

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

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Dr Lucinda Aberdeen, Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, Department of Social Inquiry, and

Dr Janet Congues, Adjunct Research Fellow, Department of Social Inquiry, La Trobe University.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent or just be mindful of the mute button if online.

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.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

Thank you both, Janet and Lucinda, for appearing today, and we are really interested to hear your perspectives on what regional Victoria in terms of university and governance might look like. What we are going to do is head straight to some questions from our panel members, because that gives us the best use of our time. I am going to let Kim O'Keeffe go first because she is from your region.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you so much, and thank you for joining us, ladies. It is so important that we do get to hear the voice of regional communities, particularly when we are making some recommendations moving forward that will really be impactful on regional people. I thought I might start by asking: how are regional students and staff currently represented in governing bodies in Victorian universities? Who would like to answer that one?

Lucinda ABERDEEN: I would like to say that is actually beyond the scope of our research to be able to answer that more generally. Our focus has been more on the La Trobe University Shepparton campus, as well as several other campuses interstate, so we are not really in a position to comment on that in a general way.

Kim O'KEEFFE: That is all right, I can go to another question. What are the key issues affecting regional students and staff as a result of current governance systems? Is that in your scope?

Lucinda ABERDEEN: Yes, it is. Yes, there are a number of issues. Particularly our research has established that regional university campuses are really important physical sites at which regional higher education students can gather and congregate, because particularly, they are often students, as is indicative of the whole of Victoria, from households where median incomes are lower than in metropolitan areas. Also, they are often first-in-family students. They often have cultural and social responsibilities. They have to maintain employment. They also are often first in family and may not have English as a first language. So these are students who, as regionally based students, fall into all the equity categories and multiple equity categories, which is why we call them intersectionally diverse students, and that is very much in contrast to metropolitan students. They can succeed very well, but they often need a lot of scaffolding, especially in their first year of studies. What we have found is that they not only value the physical university campus – being able to access that – but also the ability to access academic staff particularly and other support staff on the ground in person. That is what we know helps those students excel, exceed and achieve tertiary studies. We also know that they go on to contribute with those professional qualifications in their communities more often than not, and so they are contributing to the cultural, social and economic environment of the regions. For that reason we feel their voices do need to be represented, and so do staff, for that matter. I will let Janet add anything there to that question. Thank you.

Janet CONGUES: One of the things that we found in our research on the concentration of the equity measures for students at our Shepparton campus is that 98 per cent of them qualify as regional students and then 57 per cent of those students, of the 98 per cent, qualify in the low SES margins – and then down to non-English speaking backgrounds, disabilities and Indigenous. Then you have got your first-in-family cultural responsibilities et cetera. In metropolitan campuses they might have 30 per cent of their students from a regional background, but they might also have 20 per cent low SES. Their numbers are much lower, and most of their students would fall into one category. All of our students fall into at least two categories or more. This means that – this is mainly about our first point in our submission – if you are looking at equity funding for regional campuses, you have to work out how you are going to count that for a regional campus, and it needs to be done differently to a metropolitan campus, because for every student that is taught on campus, academics have to provide that scaffolding so that they can have equitable access to the curriculum. In a metropolitan

campus the students who fall into the equity measures are across all the courses that are on offer, not just the three, four or five courses that we have access to, and there are chances that many of those academics will not even encounter a student who requires scaffolding to access the educational curriculum. There is a real disparity between the cohorts. This is why we have introduced the TEQSA standards to say, 'We really need to look at this and make regional a priority, not just for the nicety of it or the aspirational concept, but to ensure that the aspirations of the state government and universities like La Trobe become real and practical.'

The CHAIR: I am going to just, if that is okay, Kim, ask another question around that. When I was reading the submission and also a few notes I have got here, I actually just wrote down, for example: would Shepparton get as much funding per student as somewhere like a Melbourne Uni? Is there any way to show this?

Janet CONGUES: I do not have access to University of Melbourne data.

The CHAIR: I just used them as an example. Sorry, I should have said metro or a regional university.

Janet CONGUES: I look at it this way: if they are doing it per student – again, I do not know the financial backing of this. That would be someone higher up in the finance area for La Trobe. But this is where services have often been centralised. Now we have Ask IT at La Trobe. You send in an email, someone gets back to you eventually, and you get dealt with that way. When I was on campus working with the student body as a support for first-year students a lot of my work involved actually helping them learn how to use LMS, the system that they use to access all their information, and helping them to understand what it means to write academically. On the campus you are doing more than just presenting your lecture and facilitating a discussion in a tutorial. The post-tutorial work is more intense, and you actually spend a lot more time than when I was teaching on the campus at Bundoora, and chances were I never had a student come and see me unless they were criticising the way I had marked their essay or something, because they were used to As and I gave them a C or something, you know?

The CHAIR: So, yes, anecdotally, you have seen that intensity is different at a regional level?

Janet CONGUES: Yes.

The CHAIR: And that is what you went to.

Janet CONGUES: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Janet CONGUES: And in our Cinderella paper, if you look at the paper *Cinderella on the Path at Midnight*, you will hear the voices of the students and what they are saying works and what does not work.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John, I might go to you next.

John MULLAHY: Why is it important to have well-supported and well-run regional campuses here in Victoria?

Janet CONGUES: You there, Lucinda?

Lucinda ABERDEEN: Yes, I could come in on that one. In the interests of equity, it is quite an inequitable situation if you are not taking into account the fact that people will come from households where they have lower median household incomes and all the other equity issues, equity matters, that we have talked about. To ensure those students do succeed and become part of the professional workforce of regional areas – and after all, we know workforce issues in regional areas are real issues, especially when it comes to the health workforce but also the education workforce – we need to be able to support people to be able to study in place. Those students that we have certainly been involved in teaching and researching with are very loyal to their regions because they are really grateful that they have been given an opportunity through higher education to advance themselves, their families, their communities and the region. So it is an investment that pays off, is what I would like to say.

John MULLAHY: Excellent.

Janet CONGUES: Can I also add that my main job is at FamilyCare, which is a part of the human services sector, and one of the things that we have seen is an increase in the number of qualified social workers available in our region because the social work course began to be delivered on campus. Our students, once they have succeeded, graduated, they tend to want to stay and continue to work and build careers locally. They have family, they have community connections, and they also have work in the regions while they are studying. I do not know if you are aware, but students who disappear to Melbourne often leave holes in the part-time and casual workplace environment, like your cafes but also in businesses. A lot of our business students are working part-time in the business while they are studying, and they go on to become the accountants, they go on to become the business managers and things like that. Our arts students have become journalists and communications people in GV Water. I am an evaluation research coordinator at FamilyCare, so I do not do social work – I am a sociologist – but we cross the boundaries of what we do. One of our social work students went on to work in our mental health workplace at the hospital. Another one who worked with us has gone on to graduate and work in our local hospital, at GV Health. So it is enormous. These are people who would not have relocated to Melbourne, who are actually becoming qualified professionals here in the regions. And to be honest, there is no reason why we should not have our own lawyers, our own IT experts – you know, the whole AI. There are so many subjects that could actually be taught in place.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

John MULLAHY: I must apologise. I was one that disappeared from Meredith to Melbourne to study, so you picked me.

The CHAIR: Roma, I will go to you.

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just elaborate a little bit more on the recommendation in your research around regional students, particularly how decisions are made regarding funding needs for regional campuses?

Lucinda ABERDEEN: Our recommendations are really based around that we feel there is not transparent accountability of campus location for higher education students. The statistics that are gathered tend to be from where the subjects are delivered rather than from where the students are actually located. It is common for students now to study in a hybrid mode; often they might have online subjects and in-person subjects that they can attend. From what we can understand with our research, we do feel that there is an underenumeration of the actual number of students who are studying and living regionally and needing to access campuses, the campus life and everything else it has to offer. So our recommendation speaks particularly to having a more transparent way of enumerating the regional students. As we have said, we think it will show how equity funding is devolved to campuses that are directly serving rural, regional and remote students rather than held centrally, and it will also show equity of access to services for regional students. We think that allocating online students to their regional campuses will help illuminate the actual number of students studying in the regions. That is what we are really saying: we need to working with better data.

Roma BRITNELL: Are you incorporating what I think is probably a relatively new trend of people living like in my part of the world, which is a good 3½ to 5 hours from Melbourne, but actually training it down a couple of days a week, back and forth, to study at Melbourne campuses? Is that something that you have looked at and how they are living in the regions and studying in the metropolitan area because the courses are not available, and the disadvantage that brings because of lack of transport reliability and the extra costs and all those associated problems?

Janet CONGUES: We actually have not looked at the regional students who travel to – for us it is La Trobe – La Trobe. Anecdotally, when Lucinda and I do sociology at one of our local cafes we come across a couple of students every so often who either have relocated or travelled backwards and forwards to Melbourne for their courses. The travel time is significant. We have discovered that the closest undergraduate campus to our Shepparton cohort is, I think, a 1½ hour to 2 hour drive to Albury-Wodonga, and Bendigo is like 16 hours on public transport, because you have got to go down to Melbourne then travel back up to Bendigo – there is no direct public transport across to Bendigo. So yes, you are right that there is this other cohort that actually travel and still stay connected, or they still want to continue playing their sport on the weekend and all of that kind of stuff. Sorry – I have forgotten the question now. I have lost my place.

Roma BRITNELL: I just want to know if you have done any research with regard to what I think is probably a growing cohort, with the cost of living in Melbourne or trying to find property in Melbourne to rent or staying on college, which is exorbitantly priced, and it is cheaper to train down twice a week back and forth.

Lucinda ABERDEEN: I can comment on that too. Again anecdotally, I was speaking to someone the other day who said that their whole household is committed to supporting their daughter to come down to Melbourne to study. It involves travelling to the Seymour railway station from Shepparton three times a week so they can get trains early enough to get into classes in Melbourne. They cannot reside, for example, in student accommodation on the campus that they are attending because it is about \$400 a week and that is just too much for the family budget. As Janet has pointed out, it is those young people who are often wishing to remain connected with their sport and the part-time jobs that they have regionally. They do not want to shed those, especially in a situation where we have got a rising cost of living.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan, I will head to you.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. I wanted to just elaborate on that last question a little bit more. You spoke about the fact that some of the data points in respect to attendance and where students who are attending are from et cetera – whether they are regional or metropolitan – are a little bit dicey. I just wanted to talk about how decisions are made regarding the funding needs for these regional campuses and whether you think the funding to them from the universities is adequate, obviously particularly the universities that have a metro and a regional campus.

Janet CONGUES: I would say that the specifics to that are actually outside of our research, because we do not have access to financial information and that was not the direction of our project. Our project was to make sure that students were seen as a benefit to the university higher education sector and were seen as people who made a positive contribution rather than constantly being seen as ‘in need’. However, as we said earlier, we do know that a lot of services are centralised, and part of that is because the numbers are greater on a metropolitan campus. On our campus they are so much smaller. So whilst you look at it purely in economic terms, student per capita, of course we get less funding. But that is where we went, ‘Hang on. You have got to look at the intersectionally diverse nature of our students and recognise the fact that every student on our campus, aside from maybe the occasional international student, requires extra support and work and needs to be seen as different too.’

Dylan WIGHT: On that point, and maybe to reframe it slightly – and this may even be slightly outside of the scope of your research as well, but obviously both of you have worked in the sector in the regions – do you think universities that have both a metro campus and a regional campus value the regional campus as highly as they do the large metro campus?

Janet CONGUES: No. Look, I will give you a story. I won an award when I completed my honours. I went down, and there were two other students. The three of us took out four university-wide awards that year, and when I spoke to the then pro-vice-chancellor John Rosenberg – he is not around anymore; I had met him before because I was also working on the campus – I said, ‘John, I want to introduce you to these other students from the Shepparton campus who have won awards.’ His immediate response was, ‘Oh, so you’ve won Shepparton campus awards?’ And I said, ‘No, we’ve taken out university-wide awards,’ and he went, ‘Oh, are there other regional students here?’ And I said to him, ‘I thought you might have known that breakdown.’ Now, that is going back 10 years or more actually, but even if you go to our second point about incentivising academics to teach on campus, academics see regional campuses as a dead-end career pathway. But they are happy to come in and harvest data from our regions. They are happy to be locally born, move and develop a career regionally. They are happy to build their careers in the metropolitan, publish and then come back and harvest data without having any communication with the Shepparton campus or the Shepparton campus students or academics in their discipline. That tells me, ‘No, they don’t treat us as equitable.’ That said, La Trobe’s recent regional strategy – I cannot remember the actual title for it off the top of my head – is absolutely brilliant. If we even achieve half of that, I will be singing in the aisles. It will be absolutely amazing.

Lucinda ABERDEEN: I was just going to say, if I could just add to that too, I think what Janet is also implying there – we have talked about this quite a bit – is that there is a broader narrative out there about seeing regional higher education as being less-than, as being deficient. Unfortunately, that even comes through in the Accord final report. There is a deficit narrative there. There is an idea that it is not quite as good, what you can

get out there, sort of thing, and that it is in need of attention. I think that is something that we feel that our research speaks to: just how highly valued the professionally qualified workforce that the university campuses in regional areas are creating and enabling are. And that needs to be cited to counter that deficit narrative. We think that is very important, and that is why we are talking about the importance of incentivising academics to come and research and teach on regional campuses where they are highly valued. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Roma has got a question.

Roma BRITNELL: I know you guys are from Shepparton and not from south-west Victoria, where I am from, or Gippsland, but I imagine this situation exists right across the regional areas. There is no doubt that the standard of education in the regions at a high school level, not tertiary level, is not as high as the city. And therefore, you would think that means that more effort should be put in, because it is not that the intellect is not as great, it is about the disparity we see within the education sectors that do not get the same amount of attention to build the capability. So we have a very low education retainment rate – year 12 retainment rate – and a very low amount going on to tertiary education from our region. Would you, with your research background and your experience, comment on how we are just needing to put more effort into the regions, so we can actually show the equality levels that we need to, because those children in the regions deserve that same opportunity because they do have the intellect. I am absolutely sure of that.

Janet CONGUES: Lucinda?

Lucinda ABERDEEN: We do have some very good schemes operating in the Goulburn Valley area, which are working. They are schemes enabled by philanthropy, which are there to encourage students to aspire and be interested in the idea of further study at a tertiary level. We also have a range of scholarships that enable that too. And I know myself from earlier research, which I have done with Dr Jenny Chesters, associate professor of education now at Melbourne University, that there is no lack of aspiration – we did not find – amongst the many students we surveyed in the Goulburn Valley region in terms of wanting to come to university, in terms of wanting to further their education. It might not necessarily be university in the first instance, but it might be TAFE and then it might be a transition from TAFE to university. So it does suggest, doesn't it, that with more resources, more could be achieved.

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, it does.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am mindful of time, but I want to thank both of you for appearing today and answering our questions. You have given us a really great perspective on what it means to be in the regions, especially obviously the opportunities and the equality that we need to consider for recommendations for this inquiry, so thank you so much for your time today.

Janet CONGUES: Thank you for inviting us. It has been an honour.

Lucinda ABERDEEN: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. We will end the broadcast.

Witnesses withdrew.