

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance

Melbourne – Friday 5 June 2026

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Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

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WITNESS

Professor John Pollaers OAM, Convenor, University Chancellors Council.

The CHAIR: I will start today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the various lands on which we are all gathered today. I acknowledge that in this virtual environment, we are gathered on many different lands, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

I declare open this hearing of the Economy and Infrastructure Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance. All mobile telephones, if you can, are to be turned to silent.

I welcome Professor John Pollaers. All evidence taken today by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore, you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by parliamentary privilege.

This is a confidential hearing, and matters within this hearing should not be discussed outside the hearing. Any documents you provide to us are only for the use of the committee and will not be released publicly.

All evidence given today, though, is being recorded by Hansard. Although this hearing is closed to the public, the transcript of today's hearing will be made public and published on the committee's website. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Thank you so much, John. We really appreciate your time today. We thought we might give you a few minutes to make some opening remarks if you would like, and then we will head into some questions. Over to you.

John POLLAERS: Thanks very much, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to appear. Can I add my acknowledgement to country and appreciation for elders past and present. I also wanted to thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Unfortunately, due to a reasonably serious personal health matter, I was unable to be with you on the public days. But I am very grateful the secretariat were able to set something up for us.

In meeting with you today, I bring two perspectives: firstly, that of Convenor of the University Chancellors Council, where over the last two years we have led a very rigorous reform process – not easy, and challenging on many occasions, but one that we have been pressing forward with – and then of course that of Chancellor of Swinburne University. Over recent years, the university governance has been examined through many lenses: the universities accord, the Senate inquiry, the university governance and the work on expert council and university governance. We have had the survey into university racism. We have had the antisemitism report card. There has been a very, very large focus on governance throughout the sector. I think where we are right now is at an unprecedented level of alignment across chancellors and vice-chancellors around the seriousness and the importance of implementing the Expert Council panel principles. It is significant for many reasons in that no longer is it possible for anybody to say that the issues are not understood – they are. They have been raised and re-raised on many occasions. But now we have a consistent national framework and pathway to actually putting these things in place.

Probably the most concerning feedback that I think we have had coming out of the Senate inquiry was the notion that in many instances, while governance is good on paper, it does not and is not reflected in the lived experience of our staff, our students or our stakeholders. That is a matter of big concern and the one that we are very serious about resolving. The overall position therefore of chancellors nationally is that we now want to go forward and rigorously apply those principles. I am happy through the course of today to talk to you about exactly how that is being approached, what mechanisms are being put in place and why I am so determined that this has to be applied across every university. But we think that TEQSA are the right authority to do that, particularly as the government moves to strengthen their powers and particularly as they have the ability to link the quality of response and compliance against those principles, to further inquiry and even to reregistration questions in time. Therefore we are trying to avoid a situation where parallel measures are put in place that start to deflect and confuse. There is a proposal I want to put to you today about how we can make it clearer and stronger in the Victorian context. So I think when you hear concerns over legislation, it is really that part that is most of worry.

We have brought the chancellors together across Victoria in recent months with a very deliberate view to start to understand where the areas are for reform potential, and we have done that by meeting with the NTEU, meeting with CAPA and meeting with the NUS – and I have personally been involved in each of those

meetings – because we have recognised that there are some areas that we could focus on for further reforms in Victoria. One of those is student and staff voice – the recognition that that does go to composition and that right across the sector it is important that we now make sure that the perspectives are actively available and presented, and that means widening the approach to engagement with staff and students, not just composition questions. Each university has been pretty clear that they want to do that in their own context, because there are different circumstances. But in my conversations it is clear that the chancellors are determined to make progress in that direction.

The other one I think is the oversight of major organisational change. Organisational change was kind of thrown upon the sector in a very big way as a consequence of the lack of federal government availability of JobKeeper, but that process of restructuring, reorganisation et cetera has continued, and there is very legitimate concern being expressed I think by the NTEU around the way in which these programs are communicated. Frankly, in all organisations it is a continuous change nowadays, particularly with technology, and we need to do better. The fourth is workforce composition and sustainability. That is a big and emerging issue, particularly as it relates to secure work, and it is something that we are looking at how we take on. And finally, there is transparency in communications. It is absolutely clear that over the next 12 months we need to be working on how agendas are made visible, outcomes of meetings are made visible, recruitment practices, complaints practices – all of those things are requiring improvement, and that work is underway. I can talk more to that in a few moments.

So I guess, in concluding my opening comments, our questions now have really moved not from what are the problems but how are we going to receive better information at council? How are we going to identify risks earlier? How are we going to remain connected to the experience of staff, students and stakeholders? And how are we going to increase accountability? Importantly, I think something that I wanted to really make clear, not just to you here as a committee but to all of the sector and community, is that this is no longer about trust. That trust has to be earned, and we are now in a process of renewal, where we need to build that trust by doing and having that reflected in people's experience.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. That is a very honest opening statement, because we have had a few questions around whether some universities think that we are in a crisis, a governance crisis, and you have given us a fulsome answer in your opening statements. Roma, I might go to you first if you would like to ask the first question.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. And thank you for that overview, John. So you have actually talked about the most critical issues, but I just want you to elaborate more. I appreciate it is about what to do from here on in to gain trust back, but if there is a standout issue, how do the UCC advise you are going to address it?

John POLLAEERS: To answer that, I will provide you a little bit of context of what we have been doing over the last two years. Essentially, the UCC is a forum, largely, where the chancellors are brought together to discuss governance issues. And it became very clear just after the accord process and around the time that the federal government was really cracking down on international visas that there was a great deal of mistrust building around universities and particularly a visible weakening of social licence. Anything you opened up to read was an issue.

We surveyed all the chancellors, and what was recognised by all the chancellors that responded was that roughly 50 per cent felt that social licence was a significant issue and needed attention. Fifty per cent said governance. So they became the two areas of priority. Fifty per cent felt their universities were doing well, and 50 per cent did not, so just coincidentally it was around that level. That gave us a mandate on both fronts. So in the last two years, we pulled for the first time – twice – all chancellors and vice-chancellors together to address these issues. On both occasions it has been, you know, ripping the bandaid off. We did a deep review into the social licence issues in the sector. We set up a joint taskforce between UA and UCC and a steering committee of five chancellors, five vice-chancellors, to identify, explore and engage stakeholders over social licence issues. That then continued for about the last 18 months. And now the conversation on that front has moved into, 'What are we doing to raise the capability and the mandate of Universities Australia to put chancellors and vice-chancellors together in addressing governance, social licence, workforce reform and internal improvement issues?' So – a big internal reform agenda.

We then immediately put in place a revised code of governance for the chancellors. We put in place remuneration reform codes, and we lobbied and received agreement from the federal minister to take vice-chancellors' salaries to the remuneration tribunal as it goes forward. We would like to do that with councils also. We immediately started engaging the Fair Work Commission and developing a standard around payment and workforce integrity, and we built that off the enforceable undertakings from Melbourne University. We did that in collaboration with Fair Work. We met regularly with the human rights commission on the racism review, and we were able to adopt their recommendations immediately, as we did with the antisemitism work of the special envoy.

So we have been very active in the background, just pushing others forward. When the issues arose around the experience of domestic students in high-concentration international student settings, I personally pulled all of the group of eight chancellors on the east coast together to talk about what they were going to do and how we would set some standards and measurements in place to improve outcomes. So we have been very active in addressing the issues, but making sure that we are, frankly, getting the right people in the room and moving this forward. We have kept the federal department informed of that, and the federal minister, but it has been primarily driving that agenda.

The last thing I would say is we actively were involved in the Expert Council on University Governance in a very significant way, ensuring that they had access to everybody they needed to do their consultations and then making sure that by the time they issued their report, all chancellors and vice-chancellors were ready to go in adopting their recommendations. And I can explain more about exactly what they are all doing right now and what the expectation is over the next 12 months if you would like.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Maybe on that, John, there has been sort of discussion that I suppose some universities have had to be dragged to do some work on those principles. Do you feel that some are ahead of others? Are some maybe reluctant to do them? And what accountability is there going to be when they start doing this work?

John POLLAEERS: Speaking frankly, it has been such a rigorous reform program, and there are always going to be those who are last to move forward or who are actively resistant. I would say at that very first meeting we had, the joint plenary, 75 per cent of chancellors were there and probably 50 per cent of vice-chancellors. But we did get unanimous agreement to go forward. My judgement now would be that we would be at kind of 90 per cent on both fronts in terms of active engagement, and I would say the other 10 per cent now are moving forward but, you know, have sometimes strong points of view on it. The way that we have tried to manage it – and I think this goes to the heart of the challenge that we have had, which is that there is not a standardised way across the country of looking at and assessing these things, which is why the Expert Council principles are so helpful. Not only are they helpful in their detail, they are helpful in the fact that they will be repeated every three or so years. And what we have argued is that there needs to be, either provided by TEQSA – we have actually prepared one that all chancellors have agreed to. We have asked TEQSA to adopt it – I do want to talk to you later in today's conversation about that – the view being simply at a governance assurance level it should be possible to go through every principle every year in a consolidated governance statement to say, on an 'if not, why not?' basis, 'Have we or have we not met this standard?' And so each university now is doing a gap analysis to establish exactly where they stand against those principles with an intention that they meet the principles – so it is not 'If not, just give your answer', it is a genuine ten pressure around it to be able to start reporting this from the end of this financial year in each case.

Now, if that is done and it is done in a standard way – because at the moment, the problem is everybody does it their way. Everybody thinks that it is the best way. But the reality is it is not translating in all instances. If we had a standardised approach to that, it would be very easy for you annually to go through and see who said no on an 'if not, why not?' and look to see what that issue is and where you go next. My view is that this provides an entry point to continuous improvement, and I would personally like to see that standardised report become part of our annual report that goes to VAGO and is ticked off as meeting it. But the assessor of the quality of it needs to be TEQSA.

I feel the same way when it comes to a remuneration report. That is an obvious issue. It is not an unreasonable thing for the community to expect, and again, it should be part of that annual reporting approach. That in itself

will lift all boats because it will give clarity as to where the issues are that need to be addressed. And I think that is a practical example of how we are pushing it forward.

Now, it is in that context, to answer your question, Chair, that I think it is not going to be possible for anybody to be left behind in that structure, because that is where the questions will then turn to. The beauty of now lifting UA's capability – you will note from their submission that they do not generally, up to this point, venture into governance matters. Well, it is critical and essential that we change our attitudes nationally now to recognise that governance, and making sure that governance shows up in the lived experience, means that governance assurance is important. That means that chancellors, councils, vice-chancellors and senior leadership teams all the way through need to be able to demonstrate how governance is moving through the organisation. I think this set of principles enables that to take place.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Anthony, I might head to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Professor, for appearing as well. I just want to take a step back if you do not mind. Notwithstanding and appreciating and acknowledging all the actions that have been taken since the federal inquiry and subsequent work that has progressed, which is all very much welcome of course, my question really goes to why it took so long for this to all happen. Why did it take a federal inquiry, I guess, for the university sector to come together, coalesce and start taking action on this front, notwithstanding just the substantive cultural and governance issues that have very much emerged and come to light since?

John POLLAEERS: That is a very fair question and in my view a correct observation. Look, I was really nothing short of horrified when I first became a chancellor and I realised that in those days there was no such thing as a people and remuneration committee. Often salaries of senior people were kind of kept from council. There were all kinds of traditional practices. Councils would typically meet in the evenings – you know, it would be 4 hours every eight weeks – and a lot of work was pushed into committee. There was just not the standard, and even now there is work to be done to move to full-day council meetings and better council charters and better terms of reference and committees. So there has definitely been a fundamental need to bring university governance to a different standard, and I think a lot of that work actually did start about six years ago. Then I think what really happened is that because there was not a consistent application of it and governance, I do not think, was really on the agenda, it was everybody doing the best they could to fix the problems of transparency and governance within their own organisation – until we got to the accord, and that really, it turns out, was kind of the gift that was needed or the moment that was required. It created a level of openness and inquiry around issues: 'We've got it all on the table.'

The other thing, and I mentioned it in my earlier statement, is the tension between the workforce and management, really, in my personal opinion, hit a peak during COVID when the federal government denied the access to JobKeeper for whatever reason. Universities reacted because, remember, not only did they not have that, international student revenue collapsed. And so people went into crisis mode, and there would have been a lot of employees out there wondering why these universities were not using their balance sheet to sustain them through. Now, the reality is they have been, because they have been sustaining massive losses for a number of years. But from an outrage point of view, that really crystallised. And then you link that to the perception of the [Zoom dropout] vice-chancellors, and just all of a sudden it erupted. And in some ways, as hard as these last three years have been, I kind of am pleased in some respects that it has all happened rather than this being a gaping wound that we were going to deal with over the next 10 years. All the issues have come up on the table and are now being addressed, which is why I think that dealing with the implementation now and sitting here in a year's time and saying, 'Has it happened? Have they made those changes that we have said? Have the principles been through their first round of implementation and improvement?' is such a critical part of this. I just feel like it is the crisis that needed to happen, the disruption that was desperately overdue. And the important thing is now there is a commitment of chancellors and vice-chancellors to get on with it.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Anthony. Kim, I might head to you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning, John. Thank you for joining us. I just wanted to ask: does the UCC support increasing the number of staff and student representatives on the university councils, and why or why not?

John POLLAERS: In the conversations that I have had it is a particular issue in Victoria, because in other states they already do have high levels of representation. There is a general view that that composition does need to be looked at and the numbers of staff and students need to increase. In each case the individual universities would argue that in their own context they would like to consider what that would look like and how most effectively to do it, and that includes what kind of methods to get more direct input. It is one thing to have the staff and students at the table. To have them operate as full council members means bringing their experience to bear, working as council members. And then we need to support it by working out what the information flows are going to be from student and staff forums or whatever other mechanisms to council without being filtered by management.

So there is a recognition that both of those things need to be done. At Swinburne, the way that we have handled it, just as an example, is we have taken all of the practical recommendations of both the NTEU Victorian and Swinburne branch submissions. We put those to council and formed a working group chaired by the interim vice-chancellor and the chair of the academic senate. On that working group will be – and is now – the president of the Swinburne branch of the NTEU, and by August we will have a set of recommendations around what and how to achieve those outcomes, starting first with what has been proposed, and if that does not work, then, 'Well, what will work?' We have determined that it does need to go through a proper review process, proper consultation, because I can give a view and the NTEU will give a view, but we want to hear from our students and our staff. But the reality of it is it does need to be done.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might just ask a quick question, John, and then we are going to maybe go into a different session if that is okay. I am just mindful of time. Can you maybe clarify the role of chancellors in terms of governance and the difference in maybe what a vice-chancellor would do? And how do those two interactions work at a council level?

John POLLAERS: I think that has probably been one of the greatest movements over time. The chancellor, without doubt, has the accountability for the effective operation of council and the governance of that group. And that group, with the chancellor, has accountability for the way in which governance is applied across the university. As you will have seen from the UA submission, sometimes there is an attitude that does exist across the sector that the chancellors and the council do governance and vice-chancellors do management. Well, that is not the way it is anymore. Everybody has got to do governance, because we can opine and we can make a decision, but we cannot follow it through. It has been very easy, when the council tries to follow it through, to cry foul, to cry management overreach. But it is a difficult and changing governance requirement that we do see assurance all the way through. That happens very effectively in other industries. It is new, and it is something we are working through. The best universities are working these things through with management, the vice-chancellor, council and the chancellor in the room together and owning it. But I do want to be clear and distinct: the operation of delegations to deliver the strategy, once formed, and to develop the culture and to carry through the governance is the vice-chancellor's responsibility. But I think what we are now learning is that that does not take away the council accountability. So if we have made a decision, we do have a responsibility to seek assurance that those things are actually happening. So it is a different model.

Six years ago I would say that we still had a very present attitude within the sector that councils were the ceremonial bodies. There has been a lot of change in leadership across vice-chancellors and chancellors in that time and a very clear understanding that that is not how it works anymore, it cannot work that way anymore.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are now going to end this closed hearing.

Witness withdrew.