

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

Professor Alec Cameron, Vice-Chancellor and President, and

Professor Sherman Young, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education and Vice-President, RMIT 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.

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 for joining us today. We really appreciate it. In the interests of time, we are going to jump straight into questions. But firstly, maybe if you could introduce yourself and the role that you have.

Alec CAMERON: My name is Alec Cameron. I am the Vice-Chancellor of RMIT.

Sherman YOUNG: Sherman Young, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education at RMIT.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan, I might go to you first.

Dylan WIGHT: Cool. Thanks for appearing and thanks for the submission, which does state that RMIT is committed to implementing the principles of the Expert Council on University Governance. Has RMIT already put together a plan on how to do so? How is RMIT implementing those recommendations and what legislative change, if any, would RMIT like to see potentially as a result of this inquiry?

Alec CAMERON: I will take the first question, which is the first activity we have undertaken has been to assess our alignment with the recommendations of the Expert Council on University Governance. Our assessment at the moment is we believe we are about 80 per cent compliant with the principles and the implementation around those, that we have probably got about another 15 per cent that we are proceeding to implement and we have got about another 5 per cent where we are considering what our response would be. So it has been a structured process driven by the University council to ensure that we are understanding and implementing in the right manner the recommendations for RMIT.

I think with regard to legislative change, we are not looking for any legislative change in the sense that we believe that our current Act in the Victorian Parliament gives us freedom and flexibility to make changes to seek greater alignment, if necessary, with the expert council recommendations. Clearly the higher education sector is governed both by the state for the establishment of the Acts that constitute the universities as well as audit purposes. But with many of the policies and funding, of course, it is federal legislation that applies. So clearly there is an interest here as to whether it is federal legislation or state legislation which would apply. I appreciate this is a parliamentary inquiry of the Victorian Parliament, so obviously that would be the focus. But I am also conscious that as much as possible, we probably want to see alignment at a federal level so that all universities are meeting the same standards.

Dylan WIGHT: You might have to take this on notice: 80 per cent compliant – which recommendations are you not compliant with and which recommendations are you working to?

Alec CAMERON: Very happy once again, parliamentary secretary, to give you that information or take that question on notice and give you the detail subsequent to the meeting.

Dylan WIGHT: Cool. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Roma.

Roma BRITNELL: In 2024 RMIT had 20 consultancy agreements above \$10,000, resulting in \$5.6 million invested. RMIT engaged a consultancy group for strategic planning and consultation, with a contract of over half a million dollars. What were the outcomes of that agreement and why was such a contract necessary? I also note that you engaged Peter James Booth for an academic governance review for \$81,000. What was the outcome of that agreement, and why would you need to outsource an academic governance review and not be

able to do that internally? And how was the decision made regarding the need to use a consultancy firm? You can take a lot of that on notice as well.

Alec CAMERON: Okay. Certainly some of it I would like to. If I could just go through the questions that you had. Firstly, I suppose I would say that the process that we use to engage consultants is when we look at a project that we need to undertake or an activity that we want to undertake for which we believe we would benefit from either external opinion or opinion which requires expertise which the university would not regularly have available to us. Just to try and put it in context, we have actually –

Roma BRITNELL: Strategic planning and consultation?

Alec CAMERON: Indeed, yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Half a million dollars – and not have that capacity within the university itself for strategic planning?

Alec CAMERON: Well, once again, depending on where our resources are deployed and what the nature of that strategic engagement was, yes, we do use consultants in that area. I think to understand that in the scale of the university's expenditure, we had \$5.5 million, as you said, spent in that calendar year. I think the results we have just tabled at federal Parliament last week show that that was reduced by 20 per cent, so that is down to about \$4.5 million for the prior year, so it is on a downward trend. But that is in the context of, to be quite frank, \$1 billion in terms of our payroll. The largest, obviously, expenditure is spent on our existing staff, but we do need to complement that capability from time to time by use of consultants. I do not actually know the detail of the PJB consultancy, so I am –

Sherman YOUNG: I can speak to that, if you like.

Alec CAMERON: If you wish.

Sherman YOUNG: I will speak broadly to the academic reviews which we undertake as part of our business. It is normal practice at RMIT to have independent external reviewers undertake reviews of academic activities. For example, each year our college has an independent review. The independence is in many ways guaranteed by ensuring that it is an external academic that takes part and chairs that internal review. The Peter Booth –

Roma BRITNELL: An academic review versus a governance review –

Sherman YOUNG: The Peter Booth appointment was a review of academic governance that was undertaken by an external reviewer for exactly that independence required of that review. We can take it on notice and provide details of that –

Roma BRITNELL: Please.

Sherman YOUNG: but it was an independent review, and the independence was the external –

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, because the outcomes are part of that question.

Sherman YOUNG: The outcomes were absolutely around improving academic governance and how we do that at all levels of governance in the academic governance space.

Roma BRITNELL: Have you already got the outcomes of that available to you?

Sherman YOUNG: We can provide that.

Roma BRITNELL: Does that form part of your discussions and thinkings that this inquiry would benefit from knowledge around?

Sherman YOUNG: We could certainly provide that.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for being here today.

Sherman YOUNG: Thank you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We are just going by what we are hearing and what has been submitted, so do not take anything personally from me, but I am just interested. Obviously we need to have some feedback from you in regard to the several submissions to the committee which discussed concerns that the teaching and learning quality was declining at RMIT due to less financial investment for research, workforce planning decisions and generative AI. How is RMIT responding to these issues, and how are decisions made regarding funding for research and workforce planning? Is there consultation done with the staff? I am happy to go back and go through those again if you have lost that.

Alec CAMERON: Why don't I start off with that one, and I might defer partly to Sherman. I am now in my fifth year as Vice-Chancellor. I came in towards the end of COVID. At the time the university was running a deficit. We have clawed back ourselves now to being in a situation where we are making almost a sustainable surplus. I would argue for the university sector, universities really need to make about a 5 per cent margin annually, because we are not provided with separate funding for capital. If we are going to refresh and renew our infrastructure, our facilities and so forth and grow and expand our offerings, we need to make a modest surplus of 5 per cent per year. Now, we are not quite at that point but we almost are, and that is a big turnaround from several years ago. We have done that partly through, to be quite frank – there is probably a sense that we have constrained our budgets in the last few years on expenditure on capital and facilities as to improve our financial position. But we are now in a position where we are addressing those issues, particularly with regard to, as I said, the estate and facilities.

Sherman YOUNG: I can speak briefly to the learning and teaching quality aspect of the question, and certainly we take the learning and teaching quality very seriously. As the committee would understand, it has many, many dimensions. It includes the capability and the delivery of the actual learning and teaching, but – to Alec's point – it also speaks to the facilities and resources that we provide in order to enable that particular activity. We run very rigorous and constant surveys with our students, and we call them in our university the course experience surveys. Every semester we have course experience surveys across all of our courses, which give us the data around how students are experiencing their learning and teaching. We also, importantly, get the qualitative comments out of those surveys, so we dig deeply into the qualitative data as well. Very much we take a data-driven approach to our assessment of the learning and teaching quality. The data shows that there is no discernible decline, but it has highlighted some challenges with resources, which we understand. There has been a significant amount of work done recently to uplift the quality of our learning resources, and that is reflective in some of the more recent data that we have seen, where we have actually improved our scores in learning resources.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for that. Some of them were very specific around cutting back funding for research and workforce planning. That would have an impact on student outcomes.

Sherman YOUNG: Not specifically, because the learning and teaching space is quite separate from the research space. My responsibility in the education space sits within the education of students. Research more speaks to research facilities for ARC grants, category 2 grants et cetera, et cetera, which sit alongside the work that we do in education. The challenging thing is that it is often the same person who does research and teaching, so there is often a conflation, if you like, between the research activity and the resources dedicated to that and the education activity and the resources devoted to that. We are committed to world-class research, which is very much applied at RMIT University, but the learning and teaching quality conversation sits alongside the research conversation, if that makes sense.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing here, professors. As an RMIT alumnus myself, I am pleased to have you here. In saying that, I studied social sciences. I am not sure if he is still there, but Professor Rob Watts was, and probably still is, a very theatrical lecturer.

Sherman YOUNG: Rob is a very engaging character, and we have had many vibrant conversations.

Anthony CIANFLONE: He certainly is. One of the things he very much impressed on me was the importance of critical thinking through the social sciences, and I guess this inquiry very much goes to the heart of that philosophy. My first question really is a basic one: do you believe there is a crisis in governance and culture across the university sector and RMIT?

Alec CAMERON: Well, let me answer. I do not really want to speak about other universities. Clearly there have been some governance challenges at some universities, which have pulled down the reputation of the sector. I do not think that applies to the majority of universities or certainly all universities, and I certainly do not believe it applies to RMIT. Is there a social licence issue at the moment? Yes, but I would say that is due to the actions of a small number of universities which have been on the front pages of the newspapers in recent times. At the same time, I look around the sector in Victoria and I would say we would be very satisfied with the level of governance that is being provided to Victorian universities that are not on the front pages. Similarly at RMIT, I can say with firsthand knowledge, having worked at four universities now where I have had direct engagement with university councils, we have excellent processes and systems around governance, which was of course confirmed by our TEQSA reaccreditation at the end of last year, where we achieved the maximum seven-year reaccreditation without any qualifications. So we believe, by my assessment and certainly by TEQSA's assessment, that we are in good shape.

Anthony CIANFLONE: We heard yesterday from the NTEU, who gave evidence that around 86 per cent or 85 per cent of vice-chancellors who appeared at the federal inquiry agreed with that general sentiment that there is broadly a crisis across the sector, according to their evidence that they produced. I acknowledge that generally –

Alec CAMERON: I suppose what I am saying is that I believe there is a crisis, but I think it is a crisis of perception based on the actions of a small number of universities rather than actually pointing and saying that we have a problem across the sector. I know you had Iain Martin earlier today, and Iain's common refrain is that if there is a perception of a problem, there is a problem. Right? So I appreciate at the same time we do have a problem because we have a perception problem.

Anthony CIANFLONE: If we have a problem or a perception problem, whether it is mechanical or perceived, I guess my other question then is around: why has RMIT not recommended any legislative changes in this space? I also note – and again, I do not expect you to answer for the other universities – we have not received a single submission thus far, that we have heard of, from Deakin, Fed Uni, La Trobe Uni, Uni Melb or from any of the unis, including RMIT, noting any need for legislative change. Why do you think that is, given that we have a general agreement there is a crisis, or a perception of a crisis at least?

Alec CAMERON: We can look at the recommendations of the Expert Council on University Governance and the changes that are proposed there, and I would argue that all of those can be achieved within our existing legislation. Our existing legislation is prescriptive in areas, but it still gives us room for movement, particularly in terms of appointments of council members and constitutions and so forth. As I said, we do not perceive a change that requires legislative change. There is an ability for us to act within the constraints of our legislation and move in areas that have been identified by the expert council.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I take your point, but I find it interesting that institutions that are built on evidence and research have not thought to put forward legislative change, even though the overwhelming evidence and research we have been hearing and submissions we have been receiving are to the contrary of that – whether it is a staffer or a student; whether it is around casualisation or not being heard through existing governance channels; whether it is the voice of students; whether general decisions are being made, in the view of many students and staff, and they are not engaged, consulted or involved until decisions are implemented. I just find it interesting and noteworthy that that research and evidence really do not appear to be considered and brought into the submissions and the evidence that we are hearing from the university sector per se.

Alec CAMERON: I think I would say in response that, as I said, the legislation in terms of the Acts of Parliament is reasonably common across most universities. Some universities have got themselves into trouble with those regulations but the vast majority have not, so I am not sure the problem is one of legislation and structure. I think the problem in some institutions may be to do with culture, which is very difficult to legislate for.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that answer, and I think that is a fair answer. I suppose it is for us to consider now with recommendations how we balance that act of having autonomy over your organisation but also getting the governance right to ensure public good.

Alec CAMERON: Yes. I made the comment earlier that we are still considering changes that we can make. We are not at the end of that process yet, working with the council. We would be very interested to hear the recommendations of this panel with regard to areas that they think we should be leaning into.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I do not know the answer to this, but you will be able to give me some insight. How does having a VET training part of your university affect your governance or affect the way you make decisions?

Alec CAMERON: It gives us a broader charter than other universities. It gives us a fantastic opportunity in terms of leaning into government priorities at the moment at the federal level, which are about harmonisation between vocational education and higher education. The federal government is very concerned to increase the percentage of students going on to post-school education in both VET and higher education, with an ambition by 2050 of getting 80 per cent of students into post-school education. Our experience at RMIT is that the best pathway to get students who are less prepared to progress directly into higher education is through vocational education pathways. We have a fantastic success rate with regard to students who enter vocational education, I suppose I would say in most cases not ready or prepared to go directly into higher education, and 50 per cent of those students actually articulate into higher education at RMIT, so that is a great story.

Now, do not get me wrong: it is important that we produce graduates from vocational education as well. We need people in traditional trades and a whole variety of other areas who need to go into the workforce. I suppose I would say our articulation pathways through vocational education, particularly for underrepresented groups, particularly for First Nations students, are very successful. The great result we are able to achieve is that students who come via those pathways perform at least equally as well as the students who go directly into higher education, so in some sense we are able to span that bridge for those students. What does that mean in terms of governance? Our deputy chancellor actually is the former CEO of one of the TAFE institutes in Victoria, so we have clearly got that knowledge represented on our governing body to make sure that we are aware of that. RMIT sees itself very much as an externally oriented institution. It sees itself as existing to serve this state and the community in this state. It is not about being internally referenced. It is not trying to, in some sense, be self-serving. It is: how are we best engaged in meeting the challenges that the government and industry and employers have in Victoria? And having vocational education as another string to our bow is very powerful for us in terms of engaging with employers and working on industry solutions and working on workforce planning and development with employers, including government. From my point of view – I mean, I have not previously been at a dual-sector university before RMIT – it is a very powerful way of us engaging with government and business to address real workforce development issues going forward.

The CHAIR: So in decision-making, you have got that TAFE voice there with some experience, but the TAFE sector is probably a little bit more department heavy, I suppose. I am thinking about a TAFE that might be just an independent TAFE. They would have a lot more engagement or governance from the department or from the state government. But at a university level, you are more autonomous. So I am just wondering how those decisions get made at a TAFE level, where you need to really be clear in the decisions that you are making to meet those obligations.

Alec CAMERON: TAFE provision around Australia varies massively by state. Right? You know, in New South Wales there is one TAFE which does the whole state. In Victoria we have actually got a situation where, I am pretty confident in saying, we have got 12 independent TAFEs. They are part of a TAFE system which reports to the state Minister for Skills and TAFE. We have then got four dual-sector universities, which is also unusual in the Australian context. There are only two dual-sector universities outside of Victoria. So is there a different level of governance? It is true that the dual-sector universities have a bit more autonomy than do the standalone TAFEs. They have got more of a direct reporting line to the minister, whereas the universities go through their governing bodies, and it is the Act that establishes them. But at the same time, we do work in close cooperation with the minister. We do see ourselves as part of the Victorian solution with regard to TAFEs – the four dual-sectors working alongside the eight independent TAFEs. And I suppose I would say we would

be seeing ourselves as very much aligned with making sure that our role in that space is to create the future workforce which Victoria is going to need to be successful and prosperous.

The CHAIR: We have heard a lot about how universities have become very corporatised and chase corporate-type support. You would need to do that at a TAFE level at some point, I suppose, with industry. It might be a partnership. Is there a difference in the way you disclose that then as a partnership at a TAFE level or whether you have got research projects in a partnership with someone else? Do you disclose it differently?

Alec CAMERON: I do not think we disclose it differently. I mean, the reality is the TAFE sector is more defined by work packages, which are agreed in terms of what needs to be covered by an educational program. We need to work with the industry bodies to arrive at those. In terms of delivering those work packages, it is a more constrained environment because it is more prescriptive in terms of the definition of what has to be in the program and what has to be assessed and so forth. So whilst we have autonomy as a university, at the same time we need to work within the TAFE sector requirements, which as I said, comes down to work packages which are agreed with employers and with industry groups. We see that as a benefit for our university operations – the fact that we have those direct communications with employers and with industry groups – because it does help our degree program, let me say, in specification and development and delivery.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Alec CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any other questions?

Kim O'KEEFFE: I do not know if I have missed it, but did we actually discuss additional student and staff representation on the council?

Alec CAMERON: No, we did not. I would say that is something under consideration for us.

The CHAIR: Do you support that or you –

Alec CAMERON: Look, we have been having conversations with our students in particular. At the moment we have got two elected members on council in terms of staff, we have got the chair of the academic board and we have got another directly elected staff member. Student members have only got one at the moment. We have a very satisfactory model for us at the moment, which is that we have a convention but not a rule, which is that the outgoing president of the students union tends to nominate for election to be the elected student member on council and for the last four years, since I have been at the university, has been successful in that election. The term for the student rep is only one year. What we get is actually a very articulate student, because they have spent a year as chair of the students union, and I must say we have a very engaged student union. We get a higher level of voter participation than any other university in the country in terms of our students union, so I think that is a fantastic story. Then, as I said, via almost convention rather than rule, that person serves a year on council and is very informed and very articulate. Once again, the combination of an informed, articulate student and our chancellor Peggy O'Neal, who I would describe as very inclusive in terms of managing a committee meeting and making sure all voices are heard, means that we hear those voices directly.

At the same time, that is not the end of it in terms of student consultation. Twice every semester the chancellor holds a lunch for student leaders. This was held on Monday. Student leaders comprised about 30 or 40 people within that group, and it was all about listening to the student voice and getting them to identify the issues that they are facing. Similarly, of course, as I said, we have a students union that I meet with regularly. To be honest, during the annual cycle, as we have a president of the student union every year – what was their manifesto, what are the things they want to achieve, how do we work with them to achieve those outcomes for the university? We have very constructive relations. It is not straightforward for us to move to two student members because, well, we have got one person at the moment who is very capable and very qualified because of their experience. If we were to have two, we would probably be looking perhaps for a vocational education rep because we do not have that at the moment. Of course how someone who is doing a vocational education program, which is going to be shorter in duration, will be able to fit that into their studies and other arrangements is not clear. That is why it is under consultation. But we are certainly open to the idea. And I met with Sarah Roberts last week from the NTEU, who I have a high regard for, and we were quite open about discussing these topics.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Your arrangement sounds good.

Alec CAMERON: It works for us.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We have not heard it quite as good as that. We heard a lot of, 'Having only one representative, they've had a lot of pressure and a lot of responsibility,' and also not having the opportunity to be more engaged in the council conversation and decision-making and then the transparency of them being part of that. So it is good to hear that is working for you.

Alec CAMERON: Once again, our council does not discriminate between internal members and external members. All members are at all meetings.

Anthony CIANFLONE: But would you say that is sufficient, because you guys are the biggest dual sector university in Australia – 100,000 students? Technically at the moment formally, we have got one person on the school council.

Alec CAMERON: We have got one person on the council, but as I said, there is lots of consultation, and the chancellor is very strong on this.

Sherman YOUNG: I am happy to add that we also have eight students on our academic board, so it is very diverse. There are six elected members and two ex-officio members on the academic board, and so that is a very consultative voice. We actually have a very – I will not say complex – sophisticated student voice framework, which we are happy to share with the committee, which has a whole range of engagements to ensure that we actually do listen to students and respond.

Alec CAMERON: Just picking up on some comments, because of course we have been sitting in the room for the last half hour, issues with regard to, say, dissolving programs or whatever, they are done at academic board. That is not really a council-level decision. So that is where students and staff are driving those discussions and decisions.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I just want to say as well on the record, Chair, if you do not mind, thank you generally to RMIT for the work they do. You are really in the northern suburbs, predominantly in Brunswick, just on the boundary of my electorate, Melbourne CBD and Bundoora. So thank you for the work that you do.

Alec CAMERON: No, thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it. Thanks all. We will end the broadcast.

Witnesses withdrew.