

# 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 Simon Ridings, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer, Swinburne University of Technology.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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 so much for joining us today. In the interests of time we are going to jump straight into some questions, but can you just maybe give us your name and title and we can jump into it?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Good afternoon. My name is Simon Ridings, and I am the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Swinburne University.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Simon. Are you interim acting vice-chancellor, though, at the moment?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I am the interim vice-chancellor from 4 July. A lot of the work we are talking about this afternoon I will have carriage of quite soon, so I hope I can help you out with that.

**The CHAIR:** Just to confirm: the vice-chancellor is on leave at the moment?

**Simon RIDINGS:** The vice-chancellor was not available this afternoon.

**The CHAIR:** She was not available to come. No worries. Thank you. Kim, I might head to you first.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you, Professor, for being here. Your submission states that Swinburne supports the principles from the Expert Council on University Governance. How is Swinburne planning to implement the principles, and are there specific actions it is considering taking?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Thank you. It certainly does, beyond just actions. We have got a very developed program of work that we are doing in conjunction, I should say, with the NTEU, who I think yesterday mentioned the fact that we have got a very collaborative approach to the way in which we are going about this work. Swinburne is probably well known to you and many as being an early adopter of a lot of these principles in the first place; we are a strong advocate, as you said. I should probably say straight up that as part of the work you will not be surprised that from our perspective staff and student and community voice in this work is of paramount importance not just in progressing this work but in dealing with a range of challenges that the universities are working on. The program of work of course began with a gap analysis. The gap analysis is well progressed, and we are at a stage now where we have got multiple streams of work in several council committees. That work is being progressed really deliberately in conjunction with the NTEU. In the next council meeting we have got a range of developments that we will be working on together. Some of the parts of that collaborative work align very closely with the ECUG principles. The 12 streams we have formed up together are in relation to council composition, representation, staff and student voice mechanisms, transparency and accessibility of governance, governance participation and inclusion, governance independence and integrity, skills diversity and appointment transparency, workforce oversight and accountability, governance oversight of material compliance issues, change management and consultation, academic governance interface and structured governance reporting. All of these things are being formed up with deliberate new mechanisms for ongoing engagement with representative bodies.

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

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair; and thank you, Professor, for appearing and for Swinburne's submission as well. My question goes to transparency and accountability. Of course you would be aware, notwithstanding the comments yesterday from the NTEU, that there have also been several submissions to the contrary that have raised concerns about transparency and accountability at Swinburne. Obviously there have been some issues over recent years as well – \$2.85 million in wage theft has been identified, which I know the

uni is rectifying, which impacted casual workers. There was a data breach a few years ago as well that impacted staff and students. Going to transparency and accountability, as a result of those incidents and moving forward, following on from the expert panel's recommendations, how is Swinburne making progress to mitigate such issues into the future?

**Simon RIDINGS:** The underpayment challenge for Swinburne was typical of many other universities. Like most others we had a very extensive program of work in the first instance that was remediating the underpayments. One of the things though, that are probably the most important to reflect upon is that that now is a matter that remains a continuously reported and monitored piece of work for our audit and risk committee. That is not just one that we have dealt with, it is one that is front of mind now continuously.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** But in terms of actual specific actions going forward, especially off the back of the expert panel's recommendations, how will future instances be better identified and mitigated going forward? Are there improvements in the governance process? Are there measures and steps being taken to improve representation through the university council and the relevant subcommittees throughout the university to have a better voice from students and staff, potentially to help earlier identify such issues and concerns?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Yes, there are. I think maybe there are two questions in that. One, in relation to the underpayments specifically, I might just take on notice and take the opportunity to provide more information, because we have an extremely detailed response to that, and as I said, it is a continuous item now for our audit and risk committee. In relation to staff and student voice, I am happy to talk more about that, because as I said from the outset, at Swinburne we are very on board with the need to find more ways to bring more representation in sooner rather than later. I could talk more about our philosophy of that, if you would like me to, or would you like to ask?

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** You are welcome to elaborate on that.

**The CHAIR:** Can you provide that to us in writing?

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** You can provide it on notice.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Better representation – we might be interested just to have a snapshot of that.

**Simon RIDINGS:** That was a bit more commentary on the representation? One of the things that I think at Swinburne we were alert to very early was that when we look at how staff and students participate in our various forums there is a question around what the numerical representation actually is. I am happy to talk more about that this afternoon as well, because we are very proactively looking at how it is we change that representation. One of the things that we were very alert to early was that, while the number of representatives is important, the actual representation through numbers itself is not sufficient if you do not actually create the opportunity for that voice to be heard and for those representatives to participate fully. One of the things that we did very early on was ensure that our staff and student reps on council were full members of council. I think one of the regular bits of feedback that you hear is that for many staff and students the experience of being on council is not always easy and does not always feel complete. At Swinburne even in advance of some of these discussions we are now having it has been deliberately the case that staff and students are full members. It is the case that they do participate in all deliberations. We have found ways for them to participate in confidential sessions as well. As much as we are keen to see the conversation progress about what the numerical representation is, we have also been very deliberate in making sure that the experience for them is appropriate and that their voices are actually meaningful and heard.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** The last question I had was: why has Swinburne, as far as I can see in the submission, not recommended any need for legislation change in this space?

**Simon RIDINGS:** My understanding is that from a Swinburne perspective – I shall be cautious with this, but I do believe that we possibly have the capacity to expand membership as it presently stands.

**The CHAIR:** Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Can you please explain the process for individuals to make a formal complaint to the university about a staff member or an executive? How does Swinburne ensure that it provides security to the

individual bringing the complaint? Do you have a whistleblower policy that is well understood? We have seen there is not enough transparency around students and lecturers feeling like they can participate in critiquing what is going on. How is that now looking?

**Simon RIDINGS:** There has been a lot of reform of our complaints processes. Again, I probably will not try and describe the range of different complaints from students and staff, but I might take it on notice and make sure that we do forward –

**Roma BRITNELL:** The process to address it, though, not the actual complaints – what is your process, and has that been reformed?

**Simon RIDINGS:** It is a very detailed process. Like I said, I might take it on notice and forward that to you. It has been a recent body of work. Complaints processes across all universities, including at Swinburne, have been an area where there has been a lot of recent work completed.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Is that because the culture that existed prior to this exposure that we have seen with *Four Corners* and articles in the paper was not a listening culture? Has there been a recognition that universities perhaps needed to open their ears more? Is that why you have gone through this change that is so detailed?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I would not say that is the reason for doing it, but nor would I say that that has not been a problem. I think the fact that that work has been ongoing in universities is very timely. One of the things which sometimes we remind ourselves of is you can do all the work that I am talking about, and I can provide you with all of the actual formal processes that we do have, but maybe what I would acknowledge – that I think is implied in your question – is that you actually need to do more than just change the processes and change those technicalities. So yes, there is necessarily, in conjunction with that, the identification of work that we actually do need to do and we are doing on culture as well as just those procedural things.

**Roma BRITNELL:** For today can you answer my question about the whistleblower policy? I would have thought a university would always have had a whistleblower policy. Is that correct?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I believe we do, and yes, I can get that forwarded.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just build onto that one before we go to Dylan. When you say there is work being undertaken, what does that mean? Do you review the process? Are you investigating the process? What is it that –

**Simon RIDINGS:** The policies and procedures have been recently reviewed, but what I would also say is that even this afternoon one of the activities that are going on at Swinburne is a senior staff forum that is specifically about our culture roadmap for the university. Those two things need to be done in conjunction.

**The CHAIR:** But if the process is being reviewed, and you think you can probably do better, this is what this whole inquiry is around: how we improve the governance. In terms of complaints, we are hearing that people do not have the confidence to speak up. They are worried about their job security. They are worried about what it might mean for them at the university. When you say you have got a staff forum, how robust is that? Do people feel that they cannot share their experiences because of that fear?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I do know that across the sector there has been widespread feedback that even as much as you can – as we have been doing – reform those processes and procedures, they still will not serve their purpose properly unless you do create the right culture. One of the things that I think even the expert council made really clear at the outset of its report was that there are a range of things which you can deal with, but that culture change is necessary to be achieving almost the entirety of the other specific principles.

**The CHAIR:** Would you agree that there is, then, a governance problem we have across the university sector broadly.

**Simon RIDINGS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, Chair. Anthony stole my underpayment question, so my question is actually pretty nice. According to the NTEU, Swinburne are able to maintain a higher level of ongoing staff compared to some other universities in Victoria. We have heard from a range of universities this morning, and a couple of them seemed genuinely disinterested in having more ongoing staff and also refuted some of the numbers and what the definition of 'insecure work' is. How are Swinburne able to do that compared to some other universities?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I am not sure what challenges were put to you by the universities in relation to why they could not have that higher number of full-time staff.

**Dylan WIGHT:** I think it was about research grants. Some of it was about teaching volume. There was a range.

**Simon RIDINGS:** We do recognise that casualisation is not a recent problem, but it has been a building problem over several decades. We do recognise that we are at a moment in time when casualisation is creating not just concerns for the NTEU but for individual staff in relation to its consequences for insecure work. The original question in relation to underpayments, for instance, reflects the fact that casualisation is creating challenges. We have had a very determined look at how it is that we convert, wherever we can, staff into ongoing roles. We have been very successful in the last year or two in creating a much larger group of education specialists within the university. We are very committed to looking at casualisation in collaboration with the NTEU to find ways in which we can wind that back.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Sorry, is there in your agreement – I assume there is – a casual conversion clause? You might have to take that on notice. I could probably look it up myself.

**Simon RIDINGS:** The work to create the education specialist roles, the number and the rate, was absolutely a very important part of the last enterprise agreement. The other point that I would probably mention in conjunction with that is that one of the things that we are trying to keep in frame with that casualisation discussion is the intensification of work.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes. What are the benefits that you see for the university to favour an ongoing employment model?

**Simon RIDINGS:** From a staff perspective?

**Dylan WIGHT:** Well, from a staff and an institution perspective.

**Simon RIDINGS:** It enables not just the university to invest in staff in a more committed, long-term way; you get the benefits of much greater staff commitment to the university and to their students. So it creates a more stable university community.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Why did we get there then, as a university? It is very clear – the benefits and the casualisation. What forced it that way, to more casualised staff than secure staff?

**Simon RIDINGS:** How did we get to the high rates of casualisation in the sector?

**Roma BRITNELL:** And why are you suddenly now going, 'Yes, we recognise that it's wrong and we've got to get back to the other way.' How did this journey occur?

**Simon RIDINGS:** The journey happened over several decades, and it was part and parcel of the fact that the actual massification of higher education meant that we did have a couple of decades where we had a really rapid increase in student numbers. One of the consequences of that really rapid ramping up of student numbers was that universities expanded their capacity to deliver.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Which decades?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Actually, through my decades as a young academic, through the late 1990s, early 2000s, we had a very rapid increase in the number of students in most of our courses. That is where you discovered that you had quite a large sessional staff cohort being brought on year after year after year, because that is how you manage the growing numbers in the classes with the academics that you had previously.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Why does increased growth result in insecure work, though, versus long-term employment? What is the relationship with never adapting to long-term contracts?

**Simon RIDINGS:** The way it happened over time was universities increased their capacity speedily in that sort of 10- to 20-year period by rapidly bringing on sessional staff to deal with the growth they had in student numbers.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Was it anything to do with the change from academic leadership to more business influences that had been brought in to add expertise to councils?

**Simon RIDINGS:** No, I do not think that I would characterise it that way, because to the extent that there has been a discussion more recently about the composition of councils and the ethos of councils, where the rapid casualisation really started predates all of that. As I said, if you go back to the period when I was a young academic myself, one of the things that I saw firsthand was that I taught in a number of programs over a number of years which grew very, very speedily. So a very large part of my task as a younger academic over that time became overseeing an increasingly large cohort of sessional staff members who taught into those programs with us. We have reached the point in recent years where the kinds of concerns that you are asking about have come to the fore.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Just to clarify that, there was a choice by the sector 25 years ago or thereabouts, when student demand increased and course demand increased. There were a lot more students going to university, and there was a huge uplift in that. There was a choice by the sector to move to a casual employment model to deal with that growth rather than to create more full-time careers in the sector, yes?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I probably would not reflect back on it as being a deliberate choice, but one of the things that I would reflect upon is that as a young academic, for people like me, having the opportunity to be able to get into academia initially by being a part-time or sessional tutor was very attractive. But over time, in my own experience, I did wind up then becoming a fixed-term contract academic. But for me, it was a very meaningful period when there actually was a change in the award that reflected that. Even for those academic staff who were not sessionals but were on fixed-term contracts that had been rolling over, there was an expectation that more of those should be converted to ongoing work. I completely realise the value of that. I was actually one of the very early ones.

**The CHAIR:** Some of the themes that we are having coming through this inquiry are better transparency in the governance, having some confidence in decision-making and some more, I suppose, sharing of information at a more public level. Some universities have told us today that they are starting to publish either minutes, communiqués or summaries after a council meeting. Is Swinburne doing any of that?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Definitely Swinburne is watching developments on that and trying to figure out the way to be able to move towards disclosing more of those.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Simon RIDINGS:** My understanding is that there actually are some developments at the national level in relation to what could be some of the conventions and templates that might be adopted more widely. The answer is yes, but we are looking for the best way in which to do it.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Some universities are publishing their skills matrixes for council members. Is Swinburne doing that?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I will take it on notice. One of the things which I do have in front of me – but I will not take up your time while I find it – is that we have a very, very comprehensive mapping against the ECUG principles, all of those disclosures and all of those new ways of working around all those subcommittees. That is moving towards maximum transparency and maximum disclosure.

**The CHAIR:** But it would not be publicly available to me to go and look for?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I will take that on notice. Whether they are this afternoon, I will not propose. But definitely that is the thrust of the work.

**The CHAIR:** So what is the appointment process for council members then at Swinburne? You have a student rep and then –

**Simon RIDINGS:** We have appointed members. We have elected members. Probably of most interest, we have two elected members who are our staff and student reps. One of the things which we probably should recognise is that, yes, we are very enthusiastically looking at how it is that we would expand the council to enable more representation from staff and students.

**The CHAIR:** Then when you are looking at the other appointment process for council members, you are obviously using a skills matrix, which you will check whether it is publicly available. But have you got an overlay to ensure diversity in that mix? Could you maybe expand on what your council might look like now? I am assuming you might have someone who has a finance, lawyer, I do not know, background. How do you come up with a mix?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I do believe there is a skills matrix now and there are regular reviews of council composition. Again, could I say sorry, but I will take on notice to provide much more detail on that.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I suppose I feel sorry to ask you, Simon, because I believe it is really not for you to be answering this. It is really the Vice-Chancellor. Obviously there have been headlines in the paper around Swinburne's conduct and the Chancellor's conduct. It has been reported that he had approached the skills minister to have a band increase, which would result in his remuneration being increased as well. Do you know whether the council approved that type of meeting to happen, or whether it is something that he would have just done on his own?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I am not familiar with the details of that.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Roma BRITNELL:** We can take it on notice, though.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Would you be able to come back with maybe a bit of information about that? And then the other one is, I suppose, around the students being able to raise complaints or student voice. We have heard that students do not feel very comfortable a lot of the time to raise complaints or raise issues. And maybe that one person that might be sitting on a council is very intimidated to do that. Have you got mechanisms in place to ensure those voices are being heard?

**Simon RIDINGS:** Yes. For both the staff and student reps on council, we have been very proactive in actually providing bespoke training for them when they do join the council, including even simple things like just making sure that they are introduced to all other council members so that they actually do have the relationships being built as well so that they are not just there as the representative. Like I said, they are there deliberately as a full member and we make sure that there is actually a process to help them be that and experience that.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Are there any other questions?

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** I have got a question. We have also heard about the importance of diversity on council boards and through university governance structures. I understand Swinburne has made some strides in this space around First Nations representations, multicultural and even female representation as well. Could you talk about what you guys are doing in that space?

**Simon RIDINGS:** What I can say is that we do have two First Nations representatives on our council presently. One of the things though that is going to be an integral part of that discussion which we are having right now about the potential to increase the number of representatives, is again, we will be looking at that as part of that explicitly as well.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** And multicultural representations will be a factor in that as well, I presume, and hope?

**Simon RIDINGS:** I believe as part of our skills matrix process but also the way in which we reflect on the appointments process, I could not tell you explicitly how multiculturalism per se is captured in that process, but I am happy to find and provide.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** We heard some good evidence yesterday from George Lekakis, who has been a leading voice in this space, former chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission and of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. I think his evidence was very clear around: all appointments should be based on merit, first and foremost, of course and suitability for the position, but there should be a lens which he strongly advocates for across the university sector to have an eye on that diversity as part of that merit process as well. So that is perhaps something the university can consider as part of that process.

**Simon RIDINGS:** Certainly.

**The CHAIR:** We thank you very much for your time today. We really appreciate you answering our questions as well, so thank you very much. We will now end the broadcast.

**Witness withdrew.**