

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Secretary of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment - Opening statement

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

I would like to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant and unprecedented impact on the lives of many Australians. We have witnessed both significant disruption and resilience across the education, skills and employment sectors, as they have quickly adapted to remote delivery and online learning.

From early February, my Department was engaged in whole of government processes monitoring the spread of COVID-19, including the Australian Government Crisis Committee, and managing its impacts on the international education sector. We worked quickly to prepare information for affected students, providers and stakeholders. We supported the Government to establish a Global Reputation Taskforce to deal with the impacts of the bushfires and COVID-19 on the sector, in close consultation with sector representatives.

On 2 March, I established a coronavirus taskforce within the Department. At that stage, the taskforce was primarily focussed on the impact on the international education sector. As the crisis continued to evolve, the remit of the taskforce was expanded to coordinate the whole-of-department response, working closely with other Commonwealth agencies, state and territory governments and service providers.

On 6 March, the Department also established the Education and Employment Sector Pandemic Preparedness Committee (EESPPC), which is chaired by the Deputy Secretary for Higher Education, Research and International, Mr Rob Heferen. The committee consists of representatives from all state and territory governments, our national authorities for school curriculum, skills and tertiary education, and representative bodies from across the education and employment sectors. This committee meets weekly and has played an important role in understanding the impact of the crisis across different sectors and states, and disseminated information about the Government response.

Engagement on COVID-19 also occurs through existing committees such as the Australian Education Senior Officials Committee and Senior Skills Officials Network, which operate under the auspices of our two COAG ministerial councils.

The Department has supported the Government to design and implement a number of measures in relation to COVID-19. I won't detail them all, but some examples include:

- a 50 per cent wage subsidy to help businesses retain or re-engage apprentices and trainees, currently supporting more than 31,000 apprentices.
- an Early Childhood Education and Care relief package, which works in concert with JobKeeper, to support the viability of child care services and to help ensure child care remains open and available for those families that need it. As of 13 May, 99 per cent of services remain open.
- changes to employment services, including IT systems, to assist Services Australia to prioritise access to income support for the unprecedented inflow of new job seekers. The jobactive caseload has increased to almost 1.4 million Australians, an increase in over 755,000 people since the 29th of February.

- guaranteeing the Commonwealth Grants Scheme funding for universities at current levels, so they do not lose funding if the number of domestic students fall.
- working with the states and territories to develop COVID-19 principles for school education.

The Department has also supported whole-of-government COVID efforts by re-deploying staff. We have around 270 Departmental staff seconded to Services Australia, and six on secondment to the Departments of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Treasury, Health and the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission.

All parts of our portfolio have a critical role to play in supporting Australia's community and our economic recovery. The Department will continue to support the Government and work closely with state governments, stakeholders and service providers across the employment and education sectors to ensure that the needs of Australians are met during the recovery period.

Thank you Chair.