issues such as exemptions to border closures and quarantine requirements, would have improved our ability to communicate clearly to our students on when and how they might return to the ACT.

ANU respects the requirement for the ACT Government to make decisions in the broader public health interest. We acknowledge that the Government must balance competing priorities, however we suggest that future approaches to pandemic management should consider how to clearly communicate strategic intent.

It was planned that I would be joined today by my colleague [REDACTED] who has led the ANU COVID-19 response since the initial outbreak last year. [REDACTED] is not able to be here today but I would like to acknowledge her important role in managing the University's engagement with the ACT Government and overseeing the implementation of public health measures on our campus.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant adverse impact on the Australian higher education system. The ANU experience is no different.

With more than 20,000 students and 4,500 staff, ANU is a significant part of the Canberra community and the local economy. It is consistently Australia's highest ranked university and one of the top universities in the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected ANU in many ways.

Our teaching and research has been interrupted by closures of our campus.

Our academic staff have been required to introduce a range of digital and remote teaching practices overnight.

Our staff have been asked to work from home for extended periods.

Our students have been separated from their teachers, their homes and each other by border closures, international and domestic.

While each of these challenges has been difficult, confronting them has strengthened our resolve and our ability to deliver improved education services by blending digital and in-person learning experiences.

The timing of the 2021 Delta variant outbreak saw almost 1000 domestic ANU students unable to return to Canberra for the duration of the lockdown after leaving the ACT during the semester break.

This situation was difficult for ANU to manage, and led to anxiety and frustration amongst affected students and their families.

ANU put significant resources into trying to secure the ability of students to return to Canberra during August and September 2021, including proposing to utilise a residential hall on our campus as a quarantine facility. The University also provided affected students with access to a range of support services, and negotiated substantial financial relief packages with our commercial accommodation partners.

Despite this, ANU continues to suffer damage to its reputation and relationships with its community arising from a belief that it was the University that made the decision to lock our students out.

For our residential students who were in the ACT during the early stages of the Delta outbreak, ANU provided the following:

- Close cooperation with ACT Health at the working level to manage close, casual and secondary contacts; on campus exposure sites and positive cases in residential halls.
- More than 3,400 deliveries of meals and essential supplies to residential students in quarantine.
- Welfare and wellbeing checks for students with mental health risk factors, both in the ACT and interstate.
- Critical incident responses.
- An online program for social connections, academic support and wellbeing activities.

Since our international borders were closed in March 2020, ANU international student enrolments have fallen from 10,512 at the end of 2019, the last non-COVID year, to 8,333 today. This loss of around one-fifth of our enrolments is consistent with what has occurred across the sector.

Around 4,000 of these international students are about to complete their second full academic year of remote learning. Despite the efforts of the University and our staff to provide support, two years of isolation has been extremely difficult for many who face risks to their educational development or to their health and wellbeing as a result of being separated from their community.

While we are hopeful that international borders will reopen to our students ahead of the 2022 academic year, there is no certainty that Canberra and Australia can recover the international

market share lost to competitor destinations such as Canada and the UK while we have been inaccessible.

In 2020, in response to the initial COVID outbreak, ANU undertook a major restructuring which resulted in the loss of more than 400 staffing positions, or around ten per cent of our workforce. That year the University recorded a \$162 million operating loss, the largest in its history.

While painful, this early decision to develop and implement a recovery plan was necessary to put the University in a position to be financially sustainable in coming years. We will do this while maintaining our world-class standards for higher education and research. Further restructuring or additional cost savings as a result of the most recent lockdown in the second half of 2021 are not being sought.

Despite the difficulty of the last two years, ANU looks ahead to 2022 with a sense of optimism. The high vaccination rates achieved in the ACT and elsewhere have begun to see the opening of international borders. Lockdowns across the country are being lifted. Public health restrictions are being eased.

We aim to open Semester 1 next year with full in-person teaching, a return of public events, and an open campus filled with students from across Australia and the world.