

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

WITNESS

Professor Duncan Bentley, Vice-Chancellor and President, Federation University.

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

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Thank you so much for joining us today. Just in the interest of time, we thought we would go straight into some questions. I am not sure whether you want to just do a little quick, brief opening statement around your university and how it looks for you.

Duncan BENTLEY: Thank you, Madam Chair. Basically, I think all of you know that we are Victoria's only regionally headquartered dual-sector university. We have got six major campuses and multiple sites right across the regions. We go basically from the New South Wales border to the South Australian border, east to west, across that middle bit. We have got 19,000 students; 50 per cent are regional or remote. We are number one in Australia for first-in-family, first-generation enrolments and number one in Victoria for social equity. Essentially our purpose under our Act is to serve our regional communities and to make sure that there is a pipeline of students and skills so that our regions can grow through that development. I will open to questions – I am very happy to answer.

The CHAIR: That is wonderful. That is a great setting of the scene. Thank you very much. Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thanks for being here. I am disappointed we do not have one in Shepparton, but I am always interested in hearing about regional universities. I thought I would just open up by asking – we know that regional universities are financially more challenged. In your consultancy expenditure in 2024, Federation University had five contracts for a total of \$643,000, substantially lower than other Victorian universities. How has Federation University kept its consultancy expenditure so low?

Duncan BENTLEY: Essentially, Madam Deputy Chair, we count every dollar, as we have to. Where we did have some consultancy expenditure in prior years, it was in relation to replacing a significant system so that we could make sure that we were complying with all of the wage and human resource sorts of systems. Because it had not been upgraded for a long time, we did not have the in-house expertise. You will see some cyclical rises and falls, but we try and keep consultancies as low as possible and use our internal expertise. We are Australia's first cooperative university, and essentially it is a bit of a back to the future in the sense that we do not see the university as a destination; we are the bridge between schools and workplaces for people to upskill and move into employment in the regions where the skills are needed. Our cooperative model is where we try and provide paid placements for every single student and they get academic credit for that on the way through. We are trying to use more and more student expertise because most of our students are mature age; they come with all these skills, but it is great for them to be able to practice on some of the projects within the university to enable them to upskill.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair; and thank you for appearing, Professor, and for all the great work that Federation Uni does across the state as well. Your submission emphasised how important it is to have representation on governing bodies that reflects the student cohort, and your cohort is obviously very dispersed across regional and rural parts of Victoria, as you say, from New South Wales to the South Australian border. You are very uniquely positioned in that regard, I would say. Given the diversity and the dispersal amongst campuses, courses and students at Federation University, how does the uni ensure that the governing bodies represent the interests of all the students? As part of that, why does Fed Uni still only have one representative on the council, and how is that one young person physically able to adequately represent and communicate regularly the decisions and the considerations of the school council? How could it potentially be reformed to better represent more students?

Duncan BENTLEY: It is a really interesting one, because as I said, our student body is mainly mature age, mainly female; most of them have jobs and are juggling – we have got 6000 with carer responsibilities of our 19,000 students – so it is really hard to get them involved in the way that you would naturally do if you were in a city and they were coming straight from school and were more or less full time at the uni. What we try to do is take it down to all of the different representative groups – so subcommittees, the senate. It is even hard to get students onto their own student senate and to get broad representation there because of the demands on student life. It is also hard to get TAFE students because a lot of those studies are short term, so they really do not have the time for that sort of thing. What we are trying to do is to get multiple different representations. On our subcommittees of council we do have more students – particularly, say, on the inclusion subcommittee of council, because that is where a lot of the issues are around making sure that the voice of the students and staff is represented – and we have staff representation on there as well. We have only got one representative on council at the moment. We had a really good chat to the NTEU the other day because they have got a submission that we should increase that.

This is a matter for the Victorian government. We were essentially established by the Victorian government. Half of our council are appointed by the government either through Governor in Council or the minister, which is fantastic, because then the government makes sure that there is really good representation, and we try with the other appointees to build that up. If the government and this inquiry think that more student representation is a good thing, we will work with that. We do everything we can to make sure that we implement whatever the recommendations are. Our past and current student reps are just brilliant. They give so much. What is really special is when – it is really good always – the chancellor always made sure to bring ‘What do the students think about that?’ into the conversation because so on many of these issues we might have a view but it might be divorced from the students, so it is really good to have that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Your submission says 59 per cent of students are mature age and 53 per cent study part time, so again it goes to that question of your unique situation. We have also heard from the earlier witness the view from university cautioning the committee and government around a specific mandated or capped type approach to any potential recommended changes, whether it be on staff caps or increases to different parts of a board council. Would you favourably look at or encourage the committee to look at a nuanced approach in this regard as well when it comes to increasing, potentially, student representation on council committees, given your disparity and board approach?

Duncan BENTLEY: Absolutely. I suppose the injunction to the university, whoever we are within our context, is to make sure the students, who are our key stakeholders with the employers, are suitably represented. One of the key elements we have as well is the fact that so many students are under financial stress. We have a breakfast club, we have got a nourishment nook with free pantry provision and we provide clothing for students when they go for their job interviews. These are not students who have free time on their hands to be able to do things, and they are coming from all across the region. A lot of them are coming from the outer west to Ballarat or right across. We are in Berwick and that outer south-east and then down to Gippsland. It is a student cohort who is not naturally time rich. It is about trying exactly, as you say, to make sure we absolutely get the representation, but how we do it in the best possible way so that it is not one-size-fits-all.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you. Roma.

Roma BRITNELL: Can I just clarify: are you different to the other universities with the Victorian government’s role of appointing the amount of councillors? You just said before that you have got half of your councillors appointed by the Victorian government. Is that unique to you?

Duncan BENTLEY: I do not think so, but it would be worth looking at the Acts. Essentially we take it very seriously, because the minister appoints a number, and then you have got the Governor-in-Council. We have got two vacancies at the moment, one of which is a council appointee. Based on the skills and diversity matrix – I heard the previous witness talk about the Victorian board recruitment portal. It would be really good if we could use that generally, and we would be very happy to do that. I know that the government has put in place a much stronger recruitment mechanism, and that has produced potentially an outstanding new member to the council. One of the areas we look at, for example, is AI, which is huge. What the council does is then take a look at our skills and diversity, the regions obviously and our representation and diversity but also make sure that we have got somebody on council who can ask those really hard questions about how we are actually keeping up with latest technologies or other elements.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. We have been hearing a lot about casualisation of the workforce in the universities and some of the challenges that have been identified publicly. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of having academics employed in fixed term versus casual roles, and how do you monitor the welfare of the casual workforce, given it is a cohort that is inherently more vulnerable?

Duncan BENTLEY: That is a really important point. We have about 20 per cent of our staff who are on casual contracts. That is misleading because, as I said, we have a co-op approach and employ a lot of casual students. If you go to a lot of the activities around the university, you will see a casual workforce who are students working and getting paid while they actually study. We see that as really important in a regional area.

Roma BRITNELL: Do you not differentiate them from the academics who are casual? I think that is probably the focus I am asking about.

Duncan BENTLEY: The academics who are casual is another one. There are a number of people who want to be casual because it suits their lifestyle in the regions, because they might have other responsibilities or other jobs. That is very common in the regions and outer metro. The other thing which is a key component of the co-op university is we are trying to get more and more professionals – nurses, engineers, people coming from the professions.

One of the things we are trying to achieve is to have secondments by staff into workplaces so that we get that synergy. What that necessarily means is that there will be a proportion of our staff who are not permanent and are on a casual contract, but that is with the agreement of the employers. We do still have a proportion of staff who are casual. If they would like a full-time role, that is not ideal. I think the change to the legislation around research contracts is a really good one to look at because essentially what you used to have is people rolling every couple of years or three years, hoping that you get more money. For goodness sake, if you are getting money regularly, surely the university can underwrite that. That is what the legislation has encouraged and enforced right across the sector; we have moved much more to that. It is certainly something that we will try and do wherever we can, and we have got a clause in our enterprise agreement so that we look at this each year: who can move from a contract onto a full-time position.

Roma BRITNELL: I read somewhere that casualisation of workforce is on average around 45 per cent, but you have just said 20 per cent. I think Deakin said less again. Is this more of a feature of the metropolitan universities around the country versus the regional universities?

Duncan BENTLEY: I would imagine so, yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Why would the regions be having less casualised work?

Duncan BENTLEY: We are part of our communities, so essentially the community relies on us as one of the major employers. Whether you are talking about Ballarat or Churchill or Traralgon or Horsham, we owe it to those communities to make sure people that we are giving work are looked after and they are supported, and they are given secure work wherever we can provide that.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair. A pretty strong flavour, as you can imagine when there is an inquiry into university governance, with a lot of the submissions has been around industrial concerns or industrial issues. There were several submissions that went to a concern on workload sustainability specific to Federation University. I just thought I would ask a question around that and what the university is doing or how are they engaging to make sure that for academics and staff in particular workloads are sustainable. What is the decision-making and governance around that?

Duncan BENTLEY: It is such an important point. In our last series of committee meetings one of the things we did was review the change process because, as you would be aware and you would see from our annual reports, essentially as a regional university we might be a quarter of the size of Melbourne but our revenue is minuscule because it is all domestically funded. In fact the TAFE semi-subsidises some of our higher education

delivery, so the Victorian government is picking up the tab for the feds. That means we have had to over the last few years remove about \$80 million of costs from the university, which is a huge change process.

Dylan WIGHT: And was a lot of that \$80 million for staff?

Duncan BENTLEY: Far less than we had anticipated, and we were delighted. We were able to redeploy into other roles, so the loss in staff was significantly less than we had thought. What it does mean, though, is that we have got to reorganise and redo all our procedures. They flow from the policies, procedures and all the mechanisms which then impact on workload. We were a university about 1994 and before that had all the colleges of advanced education, nursing colleges et cetera. We have got all the policies, procedures and workflows which came in from that, and a lot of it had not actually been simplified. That is what we are trying to do because of the impost on work, just on a daily basis, of all the procedures which occur where someone has to sign off on this delegation, they have to review this, they have to review that. We are trying to simplify that. That is where automation will help so that we can reduce workload, but we cannot do that on a top-down basis.

What we have got to do right across the board through our federation services project is to work with the front line to figure out exactly where the heavy workload burdens are and take the big rocks of workload out so that we can simplify them. Through the new enterprise agreement which we are negotiating with the union at the moment we want to make sure that we can streamline that because the workload has been a very significant issue right across the sector. Trying to reduce the workload in a way which secures staff and makes it fun to come to work is what we are after.

Dylan WIGHT: From a Federation University point of view is that a new project – and you talk about technological advances et cetera – trying to lessen or streamline that workload for employees? I am sure you have gone through this process before, but when there are redundancies, particularly if they are at a large scale, what happens from there is the staff that remain feel like they are doing more work. Because roles are typically never completely eliminated, someone has to do the portion of them that still exists. Is that a new project for Federation Uni trying to get those technological advances in place to lessen that workload on your staff?

Duncan BENTLEY: Before we invest in technology – because technology is like a Snowy Hydro project in terms of the budget, and we just do not have the money to do that and do it badly – the big thing is the design up-front. How do we make sure that we map all of that? That was started with a complete review of our statute, our regulations and our policies in 2021–22, which was done with the help of a former TEQSA commissioner. We got our seven-year reregistration from TEQSA in 2024, and they supported that. We have an independent chair of academic board. I know in our Act it says she is appointed by the vice-chancellor, but I recommended to the board that we have an independent chair so someone from outside with deep experience could come in and review what we were doing across the academic procedures and process to see how could we simplify so you have got independent voices plus staff project groups in each of the areas. It has been going in the mapping for a long time. The first cab off the rank was the human resource system, which has now been implemented, and then there are a series of other systems which will move into the student information system. But we need to get the design right so we do not have to retrofit because of a bad design we automate.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am a regional MP from the other side of Geelong, so I really want to highlight that in your submission you do talk about how any recommendations that we make or government may adopt really need to have a regional lens over them as well so that we do not do something for metro that will have an unintended consequence for a regional university such as you or a TAFE. But you did talk about in your submission how governance should not be just about maybe reaching that KPI of a certain number of students on a governance council but should be an outcomes-based approach where what matters most is that students have access and success and complete courses, staff and student wellbeing, the graduate outcome and how the community benefits. Do you have a sense of what that outcomes-based approach could look like? How could we put that in a matrix or measure that?

Duncan BENTLEY: It is actually really hard. We try all the time to demonstrate impact. If you look at every local council, how do you demonstrate the impact you are having on your communities? I think that through things like the QILT we could do better from a governmental point of view on the economic impact

within the regions, because at the moment Plan Victoria, for example, does not actually go down to individual regions. It really is around the metro, and it is just a broad brush once you get out into the regions. What is the government's set of strategic priorities for the regions that they are trying to reach? How are we specifically contributing to that in terms of the graduates we produce, the salaries they are getting, the experience they have and whether they are getting the jobs in the disciplines that they studied in – those sorts of really tangible outcomes? Then there is employer satisfaction with the graduates from what we are doing, because otherwise why are we here?

The CHAIR: I really like that. Thank you. That was really helpful. Are there any other burning questions? Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate you answering our questions and giving us a bit of a different perspective for this inquiry. Thank you so much.

Witness withdrew.