



**Submission to the**

**Senate Select Committee Inquiry into  
the Australian Government's Response to the  
COVID19 Pandemic**

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## ***Introduction***

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents over 189,000 educator members employed in the public primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia. The AEU members in all three sectors were at the frontline of the pandemic in Australia and as such the Commonwealth Government's response impacted on them significantly. Thus we welcome the opportunity to present our views on the Australian Government's response to the pandemic.

We note that the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 heard evidence from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment on May 19, 2020 and we have included our consideration of that evidence in this submission.

Throughout this crisis the AEU has sought to work constructively with the Chief Medical Officer and state and territory Chief Health and Medical Officers to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of school staff and students is paramount.

This submission will address our views of the impact of the Australian Government's response on each of the school, early childhood education and TAFE sectors separately. We will detail how the issues raised by the AEU were subsequently handled by the Commonwealth Government and describe the measures that could have, and could still be taken to ensure that public schools, early childhood education providers and TAFEs have the support necessary to recover from the impacts of the pandemic and to assist with Australia's recovery.

## ***Schools***

From mid-March when cases of COVID-19 began rising swiftly and significantly in Australia, the Commonwealth Government's advice to teachers, school leaders and support staff was inconsistent and coupled with often contradictory expectations. There was a lack of early and clear communication for schools and this led to a high level of concern expressed by our members about their health, wellbeing and safety.

At that point the National Cabinet had accepted the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) that schools should remain open, that pre-emptive closures were not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention at that time. This led to multiple contradictions with concurrent guidance on social distancing and restrictions on gatherings, and revealed that the workplace health and safety of those working in schools had not been considered.

In order to gain much needed clarity, on March 19<sup>th</sup> the AEU wrote to the Prime Minister, (Appendix 1). The letter clearly outlined numerous issues for the urgent attention of the National Cabinet, which are detailed as follows:

- at all levels of government, Work, Health and Safety obligations to employees must be met
- identified risks and hazards must have the appropriate level of control to mitigate them

- the National Cabinet and health officials at both a national and state/territory level have provided insufficient information and assurance to teachers, support staff, educators, principals and the AEU about the implementation of COVID-19 decisions and indeed, the safety of workplaces for employees and students
- social distancing requires staff and students to keep a distance of 1.5 metres, a requirement which is practically impossible in the vast majority of public education settings across the nation
- the restrictions which have been placed on non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people have broad implications for public education settings across the country
- schools are reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically
- additional cleaning services must be implemented to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces and frequently used objects are cleaned and sanitized.
- there is widespread concern about the possibility of school closures but limited information available publicly on how such a decision would be made nationally
- the widespread community concern has already led to high levels of student absence in many states and territories
- working from home provisions must be immediately available to public education staff who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their own or family members' underlying health conditions. In particular, those who have chronic illnesses, are immunocompromised, fall into high-risk categories and pregnant staff.
- there are specific workplace health and safety expectations arising from the additional needs of a wide range of students with individual circumstances requiring adjustment
- specific detail must be provided about working in more complex environments such as supporting students and people who have disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural, regional and remote locations.
- maintenance of income including leave entitlements and leave arrangements must be guaranteed for all permanent, temporary and casual public education employees.
- we reject unrealistic expectations that alternative (virtual) learning episodes will be provided for students in the event that schools close – such expectations are inequitable in their impact particularly for students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and regional and remote centres and unsustainable in an education system denied basic resources.

### *Initial lack of clarity and delay*

The concerns of AEU members outlined in the letter were not adequately addressed, or were subject to delayed and heavily diluted action. The Commonwealth's response and subsequent actions were characterised by a serious lack of clarity. Political pronouncements were made with little regard for practicality, for the jurisdictional independence of states and territories and were followed by subsequent backpedalling which has caused significant anxiety and confusion for the teaching profession.

The AEU also sought urgent meetings with the Education Minister and the Chief Medical Officer. During these discussions, the AEU articulated the issues of concern during an “emergency mode of operations for schools” and sought commitments for health and safety guidelines for the teaching profession. Given the deep ramifications for all public education employees and the 2.6 million students in their care, we formally requested that the National Cabinet immediately provide detailed advice about how all public education settings were to minimise the risk to staff and students if they were to remain open.

The National Cabinet gave a commitment that the AHPPC would develop such guidelines, however it was four weeks later, on April 16 that the seven National Principles for School Education were published. In that time, and even following the publication of the National Principles, which clearly stated “State and Territory Governments and non-government sector authorities are responsible for managing and making operational decisions for their school systems respectively, subject to compliance with relevant funding agreements with the Commonwealth”<sup>1</sup>, the Commonwealth Government was unable to muster a nationally consistent approach and took a series of contradictory and confusing positions for social distancing in schools, including that:

- social distancing is required in all public situations, but is not required to the same standard in schools;
- it is safe for children to be at schools because they have low chance of infection, are not vectors for Coronavirus, although it was considered unsafe for them to visit grandparents because of the risk of infection; and
- children can’t play on playground equipment in local parks but can play on equipment within their school.

#### *Confusion and obfuscation on social distancing requirements in schools*

Despite the State and Territory governments taking full responsibility for the decision making about schools at a jurisdictional level following the issuing of the National Principles for School Education, further confusion was caused by the Prime Minister’s frequently contradictory public messages.

After first advocating for school closures, on April 14 the Prime Minister stated via a recorded video message to teachers that “we cannot allow a situation where parents are forced to choose between putting food on the table through their employment to support their kids, and their kids’ education”. Following outcry from the teaching profession and the public, and the publication of the National principles two days later, the Prime Minister then reverted to confirming that the states and territories had ultimate control of the decisions affecting schools.

On April 24 the Prime Minister publicly expressed a desire to see schools return to on-site learning full time. Subsequently, and on the advice of the AHPPC the Commonwealth Government issued updated guidance that social distancing was not “appropriate or practical

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *COVID-19 National Principles for School Education*, retrieved from <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/schools/national-principles-for-school-education>

in classrooms or corridors”, despite it being still considered necessary for teachers working in these same environments.

Evidence heard at the Senate Select Committee Hearing held on May 19 demonstrated how this official advice appeared to change, not according to changing scientific advice, but according to the Prime Minister’s desire to reopen schools. Senator Keneally asked the following:

*Stakeholders have informed the opposition that the decision was made following a meeting between the education minister, the CMO and the heads of some school systems, where system heads advised the minister and the CMO that physical distancing was too difficult to enforce and couldn't be resourced. Can you confirm that?*

The eventual response implied that the change in advice from the AHPPC on social distancing in schools after the Prime Minister’s intervention of April 24 appeared to follow from discussions between federal and state and territory public servants on the difficulty of maintaining social distancing in schools, rather than being based on any change to medical or scientific advice on the safety of abandoning the practice.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of consistency in the Commonwealth Government’s position on fully opening schools peaked on May 3, when contrary to the Prime Minister’s assertion of jurisdictional independence, the Federal Education Minister launched an extraordinary attack on the Victorian Premier, accusing him of a “failure of leadership” before subsequently withdrawing his statement.

The above examples demonstrate how in its response to COVID-19 in relation to schools, the Commonwealth Government acted without regard to the teaching profession, or for the clarity that was needed and repeatedly sought, and changed its position without regard for the impact of its decisions and the statements of its Ministers on students, teachers, school leaders, support staff, parents and wider school communities.

In relation to schools, the Commonwealth Government’s reaction to the pandemic could easily lead the objective observer to deduce that the Government was more interested in using the issue of schools in an attempt to score political points than it was in providing desperately needed leadership and clarity to teachers, families and the public.

### *Putting the economy before people’s health*

The Commonwealth Government claimed that its drive to return all students to the classroom, regardless of their local circumstances and indeed the views of their state or territory Chief Medical or Health Advisors, was based on health advice from the AHPPC. However, there

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<sup>2</sup>Hansard, Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, 19 May 2020, p.24, retrieved from [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/toc\\_pdf/Senate%20Select%20Committee%20on%20COVID-19%2020%2005%2019%207726.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/0000%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/toc_pdf/Senate%20Select%20Committee%20on%20COVID-19%2020%2005%2019%207726.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/0000%22)

was significant concern from the public and from school communities that it in fact resulted from the prioritisation of economic concerns over the population's health and welfare.

This concern was exacerbated at the Prime Minister's press conference of May 5, where he said of remote learning "It does impact on the productivity. Kids going back to school lifts productivity, helps people get back to work and helps the economy get back on its feet." This was followed on May 8 by a statement that "there will be outbreaks, there will be more cases, there will be setbacks... But we cannot allow our fear of going backwards from stopping us from going forwards."

Although recognising the "incredibly infectious" nature of Coronavirus, the Chief Medical Officer has stated that children have a much lower risk of transmission. This position does not seem to consider that according to paediatricians and epidemiologists school students, and particularly young children, will also have increased levels of exposure through physical proximity and play if in contact with a Coronavirus carrier.<sup>3</sup> A recent study publicised in the journal *Science* on age profile and susceptibility to infection, on how social distancing alters age-specific contact patterns, and how these factors interact to affect transmission found that although children may be around a third as susceptible as adults to the novel coronavirus, children aged five to fifteen years also have three times as many close contacts, essentially evening out the risk of infection.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, a recent study by the Berlin Institute of Virology has found that there is no significant difference between any pair of age categories including children in viral load, and in particular indicated that viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults and that children may be as infectious as adults.<sup>5</sup>

During the peak of transmission from mid-March to mid-April the Commonwealth Government relied on a few small studies as evidence to support its position on school closures. Most notably, a New South Wales study was repeatedly cited as to justify the viability of restarting school based learning. That study was based on the monitoring of close contacts of only 18 cases, included numerous caveats and was conducted at a time when most students were not at school, having been encouraged by the Premier of New South Wales to not attend for the final weeks of Term 1, followed by school holidays.

#### *No strings attached assistance for private schools only*

Throughout the pandemic the Commonwealth Government has continued to favour private schools and has systematically excluded public schools from offers of assistance. The Commonwealth Government offered independent schools early part-payment of their annual funding, bringing 25% of total annual recurrent funding forward from July to May and June

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<sup>3</sup> Blyth, C., Cheng, A. & Bowen, A., "Worried about your child getting coronavirus? Here's what you need to know", *The Conversation*, 2020, retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/worried-about-your-child-getting-coronavirus-heres-what-you-need-to-know-131909>

<sup>4</sup> Zhang, J., Litvinova, M., Liang, Y., Wang, Y., Wang, W., Zhao, S., Qianhui, W., Meler, S., Vboud, C., Vespignani, A., Ajelli, & M., Hongjie, Y., "Changes in contact patterns shape the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak in China", *Science*, April 2020, retrieved from <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/05/04/science.abb8001.full>

<sup>5</sup> Jones, Muhlemann, B., Veith, T., Zuchowski, M., Hofmann, J., Stein, A., Edelmann, A., Corman, V., & Drosten, C., "An analysis of SARS-CoV-2 viral load by patient age" retrieved from [https://zoonosen.charite.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/microsites/m\\_cc05/virologie-ccm/dateien\\_upload/Weitere\\_Dateien/analysis-of-SARS-CoV-2-viral-load-by-patient-age.pdf](https://zoonosen.charite.de/fileadmin/user_upload/microsites/m_cc05/virologie-ccm/dateien_upload/Weitere_Dateien/analysis-of-SARS-CoV-2-viral-load-by-patient-age.pdf)

in exchange for committing to reopening schools for physical on site learning at the start of term two. Approximately one quarter of non-government schools accepted this offer. The select committee hearing of May 19 revealed that schools were eligible for early funding regardless of whether they had experienced any liquidity issues. It also revealed that the Commonwealth Government was not monitoring compliance with the terms of its offer to bring forward recurrent funding to private schools and that schools were merely required to provide a plan to reopen at the start of June, but not required to prove that they actually will. Additionally, and importantly, this incentive to private schools was offered without consideration for the protocols in place in the states and territories and in the case of Victoria in direct contradiction and with flagrant disregard for the advice of the state's Chief Health Officer.

This assistance was followed by a further announcement of an additional \$10 million in funding for increased hygiene measures, again available to non-government schools only. These arrangements further demonstrate the inequity of the Federal Governments' treatment of public schools, and its abdication of responsibility to public schools in its response to COVID-19. The Federal Government has a significant recurrent funding responsibility to public schools, and yet has, in its willingness to make alternative funding arrangements and additional funds available to non-government schools only at a time when all schools are in need, further entrenched the existing inequity in its treatment of public school students and staff.

#### *The impact of the Federal Government's failings on schools*

The Federal Government's approach to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of concern for the health and wellbeing of students, teachers and broader school communities. At times, this has descended into outright disdain for the profession, as when the Chair of the House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training encouraged parents to leave their children unattended at school and to call the police if the principal refused to accept them.<sup>6</sup> Instead of supporting teachers during this crisis the government has ignored teachers concerns and attempted to shift the blame for its poor response onto the teaching profession. This approach has severely impacted on teacher morale during a time when they are working in very difficult circumstances.

#### *A newfound concern for disadvantaged and vulnerable students*

Federal Education Minister Tehan invoked the impact of remote learning on economically disadvantaged and vulnerable students, stating that it "will be the vulnerable, poor, remote and Indigenous students who suffer the most."<sup>7</sup> The Minister is correct that an extended period of remote learning under current funding arrangements and without additional and targeted support would have impacted on vulnerable students disproportionately. However, his assertion belies the fact that the coalition Commonwealth Government offered little support for these students, offering only temporary cheaper access to NBN and leaving the provision of ICT equipment to telecommunications companies, not for profit organisations and state

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-30/government-mp-tells-parents-to-call-the-police-coronavirus/12201938>

<sup>7</sup> Hunter, F, "Experts say half of students at risk from long-term remote learning" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/experts-say-half-of-students-at-risk-from-long-term-remote-learning-20200502-p54p7m.html>



and territory governments. Further, the commonwealth and has for nearly seven years steadfastly ignored their plight by failing to implement the original Gonski funding model and by refusing to lift the arbitrarily imposed 20% cap on Commonwealth contributions to recurrent funding for public schools.

The most recent PISA results demonstrate the growing gap between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. The 2018 PISA results for Australia reveal that students from low socio-economic status (SES) households are highly segregated from their more advantaged peers and up to three years behind them:

- Australia's isolation index score of 0.20 for disadvantaged students is higher than the OECD average of 0.17 and higher than 51 of the 78 countries and economies included in PISA. This means that disadvantaged students are more concentrated in schools with other disadvantaged students in Australia than in most countries in the OECD.
- Across all domains students from high SES backgrounds performed better than those from low SES backgrounds.
- The proportion of high performers increased and the proportion of low performers decreased with each increase in SES quartile.
- In science the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 82 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is approximately two and three-quarters years of schooling.
- In reading the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 89 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is three years of schooling.
- In maths the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 81 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is two and two-thirds years of schooling.<sup>8</sup>

The vast inequity in the way that the Commonwealth distributes funding to schools means that many students are not provided with the additional resources required to enable them to overcome their disadvantage, resulting in an increasingly wide gap in achievement between students from different backgrounds. Due to the 2017 Amendment to the Education Act, and the subsequent National School Reform Agreements (NSRAs) the Commonwealth signed with states and territories from late 2018 onwards, the ACT is now the only jurisdiction where funding will reach 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) for public schools by 2023. Further 99% of public schools in Australia will not reach 100% of SRS, the minimum required resource standard, by 2023.

Analysis of the impact of the 20% SRS cap on Commonwealth funding to public schools, in combination with the state and territory funding arrangements set out in the bilateral agreements shows that the total underfunding of public schools will reach \$16.3 billion during this Parliamentary term and \$22.7 billion dollars by the conclusion of the NSRA and its associated bilateral agreements in 2023.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thompson, S, De Bortoli L, Underwood C & Schmid, M. *PISA 2018, PISA in Brief: Student Performance*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019, p.18

<sup>9</sup> Cobbold, T, "Public Schools are Defrauded by Billions Under New Funding Agreements", 2019, retrieved from <http://saveourschools.com.au/funding/public-schools-are-defrauded-by-billions-under-new-funding-agreements/>



Furthermore, in all jurisdictions except the ACT the bilateral agreements include an additional provision that allows the states/territories to artificially boost funding for public schools by incorporating various allowances into funding meant for recurrent school funding. Over this term of Parliament this “additional expenditure” clause will deprive public school students of an additional \$6.2 billion in recurrent funding. To the conclusion of the agreements in 2023 the total is \$9.0 billion.

The total underfunding from the Commonwealth cap, the bilateral agreements and the additional expenditure clause is \$22.5 billion during this Parliament and \$31.7 billion to the conclusion of the agreements in 2023. The failure of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to meet the minimum funding standard means that on average every public school in Australia will miss out on \$8,700 per student in funding during this parliament and \$12,400 by the conclusion of the NSRAs in 2023.

Given the way the Morrison Government has systematically sought to deny the resources necessary for those students already falling behind, the Minister’s sudden concern about the impact that temporary remote learning may have on them seems disingenuous.

An immediate injection of funds to bring all public schools to 100% of SRS to repair the billions of dollars that public schools are currently missing out on each year is urgently required. Such an investment will not only assist schools in helping students who may have fallen behind during the period of remote learning but will also bridge the huge equity and achievement gaps between students from high and low SES households. Analysis has shown that an increase in the average PISA score of 25 points delivers to the economy, through improved skills, improved employment outcomes and reduced reliance on Commonwealth assistance, an average of \$65 billion per year, every year.<sup>10</sup> An investment in public school funding to achieve that improvement not only leads to better life outcomes for individual students but enormous long term benefits to society, the economy and the entire country.

### *The way forward*

The revised amount of \$259 billion announced by the Commonwealth in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has so far focused on supporting businesses and individuals during a period of time when large parts of the economy have stopped entirely, but the Government’s response has not yet entered the stimulus phase. Soon, a substantial economic stimulus program will be necessary to pull Australia out of a pending sharp and unprecedented downturn.

At around 20% of GDP Australia has incredibly low public debt by international standards. Many advanced economies consistently carried net debt loads of over 100% of GDP prior to the current pandemic, yet even with the additional debt expected to be accrued to fund *JobSeeker* and *JobKeeper* Australia’s net debt is expected to reach only 26% of GDP, still substantially lower than seven of the G8 nations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rorris, A., *Australian Schooling – The Price of Failure and Reward for Success*, 2016, p.6 retrieved from <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/3814/6172/5096/Rorris2016.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Dawson, E. & Lloyd-Cape, M., *Some Facts about Debt: A Per Capita Discussion Paper*, 2020, p. 5.

Despite the Treasurer's assertion that "what we borrow today we will have to pay back tomorrow", the Prime Ministers' claim that borrowing to stimulate the economy is somehow akin to saving money on building a house and then "borrow[ing] the rest of the money to put a heated swimming pool on the roof"<sup>12</sup> and the frequent claims of those pushing austerity measures, it is widely recognised by economists that government debt is in no way the same as household debt and does not have to be repaid in the same manner. The International Monetary Fund has recently concluded that for advanced economies like Australia, so long as GDP is growing faster than the interest rate, a large public debt is very sustainable. The size of the debt is irrelevant, what matters is the debt service cost, and the current extended period of historically unprecedented low interest rates is the perfect time to borrow to increase Australia's productive capacity.<sup>13</sup>

If Australia is to recover and return to growth following the current economic shock, the upcoming 2020 Budget will have to provide very significant stimulus. This stimulus should be targeted where it can have the most immediate and long term impact. Thousands of public primary and secondary schools across the country are in critical need of infrastructure improvement and yet public schools do not have access to Commonwealth funds for capital works. The AEU asserts that a guaranteed long term federally funded capital works package is required to provide much needed improvements to public schools. In addition to providing much needed new classrooms, bathrooms, libraries, heating and cooling and sport facilities, an investment such as this, made when government borrowing is cheaper than ever, would provide a huge amount of stimulus to Australia's construction and manufacturing industries and drive employment.

Total public school enrolments have increased by 263,534 students in the decade to 2018, an increase of 10.3%, with the majority of this increase in primary school enrolments which will soon flow through to all levels of schooling.<sup>14</sup> In addition to improving the capacity of existing public schools, new primary and secondary schools need to be built to accommodate these students. A federally funded school building program will have enormous stimulus value to the economy - it will provide immediate stimulus in terms of the construction and manufacturing required to build new schools, and it will flow on to house building, retail employment growth as communities congregate around these new schools.

## **Early Childhood Education**

### *An opportunity to provide future certainty for preschools and parents*

An extension of the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) funding was announced the same day as the childcare relief package and has now been guaranteed for another single year to 2021. On May 26 the media reported that the review of the UANP commissioned by Education Council has found that these short term renewals (six one year extensions to date) of the agreement have adversely affected the scheme, but that despite the difficulty caused by annual funding uncertainty the UANP has had led to "remarkable achievements" with

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<sup>12</sup> The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, *Transcript, Q7A, National Press Club, ACT 26 May 2020, p.7.*

<sup>13</sup> Dawson, E. & Lloyd-Cape, M, *Op. cit.* p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4221.0 – *Schools, Australia, 2018*, retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02018?OpenDocument>

enrolment in 600 hours of preschool in the year before school increasing from 12% in 2008 to 95% in 2018.<sup>15</sup>

However, as noted in reports of the review's findings, the short term nature of this extension means that preschools cannot currently plan and invest effectively - "this means, for example, that good staff cannot be retained due to an inability to promise them longer-term employment, which in turn leads to higher turnover and associated administrative inefficiencies (in addition to affecting the quality of provision)."<sup>16</sup> In addition to the benefits that a long term funding arrangement would offer to preschools, offering funding stability would provide families with ongoing certainty and confidence they need to re-engage with the workforce at a time when, in the words of the Prime Minister - "we now need to get one million Australians back to work – that is the curve we need to address"<sup>17</sup>

The AEU has long called on the Commonwealth Government to guarantee ongoing permanent UANP funding for four year olds, and we endorse the reported finding of the UANP review that "funding should be provided under a new five-year partnership starting in 2021, with ongoing national co-ordination by the federal government and reduced reliance on performance-based payments."<sup>18</sup> We also support the reported recommendation that "a stronger national agreement, potentially underpinned by legislation, should then be introduced from 2026 and include more accountability for funding contributions by different governments."<sup>19</sup>

Australia lags behind much of the world when it comes to funding early childhood education. World Bank data<sup>20</sup> shows that in 2015, the vast majority of countries provide two or three years of pre-primary education. While most countries around the world offer their children two years of preschool as standard, Australia is one of only eleven countries to offer a single year early childhood education.

Early childhood education (ECE) is an area where a small investment can have a huge long term impact. A recent report by Price Waterhouse Coopers<sup>21</sup> has shown that for every dollar invested in early childhood education Australia could receive two dollars back through higher tax revenues, higher wages and productivity and lower spending on welfare and criminal justice. The report concludes that annual investment for Universal Access to early childhood education generates double the invested amount in flow-on benefits to the economy.

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<sup>15</sup> Hunter, F., "COAG preschool review highlights 'adverse' effects of funding uncertainty", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/coag-preschool-review-highlights-adverse-effects-of-funding-uncertainty-20200522-p54vjk.html>

<sup>16</sup> Hunter, F., *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Crowe, D., & Wright, S., "Morrison says open up the economy to recapture one million lost jobs", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 5 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/morrison-says-open-up-the-economy-to-recapture-one-million-lost-jobs-20200505-p54q1v.html>

<sup>18</sup> Hunter, F., *Op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, F., *Op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> The World Bank, *Early Childhood Development*, retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/earlychildhooddevelopment>

<sup>21</sup> The Front Project, *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*, June 2019, retrieved from [https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO\\_ANALYSIS\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf)

The educational and economic benefits of long term ECE funding for three and four year olds are clear, and we call on the Federal Government to extend this provision to three year olds nationally. We note that the UANP review found that two years of preschool is beneficial, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Now, as the economy restarts, students return to school and parents go back to work, there is a prime opportunity to provide exactly that certainly for ECE providers and for parents.,

The Commonwealth Government must guarantee in the October 2020 Budget five years of funding for four year old preschool to 2026 as recommended in the UANP review report, and must undertake to legislate to make that funding permanent from 2026. Further, the Commonwealth must guarantee three year old preschool funding in the same way. The annual total cost of these two measures would be around one third of one percent of the total additional Commonwealth spending announced to support the economy in response to COVID-19,<sup>22</sup> and would provide many times that in flow on benefits in employment and increased economic engagement of parents and carers, and improved long term outcomes for children.

## TAFE

### *Federal funding to TAFE must be restored and guaranteed*

For years prior to the current pandemic, the TAFE sector in Australia has existed in crisis, and unless governments act urgently and decisively to restore the gradual and systematic erosion of TAFE funding, its role in the Australian education system is under threat. The Mitchell Institute has recently reported that Australia's total investment in the VET sector is now at its lowest level in real terms since at least 2008.<sup>23</sup>

Successive Australian governments have failed to address this systemic under-funding, and recent market "reforms" have further damaged TAFE. Even before the current crisis the Productivity Commission has said that the VET sector was a mess, echoing the concerns of all major stakeholders and<sup>24</sup> the Business Council of Australia warns that the residualisation of TAFE will 'fail to deliver a good long term outcome'. They argue that governments need to define the role of the public provider in order to 'maintain a sustainable TAFE network across the country'.<sup>25</sup>

In 2018, states, territories and the Commonwealth spent a combined total of \$6.1 billion on vocational education, decrease of \$135 million when compared to 2017. The Commonwealth Government's contribution to all vocational education fell by \$326 million (10.6%) in that single year and the NCVER has reported that Commonwealth Government contributions to public VET delivery fell by more than double that total, by 23.2%, in 2018.<sup>26</sup> TAFE has

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<sup>22</sup> Australian Government, *Economic Response to the Coronavirus*, retrieved from <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Australian-Investment-in-Education-VET.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Productivity Commission 2017, *Shifting the Dial: 5 Year Productivity Review*, Report No. 84, Canberra p86

<sup>25</sup> Business Council of Australia 2017, *Future-proof: protecting Australians through education and skills*, Melbourne, Business Council of Australia, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funding-of-vet-2018>

borne the brunt of this decline in spending as an ever increasing portion of government funding is directed towards training and often non-accredited courses offered by private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the wholesale shift of public funds from the TAFE sector to many, often small, private for profit providers, the established TAFE and vocational education sector bears the burden of being the lowest funded of all the education sectors in Australia. Prior to the most recent cuts, funding was cut by more than 15% in the decade from 2007 to 2016 and government expenditure declined by 31.5% over that time.<sup>28</sup> This was swiftly followed by another cut of \$177 million in the 2017 federal budget and the further net cut to total funding of \$135 million in 2018. The damage inflicted on the sector, particularly as a result of chronic underfunding and attempts at privatisation have eroded the viability of TAFE colleges and undermined confidence in the system. As a result of this continual assault, TAFE enrolments have declined steadily in recent years, from nearly 800,000 in 2015 to 680,000 in 2017.<sup>29</sup>

The number of government funded vocational education students has fallen by almost 17% since 2012 across all jurisdictions, but in TAFE, student numbers have fallen by 25%, as all states and territories endure cuts to campuses, courses and staff.<sup>30</sup> Most recently, in 2018 the total number of students enrolled in nationally-recognised programs (most frequently delivered by TAFE) decreased by 5.9% to two million people in 2018, compared with 2017, and decreased by 16.2% from 2015 to 2018. At the same time, students enrolled in subjects not delivered as part of a nationally-recognised program (usually delivered by private providers) increased by 4.9% to 2.5 million people in 2018, compared with 2017. Overall VET student numbers have also decreased by 1.5% to 4.1 million people in 2018, compared with 2017.

### *A strong TAFE sector is essential for a recovery*

The Prime Minister has repeatedly stated his aim to get a million people back to work. Therefore it stands to reason that his government should make sure they are properly qualified and receive those qualifications from a high quality and consistent public provider, TAFE. However, to date the Commonwealth Government response in relation to vocational education has done nothing to recognise the integral part that TAFE must play in Australia's recovery.

In his address to the National Press Club on 26 May the Prime Minister referred to the “complexity of a vocational educational system that is clunky and unresponsive to skills demand... a funding system marred by inconsistency and incoherence with little accountability” and complained of “a lack of visibility of the quality of providers”. He also said “I’m very interested in investing more in a better system”.<sup>31</sup> What he didn’t

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<sup>27</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2018), *Total VET Students and Courses 2017: data slicer*, retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/total-vet-students-and-courses-2017-data-slicer>

<sup>28</sup> Australian Education Union, (2018), *Stop TAFE Cuts Manifesto*, p1.

<sup>29</sup> National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2018), *Government Funding of VET 2017: data tables*, retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/Government-funding-of-vet-2017-data-tables>

<sup>30</sup> NCVER 2017, *Students and Courses 2016*, NCVER Adelaide Table 2

<sup>31</sup> Press club speech may 26

acknowledge is that the overwhelming majority of inconsistent, non-accredited and poor quality vocational education in Australia is conducted by a myriad of tiny private, for profit RTOs. TAFE offers the highest quality of vocational education across all levels of qualification, with nationally accredited programs, long standing industry links, and a highly qualified and experienced workforce of professional teachers and a national network of campus infrastructure. By contrast, the AEU has received reports that many private, for profit RTOs have simply shut their doors in response to the pandemic, abandoning students at the time that they need the greatest support.

*Meaningless micro credentials and ripping up regulations will limit recovery*

The Commonwealth Government's priority has so far been to push to increase the provision of free micro-credentials, marketed as a way for people to occupy themselves during the COVID-19 crisis, often with no accredited qualifications attached. Further, the numerous regulatory concessions made for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) demonstrates the Commonwealth Government's preference for private for profit RTOs to expand provision. This shows no willingness on the part of the Federal Government to recognise the importance of TAFE in building a properly skilled and qualified workforce, or of the significant and long standing industry links and substantial infrastructure that TAFE provides.

The rush to cut regulations and delay audits in response to the pandemic by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) will only serve to encourage private RTOs to cut corners to seek increased profit, and combined with the rapid increase of non-accredited micro-credentialed units of study, is nothing but a recipe for another disaster on the scale of VET-FEE-HELP.

Instead, the Commonwealth Government has relied entirely on state and territory governments to ensure the ongoing viability of TAFEs during this crisis, and the Prime Minister has now stated that future federal contributions will be contingent on state and territory funding. It cannot be left up to states/territories alone to provide additional COVID-19 crisis funds to TAFE, if that is the case some jurisdictions will be protected through significant support packages and others may lose their TAFE sector entirely. While some states and territories, most notably Victoria, have provided significant support to their TAFE institutes, the level of action has been variable across the country. A coordinated plan for federal support to TAFE, to be delivered without ultimatums, is needed to ensure that TAFE institutes are well placed to provide the training needed for the post COVID-19 recovery

Additionally, the lack of focus and concern for the gaining of long term skills gained and employment is demonstrated by the proposed makeup of the emergency COVID-19 subcommittee of the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC), which limits the union movement to a single ex-officio position and includes no direct representation from the TAFE sector.

*The Commonwealth Government can still act to boost skills, qualifications and employment*

In order to rebuild Australia's economy and workforce a clear and strongly supported national workforce strategy is required. This is particularly important for youth employment. TAFE qualifications offer a clear pathway from school to a career, unlike those gained through many private RTOs who may offer unaccredited fragments of qualifications, often with minimal ongoing support, and who will see the Federal Government's drive

towards micro credentials, coupled with a relaxation of regulation purely as an opportunity to profit.

A true strategy for workforce renewal can only be achieved through the national support for TAFEs, and by making use of TAFE's longstanding partnerships with industry. It cannot be left to private RTOs to rebuild Australia's skills base.

The October 2020 Budget provides a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth to move from the support of its economic response to COVID-19 to the stimulus phase and to guarantee the future of Australia's TAFEs. The AEU proposes that the Commonwealth Government take the following steps to guide Australia, and particularly young Australians, through the crisis:

- Launch a co-ordinated effort to put TAFE at the forefront of the recovery efforts through immediate increased federal funding support and investment in infrastructure, equipment, staffing and programs;
- Restore the more than \$3 billion funding cut from TAFE and training since 2013;
- Implement targeted support for the public VET provider, guaranteeing a minimum of 70% of all government VET funding to TAFE.



# **APPENDIX ONE**



# *Australian Education Union*

## *Federal Office*

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19 March 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Morrison

### **RE: COVID-19**

The Australian Education Union is gravely concerned about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of the decisions taken by the National Cabinet with respect to preschools, schools and TAFE.

We note that the National Cabinet has accepted the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) that schools should remain open at this time, that pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention at this time and that further restrictions on social gatherings are in place.

We note that the AHPPC has stated that school closures for shorter defined periods of time may be considered as part of a suite of more stringent distancing measures. Further, that schools should implement a range of other strategies to reduce transmission, including the promotion of personal hygiene measures, frequent handwashing, reducing face to face contact, cough etiquette, physical distancing, reducing public gatherings, reducing the mixing of students, staggered lunchtimes and reduced after school activities and interschool activities.

We wish to raise the following matters for the urgent consideration of the National Cabinet meeting on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

That:

- at all levels of government, Work, Health and Safety obligations to employees must be met
- identified risks and hazards must have the appropriate level of control to mitigate them
- the National Cabinet and health officials at both a national and state/territory level have provided insufficient information and assurance to teachers, support staff, educators, principals and the AEU about the implementation of COVID-19 decisions and indeed, the safety of workplaces for employees and students
- social distancing requires staff and students to keep a distance of 1.5 metres, a requirement which is practically impossible in the vast majority of public education settings across the nation

- the restrictions which have been placed on non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people have broad implications for public education settings across the country
- schools are reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically
- additional cleaning services must be implemented to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces and frequently used objects are cleaned and sanitized.
- there is widespread concern about the possibility of school closures but limited information available publicly on how such a decision would be made nationally
- the widespread community concern has already led to high levels of student absence in many states and territories
- working from home provisions must be immediately available to public education staff who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their own or family members' underlying health conditions. In particular, those who have chronic illnesses, are immunocompromised, fall into high-risk categories and pregnant staff.
- there are specific workplace health and safety expectations arising from the additional needs of a wide range of students with individual circumstances requiring adjustment
- specific detail must be provided about working in more complex environments such as supporting students and people who have disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural, regional and remote locations.
- maintenance of income including leave entitlements and leave arrangements must be guaranteed for all permanent, temporary and casual public education employees.
- we reject unrealistic expectations that alternative (virtual) learning episodes will be provided for students in the event that schools close – such expectations are inequitable in their impact particularly for students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional and remote centres and unsustainable in an education system denied basic resources.

Given the deep ramifications for all public education employees and the 2.5 million students in their care, we formally request that the National Cabinet immediately provides detailed advice about how all public education settings are to minimise the risk to staff and students if they are to remain open.

We expect that governments will directly advise the AEU, our members, parents and the broader community about what actions they will take if the above safety measures cannot be implemented.

Further, the AEU seeks an urgent briefing from the Chief Medical Officer or his representative, and the Federal Minister for Education Dan Tehan to discuss our concerns. We are happy to facilitate this meeting via video conferencing. Please contact Sharon Ardeljan in my office on (03) 9693 1800 or email to [sardeljan@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:sardeljan@aeufederal.org.au) to make the necessary arrangements.

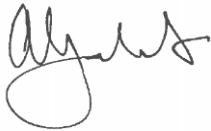
Yours sincerely



Correna Haythorpe  
AEU Federal President



Glenn Fowler  
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AEU ACT Branch



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NSWTF Branch



Jarvis Ryan  
President  
AEU NT Branch



Kevin Bates  
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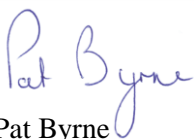
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Cc     National Cabinet via Prime Minister's office;  
Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria  
Gladys Berejiklian, Premier of New South Wales  
Annastacia Palaszczuk, Premier of Queensland  
Peter Gutwein, Premier of Tasmania  
Steven Marshall, Premier of South Australia  
Mark McGowan, Premier of Western Australia  
Michael Gunner, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory  
Andrew Barr, Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory  
  
Professor Brendan Murphy, Chief Medical Officer  
Dr Michelle Bruniges, Secretary of the Department of Education  
Dan Tehan, Minister for Education  
Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Education and Training  
Senator Mehreen Faruqi, Australian Greens