T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Monday 17 November 2025

MEMBERS

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

WITNESSES

Joshua Stagg, President,

Sonika Agarwal, Education Public Affairs Officer, and

Rhea Sankar, Academic Affairs Education Officer, University of Melbourne Student Union; and

Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Coordinator, Wellbeing Services, University of Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly's 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, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating here today: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; and Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control and report back no later than 30 September 2026.

I ask that witnesses 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 to 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 thus far. Today we will hear from witnesses from the University of Melbourne. We welcome from the University of Melbourne Student Union Joshua Stagg, President; Sonika Agarwal, Education Public Affairs Officer; and Rhea Sankar, Education Academic Officer. We are also joined by Reverend Brendan Byrne, Chaplaincy Coordinator from wellbeing services at the University of Melbourne. I thank the witnesses for participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all 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, and I invite the witnesses to make an opening statement. This will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Joshua STAGG: Good afternoon. Thank you, everyone, for having us. We appreciate that the Victorian Parliament is taking an interest in this issue. Today the University of Melbourne Student Union, known as UMSU, is presenting jointly with Brendan Byrne from the chaplaincy service at the University of Melbourne to emphasise that we are taking a collaborative approach to this issue. The topic that is the subject matter of this inquiry is of vital importance for the tertiary education industry.

Rhea SANKAR: Firstly, universities, especially large establishments such as the University of Melbourne, provide ample opportunities for cults and organised fringe groups due to the significant proportion of our students being either international or interstate. Out of the nearly 70,000 students at the University of Melbourne nearly 50 per cent are international students, and the risk this poses is exacerbated given the information on our orientation activities held at the start and in the middle of the year, where tens of thousands of students are new to Australia or Victoria. This information is publicly available.

Joshua STAGG: Since we have new international students – and interstate – arriving and they may not have established social circles or family networks within Australia or Victoria, their engagement with orientation activities may be their first experience of leaving their student accommodation. This and the isolation that is a related factor of moving country are things that these cult groups capitalise on. In a survey conducted by our union's welfare department that surveyed around 800 students we found that 42 per cent of international students indicated loneliness and nearly 50 per cent of all students found it hard to establish social networks when they began university. It is this element of social isolation on campuses that is abused by cults, who often stake out popular spots, such as entry points to and from campus and popular public areas.

Sonika AGARWAL: I am an international student, and last year I volunteered with UMSU welfare, where we ran free lunches every Thursday. While running one of these lunches I was approached by a young woman who asked me if she could have some food. The conversation quickly shifted to our religious beliefs. She told me she was from a religious college in Richmond, and she wanted me to visit her college with her right then and there. She told me she had heard and could speak to God. When I politely declined, she put her hand on my shoulder and prayed for me for a couple of minutes. If I was new to the country and if I was religiously inclined, this would have worked on me, and this is only one of a few instances that we face. We previously heard stories of several old women staying in that area and trying to engage the students waiting in line for free food in a conversation about their religious beliefs. This scene is pretty common, especially, as previously mentioned, during our orientation weeks.

Joshua STAGG: We know there are no simple fixes here, but there are aspects of our community that are dealing with this. The difficulty is a student that has just arrived in Australia or Victoria may not know or trust reaching out to government, and so support needs to come through trusted organisations. Those could be elected student peers, such as those in the union, or through the chaplaincy service.

Brendan BYRNE: Good afternoon. I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to make a contribution to this inquiry. I also wish to acknowledge the University of Melbourne Student Union and its president Joshua Stagg for inviting me to be part of their submission to this inquiry. I also wish to thank the university's leadership for facilitating my appearance today.

In the 18 months since I became Coordinator of Chaplaincy at the university, I have become acutely aware of the threat which cults pose to staff and student welfare and of the need for effective measures to be put in place to deal with this threat. These organisations operate at a strictly local and individual level. The university, on the other hand, is a large and multifaceted body, both a community and an institution, with all the complexity and diversity which this implies. By operating in the way they do, cults seek to take advantage of the difficulty which large bodies like universities have in responding at the institutional level to the threats that cults pose.

Cults operate with a mix of secrecy and brazenness. They target vulnerable students in order to isolate them from the support that is available to them through peer relationships, the university's student welfare services and student representative bodies. They hover around the margins, posing as legitimate religious organisations, deflecting questions about their structure, origins and purpose with evasive non-answers. At the same time, they do not hesitate to accost potential recruits on campus or in public spaces such as shopping malls and train stations, and they even attend the worship services of main line faith communities in order to try and identify those they think might be vulnerable to recruitment.

The student union has noted the particular vulnerability of international students to recruitment by cults. It should be borne in mind, however, that cults do not simply target those we might regard as typically vulnerable. They also exploit the natural curiosity which many younger adults who might be exploring their spiritual identity have about faith and the sacred texts which faith communities utilise. Cynically, cults take advantage of this curiosity to lure recruits through the offer of Bible studies or similar programs. At no point do they reveal that it is the cult that is behind this offer. Rather, they give the false impression that they are simply a group of well-intentioned individuals offering a service to others. Likewise, as noted, they hover at the fringe of established religious communities, hoping to spot those who are struggling with their faith or who are experiencing a sense of alienation from a faith community in order to inveigle such persons into their clutches. Most insidiously of all, students recruited into cults do not simply become cult members and disappear into the cult; they become recruiters themselves.

In doing so, cults seek to act like cancer cells corrupting healthy tissue. They seek to infiltrate otherwise healthy social and peer networks, making what ought to be a source of support and identity for students a platform for cult recruitment and an avenue into exploitation. This cynical tactic takes advantage both of the university's commendable reluctance to unwarrantedly interfere in its students' lives and community sensitivities around freedom of religious belief and practice in order for cults to provide themselves with the false cover of a legitimate religious community as well as create a self-perpetuating system of recruitment. After all, who is going to be more plausible and authoritative to a student than another student?

In conclusion, I support the position of the student union that proper resourcing and support for student representative bodies and university welfare services will enable effective response to cults. The university's

chaplaincy service and the student union and graduate students association, working in concert with the university's safer community program, campus security and counselling and psychology support service, are best placed to respond at the local and individual level at which cults operate. We can and have collaborated to produce educational materials that inform students of cult tactics as well as provide information about the support mechanisms that are available to staff and students if they encounter a cult. However, any resources which government can make available, including training and professional development, connection with recognised experts in the field of cult activity, and capacity to speak into the online and social media platforms in which cults are also active, would be most welcome. Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for your contribution to the opening statement. Just quickly, Reverend Byrne, you mentioned that materials for students have been produced by the university to talk about cults and cult awareness. Would it be possible for you to share copies of these materials with the committee?

Brendan BYRNE: Yes, I could certainly forward that to you. I believe the student unit or the grad students association would be able to provide a copy of the recent video that we collaborated on.

Joshua STAGG: Yes, we could provide that.

The CHAIR: That that would be fantastic. Thank you very much. You have spoken about some of the nature of how people are recruited on campuses to cults and how cult members are engaging students. Are you able to provide some more information about the number of reports that students might be making, either to UMSU or to the university? Is there any data that is being collected at the moment about how many instances of students being recruited or how many instances of cults operating on campus there are?

Brendan BYRNE: In part, I think I might need to take that question on notice and get back to you with some detailed information if there is some available. I would note, however, that it is extremely difficult to try and put up concrete numbers or data around that, in large part because I suspect that there is considerable under-reporting in this area, since students may not necessarily be aware of having been approached by a cult or they may have simply briefly encountered a cult and then thought nothing further of it. Or there may be cultural or other factors, particularly among international students, that make it problematic to report because of social or cultural shame that they might experience or, as the student union indicated, because of experience in their country or culture of origin that makes them distrustful of formal authority.

Joshua STAGG: We did conduct a survey in the build-up to this inquiry. We will have to take the numbers on notice, but we can provide that.

The CHAIR: If there is anything from the survey that you conducted that you could share with the committee, that would be really helpful to us. Thank you. I will hand over to Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. I was about to ask that question. You mentioned that you are acutely aware about the impact of cults on campus. What is behind that statement – the number of complaints or the culture? Why are you acutely aware?

Brendan BYRNE: I am aware of it because even before I began at the university, I was aware of previous media reporting going back several years and anecdotal accounts of student encounters with cults, but in my time at the university as the chaplaincy coordinator, it has essentially been about the nature of my encounters with cults. Some of those have been through student and faculty reporting to me about encounters with cult recruiters on campus or in other locations. Some of that has been in terms of encountering cult recruiters myself. I mentioned in my opening statement that they often attend worship services. In addition to being the chaplaincy coordinator at the university, I am part of the ministry team at Wesley Uniting Church in Lonsdale Street. I have frequently encountered cult members coming to our services, and I have also been directly targeted by cults. When I became the Coordinator and started being active on campus in terms of providing information to staff, I was contacted by an individual purporting to be from an agency that was interested in providing development and support and resources for ministers. But it quickly became apparent to me that they were in fact on a fishing expedition, trying to find out information about me and also about whether or not I had personal support mechanisms in place. Perhaps more concerningly, they also stated that they were looking for people who were familiar with the Australian cultural context who would enable them to speak more effectively into that context. So they were in effect trying to recruit me or see if I was vulnerable to having the

kind of information extracted that would assist them in their services. The very fact that shortly after I became active in this area they made a direct contact toward me speaks volumes in itself.

Annabelle CLEELAND: This can be on notice, Joshua, if helpful. With your survey, could you give us an indication of the questions asked and the scale of the problem on campus – whether people had identified it as an issue, cult recruitment?

Joshua STAGG: Sure. I will let the education officer speak to that.

Sonika AGARWAL: Yes, I think we can provide that. I do note that in our opening statement we did mention that there is a lot more increased activity during periods when there are a lot of students on campus and just note that we did just go into an exam period and hence we do not have a wide array of students responding to the survey at the moment, but we do have enough responses to get something useful out of it.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Okay. Thank you. I will share questions because of time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you all for coming today. We really appreciate your contribution. What recommendations would UMSU make to the Victorian government to enhance student safety and support, especially for international students, in relation to high-control or manipulative groups operating on or near the campus?

Joshua STAGG: Sure. I think as we touched on in the opening statement, the difficult part of this is that the support services made available need to be through organisations that students are going to inherently trust. I think if we were to look at best practice, it would be something akin to a grant that was made available to the student union and the chaplaincy service where it could work with elected student leaders that are familiar with the different cultural contexts on campus and could develop information resources that would be readily trusted by students so that they are aware of the issue.

Chris COUZENS: Have you got an idea of what that might look like? Is it an education officer or more pamphlets?

Joshua STAGG: I think it would ideally have multiple facets. We did do a reel that was provided to the committee. But a big part of it would be us during orientation. We have we have an international department. The international department would be out there talking about these groups. We did something a little bit similar with scams, because we have a lot of organisations that come onto campus, pretend to be part of orientation and scam students. So we went around handing out flyers. We gave out some broader information through emails and pamphlets and things like that.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

Rhea SANKAR: Could I add one thing to your previous question? I think a difficulty we faced in conducting a survey was actually how the question was phrased. One of our questions is, 'Have you ever been approached by a cult?' While a lot of students know what a cult is, it can be sometimes really hard to define what exactly counts as a cult, because it is all starts out as a normal conversation and then it turns into something more. But even then, if you do not go in too deep, you are not sure if that was a cult or if it was just some very persuasive group. I think perhaps a recommendation would be potentially identifying major cults that are operating on campuses – the most active – so that students can have that alarm bell rung when they encounter them.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. You mentioned earlier, Sonika, the religious college in Richmond, which is something that I do not think we have heard about so far in our inquiry. Are there others that you are hearing about, or do you think they are all linked to the one group and the one activity?

Sonika AGARWAL: No, I am certain that there are different groups on campus at the moment. This was last year, and right before I met this woman there were some other groups around the area that were not there that day. But I am sure there is more than just one group on campus.

Cindy McLEISH: Are they all targeting international and interstate students? Are people targeting any Melburnians or kids that have come down from the country?

Sonika AGARWAL: I think that would be a better question for you, Brendan.

Brendan BYRNE: I think that students from interstate or rural areas are also vulnerable, as are first-year and new students to the university. Because it is such a big institution and there are so many people on campus, it can be a confusing and at times frightening context for people who are not used to it. So I would certainly say that students who are new to the university and from rural and interstate areas would also be in that vulnerability group.

Cindy McLEISH: Do they all start with a religion focus? We have heard some evidence around different yoga – maybe I saw that on a documentary.

Brendan BYRNE: The recruiters are very good at working out the particular vector along which to approach a potential recruit. It could be a religious question or it could be posing as a community group or as a social activity group, like a yoga or exercise group or that sort of thing. They have multiple phases.

Sonika AGARWAL: Just to add to that, from the survey that we will provide you on notice with, a lot of people said they would be asked for directions and then for dinner. Just that social connection that people are usually looking for is often the tactic.

Cindy McLEISH: Something simple, easy.

Sonika AGARWAL: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you very much. Reverend Byrne, I would like to just tap further into what our Deputy Chair and also Cindy McLeish asked, and that is: how do you know they are cults? From the evidence that you have provided, you seem quite in touch with the amount of approaches that many of the students on campus have received, and I am keen to understand where your confidence comes from in believing that they are a cult when somebody may in fact be overly friendly and randomly invite you to dinner. Whilst that might be highly unusual, what makes you feel that they are cults?

Brendan BYRNE: Well, my answer to that comes in two parts. The first is that in respect of the staff and students who have come to me directly and in terms of my own encounters it is evident that there is a level of dis-ease and not just discomfort but fear and concern that what is happening to the person is that they are being drawn further and further into a context that makes them afraid and uncomfortable. That I think is reflective of that sense of coercive control that is being exercised or attempted to be exercised. I had a very recent occurrence of this where a student came to me and told me that they had been at a social event where they had been approached by someone in the context of a conversation around religion. They had been approached and invited to a Bible study program, and out of curiosity they attended. Then a small group became a large group that had a supervisor who was in daily contact with this student, urging them to do their study. Then 1 hour a week became 2 hours a week became 3 hours a week, and they were starting to be asked for contributions to the rent for the building at which these Bible studies were being conducted. So there is a gradual progression of takeover, of coercion, and the fear that that engenders. That is where I derive in large part my understanding that what we are dealing with here are cults and coercive control organisations.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Reverend, I would like to ask you a little bit more – as a man of faith. We have heard from concerned people of faith that legislating in this space of coercive control, particularly in regard to religious organisations or cults, perhaps is detrimental to those who are people of faith and want to practice religion because it could be misconstrued or misused. You are a man of faith and working in probably

a multi-religious environment. Are you supportive of legislation that could define coercive control in this space?

Brendan BYRNE: I do not think that there is a simple answer to that question. Personally I do not believe that approaching this from a point of view of arguing about religious freedom is a helpful framework, because you automatically get captured by an oppositional and divisive argument about one set of freedoms over and against another set of freedoms and whose freedoms are more worthy of protecting and so on and so forth. The only beneficiaries of that kind of argument are the cults themselves. What I would suggest strongly to this committee and to any person or body that is responsible for drafting any legislation is to be acutely aware of the law of unintended consequences. That will enable you to approach the issue from a perspective that sees all the undesirable outcomes, whether it is unwarranted interference in people's beliefs and practices all the way through to creating loopholes that enable cults to operate with impunity. I would urge that consciousness on this committee rather than approaching it from an argument about religious freedom.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: John.

John LISTER: Thank you, and thank you, team, for coming along today to speak to us about this. I am particularly interested in what it looks like on the ground. We have heard a lot of things from different university groups around the kinds of behaviours that we are seeing – how it is changing around different campuses. I am curious: if an office bearer or one of the paid employees at the union comes across behaviour that probably fits into the category that we are talking about, where do they go to from there? Who do you turn to?

Joshua STAGG: In that instance we would direct them either to a chaplaincy or to the safer community program.

John LISTER: Once they are in that safer community program – sorry, Reverend Byrne, for putting you on the spot for being the Melbourne Uni representative – where does that go to with the university after that?

Brendan BYRNE: I will probably have to take that on notice and speak to the safer community people and get back to the committee on that.

John LISTER: I am also particularly interested in that student experience during O week and those other vulnerable times. I myself have been part of many Tuesday barbecues at Melbourne Uni and know that they are an opportunity for positive interactions, but also they are a chance for many different interest groups to get into the ear of many different students. What sort of work can be done around O week to be able to support students, not just from the university's perspective but also from other agencies that partner with it – say, our visiting student services that we have through the Victorian government and the federal government as well – particularly for international students? What more can we do in those weeks?

Joshua STAGG: I think, as I have mentioned, the best way of doing it is going through the organisations that already have a level of trust amongst the student body. I know we had the Metro Tunnel holding a stall at the last orientation – there might be benefit in terms of establishing that state government presence within the orientation week and providing information. I think the biggest thing is just alerting students to the presence of these issues, because when I first heard of it, I thought 'cult' was a very inflammatory word. I did not take it seriously. It was only after discussions with Brendan that we thought that this was a real problem. So I think a lot of students come and they might hear the word 'cult' and just associate it with Indiana Jones or something like that, but in reality if they were aware of it, then they could also inform their social circles, and it would be a lot harder for these cults. We are never going to be able to close our orientations off to the public in the middle of the city, but if students had the knowledge of it, then the cults would have a more difficult time.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much.

Cindy McLEISH: Can I just ask one?

The CHAIR: Of course – please, Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Are they ever university students that are doing the preying on the others?

Brendan BYRNE: That are doing the?

Cindy McLEISH: As in preying on the others – not their prayers.

Brendan BYRNE: Oh, I see. Doing the recruiting?

Cindy McLEISH: Yes.

Brendan BYRNE: I have not directly encountered that. But from the reports that I have received from students and also anecdotally talking to my colleagues at other universities – also late last year I had the privilege of participating in a professional development program that was run by two remarkable young women who were cult survivors and who had been recruited on Australian university campuses, and they stated categorically that they had been recruited by other students – the information I am receiving is that at least part of the time people are being approached by other students.

Cindy McLEISH: Great. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you all very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this important inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, together with questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will then be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.