

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance

Melbourne – Friday 15 May 2026

#### MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

#### WITNESSES

Lill Healy, Deputy Secretary, Skills and TAFE, and

Joanna Adam, Manager, Higher Education Policy and Engagement, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

**The CHAIR:** I begin today by acknowledging the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to elders past, present and future and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

I advise that today's session is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with LA standing order 234.

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.

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 for joining us today. We really appreciate it. What we are going to do is maybe if you could introduce yourself, your title or role in your organisation, and then we are going to jump straight into some questions to give best use of our time. I will hand over to you.

**Lill HEALY:** Thanks, Chair. My name is Lill Healy. I am the Deputy Secretary of Skills and TAFE in the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

**Joanna ADAM:** And I am Joanna Adam. I am Manager of Higher Education Policy and School Pathways in the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, and thank you also for your submission, which is helpful for us to ask you some questions today. Kim, I might go to you first.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Thank you both so much for being here. I just note that the Victorian government notes on its website that it has responsibility to support the legislative responsibilities relating to higher education, including the university council appointment process. We heard a lot about that yesterday, and I am really interested if you could elaborate on how it supports the university council appointment process.

**Lill HEALY:** Thanks for the question, Ms O'Keeffe. University councils obviously are really central in universities, and the membership requirements for each of the eight public universities for which we have some responsibilities are set out in their establishing acts in state legislation. Within that context the department plays a supportive role to the minister and to government through the four government-appointed members that are required, one appointed by the minister and three then through the Governor in Council process. In doing that, we have a responsibility for working within established policy of the government focused around merit and probity requirements, and we work to the Victorian appointment and remuneration guidelines and also the diversity on Victorian government boards guidelines. The role the department plays in supporting that process, including providing advice to the minister to ensure that quality appointments are made – we work through a pretty rigorous process.

Through the 'Join a public board' site we advertise our appointments, we then run an interview selection process, we have the support of an external agency to do that, we have an independent selection panel, and for the Governor in Council appointments specifically where the university leads that process, we work with them on that and recommend appointments to the minister. So we have got the single ministerial appointment where the department leads, we have got the Governor in Council appointments where the department supports and works beside unis, but then the department provides advice through to the minister, and of course, then those four appointments are taken through into government. Again, that is all within the context of the policy around public boards, given the importance of that transparency.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. And in saying that, how do you ensure the process is as transparent as possible?

**Lill HEALY:** I will point back to both sets of guidelines because they both go to merit and probity in the way that they are established, and in following those each university council, as you know, maintains a skills and diversity matrix to inform the vacancies and assist the planning. So when we look at applying that policy and working to the matrix, then we have got a really robust process. I think we have worked through over 60 appointments in the last period of this government. Again, each of those was really clear and transparent through process, out the other side of the Governor-in-Council appointments.

**The CHAIR:** I hope you do not mind me jumping in just to ask about that.

**Lill HEALY:** No, please.

**The CHAIR:** A minister has authority to appoint those and does that. Does a minister have authority to remove a council member if there was a breach of code of conduct or something along those lines? Does the minister have any authority the other way around?

**Lill HEALY:** Overall, as self-governing institutions, it is the university councils that are responsible for their governance. In the establishing acts – and help me out here, Jo, if I am missing it – there is the capacity for the council to make those decisions around removing a member on their own council. That is not a role for government.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. So the minister is not involved in any of that type of process?

**Lill HEALY:** No, that is right. The university council, and of course then the Commonwealth powers, through the regulator, may have something to say about matters.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Lill and Joanna, for appearing and for the department's submission. My question is around concerns about university governance. You would have heard or followed in yesterday's hearings that as a committee we really were hearing growing amounts of evidence and examples of where it appears that many were arguing, or putting to the committee, that universities are geared increasingly towards corporate commercial priorities and outcomes, and many were arguing that the focus for the public good and educational outcomes is no longer the priority that it used to be, or what universities were originally intended for. A lot of that stems from – according to many of the witnesses we had – the lack of representation on the council level of staff, undergraduates, postgraduates and others from the broader university community at that decision-making level. We had a submission from the NTEU as well, which basically went through all the universities across the country, which showed that Victoria currently has the lowest representation on those boards and councils when it comes to only having one student member and one staff member representative, which we legislated – I see in your submission – back in 2015. But New South Wales and other states have in the order of two to three representatives. So my question goes to: given those concerns around university governance, how does the government and the department see its involvement in addressing those concerns and those challenges? What legislative changes could potentially be recommended by the committee, and ideally, who would oversee and enforce any of those subsequent potential changes?

**Lill HEALY:** There is a lot in that. Perhaps we could just step back and note the representation of staff and students as a principle. It is a requirement of universities to have staff and students at that minimum of one – it is just fundamental. The department and certainly the government has made that very clear through its support of the expert council. The principle of staff and student engagement is fundamental to good governance. We know that that representation and strengthening that representation is absolutely the opportunity for universities to take up, should they wish to do that. I note that in their submissions to this inquiry – in fact, I think La Trobe and Melbourne, as examples, have already undertaken to make those increases. I would also note that the engagement of staff and students through governance and membership is a critical element, as is a broader commitment to engagement of staff and students in other forums that universities have. There are lots of those examples right across universities.

I think the department absolutely welcomes the focus that this inquiry brings to ways to increase staff and student representation. It obviously is a matter for the unis themselves to work that through and pick that up. As the universities now implement the principles, we would expect to see that given serious consideration, and we

would expect and hope to see continued contemporary forms of engagement by both staff and students across each of the universities. We acknowledge that the numbers are the numbers, and again, we would welcome universities to continue to consider that.

In terms of policy, it is not for me to comment on policy today. We do recognise the work the expert council has done. They have pointed to good examples across the country of how universities are responding to that as contemporary institutions, and as with all public institutions, having strong membership and voice from the people that you serve is just a fundamental element of good governance. We will look forward as a department to the outcomes of this inquiry in fact to consider our advice back to government on these matters, but it possibly goes that way rather than the other way around today.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I just want to go back to the sort of primary responsibility for policy. What actually is the role of developing policy related to higher education? You kind of have outlined it. I just want to be clearer on that. I think Anthony has already asked it, but given what has been going on in the media – and there is an awareness around that the governance is not optimal – what actual considerations have been given to legislative changes? You know, what discussions have taken place that we can complement, hopefully, with this committee's recommendations?

**Lill HEALY:** Thanks. I mean, the broader policy settings in higher education, as you know, are a responsibility of the Commonwealth.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Sorry, around governance, so for Victoria's role.

**Lill HEALY:** Yes. The Victorian government has got some clear responsibilities in terms of setting the membership for governing councils – we just mentioned before the four appointments there – and also financial reporting and responsibilities around land transactions. So that is the responsibility of the state government in terms of governance. But I would just perhaps step up one and say universities are just fundamental civic institutions in Victoria, and so as public institutions with a public good mission established under state Acts, the expectations of government are for those institutions to be exemplary. We have high expectations for governance, and rightly so. The community expects that. The university chancellors committee takes that on board and absolutely runs with that. So there is no question around those expectations. We acknowledge, as have the university chancellors, that there have been some shortcomings. The state government has responded, I think, quite strongly to a number of those matters, particularly in relation to the underpayment of wages where those actions have been taken. Whilst that is a Commonwealth responsibility technically, the government has written to vice-chancellors in the past on those matters. The government has written to vice-chancellors in the past on safety on campus. So whilst the policy settings in a sense sit somewhere else, as Victorian-based organisations, the relationship with our universities is strong and fundamental, and that dialogue is ongoing, whether it is through formal processes –

**Roma BRITNELL:** With regard to the communications with safety on campus, we have heard a lot in the last few days – or yesterday; it felt like a long day actually – around safety on campus. Given that we have got a legislative opportunity rather than just communications, what has actually taken place to improve the safety through the governance, where those letters have resulted in actions?

**Lill HEALY:** I will start with the relationship because that is fundamental. The vice-chancellors forum meets regularly with the government on a whole range of matters, and the safety on campus is absolutely a shared priority for everybody. Perhaps a couple of examples that I will call out: the focus around the Racism@Uni study. People have jumped on that, have worked together in responses. What was the other one, Jo? We had the gender-based code, the work around strengthening safety, particularly for women on campus.

**Roma BRITNELL:** 'Jumped on' – I mean, there were people camping out in Melbourne uni for months and students felt they could not go to class. I am struggling with the whole jumped on – months is not jumped on.

**Lill HEALY:** Again, I think these will probably be some of the things you might want to raise with universities to get the practical examples coming through, and again, these are matters I think the expert council has gone to. The National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence was worked on by state and Commonwealth governments together with universities over the last 18 months. To me that is a practical outcome of an area that needed quite strengthened intervention, and I think that is a good example of picking up and running with safety matters that are critical.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So was that effective? Is there evidence of that effectiveness?

**Lill HEALY:** Yes, I think given the code has in a sense only just commenced this year, I think its objective is to strengthen some of the work that has been underway and to boost that, because it is needed. So I think the question of effectiveness probably comes a little bit down the track. But that is the objective, clearly, for that to be the case, and I guess we will look to monitor that. We do not have a formal role at the state level in monitoring that, but we work with the Commonwealth really closely where we can engage in university policy settings – whilst it is the Commonwealth’s responsibility. I think the other thing I would say is that in adopting the expert council principles, all of the principles and their implementation – the government has been clear on adopting those – then for wherever safety –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Sorry to interrupt once again. That is my third time. I apologise.

**Lill HEALY:** No, that is okay.

**Roma BRITNELL:** To have good governance you have to be focused on outcomes. So you are saying that Victorian governance extends only to the recommendations through the actions of writing a letter, but the Commonwealth are ultimately responsible for the safety? I am struggling with risk and the role of governance, because that to me does not shift then to the feds. I do not understand what you meant there.

**Lill HEALY:** The university councils are responsible for their governance. That is the way the Act runs. The Victorian government, in establishing universities, has formal responsibilities around appointments, funding and land transactions. As they are civic institutions, the government gets beside universities to support their operations and their effectiveness in their communities. Whilst there is not a technical responsibility for anything more than I have said, as civic institutions and really important economic institutions, we sit beside the unis to develop policy.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So there is no legislative underlying opportunity that you have identified or constructed some work around at this point, because you do not have a role?

**Lill HEALY:** Again, I think from the department’s point of view, I will not pre-empt policy or legislative ideas. I will reflect the work that has taken place and the strengthening work and the support for the expert council – active support for that work and active expectations that the implementation of the principles will be, and is I know already, a primary objective of university councils and universities as we speak, which I am sure you will hear about today. We will continue to work beside them as a department. Certainly it has been the government’s clear intent to continue to work beside and expect universities to be as strong with a leadership agenda as they can on be all issues that are raised in relation to their campuses, whether that is safety or whether that is other matters that may come. I think that has been clear in the way that we have been acting.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you, Chair. The government some time ago committed to increasing diversity on public boards. I just wanted to ask a couple of questions in that vein. Can you go through what the key selection criteria are for government appointees onto university councils? How can the government, outside of its ability to appoint members, guarantee I guess gender diversity but also multicultural representation on those boards? And in a historical sense – I mean, I guess in recent history – how many multicultural members have been appointed by the government to those councils?

**Lill HEALY:** Thanks for the question. Probably the place to start is to say, possibly repeating what I said earlier, in terms of diversity, the diversity guidelines are the policy that government has for all its public boards.

In terms of its appointments that it is responsible for for universities, that absolutely guides that. And also there are the appointment and remuneration guidelines. In terms of diversity on public boards, it then goes to the requirement for each university council to have their skills and diversity matrix, which they do. That is what informs the vacancies and assists with succession planning, and that is there clearly to promote diversity. The matrix records indicators of diversity around gender – men, women, non-binary, gender-diverse; location – metro, regional; First Peoples; culturally and linguistically diverse; disability; LBGTQI+; and youth. It is within that framing that appointments are considered.

As you would know, one of the challenges with any organisation's diversity matrix is that it requires people to self-disclose. Sometimes people are comfortable to do that, sometimes people are not. But that notwithstanding, I think as an example of numbers, just under 10 per cent of government appointments to university councils have been First Peoples members, and since 2015, when the gender diversity policy took effect, 70 per cent of government appointments to university councils have been women. I can call out those stats. In terms of all university appointments, I do not have that at hand, and again, others will probably be able to respond to that over the day. It is that really strong focus on diversity that the policy requires universities to have, and that is where government and the department certainly puts its effort in bringing advice into government.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you. You might have to take this one on notice. I knew that we had a really good track record of appointing women onto university councils, which is amazing, and that is very helpful information about First Nations people. What about multicultural representation? You may have to take it on notice.

**Lill HEALY:** We are happy to take that on notice.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would like to better understand the responsibilities of both the Commonwealth and the state in terms of remuneration and pay of chancellors and vice-chancellors. In your submission you did talk about a Commonwealth remuneration tribunal, which would establish a framework around classification ranges, but it has been reported publicly in media that a chancellor had sought to try and increase their own remuneration and had come to the state minister to do that. I am just wondering then: if it is a Commonwealth responsibility, I am not sure what the role is, then, of the state minister in terms of pay, setting it in a framework sense.

**Lill HEALY:** The state minister has responsibility for working within established government policy for the council remunerations, not for the vice-chancellors' or the universities' remuneration, so talking at the council level. In setting remuneration the minister would be considering the remuneration bands. A council will be classified within that policy, within a band, and then remuneration for council members will be set within that band. That is in terms of the council membership. There is no role for the state minister to intervene in or set remuneration for vice-chancellors or members of the university. That is a job for the governing council as an independent governing council.

The expert panel, again, made commentary in regard to remuneration and the state for vice-chancellors. The government has indicated its support for the findings of the expert council, consistent with all the education ministers, and the Commonwealth is now working with the – I do not know the acronym – Commonwealth-level remuneration tribunal on setting a frame for that. That is work that is underway at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** And in that band that you were talking about for council members, would they all be paid the same?

**Lill HEALY:** Each university would be classified within the framework, and it goes to scale, scope et cetera, like any public committee. Then within that there would be a rate for the member and a rate for the chair. Is that right? Yes.

**Joanna ADAM:** Within a band.

**The CHAIR:** So how often would a university approach a minister for an increase in that band or in that? Does that happen often?

**Lill HEALY:** I am not in a position to comment. I am not aware of that.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. I am just interested in regard to getting back to appointing council members that are represented. We have heard a lot around that about it not working, that there is not enough representation. I am just wondering what you are hearing? Are there discussions about what that change could look like? Are you hearing that feedback that there is just not enough representation on those councils?

**Lill HEALY:** If I sort of scan across –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** We are talking numbers rather than skill.

**Lill HEALY:** Yes, thanks. I understand the question.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Good.

**Lill HEALY:** It is probably not appropriate for me to comment on generally what I might be hearing. I think what we do know from the work that we have done, through supporting the expert council's work, is we do know that there is a strong interest in Victorian communities for increased voice for staff and students. That is clear. That was in the department's submission just in reference to that. As I said earlier of course a number of universities are already moving in that direction. Noting the Victorian government back in, whenever it was, 2015, actually returned into the statutes the requirement for that representation, to build on that is an opportunity I think at hand for universities at the moment. To continue to strengthen the staff, student and community voice, just the voice of those who benefit from the university, I think that is a real opportunity. Implementation of the principles provides that opportunity, and we are looking forward to seeing how that progresses. So probably I would not make any commentary more generally than that at this point.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Okay. Can I just quickly add something too. Just in regard to there being no additional funding in the budget either to address university governance concerns, does the government anticipate being able to make reforms to university governance without additional funding?

**Lill HEALY:** Sorry, just for clarity, do you mean the Commonwealth budget or the state budget, given it is higher education?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** State.

**Lill HEALY:** Thanks. There have been a few budgets lately.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That is all right. The 2026–27 budget.

**Lill HEALY:** Funding for university governance is a responsibility of the university itself. Governments do not fund university governance, despite what universities may wish. There are lots of opportunities for funding, that is not one of them. Again, we would hope that the universities would continue, as they are, to work really hard in this area. So in our vice-chancellor's forum, as I mentioned before, that meets regularly with a range of ministers and with our department particularly, this is an ongoing discussion just around how we can continue to strengthen the social licence of unis in the state. Really critical institutions – it is in all our interests that our unis continue to strengthen and to have that really strong social licence, which I know others will make comment on and have made comment on today, particularly down at Deakin. I know that has been a really strong focus.

To me, I think from the department's point of view, we encourage strong engagement from communities with their universities – so this is not just theoretical. If you are living in the south-west and you want to engage with your local uni, that is a really important point as much as it is in a big university in Melbourne. So that community confidence in universities and the economic confidence we have, all of that will come back to really strong and solid governance. And I keep hooking back to the principle because I think it is the recent work, it is the work we have all done to say, 'We've got to get this better.' So from the department's point of view, we really support that, and I know the government has made it clear that we will be looking strongly to see the implementation of those principles.

**The CHAIR:** Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thanks, Lill, and thanks, Joanna. That has been interesting. I still am very much struggling. Kim's question about funding: I understand it has not had any money, and I understand that the councils need to fund it through the income that is coming through the universities from Commonwealth and from HECS et cetera. But if we have seen a culture which has been identified for some time now that it is not working, that governance is not working, why has the state government not been doing some work to increase diversity, to increase the number on the board of the student and the academics voices? These are very fundamental, obvious ways to implement a change which would probably involve legislative change to implement. Why has the government sat back and done nothing? There is an opportunity to fix this, and that is one thing. It just feels like you are saying, 'The council has to do it' and 'We're hoping that the goodwill of the universities is enough to actually bring about change' – well, it clearly has not been.

**Lill HEALY:** I would just point to the last 2½ years of the work to get to this point around a clear set of principles to get to this inquiry. I think the department will welcome the results of this inquiry in how it advises government in the areas that you are talking about, so we absolutely look forward to that being an opportunity.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Why is an inquiry needed for that? Why wouldn't that be an action that you could just do as a government? I am struggling to see why it takes 2½ years for something fairly simple.

**Lill HEALY:** I would perhaps just point to some of the comments I made earlier around the work that government has been doing and the department has been supporting, so it is certainly not a greenfield site. Now is absolutely the time, so we will be keen to look at your findings and put that into our advice back to government around continuing to strengthen that.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate you answering our questions.

**Witnesses withdrew.**