

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Monday, 18 May 2020

Members

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WITNESS

Professor Margaret Gardner, President and Vice-Chancellor, Monash University (*via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: We welcome Professor Margaret Gardner, Vice-Chancellor of Monash University, to the hearing. Thank you for joining us today. We welcome you to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have asked that mobile telephones be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the Committee secretariat.

Thank you, Professor, for joining us today. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, your position and the organisation that you represent for broadcasting purposes. Then this will be followed by questions from the Committee members relative to their representation at the table. Thank you for joining us.

Prof. GARDNER: Thank you. Professor Margaret Gardner, President and Vice-Chancellor, Monash University. Thank you very much for inviting me to contribute to this Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. I will speak largely to the experience of Monash University, but I wish to emphasise that what is being experienced by Monash must be understood as representative of the experience of other large research universities in Victoria and Australia, and sharing the overall experience of public universities in Victoria and Australia.

Monash University is Victoria's and Australia's largest university. Monash recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous pressure on the State, its people and its finances. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Monash has been significant for education and research, and we are very concerned about its impacts on our students and on our staff. Our ability to provide support and employment to our students and staff is under severe pressure. The restrictions on international movement have seriously affected our budget. In 2020 alone, we are forecasting a revenue downturn of approximately \$350 million. This shortfall for this year is just the beginning of the impacts of reduced enrolments and declining economic activity in the nation and around the world—the impact that it will have on universities. The effects, we estimate, will be more severe in 2021 than in 2020, and will continue into 2022. We do not expect to experience any real effects of recovery until 2023. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the severest threat that has ever been experienced by Monash, by the tertiary sector and, I would suggest, by many other sectors in Victoria, not only in recent memory but for very, very many decades.

Monash is one of Victoria's leaders in education, innovation and research. In 2019 we enrolled over 87 000 students and we undertook what is close to \$1 billion in research and development. We are a large employer—we have around 18 000 direct employees—and we are a significant contributor to economic development through the businesses, large and small, that we support. As you all know, international education is Victoria's largest export sector. Independent analysis commissioned by Monash in 2018 showed that in the preceding year Monash's international education contributed \$2.3 billion into this export sector, and that contribution has been severely affected by COVID-19. Monash is part of the fabric of the State of Victoria. We are a not-for-profit public institution, the majority of whose expenditure is in Victoria. As a not-for-profit, we reinvest any surplus that we make into the education and research of the university, largely through employing staff, purchasing services or through the construction, maintenance and refurbishment of our campuses.

International education allows Monash to fund activities for which there are limited or no other sources of funding. This includes capital infrastructure that allows world-class education and research to take place and that also provides amenity that can be accessed and enjoyed by the community at large. When we enhance our

sporting fields or our performing arts facilities, the schools and communities around us use them and benefit from that expenditure. When we invest in our education and research by hiring and supporting world-class staff or by providing state-of-the-art buildings, IT or equipment, every one of our students, whether from Victoria or elsewhere, benefits. The spin-offs or startups that grow from our research contribute to Victoria's future; the research we do is the foundation for Victoria's innovation. Already Victoria is one of the places in the world to undertake—and is understood to be the place to undertake—high-quality clinical medical trials, because of the quality of our universities and our health system and the good relationships between them.

In this downturn we are making hard decisions that reduce our contribution and may seriously erode the future quality of what we do. This year alone we have reduced our capital works program by \$100 million, and more reductions will follow in 2021 and 2022. To give you an example of what we have shelved and deferred on a slightly long time line, that includes a new \$100 million medical education centre, principally for allied health—that is, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and the like. We have deferred a new \$120 million biomedical teaching facility, which was to be replacing old buildings, and a new \$170 million specialist AI and data science building in our engineering complex, which would also have replaced some older buildings. These were all facilities that would support world-class education and life-saving research, and none of them are at present likely to emerge.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sorry to interrupt you, but if I can stop you there, the time for the presentation has expired.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Professor, for your evidence here and for appearing before us today. I would also like to take the opportunity to ask you to thank your academic staff and those other important teaching staff and support workers, who are probably supporting students through what can be an incredibly difficult time.

Prof. GARDNER: Thank you.

Ms RICHARDS: Also, I am very conscious that some of the researchers and clinicians are responding to the pandemic, so that is a credit to you. This is an opportunity for us together, through your evidence, to unpack a little bit of some of what you just provided in the presentation. I would like to begin by asking you what steps the university has taken to ensure that quality teaching and learning are maintained as students transition to online and remote arrangements?

Prof. GARDNER: Well, the university has transitioned all its students in this semester to online education. We have ensured that we have provided increased academic and counselling support. We have increased the number of people who are engaged in supporting our academics in providing their teaching and learning online. We have changed the plans and the way we interact with students to increase the number of times that we call them and make contact with them in order to reassure them and help them through this transition. It has been a significant effort. In fact the university has invested many, many millions extra this semester, despite the downturn in revenue, in actually providing that online education, and the academic and personal support that goes with it, to our students.

Ms RICHARDS: Can you tell me how the new arrangements are going? What has the experience been like? What is the feedback you are receiving?

Prof. GARDNER: Well, overall our students would prefer to be learning on campus—that is, those who are currently outside Australia and those who are inside Australia. However, to date, the feedback has been very positive on the quality of the support they have been provided. In fact they have been very appreciative. They have actually indicated that they feel stronger links to their academic staff in this context, I think, and have appreciated all the ways people have reached out to the students to try and help them through this experience. Yes, it is not their preferred mode of experiencing our degrees, but they at present seem to be travelling very well, given what is a major transformation.

Ms RICHARDS: Have you identified anything that could be done better? There must be so many things that you have learnt, but is there anything in particular you can identify that could be done?

Prof. GARDNER: The biggest issue that we have dealt with is actually the hardship that our students are experiencing because of the lack of employment. This is both domestic and international. Monash put in place a \$15 million financial and compassionate hardship fund for all our students, domestic and international, and to

date we have had over 16 000 applications to that fund, of which over 13 000 were from international students. The total dollar value of the requests made—and we offered students up to \$7500, depending on hardship—was more than \$49 million from that fund, and so we are very thankful that the Victorian Government has also put in place a \$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund, because it is needed. We are working with the charity SecondBite. We are distributing thousands of meals to our students through our campuses. So the biggest issue has been the significant impact they have felt in terms of financial hardship, and the second biggest impact is of course the feeling people have of isolation when they are kept at home. That requires much more contact, and we have done that by providing lots of individual calls and lots of individual support.

Ms RICHARDS: You have just touched on international students and international education, and I would like to unpack that a little bit more. How is the Victorian Government working with Monash University and the broader university sector to overcome the impact of COVID and help reactivate international education—acknowledging the evidence you just gave about the importance of the student relief package?

Prof. GARDNER: We have actually had very constructive and ongoing regular discussions with the Victorian Government, and that includes, obviously, the Department of Education and Training but also people from, basically, every other department with which we interact, from health through precincts and regions through Treasury. So it has actually been very full and engaged support, and they are working very hard with us to look at that question of how we might, you know, appropriately, recognising the health matters that need to be addressed, find ways to assist those students of ours who are currently enrolled with us and who are unable to join us on campus to come back and complete their degrees and have the sort of experience that they expected.

Ms RICHARDS: Unpacking it further again, or perhaps taking it down another path, you have spoken about the COVID impact on international education and on your institution, Monash. We acknowledge it is a very large institution. What about the likely impact on the broader Victorian economy of not getting international education up and running again? And again, I know you touched on this in your initial presentation; I am interested in discussing or hearing more about the other impacts that you think this will have.

Prof. GARDNER: I think they are really significant impacts. If I could, there have been some very good pieces of work done on the spillover effects of universities into their local economies, and they are quite significant. Put broadly, effectively for every dollar that an international student is spending inside a university there is effectively two of those dollars being spent in the broader community supporting a very wide range of sectors and jobs. And frankly they are an important part of our broader community and make a very, very big contribution.

The contribution that they make inside the university I really want to make clear to people. For example, my own university actually supports hundreds of small businesses on its campuses to which it is currently providing, in various ways, relief and support to keep them alive. We are purchasing all sorts of services all the time, so the spillover effect into the economy when we are unable to keep going is significant because large numbers of small businesses operating on our campuses or next to them actually derive their income from what we do. You know, it is many billions of dollars that is supplying jobs. They are the jobs of people who work in cleaning firms, in security firms and in construction firms. They are for people who are supplying all the many things that we buy to keep the university going and who have businesses in Victoria. It is a really, really big impact. It is of an order that I think has perhaps not been fully appreciated yet.

Ms RICHARDS: And I think back to my own time as a domestic student and the experience I had shoulder to shoulder with international students. Perhaps for domestic students that provides an opportunity for us to lift our eyes beyond our own horizons. Sometimes there are benefits that are harder to measure.

Prof. GARDNER: Well, actually we have evidence from our own student surveys where, controlling for a number of factors, we looked at the impact of having a significant number of international students in your classes. And it turns out that our students report higher levels of development of leadership skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking ability and problem-solving skills in classes that have significant numbers of international students than they do in classes that have no international students. And that is what employers tell me—that when they hire our Australian students across the world they are the sort of people who can lead multinational teams and work in multinational teams, and they are highly valued for those skills.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Professor. Late on Friday afternoon I had the opportunity to congratulate a couple of constituents of mine in Cranbourne who had received the Premier's VCE Awards—a couple of young women. You will be pleased to hear one of them just started at Monash this year. So one of my own high-achieving constituents has started at Monash, and we were discussing the consequences of transitioning from secondary school to university in these current situations. Have you got any insights on how the universities—Monash in particular but actually broadly universities—are supporting these students who are in this unusual situation?

Prof. GARDNER: I can talk about what Monash does. We have a program of regular calls to students to just ask them how they are. We are attempting to provide all sorts of ways that they can connect with one another virtually since all the standard other forms of connection on campus are not available to them. We have been buddying up students. We have a new amigo system of buddying up domestic students with international students who are offshore, again to give people a sense of what it is like to be on the campus—how someone else sees life—and to share their experiences. We have really increased dramatically the amount of individual calls we are making and ways we are trying to work with students to assist them to transition in what is a big transition for everyone. And, as I say, that has basically been done by just increasing the amount of person-to-person contact we make across the virtual space.

The university has also tried to support students who are disadvantaged. We know some will not have much space at home, will not have strong internet connections, will maybe not have much quiet for study, and we have kept highly regulated spaces but spaces in our main libraries available for students to be able to come in to get that bit of quiet, that stronger internet access, that bit of space, so that they are not disadvantaged by the circumstances they find themselves in when they have to be studying online at home. And of course our residences are still operating. We have thousands of students—regional and international—in our residences who are still on campus and using the campus and those libraries a bit for their space. They are all appropriately socially distanced and cleaned incredibly regularly, so we are following all of the health rules, as you would imagine. We have also kept our university health service open, our pharmacy, our supermarket, so a whole lot of other services are working to try and support people.

Ms RICHARDS: You gave evidence earlier that there is an additional need for deeper or greater support for students. How are you supporting them in terms of their mental wellbeing as well—those broader, more holistic needs that students have?

Prof. GARDNER: We have had quite a significant commitment not just in our health service to physical health but across our counselling services to mental health, and we have transitioned all that work online and so people are able to make contact online to get all that support, and we have kept all that support alive and attempted to make sure it is as easily accessible as is possible. We are actually trialling a new program called Thrive at Monash to see how we can even further augment that, recognising that sometimes recovery is as challenging as the initial process of lockdown.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you very much for your time.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Professor Gardner, for appearing today. With the transition for students to online learning, what has happened to PhD candidates and lots of other subjects where they require things like laboratory research and other things that you cannot really do from home? What has happened to those areas at the moment?

Prof. GARDNER: Well, the university did keep some of its laboratories alive, principally working in the biomedical space, where they were engaged in COVID-19-related and significant health research. But you are correct: a large number of other laboratories were closed temporarily. We have worked out schedules for how we can allow all those students who need practical laboratory studios to achieve that work in intensive periods later in the year when we anticipated that restrictions would ease, and we are working through implementing that at the moment. So we anticipate that we will be able to make up in intensive periods the practical work, if you like, in engineering and sciences and medical sciences that students were not able to get. And for the PhD students we are in the process, given the changing restrictions, in reopening, properly socially distanced, a number of other labs so we can get the PhD students back into the labs to assist them with their work.

We also, of course, will take into account the impacts of these delays on their progress. We have made a series of extensions possible to PhD scholarships. I might add, all these things are other costs in the face of declining income but we have done all those things to make sure that their progress will not be impeded. We are working extremely hard to make sure our students will be able to complete when they would have wished to complete with the sort of support they would have expected to get, albeit it might be for undergraduate students in more intensive periods and for the PhDs it might require a slight extension of some of their work.

Mr LIMBRICK: Back to international students, because that has been a big focus of your university of course and of the sector as a whole, we have heard about international students that have been staying in Australia and have had hardships, but also, I imagine, a proportion would have gone back to their home countries. What sort of proportion have just left the country that you are aware of?

Prof. GARDNER: I cannot tell you about the whole country.

Mr LIMBRICK: Of course, yes.

Prof. GARDNER: I do not have that sort of data in front of me. But of our students there are some thousands, a large proportion of whom were unable to come to Australia and some who left and returned. We are talking—on the estimates I think we have at the moment—of well over 6000 students who are studying from their home base and outside Australia but are studying for degrees where they would normally be on campus with us.

Mr LIMBRICK: They plan to come back once the borders are open and we are in a situation where that can happen?

Prof. GARDNER: We would encourage them to come back. How long they will wait, rather than take what they have done with us, defer and move to some other arrangement, is something we cannot entirely predict. It is certainly a question about how long someone will wait for an on-campus experience in the course of their degree when they might have expected it would be a few months and now the whole of first semester for those students will be online, and it is difficult to see at present any indication that they will be able to enter the country again before 2021—and even there we have presently no line of sight.

Mr LIMBRICK: That brings me to my next question, which is: I would imagine that the university would have an extensive system for maintaining a pipeline of new students coming in; what has this done to the pipeline of new students in 2021?

Prof. GARDNER: Monash is not unusual, but Monash has its own pathways college, which teaches English language, foundation and diploma courses. It is the largest of its type. It has had a 40 per cent decline in its revenue and a significant decline in its intakes. That pipeline is severely restricted in terms of students who can join us from that college next semester and the semester following that, so you are right about the pipeline. What is actually happening is that reduced students in 2020 first semester will be followed by more reduced students in 2020 second semester, which will be followed by more reduced student numbers in first semester 2021—and you can follow that for a very long while before you might see any upturn. It is why I said that you can expect that we will probably not see signs of recovery until 2023, and that is a very significant period of continuing restrictions on revenue and the outcomes that will have on our ability to do what we do: provide quality education and research.

Mr LIMBRICK: I think we are out of time. Thank you, Professor Gardner.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you very much, Ms Gardner, for your appearance today, particularly at short notice for what is a really important Inquiry that we are in conducting. I just want to refer to what you mentioned earlier to one of the other Committee members around the State Government's hardship package for international students, and of course Monash being, as you described, one of the biggest universities, I would imagine a significant proportion of that funding will go to students at Monash who are experiencing hardship. Has any of this money actually started flowing to any students at Monash yet?

Prof. GARDNER: Well, it is quite a complex process to actually get money to flow to students. Currently the State Government is in discussion with all the universities and all other providers as well as setting up their own systems for directly providing money to students. So those processes are underway. Monash put its

process in place quite quickly, but it took us some weeks to do that, and we have an established system for providing emergency and hardship grants to students. We had to more than quadruple the number of staff who are assessing these applications. We have got a team of about 50 staff assessing these applications to try and get moneys appropriately to students quickly.

Ms VALLENCE: So that is Monash, that is your hardship fund. How about the Government's hardship fund? If you are having discussions there with the Government, when would you expect that money to start being received by students at Monash?

Prof. GARDNER: I cannot give you a clear estimate on that, because I am not in that detailed discussion with them. But we are working very fast, and I expect it to be quite soon. I am anticipating that I will hear something about how this is being resolved in the next week or so.

Ms VALLENCE: All right. So nothing coming through yet, but hopefully very soon.

Prof. GARDNER: Yes. They have been working—everybody has been working—hard and fast.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. It is a very challenging situation. And in terms of the number of enrolments, you mentioned earlier around first-year students—and I know that you have made comments publicly around the number of first-year enrolled international students—have any of those actually cancelled altogether and would you expect those to re-enrol for next year?

Prof. GARDNER: So we do not have obviously the full estimate of those who cancelled or deferred for the whole year, because second-semester enrolments are not completed, but from the first semester over 6000 deferred or cancelled. So to give you an idea overall, overall we are down on what we expected by something like 16 per cent.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. And I think you have also mentioned about how the tertiary sector rebuild will be particularly challenging. What representations have you made so far or are there any suggestions you might have made to the State Government's education department or to the Premier's office on a joint approach to challenges for a whole-of-education-sector rebuild and particularly a response to the tertiary sector rebuild which, as you have mentioned, contributes significantly to our economy?

Prof. GARDNER: For the universities collectively there is a Victorian vice-chancellors committee, and as I have said, we have been in regular—in fact sometimes twice-weekly—discussion with bureaucrats about the sorts of things that we were experiencing immediately and also the things that will be necessary for recovery. We have collectively at the invitation of the State Government put suggestions about what will be needed in relation to areas such as research and innovation; areas such as financial hardship, which of course the State Government has already responded to; areas around capital infrastructure and what might be affected there. So, yes, we have put plans to Government about that. We have not gone to the next stage in whole-of-sector 'What will the sector look like in the future?', because we are currently dealing with quite significant and relatively immediate crisis and recovery from crisis issues.

Ms VALLENCE: You mentioned as well the impact you expect to go through into 2021, 22 and of course year 12 students studying year 12 this year and the challenges that they will have experienced with schooling from home for a period of time. Do you expect that to have any impact on year 12s entering into or taking up courses for university in 2021?

Prof. GARDNER: The universities have collectively looked at this question with the State Government and with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority looked at both year 12 and entry into universities. We are absolutely clear that we can effectively admit students who complete year 12 into university and that our first-year curriculums will be able to deal with what might be some shortfalls that some might experience in terms of what they were able to complete during year 12. So all that work has been done, and we are pretty confident that we can move forward in those ways.

Ms VALLENCE: I am sure that there is going to be great gratitude around the flexibility there, so that is good that that work has already been done.

Prof. GARDNER: Or it is underway.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, underway.

Prof. GARDNER: There are details to be completed, but can I say we are not concerned. We can handle this.

Ms VALLENCE: I am just conscious of the time that we have left. I am very interested in this aspect. Obviously universities—you said you employ a lot of people; you have got students currently studying, but also you have researchers. Have you done any review of or modelling on the disproportionate impact on female academics as a result of the coronavirus situation—the ability for female researchers to research, particularly if they often take that primary caring role or they might have children doing schooling from home themselves, and the volume of research and any articles submitted? I have read somewhere that there has actually been a significant plummeting or a decrease in the number of research publications by female academics. Could you talk about that?

Prof. GARDNER: We have not done any specific research on this at Monash, but we are committed to making sure that we can support our researchers through what is a difficult period. We have actually taken account of and will take account of the issues that will affect people when they have been working from home—either their inability to access the laboratory for a period for their research or in fact the impact that schooling from home or supporting school students at home might be having on their overall performance. So we are sensitive to those things, but we have not done any more research on it. We understand what is happening, and there are impacts across the board on researchers and what will happen. More serious is the fact that in fact our research endeavour is significantly funded indeed by that revenue which is disappearing, and that is really serious for the future scale and capacity of our research workforce.

Ms VALLENCE: There is a huge challenge ahead of you. Could you maybe in the last couple of seconds left talk about how that is impacting particularly on areas that we think would benefit from this health situation—medical research and so forth?

Prof. GARDNER: The way research is funded usually involves either the university having the salary within their existing funding or providing significant other funding to that research to either top up that employment funding or whatever. A very significant proportion of our research funding and our research staff are concentrated. In fact the overwhelming majority of our research staff are concentrated in the medical and health and pharmaceutical areas. So they are at greatest risk in terms of the scale of that workforce in terms of a downturn in income to support them. The university basically provides \$1 for every dollar of research income we win. We have to find another dollar. That is the scale that we are dealing with. But let me say that is also true of researchers in engineering and science and the like. You cannot say that it is only medical researchers who are working on medical things, because of course when working in medical engineering we work with materials that affect that area.

So if you are looking at the overall impact in a field that Victoria is absolutely world class in across materials, science, medical, clinical research, pharmaceutical research, where you really do not get much better than what we have got in this state, there is really significant and serious threat to both our capacity and the quality of what we will do in the future, because when you have world-class people and you cannot support them, they go somewhere else.

The CHAIR: Professor Gardner, thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today. We appreciate your time, particularly at short notice. The Committee will follow up on any questions which may have been taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the Committee's request. We thank you for your time.

Witness withdrew.