

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 18 May 2020

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Ms Molly Willmott, President, and

Mr Lincoln Aspinall, National Education Officer, National Union of Students.

The CHAIR: We welcome the National Union of Students to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's 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.

All mobile telephones should now 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 secretariat. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes.

We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will then be followed by questions from the Committee relative to their representation here at the table. Thank you.

Ms WILLMOTT: Beautiful. Hi, everyone. My name is Molly Willmott. I am the President of the National Union of Students, and I am here with Lincoln Aspinall, Education Officer. We represent over a million postsecondary education students in Australia, including over 300 000 Victorian university students. I would like to thank you for inviting us here today. In our opening statement we focus more on the issues that COVID-19 has caused around higher education, especially towards our international students and the functionality of our universities.

As I indicated, we cannot talk about the response to COVID-19 in Victoria without talking about our international students. To briefly go over numbers, there are over 200 000 overseas students studying in Victoria. It may be our largest export, bringing nearly \$12 billion to the state and creating nearly 80 000 jobs. It is estimated that there are nearly 500 000 international students still in Australia despite travel bans and blocks to travel. Due to their visa status they are not eligible for Centrelink support. They are still losing their jobs like citizens, and many are struggling to get support from back home to pay their tuition for the semester, which is, I would like to note, exorbitantly more expensive than domestic tuition.

Federally there is yet to be a package that supports international students, so with this in mind we would like to welcome the Victorian Government's \$45 million international student fund package. In saying this, though, this package is not without its critiques. While any support in this situation is much needed and we very much welcome it, the hardship grants introduced are comparable to one pay cycle of the JobSeeker payment and are less than one pay cycle of the JobKeeper payment, which is two weeks of covering for international students, who have been losing their jobs since February. There are soup kitchens that are starting up around the state and around the country for international students who are unable to pay for their expenses at home.

Where our position is is that the Government must act further, and the Federal Government must do the same. We have seen a lack of action there. These students have been without income for months and could potentially be in this situation for at least another six months. Obviously there is a compassion argument that we should not have international students starving in this state. But also, given that it is our largest export and our university sector is fully reliant on international students to function, if we do not act now this is going to have huge reputational damage to our state education, our campus communities and our culture. I am going to hand over to Lincoln for our second point before we go to questions.

Mr ASPINALL: Thanks, Molly. My name is Lincoln Aspinall. I am from the National Union of Students within the education portfolio. I wanted to speak a little bit about the dichotomy between the proposed

educational uptick in enrolments and the actual sector capacity to accommodate these enrolments. The Federal Government's plan to stabilise the tertiary education sector at the moment is really around having a relief package that incentivises students within nursing, teaching, health, IT and science—to incentivise students who go into that sector where the country requires productivity. The Government has claimed that these 20 000-odd places that will be offered within short courses will offset university losses from the missing revenue that Molly spoke about with international students.

Unfortunately this package is actually insufficient in providing that stability. The modelling from Victoria University projects that the university sector will lose between \$10 billion and \$19 billion between 2020 and 2023. So in the next few years we are going to see an amazing amount of money lost from the university sector, and crucially international students spent around \$8.83 billion on fees in 2018. So it is unforeseeable that such a sizeable loss in revenue to the sector will be covered by the brief spike in domestic enrolments incentivised by short courses, and this financial insecurity is further exacerbated by the fact that the Government is providing no real funding relief to the sector.

The Government has provided \$18 billion in confirmed funding to institutions, but this is largely funding that has already been committed prior to the pandemic and money that the university sector was already budgeting for. So the intention of guiding young people into sectors where the nation requires productivity is intelligent, but institutions cannot fill such an increase in this demand for learning when they are, in the first instance, struggling to retain the workers and field existing academic obligations. There is a striking dichotomy between the expected rise in enrolments and the capacity for the sector to accommodate this increase.

Students should not be expected to undertake further debt when the capacity to receive a quality learning experience will be markedly attenuated. So this will impact around 325 000 Victorian students. This semester course content has already been hastily transferred online. Multiple institutions have already cut staff, and they are also looking at reducing staff pay. There is a myriad of issues within the sector, and we are quite concerned that there is a dichotomy with the rise in enrolments that will take place very shortly.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Ms Willmott and Mr Aspinall. Can I say what a credit it is to you both that you have taken on this role of advocacy with so much energy and passion. We are lucky to have the voice of students here today providing evidence. I would like to unpack some of the evidence you have already given and give you a little bit more opportunity to expand on it, but first I would like to hear what feedback you are hearing from students regarding online and remote teaching and learning, recognising I will definitely come back to the international students as an area that I can see is of great concern. But in the first instance if you could perhaps provide some insights, that would be terrific.

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes. I think it differs from campus to campus, because our institutions in Victoria are extremely different. Federation Uni is completely opposite to the University of Melbourne in terms of the infrastructure of online learning. I think, to put it pretty bluntly, students have sort of copped it. There was not really an option to not go online. I think with a lot of the feedback on online learning more of the concern is: how does online learning affect the more practical degrees—how does it affect your fine arts? There is a big movement at VCA right now about students who cannot go and do a production. How do they learn online when they have to learn how to do lighting rigs or engineering? How that is impacting will impact graduation time. A lot of the concern is also going into 'When are we going back?'. There have been some whispers around campuses from students about whether they will return to full-on campus study, whether universities, because of these funding cuts, will turn into online institutions, which I do not think we are very for. On-campus learning is awesome. It does differ from campus to campus, but I think a lot of universities, to their credit—and I do not think we would say this much—have really adapted to the situation and helped students out. Lincoln, do you have anything to add?

Mr ASPINALL: That pretty much sums it up. I think the main issue that we are concerned about is what the sector looks like in the next 18 to 24 months and that transition back to on-campus learning.

Ms RICHARDS: Taking perhaps a slightly different tack, are there any examples where the transition to remote and online teaching and learning is being delivered effectively? Are there any universities you can see where it is being done more effectively?

Ms WILLMOTT: Well, I think it would be the campuses that already go online. Deakin is doing really well. They are already a half cloud university. It is really hard to say how effective online education has been, because there has been such a huge mashup of how to deliver course content. We are hearing stories of universities where they have moved 2-hour, 3-hour law workshops and condensed them into 1 hour. It is hard to really gauge how effective it has been across campuses, but I would say the campuses that had the infrastructure already are doing quite good and the campuses who did not necessarily have that have stepped up quite a bit and are delivering as best as they can.

Ms RICHARDS: Have you got any suggestions for improvements that can be made—any ways in particular you have heard, using that student voice, that things can be done better, so some changes you would like to see?

Ms WILLMOTT: Is this in regard to online education or just—

Ms RICHARDS: Yes. Actually—you know, you have got the time—online education, and if there is anything else you would like to make sure is included in evidence, please take the opportunity to include that as well.

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes. Lincoln, do you have anything?

Mr ASPINALL: Yes, certainly. I think largely what we would like to see on behalf of our member organisations and students would be a rapid return to on-campus learning effectively when the health crisis allows for that. But I guess the sector itself needs the confidence to actually invest time and resources into infrastructure that actually provides good education delivery. Often what we have seen probably at the start of semester was quite a panic—'We've got thousands of students now that are demanding that their education obviously continues and that they can continue to get that qualification'. But without the infrastructure—and we are speaking about quite high-level universities, particularly the Go8 research-intensive universities that have never previously had to deal with things like this—it is forcing a lot of downward pressure on education providers on the ground level. So educators, tutors and unit coordinators that do not previously have experience in having to facilitate online content in such a vast array are now becoming the most relied upon people within the sector. So taking some pressure off the ground level and allowing a better design for infrastructure across faculty levels and across course content could actually allow more of a diversity of online content. But I think largely we are quite satisfied with the way that that has been rolled out in the circumstances.

Semester 2 will be quite interesting as well. We think there probably will be mixed-model education provision, particularly within different states like Western Australia, where there is an opportunity for universities to actually go back onto campus. For Victoria that is probably unlikely, but we would like to see as much proactive effort being put in by institutions to try and see how for people like those in the arts industry, engineering and science, where they usually have 6-hour labs, we can actually make that a worthwhile process rather than sitting on a Zoom call for an hour.

Ms WILLMOTT: I think, just adding to that quickly, the improvements need money and I think we have the lowest GDP investment into higher education in the OECD, but the reason we did not have the resources before this started was because we did not have the money. You talk about any issue with higher education, like how to improve it and where to go forward with the COVID response—we need more money in higher education.

Ms RICHARDS: Circling back to the evidence you gave as part of your initial presentation, I am interested in hearing your insights into whether students have adequate support in terms of financial and welfare support in place at this time. And this is perhaps an opportunity for you to provide some more granular detail on some of the concerns that you raised as part of that initial presentation.

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes, I think when we are having this discussion I do not like to split the cohort into different groups—it is othering sort of behaviour—but you have to split it into 'What is the welfare and income support the domestic students have gotten?' and 'What is the welfare and income support that international students have gotten?'. So, domestic students have gotten a bit more of a helping hand than our international colleagues.

The issues that are coming out from the domestic side are that the JobKeeper package does not cover casuals who have been in work for less than 12 months with a specific employer. I assume you all have worked in cafes before coming to this place; the amount of jump around young people have in their time in uni means most young people were not covered by JobKeeper and they have lost a significant amount of income. Another issue that we are finding with the domestic student body is that there is an age of independence to receive Centrelink at a full rate. You have to be over the age of 22 to not be compared to your parents' income to see how much you can have from Centrelink. For a lot of students, while they are dependent on their parents, their parents' income threshold means they are unable to receive Centrelink. A lot of them are not actually dependent on their parents, and they have been locked out of payments this year. A lot of our feedback from domestic students is, 'I can't pay my rent'. Yes, there is a moratorium on evictions right now, but at the end of the moratorium how is that rent going to be paid? So that is a concern we are going through.

With international students, it is really quite little. There has been a complete lack of action from a federal level for an actual, specific, direct payment towards international students or even allowing temporary residents into the schemes that are being introduced. We did a survey about a month ago where we got 3000 responses in 48 hours from international students about how they are experiencing COVID, and three quarters of all responses were 'financial strain'. These are talking about: yes, international students have to have a specific amount of money when they come into the country to be able to become an international student here, but that money dries up; their parents are losing their jobs back home; their rent is being raised; and without any government support they are losing their jobs. The financial issues with international students are going to get a lot worse. I say we are getting to crisis levels already.

There is already an issue of international student poverty and mental health issues, and those are just being exacerbated. We are hearing stories of extreme depression and mental strain because of a lack of financial support. They are also seeing places like Canada, which is stepping up for its international students, and they are going, 'Well, I'm not going to study in Australia anymore. I'm going to Canada', which is very worrying. Anything you want to add?

Mr ASPINALL: Yes. I would just like to add to the wellbeing perspective with the international students. We have had cases and stories from students who are living with, like, 13 residents inside one small apartment or sharing mattresses. These are quite frequent instances that we are picking up on. It just continues to reify the point about how important this relief package is and how important it is for the Victorian Government, working with states and the Federal Government, to actually enable international students to not just study but be able to survive this period.

Ms RICHARDS: That is an important segue into how the coronavirus is impacting on students' mental health. The second part of that is that I am interested in your insights into how universities are responding.

Ms WILLMOTT: Student mental health is already bad; it is already quite a large issue, which links into academic performance, it links into access to welfare, it links into access to special consideration at universities. A lot of the insights that I have gotten on a personal level as well—I am a student; I talk to my friends—is that this time period, the data is now showing, has caused an incredible amount of mental strain to the student community regardless of being international or domestic. On the way that education is delivered, I think one of the main issues of online learning that we do not talk about is that it is very isolating. There is a big discussion right now on student loneliness and isolation—that it is getting worse this year.

The way universities have responded to it—again, it is an institutiony institution sort of response. I do not think that many universities were quick enough in putting their services online or at least making them more accessible. Most universities in the country were also quite slow at making English-as-a-second-language or culturally and linguistically diverse counsellors accessible from home. I think it is also an issue that every campus has significant issues with disability access and mental health access for their students. I do not think there is a campus in the country that I could hand-on-my-heart say is doing well with student mental health in the way that I think students would like to see.

I think moving forward it is going to require a lot of pressure being put onto your Safer Communities, your special consideration things and putting resources into it to make sure students are going well, because we also do not know what is going to happen when campuses come back. We have to be prepared for that. I think that is what we are thinking.

Mr ASPINALL: Yes. I might just add to that. There needs to be a broad shift within the sector from a financial perspective to the wellbeing and equity of students. We fully understand that this is a sector issue about finances, and it needs to generate sustainability and make sure that in this period we can go through and make sure that the sector still survives. But students do not particularly care about that right now as well. They are struggling. We have seen in instances institutions being dragged, kicking and screaming in certain circumstances, to actually provide equity. So whether that be extending the census date to make sure that students understand what they are getting themselves into for the semester or the resumption of online mental wellbeing services in a digital format, often these are put to one side in favour of ‘How can we cover the basic economic framework of our institution?’.

Ms RICHARDS: And I am interested in finding out if your organisation is supporting any of the students as they transition from secondary school to university. I mean, that great celebration that people often expect to have when they first start university is part of making friends and the university life experience and also managing their mental health in that context. Is there anything you have been able to offer to that cohort?

Ms WILLMOTT: Look, I think that is a job that we front-load onto our members. That is the role of student unions—besides being advocates, activists and representatives—creating a good student life and student culture. Unfortunately, due to the lockdown we have not been able to really put those services out as much as we would like. I think where I am hearing a lot of concern from our members is they have lost the ability to, one, have face-to-face interactions with students but also ease the transition. This is a completely different mind way, but the transition from high school to tertiary education is going to be a really interesting thing in the next few years. The year 12 results this year—are they indicative of performance? How are we going to be moving our secondary school students into higher education in the next few years?

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you both for appearing today. I want to ask about international students and get you to provide some more information there. It seems extraordinary that often international students are touted as the billion-dollar earner for Victoria, yet we are leaving many of them destitute during this period. In the absence of Federal Government support, do you think this is something that the Victorian Government should be prioritising—supporting our international students during this phase? And can you speak to some more of the experiences that you are hearing from international students?

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes. I think higher education is in a really difficult bubble in the relationship between State and Federal. On a state level, as we said in our opening statement, any support for international students that the State has already rolled out is great, but we need to think of more concrete ways to be able to financially support these students. I think that it is about ensuring that the policies and Acts that go through Parliament are including international students as well. When we are looking at any form of utilities, rent, housing, evictions, we have to ensure that that also covers international students and that is available to our international cohort.

In talking about the experiences of international students, I went through a period at the start of COVID where I was getting 15 phone calls a day from international students that were like, ‘I’m about to get kicked out of the country but I can’t go home. What do I do?’. In our survey response, I went through it the other night and we had five or six responses of people being like, ‘I’m not paying my uni to feed my kids’. It is those really common responses that we are getting of these students who have come to a different country from across the world—the education part does not matter as much as the huge financial strain that they are under. The stories are pretty harrowing. I got a phone call the other day just from a random person who walked down Sussex Street in Sydney and found a soup kitchen where 200 people were lining up. They are starting in Victoria, in South Australia, in WA. It is charity groups. The Federal Government’s response to international students has been putting more money into charity, which means that charity groups are now overrun, which is where you sort of get the soup kitchens thing that is really starting up. The stories are quite harrowing.

Mr ASPINALL: Yes. I think speaking directly to your point about the funding of it, if we do not invest now proactively in student wellbeing, students will not repay that to the Victorian economy and the Victorian ability to rely on this \$1 billion sector will not exist.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. That is what I was interested to know. Do you think this is a reputational risk for Victoria and a future economic risk for Victoria if we are not supporting international students during this time?

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes, it is a significant reputational issue. I do not also like the conversation about international students as purely a financial thing, like it is an import-export thing, because these are people, these are students and these are the people that we study and learn with. But there is a lot of discussion online about the reputational damage that this will do to the country, and if less international students come, the university sector is under more strain, which means our education quality is bad, which means no more international students will come to the country.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. And then in terms of domestic students, you touched on it before, some of the issues you might be facing—again, falling through the gaps of Federal Government support, Centrelink arbitrarily saying that if you are 22 or under you are supported by your parents, when in many cases that is not the case. Can you expand on some more of the challenges that domestic students are facing during this time?

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes. I do not think I will go much more into age independence, because that is not a huge amount of students. I think a lot of the fear—and this is especially a bit more pertinent on a state level—is around youth unemployment in the next few years. People have been let go because of JobKeeper, their bosses have been stealing their money on JobKeeper, their places of employment are closing down—I mean, you are in Prahran; it is a huge nightlife and hospitality area that is mostly students. A lot of the concern is about work. There is not as much concern about education, because as I said, a lot of students have copped it and there are obvious concerns, but we are expecting to go back to uni in the next few months anyway. But we are hearing stories of domestic students where both of their parents have lost their jobs and that was their form of support outside of work, or they have lost their job, they live in a really run-down house in Brunswick that is falling down and they are probably going to get evicted once the moratorium is up.

Mr ASPINALL: There are also just inconsistencies with students that are currently relying on youth allowance for study and they are now receiving less income subsidy than they would be on JobKeeper or JobSeeker, so there is almost an incentive for them to remove themselves from studying at university and just to receive the bulk wage subsidy, which as a policy perspective just does not seem very intelligent. There is also just a myriad of inconsistencies around the way that JobKeeper has been rolled out for students. There are students that are making a lot more money now because they maybe only had one shift at Kmart, but while that student might be benefiting, there are 10 others that are just doing it a lot more tough. So we are calling on, predominantly, the Federal Government to move forward in actually expanding JobKeeper more consistently.

Ms VALLENCE: Thanks very much for appearing before us today. You mentioned the mental health of students and that it is a particularly challenging thing through this process—whether it is around their concerns around their learning or around looking after themselves or their jobs et cetera; you know, the prospect of being evicted through rent down the track. Can you let us know if you have made any representations perhaps to the State Government about mental health for students in the tertiary sector—like your members?

Ms WILLMOTT: Not as much, no. We have been mainly resourcing our campus members to talk to their universities about it. At the end of the day, the easiest way for a student to access mental health services is through their campus, and if those campus services are not up to scratch, then there is no point in the State Government coming in and being like, ‘Can you please see more students’, because it is not adequate in the first place. It is more about resourcing campuses to be better in themselves. I would say down the line we will probably have a bit more of a conversation with the Victorian Government. We are also a national organisation mostly, and I think that is more of a discussion to have at a national level, because we cannot be great in Victoria and leave students incredibly mentally ill around other states as well.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. On that then, you said you are a national organisation, do you receive any funding from the Victorian Government?

Ms WILLMOTT: No, our funding is solely from our members.

Ms VALLENCE: You mentioned around—you have been talking a fair bit about international students, and just to pick up on something that Mr Hibbins was talking about, the State Government announced a payment for international students. Do you know if that has started flowing? Have they received any of that money yet?

Ms WILLMOTT: I am not sure. I think it is mostly just in the rollout stage. I know that some universities have their own payments that have been rolling out. I am not too sure about the State Government.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. We heard from Monash University earlier; they have got their own hardship program. But also on the State Government's hardship program, have they conveyed to you as the student union body about when that is expected to be rolled out and paid?

Ms WILLMOTT: I think we are basing most of our information around what is on study Victoria, and that says in the next couple of months. I think when the package was announced it was very much 'as soon as possible', but again I have not heard of any individual situations.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Do you represent any Australian students that are studying in other countries?

Ms WILLMOTT: No.

Ms VALLENCE: No. Okay. You mentioned about the year 12s and 11s before and the transition. Are you advocating on behalf of, or are any of your members, high school students?

Ms WILLMOTT: No. We only represent tertiary education students.

Ms VALLENCE: All right. You mentioned a little bit before about the transition for year 12s into university or into the tertiary sector. Are you anticipating any challenges there in being able to transition effectively into university in 2021?

Ms WILLMOTT: Yes, and I think it is beyond 2021 as well. There is really fundamental learning that has been missed out in years 8, 9 and 10. I think it is very much looking at the way that we structure secondary education and how that is funnelled into tertiary education as well. Obviously there are going to be issues with this. Year 12 students are now doing completely online coursework. I think the way that it has been handled—and absolute credit to the secondary school sector for the way that they have transitioned to this and are trying to minimise the damage as much as possible—this is not something that we have had a huge influence on. It is something that I think that we should be looking at over the next few years.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay, thank you. You have mentioned obviously one of the biggest challenges for your members is the hardship that they might be facing through this coronavirus period—you know, the impact to their studies. Many students are obviously supporting themselves. Some have lost work. They are still needing to pay rent and utilities. And you mentioned in your earlier presentation around the hardship of the students. That is what you are hearing from your members around their concerns to be able to support themselves through this crisis and into the next, I guess, several months and perhaps even a year. Given so many students are now experiencing hardship, does the NUS now agree that we should scrap compulsory union fees, which cost students hundreds and hundreds—sometimes \$400—per annum and actually recommit to implementing voluntary student unionism, or VSU?

Ms WILLMOTT: Absolutely not. Look, this has been a conversation that has come up quite a bit. But when you look at the actions of student unions in the past few months that have significantly helped students on their campuses be able to access education in the first place, there is an argument that those funds are incredibly necessary for students to be properly represented on campus.

Ms VALLENCE: But if students are experiencing severe hardship, don't you think that that \$400-odd of a student union fee would be much better placed in their pockets to survive perhaps their next couple of rent payments?

Mr ASPINALL: I might jump in here. I think a great example is in Western Australia, where I originally come from, where they have a 50 per cent SSAF law. That money that goes into the student union is actually providing essential services for advocacy around the clock. Without that ability to represent students, the overall impact upon students that this pandemic would have created would have been incredibly more severe. I think voluntary student unionism has and will continue to impact student unions if it were to be brought out even more. I think that is probably what the student union movement at the moment probably needs least.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, as you said, your membership probably is not the breadth of the full extent of university students right across the country. You also mentioned just earlier around you are looking at extra ways to financially support domestic students that are experiencing hardship and international students experiencing hardship. You mentioned to Mr Hibbins around supporting them with utilities and rent. We have

also heard from prior witnesses around the waiving of union memberships in various other areas and other sectors. Do you not perhaps think that that should be waived or paused for a couple of years?

Ms WILLMOTT: Look, I think it really goes into cost benefit—it is where we are at right now. Universities do not just choose to improve the life of students. It takes pressure from the student body and it takes a good, activist, strong student union to ensure that our campuses and our universities are more caring towards students. Student unionism and your SSAF money does not just go to: we create a banner and we have a yell. It goes into free legal and advocacy services, it goes into the entirety of student life and culture on campuses. It is not a thing like, yes, we pause union funding now, but if we had paused union funding before COVID-19, then students on campuses would have been significantly disadvantaged by decisions of universities. Right now a lot of our campuses are looking at changing the way that people are marked because of significant mental health issues. Those campaigns are not coming from the universities; they are coming from the student body.

Look, also, I believe in universal student unionism. I think there should be a direct funding of student unions. I think they are an incredibly important part of campuses. But when we look at compulsory student unionism, I think that it would do more harm to the student body and students.

Ms VALLENCE: For the sake of transparency, can you both say whether you are members of a political organisation?

Mr RICHARDSON: How is that relevant to COVID-19?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, I will call the Member. The witnesses have been invited here as the National Union of Students and on the same basis as this Committee is a committee as a whole, so I do not think that is an appropriate question.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, they have obviously chosen not to answer. I think it is important because it is important around representation—

Mr MAAS: No, the question was ruled out of order, wasn't it, Chair?

The CHAIR: The question was ruled out of order. The witnesses have been invited here as the National Union of Students, and it is not appropriate to behave in that way as a member of this Committee—and the Member's time has expired.

I thank the witnesses very much not only for the important work that they do every day representing their members but for appearing before the Committee today. I would also like to again read out the Beyond Blue phone number: 1300 22 4636; Lifeline: 13 11 14; and Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 in case the discussion here today has raised any issues for anyone. The witnesses will be provided with a copy of their transcript to verify, and a written request will follow up any questions as necessary that were taken on notice. We thank you for your time and wish you well with your endeavours. Thank you.

Ms WILLMOTT: Thank you, everyone.

Mr ASPINALL: Thanks so much.

Witnesses withdrew.