

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 9 June 2020

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr Nazih Elasmr—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Ms Melina Bath

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Mary Wooldridge

Dr Catherine Cumming

**WITNESS**

Ms Hannah Buchan, President, University of Melbourne Student Union (*via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, Hannah, and welcome. Before we start I need to read this information for you. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comments repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. Before you start, can you please state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions. Good afternoon, and welcome.

**Ms BUCHAN:** Thank you. My name is Hannah Buchan and I am the President of the University of Melbourne Student Union. I am speaking to you on behalf of the joint submission made earlier this year by the University of Melbourne Student Union and the RMIT University Student Union. Our submission addresses the first and second terms of reference of the inquiry—the expansion of the free tram system and providing free fares for all full-time students. I will begin by discussing the first point in the terms of reference—the expansion of the free tram system.

The University of Melbourne and RMIT University both have campuses which sit outside the free tram zone. We recommend that the free tram zone is extended to include both universities. The free tram zone stops just one stop before the RMIT city campus and 1 kilometre from the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus. Internal documents from Public Transport Victoria show that authorised officers position themselves immediately outside the free tram zone in order to apprehend fare evaders. This means that there is a constant presence of authorised officers at both of our university campuses, which results in a significant number of students getting fined for trying to travel to university. There is anecdotal evidence from a significant number of students at both universities stating that they feel anxious about the presence of authorised officers, as they feel that the officers are waiting to try and catch out students.

We are aware that authorised officers are made to work to quotas, which makes it easy for them to target students who are under significant financial pressure. Fines disproportionately impact disadvantaged students, as 49 per cent of Australian students already have problems with the cost of travelling to class. Additionally, 45 per cent of Melbourne tertiary students listed fare prices as a reason for not using public transport more often. It is alarming that the city of Melbourne has a negative reputation about our ticket enforcement measures. We recommend that the free tram zone be extended to our university campuses. But in addition to that, there needs to be a significant restructure of the ticket enforcement measures. It is unacceptable that students feel intimidated by authorised officers, and the cost of travelling to university should never be a barrier when trying to access education. Extending the free tram zone would also improve the experience of tourists visiting Melbourne and allow for easier travel within the city.

I will now discuss the second point in the terms of reference—providing free fares for all full-time students. Both the University of Melbourne Student Union and the RMIT University Student Union support free public transport for students. Current housing affordability means that many students are not able to live in walking or cycling distance of university, which means that a majority of students are heavily reliant on public transport. We understand that not every student is able to live in the CBD and therefore would not completely benefit from the extension of the free tram zone, but providing free fares to students will make sure that all students are equally able to access public transport. The fares for a Myki may not seem like a lot, but for many students who have insecure work, they may have to make the decision between paying the Myki fare that day or eating dinner that night. One in seven domestic students say they regularly go without food or other necessities due to financial stress, and three in five domestic students say their finances are a source of worry. Free public transport for full-time students would be a significant step to help address cost-of-living pressures on students.

Should the committee consider free fares for all full-time students, we would recommend that this be extended to include part-time students, international students and postgraduate students. All of these cohorts of students have the same cost of living as full-time students but are currently not offered any form of concessions. The

only way that these students can access concessions is through applying for a low-income healthcare card, which many students would be ineligible for if their workload is cyclical.

If it is not possible to extend free fares to all student cohorts, we strongly recommend that part-time students, international students and postgraduate students receive some form of transport concession. A significant number of international students study at both the University of Melbourne and RMIT University. Many of these students are already facing significant financial burdens in order to finance their full-fee studies. We are aware that some international students are eligible for the iUSEpass, which affords Myki concessions, but many students are not able to pay for an upfront Myki pass or are ineligible for it.

Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania currently offer concessions to full-time international students in line with domestic students, and New South Wales and Queensland offer partial concessions. It is time that Victoria does the same and gives equitable fares to international students. Furthermore, Victoria is the only state in Australia which does not offer some form of transport concession to postgraduate students, and this needs to be addressed. Many postgraduate students have to forego work in order to complete their studies, meaning that the cost of a full Myki fare is very significant. By extending free fares or concessions to these student cohorts, financial pressure would be greatly reduced and students would be able to focus more on their studies.

In conclusion, University of Melbourne Student Union and RMIT University Student Union are strongly in favour of extending the free tram zone to include university campuses and strongly in favour of providing free fares to full-time students. We additionally recommend that all student cohorts are provided with free fares and, if this is impossible, to extend transport concessions to these cohorts. We understand that this would take a significant investment, but it will incentivise the use of public transport and improve student experience when trying to access public transport for education. We thank the committee for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry, and we look forward to the committee's recommendations for equitable outcomes that support all students, including our international and postgraduate student cohorts.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Hannah. You mentioned the students that live outside the free tram zone. When they have to travel they have to pay for their ticket, so what is the benefit for them if we extend the free tram zone?

**Ms BUCHAN:** I think the point that I was trying to address is that because the free tram zone stops just before RMIT University and the University of Melbourne there are a great number of authorised officers that just stay at the tram stops trying to target students to find them, so that would alleviate the pressure and anxiety about taking public transport to university.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Hannah. Hannah, could you just go over again and just tell me, in terms of the postgraduate support—Victoria is not doing it, obviously—just again, what were the results for the other states?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes. I do not have specifics about what other states do, but Victoria is the only state that does not offer some form of transport concession, so other states have concessions that are the same as undergraduate studies, or it could be partial concessions. But we just think that there needs to be some form of concessions for students completing postgraduate studies.

**Mr BARTON:** And, Hannah, do you think that if we made public transport free for students that would be a driver to encourage them not to drive into university and to use public transport?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, absolutely. I think it definitely would be an incentive and that there would be outlying benefits to that as well—so less congestion on the roads, less pollution from students driving to university.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Hannah, I am a bit amused that students might be able to afford a car yet not be able to afford a fee on public transport. But do you currently have compulsory student union fees at RMIT and Melbourne, and how much are they?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Not every student owns a car. I think it is also incredibly likely for students at the University of Melbourne and RMIT University that they do not have cars because there just simply would not be parking available at those campuses. University of Melbourne Student Union does not impose a membership fee to its members, but I do not know the number for RMIT University.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So Hannah, do you think this free public transport should be extended to all university students in all other campuses in Victoria?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, absolutely. I think public transport should be free for students. Like I said in my statement, students face a lot of financial burdens, and they should be able to access their education without fear of how much money they have to pay in order to get to university.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** And who do you think should pick up the bill for free transport for all students?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Like I said, I think it would be a great investment for the government to initiate. It would just relieve a lot of financial pressure to Victoria's students.

**Mr QUILTY:** I have a question for you. Would you support if we abolished the free tram zone together and used the savings to give free transport to all students? Would you support that?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, I would support that. I think students are disadvantaged and they face great costs of living, and so giving free fares to all students would relieve that pressure.

**Mr GEPP:** There is tomorrow's headline. Thanks, Hannah, for your presentation. The proposition that Mr Quilty just put to you was, 'Let's abolish altogether the free tram zone', the trade-off being that it is suggested that he would then support free transport for all students. I am not sure that one necessarily follows the other. But I was interested, Hannah, particularly in your reference to the number of students that go without food, based on either your research or the anecdotal information that you collect from members of the student union. That is extraordinary, one in seven—that is 14, 15 per cent—tertiary students going hungry because they simply cannot afford to eat.

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, the statistics are quite alarmingly high. I think that is due to the fact that students are often placed in very over-casualised workforces and very precarious employment situations. They do not want to have to make the choice of being able to work or study.

**Mr GEPP:** In terms of, though, our international students, I do not know and I would be interested in your thoughts on this: I think there is a bit of a mythology that runs around suggesting that because the international students have paid to come here to school—and we know how important the export product of higher education is to the state of Victoria—somehow they are free of all financial worries because there is mum and dad or somebody else somewhere in the world that is supporting their education. Is it your experience, though, that these students are also enduring the same sorts of financial difficulties?

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, absolutely. I would say that is a very common misconception, that because international students have to pay more to come here they are in a better financial position than domestic students. I think that is completely untrue. International students especially face more discrimination at work and can be less likely to be employed than domestic students. So we can even see recently the amount of international students that have needed help because of this crisis. They would definitely benefit from reduced fares.

**Mr GEPP:** Finally, you raised the issue of postgrad students, and I am particularly interested in that cohort. I do not know what percentage of undergrad and postgrad students there are at the University of Melbourne, but clearly your submission suggests that those people in particular are doing it very, very tough when it comes to money.

**Ms BUCHAN:** Yes, absolutely. I would say postgraduate studies are essentially like a full-time job. Students do not really have spare time to work if they want to do well in their studies, and it is quite unfair that they have to pay the full Myki fares even though they are studying even more than undergraduate students and just do not have time to do work on the side.

**The CHAIR:** If there are no further questions, Hannah, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**