TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Monday 10 November 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair
Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair
Chris Couzens
John Lister
Cindy McLeish
Jackson Taylor
Rachel Westaway

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Dene Cicci, Executive Director, Students Group, RMIT University; and

Julie Cogin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Annabelle Cleeland and I am the Deputy Chair of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. For me this is the Taungurung people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future and extend that respect to First Nations people across Victoria.

I want to acknowledge my colleagues participating today. We will start with Cindy McLeish, Member for Eildon, and then we will go to Rachel Westaway, Member for Prahran, and John Lister, Member for Werribee. We may have a couple of other members join shortly as well. I note that Ella George, Member for Lara and committee Chair, and Christine Couzens, Member for Geelong, have been delayed. Jackson Taylor, Member for Bayswater, is also slightly delayed but intends to join shortly.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impact of coercive control. It is required to report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the committee is holding its sixth round of hearings for this inquiry.

We are limited by time today, and I ask witnesses to keep the terms of reference in mind when providing evidence. This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on are the behaviours of high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. The evidence we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations.

On behalf of the committee I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry so far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with coercive high-control groups.

Today the committee will hear from Dene Cicci, Executive Director, Students Group, from RMIT and Professor Julie Cogin, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Australian Catholic University. I thank you both for your time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live.

While evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence the public hearing. I welcome Dene and Julie. I invite you both to make a brief opening statement of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from members. Dene or Julie, if either of you would like to start, go for it.

Julie COGIN: Go ahead, Dene.

Dene CICCI: Thank you, Julie. Thank you, Deputy Chair. Good afternoon, committee members. Dene Cicci, Executive Director of Students at RMIT University. In my role at the university I am accountable for student services and support. This spans student equity, student life, student wellbeing, student services, sport and recreation. It also involves student clubs.

RMIT really appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups by the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee. Committee members will be aware of the submission that RMIT has provided. We recognise that there are significant harms that can result from exposure to cults or organised fringe groups and that this issue requires a multifaceted approach with input from a broad cross-section of the community. RMIT is deeply committed to protecting the safety and wellbeing of our students and of our staff.

As you may be aware, RMIT is Australia's largest dual-sector university, with almost 100,000 students worldwide. To give you some context, we have three campuses in Australia, with our largest campus being in

the heart of Melbourne's CBD, located on Swanston Street opposite Melbourne Central train station and the state library. It is a busy, vibrant and permeable campus, and by the nature of its location our campus and our buildings are publicly accessible by all.

At RMIT we are proud of the rich and diverse multicultural and multifaith community. We are deeply committed to protecting the right of every member of our community to learn, to interact and to participate fully in university life with a clear sense that they are welcome, that they are safe and that they belong. As you would be aware, our universities play a vital role as places of debate and informed discourse. However, we are also clear that in exercising freedom of speech among staff and students it must be lawful and free from any form of discrimination, racism, coercive behaviour or actions that could put the health, safety and wellbeing of our community at risk.

All RMIT staff and students are subject to behavioural expectations and to conduct requirements in accordance with the university's core values and policies. In addition, there are a number of ways that we protect and support our students. Put simply, it is about fostering a sense of belonging, including through our student clubs and the way we support those students who are new to Melbourne or new to Australia, including through tailored programs to support those students to integrate into university life. We also do it through raising awareness and through inducting and informing our students of potential risks to their health, safety and wellbeing. We also do it by building confidence and understanding in our community about how to raise a concern and how to seek support if and when needed. Finally, we also do this by providing and investing in a range of extensive support services accessible by the diverse student and staff base at RMIT. This is all underpinned by our rigorous security and safety processes and our risk assessments and controls, including training provided to RMIT's frontline staff and security team and all staff who deal with students. We have policies and procedures in place that are regularly reviewed and updated as needed.

In dealing with the real and pressing health, safety and wellbeing challenges in our sector RMIT works in close collaboration with other universities, like Julie at the ACU and the team, but also with Victoria Police, with Study Melbourne and of course with the City of Melbourne, just to name a few, and we share any relevant insights, information and measures that we have found to work with our colleagues. I will hand over now, I think, to Julie.

Julie COGIN: Great. Thank you so much, Dene. It is lovely to see you again. Good afternoon to all the committee and members of the public.

ACU is a smaller university than RMIT. We have just short of 40,000 students. We are a national university with seven campuses over four states and territories and an offshore campus in Rome.

To speak to this matter, I have had reports from three of our seven Australian campuses – campuses in Melbourne, North Sydney and Strathfield – of Shincheonji members recruiting new members by pretending to be students of ACU. Members of this group, which has been referred to as a cult, have approached our students with harmless sounding requests for directions or doing a survey, trying to elicit contact details, or saying something like 'I'm new to Australia. I'm new to university. Can I buy you a coffee?' They then attempt to bring students to off-campus Bible study sessions with other young people, and their inducements of friendship and cultivating a sense of belonging has been attractive for, often, first year or, in particular, international students, who are quite vulnerable. The group have left flyers around our university and posters in different eateries, in libraries, in toilets and other common spaces. They do often attend student club events, and they openly refer to these as a fishing pool. This is how students and parents of students have reported the situation to us and how that first contact comes about.

I will go on to tell you a little bit more about what our students and their families and friends have reported. That first innocent outreach of friendship does turn into attendance at weekly Bible sessions. So it picks up quite quickly, and then that becomes multiple sessions and multiple times a week. Every day it gets to a point where this group consumes members' lives, and I think it is important to understand the vulnerability of this cohort. Studying at university for the first time, whether you are a domestic student or an international student, you do not have a lot of people that you know around you, so you are looking to build friendships. Over time they have been known to withdraw from their studies and withdraw from other people, and then they are tasked with recruiting new members at around about the six-month mark. I have been informed that at this time the name of the group is disclosed and a number of restrictions have been imposed on the members, including who

they can speak to, controls around where they can go, whether they are allowed to use the internet, how their money is spent and also the amount of sleep that they are allowed. So sleep deprivation has been a tactic reported to us. They are moving away from their family and friends. They are making huge time commitments to the group as well as being asked to make monetary contributions. So the coercive and control tactics increase a lot. Then people who have tried to withdraw face threats of divine retribution, and they are also faced with feelings of guilt to leave members who they have recruited.

We have done a lot upon first hearing about this, and we are committed as a university, like RMIT, to making our campuses safe and preparing students for these types of encounters. When we first learned about it we took immediate steps to inform and protect our community. I wrote to all of our students and have updated the communications as a reminder regularly. We do that in multiple communication modes, because students are quite dynamic with the way they speak – they often do not read emails. Also for international students we include information about this in predeparture seminars before they come to Australia. At our events we let them know. We have also involved our international student advisers. We have got wellbeing and campus ministry teams. As soon as we see the posters we take them down, as well as the flyers. We do attendance at clubs and associations, and we have really built education around what is informed consent to participate in these types of things. There are quite a lot of other things, but I will not go into that. I am happy to answer questions. But the recruitment has been really quite intense on our campuses, though it has withdrawn somewhat in recent months as we have made students more alert and more vigilant. I will leave it there.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Amazing. Thank you both, Dene and Julie. I think our Chair has arrived. I might give her a moment of breathing time and kick off some questions and then hand over. Julie, you were great in your description of the number of campuses impacted and targeted for recruitment – this is to both of you, Dene, as well. So what is the nature and number of reports that you have both received relating to covert and deceptive recruitment activity on and around campuses? I guess I am interested in the campuses as well as the student numbers, and my subsequent question is going to look at whether we can quantify the number of students that have left their studies as a potential impact. Dene, I am going to ask you to lead, please.

Dene CICCI: No problem at all. Thank you, Deputy Chair. As Julie has indicated, but also for RMIT, we have put a lot of effort into promoting ways of reporting concerns. The student themselves, a peer of the student or even a family member might contact us to alert us to a concern. In terms of the numbers of students who have expressed concern to us, they are actually very low for the RMIT context. In 2023 we had one student complaint, in 2024 we had two student complaints and in 2025 we also had two student complaints. That is formal complaints. But similarly I am responsible for our counselling service. Over the last seven years we have had around 32 students as part of a counselling session raise concerns, whether it is about someone contacting them or their past experience of this sort of coercive behaviour.

We have something in the higher education system called Safer Community, and we have teams of social workers, people who are trained to really help students who are navigating trauma or scams or any range of unsavoury behaviours, and that team monitors these presentations. At the moment, from RMIT's perspective, very small numbers of students are raising concerns, but when they do we take it seriously and we support the student to continue with their studies.

Also at RMIT, and it may be the same at ACU and at all universities, when a student chooses to withdraw from their studies, we require them to fill in a form – of course we do. As part of that form we seek information around their reason for choosing to leave their studies and in some cases have a conversation with them to see what we could do, perhaps, to help them to stay and remain successful with their studies. In terms of the data that we have around attrition, which is what we call it, to our knowledge there are not any students from the RMIT context who have explicitly indicated on the form that they are leaving as a result of those interactions. That is not to say it has not happened, but in terms of what they are disclosing to us at that point of departure, the data is not indicating that we are seeing an overarching trend in students withdrawing for that reason in particular.

Julie COGIN: At ACU we have had these on three of our campuses, Strathfield, North Sydney and Melbourne. Like at RMIT, there have only been a handful of cases reported to the university – in single digits over the last couple of years. However, when we talk to students in informal settings and we say, 'Raise your hands' for how many this has happened to, then we get around 50-odd, and we know that there are flyers in public buildings. So it certainly is impacting wider numbers than the numbers that are reporting it. When

students do drop out, they do not have to disclose the reason for dropping out, so we could not formally link to a dropout, though we have had family members write to the university in around about five cases that I am aware of that have been forwarded to me saying 'This is what's happened to my loved one', and we cannot comment because our students are adults. We cannot provide information and breach their privacy with their family members. But from the family it looks like they have withdrawn from their studies and withdrawn from their family because of these different groups.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you see this as a problem? If the reporting is so minimal, is this a concern?

Julie COGIN: It is definitely a concern for ACU. Any group that comes onto campus that makes our students feel unsafe – it does not matter if it is one student that feels unsafe or it is hundreds – is a concern for us, particularly given the vulnerability of these students. Some of them are under 18 when they start university – different by university, obviously. A lot of them are living in a foreign country without family and friends, being an international student, and that is why I believe they are called fishing ponds, because there is a larger group of vulnerable people. So yes, it is very much a concern for us as a university.

Dene CICCI: To echo in terms of RMIT, we want our university to be a welcoming and safe space for all of our students, and we recognise that particularly our undergraduate students or even our vocational education students are at that formative age. They come to university to make new friends, to explore new ideas and to do some adulting, but we want to make sure they are doing that in a really safe and supportive way and not being exposed to psychosocial risks or physical risks or coercive control. This is just one of many challenges that we navigate with the population of young adults that we are supporting, and as a result we have processes in place to identify, assess and mitigate the risks of all those challenges that are faced by today's youth. This is just one, and as Julie says, when a student does become involved in it, it is something that we jump into to make sure we are supporting that student to get back to being successful in their studies.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I guess the point of this inquiry is to understand as state legislators how we can protect students as well. What are the main challenges that you have faced in responding to reports involving this deceptive and coercive behaviour that may not meet that clear criminal threshold?

Dene CICCI: I cannot comment on criminal thresholds. One of the challenges I can speak to, though, from an RMIT perspective is because of our location and even reading the media reports of the tactics that this group adopt. It is train stations, it is public spaces – it is the State Library, for example. They are on the threshold of the university, so it is very hard for us to control the activities of members of the public or others. Again, from the media reports, the folk who are reaching out to our students are also young people as well, so it is very hard for us, even with our security monitoring, to be able to work out whether somebody is being genuinely friendly or whether they are engaging in coercive behaviours. So that is one of the challenges. I think one of the things that could help is a joined-up approach, where universities can work in partnership, as we already do but perhaps improved, with Victoria Police, for example, or also, in our context, with the Metro Tunnel – not the Metro Tunnel but the train stations. How do we make sure that the processes that they are putting in place to identify and prevent or minimise these behaviours are shared or understood by those who are on their doorstep, much like a university? Julie?

Julie COGIN: Great points, Dene. Another difficulty is we want young people to be exposed to different opinions. We want them to be having an intellectual debate when they come to university and to be confronted in many ways with what their views are. The difference here is when it goes into coercive control and is manipulative, and so it is really a bit of a balancing act. One thing that I would like to see is better preparation of students in high school. So while we are doing a lot with international students and preparing them for coming to Australia and for an international education, I think that it is just in the higher levels of high school being aware of this, because a lot of it also goes on in shopping centres, as Dene said, and other places like train stations. You do not have to be 18 and at university to become involved with groups like this. It is a lot of different public venues.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you for your response. I am going to hand to Ella.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle, for stepping in to chair the start of the meeting, and my apologies for being a few minutes late. It is great to meet you, Julie and Dene. We have also had Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater, join us in the last few minutes, so welcome, Jackson.

Julie, I would just like to pick up on some of the comments you were making about preparing international students for those university experiences, because one of the things that we have heard from a lot of witnesses throughout this inquiry is recommendations around more education being needed for young people about what cults are, what to look out for and what recruitment tactics might look like. Those suggestions have been really targeted towards high school students, and suggestions include including it as part of the Victorian curriculum. But what I wanted to ask about was how we can educate international students about cults and high-control organisations. I was just thinking of a scenario in which you might have an international student who is newly arrived to Victoria. They might go along to O week at university, really excited about uni and getting involved in student life, and they might meet a recruiter at an orientation week event. So if that takes place so early in their university experiences, how can you prevent that from happening? Do you have any suggestions for the committee here?

Julie COGIN: Yes, I do. Most universities would have some sort of buddy program, some sort of mentoring program before students come to Australia, and that is to reach out. So obviously that is one place. My own daughter was an international student to the US and had the same experience there, where a student from the university she was going to reached out so she had a buddy before she arrived in country. Most universities have something like that in place. We started providing specific briefings to all of our university entrants. We would have small team video sessions with them prior to leaving wherever they are coming from. One thing I think is a real danger, though, is information overload. They are young people, and often they are accompanied by their family and parents at these briefings. There is just so much to take in, and I think that the main concerns are their academic achievements and the English requirements and being able to understand and make friends and find housing. There is so much on their mind that this may not be able to be immediately recalled when they come to campus.

We do it as best we can and communicate it in different forms and make different reminders and use those buddies and so on before they come to campus, but obviously there is more that we could do to remind them. And at the same time, we also do not want to scare these new students coming to campus. But it certainly has paid off, because we have seen a lot less of it on our campuses since we really ramped up this education program.

Dene CICCI: If I could just add: absolutely, when you start university you do not imagine that you will get yourself into a pickle or be exposed to a scam or end up in some unsavoury interactions, so sometimes the young people, whether they are international or domestic, are not available to hear those messages of support. 'This will never happen to me', they think. One of the things that we certainly do, echoing Julie's point, is often the buddy system. Peer to peer is a really powerful way to get some of these messages through. But other things that we have found, particularly with international students, if you were to look at RMIT's webpage, we talk about a range of scams. We do not single them out by 'coercive control' or 'religious cult'; we just list scams. The more simply that we can communicate these things – whether they are scams or not, but the things that might cause you to find yourself in a pickle, we communicate those simply and easily.

The second thing we find with international students, particularly those coming from more authoritarian cultures, is that help-seeking behaviours, particularly around disclosing a matter to police, might be a barrier to them actually disclosing some of these things. So we do a lot of very careful and collaborative programming with the Victorian police to, in an informal and friendly way, introduce them to these Victorian police and to give them examples of the types of things they can raise with our police force or with the university in the knowledge that it might go to the police and they do not need to be worried that they will be victimised or targeted as a result. So yes, it is about getting the message and the education, but it is also making sure they are aware that they are in a safe country, they are in a safe place, and we would rather they told us than not tell us. So help seeking but also keeping the message simple – they would be my two things to add.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you both for that. Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong, has also just joined us. Welcome, Christine. I will hand over to my colleagues now for some further questions. John.

John LISTER: Thank you, Chair. And thank you to both Julie and Dene for some really good background, some really interesting data that you guys have been able to collect, because one of the things we have found is it has actually been incredibly difficult to collect any kind of data on this. You mentioned the program, Julie, that you have been running at ACU around making people aware of these sorts of approaches. What does that actually look like? What does it look like for a student, that program?

Julie COGIN: It would take different forms. We have monthly newsletters to students. In that monthly newsletter I would mention it and I would discuss it, and then there would be links to where you can go to for help or how to report it or things like that. I am aware that the open rate on the newsletter is under 30 per cent. So then we talk to the student presidents and those that are in clubs to try and disseminate it through peers. As Dene said, through peers is often a better way to do it. We have also got different student comms and are using different social media platforms that are a bit more user-friendly for that age group. We use those. We have debated whether to cover it off in lectures and decided not to do that but to use these other ways. In induction we do cover it in all of the clubs and just try to do it in as many different forms as possible. In our orientations with international students it takes another form in terms of the buddies and the videoconferencing and information packs. Often families are involved and parents are involved.

John LISTER: That is a really interesting thing, the family involvement and the difficulty that universities have, obviously given these young people are now adults and responsible for themselves – but still maintaining that engagement with families is really important. Dene, something you mentioned that was interesting in your opening statement was around this being not just an issue of engaging in free debate of ideas and things like that but also a health and safety issue. What sort of advice would you give to people who are hesitant perhaps in the university space to go too hard about saying, 'Look out for that mob'?

Dene CICCI: Yes, absolutely. We have put a lot of store in recent times in understanding our psychosocial risk profile, both experienced by our students and our staff, and making sure that we have arrangements in place. In particular in the last 12 months there have been heightened activities on university campuses where we have put greater stock in making sure that all of our community are safe and that we understand the behaviours that perhaps create an unsafe environment and also what we can do to minimise – things like the taking down of posters and the removal of inflammatory messaging on campus, making sure that our environments are safe. We would suggest – and I am sure other universities would agree – that part of the strength of a university is that diversity of thought, that diversity of perspectives. So maintaining a safe place for those people to come together, to be challenged, to be stretched but to contribute to the debate, is really important. But as some of the external players are getting a bit more sophisticated, we need to also be a bit more sophisticated in understanding those risks and how we respond to them and maintain that safety, acknowledging that with all best endeavours it cannot always be the case that we prevent everything. It is making sure that we make help seeking and disclosure as easy as possible, whether it is anonymous or named and that we take every disclosure seriously and we investigate. It is just – well, I was going to say it makes good business sense. You want to keep your place as safe as possible, and you want to make sure you are understanding and managing your psychosocial risks.

John LISTER: Yes. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you for your presentation. Dene, I am just going to go into what you were talking about and what Julie mentioned earlier, about pulling posters down and things like that. Have you got copies of those?

Dene CICCI: Not at RMIT – I do not have posters that we have pulled down from this specific group.

Cindy McLEISH: Julie, do you have any? Could you show us what they look like?

Julie COGIN: No, unfortunately, we do not.

Cindy McLEISH: Next time you see one, do not throw it out.

Julie COGIN: Absolutely.

Cindy McLEISH: Dene, earlier you talked about the collaborations that you have done with, say, the City of Melbourne, other universities and the police. What actions have arisen as a result of those collaborations?

Dene CICCI: Yes, certainly. In recent years we have worked with City of Melbourne and the Committee for Melbourne around international student week, also with the Victorian government around the International Education Resilience Fund, which funded some great initiatives, on the back of COVID, to really help and

welcome and understand the journey of our international students back to Victoria as a destination for education. We also work very closely with Study Melbourne, a great team of people who deliver some great content and some great programming for international students around not only that social connection and making a friend far from home but also exploring Melbourne and Victoria and understanding employability. Some of the challenges with any student in fact but with international students in particular are that it can be very lonely and very isolating, and they are worried about the cost of living and navigating those things. Study Melbourne do a fantastic job in supporting with that.

Cindy McLEISH: Do they talk about any of the risks? We are looking at cults here and predatory behaviour and coercion. As a collaborative group, do you look at that?

Dene CICCI: Sorry, with Study Melbourne I am not aware of anything being done specifically on that issue. But generally in making students feel welcome and in understanding how to disclose or to identify those issues, that is the important piece. We want them to feel safe to disclose anything, whether it is a cult, gender-based violence or other concerns. So it is not necessarily issue specific, it is more about that help-seeking behaviour.

Cindy McLEISH: I think it was you, Dene, that mentioned that they have had, over a seven-year period, 32 students through counselling. Have you done work with the counsellors and psychologists? Or more, what sorts of symptoms and long-term issues have those students that have been caught up in these had? I mean, they will not obviously disclose too much, but they might give you general themes.

Dene CICCI: I do not have that information to hand. To speak generally, often when people go to counselling it is because they are struggling with their studies. Our counselling models are cognitive behavioural therapy. Typically there are three sessions. They are short interventions. So it is not deep therapy to unpack the concerns. What we do, though, when a student does present with an issue that requires a deeper level of support or ongoing intervention, is refer them out to specialists. But the model for counselling in the university setting tends to be short term, rather than unpacking those complex traumas.

Cindy McLEISH: Surely when people leave, they do fill out the exit survey, so to speak. Is there definitely an area where they could include that? I mean, what are they going to say? 'Yes, I ran off to join a cult.' What if they have new interests or are no longer interested in study? I imagine if kids were from overseas, their parents would be pretty distressed that they were pulling out of university – Australian parents perhaps less so. From both of you, I am kind of interested in the mix or the split between international and Australian students that get sucked into these or into SCJ.

Dene CICCI: In terms of my data, I actually do not have the breakdown between international and domestic. One of the challenges of course, as you rightly pointed out, is that with an international student often they are in Australia because the family has made a financial investment but also an emotional investment, so the options to just drop out are kind of reduced and it does not happen lightly. Again, looking at the media reporting of the way this cult operates, they look at the colour of a person's skin. They do not know what their funding source is or whether they are in fact an international student or just a domestic student from an international background. So in some ways looking at the funding source of a student is not that helpful. To go to your earlier point about what the form says, I cannot actually remember off top of my head what the boxes are that we tick, but given we have such a large and varied number of students, they tend to be fairly high level.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes, I can imagine. Julie, did you have any comments on that?

Julie COGIN: No, not really, other than to say students do not have to tell us why they are going.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cindy. Over to you Rachel. Thank you.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you very much to Julie and to Dene. It is absolutely fascinating. Julie, I have got to say I am an ex-ACU student. I did my Dip Ed there and I loved it – a fabulous institution. I am particularly interested to know, though – from you, Julie – if you think it is because you are a faith-based university, which does come through in some of the subjects just in terms of guidance. It does have that element to it. I did find when I was there as a mature-age student that a lot of the students were Catholic. Do you think

that you are seeing a greater number of incidents because you have been targeted because your students might come from a faith-based background?

Julie COGIN: I think that is a very, very good question, and I could only speculate based on my own personal opinion. I think that is a yes, because the way our students are recruited is around 'Come to Bible sessions.' But it is just my personal opinion. I do not have any evidence to back that up.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Given there is so much recruiting within the universities – or not so much, but you have certainly seen people with flyers – I sort of say this tongue in cheek, but if it was a political party going in saying, 'Vote for me,' putting up a sign and leaving DLs on the coffee tables, you would ring us and say, 'Please do not do this. This is private and you cannot operate within our campus.' Have you tried to contact the organisers, given there were flyers, to say, 'Do not approach our students. Do not come onto campus, please'?

Julie COGIN: Perhaps our facilities people have done that – that I am not aware of. I basically have more to do with the students. But we do have a large facilities team that are on the lookout for the documentation. But yes, I could not comment with certainty.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Dene, I do not recall you actually saying you have seen flyers and posters at RMIT. Please correct me if I am wrong. Have you?

Dene CICCI: No, that is correct. I have not. I am not aware of any flyers or posters at RMIT.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Okay. Thank you. They were the questions that I had an interest in. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Rachel. Just a couple more from me to wrap things up today. From your perspectives – both you, Dene, and Julie – are there any policy or legislative opportunities, either at that university level or through the state or federal governments, that could strengthen institutional responses to coercive control or deceptive recruitment in educational settings?

Dene CICCI: If I think about the federal government, in recent years they have introduced an obligation for universities to have a support-for-students policy and then to provide to the federal Department of Education on an annual basis a report about how we have delivered on that support-for-students policy. This type of behaviour might be one of those things that we could include in that report, alongside some of the other risks, issues and challenges that we are facing to support our students, so there could be an opportunity there. I think John made the comment earlier that data is a gift. You understand what the trends are and, by reporting them up, it can be helpful to get that overarching view. That said, we do not necessarily want unique reporting just for this very one issue. That does not always help, but it could actually be woven into some of the existing reporting that we are already doing as part of our broader obligations. That is my point of view. Julie, you might want to add.

Julie COGIN: Yes, I would completely support what Dene has had to say. There is a lot on universities around protecting students – safe from harm, safety on campus – a range of areas that we are already reporting on. I think for this one the data may not support how widespread it is, so I think making sure that we have got the narrative to go with the data, because it may look like a very small issue but we know from how active they have been on our campus, particularly last year and early this year, that it is an issue. So I think adding it to those existing mechanisms is probably the best way forward.

The CHAIR: Just a quick follow-up question on reporting: is that something that universities could proactively do themselves, or would the federal government need to mandate that that be included?

Julie COGIN: I think it is something we can do ourselves in those existing reports. I do not think it needs to be mandated. We already get guidelines about what to report on, so it is just enlarging what is already available.

The CHAIR: Great, thanks. We have spoken a bit today about additional education support, particularly for high school students, to support their safety on campus. Apart from that, what other recommendations would you make to the Victorian government to enhance student safety and support?

Dene CICCI: One thing that perhaps we could be interested in is not so much about the protecting the safety, which of course is important, but when a student does find themselves involved in one of these

situations, access to specialised care and support. As I said earlier, that is beyond the scope of what our university counselling services can do, and we are doing our best to keep up with mental health challenges and other things that are facing our students. So development from the Victorian government of specialised services and support for these very particular cases would be very welcomed by RMIT and perhaps the sector more broadly.

Julie COGIN: I would just add: who do universities report this to? The police has not been so successful. I am aware that we have maybe done one report in the past, but where is the place that we go to to pass this information on?

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you both. Dene and Julie, thank you very much to you both for appearing before the committee today. We greatly appreciate your contribution to the inquiry and your important evidence. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, and verified transcripts will then be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much, and I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.