This year is a year like no other for all of us. We can all be sure we haven’t experienced these circumstances before. Because of this you, and your fellow students, share a unique bond. Your university years will be defined by the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of you will have seen images of the early years of Monash – those young students, now older alumni, look back at university days that were marked by new protests - social protests, anti-war protests. Whatever they actually did during their time at university, the culture and circumstances left a mark and a marker.

Every student who is starting university this year embarks on a whole new journey. A university is a place where you explore the things that will mean something to you in the future. Like all exploration, you should expect to find the unexpected as much as the planned destination.

All of you have found the very unexpected this year – and you are on that journey with lecturers and tutors and other staff. The academics leading this expedition have the equivalent of a treasure map. They know what you need to find and understand (they have a fully formed sense of the destination) but they are with you in an experiment about how to get there.

You have heard of and experienced the anxiety that comes with the changes we are in. It is easy (and all too human) to be expecting that someone is going to make most of the difficulties go away.
But the thing about crises is that, by definition, the difficulties don’t immediately go away and they have to be overcome. And we are all in it together, some with more resources, some more confident in the face of uncertainty than others, some wanting to turn back, some others to forge ahead.

While you are in it, it is difficult to remain calm, difficult to reflect on what you are learning from the experience – but this time is invaluable for testing what you are capable of learning. And you should make the most of it.

You are travelling the path never travelled before, and you as a group of students and with the academic staff have an opportunity to creatively explore how you get to the destination you are seeking – not just travel along the well-trodden path of those before you.

When you’re at your first job interview or creating your first organisation or group and you consider the challenges you have overcome, you have a story of navigating in a pandemic.

I am not trying to downplay the issues each of you is facing in this time, because your studies and your life are not separate worlds. Indeed, when we are all so much at home the lines between our outside and inside lives definitely begin to blur.

Your concerns are important to us and we are listening. Right at the beginning of this pandemic (before it was called a pandemic) we heard from our students in China who were struggling with online restrictions,
technology differences and access to VPN, so we designed our own VPN. This helped our students who couldn’t leave China but were studying with us. And that lesson helped us think through how we could support all the students who couldn’t reach our campuses for study.

In Australia, following the decisions to keep people at home as much as possible, we knew that students would have more or less space, more or less quiet - and more or less internet access depending on their life at home. This is one of the reasons we kept two of our libraries and some of our other general study spaces open on campus. We hoped that this would help when there was not enough space or quiet or internet access. As someone who spent their undergraduate years, studying with my younger sisters and brothers all around me, (although this was when there was no internet and my typewriter could keep working), I have an idea of what some of you are experiencing.

I know that we are trying to reach out and speak to you about how you are going. Some advice – even if you think you are fine – or if you think I don’t know what they can do – talk to us. We are trying our best to keep you going at your best.

Keep reaching out in the online forums; take advantage of the different ways that staff and other students are using to talk with you.

So much of what you learn, so much of what opens up new directions comes in serendipitous conversations. The richness of your education is built in those conversations. So even though these conversations are happening through your phone or computer rather than face-to-face, make space for them.
Given the success to date of the public health response to this pandemic in Australia, we can see a time, not so far away, when the isolation reduces and campus life returns. For our students who are not in Australia, we are exploring different ways to deal with the borders that prevent you joining us at present. We know that, in the end, knowledge has no borders.

For those of you whose university education began before the pandemic, this experience has shown you, and us, other ways of making that education journey that provide some insight into how the world is changing.

For those who have just begun at Monash but not really begun the journey you thought you had signed up for, this experience along with your fellow students is the one that, like all contrasts, will heighten and define the next stage of your time with us.

One of the great lessons from life is that luck plays a greater role than any of us imagine. It is how you respond to what comes along, how you understand it, live with it, use it, or transform it that is the measure of the resilience and repertoire of responses a great education should give you.

We want to work with you to that end.

I wish you all the very best – and take it from someone for whom education was the greatest gift I was given – make the most of every moment.