

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

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WITNESS

Professor Iain Martin, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University.

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

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Thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate you coming in and also the submissions and work that you have been doing in this space. We had a hearing yesterday. I am not sure whether you –

Iain MARTIN: I saw bits of it.

The CHAIR: You saw a bit of that, some of the issues that were raised, and today we want to drill into a bit more about your university. As an ex-Deakin University student I had a wonderful experience at Deakin University, and I am really pleased to be able to say that. But obviously yesterday we heard that there is some work to do and your submission also states that you are underway in doing some of that work, so we might talk a little bit about that. Do you want to say anything first before we start?

Iain MARTIN: I think what I would like to open with is that Deakin recognises that good governance is absolutely pivotal to a highly functioning and culturally safe institution. Getting good governance right is not a one-off 'We've done it,' it is a continuing period of reflection and refinement, and as a university we absolutely support the recommendations of the expert council. We have implemented already the vast majority, and by the end of 2026 we will have implemented all of those recommendations. Not all of them are clear and easy, and if you read the expert council report, there are some where there are almost internally conflicting messages around size versus representation in terms of an effective governing body. I think all of that is really important. But that innate function of governance being critical to performance is absolutely at the heart of what we do.

We carry out an external review of our governance by an independent person every three years. We are looking to bring that forward to every two years, and we do an internal self-reflection every year, which has changed what we do. We have a publicly available skills matrix – I was very pleased to see the NTEU recognise that it is out there and publicly available – that we work with as the basis of all our appointments. We have currently got a council that has nine women, six men, a First Nations representative, two members from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and somebody who is young. I laugh, but it is actually quite hard when you are looking at the governance of a big organisation to find the skill mix that fits with all of those. All of our appointments are guided by the Victorian government's diversity guidelines. We seek to ensure regional diversity, so we have got six members from south-west Victoria, eight members from the city and a member from north-central Victoria. Given that a lot of the last conversation was about appointments, perhaps I can talk about how we do that. We have 15 members of council –

The CHAIR: Iain, I am going to stop you, sorry, because I am mindful of time. Do you mind if we go into questions?

Iain MARTIN: Absolutely. I was trying to pre-empt what was an inevitable question.

The CHAIR: I think that question is going to come to you. Dylan, I might head to you first this time.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Vice-Chancellor, for appearing. I am not going to ask this question to every university, but you are the first university. Who do you, as a university, see as your two most important stakeholders?

Iain MARTIN: Our two most important roles are education and research and innovation. In education, students are the most important stakeholder, and then in delivering the research it is the benefit that we deliver beyond the institution, which is utterly reliant on our staff.

Dylan WIGHT: So students and staff. You have gone through the mix of your university council – nine women, six men and diversity. You have gone through all of that and all of that is great. How many student and staff representatives do you have on your university council?

Iain MARTIN: We have one student and two staff members. There is one elected staff member as per the council process and one elected staff member as chair of academic board.

Dylan WIGHT: One elected student and one elected staff, so we will go with two then. Given that your staff and your students are your two most important stakeholders – without them, universities do not exist – do you think that it is adequate that 13 per cent of your board is made up of your two largest stakeholders? I understand the skills matrix, I understand the skills that you need, I understand finance, governance and all of the mix that a board needs. But do you think that it is adequate that 13 per cent of your council is made up of your largest stakeholders?

Iain MARTIN: That is a question we have asked ourselves repeatedly: how you balance out the need to have that representation – and I will come back to representation in a minute – with the need to have an effective governing body. If you read the Cilento report, there is a comment at the back that there is an innate tension with more representation. We are going through a process – and I am not going to pre-empt the council conversation in the middle of May – around actually looking at if we change that. There is a paper that will go up to our council on 28 or 29 May asking us to seriously consider whether we move to two and two. But that is a decision for council; it is not a decision for me as one member of council to make on my own. We are actively looking at it.

But I do want to talk about representation, because representation brings you into the council, but once you are there you are no longer a representative; you carry the same duty and responsibility as every single council member whether or not you come from the staff. We have worked really hard to make sure that our students and staff members are full members of council. They are never excluded. In the seven years I have been Vice-Chancellor we have never not given them papers. They have been in all of the in-camera sessions, including those that review my end-of-year performance. As I say, it is not just saying, ‘Oh, there’s representation,’ it is then that transition into: you are now a full member of council. We need to get both of those bits right. We have done one and we are actively considering the other.

Dylan WIGHT: I completely agree with the notion that they need to be full members of council, and that would carry a fiduciary responsibility, I assume. I think most of us on this table have been through that on different committees and boards and whatever that we have sat on, and this is not specific to Deakin either. We heard a pile of evidence yesterday from different stakeholders about the inadequacy of having one representative staff member and one representative student and what that means in terms of the mix of council, how they get treated, whatever, but also the capacity to then go and communicate from council things that are happening that directly affect those cohorts – the actual capacity for two people to go and communicate that throughout the entire cohort of students and staff. Like I said, I understand the skills mix that boards need – we all do. But I would have thought being able to properly communicate the workings of the university and how they affect your two most important stakeholders would be just as important as making sure a whole other host of skills and mixes are represented.

Iain MARTIN: I think you could look at that as one of the duties, which is to bring information in and feed information appropriately back out, but I will put a Deakin context on this. We have 60,000 students across five domestic and two international campuses, an extraordinarily diverse student body. Only 40 per cent of them are school leavers. I am not saying this defensively, but we are very conscious that whether we have two student members or five student members we would have to have other mechanisms to engage with the wider community, because nobody can do it across an organisation at that scale, so we see this as part of layering up. Our council comes to a lot of events inside the university. They come to all of our graduations – not all of the council members, but there is council representation not just for going to the graduation ceremony but to talk to staff, students and parents afterwards to gather information. I am not defending what we are saying, but we recognise that no level of council student representation is going to provide all of that input. Council also does a very carefully – I am going to use the word ‘curated’, and it is not curated because we get the answer but curated in terms of diverse – group of students where for a significant chunk of time they come in and talk to the students about their experience. I think this is where you have to look at your council operations, how you put business together, together with the membership. I am not diminishing the importance of the conversation

about membership, but if it just becomes, 'You've solved the problem by having two student members,' I do not believe you have solved the problem.

The CHAIR: I might go to Roma, thank you.

Roma BRITNELL: Thanks, Iain – good to see you. Firstly, – like Dylan, I will be asking many of the universities this – can you outline the purpose of Deakin, the mission? What is your purpose?

Iain MARTIN: If you go back to our establishing Act, our Act is there to be amongst the country's most progressive universities to make a difference and provide an educational and research environment that serves the needs of our communities. I have paraphrased that slightly, but that is basically what it is about.

Roma BRITNELL: From a South-West Coast perspective, south-west Victoria perspective, servicing the community, what are the priorities that have been identified where you can meet those industry requirements and community requirements?

Iain MARTIN: If you look at what we do across south-west Victoria, and we are very conscious of this, the two areas in the education portfolio where the need is greatest and where we have done the most work is in the healthcare workforce and the education and environment workforce. If you look at what is happening across south-west Victoria, that is the largest piece.

Roma BRITNELL: And you are doing a very good job with the doctor course.

Iain MARTIN: One of the challenges that we have is, and this is not just talking about south-west Victoria, the current model that we have to support university student engagement does not work very well for regional communities that are very spread out without large population centres. We have had to do a lot of quite innovative work around Warrnambool and around south-west Victoria to make that work when the model is built around large-scale student teaching. As you know, we have made an explicit contribution that we will support education across south-west Victoria because there is nothing between Geelong and Mount Gambier if you take out our Warrnambool campus.

Roma BRITNELL: Is that because of the corporatisation that has taken place over the last 40 years, versus the academic centre that was the focal point, so that it has become such a business that things have actually made it too difficult to make a return on investment?

Iain MARTIN: I am going to be blunt here: if we were driven by money and a return on investment, we would not operate the Warrnambool campus. It loses the university \$10 million a year. I am not saying we are not worried about that; of course we are worried about it, but we do not believe we can fulfil Deakin's mission without investing resources from other parts of the university's activities in what happens in south-west Victoria, because we think that is part of the complex suite of things that we do. Every university is a complex web of financial cross-subsidies that we have to balance out between what we would like to do, long-term financial security and that core mission of what we do, so we are doing that. What changed Warrnambool was the move in 2010 or 2011 from a controlled-number system, where numbers were capped, to a demand-driven system. In the previous system Warrnambool was allocated 1200 or 1500 places a year. There were not enough places in the country, so all of those places were filled. When demand-driven came in, Warrnambool shrunk to 600 places a year and has pretty much stayed at 600 to 700 – sorry, not places; students studying a year – over that time. That has meant we have had to really sharpen our focus on how we best meet the needs of our local community, and we have continued to invest particularly in education and health.

Roma BRITNELL: Yesterday we heard how decisions were made at universities, not necessarily Deakin, that the students had imposed upon them, which changed their course capability and was not done with consultation, so looking from the governance perspective of more voices on the council of students or academics. The example that springs to mind is the marine science course where the boat was taken from the Warrnambool campus and moved to Geelong – I think that was actually before your time perhaps – and the need from a community perspective for veterinary science, for example, with a massive deficit of vets coming to the regions. That educational course deficit is a massive need that is just not being fulfilled, because it is not economic for Deakin to take it on. How do we achieve better as a state – this is probably more federal – to get those community needs met whilst we have got this corporatised, now demand-driven situation? We are

certainly not meeting the needs of the community. We are in child care; I congratulate you on starting that course next year, and the doctors, education – fantastic – but we have still got some really big problems.

Iain MARTIN: I think you ask a very good question, which is actually sitting at the heart of what the tertiary education commission may or may not do over the next few years given it was established last month, which is: how do they carve up a finite funding pool across the nation to balance out very many competing demands? I would be the first to agree, and I can assure you I get lots of communication around this, around the pressure around the veterinary science workforce in south-west Victoria. Veterinary science is not something that we could start on our own. It is one of the control programs, so there would need to be federal funding given to that. To get to critical mass is quite challenging, because you could bring 10 people in tomorrow but it would not work; you would need 80 to 100. We would love to have a better mechanism for how we do that, but I do not think that is actually a governance question; it is actually how, at a federal level, this is decided but also how federal and state ministers of education work together to say, ‘Actually there is a desperate need for vet education in south-west Victoria. How can we work together to deliver that in a sustainable, high-quality way?’

Roma BRITNELL: Good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you for being here. When I first looked at your submission the thing I found a little bit interesting was that you did not really support the premise of the inquiry – you did not really support the need for it. That was interesting. Do you acknowledge that there are some serious concerns about good governance in universities? We had some submissions directly about Deakin, which I will chat to you a little bit about as well. Do you see the need in what is happening right now?

Iain MARTIN: If that was the way that it was read, it was not intended.

Kim O’KEEFFE: It did not support the premise of the inquiry –

Iain MARTIN: I did not support the premise of the inquiry that governance is irrevocably and fundamentally broken, and I am talking from the site of Deakin. I know what we have done over the last eight years while I have been there. I know what has happened. The notions that nothing is happening, we are not self-reflective, we are not driven by a commitment to deliver high-quality education and research and some of the statements that we are only interested in money I will refute every day of the week. The recommendations from the expert council are incredibly sound and, as we have said, we endorse all of those utterly and completely.

Kim O’KEEFFE: On that, several submissions received by the committee allude to poor governance at Deakin. How do you respond to claims that staff and student representatives on council do not feel heard and they do not feel comfortable to speak up?

Iain MARTIN: I do not know where that came from, but that has not been my experience in seven years as a chancellor. I am going to read you a quote from our last council representative, and I am not breaking any confidences, because he put it on his own LinkedIn page spontaneously:

Coming into Council, it’s not always easy to fully understand how everything works. It takes time, guidance, and the support of those around you. I was fortunate to be given that space to learn, to ask questions, and to contribute openly. I felt heard, respected, and encouraged to bring forward the lived experiences of students in every possible way.

Kim O’KEEFFE: There are always two sides to every story, aren’t there.

Iain MARTIN: That is what I have heard.

Kim O’KEEFFE: This is the concern then, if they are not feeling comfortable to speak up yet they have made a submission. This is probably a concern and there is an opportunity, and maybe this is absolutely what needs to be happening if there is this clear division in that you see it completely oppositely yet we have a submission raising that concern.

Iain MARTIN: But that concern has not been raised.

Kim O’KEEFFE: But they are saying they do not feel comfortable to speak up.

Iain MARTIN: Every student is part of the internal self-reflection exercise, and every student is interviewed as part of the external review. I do not know where that has come from. There has not been a concern in my time on council around that. I cannot talk from other experience, but I am saying we actively seek that. One of the things we have played really strongly both for council and the whole university is: do I feel safe to speak up? We have talked about it openly in every town hall I have run. It is a specific question in our pulse culture survey that we run once a year. That is not the lived experience that we are hearing back from the 4500 staff who filled in the pulse survey in March–April of this year.

Kim O'KEEFFE: But do you see that as a concern and an opportunity though? Obviously someone has gone to the trouble to put that submission in. I am feeling that you are not accepting that, so obviously there are some submissions that need to be considered.

Iain MARTIN: I understand that that is the view that has been expressed. But what I can say is we have gone out of our way to make sure that there are opportunities for people to raise concerns, to talk openly, and if we have not got it right, we will continue to reflect and learn. But I can only go on what people are telling me, and I have not heard that. I have to say I did go back and talk to other people, when I saw that submission, to say, 'What have we missed?' They were surprised as well because that was not their reflection. I am not going to, obviously, breach confidences, but that was not their expression at all. In that same submission there was a reflection that executive has trampled on the academic governance of academic board and inflicted decisions. I went back to the chair of academic board and said, 'Has this ever happened in the time we've worked together?' The answer was no. I am not taking it lightly. I went away and asked the questions. All of this you triangulate. You get as much information from as many sources as you possibly can.

Kim O'KEEFFE: A common complaint was that it is not clear how decisions are made on council. How can Deakin improve its transparency around council decisions if the status quo is not sufficient?

Iain MARTIN: We publish a summary of every meeting that we have in council of what was done, what was decided and how it was decided. That has been there now for at least seven or eight years. I am not sure that everybody in the community is aware of that, and one of the lessons we have taken from that is: how do we make sure we publicise that more?

Kim O'KEEFFE: Do you see how we see that there is clear dysfunction when it comes to governance? I am still concerned about your perception of that. What do you want to see come out of this inquiry? What are some of the things you feel need to happen to improve?

Iain MARTIN: I think an unwavering commitment to the adoption of all of the principles in the expert council and an unwavering adoption of transparency around senior staff remuneration – I have published my detailed remuneration package from the first year I was in the role, long before any of this conversation came along. I have got no problem with that. I support the recommendation that we use the federal senior staff review tribunal to provide a benchmarking around vice-chancellors' remuneration to take that away from being the lightning rod that it is.

Kim O'KEEFFE: There are probably a lot of things. I probably should have said, 'What are the priorities?'

Iain MARTIN: I think in terms of the state there are things that we can do better: working around appointments, getting the chancellors and the minister to sit down at least once a year and say, 'What are your priorities? What are our priorities around council membership?' so that we establish that dialogue. A very practical measure that we would love to see adopted is opening up the Join a Public Board – Contribute to a Better Victoria website for university appointments. Because we are not regarded as a government department, we cannot use that. We use open EOIs, but we would much prefer to use that portal to get the widest possible – I think that would be a really easy win for us in terms of recommendations. I think also what would be really helpful would be looking at the way our annual reports are constructed. Are there other things that the state government would like to see in the university annual reports around what we do? We have had a really constructive engagement with the NTEU over the last little while around thinking about what all of this means. We have talked about some of the reporting, and one thing I would like to see is that at the moment we report our staff body on 31 December, because that is what is expected of us in the government report. That is not a date that reflects university activity. Let us work together around putting numbers out there that really work. I

think there is a lot that we can do that is very practical, but the single thing that is most important is embedding those expert council principles, because they are really sound.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Professor, for appearing and for the submission from your university. Acknowledging the work that the university is doing in this space already but notwithstanding that, picking up from Dylan's point just a bit earlier, I want to go to issues and concerns around the casualisation of the workforce. You would have heard yesterday, and we have heard an increasing amount of evidence from staff from various universities, by the way, when it comes to things around wage theft and insecure work, all linked to increasing casualisation across many universities. In the NTEU's submission they have done a survey as well, and they are saying that 69 per cent of university staff members disagree that senior management consider employees' psychosocial health as important to productivity; 82 per cent rank high or very high emotional exhaustion as an issue; 80 per cent agree that new policies and procedures aimed at cost cutting are constantly introduced – again, generally; and 71 per cent work more than their contracted hours. My question goes to – this is not in your submission, but you can take it on notice – what is the breakdown of how many staff are employed permanently versus casually or not ongoing at your university? Secondly, as part of that, why does Deakin determine to employ people that may be permanent as opposed to casual? What are the benefits? What are the takeaways?

Iain MARTIN: I would agree, and we have had conversations with the NTEU, that actually working towards a more secure, more substantively employed academic and professional staff body is a good outcome for the sector. In 2024 towards the tail end we instituted, after some conversations I had, a plan to reduce in a strategic way our reliance on particularly casual or sessional academic staff. I am not neglecting the professional staff in there, but many of our professional staff casuals are actually people coming in for very fixed tasks around open days or preparing a room for a public event – that is different. But in 2024 we employed over the course of the year 428 full-time equivalents of casual academic staff out of a total workforce of 2200. With the measures that we have put in place under the leadership of an appointment we have made, which is actually just focused on the academic experience of sessional academic staff, the 2025 figures are that that 428 had fallen to 128 FTE of casual academic staff. That is a 70 per cent reduction in one year. We would like to see that go down further.

There are challenges around how we get it down further. When you look at our casual staff, it is quite a diverse body, and there are some, particularly professional people like architects and others coming in to teach, who quite like the sessional model. But we think that is a really good start, and that has led to a 5 per cent increase in one year of substantively employed academic staff and an 8 per cent increase in those on more secure but not completely secure fixed-term employment. I actually believe in this: words are important, but deeds are far more important. I think those numbers say a commitment from Deakin's management and governance is we want to decasualise our academic workforce. We take it seriously. Those moves, because of differences in salary, were not driven by cost savings. In fact it probably cost us about \$10 million more in employee entitlement, but it was done because we believed it is the right thing to do.

Anthony CIANFLONE: We had submissions from NTEU and some of the others yesterday that suggested that the government and the committee should consider recommending a cap in terms of how many full-time staff and casuals can and should be employed. What would your view be in response to those suggestions?

Iain MARTIN: I think that any system needs to have a focus on this, and I come back to my comment about the annual report. I think we are losing the numbers in the way we report it, and I think there is something that we could be doing there. A cap is always interesting because one number does not necessarily fit every institution. You will have a different workforce pattern if you are a slightly more teaching-focused university than one with a very, very research-intensive focus. But I think it is actually understanding, looking at trends and patterns: why are we doing this, what is happening within those profiles and are we seeing change in the right direction? I understand why the NTEU is asking for the cap, and I think it does focus attention. But I am slightly nervous about the idea of one number, because there is quite a lot of institutional diversity out there.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Roma, just quickly, I will allow one question.

Roma BRITNELL: That was a very good segue, because I have seen lots of inquiries over the years where we look through one lens and then we put regulation in place that does not actually apply and takes away the nuances needed to accommodate different needs. On that, when you have got regional campuses, and I know this is probably more federal than state, I imagine there is more challenge attracting staff and sometimes casual staff might be the only way you can actually get the staffing needs met. I acknowledge what we have all heard about casualisation. What I am wondering is: given what you talked about with the different challenges for regional and the federal inquiry, did they have recommendations, which I probably should know but do not, that pertain specifically to the regions? Is there something from a governance perspective we should be thinking about so Victoria does protect or – that is probably not the right word – enhance or enable the regions to grow?

Iain MARTIN: I do not think in the federal report there was specific mention of regional. But I think where it comes in is that regional understanding and regional knowledge should be and is part of our skills matrix in terms of thinking about: how do we make sure that we are not only recruiting a narrow geographical perspective as well as meeting the other needs of that skills matrix? I think it is reflecting that perception and that expertise in understanding the needs of regional communities in the governing body.

Roma BRITNELL: Should we think about then, in this inquiry, and maybe it is a recommendation to our federal colleagues, the different funding needs or considerations rather than looking at one-size-fits-all? You talked about a change in 2010 or 2011: should we be revisiting that?

Iain MARTIN: I think we should continue to revisit that. In our submission to the accord process our university made very clear that the current funding model does not work for regional campuses and serious thought needs to be given to how that is done through different models. We continue to articulate that, Roma, because we are genuinely concerned that without that kind of support it is going to be difficult for states to continue to service what are important regional centres from an education and key workforce perspective.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We have run out of time. Thank you for answering our questions today.

Witness withdrew.