

# 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

George Lekakis.

**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.

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, George, so much for joining us today and answering some of our questions. You were recommended to us by one of our committee members to come along and give us a bit of perspective on multicultural students and how that is linked to university governance. So what I am going to do is go to Anthony first to ask the first question.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, George, for appearing. Just acknowledging George's incredible work in the multicultural space for many years as the chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the recent state government multicultural community review as well. So it is very fitting to have you here. But obviously today we are talking about university governance and university transparency. From a multicultural perspective as well, as we know, many multicultural communities, whether previous migrant communities or more newly arrived communities, are very aspirational when it comes to wanting to send and encourage their children to go to university. But what I am interested in through this inquiry is mainly around how our multicultural communities and multicultural voices are currently heard and represented in existing university governance structures, whether it is right from the chancellor level through the leadership level, and what are the barriers that are there at the moment that you feel that we need to consider and look at addressing to help more multicultural voices be recognised in the university governance sector.

**George LEKAKIS:** A huge task in itself. Well, I thank you for the opportunity, and the invitation did not puzzle me because obviously governance is a critical showpiece for governments in the way in which they manage institutions and government organisations. I belong to a couple of boards, so I know what the diversity implications are and how I have taken my own actions to ensure that diversity is well represented on the boards that I am involved with. As you mentioned, Anthony, I did undertake on behalf of the government a major review of multicultural affairs in Victoria, one which involved extensive community consultation across the state with a very large number of participants. A range of submissions, a large number of submissions, were also tabled for the committee's purview and consideration. The discussion on board appointments was quite prominent in those community consultations. I would say just about every consultation I managed had people come forward with the issue about boards, government boards, government organisations and who was represented on them.

I did my own investigation, after the invitation, on the current composition of university boards. I know many of those colleagues there, but it certainly alerted me to a growing problem, which obviously has given you the mandate to examine it more thoroughly. So it is not something that came out of left field. It is obviously a serious consideration. One of the key recommendations of the review report – there were 41 recommendations and 16 suggested actions for government – was that we require board and committee appointments to reflect community demographics, and include the requirement of multicultural diversity in appointment submissions to cabinet. So when board appointments are made, it is highlighted in cabinet the multicultural diversity factors with each applicant.

Victoria is home to about 290 languages, 300 ancestries and 200 religious faiths. Multicultural diversity is therefore a core part of Victoria's identity. Half of the population is currently overseas born, and when you include all the overseas parents that came before us, it is quite a very large number of people. Obviously their aspirations are critical in the way in which we shape government programs and services. Multiculturalism is now a defining demographic characteristic and also needs to be a core part of government business and operations. Failure to do so brings about a lack of trust in government, and also it does not allow for positive relationships to be created and built upon. When you talk about social cohesion, you want to create a sense of belonging for everyone. You want social justice and equity for all – to be transferable to all and accessed by all. You want people to actively participate in community life and across the sectors of public life, and you want

acceptance and rejection, legitimacy and self-worth promoted for the people that live here – not to be denigrated, not to be marginalised, not to be excluded. Building social cohesion, like trust, is built on positive human relationships.

On page 42 of the review we highlighted a need for representation that reflects the community within decision-making bodies such as educational institutions, boards, committees, taskforces, Parliament and the public service. It is implied that the current representation does not accurately reflect the population. All appointments should be based on merit. Let me say first and foremost that that is the critical factor. But at the same time, particular attention to gender, First Nations peoples and the multicultural demographic should be part of the process and be critically applied to the selection. This review is part of that step that you are conducting – this inquiry – and cycles of appointments should be able to achieve the objective that I have just outlined, at least in three years if you apply that factor in the selection process. I think that is critical in building the trust, and people that spoke to us talked about boards and committees and organisations that do not have participation. I remember back in the 1970s there was a philosophy in community services, at the very least, that service users should be part of board structures, and then came the people of different colour, religion and faith that were accepted on boards as well. Gender is clearly articulated, and so are First Nations. Multicultural selection should be critical. In my review of the university councils, and I know a lot of the folk that are part of those councils, and they are all esteemed people – I am not denying their credibility and their contribution, and nor do I want to demean it – there are equally other people who can actively facilitate that role if selected and given the opportunity based on their merit, their academic qualifications, and of course the insightfulness that they would bring to the board tables when they have to deal with complex multicultural issues as they emerge within the campus and the society more broadly.

I noted the student and staff reps of multicultural character, and that is with all the universities. The cohort of people of diverse backgrounds is featured in about one or two of the board appointments. It is clearly an omission. I know the difficulties in the processing of board appointments, and I know the politics behind it. But at the same time we do have a specific requirement to pay attention to the demographic – you notice that I do not talk about quotas – that it is something that is factored into the appointment process. That will generate greater trust in public institutions, and people will feel that it is reflective of the community. When you look at your student populations, both international and local, you would find that the diversity of those students far exceeds the diversity in my time when I went to university. That is all I have got to say.

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

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you, George. I am from Shepparton. I have a very large multicultural community, so it is really important to me to make sure that multicultural voices are not only heard but also given strong educational opportunities. The work you are doing is amazing. I am going to go back and have a look at that because I think really it sounds fantastic, and I really value that. But I think, from a logic perspective – how do we encourage that transparency and that skill set on a board that will actually make that meaningful change in selection? Because at the moment we are hearing a lot about them not being transparent when choosing people for the council boards and all those things – jobs often are selected perhaps not for broad enough reasons, and I think you have touched on that. So how can we, through governance opportunities, make that change? It is very difficult. It is a bit like council selections – you know, your local government selections.

**George LEKAKIS:** Well, they are elected.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** They are elected. However, there are often ways and platforms and opportunities to get that voice out – why certain demographics or certain cultures should be included. I think we have seen some success in that in my area – and some not so successful times. One of my portfolios is as the Shadow Assistant Minister for Regional Multicultural Affairs, so I am really, really active in keeping kids in school and making sure language barriers are somehow addressed. I have a young boy who works in my office from Afghanistan. He has only been in Australia for two years. His English is really good, and he is a really good example – a year 12 student – of someone wanting to have an education and wanting to have a voice in our community. He is doing a youth forum next week. How do we elevate that to get this multicultural representation onto those boards?

**George LEKAKIS:** Well, being on boards, one of the critical issues regarding the selection of board members coming forward involves a skills matrix. If you have a good skills matrix that you examine and you

decide with other board directors as to what is required, well obviously the skill set is critical. Then you have the overlays – the gender overlay and the First Nations overlay, and there should also be a multicultural overlay. If you are selecting people, you first determine whether you need a finance person, a legal person, somebody in civil engineering or marine biology or whatever the case may be – that is the first quality. Then you look at the other factors as well – whether you want to maintain the gender balance or whether you want to diversify the board in terms of reflecting the local community. So you select people on merit, based on the skills needs you have identified, but you also take into consideration positioning your board to reflect the local community as well. And there are people who are quite capable.

I am on a board. I chair the Victorian film commission, referred to as VicScreen, and we have made sure that the merit and skill set that were identified as required in the skills matrix are then coupled with the other considerations. I am proud to have a 50–50 board on a gender basis and to have great diversity of people – people from Korea, India and a whole range of countries. They are all involved in the film industry of course, and they have the skill set that is required, whether Vietnamese or Cambodian. It allows for a richness of discussion, insightfulness and obviously issues that are not picked up. A lot of people are connected to communities and community structures, so they infuse the discussion with local stories and local connections. It is very important, and I have a very enjoyable time with my colleagues from a whole range of different communities. For me, it is simple.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I was going to say, your lived experience of having those people represented on those boards is so important. No-one else can be their voice.

**George LEKAKIS:** Yes. That is right.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Others are not experiencing what they are.

**George LEKAKIS:** Yes. That young man you have working in your office –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Exactly – lived experience.

**George LEKAKIS:** If he gets qualifications down the track and you are in government, obviously he will be seeking to contribute further. So you enhance that opportunity. I do not know – look, the politics of appointments is critical in your consideration, but it takes ministers who are committed to multicultural affairs to push them forward. They are the ones that actually direct the public servants to make those determinations and those decisions. It is up to the politicians of the day in their portfolios to make it happen.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. John.

**John MULLAHY:** Two of the principles relevant to multiculturalism are diversity of perspectives and inclusiveness and responsiveness. How would you recommend Victorian universities implement these two principles?

**George LEKAKIS:** Well, the minister in charge of the portfolio should set the direction that board appointments should factor in multicultural representation. And then the people working up the selection process have to identify applicants with such characteristics who could contribute to the board, and in consultation with the chairs they can make it happen. You do not impose things like that; you have to work through them, and it is a sensitive process. So you have got to do it carefully, but you have got to do it, as I said, on a merits-based proposition.

**The CHAIR:** I am just mindful of time, but I am going to ask one more question, if I can, just quickly.

**George LEKAKIS:** Yes, you can ask.

**The CHAIR:** Some of the submissions that we have had for this inquiry do talk about racism in terms of hiring practices. Have you had any examples or could you share anything around that, around maybe some, I suppose, universities particularly, or another example, of when there is racism in hiring and employment?

**George LEKAKIS:** Look, the hiring processes, depending on who the people doing the hiring are, can impact upon the decision based on their own perceptions, negative or positive, regarding the applicant's ethnicity, racial or religious background. That is a fact. It is not something that does not happen, but I cannot

identify specifics. People feel that they have been unsuccessful and have lost an opportunity to get a job, and they might refer to their race as being the reason for the failure, but it might not have been. That is why I always consider merit fundamental to any decision. The factor of race or religion is something that is taken into consideration, but most workplaces in Victoria are very diverse now. It is not selection by race; it is selection by a person's capacity and skill.

At universities, well, I am the deputy chair of a vocational institute, Chisholm Institute. I go to a lot of the ceremonies, graduation ceremonies. It is so diverse that it is absolutely unbelievable. Those people have all completed courses, which are completed by all to the standards required by whatever authority accredits those courses to be. Now, if they are going for a job, they have got to put their best foot forward, and most people are selected on that basis. There are some people that, you know, might be predisposed to thinking that. I do not see that as the overwhelming factor.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. That is good to hear.

**George LEKAKIS:** I have hired a lot of people in my career, and race or religion never really came into it. Anyway, that is my personal opinion.

**The CHAIR:** That is a good way to end, I think, George. Sorry, we have run out of time today, but I am really thankful that you have been able to come along –

**George LEKAKIS:** I am glad for the invitation.

**The CHAIR:** and answer some of our questions today, so thank you.

**George LEKAKIS:** Well, I hope you put the multicultural factor as part of the selection.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**George LEKAKIS:** That would be a great outcome. And you would be the first to do it, which is a really great thing, and it might lead to other processes in the public service for that to occur. So be champions for the cause and do it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, George. We will now end the broadcast.

**Witness withdrew.**