

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 28 June 2022

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

#### **WITNESS** (*via videoconference*)

Professor Mark Rose, Vice-President, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.

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

Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

Could I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thanks, Mark, for being with us this afternoon. Thanks very much.

**Prof. ROSE:** Can I, John, join you in acknowledging the different countries we are on. I particularly want to acknowledge the peoples of the Kaurna plains here at Adelaide. I am over here working on the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education so it would be remiss if I did not recognise Ngarrindjeri and Narangga men, women and kids of this nation. I live in Coburg, and I want to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people. And I bring with me the compliments of my elders, the Gunditjmarra, and the respect of my ancestors. John, thank you for that welcome. It is good to see the Geelong jumper on your computer screen.

**The CHAIR:** You are a Geelong supporter. We are going to get along really well.

**Prof. ROSE:** Absolutely. Am I allowed to repeat for Hansard that that win by three points was magnificent at the—

**The CHAIR:** I know—wasn't it. I was there at the MCG. The crowd just went nuts. It was fantastic.

**Prof. ROSE:** Yes, I know, and better still is the future when we win another grand final.

**The CHAIR:** And Tyson Stengle was magnificent. Eddie Betts is doing a great job on Tyson. It is great to see.

**Prof. ROSE:** He is, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Anyway, now we should get back to work.

**Prof. ROSE:** Yes, I know.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for being with us, Mark.

**Prof. ROSE:** Thanks. And hello to everyone on this call. Christine, it is great to see you—great to work with you. Kat, it is great to see you; your office is right next to the best coffee shop in Melbourne, the Espresso Room. And to the other members, I am Mark Rose. I am Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous, at Deakin Uni—that is my day job, that is where I get paid—but on this occasion today I am here representing Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, of which I am the Vice-President and have been for a couple of decades now, so my comments today are in relation to my community role, not my professional role.

On the three points that you would like addressed today, the future skills are something that Aboriginal people have been working on for decades. I was 12 years of age when the referendum came down that allowed Aboriginal people to go beyond year 8 in school. I have seen the rise of the Black Academy. Twenty years ago at VAEAI we instructed the CEO to write to every year 12-completing Aboriginal student, and there were two kids in the state. Last year we were up to 700-plus, so the skills and the projection of skills are really important.

I want to also make reference to the three strategies that we have at VAEAI: the *Marrung* strategy, a 10-year strategy—cutting edge—built on data, and that has got leverage points for Indigenous kids and non-Indigenous kids. That is in place, and at the midway point, at five years, it is good; the *Wurreker* strategy for TAFE—and that is with the intention of building up our capabilities beyond levels 1 and 2 into certificates III and IV, which will be a pathway, a linking point, to jobs; and also one that I chair, through VAEAI, the Toorong Marnong accord, which is a partnership between the Victorian vice-chancellors and VAEAI, where we came about 15 years ago and said, ‘We’re sick of competing against each other, with the downstream effect that our kids get buffeted around as a marketing tool’. All the universities in this state—we have got the second-smallest Aboriginal population in the Commonwealth, yet we house 25 per cent of the nation’s universities, and we have decided, in line with the Victorian Vice-Chancellors, to work in partnership, to collaborate and not to compete. That platform is a great one for skills.

About half of our universities are dual sector, and the other half have got productive relationships with TAFE institutions. There are two aspects that I would like to talk about with future skills. One is for our own people, moving them through the siloed sections of our education systems—compulsory years into adult and higher education, and we have got early years, all with different structures and philosophies. And that makes a bit of a soup, a dense soup, so what we need to do is work between those silos and create pathways. The skills for our people are both cognitive and technical skills that will bring about jobs. What we wanted to note from the VAEAI perspective is that we are on the threshold of Treaty and that will itself bring a whole lot of skills. The third point is about the regionalisation—and I just want to acknowledge, Chris, the work we are doing in Geelong in the employment strategy and working at that space. That has happened in other places in the state, but I think the Geelong one, with the partnership of a great university and a great TAFE arrangement—when we come together in partnership, in collaboration, that is when we achieve.

I wanted to talk also, John, if this is okay, about the work that happens. I chair the Indigenous advisory Committee for ACARA, so I have got a bit of action at the national level; I sit on the board of VCAA; I am on the board of the Council of Deans of Education; and I do a bit of work at NESAs, a New South Wales education arrangement. So I see curriculum from go to whoa. One of the hearty things that we are getting, talking about skills for the future, is the advantage of Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum beyond being a cultural Contiki tour, taking them to a nation-setting point. I say of the kids sitting on reading mats today, when their grandkids are sitting on reading mats in a couple of generations they will be facing a geopolitical situation in which Europe and the Americas may not be the world powers that they are today; it will possibly be China and possibly India that will go into that mix. Be there Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, it is not pandering to a minority or political correctness; it is empowering all kids, black and white, to deal with competing world views but anchor themselves in it, and I think this is nation-setting stuff. It got lost in the consultation around curriculum 9.0, where people said that it would make kids less patriotic and they would not fight. That was one position. My position is it is something this nation needs.

We have got four faces of this nation: we have got our colonial history; we have got the fact that we are part, geographically, of Asia and the Pacific; we are the world’s most diverse multicultural community; and we house the world’s oldest living continuous culture—and if we do not have all those faces in balance and in our curriculum, we may as well all be homeschooling again. We have got the right ingredients to build the skills for the future. The cognitive skills of dealing with competing world views will be essential for our nation going forward and will solve a whole lot of issues. The technical skills that will get people a job are one thing, but we have really got to balance the cognitive and the technical skills. And the clean economy—we have got a whole lot of examples of firestick economies from the Indigenous world. We can add to that. But the regionalisation skills of health and community services are really important for our people. So from an Aboriginal perspective—and, John, I have got to apologise; I have been known to give 3-hour lectures without drawing a breath, let alone taking a pause.

**The CHAIR:** We do want to ask some questions at some point, Mark, so—

**Prof. ROSE:** What if I leave it there? I hope I have just painted a picture that—

**The CHAIR:** Yes, you have.

**Prof. ROSE:** Okay. Good.

**The CHAIR:** You have done it really well. Thank you so much.

**Prof. ROSE:** Thanks, John.

**The CHAIR:** I might throw the first question to our newly appointed First Peoples parliamentary secretary, Chris Couzens.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you, Chair.

**Prof. ROSE:** Congratulations, Chris. We are very pleased.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you, Mark. Thank you for all the work that you are doing in Aboriginal education and in particular the work that we are doing in Geelong, which is really exciting. You are obviously leading that research, so we are very pleased to have you online today as well.

My question is around study options. Submissions to the Inquiry highlighted the benefits of local tertiary education options in rural and regional areas. How important are local study options to Aboriginal students, and what support do Aboriginal students from regional and rural areas need to study locally?

**Prof. ROSE:** A great question. Thanks, Chris. If there is anything we have learned from COVID, it is that your classroom can be anywhere. I am sitting in a dodgy hotel room—no, it is not that dodgy—in South Australia and having a really clear and productive conversation. The local options: our kids going away, whether you are Indigenous or non-Indigenous, is always a big issue. My first principalship was in Casterton. It was in the time when families had to recognise that they would have to wave goodbye to their kids to go to the big ugly city to study. But the nine great universities that operate within our state borders all have got really productive online versions, and we are moving into the technical space. We were talking here this morning about creating that fully immersive, 360-degree experience—recreating Cimmeragunja in the early days. As people walk to Mooroopna they will be able to, with virtual reality, walk off with their ancestors. So the great learning technology is really advancing.

Wherever you have got an electric plug and fast wi-fi you have got a university and you have got a TAFE sector. There are disciplines that need the hands on, but Deakin, through the former institute IKE—Institute of Career Education, which is now NIKERI, has been fortunate to have those away from base, where people fly in for an intensive and complete their degrees. The three big Aboriginal organisations in Brisbane are run by graduates of IKE today. I have not always worked for Deakin, but I am very pleased to be back there for the third time. It has got a really good heritage and footprint. Deakin had the cloud arrangement, which we do not refer to anymore because people see that as storage rather than learning, but we have always been pushing the boundaries of technology. As a student of Deakin back in the 1970s, in its third or fourth year, I was amazed at their intention of converting a railway carriage to Melbourne so people could go into lectures on their way to Melbourne. Now you can do it on your iPad. So technology is the answer—and really agile, smart minds.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Mark.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kat, did you have a question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mark. It is so lovely to have you here.

**Prof. ROSE:** Good to see you, Kat, too.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** My question goes to, I guess, the priority skills areas of this state and to what extent Aboriginal students in Victoria are currently enrolled in university courses in those priority skills areas such as health care, education, STEM and agriculture. What are the barriers to them enrolling in those priority skills areas? How can they be addressed, and how can universities and the Aboriginal community controlled organisations and the Victorian Government all work together to address that?

**Prof. ROSE:** As you know, Kat, we have had a really great relationship. In your electorate you have got the league, you have got VAEAI, you have got VACSAL and every other acronym you could talk about, which is fantastic, and we work very productively. We are apolitical, but the relationship is great.

The priority areas: I do not care where our kids go as long as they go somewhere. I chair the Koorie Academy of Excellence out of VAEAI, and I will work day and night to get our kids into learning. Traditionally a whole lot of our elder intellectual academics have come through apprenticeships. There is a fellow over here who is a visiting professor in America, but he started off as a diesel mechanic. So we are edging back—it is a rise of the black academics. We are at the start of a renaissance in education, because we were ruled out. We have come traditionally into being enclaves at uni, and now we are part of the mainstream. Then we moved into the soft subjects—the teaching, the nursing, the social welfare—which was great, but we are pushing hard to get people into the STEM, and that will come. When I was at La Trobe we delivered to four Aboriginal students a first year uni subject in maths when they were in year 11. The well-meaning educationalists often tell our kids, ‘We’ll make education easy for you’, and they drop out of science and maths, and so when they get to the gates of the uni the options are really narrow. We need to open them up.

The key part, Kat, is also that our business is working in collaboration. The Toorong Marnong protocol: we call this thing—I hope it is not recorded in a bad way in Hansard—exchanging prisoners. If we have got a Koori student who is in the wrong place, it is not a loss for our uni and a gain for the other uni, it is a gain for both of us. We have told vice-chancellors, ‘We are the custodians of Aboriginal education’, and they support us greatly.

In Victoria, if you placed every university side by side with their entrance—of course you have got your G8s at one end of the pool where you need a fairly functional ATAR score, but down the other end there are places that are looking more creatively at ability plus engagement support. You can get a portfolio and interview that push the ATAR out of contention. There was a young kid that we helped to come on. Toorong Marnong runs a 24-hour 1800 hotline for our kids when they get their results. The call comes to me, and if I am asleep it goes to someone else. There was a young kid in Echuca who sprained his foot and could not get to school, but we got him into the Catholic uni and put the right support in place, and now he has graduated. At that local level, with community control, with VAEAI and with the LAECGs we can direct resources, and we will do anything to get a kid into uni. We do not want to say that uni is—if a kid’s dream is the technologies, restoring cars, apprenticeships, TAFE, it is great.

When I started as an academic it was 16 years before I had a Koori in front of me in class. That was just far too long. I am really proud of this state, I am proud of the relationships that we have had with government, and as I said, VAEAI is very apolitical. At my 60th birthday we had the Liberal Minister for Education and a former Labor Treasurer come, so I was pretty happy. Yes, it was very ecumenical.

It is working in partnership, listening to us and of course treaty offers on the horizon—so many more opportunities. For my sins I did time in a business faculty. Someone who was a socialist in the 1970s became a business academic teaching entrepreneurialism, which is kind of a bit schizophrenic if you think about it. But that is the next area. Unless we bring and create an economic base, we are going to be—talking about closing the gap, that is the vision. STEM and business—that is where we need to go, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for that comprehensive reply, Mark. I know you touched on it a little bit, but just in terms of pathways into university—and it is such a critical part of advancing, obviously; a student going from not only primary school, secondary school and then to university, hopefully—how can universities, TAFEs, government and Aboriginal communities work together to increase access to university, including by providing clearer pathways across vocational education and higher education? I think these are the two really hard areas. It is really hard to progress through unless you get really good guidance along the way. And sometimes it is hit and miss and there are certain talents that need to be extracted out of students, and sometimes it does not work that way. So how do you think we can do it better as a government?

**Prof. ROSE:** John, just supporting us in our programs that we run with the community and with kids. The Koorie Academy of Excellence, for instance, is a brilliant program. Our community, particularly in Melbourne, is so dispersed. There are 1,800 government schools, and over 1,600 have one or two Koori kids in them. So unlike Noel in the Cape, where he has classes full of Aboriginal kids, we have to work through systems and we have to work through the agency of non-Indigenous, and we do it with our CUST, our policies. There is breaking down the language barriers—people who understand systemically the systems and can come back and translate them to the community, engendering aspiration. Every Aboriginal parent wants the best for their kids, but they do not know how to advocate for their kids at a school level, or if they do, do it in an appropriate way. They want the best for their kids, but because they were screwed over by education systems generationally, we

have to re-engineer the relationship—and VAEAI has done that beautifully for four decades. Continue to support VAEAI, continue to support self-determination and Aboriginal control and continue to support our engagement. One of the things that I am heavily involved with in curriculum is making sure that Indigenous perspectives—my strategic aim, working with the nine universities, is to make sure every student, black or white, leaves with an Aboriginal experience. It is all our culture; it is not just ours.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Thank you so much for being part of today and all that you do for the community generally. Thanks very much, Mark.

**Prof. ROSE:** Thank you. I know you guys do not get thanked as much as you should, but working close to many of you I do see the strain it takes. Yes, we are very optimistic for the future, so thank you for putting up with listening to some ageing blackfella today.

**The CHAIR:** It is always a pleasure. Thanks, Mark—always a pleasure.

**Prof. ROSE:** And for Hansard: go Cats! All right?

**The CHAIR:** Go Cats. On that wonderful note we will end the broadcast.

**Committee adjourned.**