

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance

Melbourne – Thursday 14 May 2026

#### MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

#### WITNESS

Jesse Gardner-Russell, National President, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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Thank you so much, Jesse, for coming along today and answering some of our questions and for the submission, obviously, as well. We will come to questions straightaway from the committee members, but if you can just introduce yourself and maybe the role you play and maybe just a little bit about your position with the submission that you have made.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** My name is Jesse Wilson Gardner-Russell. I am the National President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, the peak representative body representing over 570,000 postgraduate students in Australia. I am also a current PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. I research how to help people recover their vision after having a stroke.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. So those students are both domestic and international students as well?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** That is right. That is really great to know. We will go straight into some questions, please. Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Welcome, Jesse. Thank you for coming along. Can you just perhaps tell us what are the key issues the Victorian government should be aware of in reforming university governance?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Thank you. It is a really fantastic question. At CAPA we try to take a bit of a step back and look at the higher-level situation at universities. For us, university governance is all about how we set priorities at universities. Across the country as well, particularly when talking to our Victorian members, what we hear is how those priorities are being set, who is setting those priorities and what that is resulting in needing serious attention. That is what we are asking for in reform and what our joint reform proposal that we have put forward alongside the NTEU and the NUS is calling for. So at its core we believe that universities are public institutions: they are funded by the public, they are legislated through the Parliament, and they should be accountable to the public. What we have put forward is a vision where more of the public, and in this circumstance that is the university community, would have a bigger say in how universities are making decisions and setting priorities. We believe that is a first step in order to help ensure that these fantastic institutions are able to deliver world-leading research. Australia produces 3 per cent of global research on 0.3 per cent of the global population. We have some of the top universities in the world, but we can make them better, and we can ensure that they are working for the long term for Australians.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thanks for appearing, Jesse, and for your work with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations but also for your advocacy in the medtech sector, which I am very familiar with as well, separately to this inquiry. My questions are very simple, around the impacts on students. Can you just talk through, from a postgraduate point of view, what are the most common issues that postgraduate students are coming to you with or raising when it comes to issues of governance and culture and how that impacts them personally when undertaking postgraduate studies at university, whether it is from a wellbeing perspective, an emotional perspective or an academic perspective, whatever it may be? Can you elaborate on that?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** I am very happy to. In our submission we describe what we call a model of 'consent by silence', where there are opportunities for some students to be on university structures that make

decisions. But the way that they operate is in a manner where instead of voicing your consent, rather silence from the committee is taken as consent for what the university is planning on doing. This creates a power imbalance for students, particularly postgraduate and undergraduate students who might be newer to the university space, in order to speak out against decisions that they may disagree with. This is particularly hard. I mean, imagine you were in a room with scientists who talk about vision research, and they are asking for your opinion. You have only just heard about this topic or only just sort of entered this space, and they are asking for your opinion on which project to invest in or what priority you need to be setting for the next 10 years. It is quite hard to find your voice in those early stages. And even, you know, I have been doing this for four years, and it can still be hard to find your voice in some meetings and in some spaces. What this means is that from the very outset of ideation of issues, the student voice is diluted and harder to be heard. But then when it comes to how this impacts the on-the-ground issues, a good example is how university policies are often developed. Most of the time it will be a small working group that sits down and writes a new policy, and then after they have written it and after it has been implemented, they might talk to the students to see how it is impacting them. But the issue here is that you are tuning up a policy at the end point rather than incorporating the people affected from the outset. This disproportionately impacts postgraduate students, because we are older. The average PhD candidate is going to be around 35; the average masters by coursework student is going to be somewhere in their early 30s. Most people have families, they have a full-time job, and so their capacity to go and actually give input into these issues is significantly reduced. As a result, a lot of these structures are not designed or working for postgraduate students.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Just on that as well, your term around consent by silence in these sorts of group settings or working groups or committees, from a formal perspective, what is your experience and insight around how minutes, for example, around those decisions and those meetings are finalised and transparently available to other people on that committee and beyond more broadly to the student body? Are there generally processes in place to allow for that transparency?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** There are many committees that you would only find out about through internal channels. It can be quite hard to understand how all these structures fit together. There are some that are publicly available – for example, the academic board minutes are often available – but for something like the university governing body, the board, the council, it is very hard to access information about how the decisions were made there.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** John.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks, Jesse. Thanks for appearing. I have got an interest in student unions and how they are linked to governance at universities. Are student unions currently independent of university administration?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** It is a fantastic question, and I think there is a mixed answer, which is that in our view they should be. In our view they should be independent. However, at some universities they are not, or there can be some grey area lines in what kind of connection between the university and the student organisations exists.

**John MULLAHY:** Often funding is the thing that links between the governance that allows the unions on site.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. When I was the president of the University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, I negotiated two of the funding agreements, and there are many clauses that you can find in them that always ensure that the leverage sticks with the university. The terms of I guess what you are expected to deliver at all times can be very easily used against you if you do not meet the very specific bar that the agreements are setting out. This creates a clear challenge for student representatives to hold a university to account when your own funding could be quite easily pulled or there could be clauses utilised which would basically incur additional costs onto your organisation or lead to the removal of some kind of in-kind support.

**John MULLAHY:** Have you got an example of that, from your experience?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes, I believe that with both the University of Melbourne organisations – and this was the same for both organisations – there was a clause about the charging of rent, which could be basically changed depending on a particular clause in the agreement.

**John MULLAHY:** Do student unions have a direct pathway to voice their concerns to the governing councils?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** That is also really fantastic question. At some universities we do, and at other universities some would say we are actively locked out. At the University of Melbourne student representatives speak at the university executive meetings, present, talk to the executive and have ex-officio positions on the academic board. For example, just recently the University of Melbourne also created a second student council member position, which is fantastic. But we would probably say that is the gold standard.

**John MULLAHY:** Wouldn't three or four be better?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes, it would be a lot better. But that situation is quite abnormal. At many universities, student representatives would not have that opportunity to be able to go and speak to the university executive directly and voice their concerns. That is why our joint reform proposal is putting forward this idea of the student advisory committees. That would be a sort of subcommittee of the university council that gives a broad range of students – in our mind it would not just be the elected student representatives, but they would be chairing and sort of driving things forward and enabling other students from the community as well to have that direct line to the university governing body to inform them of what issues are being faced on the ground. And we know quite well what these issues are. We did a survey of 8500 postgraduate students, and we found that over 75 per cent were saying that the biggest issue they were facing was cost of living. Forty per cent were saying that the cost of public transport was a major issue, as postgraduate students cannot access transport concessions.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Just Victoria, or is that nationwide?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** This is Victoria. For example, international students overwhelmingly report issues with accommodation and understanding their tenancy rights. These are issues which have links to government, but as well universities have the resources and the capability to help support students if they are hearing them and listening to them about what these issues are.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks, Jesse.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can I just go a bit further on that before I actually ask a question. You mentioned that Melbourne University, I think you were saying, do a good job providing opportunity for students to speak up about issues. Is that what I heard you say? That there are more students that have a direct line up the chain?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. They have made big improvements over the last 18 months to two years.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. Have you seen a difference in the outcomes from the extra representation, or is it too soon? It is probably too soon.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** There are some bits that would be too soon, but last year the university worked quite closely with the student representatives, and we launched a canteen where students could get \$5 lunches, \$5 breakfasts and \$5 dinners every day. That has been a massive support for students. This is particularly important for postgrads as well. I am often in the lab until midnight, so having an opportunity to duck out and grab a quick, cheap meal that is affordable and nutritious makes a huge difference to not only your health and wellbeing but also helps address that cost-of-living issue. That is, in my mind, a direct result of the university working with students.

**Roma BRITNELL:** That is an issue that is affecting them from the cost of living. What about from a governance perspective? Do you think that the voices, from a governance perspective, have been increased as well at Melbourne Uni?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** The additional student representative on the council has only just been implemented –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Right. Okay.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** as of the last couple of weeks, so it is far too soon to say what the changes would be.

**Roma BRITNELL:** All right. Across other jurisdictions around Australia, are you aware of any better examples that we can look at? What you have heard around the cohorts around the other parts of Australia in the postgrad sector?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Victoria, when it comes to just the representation of postgraduate students on the governing bodies, lags far behind. In Western Australia there is a dedicated postgraduate position at all the universities. At Queensland I believe that the majority have a postgraduate representative. Same goes for New South Wales, where I think just over 50 per cent have a postgraduate student representative on their governing bodies. In Victoria only one university has a postgraduate student.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thanks.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you. Thanks for appearing, Jesse. In your experience is there a particular cohort or type of student that tends to gravitate to wanting to be a representative on these bodies? As part of your joint reform proposal here with the NTEU and others, if Victoria was to legislate in this space, do you think that it could be helpful in that legislation to maybe stipulate that if there were three student representatives, maybe there had to be one undergraduate, one postgraduate, for instance, just to try and get the entire student cohort represented?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. In our minds that is what we need to do. It is unfair, actually, to expect an undergraduate student to be able to understand and be an expert on the issues faced by someone that is 10 years older than them, works a full-time job, has kids, has a mortgage and has a completely different interaction with university. Similarly, it is unfair to expect someone who is 20 and an undergraduate student to understand the issues faced by a postgraduate research student and the issues facing the research sector and understand how that all interplays in the university space. To answer your question, I think it is 100 per cent vital that there needs to be that delineation of the mode of study as the criteria for additional representatives.

**Dylan WIGHT:** In your experience is there currently adequate interest amongst students to perhaps take on that responsibility and take on that role, and if not, are there levers to pull? Are there mechanisms to perhaps increase that interest?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** I think there is a twofold answer to that. Part of it is the knowledge about what these bodies are and what they do and how you can actually be an elected member of them – it is quite low. If you went and asked the average student on campus what the university council is and who is on it and what they are doing, many would say, ‘What’s that? Never heard of it.’ They might even confuse it with their student council. I think that the work that ourselves, the NTEU and our other colleagues have done in shining a light onto university governance has helped improve and increase the visibility of these bodies, but I think there needs to be some onus on the universities to make sure that it is actually more visible and more publicly available. I think that when these opportunities are public and when it is in the students’ minds, many students are very happy to put their hand up for positions. For example, at a postgrad level, one of our member organisations just finished their elections and had over 60 unique candidates for five of the governing positions and I think 300 nominations total for all the various positions. That is quite an engaged cohort there, and I think it is about translating visibility across the university so that way more students put their hand up.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Great. I would just like to ask a question around – your submission talked to, and you have mentioned this before, postgrads not only bringing knowledge from their undergraduate studies but are older than their other counterparts, but also that many of those students then are future employees of the university. If I am on a trajectory where I would like to be employed by the university, does that influence how I may raise concerns? Am I worried that I will not get a job if I am critical of something? Can you talk about maybe raising complaints and how maybe a postgraduate might feel if they are looking towards a future job with the university?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** That is a very good question. Just personally, obviously that goes into my mind every time I raise up issues, as to whether that will impact my employability as a research academic. However, there are also many academics as well that speak out and raise their voice, and I think that normalising students speaking up alongside academics is a better solution in the long term than potentially continuing this current culture. Yes, it is obviously a risk, but I think that pushing that long-term cultural change is the way to resolve it.

**The CHAIR:** And do you feel comfortable in that there would be a good process to be able to do that? Do you feel there is a process now or do you feel that it could be improved – if I was going to make a complaint, for example?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. So to make a complaint – you mean make a complaint in terms of how you are –

**The CHAIR:** Well, what are the steps? If I had to make a complaint, what am I going to go through? What is the process?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. So there are formal complaints processes at most universities. Where the new national student ombudsman sits in with this is that, as well, it can, if there are not the correct policies in place at a university, the NSO can make recommendations, from my understanding, on what those policy changes should be. But one of the issues with making complaints is the length and the bureaucratic nature of these complaints can take a long time. Particularly if you are a student with a lot on your plate, let us say you are working a job and studying is your five-to-nine, not your nine-to-five, then going through months and months of a complaint system is probably going to be something that turns someone off making a complaint.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That was close to what I was going to ask, actually. But just in regard to your recommendation that the Victorian Parliament change the legislation of all Victorian public universities to include one elected undergraduate student member, elected postgraduate coursework student member, elected higher degree by research – that seems a really good point to have the right balance of representation – and the Victorian Parliament change the legislation to extend to two years for student members. Do you just want to elaborate on that a bit more, why you think that is the right model?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Yes. So it builds on Dylan's question about the differences in the cohort. I have done a masters by coursework, I have done an undergraduate, I have done an honours, I have done TAFE and now I am doing a PhD –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I understand the contributions.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** and I have seen, across all of that, how you have a completely different relationship with the university and different pressures that are on you. And our recommendation acknowledges that a masters by coursework student doing business may not understand the day-to-day of a research student that goes and does field work in India to understand food insecurity in the developing world, just as that student may not understand the issues on the day-to-day or may not be an expert on what law students are currently dealing with or the challenges in their space. By having that delineation across the three, it enables you to not only build up that knowledge from having older students that have their previous study and are bringing in their external knowledge, but as well you have the on-the-ground sort of expertise from their mode of study. The two-year term recommendation is built on the fact that universities are complex places – it takes a long time to learn how they work. For some students that have never read a balance sheet before, you have got to become financially literate, you have got to learn about governance, you have got to learn about what all the different committees of the university are doing, you have got to build a relationship with the vice-chancellor to understand what is driving them and then you have got to start making decisions. When you only have one year to learn all of this, by the time you have finished that year you have finally maybe just started mastering it and then it is time to go. Giving that extra year also gives continuity for the universities in that sort of stable priority setting, and students are able to give bigger contributions over that time and actually use that knowledge that they have gained for longer.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I think we have got time for one more question. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair. Again, thank you for your evidence, Jesse. My question goes to, I guess, the role of governance at the moment and how it is impacting student and postgraduate student satisfaction. We have heard a lot from other witnesses around the role of underpayment, wage theft and casualisation, but your submission goes into detail actually around the impact around staff and student ratios. You say that of the top 100 ranked universities in the world, there is a ratio of 5.22 students to one academic staff member, but in Australia, in our public universities, it is six times higher at 30.5 students for every one staff member. You gave a great example around how the student voice being embedded in the decision-making process can lead to better outcomes, with that cheaper lunch and canteen program just as an example, but how do you feel having more staff and student voices in the governance process could potentially help address the ratio issues and also better improve student satisfaction?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** That is a really good question. In our submission we also touched on, I guess, the current remuneration guidelines for board members of the university – so the council members. Under the current model your take-home pay packet as a council member is based on either the total university turnover or the operating surplus. Now, in our view, if that is the underlying setter of the priorities, then there are only two ways to increase your pay packet: either grow the university and get more students and get more government funding and get more grants, or cut costs. In our view – and I believe this is in our submission – we believe that the guidelines should be changed to put student welfare and student outcomes as a driver, because that enables us to set the priorities from the beginning that students and staff are the community and should be what is driving the remuneration guidelines of the board members.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Your submission also says, though, that funding from government to universities had fallen from 85 per cent in 1987 to 41 per cent in 2003. Funding has actually gone down despite the growth of enrolments, from a government subsidy point of view –

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Correct.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** which is noteworthy. So you are saying it is currently not listed as a priority – that student welfare outcomes are not one of the factors at all, in any way, shape or form, in any university that you are aware of?

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** Our understanding of the Victorian system of remuneration guidelines is that it is just total turnover or operating surplus that determines the pay band for the council members' and board members' payments. To also add to that, from my recollection, government funding of universities has dropped somewhere around 19 per cent over the last 12 years. So I think that builds a very clear picture of –

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it does. That is excellent. I am so sorry, we have run out of time today, but thank you for answering our questions and appearing today. We really appreciate the input for the committee to consider. Thank you very much.

**Jesse GARDNER-RUSSELL:** A pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

**Witness withdrew.**