

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 20 August 2024

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WITNESSES

Hiruni Walimunige, Co-Manager, Policy and Advocacy; and

Jaime Morrison, Policy and Advocacy Officer, University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association; and

Joshua Stagg, Welfare Office Bearer, and

Sara Guest, University of Melbourne Student Union.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the continuation of the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. Joining us for this section of the hearing is a panel from the University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association: Jaime Morrison, Hiruni Walimunige, Sara Guest and Joshua Stagg. Welcome to you this morning.

Before continuing, I just want to quickly introduce the committee panel to you. To my left is Deputy Chair Mr Ryan Batchelor, to my right are Mr Aiv Puglielli, Dr Renee Heath, Mr Joe McCracken, and my name is Trung Luu, the Chair. Welcome.

Before we continue I want to read this information to you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council's standing orders. Therefore, the information you provide to this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Giving deliberately false evidence or misleading the committee may be considered contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Just for the Hansard recording, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are with.

Jaime MORRISON: Jaime Morrison, graduate student association.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Hiruni Walimunige, University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association.

Sara GUEST: Sara Guest, the University of Melbourne Student Union.

Joshua STAGG: Joshua Stagg, University of Melbourne Student Union.

The CHAIR: Welcome, again. I have read your submission, but we are open to hearing an opening statement from you before the committee asks any questions.

Jaime MORRISON: Thank you for inviting us to speak with you today. When you imagine a typical graduate student in Victoria, you may picture the common stereotype of a university student. This stereotype portrays graduate students as eating cheaply, socialising often and having little income as they divide their time between study, assignments, part-time or casual work and catching up with their friends and peers. Today we invite you to think beyond this stereotype to understand the lived experiences of graduate students who lack food security.

GSA has conducted a survey with graduate students to understand their experiences. This survey found that the coping strategies graduate students employ to deal with food insecurity can have serious and harmful consequences. To cope with food insecurity, graduate students report that they will skip meals, rely on beverages such as coffee, forgo adequate nutrition, forgo food safety considerations, purposefully seek out free food on campus, access university-run food relief services, shoplift and dumpster dive. Some graduate students report that they constantly worry about where their next meal is going to come from. This reality is clearly going far beyond the stereotype of graduate students eating cheaply as they complete their degrees.

Graduate students report that their physical health is negatively impacted as a result and that the worry, anxiety and depression they feel due to food insecurity damages their mental health. The social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of graduate students also suffers due to food insecurity, particularly as it can limit their opportunities for social interaction. Worryingly, GSA has also found that some graduate students who experience food

insecurity consider pausing or ceasing their graduate studies. This is because without access to adequate food it is difficult to concentrate, challenging to study effectively and a struggle to participate fully in university life. I will now hand over to my colleague Hiruni to continue.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: To add to what Jaime has said, our work with graduate students shows us that food insecurity is related to the overall cost of living. As you know, it is not just the cost of groceries that has increased, but also the cost of other essentials like rent, electricity and transport, to name a few. What this means for vulnerable graduate students on low incomes is that the pursuit of higher education becomes less about learning and upskilling for the future and more about balancing a series of trade-offs day to day. For example, when facing a sudden rent increase a graduate student may sacrifice a healthy meal so that they can pay their rent and remain housed. Another graduate student might sacrifice valuable time that could be spent studying or attending classes to instead wait in line to secure a free meal on campus. On the more extreme end, a graduate student on a low income might find that that income can no longer sustain their full-time study, and as a last resort they may drop out of their course entirely. In this sense, addressing food insecurity means addressing a whole range of cost-of-living issues.

Graduate study is important. It is a pathway to participation in the workforce and a key component of Victoria's research output. For graduate students on lower incomes who are vulnerable, even managing and trying to cope with food insecurity places a significant burden on their lives and study, and it places them at a disadvantage compared to their more financially secure peers, even before they might enter their chosen profession. We invite you to reflect on what food insecurity means and how it impacts Victoria's education sector, our research community and our skilled workforce when graduate study is inaccessible and unsustainable for those on low incomes.

Joshua STAGG: Good morning, everyone. It is a privilege to be invited here to discuss this vital issue. My name is Joshua. I am one of the elected Welfare Office Bearers at UMSU, the University of Melbourne Student Union. With a living history that extends over 130 years, UMSU is committed to providing quality experiences on campus and creating a community for all graduate and postgraduate students, staff and visitors from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. As a non-profit organisation run by students, for students, we provide valuable funding that keeps the arts, representation, advocacy, live music and cultural services alive on campus. UMSU Welfare is one department of UMSU. Me, my co-office bearer and our committee of seven were elected by students to develop and maintain a variety of initiatives aimed at improving student welfare. We run Union Mart, a food bank that serves over 6500 students every semester, we run welfare branches, which provide a free meal to hundreds of students each Tuesday and Thursday and we run harm-reduction courses to ensure our students have the knowledge to be safe in all of their activities.

In 2024 the welfare department ran a large-scale survey with nearly 1700 responses. This survey featured a broad variety of questions targeted at the struggles students are facing due to rising prices. Utilising this data, we created the report titled *A Campus in Crisis* which codifies the issues we see every day. Up until now, we knew the extent of these issues on an anecdotal level, but we now have the empirical data to support our advocacy. This data and elements of the report were used to develop our submission, and we have brought along additional copy to the report that we hope proves informative.

Moving forward, the issues detailed in our submission and the report are a microcosm of the issues seen across the nation. Students cannot afford to eat, they cannot afford to maintain a nutritionally balanced diet and they cannot afford to feed their loved ones. We are, of course, happy to answer any and all questions that will progress this conversation towards solutions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Joshua. Sara, are you happy to answer questions?

Sara GUEST: Yes. Happy with that. That is fine.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. I will go to the panel to put some questions to you. Ryan, would you like to start?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks very much. Maybe you can do it from an undergrad and postgrad perspective; I do not really mind how you carve up the response. I am really interested in what you think is unique about the experience of students, with respect to food security, that might be different to those issues faced by the general population. If there are, I could ask – I am in your hands.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: I think what we are finding from students is that they are under conditions of lower income – and that was something that was brought up in our submission – so the opportunity to earn while studying is quite limited. We acknowledge that with incomes for populations outside of the student population there is a similar issue there, so there is overlap, and that has also been shown in the fact that in our study the predominant cohort was young people under 25. There is overlap between the general population and students, for sure, but I think something that is unique is, first of all, the living situation of graduate students: potentially students living in student accommodation where cooking facilities are quite limited. There is also, as I mentioned before, the earning potential of graduate students and the inaccessibility of certain concessions, like the transport concession for postgraduate students in Victoria. Particularly our cohort of international students may be facing inaccessibility and inequity without the support of various concessions and benefits as well and also being under certain income limitations due to their visa status. So I think there are certain –

Ryan BATCHELOR: By that you mean restrictions on how much people can work?

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Yes, certainly.

Jaime MORRISON: I might add to that, just on the income point: what surprised me was the level of people whose main source of income was actually money from their families or people in their lives; they might not actually work. So if you are already struggling with that money, you might be hesitant to ask for more, especially if you think your parents are also struggling. So I think that is just another kind of unique feature we found in our survey.

Sara GUEST: Just to add to that, I have worked with Josh – my research is actually about the experiences of food-insecure students in Melbourne – and I would just say that what separates students from the general population is time and all of these things that students juggle, right? It is fine if you are a student who has access to a great social network – you can find social supports, you might be from Melbourne. It is a lot easier to juggle than if you are an international student who is new to Melbourne and does not have that social network. A lot of research has shown that social isolation is a big thing for young people and for university students, which is surprising considering that they are surrounded by other young people all the time, but that makes it difficult to manage and to cope, and I think a lot of the research on the sort of general population at a household level shows that those support networks are really, really crucial. So social isolation, time, managing work, study, maybe you are trying to do an internship as well – all of these things.

Then Hiruni and Jaime have hit on space. Student accommodation is a whole other kind of arrangement for living, and a lot of my research has shown that just even having the space to cook something – if you are sharing a tiny little studio apartment, there are usually two people in this tiny little apartment and there is one burner, so how do you prepare food? How do you store food when you have a tub that is as big as this? That makes it tricky as well. So it is about living arrangement, time and obviously income as well.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What do you think the most effective solution would be, therefore, with these unique sets of circumstances for food insecurity, particularly for those students?

Sara GUEST: We are talking about the uniqueness of students, and one part of the uniqueness of higher education students is that they come to campus. I think that that is a key site of intervention. They are unlike a general population, where maybe through work there is some space there. Students come to campus. I think that is a point of intervention – making sure that there are options for students to have access to affordable, nutritious food. Programs that can go through campus I think are a good way to get our international students and domestic students, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You mentioned there is Union Mart. Are there any other types of subsidised food available to purchase at the University of Melbourne, for example?

Joshua STAGG: Union Mart is entirely free. There are other food relief initiatives, but there is not necessarily subsidised food. We have, I believe, one not-for-profit on campus, given that other one shut down. So no.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: GSA run our own program of free lunches and free breakfasts on alternating weeks. That exists for graduate students to access. In the first half of the year it averaged over 125 students per day, with some of those days having over 200 people present. So that exists for graduate students. I think we

are hearing as well that graduate students might also seek out less formal means of accessing food relief, so social events where food is catered for free, club events where students pay a membership and they attend an event to have free food, so there is also the importance of that non-formalised food relief as well.

Sara GUEST: I will just add that in Australia we have quite commercial campuses, and that is a relatively new development since the late 1980s. We saw a drop-off of publicly provided food on our university campuses, and now food is a way for universities and institutions to make money. So aside from having free food, there is not really food that is subsidised by the university, and that is sort of across Victoria. There are a couple – Realfoods is student union run at RMIT; there is Wholefoods at Monash that is student union run as well – but in terms of the university actually subsidising food for students, that is not really something that happens in this sort of current model.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Thank you all for coming in. It is great to have a whole lot of young people presenting as part of this inquiry process. I might begin with the Graduate Student Association representatives. I understand recommendation 5 to the Victorian government is to encourage Victorian universities to provide low-cost, nutritious, subsidised food options on campus through the establishment of university-run cafeterias. Could you tell me a bit more about what that would look like?

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Sure. I think the intention there was, as Sara mentioned, to have food relief where students are likely to access it. We heard from our survey that graduate students were seeking out free food and food relief on campus at much higher rates than they were accessing and seeking out food relief outside of campus. I think that is due to various things, like location, convenience, the fact that it is easily accessible and familiar as well – it is at a familiar place. I guess the intention there is to have it at a place where graduate students are essentially. In terms of low-cost and nutritious, first of all low-cost because not a lot of food on campus is affordable for those on low incomes but nutritious as well because we are hearing that free food, for example, at an event you might go to is usually like free pizza or a sausage or things like that and we heard from students in our survey that they were very interested in accessing nutritious, healthy meals. They were very cognisant of the fact that when income is low, their diets suffer for it. So I guess to tease out aspects of that recommendation, that is the intention there.

Jaime MORRISON: I will just add that I think in the survey it came through that a lot of students who maybe come from overseas to do their graduate studies here are actually really surprised that there is no subsidised university-run cafeteria where they can get a meal for like \$2 or \$3. I think it is much more common in Europe – Sara probably knows more about that – but yes, I will just add that to Hiruni's point.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Interesting. Should the state government fund a program like that at universities in Victoria?

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: We would certainly encourage it. We would certainly support it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Awesome. Thank you. With regard to the student union, I understand you have got a recommendation there to establish and maintain independent not-for-profit food cooperatives on campuses. Could you maybe speak to me a bit about that?

Joshua STAGG: Sure. In my view the increasing commercialisation of campuses is linked to the Howard government's removal of mandatory union fees. It has rendered student unions dependent on SSAF, so we are in a position where we are no longer at the table for these bigger scale commercial development conversations on our campus. This year especially we focused on bringing not-for-profits onto campus. Right now we have got a few pop-ups where they will come and set up a table in the middle of campus and serve food at cost. We are just trying to provide these options to I guess compete in a sense with the other commercial retailers on campus and at least give students an option. Some students who have the income can afford to go to a commercial retailer on campus, but for the average student who cannot afford that, there is a not-for-profit where they know they can go and buy some food where the commercial interest is not their top priority.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Maybe to the entire panel, do you think that if the state government regulated supermarket profit margins on essential items that students are wanting to buy, that would increase food security for students?

Sara GUEST: Yes, I would say that would make a bit of a difference. When you think about how much it actually is on essential items, it might be, I do not know – if you are buying milk and bread or rice or something like that, it might save you \$20 a week or something, but the cost of rent for students is so high. We were looking in our survey: the average student spends between \$350 and \$400 a week on their rent. \$20 is great – that is really important – but also thinking about how we provide subsidised housing for students, how we ensure they are not going to come across a rent increase unexpectedly that –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Should we freeze and cap rent increases?

Sara GUEST: Yes, and I would say especially –

A member: Wrong inquiry!

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Wrong inquiry – we had that one.

Sara GUEST: But I would say it has something to do with this, especially in student accommodation. I think there is a need to interrogate the relationships that institutions have with student accommodation providers, because you are paying \$450 a week for a tiny little shared six-person unit. So yes, and I think more as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Totally picking up where you have just left then, I understand you have got a recommendation there to lobby the federal government for a permanent and adequate increase to the rate of Austudy, youth allowance and Abstudy while lowering the age of independence. Why is that important?

Joshua STAGG: With the age of independence, students, despite living essentially out of home, are unable to access welfare benefits, despite the fact that they are more independent than someone who is over the age of independence but living potentially at home.

Sara GUEST: I think raising youth allowance and all these things that support students is so important. Unlike the age pension and these other kinds of welfare benefits that have seen increases, the supports for students have remained slightly stagnant; they have gone up with CPI. And like we were saying, with how much accommodation is – if you want students to be able to focus on their studies, they cannot be worrying about where their next meal is going to come from and they should not be worrying about how they are going to cover rent. The burden of the cost of education is shifting increasingly onto families to cover. We were talking about low-income students. As a matter of equity, a permanent and adequate increase to those welfare benefits is so important for achieving the goal of educational equity.

Joshua STAGG: And if I could just add something, in our report we found that about 10 per cent of students stated they preferred being paid in cash as opposed to being paid digitally, and a significant reason, when pushed on that, was to avoid their taxable income going up and detriments to their welfare payments.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you, guys, so much for coming and presenting today. There is the cost-of-living report. What do you think the drivers of this cost-of-living crisis are?

Sara GUEST: For students?

Renee HEATH: Yes, because you mentioned before capping prices at supermarkets might knock \$20 off, but then there has been this huge rent increase. Does the cost-of-living report cover any of that?

Joshua STAGG: Yes. We brought some copies of it to distribute afterwards.

Renee HEATH: Great.

Joshua STAGG: The big ones that came up were housing – we covered that a bit; medical things were a big thing – a lot of students were saying they always or mostly avoid medical appointments and prescriptions due to rising prices; food adds up; and the big part is work as well. We talked about visa restrictions, but also

students cannot afford to leave campus for too long, because if they are required to be in class, they cannot afford to live too far away from campus – they have to live in the city, which is more expensive. They also cannot afford to find employment further away from the CBD where it might be less contested, because they keep on having to come back to campus for class.

Renee HEATH: Has this gotten worse since COVID?

Sara GUEST: Yes. I think COVID absolutely has made it worse, but I think that it is really important to recognise that this is actually – we had the hungry student stereotype, right, but it has persisted. It was a thing before COVID. COVID I think made it more visible. You had international students queueing up in the street for free food during COVID; universities had to respond. And I think the cost-of-living crisis has just been something that has absolutely exacerbated the issue.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Yes, I just want to add one more thing in terms of the things that have increased: also notably the cost of transport. So, the cost of PTV has increased by, I think, 5 per cent this year from the beginning of this year. One of our key recommendations was that transport concessions be extended to include postgraduate students, and notably I think Victoria is one of the only states that does not offer this. So it could be something that could ease those ongoing transport costs, because transport is of course essential. Many of our students in postgraduate study undertake placements, and to tie that to income, that is labour that they conduct essentially for free. Like, even with this Commonwealth prac payment coming in and for our graduate researchers who are supported by the Research Training Program living stipend – that stipend at our universities is around \$37,000 per year pro rata, which is below the minimum wage – there is a real income issue there in terms of labour that both courseworkers and researchers are facing.

Sara GUEST: I will just add that that is actually pretty high relative to the other institutions across Victoria. Some are as low as \$28,000. Could you imagine trying to survive on that, and you potentially have dependants as well that you are caring for? That is nothing at all.

Renee HEATH: Thank you, Trung.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Heath. Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you. And thanks, everyone, for your contributions. It is very interesting. I see the food insecurity issue as probably a symptom of the broader cost-of-living issue. People make different decisions, different economic decisions. You have talked about paying for rent, and because you are paying for rent food becomes less affordable, or less accessible. I will ask both of you this: do you have many of the people you represent in public housing?

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: I think because most of our survey respondents were international students, I do not think that was an option for them. So we heard about that a lot less, from memory.

Jaime MORRISON: Yes. No, I have not heard that myself.

Joshua STAGG: Yes. About 79 per cent of the people that entered our survey were international students as well.

Joe McCracken: Okay, so both representing more so international students, based on the results of the surveys, then. Is that fair to say?

Joshua STAGG: Generally. It is those who tend to be the students that are using food relief services, and I think that links back to these issues.

Joe McCracken: So what are you hearing in terms of these issues, then? The driver is, I am guessing, a lack of an ability to earn more income. Is that fair to say?

Joshua STAGG: Yes, on my end, that is the main driver. Generally, if the rent goes up and food is getting more expensive, they literally cannot earn more income unless they are able to find a higher source of income from employment.

Joe McCracken: Would that be the same?

Jaime MORRISON: Yes, I think I would say that is the same. We do get a lot of comments from international students saying they struggle to find work. Given the high cost of living and not being able to afford enough food, they have tried to find more employment opportunities, but it is very difficult for them. That definitely came up in our survey.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Those who do try to manage food insecurity by taking on more work, we are hearing that it does have a detrimental effect on their studies. Yes. So there is that flow-on effect of not being able to contribute as much to your studies and everything that comes along with it.

Joe McCracken: There is the point that I think you guys raised before about the fact that if someone wants to get work that might be less competitive, so you can actually secure a job, they may have to go further out, but then obviously that takes time, effort, resources, cost et cetera. That is a really big challenge to overcome. Have you had any thoughts on how that could be overcome?

Joshua STAGG: Nothing small scale. I think that the most short-term solution is, as I was saying, moves on public transport – things like UMSU provides PTV vouchers for students in financial need. But there are only so many we can provide. Back in the day, when student unions were able to own their own housing, there was also that competing force that was holding back other forms of student accommodation. But now, I do not have a short-term solution that would fix it overnight. I think the best that student unions can provide is those small, almost ad hoc solutions.

Joe McCracken: I see both groups as providing those – it is not a criticism, but it would be good if you did not have to provide those services because the problem had gone away. I am trying to focus my questioning on fixing the cause of the problem rather than, dare I say it, bandaid solutions. Does that make sense? I am trying to figure out whether it is vicinity to work, cost of transport – okay, that is a cost driver that can perhaps help provide some relief.

What do you think some of the other cost drivers are that could help drive some relief? You have talked a bit about housing before. We have had a housing inquiry in this committee, and there were a number of recommendations that came out of that. But would you broadly say that if rents, for example, or the cost of housing, somehow were reduced, and I am not saying by a rent cap – but perhaps if the government built more public housing or perhaps if there was more supply in the market, which are market-based solutions; I will not go into the politics of it – do you think generally a lower cost of housing would help contribute?

Sara GUEST: I think that would make a huge difference. In our submission we detail just how many students – 80 per cent, I think –

Joshua STAGG: Seventy-nine per cent.

Sara GUEST: are spending more than a third –

Joshua STAGG: Yes, housing stress, which is defined as greater than 30 per cent.

Joe McCracken: So that is probably the biggest cost driver.

Sara GUEST: I was just going to say that in my research chatting to a lot of students – and especially those who came to Melbourne just after that COVID lull when the cost of student accommodation was quite low – they are spending \$350 a week. And I ask them, ‘So, if you were spending less on rent?’, and they are, like, ‘Yeah, well, I’d be able to afford food, then.’ It is just that the cost of housing is a massive issue.

Joe McCracken: Can I ask one last, quick question? I think it was you, Josh, that said something about living on res, basically. What is the average – at Melbourne Uni what is the cost of living on res in terms of weekly –

Sara GUEST: You do not want to know.

Joe McCracken: I do want to know, because this is important.

Jaime MORRISON: I think I know. I just heard it is \$1000 a week, but I should say they cover food as well.

Joe McCracken: What if you do not take up the food? Can you not take up the food offer?

Jaime Morrison: I do not think it is an option. I am pretty sure you have to.

Hiruni Walimunige: It is included as part of it.

Jaime Morrison: It is included – it is accommodation and then they provide breakfast, lunch and dinner, I am pretty sure.

Joe McCracken: How does a student earn a grand a week?

Sara Guest: Well, they are not earning that; their parents are earning that, right?

Joe McCracken: Exactly.

Sara Guest: There is probably a distinction to be made between the colleges on campus. Like residential, right? That is about \$1000 a week –

Jaime Morrison: That is, the colleges on campus are \$1000 a week.

Sara Guest: and then we also have numerous others – Scape, Iglu, all the student accommodation housing. But even then, anecdotally from what I have heard, you are talking a minimum of \$250 or \$300 a week.

Joe McCracken: What do you get for that? Like, do you get literally a room and a share facility sort of thing?

Sara Guest: It depends. You could have an apartment that includes a tiny, little kitchen –

Joe McCracken: Like a kitchenette sort of thing, yes.

Sara Guest: A little kitchenette, like I said: one or two burners, a tiny, little bar fridge. You might also have just a room that has a giant, shared kitchen for the whole building or a kitchen on the floor that you are living on. But a lot of students have brought up that it is also sometimes hard to share a big, communal kitchen just in terms of how dirty it can be and timing – everyone wanting to use it.

Joe McCracken: People are messy sometimes, 100 per cent.

Sara Guest: That can throw you off, too.

Joe McCracken: What about shared toilet facilities and those sorts of things? Are they communal, or is it usually private?

Sara Guest: Again, if you want to pay a little bit extra, you might get your own private one, but if you are really scraping the barrel and trying to find something that is decently affordable, then you are probably sharing those facilities as well.

Joshua Stagg: There is a new structure, and I believe it is in some of the uni lodges, where each floor will have a certain number of bathrooms that are communal out in the main area, and each apartment will be allocated to a certain bathroom. So you have got to leave your shared apartment and then walk to the communal bathroom that you then share with a set number of other apartments.

Joe McCracken: I guess particularly with people from different cultures and backgrounds that might not always be appropriate. I am guessing if you have got a lot of international students, that may not be comfortable. Is that feedback that you have received?

Sara Guest: I have not heard that specifically – I have heard about other issues with the shared facilities – but I would assume so.

Joe McCracken: I think my time has run out, but I could talk for hours. I am interested.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Joe. Just to both groups, what we have heard so far is you both represent a large – you said roughly about 90 per cent of those seeking food relief through programs like yours are international students. Is that correct? You are basically speaking on behalf of international students; 90 per cent of your clientele who have issues regarding food insecurity are international students. So my question to you is in relation to one of your recommendations, which is for an increase in lobbying of the federal government for a permanent and adequate increase to the rate of Austudy youth allowance. When these international students do not have access to it, how would that assist these international students, which are 90 per cent of the people you are representing? It would not address that issue for them, would it?

Joshua STAGG: No, it would not help them. That is targeted at domestic students. Whilst international students right now are the majority of people using our services, there are still domestic students in need. Whilst the other recommendations target, I guess, domestic and international, that is domestic.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to clarify that. Obviously, the housing issues are the main driver which is flowing through to all the costs of living. I understand the program which you are offering at the moment in relation to free lunch and breakfast. You mentioned earlier subsidising the cafeteria at the university. Would it be more appropriate to have the university subsidise it or the state? I just want to ask your opinion on that.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: I could see it either way.

Joe McCRACKEN: It is much of a muchness, isn't it?

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: Sorry?

Joe McCRACKEN: I would have just thought it is much of a muchness. You do not care who subsidises it.

Hiruni WALIMUNIGE: The end user, the end student, might not see the difference. They probably would be more grateful than anything. But I think the benefit to the state subsidising it is, I guess, the recognition of the fact that students do contribute to the state's economy. They contribute to the university sector in the state through significant contributions to research and also to teaching. We spoke greatly about the partnership between university and the state, and maybe there is an area to explore there in terms of – of course universities are a federal responsibility – the partnership between universities and state and knowing where students are and being where students are and enabling food security there. I guess that is the background of those recommendations.

The CHAIR: I just want to work out – there are a lot of programs which you are offering which are of great benefit and should be supported. I think you mentioned free lunch and breakfast, which is probably something that not all profit-run organisations would help with. Looking at it overall from the state's contribution, that is to assist those organisations who are not just for the uni students but also for the wider community. That is why I asked whether there are benefits to subsidising those sorts of programs from a state point of view which are of benefit to both university graduates and the wider community at other schools. We have spoken about the food relief you offer as well. I was just wondering, from your point of view, whether there are certain programs or benefits you would like our committee to advocate to the state about – to do certain things or advocate for universities to do certain things. That is why I was getting your opinion about spreading it out rather than just pushing it all to one organisation or to the state to do, which they probably will not do because you have got various programs going on. That is why I am asking your opinion in relation to what best suits the program. That is all.

Joshua STAGG: I think in my view the biggest help we need is with that campus development discussion. Universities have a duty to look after their students, and right now, in my view, they are prioritising commercial interests, not necessarily maliciously but just because student unions no longer have that seat at the table that they previously had. I think that state support in maybe saying 'Hang on, this is something that needs to be considered. Your campus needs to be sustainable for students to live and work on' – that voice supporting student unions I think would be very valuable.

Sara GUEST: I just wanted to jump back quickly to the cafeteria thing and the role of the state, we are dealing with university students, but we know that language students that come to Australia are actually – we are dealing with a relatively privileged group of students who we have surveyed at the University of Melbourne, but we know that there are students who are in much more dire situations, and thinking about how

can the state also kind of serve higher education students as a cohort – language students I guess or just young adults in that sense. I think in that regard there is maybe space for the state government to be thinking about canteens or cafeterias for students. In Germany they have an organisation called Studentenwerk, and that is state-funded – when I say state, I think it is federally funded – but it is a regional organisation that looks after the welfare of all higher education students. They have canteens where any student who has a student ID is good to go. They are kind of in each city in locations to serve students. I think that is an option. I mean, it is very blue-sky, but that is one to think about.

Joe McCracken: How is that funded? Is it just out of general revenue from government, is it?

Sara Guest: I am not 100 per cent sure. I know it receives funding, and it is predominantly funded through the government.

The Chair: Thank you. Any other questions, committee?

Aiv Puglielli: I am happy to snag another. We have been hearing a lot today about playing off housing costs, rent and food. That feels pretty whack, right? Would you say as a panel – obviously representing different groups – that both of these things are human rights: access to affordable, nutritious food and having a roof over your head. Yes? Just setting that as a baseline, right?

Sara Guest: Absolutely.

Aiv Puglielli: And then, for example, food – the provision of food to people in Victoria. Do you think that is an essential service?

Sara Guest: Yes.

Hiruni Walimunige: Yes.

Aiv Puglielli: Should we treat it as such, for example, under the Essential Services Commission in Victoria? It gets a bit more technical. If we are thinking about it as an essential thing, why don't we regulate it as such?

Ryan Batchelor: What food would you think would be essential?

Sara Guest: I was going to say this is a tricky thing about having like a top-down sort of approach – food is so socially and culturally mediated.

Ryan Batchelor: What are the issues with a top-down approach?

Sara Guest: Those things. We even see it with us as organisations trying to help students that sometimes the food you have on offer does not meet dietary requirements or cultural needs, so I think there is one thing – it is interesting to think. I do not think you can just be giving people food.

Joe McCracken: You want people to make their own choices. That is the best thing.

Sara Guest: I was going to say autonomy, dignity – those things are really important, yes.

Aiv Puglielli: Important points. Thanks.

The Chair: Any more questions?

Joe McCracken: I could talk forever, but thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much for coming in and providing your submissions and your point of view and from the students' perspective as well as international students. I understand there are issues that international students face being in a new location, new place, new network; I think that can be something to look at, definitely more support for those cohorts. Thank you for coming in, both the student association and the student union for coming in from Melbourne. Thank you very much for your time; we appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.