

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

Felix Hughes, President, National Union of Students.

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 so much, Felix, for coming along today. We really appreciate you answering our questions and giving a bit of insight into your submission. What we might do is maybe you could introduce yourself and what kind of role you have at the union and then we will go straight into some questions.

Felix HUGHES: My name is Felix Hughes. I am the President of the National Union of Students, which represents 1.6 million undergraduate and postgraduate students across Australia. I am also a Monash University student and was the secretary of the Monash Student Association last year.

The CHAIR: Perfect. You will have great insights. John, I am going to go straight to you.

John MULLAHY: Just for the record so that there is no conflict, Felix Hughes did work for me until earlier this year when he got a better job at the National Union of Students. I thought I would place that one on the record.

But obviously, you have got very good experience with regard to the experience of students and their voice to governance. I would like to delve into: are student unions currently independent of university administration?

Felix HUGHES: It depends on the university, but far too often they are not, or they are not independent enough. There has been a growing trend by universities in the country and in the state to try to undermine student unions, to take over both the advocacy services and their support services and to encroach on their independence. Independent student unions are one of the most fundamental pathways towards ensuring accountable universities and the student experience. In Victoria, for example, when universities tend to dislike the advocacy done by student unions, they have a tendency to create essentially scab student unions and fake student unions that are not independent from the university.

John MULLAHY: So for example, the MSA, do they have a direct pathway to voice their concerns to the university's governing bodies?

Felix HUGHES: The MSA does have a direct pathway to voice its concerns to the university in that it can meet with the vice-chancellor. However, that is limited to scheduled meetings which occur at regular periods. The MSA does not have, for example, a representative on the university council. It does not have a representative on sub-councils of the university council. It does not have a representative on the academic board, and often what occurs is the university's consultation with MSA is a tick-box exercise. It does not genuinely engage with the MSA in a genuine nature or in a nature where they seek the MSA's input before the university makes a decision.

John MULLAHY: So what would you see as the ideal relationship between student unions and university councils?

Felix HUGHES: I think that student unions exist because of the student amenities fee, and that is only given to student unions through universities. When universities dislike the direction of a student union, they seek to undermine their independence. They seek to undermine the role of the student union. I think that one of the most important things that this committee could do is to recommend that student unions and student-led organisations are recognised in Victorian legislation. When student union presidents go to a vice-chancellor or a chancellor or deputy vice-chancellor and raise an issue, one of the first questions they happen to ask is, 'If I raise this issue, is this vice-chancellor going to target our student union? Are they going to try to target our independence? Are they going to try and take over our board?' There have been examples in Victoria where that has occurred and where they have tried to diminish that student union. A question that a student should

never have to ask when they meet with the vice-chancellor is, 'If I raise this legitimate advocacy, whether that's about sexual assault, whether that's about anti-racism work, and the university doesn't like it, is this university going to try and either diminish or replace the student union?' I think the existence of student unions is the most important thing, and a relationship whereby student unions are recognised in legislation means they can walk into any room with any senior management member and actually get outcomes. Whereas right now, the first question we are asking is: are you going to target us?

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Roma, I might head to you.

Roma BRITNELL: What concerns are students in your union voicing in regard to university governance, and is there a dominant issue that is being raised around governance?

Felix HUGHES: Broadly, universities are not engaging with student voices. Student voices are not heard before universities make decisions on council. And for the very first time, when students and student representatives learn about something, it is after it has been sent out in a mass email. The biggest concern is that student voices are not actually considered and taken into consideration before the university makes decisions which will impact students.

Roma BRITNELL: But you have got one voice on this council? That is you?

Felix HUGHES: Yes, at Monash University they have one voice on the university board. That is not me.

Roma BRITNELL: That is not you?

Felix HUGHES: That is not me, no.

Roma BRITNELL: So that person is excluded often from decisions because the first the students know is that they get this email about change or that person did not get the opportunity to send an email out to tell everyone about the change? What is the usual situation?

Felix HUGHES: So, for example, last year Monash University announced that it was going to be cancelling all law faculty tutorials. That announcement was made without asking one student beforehand how this would impact students. Not one student was asked, 'How does this impact your education? How is this going to impact your learning?' The university announced the decision. As soon as it was announced they were very keen to sit down with us, they were very keen to listen to our concerns, but if the university was actually making decisions based off student input, they would have sat down with our student representative first, they would have sat down with the student union and they would have sought community feedback.

Roma BRITNELL: Did they reverse that situation after?

Felix HUGHES: No, they have not.

Roma BRITNELL: But the students were very concerned at the effect on their education.

Felix HUGHES: Students are extraordinarily concerned. It is having massive impacts on their education. You are seeing classes doubling in size in some instances. You are seeing students worrying about their education and having no clear voice to raise it with the university, because they are locked out of those decision-making rooms. And by the time something comes up with a student, the university has already announced it.

Roma BRITNELL: So the tutes were cancelled but the classrooms doubled. Explain that to me. Did you just say that?

Felix HUGHES: The university has changed the form of classrooms. They have abolished tutorials, and they are introducing – I have forgotten the exact term – a new form of classes, which includes more students in less classes and less active participation.

Roma BRITNELL: Right. Okay. I understand. So more load on the one person to manage a bigger cohort. Right. Got you.

Felix HUGHES: Yes, which is also unfair on that staff member, because it is impossible to raise a question in class if you have got hundreds of students in one classroom.

Roma BRITNELL: Whereas the tutes were more personalised and –

Felix HUGHES: Yes, accessible. The other part of that issue was when that email was first sent out and the MSA and the student representatives raised that with the university, the vice-chancellor and to my understanding the deputy vice-chancellor were not aware of that cancellation of law faculty tutorials. They heard it for the first time from us. And there was a failure in the internal governance of the university to actually make sure senior management were aware of that issue first and to tick it off. My understanding is it was done by the dean of the faculty, and a decision like that should never be made without proper consultation with senior management of the university, who should have an obligation to consult with student-led organisations.

Roma BRITNELL: Was there a rationale given post the decision as to why they did that?

Felix HUGHES: No rationale that we have understood.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. We heard both from the NTEU and Trades Hall this morning about the corporatisation but also the casualisation of a lot of the university sectors – educational staff I guess, academics et cetera. Has that, in your experience, affected your members' capacity in terms of completing coursework, learning et cetera?

Felix HUGHES: It is often a cliché to say, but staff working conditions are student learning conditions. When staff members are casualised, when staff members have high workload, it has a direct impact on the learning that students can get, and we do not blame staff for that at all. They are overworked, they are underpaid. But what ends up happening is in a classroom with hundreds of students, students are unable to raise their hands and ask questions and students are not able to get feedback on their assessments because staff members are just overwhelmed by that. You have students who are wanting more feedback, wanting more one-on-one support, but they are not getting that at all, and the direction that universities are going is actually worse. What we want to see more broadly is staff-to-student ratios in classrooms – so, one staff member per X number of students – to protect that.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, Felix. You are obviously doing some really great work. Some of the things you have just raised have been raised already today, particularly in staff ratios, staff overload – all those types of things. But given these organisations are national, are there any Australian jurisdictions where students feel the governance system works for them, and what lessons could be learned from other jurisdictions in these areas? Have you heard of a model elsewhere that is working well and you see they are doing some great work that should be happening in our state?

Felix HUGHES: I think Western Australia has developed the model for student voice in this country, and that happened quite a while ago. The first thing they have done is Western Australia has mandated that 50 per cent of the student services and amenities fee go to student-led organisations. The federal government has implemented 40 per cent to student-led organisations, which is why when you look at Western Australia versus the rest of the states, Western Australian student-led organisations are so much more effective at advocacy. They can actually impact and represent students far, far better than the rest of the country because they have the resources to do so. Beyond that, student-led organisations in Western Australia have been recognised in legislation, and so that means when they walk into a room with the vice-chancellor, they can stand up for students without having to worry, 'Oh, is our union or our guild going to be abolished tomorrow because of this?' Whereas that is something we have seen in Victoria. One example is at La Trobe, where La Trobe

University established the student representative council, despite there being the La Trobe Student Union, which has existed for 60-plus years. The university, without consultation with students whatsoever, made a fake student representative council that is undemocratic. It is co-chaired by the university. It is not a real body. However, they have now directed SSAF to that body. That means that legitimate student representative unions are missing out on student money so they can do the best advocacy possible, and it is a very deliberate and very effective way of undermining student representation and student voice.

Kim O'KEEFFE: So leading on from that, how frustrating is that? You are doing so much work. It is probably pretty obvious, but you are doing a lot of work, obviously. I can hear it and I can see it and well done. But how frustrating is that, to think you have got this role, and as you say, you are responsible for almost 1.6 million people – it is incredible. And we need younger people. We need lived experience and we need to connect that to good governance. So how frustrating is it? I mean, I am sure it is an easy question to answer, but how do you feel about all of this? You know, particularly the frustration, I am sure, because of the effort you are putting in.

Felix HUGHES: It is extraordinarily frustrating. The issues that we are trying to talk about with universities are really serious. It is policies and responses when a student has experienced domestic violence and family violence. It is what academic support is there when you are having family emergencies. It is having more 24/7 libraries on campus for students that experience insecure housing. It is things that impact every student's life every day and have really severe ramifications on them. It feels like universities just do not care at times. They are there to protect their reputation, not to actually protect students. Students are banging on that door saying, 'We need this, we need this, we need this.' And it tends to be that the only time universities open that door is when there is a media article or where their reputation is at risk.

The CHAIR: Anthony?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Felix, for appearing, for your submission and for your advocacy on behalf of students at the NUS, but also at your university as well. Look, my question really is just simply, if you could take a few steps back here, just walk us through – and I know you gave the example of that decision around class sizes changing and the type of hybrid class model evolving without student consultation. But just in that case or other cases, walk us through the steps of how a complaint from a student is lodged, how it is considered, how it is handled or not appropriately handled, how it is processed, and how a resolution is facilitated through the current governance structure. What are the barriers within that structure? Obviously we have heard about what the ideal structure should be, but just walk us through, mechanically, what it is like at the moment.

Felix HUGHES: So there are a few things that came to mind there. The first is the university's academic board, that looks after academic policy. Students tend to have a representative or two representatives on these boards; however, often to get something onto an agenda item, the university has to put a star next to it. So university students can submit items to the academic board, but for an academic board to actually consider that item, the university or the chair of that board has to put a star next to it, which means students can be there on their academic board, in the position they have been elected to, yet cannot even get a simple matter put on the agenda.

On university councils, Monash has one university council member, and what that means is you are going into a room of people who are adversarial towards you, who treat you with less respect. We have seen cases in the past of students being given a different chair when they go to university council, students being given a slightly lower chair; or students going to a graduation ceremony as a member of university council, which they are entitled to, and then being told all other members of university council are going to be taken to the official welcoming ceremony, and then you can go and join them after. You see examples of them – very small things, but very deliberate things – not having a glass of water, while all the other members of university council have a glass of water next to their table. It is very deliberate small things which are designed to intimidate them, to undermine them, and when you are talking about a 21-year-old that is going into that room, really scared sometimes, it is designed to intimidate them to not speak up. And one of the worst parts there is where you have one representative who is going into that room, versus 10 or 15 other people who can be quite intimidating, to speak up. So one of the proposals is to have multiple student representatives, so you are going into that room with an ally, so you are going into that room with someone that can second your motions, you are going into that room with actual support from your peers, because otherwise every time you raise a question you have

10 people go, 'Oh, that's not actually a real issue.' It can be really intimidating for students, whereas having that backing next to you, on either side of you, who are going to say, 'No, this is a real issue. You need to answer these questions' is really important.

The CHAIR: One of your additional recommendations for us to consider was legislating 100 per cent of the student services and amenity fees. Can you talk a little bit about what that might do? Sorry – that was to be allocated directly to independent student unions.

Felix HUGHES: SSAF, which is the fee that goes to student-led organisations, is used by us for all kinds of reasons. The main role of a student union is, first of all, to create a campus culture, to create a student experience. That can be events, music, clubs and societies – the places where you actually meet your friends at university and where you can get lifelong memories so that university is not just a whole bunch of rooms where you go to class and you leave but you can go to class and then go and sit on the lawn, listen to some music and meet friends. Clubs and societies only exist because of student unions, and having well-funded clubs and societies means on a campus you can walk down and there will be a live stall with some free food and you can go and chat to people. It means support for students academically – if you have a misconduct hearing, having a student union staff member that can be there to walk you through the process, to explain what is going on and what assistance you can get.

Cost-of-living support – with Monash, for example, last year our student organisation negotiated an increase in SSAF from the university, and as part of that we increased our free breakfast program from once a week to every single weekday. So students right now who are having to go without meals just to attend university can go to campus every single day and eat food. Too many students were starving. That completely changed the culture on campus. There is no longer this stigma where students have to feel really embarrassed to get free food. We are putting music there, we are putting events there. We are trying to make these environments where students actually want to go and do not have to feel embarrassed about starving.

Then the third part is advocacy and campaigns, so things like fairer academic services and cheaper parking. With those funds, student unions can actually run those campaigns. A lot of student unions also run safe spaces for autonomous groups – a disability lounge, a queer lounge, a women's lounge. And those funds allow us to actually make sure that marginalised students are welcomed into the university system so that we provide tailored support for regional students, international students and students who far too often are left outside. Otherwise you see the university using those funds. The examples of what universities are using SSAF on are sometimes ridiculous. Last year there was a tent that a university bought for about \$300,000 with SSAF. \$300,000 for us is free dinners twice a week all year. It is things that actually impact students' lives. It is things that let students get through university without starving and risking their health. Right now what we are providing is probably the cap, because we are using all of our funds. If you increase that, it can be things like more training for students, more anti-racist work. It can be more free food and events. It can be more staff members to assist with academic misconduct and it can be legal advice for students. It can be running more events tailored to international students. The possibilities for us are endless.

The CHAIR: How much do you get at the moment? You said 'legislate 100 per cent'. Sorry, there are two questions: how much do you get and how is that divvied up in deciding how much you will get?

Felix HUGHES: The legislated minimum at the moment is 40 per cent; however, the way that universities get around that is by establishing fake student unions that they can then divert the SSAF to. In the case of La Trobe, like I mentioned, the La Trobe Student Union is the democratically elected student union. The student representative council – the fake body – is getting some SSAF, and that is SSAF that would otherwise go to the democratically elected organisation. So that 40 per cent minimum that we are hearing about from the government federally, while it is a fantastic policy, is not actually being reflected on the ground because universities are consciously and deliberately and at times quite well finding ways around it. It does differ by university. Some universities are at 50 per cent in Victoria. The highest in the country I think is around 65 per cent. And what we want to see is – Monash, for example, I think last year was 40 per cent; we have renegotiated to 50 per cent, but that is 50 per cent shared between five unions, so in reality for the Monash Student Association you are looking at around 15 per cent, which is nowhere near enough to do the services students need.

The CHAIR: But you are still putting on a breakfast on that very tight budget.

Felix HUGHES: We are doing quite a bit else as well, if you would like to hear about that.

The CHAIR: You are doing a lot with what you have got, right?

Felix HUGHES: What the Monash Student Association does is we do free breakfasts every weekday and we do free food on Monday nights or free dinner. We hold Wednesday sessions throughout the semester with live music and free food so students can come down to the lawns and meet other people. We have increased funding for clubs and societies to encourage them to do more events on campus and more events with free food. We run a cafe for students that has \$3 meals, so after they leave class they can have an accessible meal. We run, like I said, safe spaces for students. We have also got things like a mature-age and part-time student department. We have an international students department. We have departments that actually focus on areas they need to, so we have a residential communities department that goes out into residential halls and just hands out free meals a few times a semester. They will get thousands of free meals, and they will just hand them out to students, and that changes their lives because they are quite literally going days without day eating.

The CHAIR: The question then would be – I think what you are doing is absolutely incredible: shouldn't the universities be doing this?

Felix HUGHES: They should be, yes.

The CHAIR: It is great that it is in your hands, you can do this and you can represent your students. But we want the campus, for example, to be a safe space, and that is what universities should be doing.

Felix HUGHES: They should be; they just never will. They have shown that over decades and decades and decades their priority is never going to be cost-of-living support for students. It will be cost-of-living support for students once every three years when the media gets really loud about it, whereas student-led organisations' priority is student welfare. Our priority is making sure that if you are starving we can help you. Universities tend to listen to that for three years and then they will make a big announcement, listen to that for another two years and then make a big announcement, whereas our support is every single day on the ground.

The CHAIR: John, did you have something further?

John MULLAHY: Yes. How much funding did MSA get last year after the renegotiation of the 50 per cent?

Felix HUGHES: 50 per cent – it is upwards of \$5 million. I think it is around \$7 million. With that we have been able to expand so many services. We have increased the amount of free food we have done in almost every department as well.

John MULLAHY: So MSA got \$5 million to \$7 million?

Felix HUGHES: Yes. Between that, yes.

John MULLAHY: What is the VC paid?

Felix HUGHES: Too much. One point something. It is quite high at Monash.

John MULLAHY: You get all that stuff done with that amount of money, and the board of the university cannot do that.

Felix HUGHES: No.

John MULLAHY: Interesting.

Felix HUGHES: The other part is that student organisations do know where those funds and where that money is best spent because, at the same time, they are democratically elected, and student unions will always be better at that because the people on the ground handing out the free food are also the ones experiencing those problems. With that money student-led organisations are the best group to do it because they are democratically elected and they are on the ground every single day. As they leave class, 30 students tell them their issues, so they are the ones most in contact with students.

The CHAIR: Which I think goes to my point that you are doing a great job and it should be maybe in your hands but with a bit more support from the university. Can I ask also: you have signed up to the – I have gone blank, sorry.

Felix HUGHES: Joint reform proposal.

The CHAIR: The joint reform. One of them was around transparency. Do you get to hear much about how decisions are made – minutes, agendas published from the council meetings?

Felix HUGHES: No, none whatsoever. Agendas are not shared with us. Minutes are not shared with us. When they are, like I mentioned before, to put something onto a meeting agenda in the first place is quite an effort. It is meeting after meeting and advocacy just to get something onto the agenda. We have no idea how decisions are made in the university council sometimes. We look at something and go, 'This is ridiculous. How did this pass anyone's eyes whatsoever?' I saw Monash University's submission to this inquiry actually, which said that increasing the number of student representatives on the council does not increase the diversity of opinions, which is just blatantly incorrect. I do not know how that passed anyone's eyes. I do not know how that got submitted. I do not know how anyone could write that and think that that is correct. It is ridiculous. It is I think an attempt to throw as much mud at the wall as possible hoping something sticks, whereas in reality having multiple students on that board and that council will increase the number of students being represented. You cannot expect one student to represent 60,000 students. There are so many different groups. There are domestic students, international students, undergrad, postgrad, regional. You cannot expect one student to do that work. This notion that somehow an increased number of students in those rooms is not going to increase the diversity of opinions is just outright offensive.

The CHAIR: Does anyone have any other questions?

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just clarify which university said that they did not have –

Felix HUGHES: Monash University.

Roma BRITNELL: It was Monash. Thank you.

Felix HUGHES: I think they are appearing tomorrow if you want to mention that to them.

Roma BRITNELL: It might be why I am writing it down.

Felix HUGHES: I do not think there was any student that was happy with that submission.

The CHAIR: Are there any other questions we have got for Felix? The only other one I might ask is – you are obviously presenting today and everything will be on the record: do you feel that there are ramifications for speaking up – and do other students or academics or staff? I know you are students, but do students feel like they cannot raise things because they feel they will be targeted in any way?

Felix HUGHES: Yes, absolutely. Students are regularly penalised for raising things with the university. Universities will lock students out of discussions when they hear feedback from students that is not what they want to hear.

The CHAIR: Penalised how?

Felix HUGHES: There are a few different cases that come to mind. What has been the biggest for the last few years on campus has been anti-racist work. The increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia but also in anti-African, anti-Asian, anti-Palestinian and anti-First Nations racism has been horrific, and you have students meeting with the university to raise this time and time again, saying, 'This is outright horrific. The university needs to do more.' The people the university tends to want to meet with time and time again are the students that go into those rooms saying very little or the students that the university appoints into that room, the students that the university decides they want to meet with today. If a student walks into that room at the university and says, 'We're not happy with what's happening,' the university has a tendency to not meet that student again.

On an academic side, there are a number of students that are really scared to raise matters publicly, and they will go to their student union to raise things confidentially, because there is a culture on campus where students expect some sort of ramification. I think that expectation did not just get made up. It came as a result of years and years and years of targeting students. That can be students who are casual staff members at the university magically finding out they do not have any hours about a month later after they have raised something publicly. One example in Victoria is that student accommodation is exempt from rental tenancy laws. So when students want to raise things with a university about their accommodation, saying, 'There's mould in my room. I'm really struggling at my accommodation right now,' universities have a tendency to not allow that student to come to accommodation the next year. It has created a culture where students do not want to go to the university and raise issues and do not want to sign petitions calling for better accommodation, because the university just will not allow them into accommodation the following year. It is a culture where students have to choose between standing up and saying 'I shouldn't wake up to the smell of mould in my room' or 'Do I have a house next year?'

The CHAIR: Thank you, Felix. John, you go.

John MULLAHY: How are your studies going? Are you focused on them?

Felix HUGHES: It could be better.

Kim O'KEEFFE: What are you studying, Felix?

Felix HUGHES: I do international relations.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good job.

Felix HUGHES: When I do it, it is fantastic.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good. Keep doing that.

The CHAIR: Assignment due tomorrow. Thank you so much, Felix, for your time and for really being open with us to help us understand the student experience. It helps us with some recommendations going forward, so thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.