



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 2021
PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

(Reference: [Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response](#))

Members:

**MS E LEE (Chair)
MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)
MS J CLAY**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2021

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**Secretary to the committee:
Dr D Monk (Ph: 620 50129)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 2.41 pm.

BALLANTYNE, MR DANIEL, Director, MusicACT

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome to the sixth public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response. The committee acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people, and acknowledges and respects their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and the region. We also acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be joining us at today's hearing.

Today we will hear evidence from MusicACT, the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and will be transcribed and published by Hansard. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be helpful if you could please state, "I will take that as a question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

Please be aware that today's proceedings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which not only provides protection to witnesses but also obliges them to tell the truth. The provision of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter, and all participants today are reminded of this.

Welcome, Mr Ballantyne. Can you please confirm that you have read and understood the pink privilege statement that the secretariat sent to you? There is a copy on the table as well.

Mr Ballantyne: I have already read it and understood it.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Ballantyne: Yes, I would. First, thank you for having me here. MusicACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people, who have made music on this land for many thousands of years.

MusicACT is the contemporary music industry representative organisation for the Australian Capital Territory, and is a member of the peak body the Australian Music Industry Network. We receive funding support from the ACT government, the commonwealth, APRA AMCOS, and Molonglo. We do not and, for obvious reasons, will not into the foreseeable future seek financial support from artists and music industry professionals and businesses. They have either gone bankrupt or are just hanging on, utterly skint.

While the music industry and all of its people are precious and important contributors to our cultural, social and economic lives, this does not require a lengthy justification. At a fundamental level, we all know the passion and energy that music creation brings and how music, both live and recorded, creates joy everywhere.

The Australian live music and entertainment industry is in crisis. In dollar terms,

consulting giant PwC found Australia's live and recorded music market was valued at \$1.1 billion in 2020—a decline of nearly 39 per cent on the previous year, driven almost entirely by the suspension of live music industry activity, which shed 90 per cent of its revenue, at \$86 million. Most industry experts believe that the PwC analysis significantly understates the financial implications. It does not cover 2021, yet alone the yet-to-be-measured negative employment, cultural and social impacts.

Unfortunately, we do not have an accurate assessment of the size of the ACT music industry, nor do we have firm indicators as to the cultural, social and economic health of the ACT music industry. This is an industry resourcing question that we would welcome assistance with.

I can tell you this: MusicACT has over 570 music pro members. There are musicians, music industry professionals and business owners who are all distinguished by their professional intent. There are also over 1,100 APRA AMCOS registered ACT-based songwriters. These are people registered to be paid performance royalties across the ACT, Australia and world music scenes. MusicACT also has a core group of 92 live music managers/business operators, who are supported by and liaise directly with MusicACT. For example, MusicACT has assisted with cumulative funding grant applications in excess of \$1.2 million through the pandemic crisis.

I am saying all of this because I believe there is a perception that the music industry in this town is not significant. Did you know that a proudly Canberra-based artist, Genesis Owusu, only this morning was awarded the triple j Album of the Year, and has seven 2021 Aria Award nominations? This does not happen in a vacuum. The ACT has amongst the best educated, most progressive artists and bands, and has produced numerous industry-leading figures, including Dave Ruby Howe at triple j's *Unearthed*, Ryan Sabet at Kicks Entertainment, and Rod Yates at Jaxsta, to name a few.

Throughout Australia, governments during the pandemic have woken up to the size and importance of the music and entertainment industries as positive social, cultural and economic drivers. As they have attempted to provide support through very difficult times, in doing so they have discovered how complex and interrelated the music industry ecosystem is. It is one industry that is clearly driven by passion and creativity, yet it is determined, unlike most other cultural sectors, to achieve self-sufficiency and business success.

I have distributed, through David, a paper which has a diagram on it, which I did not bring. I have a simple artist-centric model of the vast web of business, services and roles, put together by the Gold Coast City Council. MusicACT's professional development plan sets out to grow the capacity of artists and emerging professionals as presented here. There is more on the Gold Coast City's approach below. You will see a diagram where an artist is at the centre of upwards of a dozen different types of business and operator.

MusicACT wants to impress on you why a local live scene is important economically for artists and everyone else. You now know who is involved. First to be hit and last to begin to recover: that is the live music industry experience on the pandemic rollercoaster. Furthermore, we now know, after a succession of lockdowns, that once

the reopening starts, live music venues in particular have been unable to achieve viable capacities readily, as social distancing measures are wound back, and inconsistently, across state and territory borders. This impacts touring.

In the ACT, 50 per cent capacity for indoor venues was the norm until our last and most recent lockdown was declared in August. For this opening up, this remains the case, subject to the somewhat complicated ACT health exemption application process currently underway.

There is an easily understood financial impact on emerging artists and artists seeking to build and widen their audience base through our leading and internationally renowned promoters and touring companies. Put simply, it is the universal music industry business plan: invest, record, release, tour, recoup and repeat. There is no touring income from playing live; typically, a national tour is no longer viable, thanks to just one state or territory's lockdown action rendering it unviable; and there is now a pervasive and dreaded loss of confidence where most artists and touring businesses have run down what modest reserves they had. There are limited or no funds available to kickstart that cycle: invest, record, release, tour, recoup and repeat. Skilled, talented artists and industry workers are giving up and leaving the live music and entertainment industries.

Here in the ACT, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the small team at artsACT, who have worked across the ACT government to help to deliver important relief through funding initiatives, including Homefront and Amp It Up!; and, indeed, the funding that MusicACT receives annually of approximately \$120,000. This has not been without issues, including delays in the current funding announcements due to what we believe are ACT government and artsACT teams being stretched by work demands across the pandemic response. ArtsACT, we believe, needs more resources.

We also think that the music industry, as it is considered in other jurisdictions, is more than just an arts or cultural portfolio consideration; rather, the music industry is a driver for wider economic outcomes, best encapsulated in the concept of the night-time economy, or NTE.

I would like to acknowledge the progress that the ACT government is making on the creation of entertainment areas, a long-sought and thoughtful reform advocated by MusicACT. The last ACT budget saw \$250,000 committed to work on creating entertainment areas. It is hoped appropriate regulatory and planning reform will open up and reverse the decline in live music entertainment and night-time economy businesses that we have witnessed over the last decade.

I would also like the committee to note and to acquaint itself with other jurisdictions and how they have undertaken reform during the pandemic to enable a rapid recovery of the music industry and NTE businesses. Queensland have declared three entertainment areas—\$37 million-plus in music industry support. This is just from what I have been able to gather. In New South Wales, there have been 500 amendments to planning, liquor and environmental legislation and regulations to enable live music, NTE and the creation of entertainment precincts—\$24 million in direct live music industry support, plus \$200 million in indirect support and cultural support.

In Victoria, it is very difficult to quantify, but there is in excess of \$100 million in direct support. Please have a look at the Victorian Music Development Office website. They have also undertaken legislative reform to protect live music venues and enable creation of entertainment areas. Melbourne is now recognised as one of the world's great live music cities. This did not happen by chance. It was planned and worked on. Only a couple of days ago, the Victorian government announced \$20 million in cancellation insurance underwriting for touring acts. That fulfils a major plank in the music industry's own recovery plan, which I will touch on shortly. This is just a limited survey. WA, SA and NT are all moving to enable and support live music, live entertainment and NTE growth through various funding programs and reforms, as they enact their respective pandemic recovery plans.

Further to the work already being done here in the ACT, how could we step up and accelerate recovery and growth to reap the benefits of the already capable latent music scene and its industry? Look at the APRA AMCOS led open mike or open music industry conference five-point recovery plan. That is attached; you can maybe read that afterwards. Also, please look at the Gold Coast City Music Action Plan. It is a plan for a whole-of-government approach to music industry growth. These two plans strongly indicate the potential and where we can go in the ACT as we chart our recovery from the pandemic.

On an exciting and positive closing note, the ACT music industry is pulling itself up by the bootstraps, with help from Amp It Up! funding from the ACT government. MusicACT also now has a direct line into how many gigs are happening, after we launched, last Friday, What's On? Lots On—or WOLO. I have given you a sticker, so you might have connected with that already. This is an open-access, open-source live entertainment and gig guide—we think the first of its kind in the world—where artists and venues can enter their listings. Importantly, it is not impacted by commercial or advertising considerations. This was funded thanks to the commonwealth Live Music Australia program, and lots of sweat capital from Billy Bianchini, MusicACT's program manager, and the legendary Allan Sko at *BMA* magazine. That is the end of my opening statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Ballantyne; I really appreciate it. It was very thorough. Thanks for sending this through as well. That is very helpful for the committee. I will hand over to Ms Lawder to ask the first question.

MS LAWDER: Thanks for your opening statement. It addressed part of my question about the recent lockdown period and how difficult it must have been for local artists and arts organisations. Can you expand a little more on what you said about the process of easing restrictions, particularly in relation to density limits, and how easy or not it is to understand them and get further information?

Mr Ballantyne: There are a couple of points there. From our point of view, the music industry relies on capacity to achieve viability. This capacity, clearly, will not help with public health measures—what they actually mean. I do not know of any other industry that has been impacted as quickly or has been able to recover as late as people that present live music, concerts and entertainment.

As for the ACT government's processes in response, it has been steady and consistent. But the most recent opportunity to increase capacity is subject to an exemption application. I know that venues achieved exemption applications prior to this last lockdown, and they can apply for and immediately get it. Other venues, if they have not had it, have to apply and wait. There is a bit of ambiguity around it. I must say that the messaging around it has been a bit ambiguous. It is not explicit that, for instance, when you apply for exemptions on the website, you are applying for an exemption for a live music venue as opposed to the other exemptions and so on.

MS LAWDER: Do you feel you have been consulted and have been able to give input which has been taken notice of and incorporated?

Mr Ballantyne: Broadly, yes. It is fair to say that Minister Cheyne's office have been particularly engaged in these questions. They have a very good senior adviser there who is well known to the music industry, Michael Liu. That has gone really well for us.

My issue, broadly, is that the ACT government could focus as deeply as other jurisdictions have on the opportunity to recover through fast activations in the music industry. We still have this long-running issue around planning, regulation and other reforms required to make music venues viable, especially in the mixed-use planning environment that we see around our town centres and city centres.

MS LAWDER: With respect to living with COVID, what do you suggest could be changed to make life easier for your industry?

Mr Ballantyne: I think there could be a continuation of the kind of support for venues and artists locally, a willingness to align as soon and as quickly as possible with conditions as they are elsewhere in Australia, so that touring can occur, and, as I mentioned, the forthcoming reform with the creation of entertainment areas, so that we have an opportunity to start opening businesses—new businesses, not just old ones.

MS CLAY: For MusicACT, you would like deeper engagement from government on the recovery phase. Are you pulling out entertainment precincts as probably the most useful single thing that could be done?

Mr Ballantyne: No, not at all. We have been pushing for this reform for a decade. We have the commitment now to do that, and there is funding in the budget to get on with it. From my point of view, I would like to know the extent of the ambition behind that reform. There is room for consultation in that budget; I believe that is what it is for. So we can certainly seek that ambition.

That is definitely the big one. Broadly, if you look at the Gold Coast, and the way that they have gone about their Music Action Plan—and there are equivalent music action plans all over the country; in Newcastle, which I have been involved in—they look at how music is great for the community, the arts and cultural development. They look at it as an industry; they look at it as a way to represent a place, and so on. I strongly suggest that, if you are looking for ideas for reform and progress in the music industry, the entertainment industry, you should look at the Gold Coast Music Action Plan.

MS ORR: I believe there was a very famous committee excursion by Mary Porter, Alistair Coe and Caroline Le Couteur.

THE CHAIR: What happened on that committee excursion stayed on that committee excursion, apparently!

MS CLAY: I was interested in Homefront. I liked Homefront, and I was also really pleased that it came out quickly, when it did. I thought that was good.

Mr Ballantyne: We are still waiting on the third round.

MS CLAY: Yes, we are still waiting on that. Maybe we will follow up on that. I was interested that the funding model for Amp It Up! was a bit different for the ACT government. Quite a lot of it was tied in to artist direct reimbursement, and some of it was tied in to promotions and facilities. Now that we are in the recovery phase—let us call it the recovery phase, rather than a crisis phase—do you see value in those sorts of different funding models, rather than the traditional grant or with the government building something?

Mr Ballantyne: Having observed the funding models and efforts, especially in New South Wales, up close, I would say that the ACT pretty much got it right, because they came and asked us how to design it. We said, “Keep it super simple.” Broadly, I would say that, with arts funding, it is incredibly risk-averse. Arts funding is terribly worried about somebody getting \$3,000 or \$4,000 for nefarious purposes—not that I want money used for nefarious purposes, but it generally results in a funding application that is lengthy and complicated.

I have just completed a New South Wales government funding application for my other business which was 29 pages long. At least Amp It Up! was done with simplicity and elegance, and it went straight to artists’ incomes. It supported venue operations and a little bit of marketing. Those are the three key things that fuel activity.

MS CLAY: How do you feel about the quantum of the funding there, when you look at—

Mr Ballantyne: Never enough.

MS CLAY: Never enough; when you look at the quantum of general COVID business funding, and when you look at the quantum of the general arts budget, which has a lot of facilities in it, and then you look at things like Homefront and Amp It Up!, do you feel that we are putting enough money into the right places to help individual artists to recover? Do you feel that we have that balance right yet?

Mr Ballantyne: There are three points there. I could easily start to rant about the over-capitalisation of arts in this town. In my previous role as an executive director at Belconnen, I became acutely aware of just how over-capitalised this town is in arts facilities.

Having said that, the business funding and support that came through to the ACT

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generally through the pandemic, both commonwealth and territory, applied to everybody, including music industry businesses. The Amp It Up! funding acknowledged that the music industry, and venues and artists in particular, would be amongst the last to get a break, once things opened up. If the question is: do you think it is enough? No, probably not. But it was certainly a very useful amount, and it is yet to be paid out. The Amp It Up! funding, of course, arrived in people's accounts pretty much in August when—guess what?—we locked down again. We have yet to really assess the impact of it, except that I do know local bookings are doing quite well at the moment.

MS CLAY: Good.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we have run out of time. Mr Ballantyne, thank you very much for your time in assisting the inquiry.

MS LAWDER: I have so many more questions.

THE CHAIR: We do. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your evidence today. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available, to check for accuracy. I do not think that you took any questions on notice.

NIXON, PROFESSOR PADDY, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Canberra

ANDERSON, PROFESSOR IAN, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Student and University Experience, Australian National University

THE CHAIR: We will continue our sixth public hearing of the select committee. I call representatives of ANU and UC.

THE CHAIR: Please be aware that today's parliamentary proceedings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which provides protection to witnesses but also, of course, obliges them to tell the truth. The provision of false and misleading evidence is a serious matter. All participants today are reminded of this.

Can you please confirm that you have read and understood the pink privilege statement that the secretary sent you and that a copy is also available on the desk?

Prof Nixon: Yes, I have.

Prof Anderson: I have.

THE CHAIR: Do either of you wish to make an opening statement?

Prof Anderson: I do have an opening statement. I might just speak to it rather than read every page, and I will leave you with a copy.

A language other than English was then spoken.

I just want to acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people in the language of mum's family, which is Palawa kani. Thank you for the opportunity. I just want, at the outset, to express my gratitude to the ACT government for the journey we have been on over the last 12 months, in the sense that in the last 12 months it has been truly a very collaborative relationship. There have been some moments of significant trauma along the way but I do not think—and the results speak for themselves—that we could not have ended in a better position.

There are a number of ways in which we have connected with the ACT government at an operational level in trying to get a sense of where the epidemic is heading. I think one of the reflections that we have over the period is that there has been no significant departure from the operational relationship. There were points in time where we did not quite understand the strategic agenda of the government. That had some implications for us, which I am really happy to talk through.

We certainly have to take the view set out in the national Biosecurity Act that the government leads on public health matters. It is our responsibility as institutional leaders to fall in behind that, although I would note we are a university and we are full of academics who have very different views around the various public health matters. That is not an issue for us at the moment. Our issue is really how we best position ANU as an institution.

There are two more points that I really want to make. The first is that, beside me

should have been Professor Tracy Smart. She has been our public health lead over the course of most of the pandemic. She had much more oversight of the operational matters. So there might be some issues that I cannot honestly give you a very close on-the-ground experience on. I am very happy to take questions on notice or provide further evidence as needed, given that I do not really want to guess on some of the key details.

The other point is that, without a doubt, COVID has had a significant impact on the Australian higher education system. And universities here in the ACT are no different. We can talk to some of those broad impacts through this session of the hearings. But I do want to make the point that surprisingly COVID has had some positive impacts in terms of universities overall. For us at ANU, it has left us with a significant resolve to really tackle online digital education going forward and really produce a higher quality, we think, of the current educational model that we will ultimately do. Probably if it were not for the pandemic, we would be in that position to really ask the question about the quality of our digital education, given that we are significantly a place-based learning institution.

It would be greatly remiss of me not to also acknowledge Patricia Cowell who is Tracy Smart's offside and is a key part of the COVID response. I really want to have on the public record my deep gratitude to both of those women who have really chartered our public health course over the last couple of months. It seems like a couple of months; actually it has been nearly two years.

THE CHAIR: It certainly has. Professor Nixon.

Prof Nixon: I too would like to recognise the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners of the land where we meet today, and recognise the elders, past, present, and emerging. I would also like to note that both we and the ANU have worked very collaboratively during this period over the last two years. Being new to the ACT when this first happened, it was a very beneficial partnership between the two institutions. Tracy, particularly, has been very helpful working with our health service providers as well. I guess this has been a major test for the university, for our staff and for our students.

In the second lockdown obviously we were prepared and had contingency plans in place and we were able, to use that word of the moment, to 'pivot' quite successfully back to online with minimal impact, if any, on the quality of the teaching. Nonetheless, I think some of the fundamental challenges to the students and the staff to maintain and deliver that have been quite fundamental. Noting what Ian said, it has driven some of our thinking around digital learning and online provisioning as a face-to-face institution. I think the biggest impact for us would be in our research, practical classes, work integrated learning—all those things that are sort of at the heart of how we do our business.

One of the major challenges for us has got to be the ongoing uncertainty around international borders. Now that we are transitioning to the ACT being welcoming and with the opening of the border with New South Wales and being more comfortable about planning a future, that—and I will come back to that—for us is a really fundamental issue. We have got, at this moment in time, about 650 enrolled students

internationally, whom we are going to prioritise to return at the point at which we can. Obviously then there are the new enrolments, those students that would like to come to Australia and to the ACT to study. And we are very keen to try and work with those to come here as well.

As with all institutions, there has been some significant financial impact over the period. However, we, as an institution, were on quite a significant growth trajectory prior to COVID. So we were able to mitigate some of those impacts and stabilise our finances. That, for us, has been a major challenge. And we have had some major impacts. Commercial activities, for example, on campus, have almost effectively come to a close in some context. That has hit our revenue there for upwards of 30 per cent.

As we go forward, I think one of the things I am really proud of, from the institution, is the role that University of Canberra played out as Canberra's university. I would like to give you just a couple of examples, just to give a sense of where we stepped up to support the ACT.

With health students, we ran vaccination clinics; students were contact tracers; and in the aged care and disability workforce we supported the ACT with our mobile health clinic, which was used as a COVID vaccination and treatment centre. Our education students worked with ACT teachers across the whole of the ACT to develop online resources for students and for the curriculum. Our news and media research centre was working with the ACT government on understanding cultural, linguistic and diverse communities and on engagement in critical and urgent situations. Our law students ran over 300 small business events to support everything from advice on commercial leasing to approaches to rent relief et cetera et cetera.

I think we made a very significant contribution back to the ACT during this time, notwithstanding some of the fundamental issues that impacted us. I can go through a few of those—and I think we should come to those—but I will finish at that point that I started with. The impact on international students will continue to be significant, and I want to emphasise this: in year one we lost one-third of our students; in year two it is two-thirds; and in year three it is the whole 100 per cent.

The cumulative impact of non-returning international students has a long-term pipeline issue actually for the universities and certainly for us. And we think that is a pretty urgent issue and one that certainly we want to work with the ACT government and with colleagues in opposition to try and lobby to make sure we move that piece forward as soon as possible.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that opening statement. It is actually good that you have talked about the international students because that was going to be my question: the challenges that you face as institutions in terms of international students. Thank you for those numbers. If you could tell us what are the types of support or any other facilitation that can be provided at the ACT government level that would help lessen the impact or the long-term impact of the loss of international students?

Prof Anderson: I would think, first of all, reviewing and enhancing our marketing position as the ACT. I do not think it is the role of government to run ANU marketing

or indeed UC marketing. We cannot assume that those international students who are not here will recover that market in a very easy way. Our sense is that a much stronger focus on the student experience is needed.

I think the other view I would have, as we are going forward, is that probably where the government could position itself is a stronger sense of the ACT community, rather than running the marketing for the university, which has been done prior to the pandemic—and was completely appropriate then—to really get a better sell for the ACT and differentiate that soul from the markets in Sydney and Melbourne, where they have significantly higher capacity, as well as to build a sharper differentiation between the students who are going to a major metropolitan capital and those who might actually choose to come to the ANU and the University of Canberra, to Canberra.

One example is we are streets ahead in terms of providing a safe community in the perception of the international market. The second thing is that we have an extraordinarily beautiful city. We do not make enough of that in our international marketing. The third thing is that—and I can compare my earlier experience some time ago at a university in Melbourne—many of the students actually were quite lonely, the international students. Their experience, coming from overseas, apart from all the ways in which universities in Melbourne would market that, is actually being in a small bedsitter in a large city, just being lonely, going to class and coming home. I do not think that should be the case in Canberra.

I think we should be just rethinking that broader strategy and maximising the opportunities of being in Canberra and actually getting a really clear line of sight to that international market. For our part—and I am sure that is the case with the University of Canberra—we should actually be strengthening our focus on student experience.

Prof Nixon: Certainly I will agree that the key message that the ACT is open for business for international students is deeply welcoming. As you indicated, Ian, Canberra is very safe and has one of the best qualities of life recognised internationally. So it is certainly a place that I want, as a community, to market—to sell, but also to welcome them when they arrive. Part and parcel of that is actually not what we just do in the university but what we do more collectively to integrate students into our community. That piece is critical.

I think, following on from that, as we get into what is evidently going to be a highly competitive market—we are already seeing the UK, the US and Canada capitalising on the fact that the borders are closed here in Australia and attracting international students; I do not see that as being an international issue—I do think students will want to come to Australia but I think those attraction models will be required in the short term to rebuild our market presence. I think that is where collaborations with government are absolutely critical.

I will say that ANU and ourselves have put in proposals to government on a number of occasions, both federally and locally, around how we will deal with the return of international students. That now is a different model because ACT and New South Wales, in particular, now have no requirements for quarantine. The challenge for us is

fundamentally that now the federal borders are closed and that sits outside this particular body to be able to influence. So I think that is a critical one.

As soon as we get a flow of students coming back we will start to see a fundamental change in the perceptions of Australians to international students. We will start to see that rebuild, I think, relatively quickly.

MS CLAY: Thank you for running us through your international student impact. You lost a third in the first year, two-thirds, then—

Prof Nixon: Yes, as a sort of philosophical model.

MS CLAY: Yes, as a general rule. Can you give me a sense of how important the international students are in terms of numbers compared to your overall population and also in terms of revenue? What is the impact of that on your overall operations when you lose that one-third or that entirety?

Prof Nixon: It varies very differently across the sector. I think almost either end of the table will have two different stories on this. For our university, we were operating at about 22 per cent of our student body being international students, with a growth model fitting in there.

We had the earliest semester start date in Australia. Actually we had a large proportion of our students already in place before the lockdown happened. So we were less impacted in the first year in particular. And then we did a very large effort to recruit in-country international students for post-graduate courses. We were able to maintain that, what I would call, relatively modest percentage of international students. And overall the impact was modest.

That said, they were not living on campus; they were not engaging in the university—student halls and residences. All of the commercial activities were deeply impacted because we did not have the on-campus presence. There is the knock-on impact as well, because they provide the key component of the workforce for the hospitality sector, for all of those things. There are economic benefits to the territory. I think all of those were impacted. I suspect, without putting words into my colleague's mouth, it would have been a different story for ANU.

Prof Anderson: Professor, I do not think you ever will put words into my mouth, given that we are up the road. But can I just clarify that I started the day ANU shut. So I do not have a full picture of a normal academic year. So I will give you a bit more of a qualitative sense, without giving the actual numbers. We have about 4,000 or 5,000 international students. We have a total of just under 20,000 students. The loss of international student revenue was a key drama to the financial recovery, without a doubt. That was a very painful process for us as an institution.

I want to maybe give you a sense of what impacted the different student groups. We have just over 3,000 students who started at ANU prior to the pandemic and had not yet made a start. I say that quite deliberately because that group of students had chosen to make the ACT home—it might be for a particular point in their life—but they chose to enrol here and come to Canberra, and they were part of our community.

PROOF

For that group of students, the real challenge has been—and this goes to my earlier comment about what our learnings are around our digital capacity over two years—continuing their education through Zoom. There have been a range of challenges with that, and I do not want to over-emphasise the degree of goodwill across the teaching community of ANU to really meet their needs, but we were in a difficult position. I also do not want to oversimplify the teaching experience; so I will just go to probably the worst case for some of them, which was getting up late at night to go into a class and face a Zoom local call.

That was a really very difficult challenge, and it drove us to think more innovatively: how do we create an inclusive teaching environment for that particular group of students? Albeit they might be in China, Malaysia, India, Indonesia or other parts of the world. It has really driven our thinking around social inclusion particularly, and how do we maintain social inclusion with a group of students who actually could not come back.

Now the other challenge for us, of course, is that the gap in the declining numbers across enrolment—and my opening statement provides a bit more detail—has been incredibly challenging. That has been lost and forgoing revenue. But it has really driven our thinking around how do we rebuild that market, again assuming they are not just going to come home or come back to Canberra, just because the borders are opening.

We have to convince them. We have to convince them in a really tight educational market where students are looking for product differentiation. And we need to think about how we differentiate our programs. One of the things is really through driving a quality-of-student experience.

If I could make one more highly contextual observation, over 20 years in the higher education sector—and I would point to particularly to the ANU or the UC here—we have been in a growth surplus environment where we really have not had to compete to a degree to which we now do in the broader global university system, making sure that we have a sharper product.

I think that that really sets the stage going forward for actually thinking about what does the student experience look like. Why do mums and dads in China or Malaysia send their kids to Australia? Are they really realising their aspiration to strengthen their English language skills? Are they really realising their aspiration to make connections that are going to really put them in good stead for their future international connections? Are they realising their educational ambition while sending them to a sharply, well-defined global institution?

Whilst I do not have the specific answers to those questions, they are the key things I think we need to have in our mind as we move forward into 2022.

MS CLAY: I was fascinated to hear about all the contributions UC made during COVID. That was really lovely to hear. You were talking about students doing legal workshops and contract tracing. Have I got that right? Was that done as part of the course work?

Prof Nixon: Yes, to some extent it was. For example, the training teachers that we have, as a part of re-balancing, could not do any classroom work; so they worked with teachers to develop online materials for curriculums. Similarly with the student lawyers, they could not do face-to-face clinics; so they then did online support for businesses, all mentored and supported. These things are never done on their own. Because we have a significant number of thousands—and I have not got the number off the top of my head—of work integrated placements every year, and that is a central part of all our degrees, we had to find ways of rebalancing that. Of course, the natural way to do that is to focus on the community needs at that point in time and see where we can build on it.

MS CLAY: I know early in the piece—and this would have been in the first lockdown—there was a lot of discussion about whether we could do in-campus quarantine. I know there has been a lot of ongoing conversation with government about quarantine for international students. I am just wondering how it came out for both UC and ANU, how you felt that conversation was handled by government in those early days and then, with what we have been through and we now know where we are, how you feel the consultation happened and how you feel we actually have managed that, with a bit of benefit of hindsight. That is a big question.

Prof Nixon: I reckon this is where Tracy should answer. Maybe I will channel my sense of Tracy! There were a few moments where we thought we were not in alignment with government—all along the way—and that is on the kind of tactical stuff. In some, we have landed in a relatively charted position.

The question of quarantine is really tied to borders, international borders, and really getting the quarantine model right. It really required some alignment with the commonwealth government, who ultimately would have signed off on it. We came very close prior to Delta. There were a number of conversations that we were having with the ACT government, with Prime Minister and Cabinet, with DESE and the commonwealth. I had anticipated that we were getting close, and Delta happened. Delta was a game changer. It completely changed the pandemic rules.

We were willing and able to offer online quarantine. The view of the Chief Health Officer is that on-campus quarantine would not have met the requirements in terms of her standards that she was quite rightly setting for the ACT. We took a slightly different perspective at the time. Again, we were coming very close in June. We did not quite get there. And that was really the pandemic timing.

There is still a question about quarantine not from the ACT government but from the commonwealth government, and we are waiting for some clarity on what the commonwealth government requires. But I feel that we are better positioned there.

The other observation that I would make—and it really was very different here in the ACT—is that the ACT is a small jurisdiction. I know that I am stating the obvious, but actually for quarantine options that mattered. That mattered because about May this year it was quite clear that the hotel community in the ACT was not walking away—I would say—but kind of running away from the opportunity to be the quarantine hotel.

PROOF

Really our set of options in the ACT was quite limited. We were actively making every proposal that we thought might get legs. We were considering building a quarantine site, using campuses and everything else. In the end, that was not going to make a difference.

Now, in retrospect, could it have at any point? I do not actually know. But what I can say is that, despite the points of disagreement along the way, the ACT government continued to be in dialogue with us.

MS CLAY: The conversation continued?

Prof Nixon: Yes.

THE CHAIR: A lot of my questions were answered in the opening statements. You were both very good actually with a lot of detail. The only follow up question that I had, which I think has now also been covered, was about the detail of some of the proposals that you put to government. But my understanding is that that is an ongoing conversation. Is that fair to say?

Prof Anderson: Yes, that is right. I would say that this is a really good example of the two universities working very collaboratively. We pooled our resources in terms of deciding which halls of residence, whether it was ANU or ourselves. We did not really mind which ones worked. Equally, in terms of the staff working closely, we both—sorry, I am speaking for ANU—worked very collaboratively because we want international students back here full stop.

Prof Anderson: And again, noting that Paddy and I were not in the university community prior to the pandemic.

Prof Nixon: No.

Prof Anderson: So we can only reflect on what we know. It has been a genuinely collaborative moment, which is unusual in the university world.

THE CHAIR: I understand. I note the time. On behalf of the committee, thank you for taking the time to provide us with your evidence. It was very helpful to the committee's deliberations. The secretary will provide each of you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's proceedings, when it is available, so that you can check for accuracy. I thank all witnesses for appearing before the committee today, at this sixth public hearing, and I call the hearing to a close.

The committee adjourned at 3.31 pm.