

30 September 2020

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn MP
Chair, Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Spring Street
East Melbourne Victoria 3002

Dear Chair,

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

The Early- and Mid-Career Researcher Forum of the Australian Academy of Science (EMCR Forum) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee regarding the impact of COVID-19 in Victoria. Our submission focuses on the second term of reference of the inquiry: any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This submission comments on the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early- and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) in Victoria and outlines measures the Victorian Government can use to support the Victorian research sector.

Introduction

The EMCR Forum is the representative body of over 5,600 EMCRs in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) in Australia. Of these members, 1,361 (approximately 25%) are based in Victoria. For the purposes of the EMCR Forum, early- and mid-career stages are defined as less than 15 years' experience post-PhD attainment. EMCRs work across the higher education sector, government, research organisations and industry.

The EMCR Forum Executive comprises 12 EMCR volunteers from across the STEMM disciplines across Australia, including metropolitan and regional universities. The EMCR Forum's mission is to serve as the voice of Australia's EMCRs, championing improvement in the national research environment through advocacy.

Concerns

The EMCR Forum commends the Victorian Government on the measures taken to date to support the university sector, including the creation of the Higher Education State Investment Fund, the payroll tax deferral offered to Victorian universities and the support offered to international students.¹ Similarly, we support measures to fund research directly, including in the fight against COVID-19. These measures are particularly welcome given the Federal Government's approach to JobKeeper with regards to publicly funded universities (including all Victorian public universities)² and the exclusion of international students from the JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes.³ The impacts of these responses will be felt particularly strongly by regional universities who face the loss of domestic students to sandstone universities as a result of continuing losses in the international student sector.⁴

Unfortunately, given the longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic's forecast impact to the science sector and the EMCR workforce, further measures are needed.

Issue 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on the university sector

The university sector has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic primarily due to international border closures and the subsequent loss of revenue from international students. This revenue, in some cases, accounted for up to 40% of university budgets.⁵ Combined with the lack of Commonwealth support — including exclusion from the JobKeeper scheme — universities are reducing or deferring capital expenses and cutting staff. In Victoria alone, Deakin University, La Trobe University, Victoria University, Monash University and the University of Melbourne have announced nearly 2,000 collective redundancies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ This reported figure notably does not include casual or fixed-term staff, which account for a majority of the university sector workforce.⁷ Many of these workers have already lost work and face significant uncertainty around their future in STEM.⁸ Further losses in the sector are extremely likely, with experts predicting losses could “reach into the tens of thousands”.⁹ As a result, we have heard from many of our members that they are planning to support their families by exiting the research and education sectors, and looking to move to a more stable sector.

While support for the university sector may still be announced in the forthcoming Federal Budget, the measures contained in the Job-Ready Exposure Draft¹⁰ fail to offer the certainty that the sector needs in order to operate effectively in the future. Commenting on the measures, the Chief Executive of the Group of Eight Universities, Vicki Thomson, stated that the measures do not solve the underlying issue: that universities are being asked to teach more students with less resources.¹¹ Similar concerns were raised in a number of submissions to the Jobs-Ready Inquiry, including by the University of Melbourne which noted in their submission that the measures amount to a “six percent cut to teaching funding”.¹² In addition to the impact on funding, universities have also been affected by lockdown measures which have increased the overall workload of staff as they transition to online learning and providing social and emotional support for students who are themselves struggling with the effect of lockdown on mental wellbeing. This is exacerbated by the effect of increased workload on EMCRs' mental health and general wellbeing. Lockdown measures have further affected science researchers' ability to work due to travel and building occupancy restrictions,¹³ and the need to take on additional teaching responsibilities to account for a reduction in casual personnel, all while managing the general disruption and additional caring responsibilities that are commonplace during the pandemic. The impact of these measures will be discussed with specific reference to EMCRs below.

Issue 2: Impact of COVID-19 on EMCRs

While workers in all industries have been impacted by COVID-19, the effect on EMCRs has been uniquely severe. EMCRs have faced significant uncertainty regarding their future employment, ability to access grants and laboratories, and, in some cases, the loss of years of work.¹⁴

To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EMCRs, the EMCR Forum surveyed its members in May of 2020.¹⁵ Of the Forum's 5,500 members, 330 responded to the survey. Many, unsurprisingly, reported disruption to their research work alongside increased anxiety following discussions around job losses in the sector.¹⁶ Over 65% of respondents are currently

on fixed-term contracts and 57% of respondents reported increased uncertainty around the continuation of their employment. Given the recent job losses in the university sector, this number has likely risen since we conducted our survey.

The impact of the pandemic is not, however, evenly distributed. The EMCR Forum report concluded that:

“The combination of increased caring responsibilities, disruptions to working hours, job insecurity and paid work capacity will have significant effects on the careers of female EMCRs (an already underrepresented group in STEM) and hinder their opportunities to contribute to Australia's research and economic recovery”¹⁷

Disruption to scientists early in their careers typically has long-lasting impacts. Research has demonstrated that grant funding is funnelled primarily to individuals who can demonstrate sustained and consistent success.¹⁸ Researchers who have lost access to labs or taken on additional responsibilities during the pandemic may struggle to maintain the research output expected of them. This risk is compounded for EMCRs in Victoria given the additional lockdown measures¹⁹ which may disadvantage certain types of researchers in the state, compared to their counterparts nationally. While some researchers can conduct experiments remotely and as such work from home, others are reliant on physical equipment housed at universities, the lack of laboratory access for these researchers puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers in other states. Similarly, many high-performing research teams are reliant on post-docs arriving from interstate or overseas, this is largely impossible or impracticable during stringent lockdowns and border closures.

In conjunction, career interruptions, additional work responsibilities, national resource allocation changes and increased job insecurity could drive EMCRs away from the sector.²⁰ This loss could harm the recovery of the university sector and impact the quality of teaching afforded to future students. Furthermore, the loss of these researchers would reduce Victoria's (and Australia's) research output, reducing our ability to recover from the effects of the pandemic.²¹ This impact is particularly concerning in Victoria given the ongoing lockdown and the fact that Melbourne is the hub of medical research in Australia. Medical research (outside of research into COVID-19) has been one of the most affected areas of research due to the need for laboratory access and the diversion of resources to fight the pandemic. While this diversion is, in the short-term, appropriate, the ongoing impact on EMCRs means that we run the real risk of Victoria losing early- and mid-career medical researchers at a greater rate than in other states.

While organisations including the Australian Academy of Science, Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council are working to address these impacts, support needs to be coordinated by the Government. As discussed above, Victoria is taking measures to support its universities and international students (whose return is key for the sector as a whole). These measures should be extended, and the Victorian Government should join efforts in pressing the federal government for additional support for the sector in the forthcoming Federal Budget 2020-2021. Additionally, the Victorian Government should support calls for the impact of COVID-19 to be factored into grant decisions by funding bodies such as the ARC and NHMRC.

Final considerations

The EMCR Forum's recent [COVID-19 report](#) highlighted a number of key recommendations for government, as well as other key stakeholders, to help support EMCRs and the wider research sector. These include:

- Sending a public message of support by acknowledging the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on Australia's EMCR community and our future STEMM workforce
- Including the EMCR community in the design and delivery of policies and programs that support science and research, including the role of science and research in economic recovery
- Formally monitoring the impacts of COVID-19 on EMCRs and on equity, diversity and inclusion within the STEMM sector to inform the development of policies and programs that mitigate the uneven effect of attrition from the research sector.²²

It is appropriate that, given the heightened impact of lockdowns in Victoria and the projected economic effect of these lockdown measures, that the Victorian Government considers implementing state-specific measures, even in the absence of a national framework or scheme.

References

¹ Victorian Government, *Support package for universities* (Web Page, 21 May 2020) <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/Pages/covid-support-universities.aspx>>.

² Naaman Zhou, 'Four private Australian universities allowed to access jobkeeper payments This article is more than 3 months', *The Guardian* (online, 25 May 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/25/four-private-australian-universities-allowed-to-access-jobkeeper-payments>>.

³ For discussion see Maani Truu and Bethan Smoleniec, 'No excuse' not to extend JobKeeper to temporary migrants, casuals after \$60 billion bungle: advocacy groups', *SBS News* (online, 23 May 2020) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/no-excuse-not-to-extend-jobkeeper-to-temporary-migrants-casuals-after-60-billion-bungle-advocacy-groups>>.

⁴ See, eg, Greg Craven, 'Elite unis reduced to campus hunger games', *The Australian* (online, 5 September 2020) <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/break-in-supply-chain-means-elite-unis-struggle-to-survive/news-story/960e6c83210c668d58c70e2c111d1cc6>>.

⁵ Anne Davies, 'Australian universities to close campuses and shed thousands of jobs as revenue plummets due to Covid-19 crisis', *The Guardian* (online, 5 June 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/04/australian-universities-to-close-campus-and-shed-thousands-of-jobs-as-revenue-plummets-due-to-covid-19-crisis>>.

⁶ See Adam Carey, 'Hundreds more university jobs to go as La Trobe, Vic Uni announce cuts', *The Age* (online, 13 August 2020) <<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/hundreds-more-university-jobs-to-go-as-la-trobe-vic-uni-announce-cuts-20200813-p55lbo.html>>; Conor Duffy, 'University of Melbourne reveals 450 job losses as COVID-19 creates revenue hit, drop in international students', *ABC News* (online, 5 August 2020) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-05/university-of-melbourne-announces-450-job-losses/12527576>>; Paul Karp, 'Monash University to cut 277 jobs as slump in international students bites', *The Guardian* (online, 16 July 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jul/16/monash-university-to-cut-277-jobs-as-slump-in-international-students-bites>>.

⁷ Jess Harris, Kathleen Smithers and Nerida Spina, 'More than 70% of academics at some universities are casuals. They're losing work and are cut out of JobKeeper', *The Conversation* (online, 15 May 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/more-than-70-of-academics-at-some-universities-are-casuals-theyre-losing-work-and-are-cut-out-of-jobkeeper-137778>>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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- ⁹ Anne Davies, 'Australian universities to close campuses and shed thousands of jobs as revenue plummets due to Covid-19 crisis', *The Guardian* (online, 5 June 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/04/australian-universities-to-close-campus-and-shed-thousands-of-jobs-as-revenue-plummets-due-to-covid-19-crisis>>.
- ¹⁰ Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 (Cth) ('Exposure Draft').
- ¹¹ Fergus Hunter, 'Government cuts some uni course fees, locks in funding', *Brisbane Times* (online, 25 August 2020) <<https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/federal/government-cuts-course-fees-locks-in-funding-after-unis-nationals-raise-fears-20200825-p55p4v.html>>.
- ¹² University of Melbourne, 'Submission to the consultation on the draft legislation to implement the Job Ready Graduates Package' (August 2020) <<https://docs.education.gov.au/university-melbourne-3>>.
- ¹³ These restrictions have a particular impact on early and mid-career scientists who face limited access to laboratories, fieldwork and, where necessary, access to participants for research.
- ¹⁴ Justine Shaw and Yee Lian Chew, 'Early and mid-career scientists face a bleak future in the wake of the pandemic', *The Conversation* (online, 13 August 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/early-and-mid-career-scientists-face-a-bleak-future-in-the-wake-of-the-pandemic-144350>>.
- ¹⁵ EMCR Forum, *Impacts of COVID-19 for EMCRs National Survey Report* (Report, 12 August 2020) <<https://www.science.org.au/files/userfiles/support/documents/covid19-emcr-impact-report.pdf>>.
- ¹⁶ The survey results were further discussed in Shaw and Chew (n 12)
- ¹⁷ EMCR Forum (n 13) 3.
- ¹⁸ Thijs Bol, Mathijs de Vaan and Arnout van de Rijt, 'The Matthew effect in science funding' (2018) 115(19) *PNAS* 4887. This impact was discussed in Shaw and Chew (n 12).
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- ²⁰ Alexie Papanicolaou and Andrew Ray, 'Job-ready graduates changes loom as last straw for emerging researchers', *The Conversation* (online, 27 August 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/job-ready-graduates-changes-loom-as-last-straw-for-emerging-researchers-144853>>.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² EMCR Forum (n 13) 5.