

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

**INQUIRY INTO THE NEW SOUTH WALES
UNIVERSITY SECTOR**

CORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 12 June 2026

The Committee met at 9:20.

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine (Chair)

Ms Abigail Boyd
The Hon. Anthony D'Adam
The Hon. Taylor Martin
The Hon. Rachel Merton
The Hon. Bob Nanva

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Emily Suvaal

The CHAIR: Welcome to the seventh hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the New South Wales university sector. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Sarah Kaine, and I am the Chair of the Committee.

I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

I also raise with concern that over the course of the inquiry to date, Committee members have heard from a number of inquiry participants that they fear reprisals from senior leaders of universities because of their evidence to the Committee. We have also heard that witnesses have been questioned by university leaders about their evidence. I remind all observers to this inquiry, including senior university managers, to be very mindful of the actions they take and the discussions they have in respect of oral or written evidence given to this Committee. Senior managers should also be mindful that even if they do not intend for their actions to be threatening, they may be perceived as such by inquiry participants given the very sensitive context in which the inquiry is being conducted. I thank you for taking these matters seriously.

Professor RENÉE LEON, PSM, Vice-Chancellor and President, Charles Sturt University, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, Professor Leon, and thank you for making time to give evidence. Would you like to begin by making a short opening statement?

RENÉE LEON: Thank you for inviting me to appear and for undertaking this important inquiry. Universities support the economic prosperity and social wellbeing of the State, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to your work. Charles Sturt University plays a vital public purpose through our teaching, research and community engagement. We educate the future workforce on which regional communities depend, and we undertake research to solve the problems of regional Australia, the nation and the world. The regional areas we serve are struggling with chronic workforce shortages. Importantly, over 80 per cent of our regional students go on to live and work in regional Australia after graduating. In the last month, we have celebrated the graduating class of 2025, which included more than 900 nurses, midwives and Indigenous health practitioners; 1,600 teachers; more than 450 allied health professionals and 110 dentists, to name but a few. It also included the inaugural class of graduates of our medicine course, which was established in 2021 with the goal of providing more doctors for the bush.

All of these graduates are essential to the delivery of critical services in our communities, especially in education and health. Last year was the ninth consecutive year that Charles Sturt ranked first among all Australia's public universities for full-time postgraduate employment. We have seen continued growth in student satisfaction, placing Charles Sturt in the top five of Australia's public universities. But we do operate in a challenging environment, particularly in relation to funding and policy settings that do not reflect the realities of regional higher education delivery. Governments, particularly the Commonwealth, must ensure that regional universities are funded appropriately so we can continue to deliver for our communities without over-reliance on more volatile revenue streams, including international student fees.

We strive to offer a comprehensive course range at our campuses because, usually, there is no other university in our locations. I understand the Committee's focus on governance and management decision-making, and I welcome this opportunity to confirm that Charles Sturt University maintains very high standards in both. Our experienced senior executive team implements a coherent strategy in line with our university mission, and we are overseen by an active and engaged university council. We regularly review our governance structures and processes, including independent assessments every two years, and act promptly on any recommendations. Equally important to me is how we engage with and listen to our staff. Charles Sturt University remains committed to serving the people of regional New South Wales by delivering high-quality education and research and, in doing so, building stronger, more resilient communities. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Just before we begin, what is your academic discipline?

RENÉE LEON: Law.

The CHAIR: You are an academic in law?

RENÉE LEON: I've got a Bachelor of Arts from the Australian National University, a Bachelor of Laws from the Australian National University and a Master of International Law from Cambridge University in the UK.

The CHAIR: Your experience with higher education and higher education management and governance comes not from being an academic. You were on a university council somewhere? What was your experience in higher education prior to being vice-chancellor?

RENÉE LEON: My experience was as a long-serving public servant. I'm experienced in the management of large and complex organisations. I'm experienced in the regulatory settings of government and I'm experienced in policy. All of these have proved very valuable to Charles Sturt University.

The CHAIR: If I could start with the events of the last year or so, you've made some public commentary on the events. I think you came out saying that there needed to be \$35 million in savings found. As I understand it, that was meant to be across several tranches of organisational change, some of which I understand have been completed, others of which have not. Given the results that have now been reported in the 2025 annual report, which show an increase in revenue from both international students and domestic students, but also show a large spend on consultants and marketing, have you reviewed the savings that you need to make?

RENÉE LEON: We had an increase in international student revenue off what was a very low base the previous year. Sadly, it was not enough to close the revenue gap of the university, and it's clear from current

Government policy that it's unlikely that substantial growth in international student revenue is going to be available.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Professor Leon, the Auditor-General's report that came out yesterday shows a sustained increase over time in revenue from international students across pretty much all universities in New South Wales. That's despite several vice-chancellors sitting here over the course of this inquiry and suggesting that there was going to be a collapse in revenue from international students. If you could explain how you sit with that?

RENÉE LEON: I certainly can't speak for other vice-chancellors, but in relation to Charles Sturt I'm sad to say there has not been a sustained increase. Up until 2019 we had about 8½ thousand international students studying with the university, which delivered a net \$35 million to our bottom line. We currently have about 10 per cent of that number. We have a very small number of international students now, for a range of reasons. It means that our efforts to rebuild international student revenue have occurred at a time when Government policy at the Commonwealth level is disadvantageous to the regional university student cohort. There has been a sustained proportion of international student revenue that comes from Chinese students who have not been particularly hard hit by Government policy, but the Chinese student market goes primarily to the Group of Eight universities. The markets in which regional universities acquire students have been hard hit by Government policy.

The CHAIR: Your deficit this year was \$12 million. Your spend on consultants and marketing was closer to \$15 million. I'm not suggesting that \$3 million is a huge difference, but how do you justify that spend when you could have been in the black without such a spend particularly on consultants?

RENÉE LEON: Our consultant spend, as reported in the annual report, is just over \$10 million. Hardly any of that is for the management advisory consulting that I understand this Committee has been particularly interested in.

The CHAIR: I think in light of KPMG we're interested in everything.

RENÉE LEON: A substantial proportion of the money recorded as consultant spend is for technical services to enable our researchers to undertake the research that they do, where they have to outsource certain technical parts of the work to external firms. Then a substantial proportion of it is for expertise that we simply don't have and wouldn't keep. For example, the campuses where Charles Sturt is are mostly quite old. If we are doing any refurbishments to our buildings, we've had to get experts in to advise on heritage. That's not something that we keep on staff. We are—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt. Could you please provide on notice, as you and other universities used to do, a list of your consultant engagements since they were last reported in the annual report, which I think was in 2022? If we could have the list of those, that would be helpful to understand the scale of the expertise, as opposed to, you know, your KPMGs—do you engage KPMG at all?

RENÉE LEON: We have engaged KPMG on a very limited basis. We don't have them for management advisory services.

The CHAIR: Do you have them for audits?

RENÉE LEON: No, EY is our auditor.

The CHAIR: So you will provide us with details of both KPMG but also your consultant spend, as per previous annual reports. Other universities have named their change programs, for better or worse. It doesn't seem that you have but there was this \$35 million. I understand about \$7 million of that was recouped last year, which has left a balance. My understanding is that you haven't explained to the university community where the rest of those savings are going to come from. As I said, given the small deficit and the increasing revenues, are you still pursuing that total?

RENÉE LEON: I do just need to explain the deficit that you are referring to, which is reported as \$12 million. We received \$18 million in one-off revenue in 2025 that is not part of our future operating revenue; and so our actual ongoing deficit continues to be in the vicinity of \$30 million.

The CHAIR: Can you provide me on notice what is the exact figure you say your operating deficit is?

RENÉE LEON: For 2025, it would be \$30 million.

The CHAIR: Exactly \$30 million?

RENÉE LEON: It might be \$30.5 million. I am happy to clarify that on notice. The \$18 million comprised a substantial one-off spend from the Commonwealth for equity places that had been received in prior years and that were subject to reconciliation and clawback. Last year, the Commonwealth decided it wasn't able

to reconcile those figures and allowed universities to keep the amount. It was moved from our balance sheet back into our profit and loss statement. That comprised \$14 million that we won't get again. Then we had an accounting analysis done of the recognition of our research revenue, which identified about \$4 million that was on the balance sheet that should be recorded as revenue, not as pending revenue. That comprised \$18 million that we won't get in the future. So that \$18 million plus the \$12 million reported deficit means the actual structural deficit remains at \$30 million.

The CHAIR: I have been looking at annual reports of the universities since they were tabled. Were there any accounting changes that worked the other way which previously weren't expenses but were listed as expenses—intangible assets, for example? Are there any notable—

RENÉE LEON: Not notable. No.

The CHAIR: So there weren't any in the multimillion dollars that changed from asset to expense?

RENÉE LEON: No. You asked about the change program—and, no, it doesn't have a name. We have told staff that we have to get our budget back to a sustainable position and we are undertaking a series of changes to achieve that. Based on management's recommendation, we have the agreement of our council to do that over a phased period in the belief that it is better to work these changes up in a careful way and in consultation with staff than to just take a very large cut out in one year, which would risk us taking out staff without taking out work—something we don't want to do. We are doing this in a careful way by examining how we can reduce the actual activity of the university in ways that won't harm the performance of our mission and that will reduce workload commensurate with the reduction in staff numbers.

The CHAIR: And you haven't engaged any consultants to assist?

RENÉE LEON: Not to give us any advice on that. No. We engaged some contract labour to do logistics management for us, to keep track of how certain initiatives are proceeding and to do some detailed analysis of things like workflows. All of the recommendations and decisions about the direction of the change program are being undertaken by the senior management team ourselves.

The CHAIR: So is that UniForum? Have you engaged with Nous?

RENÉE LEON: We used UniForum benchmarking data to identify areas that would be worth looking at for efficiencies, but all of the looking at those areas is being done by the university itself, not by Nous.

The CHAIR: I'm going to ask one more question before I pass to my colleagues and I've got some more for later, which I'll put as a supplementary if we don't get to them. You still need to identify, according to you, \$30 million worth of savings. Is it true that you received a 7 per cent pay increase last year?

RENÉE LEON: No, 1 per cent.

The CHAIR: What is your salary?

RENÉE LEON: I'll just get the exact figures for you, Chair. I do just want to clarify that the change proposals so far have delivered \$7.5 million in 2025, so there's not still \$30 million to find.

The CHAIR: I understand that.

RENÉE LEON: I have already announced to staff this year a series of areas where we are working on change, including in engagement with staff. I've told staff that we expect that to deliver in the vicinity of \$14 million this year and that, as agreed with council, we have until the end of 2027 to achieve the balance. I've also said to staff and worked with staff to identify non-salary means of achieving that save. So of the \$7.5 million last year, \$2.5 million was from non-salary savings and some of those have been suggested to us by staff because we consulted extensively with staff to get their ideas on ways that we could achieve the savings without reducing salaries and we've got a range of further ideas suggested by staff—including leasing out buildings and consolidating buildings into a smaller space—that are going to achieve some of this year's save. We certainly are trying to minimise the impact on staff.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that. As you know, executive salaries are a bit of a sore point. It's hard to see from the outside how so many executives earn double or more than the Premier of the State or the Prime Minister, for that matter. In your submission, I think you say it would be marginal if you reduced executive pay. It might be marginal, but wouldn't it be a token to staff?

RENÉE LEON: Absolutely, and that is why last year, although the staff all received, in accordance with the enterprise agreement, a 3 per cent pay rise, we decided that the senior executive, including me, would only receive 1 per cent, so that's me and the entire senior executive only received 1 per cent last year.

The CHAIR: One per cent on a million bucks is a little different to 3 per cent on \$80,000.

RENÉE LEON: In addition, we've reduced the number of senior executives. So we took out about 16 senior roles last year. We are continuing to look at ways to make the structure less top heavy and to enable there to be more funding available for academics and for the front line. You asked about my salary, which is not \$1 million. My cash salary is \$797,000. On top of that, I receive superannuation of ninety-five.

The CHAIR: And bonuses?

RENÉE LEON: No.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Professor, thank you so much for your participation. In 2024 CSU changed its Governance (Academic Senate) Rule, removing the requirement that the majority of academic senate members be elected. I'm also aware that, as a consequence, there was also the removal of the role of scrutiny and evaluation of course offerings given the change to the senate election. I'm wondering if you wanted to comment on that?

RENÉE LEON: Yes. We do maintain a majority of academic members in the senate, quite clearly. At the time I arrived and prior to that, I think there had been a much larger number of ex officio members and so we have rebalanced that to ensure that there is a majority of senate members. The changes that you're referring to actually went through senate for their adoption with a majority of academic members present. They were voted on by the academics of the university. The changes that we made to the way in which the functions of senate are expressed were not in response to any action by management, but to an independent academic external review of the governance rules of the senate, which identified that a number of things that were in the senate's functions were actually functions that senate by itself cannot and does not perform; that some of those functions are actually performed by other parts of the university. The external review advised that the terms of reference be amended to properly reflect the actual functions of academic senate. That is how they're expressed. Those were also voted on and approved by academic senate.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Vice-Chancellor, just confirming that in terms of the governance arrangements and this change that no longer a majority of the academic senate members are elected. There's no longer a majority. They are appointed.

RENÉE LEON: No. They're elected. They're all elected, except that I attend academic senate. I'm not elected. I'm there ex officio, but the majority are elected academics.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Vice-Chancellor, in your opening statement you made this reference in terms of the university and its offering for rural, regional, out-of-metro students. I'm also aware that there has been an experience where we've seen the cancellation of on-campus offerings. Students are encouraged to study online. I'm just wondering how that meets that rural student, that regional offering with local campuses.

RENÉE LEON: I'm so glad you've asked this question. We have such a commitment to our regional communities, and it pains us to our souls to have to cut courses that we know would be valuable in regional Australia. We really hope that one of the outcomes of this inquiry will be that the New South Wales Parliament and the New South Wales Government advocates to the Commonwealth to fund regional universities in a way that isn't treating us as if we were the same as a city university. It costs us much more to deliver regionally. Furthermore, because we operate in thin markets, it's very difficult to achieve the number of students per course per campus that would enable us to deliver the course within the inadequate funding that the Commonwealth provides. Because we are in such a difficult financial position—due to mainly the loss of international student revenue—we can't afford to keep offering in-person all of the courses on all of our campuses that we would like to offer. We only reduce them when they fall below a level that's financially viable and we absolutely wish we didn't have to.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Was consideration given to possibly cost-cutting arrangements in other areas of the university to maintain that campus student offering?

RENÉE LEON: That is what we're doing now. That is the change program we're embarked upon just so we won't have to go any deeper into course cuts. The change program we are undertaking now, we've told staff, will be mostly impacting professional and general staff—not that we don't value every single thing they do—but we are trying as much as possible to avoid cuts to courses and cuts to academic staff, that being our core mission as a university. Obviously our professional staff support our academics and support our students, so we are seeking to do the change program in a way that provides services more efficiently and effectively, rather than reducing those services objectively.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Vice-Chancellor, I note in your submission there's a long list of all the course offerings. I'm just wondering, in light of the cancellation of on-campus offerings and the move to online, would we be able to get an idea of what's no longer offered on campus?

RENÉE LEON: Yes, certainly. I should say in relation to online, the majority of our students are choosing online because it suits their lifestyle. Many of our students are mature age rather than school leavers, and they already have families and jobs and other responsibilities. About two-thirds of our students are online because that flexibility suits their needs. We're proud that it means we can offer a higher education degree to people who live outside our footprint as well, including much further west even than the Central West.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I'm absolutely aware of the flexibility.

The Hon. TAYLOR MARTIN: Thank you for being here this morning, Professor. In your submission, just on the very first page, there's a cover letter that you've signed. There's one particular point you've made, if you're able to elaborate on. You mentioned "chronic and systemic underfunding and overregulation, frequently poorly thought-out policy changes". Are you able to elaborate a bit more on your experience, and Charles Sturt's experience, with those factors?

RENÉE LEON: In relation to "poorly thought-out policy changes", there's been a substantial change to international student intake, driven primarily by migration outcomes, without any real consideration by the Commonwealth Government about how the \$12 billion to \$13 billion of revenue that funds the higher education sector is going to be replaced if international students are being discouraged. Changes were made to the visa settings that, in effect, enabled the richest universities to continue to bring in high numbers of international students, because they only really affected the non-Chinese market, on which all of the poorest universities depend. That's the kind of poorly thought-out policy change. I think I attached to my submission a list of all of the regulation that we have to comply with. That continues to increase. What it means is that we employ more and more of our staff engaged in reporting rather than in providing services to students and academics. I'm pleased that the Commonwealth has established a Better Regulation Working Group, but regrettably its terms of reference exclude all the existing legislation.

The Hon. TAYLOR MARTIN: Yes, I can see it in the appendix that's provided—pages and pages.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Thank you for your attendance today. I'm interested in the numbers that you just cited. Two-thirds of your students are online. So one-third are on campus. Is that right?

RENÉE LEON: That's right.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Of that one-third, what proportion are international students?

RENÉE LEON: It's quite a small number. We have one of the smallest numbers of international students in the sector. I'll just get the exact number for you. In 2025 our onshore international students were 4.5 per cent of our total onshore enrolments. They are nearly all in-person students, because of the settings under CRICOS that require those students to be in person.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: What does that work out to be in terms of the proportion of the on-campus students?

RENÉE LEON: Our on-campus students are 12,242. We have about 1,600 international students. It's quite a small proportion.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Of the on-campus students, what proportion of those are drawn from rural and regional New South Wales?

RENÉE LEON: Nearly 50 per cent. No, of the on-campus ones it's a much greater proportion. Sorry, I will have to get that number for you, because our online students also include a proportion who are not in our regional footprint. I might have to take that on notice, the proportion of our regional on-campus students who come from the regions.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Did you relocate to take on the position?

RENÉE LEON: Yes, I relocated to Bathurst.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Is accommodation part of the package that you're offered?

RENÉE LEON: Yes. I pay rent for a house that's provided by the university.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So the university owns your house and you pay rent to them?

RENÉE LEON: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How's that rent determined?

RENÉE LEON: There's a market assessment that's undertaken by the university secretary supporting the nomination and remuneration committee.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So it's at the market rate?

RENÉE LEON: That's correct.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I wanted to ask you about the governance process. Your university council, does it hold open meetings?

RENÉE LEON: Open to the public?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Yes.

RENÉE LEON: No.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: They're closed meetings?

RENÉE LEON: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: What about the minutes of the meetings? Are they made public?

RENÉE LEON: We provide a summary of the council deliberations publicly and on our website.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: A summary? So the full minutes aren't—

RENÉE LEON: I have now undergone a process this year with the university secretary that has been approved at the most recent meeting of council to increase the amount of detail that's provided in those minutes, and to only remove parts that are commercial in confidence. From the April record, you will see that they are a more detailed set of minutes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: In terms of the composition of the council, what's the balance between appointed versus elected members?

RENÉE LEON: It is as set out in the Charles Sturt University Act, the New South Wales Act. At the moment it's about 46 per cent, I think, appointed.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How big's the council, sorry?

RENÉE LEON: Fifteen. They're all quite large compared to boards, but that is because of the requirements of the Act. We try to keep it small enough to be effective, but large enough to encompass all of the skills that are required to run the organisation, including people from regional areas, people with academic background, people with financial and legal experience, and people with broader research and industry experience.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So since you've been appointed, which is what, 2021—is that right?

RENÉE LEON: That's correct.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How many of the appointed members have you had a role in the selection of?

RENÉE LEON: I don't select the members of council.

The CHAIR: But the university appoints—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The university appoints—

RENÉE LEON: Do you mean me personally or the university?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I'm curious about the process of how the university determines or recommends, as the case may be, who gets appointed to the council and those appointed positions.

RENÉE LEON: The university engages a headhunter, a recruitment agency. We share with them where we are up to with our skills matrix, as to whether there's particular skills that we need on the council. Then the recruitment firm will go out and seek people from the whole field of available non-executive directors of people who meet those criteria. For instance, due to a rollover of people who had financial expertise, we recently identified that we needed to get a new member with financial expertise so we've appointed to council the former manager of the Hume Bank in Albury. People who've got who've got relevant expertise are—a shortlist is brought by the independent recruiting firm to a selection committee set up by the nomination and remuneration committee. I have been a member of some of those selection committees, but the ultimate decision is made by council.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So it's not a fixed committee? The composition of the selection committee changes?

RENÉE LEON: It changes depending on membership of the nomination and remuneration committee.

The CHAIR: Are there any elected representatives on that committee?

RENÉE LEON: We've had the chair of academic senate who represents the academic part.

The CHAIR: But they're on council as the chair of academic senate, not as the elected representative?

RENÉE LEON: That's right.

The CHAIR: You don't have any elected people on the remuneration committee?

RENÉE LEON: No. We have the chair of academic senate, for instance, sitting on the selection committee at the moment for the new chancellor.

The CHAIR: Do you have elected representatives, as opposed to the chair of the senate which is different, on any of your audit and risk or other committees?

RENÉE LEON: No.

The CHAIR: You don't have any elected representatives on the committee?

RENÉE LEON: We have two staff representatives on council and one student representative on council.

The CHAIR: And none of them are on committees?

RENÉE LEON: No.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So there's only three elected people on the council? That's not—

RENÉE LEON: We are in line with the Act.

The CHAIR: That's not 46 per cent.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Yes, that's not 46 per cent. Coming back to this question about the elected members, the three members, what committees do they sit on?

RENÉE LEON: They're not on any of the committees.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Why is that?

RENÉE LEON: It's quite a heavy workload being on council. One of our staff members who didn't stand for appointment again this time, indicated that the workload was one of the reasons for that. I think if we asked them to be on the committees as well, we'd have even less success attracting members on. But of course, everything that comes from the committees goes up through council. They do get an opportunity then to comment on it. I can say the elected members do, in fact, comment and make observations and input to the discussions at council on matters that have come up from the committees.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I think it's safe to say that the strategic decisions that are made by governing bodies, most of those are thrashed out in a committee process. The fact that there are no elected members on those committees really suggests that they're not actually in the room where key decisions are being developed and made. Certainly they are in the process in terms of ratifying those decisions when they finally come to the governing council for final approval, but do they get release time to participate in—

RENÉE LEON: I'd like to assure you that the way our council operates is that the strategic decisions are taken at council and the committees are focused much more on the routine and compliance issues. We don't just have council operating as a rubber stamp for strategic decisions. The strategic decisions are actually taken at council, whereas audit and risk will—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: A strategic decision like appointing the chancellor is a pretty important decision. That's not being made at council. The actual recommendation is being determined through the selection committee, right?

RENÉE LEON: Yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: It's not necessarily true that the strategic decisions are all made in the council. I've been on boards. You don't make the decisions in the meeting; the decisions are made before the meeting.

RENÉE LEON: Not at Charles Sturt.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: And the board provides the formal approval.

RENÉE LEON: That is not the case at Charles Sturt.

The CHAIR: The change process that you've been going through and you've said is an ongoing process, there are going to be lots of things coming up and you haven't had external advice, you've had some analysis—you've presented to the whole council on the next tranches of those changes?

RENÉE LEON: Yes. I presented to the whole council on the overall change program last year before we embarked upon it in detail and they were already well informed by our regular reporting to council and have had views about the financial position of the university and the steps that we should take, and at each meeting of council I update them on progress against the change program and the next steps that will be taken.

The CHAIR: Is that considered first at the finance committee?

RENÉE LEON: Yes.

The CHAIR: You go to the finance committee?

RENÉE LEON: I do.

The CHAIR: So you go to the finance committee, you brief the finance committee, decisions are taken in the finance committee—

RENÉE LEON: Not decisions.

The CHAIR: Why do you have a finance committee? You have a finance committee that does what? What do they do, if they don't send recommendations?

RENÉE LEON: They send recommendations, but they don't make decisions.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: That is still a decision, isn't it? To recommend something to the board is still a decision. It's incorrect to describe it as not making a decision.

RENÉE LEON: They make a recommendation.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Which is a decision.

RENÉE LEON: I can assure you that council itself considers and discusses—and certainly considered and discussed—the issues about the financial sustainability of the university and the proposed change program. There was no element of rubber stamp about the way council approached that.

The CHAIR: Can I follow up on two parts of that. If the finance committee doesn't make a decision—it's a recommendation—does that mean that the same discussion is then had at the council? You would then have to put all of the information in front of the council because a recommendation is such that it narrows down all of the options to make a recommendation. If you're saying you don't make a decision of excluding information at that finance meeting, then you have to take all of that information back to the council meeting and prosecute all of those arguments again. Is that correct?

RENÉE LEON: The way we divide up the work of the council and its committees is that more routine matters will be considered in detail at the committee and then, for those more routine matters, it will be just a summary of those that goes to council. For more significant matters—

The CHAIR: But you've said recommendations go to council.

RENÉE LEON: Yes, but for more routine matters you won't need to re-put all of the detail to council because it is relatively routine and compliance based and not something that needs a strategic discussion. For more significant matters like the financial sustainability of the university we would—and we do—put much more of the base information to council so that they can have a full discussion. The way we've divided up the work—when I arrived, council meetings used to go for absolutely hours and hours going through lots of routine detail and so we have, with an external governance expert, separated the work out into the more routine, which can be looked at in detail by committees and then just a summary and recommendation goes to council. That has freed up the time of council so that it can have a proper discussion about big, strategic issues. That includes, of course, the financial sustainability of the university. Then we do benefit from a broader range of voices around the table by having a discussion at the full council about the options that are available and the ways that we can get back to sustainability. That's been a discussion that we've been having every year with council because the university has been experiencing deficits for a number of years, and that can't go on.

The CHAIR: Can I ask a question going back to the finances. You spoke about the comparatively small international student intake. Do you use education agents?

RENÉE LEON: Yes, we do.

The CHAIR: Can you, maybe on notice, let us know how much you spend on education agents?

RENÉE LEON: Yes.

The CHAIR: It would also be really good to have a list of who those education agents are.

RENÉE LEON: I'll take that on notice. I should say, of course, agents are paid on a commission basis, so they get paid based on how much revenue—we always earn more than we pay them.

The CHAIR: Sure. It's kind of how effective they are, though, isn't it? In terms of the marketing, that's separate to your education agents.

RENÉE LEON: Marketing is primarily to market the university to domestic students. That's how we attract students. We have one of the lowest marketing spends per student in New South Wales and in the sector. We are very efficient about how we spend on marketing. But if you don't market yourself at all, you won't have any students.

The CHAIR: I don't know. I thought reading your op-ed that your whole go was you're the one across the great divide, so that's where people, by default, go. I understand—

RENÉE LEON: You'd be interested to know then that just a couple of weeks ago we had the University of Sydney in Bathurst recruiting for students. Sadly, we can't just assume everyone will come to us just because we're there.

The CHAIR: Our time has ended. We very much appreciate you making the time to be here in person. Thank you for that. I have no doubt there will be supplementary questions and I think we asked you to take some on notice, so we do appreciate that.

(The witness withdrew.)

Mr BILL PARASIRIS, Chief Operating Officer, Western Sydney University, sworn and examined

Mr MARIO MILANOVIC, Interim Chief Financial Officer, Western Sydney University, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for making time available to come and speak with the Committee today. We do appreciate it. Would you like to begin by making short statements?

BILL PARASIRIS: No, we're good to begin. Thank you.

The CHAIR: A question has come to mind. "COO" and "CFO"—both changed mid last year. Was there something in particular that happened? Were there further changes in the C-suite that went on? It just seems like a big change in one go in this area.

BILL PARASIRIS: The COO position became available in May last year and changed in May last year. Our acting CFO, or vice-president - finances and operations, at the time chose to retire towards the end of last year, so we put an interim CFO in place at the time.

The CHAIR: And you're now no longer interim, Mr Milanovic? Or are you still interim?

MARIO MILANOVIC: Yes, still in the interim acting role.

The CHAIR: If I could begin by asking you about Reset, I think it's called, could you explain to me what Reset is?

BILL PARASIRIS: Reset was a program that we undertook at the beginning of last year, when we had an indication of where we were heading over the next two years and how we had tracked over the previous couple of years in respect to operations. It also undertook a detailed review of the university's overall operational plan and how fit for purpose we were, looking into the future, with respect to our workforce, the positions and the people we had in place to deliver the outcomes we wanted to deliver as part of our mission and our obligations to Western Sydney.

The CHAIR: So it was a review? It wasn't an action plan. You've made it sound like that was a review of positions.

BILL PARASIRIS: It was part of an action plan, but it was a detailed review in the initial period to understand where we were currently, operationally, and where we needed to head to ensure the viability and sustainability of the university.

The CHAIR: Who undertook the review?

BILL PARASIRIS: The university did. We established a team that reported through a formal governance structure and reported up through to the relevant subcommittees and the board of trustees, ultimately.

The CHAIR: Who was on the team?

BILL PARASIRIS: The team was led by, in-house, myself as one of the team members. But people from finance, from HR, from the academic side of the business and from various parts of the business were part of the team that headed up that review initially.

The CHAIR: So there wasn't any external support given to that team?

BILL PARASIRIS: No. There was specialised skill set and resourcing support that was given to help with the workload.

The CHAIR: And what is that?

BILL PARASIRIS: Sorry?

The CHAIR: What is that, a specialised skill—can you be a bit more specific?

BILL PARASIRIS: Additional contingent labour to help take on the additional workload that was required, and there was a specialised skill set in respect to enabling to pull together data but also to inform what future workload looks like.

The CHAIR: Are we talking things like UniForum or Pilbara Group?

BILL PARASIRIS: Neither of those two were part of the process of this Reset.

The CHAIR: Could you actually give me names? Contingent labour—was it just people casually employed from the street? Was there a hiring group? Was there a labour hire agency? Was there a consultant group?

BILL PARASIRIS: It was a variety of people, from Hays recruitment services through to Org Advisory and Managed Solutions, and other such services.

The CHAIR: Could you please provide on notice the list?

BILL PARASIRIS: Yes, I am happy to actually table the list of all consultants—the top 30. We had that ready today.

The CHAIR: Fabulous. When you were talking about having a look at where you were heading, I'd like a bit more understanding. From what I understand, there were claims made in early 2025 about the position of the university which suggested, I guess, a particular course of action. Subsequently, student figures were different and the circumstances were different, so then it changed quite considerably. Can you take us through that? You get this review that says, "Dire straits. You have to do something, university management"—that's the narrative we have pretty much everywhere. You say you've got to do something, then you find out that student figures aren't as bad as you thought or maybe finances aren't as bad as you thought. Can you talk me through it?

BILL PARASIRIS: I won't take away from some of the evidence that will be given further today. We reached out and engaged with our people early last year and it was a big call-out—

The CHAIR: Who is "our people"?

BILL PARASIRIS: Our community, our staff, our students in respect to the services that were being provided. There was a big call-out about how things were being difficult, how people were being hampered in delivering their roles and their functions, how the workload and requirements were not aligned—whether it be position descriptions or skill sets in relevant areas. At the same time, yes, we talk about the volatility that all universities face with the changing Federal funding and regulatory requirements. I'm not sure about the claim about financing numbers not being correct but there was change to the forecasts due to enrolment numbers and funding, which also had us look at what we needed to do in respect to ensuring financial sustainability and reducing our cost base. That was part of the review but was not solely why we went and undertook the Reset program.

The CHAIR: What was the justification then? I used to work at a university and, as I understand it, you have forecasts and census dates and there can be big variation. You sit that out because you have no idea what's going to happen. You wouldn't base forecasts, I presume, before a census date? You didn't do that, did you?

BILL PARASIRIS: No, you have to forecast pre-census date to be ready for students to come in on enrolment day. If you didn't forecast that, you wouldn't be ready in multiple ways to be able to—

The CHAIR: No, that's different isn't it. Forecasting for potential service provision is different to forecasting what your deficit is going to be the following year. That's quite different.

BILL PARASIRIS: Yes, we did forecast based on data and trends. As the Committee would be aware, changes in regulations saw a significant shift in the number of students, both internationally and domestically, that took up places. We also saw a significant shift, especially for Western Sydney, in the average load a student took. There were multiple things that changed. Cost of living put significant pressure on students which meant a large proportion of our students were taking less load because they had to work to get through day to day.

The CHAIR: Perhaps if I can just distil it down before there will be questions from my colleagues. What was the key problem that Reset was designed to solve, and did that stay as the key problem? Did you articulate a key problem—I am saying "you", sorry. Did the team articulate a key problem at the start of Reset and did that change? What was it designed to solve and did that change over time?

BILL PARASIRIS: It was designed to resolve what we needed to do to deliver efficient services to our community, being our students, our staff and the broader community of Western Sydney—to make sure we were fit for purpose for the future and to ensure that our ongoing cost base was fit for purpose and relevant for sustainability. That has stayed the same throughout; however, the main key priority was that we would work through what we could to ensure that as many people, and everyone who wanted a role at Western Sydney, got a role, if that's where we are trying to get to.

The CHAIR: I wonder if this is a take on notice thing—the "fit for purpose" and "do what we're designed to do" is hard for someone from the outside to know what that actually means. If you have got any documents or presentations about what you said when you were trying to be "fit for purpose" or to "deliver on our efficiencies"—

what efficiencies are we talking about and what purpose are we talking about and how was that articulated? I know you guys are in it, but for us on the outside it's hard to know exactly what that refers to.

BILL PARASIRIS: Definitely can do that and also provide the numerous consultation sessions that we had with our people to help inform the end results.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: How much has the university spent on redundancy?

MARIO MILANOVIC: In 2025, we spent circa \$74 million.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That was how many redundancies?

MARIO MILANOVIC: It was approximately positions of about 170.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Forgive my ignorance, how many more redundancies are in the works? Are there more?

MARIO MILANOVIC: No.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: No? Because there was talk at one point of there being 300 or 400 potential redundancies.

BILL PARASIRIS: When we first undertook the process, yes. It was as bad as up to 400 positions were needed. But with the work that the Reset team did to identify all savings and all efficiencies we were able to bring that down to that significantly better number. I want to highlight that at the end of the day all redundancies were to people that volunteered for a redundancy; there were no forced redundancies.

The CHAIR: On notice, could you provide to the Committee the list of the savings that weren't redundancies?

BILL PARASIRIS: We definitely can.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Were there consultants involved in the Reset program, and which consultants were there?

BILL PARASIRIS: As I mentioned earlier, the consultants I talked about earlier that helped assist with specialised skill set and with contingent labour support were involved in that team so we wouldn't put extra burden on our teams, but they did not lead any part of the program.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: How much was the cost of those consultants?

BILL PARASIRIS: We've tabled that because there's a break-up in different areas.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I might have to have a look at that document. I don't know if I've got that. In the report that came out yesterday from the Auditor-General in relation to university finances—

BILL PARASIRIS: Sorry, it was \$1.3 million.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you, that's very useful. Western Sydney University has the equal largest number of council-appointed members on its university council, which is almost half of them. Why is that?

BILL PARASIRIS: I'll have to take that question on notice or ask that question of our vice-chancellor. It's not something I'm—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: All right, thank you. Looking at the spend on the top 30 consultants, KPMG is there at \$2.67 million. What would that entail?

BILL PARASIRIS: If you turn over the page, there is a description there.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Does that cost include individuals you've brought into the team as contractors or just consultant costs?

BILL PARASIRIS: It would include both.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of the governance, I understand there is a board of trustees of 18 members. Of the 18 members, what is the breakdown between appointed and elected?

BILL PARASIRIS: Again, I'd take that on notice or ask that question of our vice-chancellor this afternoon. That's not part of what we are responsible for and do. We could probably answer it, but it probably won't be an accurate answer.

The CHAIR: If I can go back to the specifics of Reset, how many redundancies were there in the end?

BILL PARASIRIS: About 170. If you give me a moment, I'll give you the exact—

MARIO MILANOVIC: It was 187.

The CHAIR: How were those decisions arrived at?

BILL PARASIRIS: We worked closely with our union at the time where we made a commitment to all our staff that wanted a job that we would guarantee and ensure a job. We went through a process of sending out an expression of interest asking which staff would be interested in potentially taking up an option of redundancy. There were some conditions around that. We had a list of a number of people who put their hand up. We then reviewed those requests, depending on whether they met the criteria and also whether we required that particular function to continue to be there, to make a decision on whether that was accepted or not. Obviously, we could not make redundant positions where the functions that were being served were required to be continued to be served for the university.

The Hon. TAYLOR MARTIN: Briefly back on the consultant spend, just looking quickly at the second page and the top two consultants, it seems that it's very much data heavy. How much would you say that's in relation to the data breach incident last year, and how much may have happened otherwise? Is it fair to say that there is over \$4 million spent addressing the data breach?

BILL PARASIRIS: Correct. It is fair to say that. I just would like to call out that those costs were not part of our decisions on efficiencies. One-off costs like those we did not put into targeted efficiencies because we knew they were one-off costs and we would carry those costs without impacting our people.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: You've mentioned a few times efficiencies in the process of research—

BILL PARASIRIS: Efficiencies can be process as well, not just dollars.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I'm just interested, with respect to looking for efficiencies, how did you actually collect the evidence to determine where those efficiencies can be found? Did you look at the actual work that was being performed by the people that were ultimately made redundant? Did you rely on job descriptions?

BILL PARASIRIS: In the first instance, what we undertook was to look at the university's cost base minus people and undertook a review line by line about every cost base, whether it be cleaning, refurbishing and other, and found savings in all those areas in the first instance, if we looked at that. Then what we did do is look at work requirements and workload that's needed to deliver minimum core services for teaching, learning and research. We mapped those against positions and against position descriptions and reset what that looked like in each business unit and each area to understand what we would require to be delivering on our mission and core purpose, which then informed what had happened.

We talk about these redundancies, but we should also talk about the fact that we recreated nearly 500 new roles where people within the organisation either applied or were placed in those roles where we saw transferable skills that they undertook. We committed to development and training in those new roles to our people so that they could perform those duties in those new roles. There was a significant shift over and above what we were focused on here today about the redundancies. There was a shifting and ensuring that the workforce was ready for the changes that we were making to ensure we delivered teaching and learning in the way that our students and community were asking for.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: To just take a very superficial view of the work performed by the 190-odd that were made redundant, you would accept that sometimes the work that people do does not immediately marry up to the job description that they were attached to.

BILL PARASIRIS: Correct.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: It could be larger; it could be smaller. Were you confident in making those positions redundant that you then didn't need to source those skills in via contractors or outsourcing those roles?

BILL PARASIRIS: We were. What we did is each area got asked to map those duties and show how they would be performed or—

The Hon. BOB NANVA: What did the mapping look like? What did that involve?

BILL PARASIRIS: We individually looked at the person performed A, B and C duties as informed by that individual. We mapped to see where—

The Hon. BOB NANVA: As informed by the individuals?

BILL PARASIRIS: Consulted, yes. Then it was mapped against "Was it sitting somewhere else? Was it going to continue? Did it stop and could it be managed?" In saying that, as you could say, it was done to the

best of the knowledge. We had, at arm's length, our audit and risk team review those mappings, and we've been monitoring that on a monthly basis to see how that's tracking. We are now about to undertake a post-implementation review to see, "Have we met those requirements? What have we missed, and what changes can we make?" Our EBA allows us to do that, to make sure that if we have missed something or something hasn't been picked up, we can make those changes and it's done. I can say here today that early on in the piece we did see some requirements in respect to some of the student-facing services that were being delivered to our students, and we saw that there was a couple of items missed. We put in more people in those frontline services facing people to help to support and to make sure that we delivered on what we promised.

The CHAIR: The evaluation that you're going to undertake, is that being undertaken by people who weren't involved in the implementation?

BILL PARASIRIS: It's being reviewed independently, at arm's length, by our internal audit and risk office, which is line two and three. What will happen is the business units will do a review, and there will be questionnaires, and we'll take the union's survey as well, as part of that. There will be questionnaires that will be sent to it, as we are required to under the EBA, to allow staff and the unions—for them to inform where they feel we haven't met the requirements. Off the back of that, then we would have to map how we either accept that it is true and what we're doing to resolve those issues, or what we're doing to change to meet the requirements that we need to meet. Then that happens through a formal process. We respond and say, "We've heard these issues. This is what we're proposing," before it's finalised and closed out.

The CHAIR: Your audit and risk team weren't involved in the original implementation?

BILL PARASIRIS: They were involved in ensuring that the mapping against the positions was true and correct, and that it met the minimum guardrails, and also controls were in place to ensure that things weren't falling over.

The CHAIR: Who do they report to? Mr Milanovic?

BILL PARASIRIS: No, they don't report to either one of us. They actually have a direct line of report to the audit and risk subcommittee of the board of trustees.

The CHAIR: You won't be able to tell me if there are any elected members on the audit and risk committee?

BILL PARASIRIS: I'll take that on notice.

The CHAIR: I'm not trying to put you on the spot.

BILL PARASIRIS: I'm just picturing the members, that's all.

The CHAIR: I note that we've just said that you're not here about board issues. We'll stick with that. I do want to go back to the original diagnosis. When it was presented either to the board of trustees or to staff, what was the scale of the financial situation? What was reported to the board and staff about what was going to be needed, and why?

BILL PARASIRIS: At that point of time, the forecast had us needing to identify about \$74.5 million worth of savings overall for 2026.

The CHAIR: So \$74 million. As I understand it, early on, there was a lot of concern about this amount, but that then changed and it stopped being such an ongoing concern. As I understand it, the operating deficit which was understood at the time of that review is much the same as the operating deficit is now, which I think is about \$10 million. What was the difference between what happened last year and what's happening now? Is there still \$73 million, even though the operating deficit seems to be the same?

BILL PARASIRIS: We ended up with an operating deficit of \$10 million in 2025. At this point of time, for 2026, we're looking at a surplus of closer to \$2 million, without reflecting an operating deficit of \$10 million this year.

The CHAIR: Yes, but I understand that last year, during the town hall meetings about the Reset, the operating deficit was known then to be about \$10 million. That's what the vice-chancellor said. I'm just trying to understand if I'm missing something because it seems like the underlying conditions are the same but the narrative around it is quite different. I wondered if there's something that I'm missing on that.

MARIO MILANOVIC: Thank you for the question. I just wanted to reiterate the point that Bill had made. We obviously did a lot of planning and so forth around Reset. It wasn't just simply a cost-cutting exercise, as you would expect. It was a reconfiguration, if you like, of our business and what we needed. That was on the back of the fact that we run forecasts and budgets over rolling periods. From what you would have seen, and

you've obviously got information there around the town halls, at that time we had a budgeted \$10 million deficit for 2025. But when we did the first census, that had grown to a \$25 million deficit for the year of 2025. But our forward projections, including that, were showing, as quoted in town halls, that we were looking at a \$250 million deficit over four to five years for each year. That is what led us to take a position at the organisation and say, "We need to now undertake a Reset review." They are the numbers.

The CHAIR: What was misforecast so dramatically? If you're talking over those rolling years, there was a \$250 million—what had to be revised?

MARIO MILANOVIC: If I can, as we've mentioned before, I think we're starting to realise the impacts of JRG, the impacts of the government funding, the capping on our internationals. All of that is part of our mix and forecasting. We've known our cost structures and we know the services that we provide. When we talk about revise, just to quote you, I don't think there was a "misstatement". This was just how we, as an organisation, forward forecast all the time. We had identified that.

BILL PARASIRIS: Chair, I would say if we didn't undertake the work we did, we would have realised what we forecast.

The CHAIR: So 180-odd redundancies and the \$2 million or \$3 million you've identified as "other savings" saved that?

BILL PARASIRIS: It was more than \$2 million or \$3 million in other savings.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I thought that was what you said earlier.

BILL PARASIRIS: No. It was significantly more than that.

The CHAIR: Sorry, that was my mistake not meaning to verbal you there.

BILL PARASIRIS: It was in excess of \$23 million.

The CHAIR: I wanted to ask a bit more about both the contracting, the consulting and the tenders. I also wanted to ask—you started in May last year. You came from where?

BILL PARASIRIS: I was in the university. I was vice-president of commercial, in operations prior—

The CHAIR: In the university?

BILL PARASIRIS: Yes, correct.

The CHAIR: And Mr Milanovic, you were within the university as well?

MARIO MILANOVIC: Yes, that's right.

The CHAIR: Of the consulting groups that we see here for last year, are there any people now working in the chancellery or in senior executive positions that were previously, or did become, employees of the university?

BILL PARASIRIS: No.

The CHAIR: There weren't?

BILL PARASIRIS: I do not believe that there were any people that were involved in any of these services provided that are now full-time employees of the university.

The CHAIR: Now or for a period of time?

BILL PARASIRIS: I would have to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: I think we've already had reference to the Auditor-General's report that was tabled yesterday. One of the concerns that the Auditor-General had was that there seemed to be a large number of consultant contracts entered into without going to tender. I just wondered what your policy was and—you might have to take it on notice—did these all go to tender?

BILL PARASIRIS: I can answer that question. All procurement that was undertaken for consultancies, other than cyber, were done via a tender process. However, during what we call the crisis, a significant crisis, we had to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all our community that potentially had their data breached. We had to react and we were appointing dedicated skill set, based on availability and resources from a couple of consultancies, to help us respond to the crisis and police action that was taking place at the time.

The CHAIR: So that would have been KPMG?

BILL PARASIRIS: It was not just KPMG. It was KPMG, it was CrowdStrike, it was CyberCX, it was Deloitte and some others. It was multiple services. It still complied under the emergency procurement processes that we have, which are also in line with treasury's emergency procurement processes.

The CHAIR: Could we get a list of those who were engaged on that crisis basis?

BILL PARASIRIS: You definitely can.

The CHAIR: That would be good. One of the other areas of concern—and it might come to you two or you might direct me to others—from the Auditor-General was personal interest disclosures. There seemed to be a ridiculously large number, across the university sector, of people who were benefiting from university contracts without disclosing them. I just wondered, what's your process? Have you seen the Auditor-General's report and thought, "We should have a look at this?"

BILL PARASIRIS: A bit of both. What we can say is that we do undertake an annual review of senior staff to make those disclosures. What we've also now said is we will undertake an annual process and attestation over and above, off the back of the Auditor-General's recommendations, to make sure that we capture on an annual basis. We will do independent testing, as recommended by the Auditor-General, to pick up anything in the event that something isn't disclosed. We've taken that on board but we do currently undertake an annual review—we're getting tighter on it.

The CHAIR: Just on the consultants again, I know there is a Treasurer's directive which doesn't require disclosure, but some universities have voluntarily disclosed this kind of information in their reports. Some haven't. You may or may not know that it's a recommendation in our interim report that that changes. Would you be prepared to include this again? I understand you did disclose in earlier years so was it just "We don't have to anymore, so we're not going to."? It doesn't seem like best practice.

BILL PARASIRIS: No, it was a decision made that we kept our reporting in line with the mandatory requirements. However, given we've brought this to the table here today—we've taken the interim report and we've done a full review of the interim report. We are accepting the recommendations of the interim report, and we'll be ensuring we put in place recommendations of the interim report into the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you, I appreciate that. Thank you for letting us know that. That is good to hear.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I ask, in relation to—sorry, I'm still digesting this table—the PwC amount there of almost a million dollars, is that in relation to the wage theft remediation?

BILL PARASIRIS: Not exclusively. There would be some of it—most of it would be pay confidence.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The building pay confidence program, I understand it's more than doubled its provision for wage theft in the last year.

BILL PARASIRIS: Correct.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Why is that?

BILL PARASIRIS: When we undertook a detailed review, which I have been apologetic to our people about—I apologised numerous times. We made a commitment that we will remedy more than the minimum requirements as required by the regulator. We asked that we do a detailed review so we could ensure that we got it right and that we paid back anything that was incorrectly paid. In that review that was undertaken, that was identified, including a decision that was made to take payments back beyond the minimum six years and take it back to the EBA in that time. We upped our provision for those purposes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Okay, so you now owe, you think, about \$29 million in wages that weren't paid?

BILL PARASIRIS: Correct, as we understand today, but that process continues. It's going to be a long process to get it right but, to the best of our knowledge, that is where we stand today.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I know you're not alone among universities in relation to wage theft and underpayment of staff, but when you owe \$29 million, we think, in wages, you've given a lot to consultants—I understand that not all of that million to PwC is actually in relation to this particularly, but in 2025 it looks like you paid no remediation payments at all. From an outsider's perspective, looking in, you've got all these people who are waiting for their money that they're owed. They're not being paid and the provision is going up. Why are they not being paid?

BILL PARASIRIS: Firstly, we did correct the base rate in 2025 in November. We rectified the annual payments—annual salaries divided by hours and so forth. There's a discrepancy and the regulator still doesn't have a fixed position on what that should be like, so we took a position that was safe, over and above. We remediated

that in November of last year. The reason why we didn't do any further remediation is because the calculations—making sure we got it right—were still being undertaken. That means going through numerous datasets, multiple files and multiple calculations to make sure that we didn't remediate multiple times. We have, I can say, commenced remediation where those items are done, and we do have a detailed program and commitment which we'll be communicating, and have been communicating, to our staff—how we'll be undertaking that process over the coming years.

The one thing the board has instructed is that we remediate when we know and not wait until we know the totality of each individual, so we'll be doing that. The other thing we are doing is also working with the ATO because this remediation could have an impact on some of our people being pushed over certain thresholds which will eliminate their entitlements to some subsidies like child care and health care. We're working with the ATO so that we make sure that that doesn't have an impact on that as well, and that it is taxed at a bracket that ensures that our people are no worse off, even though they'll receive these back payments. We're committed to getting this right. We're apologetic for what's happened. We want to do the right thing and remediate as soon as we can, but do it correctly with compassion and understanding.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Okay, but it doesn't seem to be dealt with with the same sort of urgency as some other things. About \$1.2 million was paid back in 2024 when the provision was \$13 million, but the provision is now \$29 million. People are waiting for this money. They may prefer to get multiple remediations than have to wait. Why is it taking so long? If we have all of these consultants working, I don't understand how it takes this long.

BILL PARASIRIS: We've just stood up a dedicated team that's focused—well, not just. When we understood what the totality of the implication was, we stood up a dedicated internal team to focus just on this remediation. So we are treating it with urgency. But I think accuracy is also something that we would like to do. We would not want to be remediating people multiple times on the same matter. I think it's important—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But maybe they would. If I was owed money, maybe I would prefer to get some of it than none of it.

BILL PARASIRIS: In the instance that the remediation was correct. But what happens if we made a remediation and there was overpayment and we'd have to call that back. That would be more problematic than making sure we made a correct payment.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But again, this is basic payment of wages. You've not got it right. There's been an underpayment. These things are never overpayments. I find that fascinating as well. In every case, it's about universities underpaying their staff.

BILL PARASIRIS: That's not true. There are instances where there are overpayments and—

The CHAIR: Not to the tune of \$29 million.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, not \$29 million worth.

BILL PARASIRIS: No.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: How much have you spent in total on consultants—not just in the past year, but in total—to calculate the amount of this wage theft?

BILL PARASIRIS: I would have to take that on notice. I don't have those entire figures in front of me. But what I wanted to tell you is that the team that's been stood up is an internal team, to do this.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When was that team stood up?

BILL PARASIRIS: It commenced probably about September last year.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When was the wage theft identified for the first time?

BILL PARASIRIS: We commenced undertaking—I'll have to take that on notice, because I don't have the exact date. It was slightly before I commenced in this role.

The CHAIR: I've got a related question. You're calling the remediation program "Building Pay Confidence". Is that right?

BILL PARASIRIS: Pay Confidence, correct.

The CHAIR: You said that there were presentations, town halls and discussions about the Reset program. Was the Building Pay Confidence program included as part of the rationale for needing the Reset?

BILL PARASIRIS: No. The same way we treated the cybersecurity incident, the costs with that, that's how we're treating this particular program as well. We're not treating these costs, which we're just saying are one-off costs, as part of our operational costs which informed what efficiencies, savings or processes we need to do.

The CHAIR: So it wasn't used in any of the discussions to—

BILL PARASIRIS: It was spoken about, but it was not mentioned as one of the reasons that we needed to find savings. But it did inform some of the skill and capability uplift and numbers we needed in our payroll team. So there was an increase in people—

The CHAIR: As an IR academic, I bemoan the fact that there is very little skill in IR in any organisation anymore. People can't read awards. That is what we need. That is just my little rant, and it has nothing to do with you. Can I go back then to the overall program? We're concerned here about governance. Did either of you brief the board or subcommittees on the Reset program?

BILL PARASIRIS: We assisted with preparing the briefs. The vice-chancellor would brief the board and the subcommittees, and we would answer any specific questions that related to our areas.

The CHAIR: The vice-chancellor briefed the board.

BILL PARASIRIS: At every board and every subcommittee during the process.

The CHAIR: Do you attend ex officio?

BILL PARASIRIS: I do. I attend all subcommittees and board meetings.

The CHAIR: You attend all subcommittees. It was the vice-chancellor who did the explaining. I'm asking this because it's something that we've had to ask every university. Most universities have undertaken some kind of change program. Did you provide a full cost-benefit analysis that showed gross savings, gross costs, back-pay periods and those kinds of things? How detailed was that?

BILL PARASIRIS: We do that at every reporting for all things university. It's done at the detail that is required and requested. Sometimes they do deep dives on some of those areas as well, as we go through. It's not a thing that we did just for Reset. Reset was definitely part of the reporting. It's something we give them visibility on at every subcommittee meeting and every board meeting.

The CHAIR: One of the reasons I ask is because the National Audit Office report into ANU bemoaned the lack of general inquisitiveness of the ANU council. Some of the things that we've heard from other evidence has been that there isn't a general culture of inquisitiveness on councils and boards. I'm trying to understand what the level of detail is that's provided. As you well know that same audit report suggested that ANU council couldn't possibly have had the information they needed to make good decisions. We're trying to get a sense of what is the scale and scope of information received and the discussions that are had. We can, if necessary, have it in confidence. It would be great to have a copy of. I think you intimated you have some reports from around the time when Reset was mooted. What was presented to the board and the subcommittees would be very useful.

BILL PARASIRIS: We would be happy to do that.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of the session. We very much appreciate you making the time to be here today and the answers you've given and the documents you've tabled. There might be questions that we ask on notice and supplementary questions. The secretariat will be in touch with those.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Professor ROBERT MAILHAMMER, Professor of Linguistics, and Chair of Academic Senate, Western Sydney University, affirmed and examined

Associate Professor MOURAD TAYEBI, Associate Professor in Biomedical Sciences (Neuroscience), and Member of Academic Senate, Western Sydney University, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for coming and welcome to our inquiry into university governance. Would either or both of you like to begin with a short statement?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Good morning, Chair, members of the Committee and members of the audience. My name is Robert Mailhammer. I'm a professor of linguistics at Western Sydney University. I specialise in language change and Indigenous Australian languages. I was elected chair of the academic senate in 2021, and have held this position for 4½ years, having been re-elected twice. This is not a management role; it is part time, and I continue to be a regular academic who teaches and researches. The chair of the academic board, which is the generic term—we call it the academic senate at Western Sydney. The academic senate is crucial for the core business of the university. As the academic board, the academic senate is the primary custodian of academic values and standards, which is laid down in the Western Sydney University Act.

The academic senate decides on academic policies. It approves the conferral of awards. It monitors academic standards and performance, and academic risk management. It's responsible to the board of trustees—the governing body—and advises it and management in academic matters. The academic senate is composed of a mixture of academics, students and members of the senior executive. We have about 40 members. As chair of the committee over the last 4½ years, I've gained an intimate knowledge of academic governance more broadly within the sector, but especially Western Sydney University. As I said, I'm a regular academic and continue to teach and research.

MOURAD TAYEBI: I'm an associate professor in neuroscience, also a qualified veterinarian and a veterinary pathologist, former deputy chair of the senate and current elected member of the senate. I'm married to a beautiful Aussie lady, with three kids.

The CHAIR: You have explained how long you've been there and what else you do, but can you explain a bit more about the role of the academic senate and its importance to the community?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: All universities in Australia have an academic board—that's the generic term, as I said. The role of the academic board in general is to ensure that the quality and the academic performance of the university is in line with the standards set by the legislation and with the academic standards that the disciplines and the experts set. Academic boards report to the council—the board of trustees, in our case—and advise the board on academic matters. The academic senate is the peak body in academic matters, and it has a crucial role in ensuring that the academic mission is on track and that the university is able to fulfil its obligations—its legal obligations and its obligations under the broader mission of what the university does in terms of creating knowledge and disseminating the knowledge. That's the role of the academic senate. It is an elected body, to a large degree.

Of course, the composition of senates varies in Australian universities. At Western Sydney, the majority of its members are either elected academics or they're nominated through and then elected by the academic senate—about two-thirds. We have one-third of senior managers. That includes the vice-chancellor, for example, and the deputy vice-chancellors. As one of the few bodies in the country, we have an external member as well, which is a new addition after an external review. We meet five times a year—regular meetings—and, as I said, we discuss and approve academic policies. We approve the conferral of awards and we accredit programs. Anything that's offered by the university in terms of an award has to be accredited or approved by the academic board, by the academic senate.

The CHAIR: That's quite a big role with regard to validation and academic integrity. Does the senate have a role in vetoing decisions or vetoing programs? What's the limit of its power?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: There are some things the senate does approve—for example, academic policies for which the academic senate is the approval authority. You could say that this is the closest to a legal approval thing that the senate can do. And, of course, any new program that is offered by the university has to be approved by the academic senate. If a program is proposed to be discontinued, though—and that's a strange thing—there's no approval necessary from the academic senate. The only thing that the academic senate needs to approve is the transition plan. If there is a program discontinued, then the university will of course have to fulfil its obligations to its students, and it will have to put a transition plan on the table. That's what the academic senate approves. Apart from that, with regard to discontinuation and the changing of the offerings, the senate currently

doesn't have a role¹.

¹ In [correspondence](#) to the committee provided on 15 July 2026, Professor Robert Mailhammer, Professor of Linguistics and Chair of Academic Senate, Western Sydney University, clarified their evidence.

The CHAIR: So the senate has a role in approving but can't have an impact on decisions that materially impact academic programs—for example, if something is terminated—only those approval or transition stages.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes. There is a discussion that this should change and that, in future, the academic senate will be the approval authority for that. But, under the current rules, the academic senate doesn't have a role in approving the discontinuation of programs.

The CHAIR: So there's a live discussion about the role ongoing now?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: There is a live discussion but it's happening—I would like to have a discussion that's a little bit more open and a little more collegiate with the academic senate. What's happening at the moment is I only hear that this is happening. Like many universities, we have a corporate system where the university management is doing things not necessarily with direct involvement in the design stage.

The CHAIR: So you understand that there could be this consideration going on, but that's outside of the actual senate itself?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I know that there are considerations, but I haven't seen any paper tabled or anything like that. I would strongly fight for such a change, of course. But, as of yet, it hasn't manifested.

The CHAIR: The senate maybe doesn't conduct, but is it given information about impact assessments of teaching quality, student experience or research capacity? I'm particularly thinking about what we just heard from witnesses about restructures and Reset. Is the senate provided with any information that might be relevant to academic programming of that kind of change?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Sporadic, I would say—not as organised and as comprehensive. As it probably would be good to get academic feedback, of course. Like at other universities, there is a bit of a tendency for academic senate to be not involved in many of those discussions. Therefore, things that you would consider to have an academic impact are not necessarily taken to the academic senate. I have had to—what's the right word?—make sure that when I hear of something that is relevant, that I'm able to get this into the academic senate. But it's not as forthcoming as I would like it. It has been like that for quite a while. Things may change but, as of yet, it's a bit of a struggle.

The CHAIR: From that answer, then, it's reasonable to say that in regard to the Reset restructure that we've been talking about today that there aren't mechanisms for the senate to verify claims. Currently, there's no mechanism to have that data delivered so you can consider that?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: There is a mechanism. We have a mechanism called questions on notice. We can ask questions. Any member of the university can put in a question on notice and the chair will decide whether it's within the remit. We have had questions on notice about Reset and the rapid review of programs that has led to this continuation. Whether those questions have led to fulsome answers that were useful for the academic community is a different matter, but it is possible for us to ask these questions. We have asked these questions, but we haven't always received information that we think we would need.

The CHAIR: The question on notice goes to the academic senate. You vet it to see whether it's within your remit.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Within our terms of reference.

The CHAIR: Then you pass that onto the appropriate executive, who then feeds back.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes. That's an answer that has to be provided in the senate meeting. It is minuted, so it's on record.

The CHAIR: The feedback mechanisms for other staff from the senate is you have minutes that are publicly available, other reporting?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: We publish an outcomes document as a summary of the meeting as close as we can do it after the meeting. We aim for a quick turnaround. It's not always possible, but the university community then is informed about the outcomes as timely as we can do it through the members. Each member gets a copy of that—an electronic copy, of course—and is encouraged to disseminate that within their unit. Most academic senate members are quite diligent in this, and distribute it in their schools so that academics and students and other staff members know what happened at academic senate. Everybody is also encouraged to, and are invited to, attend the academic senate. It's a university public meeting. As long as we don't run out of physical space, members of the university, staff and students, can attend; and it has happened.

The CHAIR: I've mentioned it a couple of times already, but I want to ask very specifically now. I understand that—if not publicly then certainly it's well known—you've expressed concerns about the Reset

restructure as it has actually affected academic governance planning quality. Can you briefly outline to the Committee what your concerns were or are?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes. First of all, I've raised it in a number of forums. Of course, in the academic senate, I've expressed my concerns to the governing body as well—various aspects of it—and directly to members of the senior executive. I think the basis for the concerns that we have were that certain decisions and outcomes were problematic in terms of what they did. It wasn't clear to members of the community, in particular, why decisions were taken and who would be accountable if things weren't going in the right direction; the way decisions were made; how they were then communicated, which led to significant erosion of trust and patience within the community.

There were significant side effects of the restructure that affected the academic core business. There were specific concerns. For example, when the review of our courses led to recommendations being made that those programs were going to be discontinued, there wasn't in all cases good discussions with the academics or advice from academics. That has led to some really strange outcomes where colleagues have been left without workload or without things to teach. Parts of programs were deleted or discontinued but the other parts weren't. It wasn't clear why these things would happen. It wasn't clear why the academic advice was ignored, in many cases. Those concerns have raised concerns about the general quality of the academic core business resulting from the great speed, the under-resourcing of this restructure, and the general lack of or incompleteness of what we would like in terms of academic monitoring and oversight.

The CHAIR: It's interesting, because we've just heard from some university executives that they engaged in planning and mapping of courses and workload. Mr Nanva asked a very specific question about that. They said that they asked the academics themselves what was happening, what was needed, and then took that into account. Is that something that you've understood or is that something that they did around academic—instead of going to the academic senate?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I don't know. I asked for exactly that. I asked that we needed to do some mapping and whether we have the capacity to do this and who would do the work. Particularly with student courses advising, there was a whole change that changed the way advising was done. That caused significant problems because for a little while, for the first three or four months, we didn't actually have good student advising because of the changeover. We specifically advocated and specifically pointed out that this is a risk and that there should be some kind of contingency planning and some kind of mapping of capacities. We were informed that this was done, yet we had this problem that we had a significant loss of students because of the lack of advising. Some of it was technical, because of the services, but some of it was because the capacity evidently hadn't been mapped and there hadn't been any contingency planning. I don't know how this works with the programs. I know that there was mapping done in terms of whether parts of the program were essential to the program. There was then—it turned out that in some cases there had been collateral damage and in some cases the subject had to be reintroduced.

The CHAIR: This is in a case where a core subject for a degree or for a program was accidentally deleted, but you need that; otherwise, you can't give someone their—

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: It did actually happen, yes, on some occasions. We didn't know everything. This was only cases that came up after a question on notice and also some cases that we knew. It was very difficult to get information across the whole university on this. It was difficult to fly in people who would actually come and speak to us and speak out on this, so we don't know what else there might be, but there were documented cases where subjects had to be reinstated. Then, of course, the other problem was that we had very often, because of the compressed time frames, our own policies which required certain time frames weren't—we were incongruent with that. I did point that out as well and have been pointing this out as well. As I said, these are other concerns that we had and the policies weren't necessarily followed where it should have been.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I have one quick question following on from that. Post-Reset or restructure, has there been any follow-up assessment to see what impact those job losses have had, if any, on service delivery, student outcomes or academic standards? Has there been any follow-up?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I know that there is a plan to do a post-Reset review. That's what I've heard and what I've read, but I'm not sure. I've certainly not been involved in any pre- or post-analysis of how we are tracking. I give you my own example. In my area, in my discipline, we lost about half of our staff members due to voluntary redundancies. We are being asked to develop new things, but we've never been asked or contributed to any sort of mapping of whether this is actually possible. Indeed, I have asked that question at the board level whether we have the capacity to do what we do and whether we have done some mapping on whether we can develop the new programs and do all the rest of it. The answer was always "Yes, we have," but I've never seen any evidence of that.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: In terms of the post-Reset review, was there any communication on what that will look like or who will be consulted?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Not clear. The only thing that I've read in the summary is that it has got to be at arm's length, but one of the problems that we had was that it was very untransparent. It wasn't clear who was doing it. There was a group of people that were involved in it. It was called the Reset team, but it's certainly very difficult for us to get any information on this. So I'm not sure. I would like to say that I was very involved in all of this. I would like to say that the academic senate was very involved in the academic part of this.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: But it wasn't?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Bits and pieces, whatever you got. But it wasn't certainly—with a restructure of this magnitude, I would have thought that there would have been a committee of sorts that had transparent communication and accountabilities. That wasn't done for whatever reason, maybe because of the speed, I don't know, but it has caused a lot of pain, I think. I'm not sure whether it's—one of the questions that we had was if it was worth that.

MOURAD TAYEBI: My intention was to really focus on something wholly different from senate; he's best placed to discuss this. I just wanted to answer your question by taking you back to pre-Reset as opposed to assessing post-Reset. It was done under extreme psychological constraint in the sense that I remember really clearly three or four days before Easter there was a webinar announcement that 400 people were going to lose their jobs. Whatever happened after that—and that was when the Reset was planned—people were not psychologically able to think about courses and plan ahead. In fact, a lot of us didn't know whether we would be staying at the university at the end of that year.

To me, that sort of psychological constraint that has been put—and, in my view, it was unnecessary to make that sort of public announcement during that specific period of time. This was then followed by changing the university's structure, turning the whole university into faculty versus school versus university. I really think it would be very hard to implement any sound assessment of what post-Reset would look like or what it would mean. All I can tell you from lived experience is that people are not happy. People are feeling disengaged and disenfranchised. You go to—I'm sorry, Chair, I'm known to be quite open about my views. I'm not politically correct.

The CHAIR: This is a forum to be open.

MOURAD TAYEBI: I don't mean to be offensive to anyone. This precedes the current arrival of our vice-chancellor, so I have to be, in a way, fairer to the current vice-chancellor. But, at the end of the day, it wasn't done in a proper way, as far as I'm concerned. We were led to think and believe that the university will move into two structured layers—faculty and university umbrella, obviously, in that. Now we ended up in a three-layer structure—so the school is building up again a formal structure. In fact, we have another structure creep in insidiously into the new structure, which is the Provost unit. I don't know if you've read a lot about how Stalin took over power. This is how it looks like, unfortunately. I'm not making this personal. This is not about a specific person. I believe I've been at this university for about eight years. It's a narrow culture that cannot see beyond—to me, at least—what the leadership wants to achieve. There is a semblance of a pretence of wide consultation. Myself and many other academics do not believe that it's done properly. In terms of the outcomes, it will be very hard to measure them beyond that.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Do you get the sense that the motivation behind making sure the university's operating model is fit for purpose, without getting—I don't want to use the managerial speak, but do you get the sense that the motivation and the intentions may have been well meaning but the whole process was executed poorly? Is that a fair assessment?

MOURAD TAYEBI: I have no doubt in my mind people are really well meaning. I do believe they want the best for the university. Do we have the right mix to do that? Some of us do have doubts, to be honest, because we have that with some of the senior leaders for many years. They know how they operate. It's too late to teach an old dog new tricks, literally. Again, I don't want to make this personal but, at the end of the day, a lot of us do feel that, even if they are well meaning—and I believe the majority are—it's just not the right mix to be able to take that to fruition.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I think one of the problems that we have is that we weren't clear on the premise of why the Reset happened. It started off with a financial problem that we seem to have and then it was the staffing mix. There were inconsistencies and the story kept changing. It was very unclear. I have no doubt that everybody wants the best for Western Sydney University. But I'm not clear whether the diagnosis and whether the remedy that was applied in all cases all stacked up. But that was all—I think we're operating on limited information in some cases. That makes it very hard.

The CHAIR: Across the universities we've heard similar stories, varying motivations, I think. We're trying to understand what governance arrangements would assist in there being greater transparency, assist in different parts of the university being able to participate more. I'm interested in your views on that. Following up on that, Associate Professor Tayebi, you implied centralisation perhaps within what we would call the chancellery. We noted with the previous witnesses that there had been a turnover in senior staff. I wondered if that forms part of the problem here. I've asked you two questions there. One is about other governance recommendations, because that is what we're looking at. The second one is about the particulars of senior management change and what that has meant.

MOURAD TAYEBI: If you'll allow me a bit of an extended answer—please feel free to cut me off whenever you feel like I go off track. I did intend to come here to initially focus on how dysfunctional our promotion processes are at the university and have been for a very long time. I did also consider using this platform selfishly to highlight my own plight and how the university treated me. Then I realised that it was just counterproductive. It's not about me. The reason for that—the way the university treated me personally. People heard what happened to me and started privately telling me about what they were going through. I actually realised that it was systemic and it was quite systematic in terms of how the university behaves when there is a perception of dissent. What I really learned from this—and probably I walked into this quite naively. I am not a naive academic. I've been in the UK for a really long time, in the US and here, but never was interested in getting involved in the political football, if you like, within universities.

But what I realised is that this really speaks to failure of governance, accountability and, of course, protection. People feel completely deprived of protection if they want to speak out. Specifically, I believe—and this is personal to me—in the context of the Western Sydney region, is its representation. A lot of people say, "What does it even mean when you talk about representation?" We are talking about a leadership culture that is pretty much, as far as I'm concerned, implanted within a region that does not see itself mirrored in the senior leadership. That doesn't mean those leaders—or at least not all of them—are not capable of doing their job. But I think a lot of people like us, migrants, who we feel are capable of doing the exact same job these people are—we are not given this opportunity to get to that sort of level to be able to solve those governance issues in a very specific context, which is the Western Sydney region context.

I think the university, at least as far as I'm concerned, has decided to be a university implanted in Western Sydney. I don't think it's a university for the Western Sydney region. It's important, as far as I'm concerned, because the students can see who is leading. In fact, to me, the message to the students in our region is "You come to us. We really want you, and we'd love you to be our students, but then there's no prospects for you to be a leader one day." I'm a bit intermingled in terms of what I'm trying to relay to you to answer your question. Those failures, I don't think they are deliberate, but I think there is a narrow cultural view and overview on how leadership is seen. I'm really happy to be here, not that I enjoy this—probably you can see that I'm a bit nervous being here. Power has to be taken away from universities. There has to be some intervention to fix this. This is a lifetime opportunity. If we don't do that now, Asia is going to take over, unfortunately, in the education system.

The CHAIR: Mr D'Adam—and I know that, Professor Mailhammer, you had an answer as well.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I wonder whether, in a previous governance iteration for New South Wales universities, alumni had a substantial say over the composition of the governing body, the council or the senate. I know that Western Sydney is still a relatively new university in comparison to the other universities in the system, but the alumni now are quite substantial. Do you think shifting back to giving alumni more say in terms of the composition of the council is a way to rectify that question of this sort of implantation of leadership from outside the community that Western Sydney is designed to serve?

MOURAD TAYEBI: I'm not sure what the mechanism is; I haven't thought that far. All I can tell you is observational. It's not even backed by data. It's visibility around—that is what we see. You can just google the board of trustees, for instance. Probably the only ethnic representation is a student, and that can't be acceptable.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I am the only one whose native language isn't English.

MOURAD TAYEBI: Here we go.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: And I'm white.

MOURAD TAYEBI: And, again, this doesn't mean at all that those board members are not capable. But are they a good representation? I really dislike using the word "minority" for the Western Sydney region because they are the majority; they are not the minority. But they are not being given the opportunity to represent themselves. I think the message is quite dangerous. You're told you are capable of doing research, teaching and supervising students, but you're not good enough to be in a leadership position. I think there has to be that sort of balanced—whether alumni are the solution, I honestly don't know.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I think there's a systemic problem. I don't think I agree with taking away power from the university. I think it's more trying to give power back to the university community. I think that's the issue that we have at the moment. We have universities that are run like companies and that have the logic of companies, which is a bit more of a top-down managerialism and corporatism. This has disenfranchised the academic community.

On paper, we have in Australia one of the best academic governance systems and most independent governance systems internally that there is on the planet, where most academic boards have an elected chair. The problem is that we're all employees of the organisation, and the problem is that when we sit on council, we are the only academic experts but we're employees of the university. We have the vice-chancellor as a member of the council. We have senior executives sitting in on council meetings, and that's really, really stressful, and it's really difficult for us to say what we think because you have to be brave. I've seen and experienced things that we shouldn't experience. I'm not a singular case. You've heard from other universities, though I think we have heard some specific things that other universities mightn't have.

The main problem is there is nothing in the system that safeguards the academic governance part that is doing the quality control, that's doing the monitoring of what the university does. There is nothing that safeguards us. If there is a violation of policy, if there is something happening, we can't do anything. I'm dependent on management helping and cooperating. I'm dependent on my board and my council to support me if there is something like an executive member who doesn't want to give a report and actively refuses to comply with the resolution of the academic board. There is nothing I can do. I can go to TEQSA. I can wait until TEQSA comes around and maybe picks this up, but I've got nothing in hand. I can go to the board and to the chancellor, but if I get no help there, I can't do my job. That's a really fundamental problem.

If quality reports don't come through to the academic board and the academic board has no visibility of things, they can't do their job properly. Then the whole academic enterprise is in danger. That's a systemic problem. There are universities where there's a little bit more structural guardrails. We now, for example, have a senate that isn't dominated by management in terms of numbers—or at least isn't fifty-fifty. That's a step in the right direction. We have an external member. That's another step in the right direction. We're hopeful they're going to get an external board member with academic credentials. These are all steps in the right direction. But there has to be something more that ensures that the academic community is represented and safeguarded against the managerialism.

There was a suggestion made by Melbourne academics a few months ago for a bicameral system—that you have an academic head and a corporate head. The vice-chancellor of a university in Australia is the academic head and the corporate head. The separation of those two, for example, could be a way to think about this. But there has to be something that safeguards the academic community from the dangers that corporatism and managerialism applies. There's inherent tension in "I want to get as many students as possible. I want to sell as many products as I can. I can cut corners, potentially, because it's not the case that the best quality is going to guarantee you lots of students." That inherent tension is problematic. It's difficult for management. I understand that. It's tempting for management to do things the way they do things sometimes. But it is an inherent systemic problem that we have.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: In this inquiry all the chairs of academic senates that we've had before us have been, let's say, not critical voices. I'm curious about how Western Sydney gets an academic chair who is prepared to speak up. Was there something specific about the dynamic that led to you being elected as academic chair?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: I think the reason why I'm still here is because the academic community supports me, and parts of management do. I have to say I have been actively discouraged from running for office. I've been re-elected twice against strong headwinds, including direct advice not to run for office or for re-election.

The CHAIR: From?

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Direct advice from who?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: From parts of the senior leadership. I've decided to run twice. I have been re-elected twice because of the support—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: In contested ballots?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Contested, yes.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: With opponents sponsored by the senior management?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: It certainly didn't look like there was an opposition that had a very strong alternative agenda. I don't know. It's hard to say. It was a bit surprising. I did this because I feel a duty to the academic community and because I know it's essential for the university that we have this critical sanity check every now and then if somebody says, "This mightn't be the best idea." It's certainly not an easy ride. It's certainly much easier if you just rubber stamp everything. I know that some of the chairs of academic boards and senates have had similar issues. Some don't. It depends on how the dynamics work. As I said before, it's dependent on cooperation in the system. Universities are like a triangle. You have the governing body, the academic board and management. We are the weakest link here. That's a problem, because you've got no protection. So you do this because the academic community supports you. That's what I'm grateful for. That's why I'm here.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Can I ask, on the governing council, do you sit on any of the subcommittees?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: No.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Have you ever been asked?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: No, I have asked, but I've never been—

The CHAIR: You've asked?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes. Many of my colleagues sit on the audit and risk committee, for example. That's a common thing for chairs of academic boards because we oversee the academic risk management, so it would be natural. It has always been said either it's not necessary or—at the most recent attempt, I was told that it wouldn't work because I was an employee of the organisation and I shouldn't be on that committee. I don't know; that was the advice that I got. But it's the same on the—we used to have a board executive committee where all of the other chairs of the standing committees were members, except for me, as the chair of the most important standing committee, from an academic perspective.

The CHAIR: Can I go back to talking about structure? Professor Tayebi, you were talking about how the change coming in was meant to create two structures—the university and faculty—and subsume schools into the faculty level. Is that right, and are you saying that that hasn't occurred?

MOURAD TAYEBI: My understanding—and I'm used to a faculty structure in my previous academic life, and I supported it, actually, wholeheartedly. It was meant to morph into a two-layer structure, and the schools would be sitting with no informal administrative structure. They, I think, realised, over a period of time, you are not able to manage schools without having local leadership.

The CHAIR: So it was centralising some of that professional support into faculty level from schools.

MOURAD TAYEBI: Yes.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: What normally happens is that universities have faculties—they have actually quite a few—and then they have very small schools that are discipline based.

MOURAD TAYEBI: Departments.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Some people call them departments—whatever the nomenclature is. Those smaller units don't need a lot of administration because they're very small. Our schools, with some exceptions of singular disciplines like law and psychology, are still very big, so we haven't gained much of the benefit of what the faculty structure might give us because the schools still need some kind of structure in between. So we actually haven't seen the shift that the academics were told, "You're going to have less admin." We see academics in some roles being more overloaded than they were before. That's, I think, what Mourad says: We have done the job to some degree, but it's a half-arsed job, if you understand.

The CHAIR: The academic term!

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes, exactly.

The CHAIR: The idea was that, with Reset, there was going to be this structural change. Because we were asking about efficiencies earlier, what are the efficiencies that were being asked for? You, as academics, were told that the efficiencies would come from the conglomeration of the schools or disciplines into the faculties, and that's where the efficiencies would sit.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes. Basically, very early on, we said that you need small schools for this, and the advice given to management was—I was on the review panel. I said, this only works if you have small schools. Then you're going to get rid of a third layer, because the argument was that we want faculties so that it's easier to deal with the whole of the schools. I understand that, but then the idea was, if you have very

small—we didn't want a third layer. At the moment, now, the problem is that we really have these big schools which need a lot of admin, and then you have the faculties so, effectively, you end up with three layers. That was something we didn't get.

We said specifically that that's an issue, and I remember academic senate debated the structure because, at that time, academic senate had to give advice on the restructuring of academic units. We said, "Yes, a faculty structure is good, but we do want to see these things." I said this at the board as well. I said, "Yes, my senate is supportive, but we need to be able to work out what the relationship between the schools and the faculties are."

I was clearly told, "We're going to work this out as we go." That's one of those things where I saw the problems. We had a lack of planning in all of this, and then we rushed into it with not enough resources. You can see how this is a recipe for a suboptimal outcome.

The CHAIR: In summarising, this restructure was decided on because it seemed there was some kind of financial imperative argument. Whether you accept that or not, there was the argument put, and then there were activities associated with that that weren't necessarily planned out to their conclusion. It was "This is what the immediate action we're going to take is." But there wasn't the "What comes next?" or what the implication is. Is that a reasonable summary of that?

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: Yes, you could summarise it like that. There was generally the idea that we have to do this. That's the narrative: "We have to do this. We've got to do it quickly, and then we're going to work things out as we go." I was very critical of that and I've been critical of that, because that's not how we do research, for example. We don't just poke someone and see what happens. We form a hypothesis first and think, "Oh, if I do this too many times, it's going to"—

MOURAD TAYEBI: In fact, Chair, it was a bit strange how the whole thing came about. The faculty structure was approved by the board as an idea, as a concept, so no structure, at that point, was discussed. We didn't understand why it was rushed. We were led to believe there was a sense of urgency to approve it very quickly, but there was nothing in terms of details of how the faculty looked. To me and a lot of academics I know, we are right now more worried about a third layer creeping in. I didn't mention that earlier—and I wasn't innocent about mentioning this—but the provost unit is now centralised. I think, as a concept, it's not a bad idea to have autonomous faculties within the university. I think it's more efficient and I'm used to that sort of system, but now we are seeing that changing towards all faculties reporting to one single unit. We're just reverting, I believe, into an old model with different names.

ROBERT MAILHAMMER: The lack of transparency results from committees and things that have crept in, which we hear about on the sidelines. We don't actually know what they do. There's a "load committee", apparently, that looks at student load. We don't know exactly what they do. I like transparency and accountability. I think that's the way we use to work as academics. We put our results out there for criticism. If somebody disagrees with that, that's fine. We live and learn. So that's an issue that we have. We have things that are nebulous in the system. We don't know what they do. We don't know what the accountability is or what the transparency is. We've always laid everything open in the academic senate and made sure that we have the minutes and everything transparent. That's the only way we can work. That's the worry: We can't monitor what we don't see.

The CHAIR: On that note, we've come to the end of our time, or a little bit over. We very much appreciate the evidence you've given today. It's very helpful. We appreciate you making the time and the work that you do on the academic senate at Western Sydney. Thank you for that as well.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr DAVID BURCHELL, PhD, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, and President, National Tertiary Education Union, Western Sydney University Branch

Mr DAVID MAURICE, Data Platforms Manager, Division of Operations, and Member, National Tertiary Education Union, Western Sydney University Branch

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you so much for making yourselves available to appear today and for the effort of the NTEU in putting submissions together. Do either or both of you want to make an opening statement?

DAVID BURCHELL: A very short one, maybe, yes. I'm here to speak in sorrow rather than anger, which you might be surprised by, as a trade unionist. I've been a staff member of Western Sydney University since 1993. It's part of my blood. It's part of my life and I think of it as a family—a dysfunctional family at times, but a family. I've got to say, 2025, for me, like quite a lot of people at the university I think, was the most unfortunate year of the university's existence—certainly in my 33 years there. A lot of stuff was ripped up and what replaced it was not very good. I also think there has been serious ongoing damage to levels of trust and to the currency of truth at the institution. I'm going to add one more thing, which is—I say this all, as I said, in sorrow rather than anger—I have no animus against anyone in the senior leadership of the university. From what I can see, they're all decent people trying to do a job as they see it. I see it differently, on occasions. I'm sure also, when speaking here, the folks who were speaking here this morning were also speaking in good faith and good conscience—though I can't agree with some of their recollections of events.

There are two issues for me that are sort of overarching issues, probably. The first is the Reset restructure was never clearly, or perhaps even honestly, explained. The university community was kept in the dark about what was going on, and the explanations that were given were not credible or serious. The financial crisis never existed. The second is I think the Reset restructure itself proceeded along very odd lines. I still don't understand them. I have not been able to access anyone who could explain them to me. Rather than taking, say, external consultants, such as UTS, there was a team of consultants installed within the chancellery itself who appeared, to people in human resources and elsewhere, to be running the restructure—I know Bill gave a different view this morning—but who didn't seem to have any competence or expertise, and this was mysterious. It was also mysterious had they been hired, why those people had been hired. It was mysterious, the fact that they seemed to have personal connections, and it was unclear what the relationship was between those people and the staff of the university who appeared to have the expertise.

So they're the two things, I think: firstly, a lack of candour and honesty about why things were happening; and, secondly, a very strange process for restructuring an institution of that size, which has caused, I think, significant lasting damage. The vice-chancellor has acknowledged, and I give him respect for this, that our enrolments this year were badly damaged by the fact that the entire student-facing services and student advice system had fallen over, not to mention IT, and that our student numbers this year are slightly better than last year but they should have been much better than they are. We squandered an opportunity, I think, because of the mess that was created last year. That's enough from me.

The CHAIR: Mr Maurice, do you have any opening statement or are you happy to go to questions?

DAVID MAURICE: Just a very short one. I'm currently employed as professional staff. I'm the data platforms manager at Western Sydney University. I started in that role in 2026; I started at Western in 2020. I'm here today to support Dr Burchell and the NTEU and my colleagues with my testimony today.

The CHAIR: That's a big job you've got there. Dr Burchell, thank you for that introduction. I think that was an interesting summary, and the two key issues for you were interesting to hear. I wonder if we could get some more particulars. My colleagues and I were asking about consultants and the embedding of consultants in the chancellery. I don't feel like we got particular details. I know that you have publicly raised concerns about the use of consultants in the Reset restructure. As you know, we've been looking at the use of consultants across the sector. I wondered if you could talk about what you feel is a bit different about consultant use in this case for this restructure.

DAVID BURCHELL: The first point, which I think you folks have probably worked out for yourselves, is that, like every university in the Sydney Basin, Western Sydney University makes a lot of use of the big consulting firms, especially KPMG, Deloitte and PwC. I haven't seen EY about. It's sometimes hard to track exactly how much money is actually spent there. I'm not confident.

The CHAIR: EY is there, just to let you know. We just got a list.

DAVID BURCHELL: I have seen no evidence—although I have to say that members and non-members from around the university deluged me personally with evidence last year—that any of the four large firms had a directing role in the restructure. There was clearly a plan. The plan came from somewhere, and it was formed well before the public explanation for what was going on, but I don't believe it was done by any one of the major consulting firms. However, what we did see—an oddity, I think—at our place was that a large restructure was determined seemingly in advance and a rationale was given for it.

A thing called the Reset team—I think you've heard that term already—was created in the chancellery that included a mixture of people co-opted in from human resources and the office of people. A group of consultants who, as I said, came from different places often seemed to be consultants on their own account. It was hard to match their histories—LinkedIn and the public record—with the roles that they were playing. People—including, I've got to say, quite senior people in the division of operations—informed us that these people were doing their jobs.

The CHAIR: Can I just get some clarification there? There were people brought in as consultants, but not from the traditional suspects, the big four, to undertake roles with the Reset team.

DAVID BURCHELL: That's correct.

The CHAIR: In trying to see who they were, because they weren't with the big consultancies, and trying to track down any information on them, public information seemed to not show that they had a clear history in restructures in tertiary education, for example.

DAVID BURCHELL: There was an exception to that. There was a significant person who was on staff for the university—directly appointed, not by a merit-based process. I don't know if I should mention her name. Again, I've got no reason to doubt her integrity at all. She is a member of staff. She had some expertise in doing some similar work at UTS. Other than that person, we couldn't see any connections between the roles that people were playing and their previous histories. Just to add one more point, the interim chief people officer of the university—which, as you know, in modern parlance is the super HR chief—was, and may well still be, a consultant who was being paid on a daily rate the same as the other consultants. Although, trying to get to the bottom of that was confusing. Nevertheless, one way or another, invoices are out there—the ABC has them, as you probably know—that demonstrate that fact.

The CHAIR: Just confirming so that I've got it clear in my head, a chief people officer—the HR head honcho—was engaged by the university and paid as an employee but is still a consultant.

DAVID BURCHELL: As I understand it, he was paid in the same way as the other consultants in the chancellery, which was on day rates. Invoices were submitted either fortnightly or four-weekly. He submitted invoices in the same way as everybody else.

The CHAIR: But he got the title of chief people officer, which is normally an in-house role.

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes. To be fair to this person, who I have met on a number of occasions and who seems like a very likeable human being, he does consult on the role of chief people officers. He himself had no experience in the kind of work he was doing, so far as I'm aware from the public record.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you to both of you for coming and giving us the benefit of your experience. Dr Burchell, in your opening comments you talked about having sorrow, not anger, and believing that the senior management was doing the best they could. How does that make sense when there have clearly been such failures? You talked about the lack of transparency and honesty and the lack of clarity in the process. People being appointed as consultants appear, on the face of it, to not necessarily have the experience to do what they're doing. Somebody made those decisions. Responsibility has to lie with the senior management who made those decisions.

DAVID BURCHELL: There's an answer to your question; you may know it already, I suspect. Who knows? I think, in good conscience, members of the senior leadership of the university and the vice-chancellor himself believed a restructure was necessary, but it was a kind of surgical role. You were the surgeon who didn't want to scare the patient, and so you didn't want to tell the patient what was about to happen until after it had happened. They imagined that to be the way these things get done well. I think they thought they were doing the right thing for everyone by their own lights. But, in the process, I think the two things eroded the basis of trust at the institution and made a mess of it because, actually, the need to keep so much secret and to have people doing things in private, without consulting with the people who actually had the expertise—who were sitting and watching them doing these things—meant that there was a lack of any basic knowledge.

For instance, when the NTEU sent a list of concerns to the vice-chancellor back in April this year about what had fallen apart in student services and student advice, a response came to us from George—but I think

probably from the chief people officer, effectively—which made it clear that there was no understanding of what the student advice roles in schools were or the titles that we'd referred to. They'd never heard the titles before, and how could they, because they were consultants from outside the university who had never had any role in an academic setting before. For instance, we'd referred to a director of academic program—a DAP—and the guess had been made that this was a deputy associate dean, which isn't even alphabetically correct, but you know what I mean.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What puzzles me, and it's not unique to universities—we saw it on our consulting inquiry, when we were looking at government boards, health boards and other things—is that you have not just this infiltration of consultants and reliance on consultants to carry out these major projects and operations, but then, simultaneously, an expectation that board members should be well paid and also should come from a business background, because they're necessary in order to responsibly manage entities. From an outside perspective looking in, you've got incredibly well paid senior management at universities with this background—we're told that they're paid this much because they have such a wealth of experience in business and all the rest of it—but then they're reliant on these consultants who invariably do the wrong thing, creating this level of disconnect in accountability. Ultimately, we're not talking about a bunch of people without any skills who have delegated this responsibility to consultants. At what point do you think it became obvious that the process was not working, and would you have expected senior management to step in at that time?

DAVID BURCHELL: It should have been clear, I think, about October-November last year that things were going terribly wrong. But the vice-chancellor had a fixed schedule that he reiterated over and over again that all the changes had to be put in place, and people who were separating had to leave the institution by the end of the calendar year 2025. He never wavered from that. In fact, when the concession was made, at the NTEU's request, that anyone who was in a disestablished position, of whom there were many, many hundreds—actually far more than 400, maybe 600, from memory—who wanted to retain a job, could retain a job, the vice-chancellor agreed, partly, simply to get it done by Christmas.

The CHAIR: Can I just confirm—sorry, Dr Burchell and Ms Boyd. I understood that it was voluntary, but I didn't understand that there were 600 or so roles disestablished. Is that right?

DAVID BURCHELL: Just to be absolutely clear—and I'm under oath, so I want to be absolutely clear—

The CHAIR: And you can take it on notice. I'm not attempting to—

DAVID BURCHELL: No, I can answer the question. I just want to be as precise as I can be. This gets back to an earlier point made this morning. Again, I'm not in the business of getting in a verbal joust, but the vice-chancellor signalled at a webinar on 16 April that, because of a financial crisis, 300 to 400 jobs would have to be lost—forced redundancies. What followed was a change process, which involved an enormous amount of spilling. Around about 600 people's jobs were disestablished. They were then expected to either walk or find a new role in the new structure.

At that point, just to be clear again and precise—there was a lot of slightly loose talk about mapping earlier today. In the change process required by the enterprise agreements—the change proposal process or organisational change provisions of the agreements—there's a process that has to be followed: change proposals, final change plans et cetera. There was no clear mapping of any of the existing roles against roles in the new structure, so most of 600 people didn't know if they had a job. That's not to say they were all going to lose their jobs, but basically there was an enormous game of musical chairs.

The CHAIR: That sounds chaotic.

DAVID BURCHELL: It was chaotic. The only thing that stopped it being chaotic, actually—I'm sorry to say and I hate to say this—was the National Tertiary Education Union. Because, when the vice-chancellor agreed that anyone in one of those disestablished positions who wanted to maintain their employment with the university would be found a role in the new structure, the chaos was suddenly reduced. I noticed this morning Bill took that as a partnership thing. I'm glad if they took that as a partnership decision. I think that was the sanity moment when we managed to restore order.

To be fair to the vice-chancellor, I think he understood that, which is why he eventually—took a long time—agreed to that, because he realised that would stabilise an otherwise absolutely traumatic situation where one in five university staff didn't know whether they had a job and what it would be. At the end—to be absolutely, scrupulously fair here under oath—when you put together that chaotic process with the sureness that, if you wanted a job negotiated by the NTEU, you would retain one in the new structure, some people actually had a good Reset. Some people effectively got promoted, some people got away from supervisory relationships where the

two people didn't like each other, and other people found niches for themselves. But that was a happy accident; that wasn't part of planning.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: What did the mapping involve? Was it a desktop review of the organisational structure? Was that the mapping? Was there actually a detailed look at the workflows, the work patterns and the workloads?

DAVID BURCHELL: The change proposals were marked confidential—who knows why; that always happens—but obviously they'd be accessible to the Committee, and I have them all anyway. There was no requirement of the enterprise agreement at that point—we have negotiated something like that in now, subsequently, after the horse bolted—to do this. But good practice would be if you tried to see the fit between the position description and skills and experience of the person in the existing position and the new positions, and tried to match people against them. In the absence of that, it was chaos.

Sarah, as a follow-up point to your question, not only that, for the first few weeks of the restructure most of the position descriptions of the new roles weren't there, and they were created over a period of time. So there were many hundreds of new roles in the new structure, but nobody knew whether or not they were appropriate to apply because there were no position descriptions uploaded. When they were—I'm sorry that this is factual and I'm saying this under oath—my clear understanding is that many of them are created by AI. They were so generic that there were roles a few levels apart—I think between five and seven and above—which were essentially the same role but being paid tens and twenties of thousands of dollars apart. It was an improvised process done at enormous speed.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Does it concern you, though, that strategic decisions of this scale and magnitude can be undertaken, and the haphazard nature of its execution is not, I suppose, seen by the board? Isn't it a problem that the governance structure doesn't have the guardrails in place to make sure that something like this isn't occurring?

DAVID BURCHELL: I'm not going to do Robert Mailhammer's job because he does that better than I can, but from a distance I could see no connection between the governance structure of the university and the restructure. Admittedly, the restructure hit the professional staff workforce harder than the academic workforce. The majority of the jobs on the line weren't academic jobs. Nevertheless, the results flowed through to all academic units. Students couldn't get advice and no-one knew what their roles were anymore. In the absence of proper advising roles, academic staff were being forced to improvise advice, even though they hadn't been formally delegated to do that, and thus were putting themselves in potentially unsatisfactory performance or misconduct situations if they gave the wrong advice to students who then couldn't complete their degrees. That was all happening in February and March this year—just a rolling chaos.

To be fair, the vice-chancellor, I think in a couple of emails in April and May, did acknowledge that things had gone badly wrong. But then, unfortunately I think—really unfortunately for him—segued into suggesting that because the university does this stuff badly, we need to do it better in future and therefore we need a more strict performance culture about student performance and advice, which gave the impression that he was blaming the people left behind after so many people had left. I don't think that's exactly what he meant to do, but that's certainly what it looked like, I'm saying. There was a partial acceptance that a tsunami of mishaps had happened, but there was a dogged insistence that it can't have been the restructure. It must have been decisions made before the new regime arrived, or else people on the ground weren't doing it well enough. That's all on the public record. The vice-chancellor circulated it in those all-staff emails.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: As someone who is on the front line, ultimately part of what the Committee's looking at is how you improve governance structures to make sure, I suppose, failings of this nature don't take place again. What structural guardrails do you think could be put in place to prevent these sorts of mistakes from happening?

DAVID BURCHELL: Sorry, you've asked me the question again because I didn't answer it, and I'm not going to answer it well, again—unfortunately. What I meant to say then, but got carried away, was I'm not an expert on governance, but I do have a lot of experience because I've been through multiple vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors, and some of them have regarded me even as someone they could trust. I do have a lot of experience in the way the university has been run. The problem I see is not from the governance angle. That's just not my angle. I see it from the leadership angle. I'm just concerned that a vice-chancellor can hit the ground running with what seems to be a pre-formed plan, with little knowledge of how the institution actually works and just wreak havoc without there being guardrails in relation to the authority and responsibility of vice-chancellors and senior leadership figures because no-one has had to carry any cans for anything, I don't think, except the staff.

Also the complete opaqueness of the financial claims, which never added up at all—I can go into that in detail if you want me to—suggests to me also that financial reporting is not strong enough, and that just general regulation of the leadership of the university, quite aside from the governance, is seriously amiss. A number of people have said to me there seems to be a kind of black hole. You have the public service with some incredibly strict rules about how it's managed. Private corporations are regulated and have their own internal regulations. The university sector seems to be kind free floating, and it's not clear what the restraints on leadership are—appropriateness, and in terms of authority and responsibility. There really should not have been claims made about a budget deficit of the sort that were being made—that didn't even make simple arithmetical sense.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Isn't that the job of the council? Ultimately, doesn't the council restrain the vice-chancellor? Isn't that their role?

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes, the board of trustees. I'm here to tell you right now that the same bad information was given to the board of trustees as to other people. We received the same briefing at NTEU. The board did in, I think, 2 May which contained a bunch of financial information, some of which was just simply incorrect and other which was out of date. I'm afraid it's sort of garbage in, garbage out. If a board isn't being told what's actually happening, it's hard for them to restrain the actions of the people doing the things.

The CHAIR: Can we come back to the specifics of the finance. I just want to get to Mr Maurice as well, if that's okay, and to the recurring theme of ours, which is about consultants and contractors. You're in a professional staff area and also in IT which, from the list we've been provided today, has been very heavily serviced by consultants. Obviously, occasionally you're going to need consultants in with particular expertise in particular circumstances. Can you explain to us a bit about the use of consultants and contractors in your area during and after Reset? Did you think it was appropriate? Did it work? Give us a bit of an assessment.

DAVID MAURICE: In regards to consultants throughout IT, yes, Western is a large user of consultants within IT. We've had lots of disruption in IT over the past seven years. I think we've had at least six or seven ITDS managers in the time since I've started at Western in 2020. In my team in particular, during Reset we were going to merge some teams together. At that time, we did not actually have a director. That director had not been reassigned on a contract at that point, so a consultant director was brought in to run the team for six months and to provide assistance to the executive as to how to structure this new team post-Reset. So that consultant and their team was brought in. Obviously, they're a new consultant. They're not used to university business, essentially, and they knew very little about the work that we did. Even when they spoke—

The CHAIR: So they weren't IT consultants that specialise in university work?

DAVID MAURICE: Not that I remember from looking at LinkedIn, no. This consultant, the first time they spoke to some of the teams that were joined together was to tell them that they were to lose headcount, literally. In some meetings, I asked Bill directly to promise to us that the work and staffing post-Reset would be appropriate for the headcount that was planned. Within reason, there was that promise given. As we are now five-plus months post-Reset, that has already been broken in a number of different ways.

The CHAIR: So you have less staff than you anticipated or more work than you thought?

DAVID MAURICE: Yes to both of those. In general, in the professional area, most teams lost about 20 per cent headcount, I think. I haven't got my notes here, sorry.

The CHAIR: That's okay. Take your time.

DAVID MAURICE: More work—work that was not mentioned as part of Reset has come up in the past five months. We have lost headcount, as well as trying to maintain existing work, let alone bringing four teams together into a new data office with an entirely new way of doing things.

The CHAIR: Were there multiple consultants and contractors use, or was it just that group that was brought in?

DAVID MAURICE: There was one group that was there to manage that process for the executive, and there were other smaller individual consultancies for specific projects and for specific tasks within the data office, yes.

The CHAIR: In your view, particularly the individuals, was there not in-house capability to do some of that work?

DAVID MAURICE: Disregarding the executive planning part of that, yes, very much so. The issue is, of course, we have lost headcount. So you can ask people to do more things, but we don't necessarily have the time to do all the things that we need to do now.

The CHAIR: One of the consequences of reducing headcount is that you then need to get contractors in to come and do the work that you couldn't do because you lost your headcount.

DAVID MAURICE: That's right, and for work that was not planned as part of Reset.

The CHAIR: Because there's going to be work, aside from a restructure in IT and a university, that you could probably predict is not an IT professional.

DAVID MAURICE: That's right. There was even work ongoing pre-Reset in regards to developing things like our mobile app that were well underway, were well known, were already hiring consultants and having consultants drive those projects. Those consultants are still maintained in those projects post-Reset.

The CHAIR: They're still there?

DAVID MAURICE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have a sense of the length of time? You may not know this. Are these open-ended projects, contracts, roles?

DAVID MAURICE: The ones that I am aware of are normally between three to six months. There have been discussions going on that we would now take up managing those particular processes after they have been implemented by the contractors. But, of course, that is then extra work for us to do.

The CHAIR: Yes, with fewer people. Thank you. I appreciate that. Dr Burchell, you spoke about Reset but also the briefings that were given and the fact that they didn't seem to make financial sense or didn't seem to be correct. Could you take us through that evidence?

DAVID BURCHELL: I note that Bill this morning, no doubt absolutely sincerely, said that there was a long process of consultation about a restructure that would be an administrative kind of thing. As far as I'm aware, the first time the university community publicly heard the word "Reset"—though it had come to me prior to that by other channels—was when the vice-chancellor had a webinar on Teams on 16 April, I think it was, 2025 when he presented financial figures that suggested that there was a crisis and that the crisis, if the books were to be balanced for 2025 but especially 2026, would amount to, I think, \$55 million in the first year and \$80 million in the second, and that would add up to, one way or another, 300 to 400 jobs. The direct connection was made between job losses and the financial crisis. There was no reference at all to any process having been undergone which was a restructure for administrative purposes. It was all presented as being about financial issues.

At the NTEU, we had a briefing. Josh Gava, our industrial officer, and I had been called by George to his office a couple of days before and given a heads-up about it. We'd asked him some questions. I said, "I don't like some of these numbers. Where is this coming from?" Then and later, he acknowledged that he is not a financial person. Later on, when we raised some of the issues with the numbers with him, he directed us towards the then CFO, Darren Greentree. I'm not in the business of trying to work out what George thought was happening. If you look at the numbers—and the PowerPoints for George's town halls and webinars are not circulated, but obviously there's a screenshot function in Windows and people use it. Also, apparently—I wouldn't do this—the transcript function wasn't turned off, so people could also take transcripts.

If you look at the PowerPoints, the figures don't add up. What's called the operating deficit for 2025 is actually \$10 million, and then on top of that were a number of other things. I'm doing this from memory, but I can obviously supply the data. There was cybersecurity; there was pay confidence—we've heard about both those things already; there was what was called negative contingencies, which covers a whole lot of territory, and it was never explained what that meant; and, lastly, there was a shortfall in student numbers. The financial crisis was presented as being partly about student numbers, partly about a cybersecurity issue and partly about pay confidence. I said to the vice-chancellor, "You can't tell people you're going to take their jobs away because you accidentally stole their money from them in the past. That's an absurd claim. Likewise, you can't say that because we haven't had good enough cybersecurity, X hundred jobs have to go." And then there was generally a retrenchment in the public, as well as the private, discussions towards the student numbers issue.

But we knew, because we had members everywhere, that the figures didn't make sense. I knew because George had shown me what he was relying upon, which was a forecast that had been done, I think, in February or early March—well before HECS census date—that seemed to show a sudden drop-off and low projection for 2025, compared with the previous year, but the measurement was being done not year against year, actually. The measurement was being done between the forecast at that moment in time and the target for that year set the previous year. That confusion, deliberate or otherwise, persisted through the whole time. If you look at George's PowerPoints over a series of time, first of all, the operating deficit, which was \$10 million, is not referenced as the operating deficit. There is a town hall he gave where there was a PowerPoint that clearly says, "The operating position of the university is this; \$80 million deficit." The operating deficit was \$10 million. But there was a

consistent muddling of the year-on-year student numbers, which are actually up on the previous year and the year before, and the targets that were set—sorry, this is boring.

The CHAIR: No, it's important.

DAVID BURCHELL: To make this clear, there are two processes—and we have members far more skilled in this than me. Financial forecasting is done, obviously, to try and work out where we sit with student numbers on a rolling basis from the beginning of student enrolments at the start of the year. That, I think, is probabilistic. It's based upon previous years. Generally, that's okay, but there are years when that goes a bit wrong. The targets for student numbers are a quite different thing. Historically speaking, it had been a complicated process but mostly involved deans and others opting for a number—a target that they would aim for, for the following year, for the number of students for their school or discipline. The targets are aspirational, to get back to—

The CHAIR: Were the deans' budgets attached to their targets?

DAVID BURCHELL: Not that I'm aware of, no. The targets are political, if you like, and aspirational. The forecasts are supposed to be firm but obviously can't be totally firm because they're based upon predictions from the past. We were never short of students in relation to the previous year or the year before that. The only problem was that the target had been optimistic. But then my understanding from talking to people who had managed the process in the past, including the former head of the area that managed the process—CIA, competitive intelligence and analytics, I think—

The CHAIR: I love that it's CIA.

DAVID BURCHELL: Pardon me, I lost my train of thought here.

The CHAIR: So this was the target—

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes. The targets were nearly always optimistic and that was expected. But in, I think, the knowledge vacuum that happened in 2025, it wasn't clear that that was the case. So apples were being compared to oranges to make a crisis that didn't exist and had never existed. What made it even weirder—many of our members and many hundreds of staff at the university occupy professional staff positions where they have access to the current student numbers. It's called the worm. It's a rolling thing on a daily basis. They could see that the student numbers were fine even while the official messaging was that we had a problem. I don't think I'm asserting; I think it is simply a fact that trust was being eroded by an incorrect use of numbers. To be honest with you, it was a mixture of confusion and negative wishful thinking—"There's these things we want to do. We want a crisis. Look, there's a crisis." Then you cling onto the crisis narrative even when it no longer serves. Then eventually, when an annual report comes out, you maybe have to walk the crisis narrative back.

The CHAIR: We have heard of so-called crises across the sector. The crisis was revealed in April, which you've now explained was based on targets being used rather than the more predictive—

DAVID BURCHELL: Actually, the forecasts were out of date anyway. There were up-to-date numbers then that disproved the forecast too.

The CHAIR: That was then used—there was this discussion. There was this idea that 400 jobs were going to have to go as part of it. All of those factors were described as being part of the reason savings were going to need to be found. When did the narrative of the crisis fall off? When did you stop hearing about the crisis? I know we've seen the annual report this year, but was it before then?

DAVID BURCHELL: There were stages. The vice-chancellor stayed fixed to the narrative. Again, to be fair to George, he does not claim to be a financial guru. He stayed stuck to the narrative very firmly until the middle of 2025—I don't have the date in my head. Then, belatedly, it was acknowledged that there were subsequent forecasts that didn't match with the earlier forecast. So the imagined deficit was rolled back, I think, from \$55 million to \$40 million and ultimately \$25 million, from memory—I'm doing this from memory. That happened over a succession of months. It was a slow walking back. But the out years, 2026 and 2027, mysteriously remained the same. It stayed an \$80 million deficit for 2026 even though most of that deficit was supposed to be a pipeline effect from 2025. The numbers now added up even worse, even though the 2025 numbers were more credible. Then, towards the end of the year, as the restructure was completed and the new workforce was settling in, the vice-chancellor sent around an all-staff email saying, "We've done it. We've saved all the money necessary and there's no financial crisis anymore." There was a period of a slow walking back and then a dramatic end. Peace broke out right at the end of the year.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Dr Burchell, your opening remarks were talking about the issue of trust. In terms of recognising the financial challenge presented to the university, whatever numbers you want to

put on that, would you not agree that there was a financial case for a level of significant reform, whether it takes the name of Reset or not, that the university had to undertake?

DAVID BURCHELL: No, I don't accept that at all—2025 was an ordinary year. I've been at Western Sydney University for a long time. I've been branch president of the NTEU for a decade. We had multiple financial briefings every year. Because we're, frankly, a poor university—we don't have huge endowments and we don't actually have huge property assets, though we have significant ones—the university's finances generally sit somewhere around 20 to 30 million, plus or minus. On the face of it, on the basis of the actual operating deficit and not the endless add-ons, it didn't look like any abnormal year at all. The only thing that was aberrant was one particular student load forecast—forecast number three, from memory, from late February or early March. Other than that, it looked like a normal year, and indeed all the logic was that it would be a normal year because the student numbers were actually up and not down.

There was another element to the narrative I haven't mentioned, which was that from time to time the vice-chancellor would talk about a crisis to do with overseas students, but Western Sydney University doesn't depend nearly as much on overseas students as most other Sydney universities. We're not glamorous. And in any case, the legislation hadn't gone in and wasn't going in that would have caused the problems. There was no obvious evidence that this was an abnormal year other than rhetorical claims. My view is that the restructure was conducted for organisational reasons, not financial reasons.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of the Reset restructure, there was agreement reached about no forced redundancies. Is that the case?

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes, that was our position. The vice-chancellor, he ultimately accepted that position. Further than that, it was no forced redundancies and anyone who still wants to maintain their employment with the university will be found a role at a level appropriate—no less than their current role. That changed the game because suddenly people stopped being so panicked.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: That was a significant change in terms of part of the reform Reset agenda—the agreement of no forced redundancies?

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes, but that was right at the end of the year. That was October—late October, early November. Sorry, I don't have the exact date in my head.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: And your members would report that where their job was made redundant, they have been offered a suitable alternative job.

DAVID BURCHELL: Yes. The vice-chancellor, to give him credit, stayed with the pledge, and we followed our members through. I think I can report that every single member whose job was disestablished and who opted for a position in the new structure has been found a suitable position.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: There were reports of strike action undertaken by the university at other campuses. What was the experience at Western Sydney University?

DAVID BURCHELL: A strike action?

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Yes, in terms of union action against reforms and threats of job loss. Was there action taken at Western Sydney University?

DAVID BURCHELL: Under the Fair Work Act, of course, protected industrial action has to be taken during a period of enterprise bargaining for reasons related to that. We were in enterprise bargaining, but this was not directly related, so that limited our options. We had a rally, and other than that we presented ourselves as presenting the facts. We organised our own all-staff webinars, and we presented the data that was available to us and explained where we thought the data coming from the management was. It was a different strategy to what unions would normally do. It was basically a truth-based strategy rather than an agitational-based strategy.

The CHAIR: Which is not to say that unions don't normally present truth-based strategy. I just want to get that on the record—

DAVID BURCHELL: Hopefully.

The CHAIR: —just in case that be misconstrued by someone. Thank you so much. That was incredibly helpful of both of you today. We appreciate the time taken to come and present to us but also the time and energy that you both clearly would have invested in getting through the Reset restructure. We appreciate that as well. We appreciate you being here. Thank you so much. If there are supplementary questions, the secretariat will be in touch.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr STEPHEN BALI, MP, Member for Blacktown, before the Committee

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bali, for agreeing to appear today. Do you have a short opening statement?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: I will just focus briefly on the three key points that I put in my submission, which was circulated. That looks at potential recommendations or requests for information, depending on what the Committee can look at. I think the first one has been coming through quite strongly today in relation to the governance, structure or accountability of universities. Throughout this paper, I was talking about looking at universities, as we've heard with some of the presentations, and where are they actually held accountable. They don't have shareholders. They don't have electors. They may have a senate, they may have a board of trustees, they may have students and they may present an annual report to Parliament each year, but, as we heard in today's presentations, there are a lot of question marks in process and procedures.

Arguably, something for the Committee to consider is to maybe amend the Act so as to ensure an inquiry like yours—a permanent inquiry for the upper House, like a select committee—to actually dive into the issues. Each university could spend half a day presenting. At least, that brings a bit of a public gaze on what's happening behind the scenes so that there's a bit of accountability. You need that. The justification is that if you look at the amount of public funds coming into a university—whether it's Federal government, State supported, students or international students—it's not like you're just selling a cup of coffee or you're selling iron ore or something. It is coming from the public purse, so they should be held more accountable.

The second one was more about requests for information. My particular examination here is what's happening in the Nirimba campus and some of the questionable practices around the closure of that campus. Firstly, on requests for information, WSU should actually come clean a bit more as far as their plans, if any. In the discussions with Vice-Chancellor Williams with myself, Federal member for Chifley Ed Husic and Mayor Brad Bunting—we had a roundtable discussion—he was saying that there are no plans. He can stay there for 10 years, 20 years or five years. We know they're cashed-strapped, is what we're hearing. They're financially challenged. We don't want to be in a situation where they decide to sell. There's a whole reason why they shouldn't just sell. I may touch on it later—the importance of keeping it as public space and as training facilities. It's on a community title. Back in 2015, in the annual report, which is written in this report, it says that it was all resolved. What was resolved?

Another thing has come through from Hamish Macdonald of the ABC. Hamish actually asked, "Can you categorically say that it's not about the university clearing off an asset to get cash to work with other endeavours?" It was interesting. Vice-Chancellor Professor Williams' response was "Absolutely, categorically this was a decision about students." He didn't actually say he's not going to sell the campus. He didn't actually say what the future of the campus is. He's just saying that whatever decision he does make is allegedly about the students.

The third one is really recommendations around WSU Nirimba. At the moment, it's SP2 zoning. That should be maintained. Its future should be as an educational or open space. But, to provide that openness that we've seen, as far as governance and the future of Nirimba, I think there should be a local chamber of stakeholders, which is MPs, the mayor, leaders of the community and business with the WSU leadership to actually talk about the future of that campus. That should be locked in because, as we've heard throughout today's submissions, they say one thing and then something else happens.

Just to finish up, the classic one was on the Hamish program back in December when you had the classic line from the vice-chancellor talking about Nirimba and saying he was sad that it's a facility below standard. It was built as a 1950s naval base, and it has come to the end of its useful life. But, if you actually look at it, from 2012 to 2015 they rebuilt the administration building, they rebuilt the accommodation block, and they built a brand-new, state-of-the-art, 400-seat lecture theatre and 20-seat tutorials, and then the vice-chancellor says on the radio program that there were no power points to recharge the computers. As we are hearing all day long in your submissions, the vice-chancellor says one thing, and then there's something else. They talk about the lack of students, and the data that I've provided—and I can give updates. From 2018 to now, there have been between 47,000 and 49,000 students. It's constant—2,000 students up and down. But you can do your budget.

The crisis is not as a result of the university's core business. It's actually as a result of mismanagement: write-offs, not recognising tax when they have to pay tax, and IT systems that need to be rebuilt after they just invested so much into it and capitalised it—turned it into an asset and then realised there's \$59 million and we're now jettisoning that system. Everyone else is getting blamed for the problems of management, and we just want to have a situation that improves governance and improves the transparency of the Nirimba campus so that it stays open space as a training facility for a city of Blacktown that's growing to be over 600,000 people by 2041 based on the current zoning. We're not saying no to development but, at the same time, the city is growing, and we need a university that calls it home. Just like when WSU said, "We're not interested in Blacktown," so one-quarter of

the entire Western Sydney is not covered by WSU. They call themselves Western Sydney but, at the same time, there's something like 600,000 people—the Hills and Blacktown—who don't have a campus. As far as the university is concerned, you can go travel; we don't care.

The CHAIR: Can I start questions based on that? We heard today from members of the academic senate about the particular purpose of Western Sydney University, and the concern expressed—and I think the word used—was that it's a university that is now implanted into Western Sydney rather than being of Western Sydney. Can you explain—being so connected to the community there—what WSU means for Western Sydney? What has it meant and what should it mean for the entirety of Western Sydney?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: What it meant originally—if we really step back in time, my first degree was at the Macarthur Institute of Higher Education, which became the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, and then a part of Western Sydney University. I've got a long history associated with it. If you go back further, into the '70s, having lived my entire life in Blacktown, my dad, being involved in council back in the '70s; John Aquilina, the mayor and Speaker of this House, eventually, in '77; every Federal MP; and every State MP—everyone wanted a university in Western Sydney. Everyone saw the growth, and then the Dawkins report came along—or the Dawkins revolution, as it's sometimes referred to. There were good and bad aspects of it, but it converted all the advanced colleges of education into a university.

They lumbered all the ones in Western Sydney together as one university. It was really a hope and an endeavour to move forward. Blacktown was always forgotten, and therefore our local MPs and councils always banded together. Then the opportunity came up in 1995 with the closure of the Nirimba naval base. It was a vision of hope and easy access, because Western Sydney is a gigantic space. If you look at the map, today it's 2.7 million people. It's a huge space. WSU was created and developed and was our light on the hill, so to speak, to quote Ben Chifley—

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: It was supposed to be called Chifley University too.

Mr STEPHEN BALI: Supposed to have been called Chifley. There's a lot of history that we can talk about, but essentially it was there, and then it became a business. It became corporatised. It then started to look at overseas, and placed itself overseas. It then started going to Lithgow—Lithgow joined WSROC, so it's part of Western Sydney, I suppose.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: That's a stretch, mate.

Mr STEPHEN BALI: It then started looking east and looking all over the place. It then lost its mojo in Western Sydney. The academics are great—they pump out some really good research about Western Sydney—but, essentially, if you look at the numbers, according to WSU's own data, of all the university students currently at Western Sydney, only 27 per cent call Western Sydney home. Then they started pulling out, and then you started seeing Wollongong university come in. My conversations, which are listed in the report—when I sat down as Mayor of Blacktown back in 2016 and 2017 to talk to Vice-Chancellor Glover, I said, "How do we expand?"

At that stage, there were no degrees—back in 2006, all the degrees were pulled out from Blacktown. Glover just basically said to me, "Blacktown students are prepared to travel. Good luck getting anyone in here." The funniest thing really was that, like a bullyboy, he then turned around and said, "Look, if any university does come in here, I'll build next door to them and run them out of town," like he was trying to do down in Liverpool. He built next door to University of Wollongong. That way, he'll take them on and what will be will be afterwards, and then he'll close down the campus. So it became a corporatised bully with a "I will do this" attitude. Then he said to me that if I, as mayor, support him selling Nirimba, he may put some money in.

There were some articles at the time, valuations on the back of envelope and valuers looking at it unofficially saying that that 70 hectares of land would probably be worth about \$500 million. With the previous Government, we weren't too sure whether they were going to sell the TAFE site or not. Geoff Lee, who now works at WSU, was then the Minister. He gave me, eventually, an assurance that prior to the 2023 election he wouldn't sell it—which was good—but then it's game on after that. At least we had some assurity at that point, to give Geoff some credit for what he was doing. It was just all up in the air. Today, the university just cherrypick what they want to do. They've caused chaos to the academics. People aren't choosing WSU. It's so sad to see the situation we are in, where they've had to spend, over the last 10 years, \$130 million to advertise to local students that they are the choice and that it's their university. Spending \$130 million over 10 years, you just go, "Well, after 40 years being there, you should be the first choice in everyone's mind, but you're not."

The CHAIR: I want to talk to you a bit about—I know that you're particularly interested in the Nirimba campus. I understand that it was used by one of the controlled entities. Was it exclusively used for what's known as "the college" of WSU? Do you know what it was being used for before it was decided to shut it down?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: It was a full-functioning university campus. In 1995 it was created as a university campus, a TAFE campus and two senior high schools. The university there had several degrees from construction to business and law, and various other faculties were there. There were two or three major faculties offering from undergraduate to postgraduate to doctorates. In circa 2006, the university decided to cut the program because, it said, "There's the same or similar programs in Werrington and Rydalmere and Parramatta"—at that stage, Rydalmere was the main part. They said, "We don't need Blacktown." Mind you, it's half an hour travel, 45 minutes, and if you go by train, even longer, and Rydalmere campus is a lot further out from Parramatta to get to by public transport. They shut down the Blacktown campus. Just another plug for Blacktown—it will pass Tasmania's population by 2037. Tasmania's got quite a few campuses; Blacktown has none. So, you just go, "Really? For 600,000 people, you've got to travel out of our local government area?"

But anyway, they shut it down and they created the college. Now, the college is particularly just for backgrounds, like a foundations course—if you want to go into the world of business, you do a diploma of business. For students that didn't succeed too well in their HSC, it just gives them an ability to see if university life is there. They bring them up to speed, so it's a very important aspect. If you pass that first year, then you go on to the degree. But to go on to the degree, you had to leave Blacktown. So, it's very important, and it became—

The CHAIR: Sorry, so what you're saying is basically it provided a role which was a very useful gateway role, particularly for students who perhaps hadn't done as well as they would have liked or didn't know if they were going to go to uni, and they were using it as that stepping stone year. Is that right?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: It was as a stepping stone. That was created roughly in 2008. By about 2013, 2014 or even before that, there are old press releases and stuff or documents in annual reports that show that they were looking at—the only place to do this college aspect was at Nirimba. That's why the Federal Government gave about \$10 million to build a new, state-of-the-art, as they call it—and it's quoted in my submission there—facility, which Professor Williams reckons there are no power points in, and he reckons is a 1950s building. But it's a brand-new building. There's a whole range—they were anticipating more than 5,000 students there. If you look, since 2010, in my report, I give the table—I'm happy to table it again—which is updated to 2025. It started from about 2.7 per cent of the entire university base to up to about 5 per cent of the university base. That's how many students were going to one little campus at Nirimba—five per cent of the entire university.

And then, suddenly, after spending all that money, by 2016 there was an unknown, somewhere in the back blocks of the chancellery, who decided that they were going to kill off Nirimba. Each year, if you look at the UAC books, there were less and less courses on offer. But the funny thing about it is that those courses that were on offer were still being picked up. The locals wanted to do something in the Blacktown area, so the numbers didn't die off as much as they wanted. By 2020, still 4½ per cent of the entire student population was based there. Then they just simply started closing courses. They were saying, "We're doing consultation," which they never did. The business course was shut down about three weeks before the mid-term final exams. Students got a letter sent home to them saying, "Thank you very much for being a diploma student. You've still got subjects left, but you are now a student at the Sydney campus."

Imagine telling a Blacktown student—not even the Rydalmere campus, not the Parramatta campus, not the Penrith campus—"Thanks for playing, but your next semester subject will be in Sydney CBD." These students, whom I know personally, then contacted the campus to say, "I can't get to Sydney." And they said, "Well, you, as the student, have to disenroll from the Sydney campus and try to find a vacancy at one of the other campuses." And then the then vice-chancellor and others, when I rang up to make representations on behalf of these students, said, "Oh, no, no, we did plenty of consultation. That's not the case." They put it in writing, and then afterwards they backtracked and said, "Yes, you're right. Sorry about that." No consultation with the academics, no consultation with anyone—they just shut down a course. As I've said previously, they engineered the death of the Nirimba campus, which can be reopened tomorrow. It's a functioning university with fabulous facilities, and yet Professor Williams turns up there and says that he had a walk around there—I don't know what he saw, because there's brand-new buildings there and a great facility. Yet, as I said before, he reckons there's no power points.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: February 2025 is when WSU announced it would leave the campus. I'm wondering, did that not then follow the Government calling for expressions of interest for the campus site?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: No, the Government hasn't, I don't believe. So I'm interested, because what they've been saying, like, 2025 was actually—they said they had town halls. They never spoke to any local MP. They were talking about the potential of closing the campus. Don't forget, in 2022 there was a newspaper article in *Blacktown News* that actually identified then rumours of the closure. The university came out and said, "No, they are an important element of the life of Blacktown and Western Sydney," and that they were going to stay. They squashed all the rumours. Making a decision only lasts three years, according to WSU.

In 2025 they once again spoke about it—still a town hall. I'd like to get a definition of what "town hall" means. Do they just get a couple of students or just let some people know that the vice-chancellor is going to have a chat on a webinar? How many people would turn up to it? There was no real consultation. The meetings I've had with the vice-chancellor, and what he's said on radio and elsewhere, is that he is going to engage with the Government. My understanding is he hasn't engaged. He may have engaged, but I don't know. I haven't asked the Minister recently. There has been no formal discussion apart from the meeting that I called for—to have the mayor, Ed Husic and myself there. He gave an undertaking that there is no great rush and that he'll talk to stakeholders, whoever that may be. There has been no real discussion.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I wonder if we could possibly just get some clarity as to whether—I am informed that calling for expressions of interest took place and that they ruled out that the site would be used for an equivalent university. I'm not sure.

Mr STEPHEN BALI: Who would call for that expression of interest?

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: The New South Wales Government has called for it. The status of the campus at the moment—it remains vacant.

Mr STEPHEN BALI: Yes. The buildings, I believe, are just vacant, locked up.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I'm just thinking we're now in June 2026. If this was February 2025—

Mr STEPHEN BALI: There were still students there until the end of last year. It's a safe area. Mr Williams may not believe it is, but there is security there. You've got the TAFE campus and two senior high schools on there. It shouldn't be left. Once again, instead of leaving it vacant, there is a demand for lecture spaces and for meeting rooms. The university should have its social licence in relation to working with the community to allow meetings to take place and to have public forums on various issues.

Coming back to the Chair's original point, what is the role of WSU in Western Sydney? You've got a massive campus there with a 400-seat lecture theatre. Wouldn't it be great to actually hold civics lessons, or hold different aspects that the community can come to for community learning in one-off lessons or a short series, and work with local community groups? People are always looking for community spaces. Instead of locking it down—they're already paying for security and cleaning still. I assume you've got a cleaner. If you let some building be run down, you should have some type of occasional—

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Hence my question on the time frame here. What is happening on the campus today?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: It's just sitting there.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: It's sitting vacant. And your last discussion with the vice-chancellor on this?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: Was either early this year—that was the three of us meeting up with him—or late last year.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I think we're going to be seeing him this afternoon to pursue this.

The CHAIR: Mr Bali, is there anything else you wanted to let us know about, either the Nirimba campus or WSU, before we finish up? I note your helpful reflections on university governance generally.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I wanted to ask about the transport. This is an issue that has been raised about the viability of the Nirimba campus's connection to transport. Do you have any comments about that public transport access?

Mr STEPHEN BALI: Public transport across Western Sydney has been slowly improving under our Government, which is good to see—more buses and connectivity happening, but probably not enough over the period, but it costs a lot of money to slowly rebuild the network. You've got a railway station fairly close to it, probably a 15-minute walk or so. If you look at the Werrington campus, the Kingswood campus, if you look at a lot of campuses, they're not on top of transport. Heck, if you look at the University of New South Wales before the light rail was built, it was miles away and still survived. Macquarie University now is well connected. Most people in Western Sydney have a car or can arrange transport, but there are bus services, trains and stuff.

I think, as the data shows, when you're just throwing unsubstantiated statements out there, the mud always sticks—saying that students don't want to be there. Here's another one to ask the vice-chancellor. He said that 50 per cent of all the Nirimba students failed in their course and the moment they moved them off campus, 90 per cent were passing. My question is how would you know that from last year when it would have been the first year without most of them even sitting an exam, and you're telling me that back in 2015 with 2,244 students

there, or in 2019, 2,340 students, that 50 per cent of them were failing? I know one student in particular who got the dean's merit honours list attending the Nirimba campus there. The puff statements put out by the vice-chancellor are that the place is broke, yet the finances are not—you had lots of people talking about finances, but their expenditure has massively grown.

The classic example was what we just heard earlier where 600 jobs were identified to be cut, 400 were actually made redundant; yet, please have a look at their numbers. I think I've put some numbers into my paper. The actual number of employees has increased. How do you make 400 people redundant and yet have more employees today than at the peak of students back in 2019? They've got more professional staff, more people working at the university today after 400 job cuts, so you've got to ask: How do they manage this place? They sack all these workers, give them redundancies, and then they employ even more, and then say, "We've got to restructure. Oops!" None of their statements, if you apply the blowtorch of truth to the vice-chancellor—no power points. "You can't even recharge your laptop." That was his actual quote. You're telling me that in a modern university in a modern building that won awards back in 2015 as the twenty-first century IT business lecture and tutorial room, they forgot to put power points to recharge a computer in there.

These are the statements that he throws out: "People can't get there. The transport's not good enough." The other thing he said was "If you're a woman, you wouldn't want to walk from Quakers Hill station to the Nirimba campus." I take umbrage at these people who don't live in Western Sydney, who sit on the board in leadership positions of a Western Sydney university, have nothing to do with us, occasionally come out to Western Sydney for their board meeting, go away back to the east or the north, and then have this perception that Western Sydney is somehow some type of evil place run by drugs and you name it, and that it's not safe. Maybe we need to find people who actually live in Western Sydney become the vice-chancellor and the chancellor. There are plenty of people who have worked, grown up and run successful businesses who still live in Western Sydney who ought to be on the board of Western Sydney University.

The CHAIR: We very much appreciate, Mr Bali, your being here today and sharing your views.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Great reel, Steve.

The CHAIR: That will be a great reel. It's not controversial, so I am going to suggest that we decide to publish Mr Bali's submission so that it can go up today.

(The witness withdrew.)

Distinguished Professor GEORGE WILLIAMS, AO, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Professor, thank you very much for making the time to come and be with us this afternoon. I understand you had a busy morning, so we appreciate it. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Thank you for the opportunity to appear today. I do give my apologies on behalf of our Chancellor, Jennifer Westacott. She is deep in graduation ceremonies right now on our Parramatta south campus. She's got those ceremonies all today. In fact, I've just come from one of our ceremonies, which was an enormously wonderful event for us. We graduated nearly 200 teachers, who will go, in many cases, into the public school system. We also had a big celebration of public education. We gave an honorary degree to Murat Dizdar to recognise his enormous work on behalf of public education. I mention this as a start because, with our ceremonies in particular, we start with our focus on the students. In our case, about two-thirds of our students are first in family to go to university—we suspect the highest in the country. We have the highest number of low-SES students in the country. We have half of our students speak a language other than English at home. We've nearly 1,000 Indigenous students. So our graduation ceremonies are a wonderful reminder of why we are here: for public education.

This morning there were students walking across the stage in tears of joy and parents shouting out with amazement that the first person in their family had gone through university. It was a really wonderful example of why we exist as a university. It's also a reminder for many of those students what a hard time they've had as well. For this inquiry, it's important for me to mention just how difficult it is for many students within the system today. One in two of our students has food insecurity at Western Sydney University. We think we might give out about 22,000 free meals and visits to our food pantry this year. We have big problems with devices with our students, with loneliness. There are a range of really difficult issues. For too many of our students, having a public education can mean years in poverty, in ways that simply are unfair and should not be the sort of system we have.

When I started as vice-chancellor, in recognition of the centrality of students, in my first year I declared it to be the year of the student at Western Sydney University. When it came to my second year—and I'm now in my second year—I said it's the year of the student again. I'm saying to my staff that every year, it's about focusing upon the people we serve and giving them a great education. As you can get a sense, I'm really passionate about public education. I'm a big believer in the benefits that it brings to our society. I'm someone who benefited directly from a great public education. But I do want to say in coming to this Committee that not all is right in higher education. In fact, much of the system is no longer a public education system. There are deep problems that I personally very strongly believe we need to fix. In terms of understanding that, I wrote a book last year. I'm happy to give it to members of the Committee. I've got other copies here if people want it.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Signed copies?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Happy to sign a copy. As an academic, I wanted to understand how have we got here as a higher education sector with such corporatisation, such casualisation, with domestic students often missing out on the benefits that they needed and, to be frank, how we had emerged as a market for education as opposed to the delivery of a public good. For me, I don't see a big difference between patients in hospitals and kids going to schools. It's about a public sector body delivering public good across both of those areas. For me, the ultimate sign that things are deeply broken are job-ready graduates. With art students now paying \$52,000 to go to university, many will never pay that degree off. It is, frankly, against our values as a country that we're not giving those people a fair go. It's why, as a university and a vice-chancellor, I'm strongly supportive of the major regulatory reform that is going through the sector, ranging from governance through to fees to elsewhere. The sector does need to change so that it properly reflects the public education part of our mission.

In doing so, I'd also like to pay tribute to our staff. It's really important to do so. I believe the system must support our staff and our students, and a big part of my job is caring for our staff and making sure that they have a great job and can fulfil their mission and their desires at work. I acknowledge that it has been a really tough time, not just in our university but across the sector. That includes our own Reset process we had last year that I'm sure I'll take questions on, and that reflects our financial issues. It also reflects, across the sector, what happens when the Commonwealth takes \$4 billion out of the sector over five years. Of course, there have been international student declines and other changes as well. At our end, AI is having big impacts upon staff, with quite large existential questions about what public education means in a world of AI. We went through a really dreadful, difficult period, which was over much of my early time, of a cybersecurity problem which had big impacts upon our community as well.

I could go from there, but this has been far from an easy time. I'd just say how profoundly grateful, thankful and proud I am of our staff for how they've navigated this time, and their commitment has never wavered.

For me, that's really inspirational, and they are absolutely committed to our mission of student success, impactful research and particularly, in doing so, serving Western Sydney. We're here for Western Sydney, and, as a university, we must deliver for the region. The last thing I'd say, perhaps unusually, is that I actually want to give a thanks to our unions—the NTEU and the CPSU—at Western. Sometimes we disagree. I was a union member during my time as an academic for a couple of decades. I respect the role of the union, as a vice-chancellor. I encourage people to join our unions. I think they play a key role in advocacy. As a vice-chancellor, I can name areas where I have changed my mind. I meet with the unions often. They've come up with good ideas that I hadn't thought of, and I give them credit for helping us navigate some difficult processes in better ways that look after our people.

I'd also give them credit for the joint partnership on decasualisation. We've led the sector—160 people converted from casual to ongoing staff. I know the profound impact that has on the life of those people to get on with their lives, to have meaningful work and the like. We obviously would like to see more decasualisation over time. When it comes to Reset, with the unions, I credit that partnership for enabling us to get through that period where the only people who left the university did so voluntarily, and there were no forced redundancies of people under enterprise agreements. Again, I credit the union for the jobs guarantee I gave that every person who wanted a job at the university would be found a job, in accordance with the EA, and that's something we obviously stuck to throughout that process. There's a bit there and a lot going on. I'm very happy, of course, to take your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that introduction, Professor Williams. I want to start with some of those general comments you made at the beginning about the state of higher education and universities, and indeed, some of what's contained in your book, which I read with interest. Part of what you highlight there, using the University of Tasmania as an example, with the report that was conducted into them, was a decline in trust between universities and the community, and a sense that the community feels that universities have become money-making ventures and that there has been a corporatisation of universities. In light of that, I have a couple of questions regarding WSU. Firstly, is WSU a member of the Business Council of Australia?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: No.

The CHAIR: It has not joined? Because many others—

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It has been in the past, but, no, I actually ceased the membership during my time at the university.

The CHAIR: Why did you cease it?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: The main reason was I didn't think it provided us value for money at the time that we needed. I made a decision about what we should focus on as a university, and I didn't feel that was something we should continue.

The CHAIR: The next related question is, today we had other evidence provided and information tabled about WSU's spend on consultants. Aside from what you also highlight in your book, which is executive pay as being a contentious issue, something that has very much emerged through our inquiry has been what I would posit as the overuse of consultants. There still is considerable use of consultants at WSU. This document says it—

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Can I ask my team to give you a document?

The CHAIR: Yes, I've got it.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: You've got that. Great.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We do have that. Doesn't that also feed into that distrust and concern about corporatisation, that we should pay executives very, very well at universities—many are paid multiples of the Premier's wage—and yet we still have to engage all of these consultancies? How doesn't that just further erode trust? I appreciate your sentiments, but the proof is still in the pudding.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It's the actions that count. Absolutely I accept that. I accept the premise of your question too. I think the evidence is very clearly there in community responses and the like. Of course, I wrote directly about those things in the book expressing similar concerns. The NTEU has a clear agenda and I agree with a large part of it exactly along these lines. When it comes to executive pay, when I came in, I felt strongly that this should be set at arm's length from the board. I credit my chancellor, Jennifer Westacott. We agreed it should be benchmarked. It has been for the lowest secretary of a Commonwealth department. Since I arrived, I have had no pay rise at all. It'll be two years in July. I've refused those rises. I'll just stay where I am for the time being, particularly given the challenges that we've had. Publicly I support very strongly that the Remuneration Tribunal should be involved here in banding and setting salaries to provide the confidence and the

like that you're talking about. But I think we're public sector bodies and should have public sector methods for determining these things.

The CHAIR: According to your most recent annual report, there are still—I just did a very quick count and I don't know that I had my glasses on. I think about 17 people at Western Sydney University earn over \$380,000. That is still a large amount of people earning a large amount of money, given that the Premier, I think, earns just over \$400,000.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Maybe I can say what I did about that, because I saw those figures and I saw the NTEU report as well, which collated this across Australia. In October 2024 I put a pay freeze on all senior staff, including myself, that lasted about 18 months. There has been a pay rise this year but lower than all other staff members. But that was a lengthy period. In the Reset process, I cut one in four of all senior staff. There were no impacts upon other staff until that happened. If you look at our annual report, it shows that the average salary of our senior staff since 2022 has decreased by \$90,000. There's a trajectory here. I'm not saying it's complete, but under my watch there have been freezes, a big decrease last year—a full \$90,000 decrease. You can't just flip things. People are on contracts. I would say I've really imposed pay discipline at that level. I intend to continue to do so. I support the Remuneration Tribunal assisting me to say these are the right bands for senior staff and myself.

The CHAIR: With regard to how people are remunerated, obviously you would be aware that in September last year *ABC News* reported on a group of consultants that were employed on day rates of between \$1,300 and \$2,800 a day in the university chancellery. I'm not entirely clear what the work was that they were performing. Perhaps you can let us know. But they were apparently displacing ongoing staff. While you might have fewer staff, you still have money going out to pay for the roles. There also seems to be evidence that one of those positions was a chief people officer, and a consultant subsequently occupied the position of chief people officer despite maintaining his personal consulting business. I wondered if you could provide any further information. That's a bit disturbing. Would you like to comment on that?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I'm very happy to. What happened in the middle of last year was our chief people officer resigned. This was in the middle of our Reset process. We needed to get someone immediately. We made the decision we would appoint a contractor into that role until we could recruit. We've now recruited. We have a person who's coming on board shortly, but we had to fill the position in the middle of that process, and we couldn't wait three or six months as it can take to go through a full recruitment process. That's why we brought that person on board as a contractor essentially for that period.

The CHAIR: How were they chosen?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: They were chosen because they were already assisting us with work connected to Reset. We felt they had the skills on a temporary basis to fill the role, and they were chosen because they were already aware of what was happening, and we felt that they would be able to do the job well. In fact, I think that was the right decision in terms of the work that has occurred. For the other parts of your question—and let me say, the first approach I communicate to my staff is that the default for consultant use is no. We do not use consultants as a default. Our priority is to build internal capability.

Our Reset process was led by an internal team. We picked our best people who know and love the university to help us translate and go through that really difficult process. But there are times, nonetheless, where we do need to use consultants. One would be we just don't have the expertise. So \$30.5 million you'll see for last year are very large components on cyber work, employing consultants to work with the police and others to do the forensics and other work. That was a massive spend we had to do to get through that cyber process, and that will continue for a period given the needs that we have there, particularly engaging with the police on what's an ongoing prosecution.

Another area we don't have a choice is we're often required to have external assurance for what we do, and that could be regulatory bodies and the like, and the third category is we do use consultants where our team can get burnt out and we need to help them. That's the example particularly with Reset. We spent a total of \$1.3 million on employing additional support, consultants and the like for Reset. I don't regret that because it didn't displace any one; it complemented them, and they all left at the end of it. But we needed that help because the work was so large. We didn't go to a big firm, but our people just couldn't get through the workload without that assistance.

The CHAIR: We've had another university that's in quite a bit of hot water where they had a consultant act in a senior role who was still on the books of a consultancy to a degree. Does it not concern you—I've had a look at the website of where this consultant now sits—given that part of their sell is their experience in higher education, which I presume was gleaned at Western Sydney University? Were you not concerned that the person you were employing—and I still haven't found out whether they were engaged by the day—to undertake work,

using the title of chief people officer, was able to leverage that to gain work elsewhere? What kind of firewalls, what kind of discussions, what kind of protections—

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I respect the questions, and these are things I was very conscious of as well. We employed them firstly not as a consultant but essentially coming in for an interim period. They're the interim chief people officer, and that interim bit is very important. The clear understanding was they were dedicating their time to us for this period of time. We have a strong conflicts policy that applies at times like this. There have been instances where I know we have checked those things to ensure the person is dedicating their time to us and doing so appropriately. It's not a firm that otherwise we were using in other ways. This was a particular person rather than the firm that we're engaging, and it was conducted on that basis. If it wasn't in the middle of Reset, we would have gone straight to market. We would have gone straight and hired someone, but at that point we had to have someone fill the job in the middle of a change process involving the enterprise agreement.

The CHAIR: What qualifications did they have to lead a major restructure, which at the time was slated to be 400 staff? We now know that voluntary redundancies—but 600 staff were displaced. What qualifications did this person uniquely have that meant that they were right, even if timing was short, to be undertaking that role? Had they vast experience as chief people officers in higher education?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Let me also get you a bit more information. I didn't employ that person directly. They're not reporting into me. I would need to check with the person who made that decision, but I did have conversations to satisfy myself about that. That included particularly the quality of their work they had already done for us in assisting with the process we were going through, their familiarity, their judgement, the fact that their CV had demonstrated they had the requisite skills. But these were things I was assured of rather than looking at those directly. But I'm very happy to take that on notice and give you a better answer.

The CHAIR: If you could, and if you wouldn't mind taking on notice and providing to the Committee what the checks were that you said were undertaken to ensure that there weren't conflicts of interest. As I said, it's directly analogous to another university we've had in front of us where we had someone acting.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I understand.

The CHAIR: At least then we saw a letter where they were meant to be not paid for the day. At least we've seen that, whereas we don't have that undertaking. If you could provide that—

GEORGE WILLIAMS: We will give you that information.

The CHAIR: That would be very useful. Still on this theme, you would be aware of the most recent scandal with KPMG. You would be aware that in our interim report, we focused on consultants. KPMG sat before us, not in this room but before this Committee. We asked them explicitly how it was that they could be sure that there weren't any conflicts of interest and that there weren't any confidentiality breaches. They said, "It's all good. There's nothing to see here." We've subsequently seen that, in other areas of their business, that is not the case. I wondered what you have done to proactively assure yourself.

If we're talking about perceptions and the perceptions we started the discussion with, in public perception, having a chancellor who is also formally noted as being an adviser to KPMG, and your university does engage KPMG on multimillion-dollar contracts—I think I asked the witnesses to provide information over the years that we don't have in annual reports about KPMG work—what have you done to assure yourself that there's not a risk with KPMG, but also to manage what now must be a reputational issue, having the chancellor being an official adviser to KPMG?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Let me say, firstly, in regard to the chancellor that, yes, she has that role as special adviser. The chancellor is also someone who acted as secretary. She worked as a secretary for a New South Wales government department in Victoria in housing, infrastructure and community services, as chair of the Bradfield authority—

The CHAIR: But you're not giving work to the departments in Victoria.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I completely understand the nature of the question, but one of the reasons I wanted to work at Western was to work with our chancellor. She comes from housing commission. She has lived the experience of our students. I've never seen a more fierce advocate for Western Sydney than her. I think we're extraordinarily lucky to have her in that position. It's a great privilege to work with her. That, for me, is the picture, if you like. The question is how do we deal with the real possibility of conflicts with KPMG that can arise with not just her but a range of board members in different contexts, even where public sector roles come into play. Our chancellor formally declared her involvement in KPMG the day before it was announced. It went straight onto our register before it was announced.

I can absolutely assure the Committee that I'm proactive in ensuring that—I mean, she would never want to be involved in those decisions—they're always kept away from her. That's any engagements with any consultancy firm. We've also now put in place a formal protocol in writing that makes very clear that here are the areas you can do it. That's on our conflicts of interest register, down to basic logistics and the like, to make sure it's crystal clear. That's to protect her, the university, and also in light of public confidence as well. In case that wasn't enough, we've actually asked for an arms-length probity review of all recent major consultancy engagements. I've asked for that. I just want to check in case I'm missing anything. I know the processes are right. I think I'll get that next week, and we're happy to report on that to the Committee when we have that.

We had a major board session with Melinda Cilento last week talking about these issues. We've gone through it. The answer is that we're absolutely proactive. For me, it means asking questions all the time, being aware of it and making sure the process is there and the culture is highly supportive of that. As I said, the starting point is no to consultants. The final thing I should say is that I've actually put in an extra check as well for any consultants over a threshold level. It must go through our internal audit process. That person, independent to the board, checks off everything. To make sure I'm not missing anything, it must go through that process. Her job is to check that it matches. My default is no, unless there's a good reason that it has to happen.

The CHAIR: I've only got a couple more questions because I know that there are others from the Committee. One will be quite quick because I suspect you'll have to take it on notice. Could you let us know if any council members have any professional links to—obviously we know about KPMG—any of the other consultants that are listed on this list?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Sure, I'll get you that on notice. Are you talking about board members' links to that document?

The CHAIR: Yes, board members. I'll get the terminology right. You said we were going to ask about Reset; we're going to ask about Reset. In April 2025 at the online town hall that you addressed, you suggested that the university faced an imminent financial crisis—to be honest, that's a narrative we've heard elsewhere—and that remediating the situation would require the loss of 400 ongoing jobs, the same number we'd seen at other universities around the time. But we do understand that this claim was based on earlier projections, and we've explored that today in some of the evidence—before census data was available—but there was other evidence that there wasn't this student issue. But in November 2025 you suggested, in one of your week in review emails to all staff, that the financial crisis had come to an end. Can you explain the basis of your claims of the financial crisis and the reason for the changes, or do you need to amend the claims that you originally made?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Let me also start with—I was very careful not to describe it as a crisis. What I said was, we had to live within our means. We've actually gone back and checked my communications as well, and what I said on that occasion—but on many other occasions—was that, when I came into the university, we'd already had two years of deficit before I arrived. If we looked at where things were heading, we expected there'd be a combined deficit of about \$250 million over five years. I said that we had to live within our means because, otherwise, we're loading the university up with debt over a longer period of time. A lot of one-off things we exclude from that but, essentially, our core operations needed to operate within a reasonable margin or just debt, debt, debt was where we were heading. So that's what we needed to fix.

But the other key point, I said, was that it wasn't just about the financial issues and living within our means. The week I arrived I put a survey out to staff. I asked them for their feedback on what I should focus on and where things were working and not working. Staff were forthright and frank in saying that they loved the place but, frankly, a lot of things were broken and they needed to be fixed. There was duplication of roles, lack of responsibility, people in dead-end jobs and legacy systems that were not working. At that town hall I said that we have a financial problem we need to deal with but, in fact, the longer term and bigger issue is that we have to get the university working right because we're not well-aligned with good jobs at the university and also with serving our students.

A lot of what we did, actually, was fix the financial issue. So, by November, I could say, "We're now getting to that financial sustainability point," and we're still there. We're now there. We've dealt with that. We have right-sized through the decisions that were made. But, even more importantly, we have 491 people in new jobs aligned to good work. Many people got promotions from that. It's exactly what we should focus on. They're doing things directed at our students and our community in Western Sydney, and we're now an organisation much more focused on the public mission that we have. So they're the two key things we achieved: the financial, but really setting ourselves up for long-term success for Western Sydney.

The CHAIR: Isn't it true, though—we took evidence earlier today that the operating deficit was the same. You knew it was going to be \$10 million. That hasn't changed. It was what was added on top of that underlying deficit that could be chosen, if you like, to tell the story of financial sustainability or not.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, and I'm really alive to the earlier debates. I've read Richard Denniss's evidence. I've rung him up, actually, and asked him. I've talked to him through these issues, and I've said, "Tell me if there's something I should know here." But our accounts do include philanthropy, investment income and the like because I completely accept Richard's point that it's a holistic picture that we have to present, and we have a public obligation to use our finances in accordance with our Act. But what I would refer to are the audited accounts of the university. That's what I rely upon. I rely upon Bill Parasiris, who you had here this morning, particularly, as our chief operating officer. The audited accounts show deficits over the previous two years.

When I arrived, I was hit immediately with international student caps, which put significant impact upon us. We had optimistic projections which could no longer be met because international student caps said you could not recruit those students. That's about 20 to 22 per cent of our income. We also had a big impact on us through domestic recruitment, again, relative to projections, because other universities—because they couldn't get the international students—suddenly started taking many more domestic students in Western Sydney. We were hit on those fronts.

The other one that really hit us hard was cyber issues. We have spent tens of millions of dollars fighting that and lifting our profile. I've had to make commitments to the Federal Government about what we will do there, and I've apologised to our community for the harm those incidents have done. You put those three things, in addition to the two years of deficits in the audited accounts—that's what moved us from that to being in a position where we were not sustainable. I could have made a bet that maybe the international student caps would go away and it would improve, but I didn't believe that was the case. Sadly, that's proven to be the case. We're seeing further moderation and downturns, and we have to be a university that recognises the world in which we operate. We can't expand.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good afternoon, Professor Williams. I must say, I haven't read the book, but I've read some of your articles and I do find your approach to be a breath of fresh air. It was disappointing, though, to hear the reflections in relation to the Reset program and the way that that has impacted on staff, particularly the comments made this morning around a lack of transparency and clarity in relation to that project. Would you admit that there were problems with the way that that was rolled out? Would you have done it differently if you were to do it again?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Let me say, absolutely there were problems. This was a process run in six months at high pace with our own team leading it. I would absolutely acknowledge—I can give you examples, if you like, of where actually it didn't go right. We'll shortly be starting a full review of the whole process. We have to do so under our EA, but I want to know what went wrong and what we need to fix. A good part of this year we've been asking, "Well, where did we get it wrong? And how do we fix those?" I'll give you one example where we, I think, took too many people out of some frontline IT areas. It led to a big spike in waiting times for IT services. We've fixed that now. We put extra staff in. We've given our students casual jobs to assist with that. At the granular level, absolutely, but in terms of the decision, no; it needed to be done. I wish it wasn't. It wasn't what I expected in coming into the job and, to be frank, a lot of my job is what's the least worst outcome in a broken system.

In terms of the transparency, I feel as if we communicated assiduously. If I look at what we did, I had 27 Reset emails explaining. If you think about that over six months, we're talking about almost one a week saying "This is where we are." We had the finances. What went to the board, went to our union and went to our staff—same finances all the way through. We were very clear in making all of it transparent, pretty much every week. I had four or five all-staff webinars averaging 1,300 people—five for the whole community, average 1,300. I had eight in-person town halls across all of our key campuses during that period. That was attended by, in total, over 1,100 people.

In addition, what I did throughout was I rang people directly across the organisation, particularly those most impacted, to ask if it was working for them. Sometimes it wasn't. I intervened, stepped in, made changes where needed. I had a feedback form. Many people wrote to me directly saying, "This seems unfair. It's not working." I had a team—let's get on to that. I really encouraged people to come forward, and I responded personally to those people where they came to me with that. I feel as if we gave them extensive information. One bit of feedback I have got from people consistently is that they were never in any doubt about what was happening and when. It was all mapped out with graphs and the like, and almost on a weekly basis, they were told what was happening and why.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Do you think, though—I hear—

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I should say I'm happy to give you some of those emails. If you want to see actually what we did, I'm very comfortable with giving the Committee to show how we communicated, just so you get a sense of exactly what we were telling our people, including the financial material.

The CHAIR: That would be great.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: We heard earlier that one in five staff have had their jobs potentially at risk at one point, particularly before the jobs guarantee was negotiated with the union. That sounds like an incredibly disruptive thing to put onto a community of workers. Were you particularly taking action in relation to the wellbeing of staff? Were you keeping tabs on whether people had the support that they needed during this time?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Very much so. I'll talk about the formal bits, but this is also the informal: visiting sometimes angry teams; recognising the morale impacts upon people; myself going directly and just being in a room with people. That was really tough, I'd have to say, but it was important to do it. I learnt a lot from that and changed course where needed based upon that. But we also formally manage the psychosocial and the like throughout. It was telling for us that we're in constant contact with SafeWork. I actually invited them on: "Would you like to come onto campus?" They didn't come on campus, but at any point we said, "Please, come on. We want to know if there's a problem." If you look at our psychosocial incidents at the critical time in the last quarter of last year—when we're in the middle of the change papers and the like—the number of incidents was lower than it was the previous year at the same time, when there was no Reset. So, in fact, we did not see a big spike in the psychosocial incidents.

It was lower than outside of Reset, and I think it was because we were so assiduous in keeping on top of it. What I would say, though, is we saw a lot more illness, misadventure and things like that—people taking leave, particularly those who decided to exit the university. There was a big spike in that. I suppose they decided they wanted to take a voluntary redundancy. What I also did, I think to—it's a bit like when you're at a hospital. You want to know why it's happening, what's going on. It's just constant communication and honest, direct communication, including the hard stuff, as you'll see about why we were doing it. That even included—we started at 400; every time it went down, I said, "It's now down to this." The way I'd communicate that is "It would be 400, unless we take these actions." That is what I said.

The first thing is, we are top heavy. We had a lot of senior people paid high salaries. I cut one in four of all our senior staff, reduced the salaries. That saved a lot of money in doing that. It reduced our divisions from eight to six. The second thing I did was a line-by-line analysis of all expenditure—catering, consultants, travel, even down to maintenance, how often we mowed the lawns. We saved \$23 million doing that. That took us a few months to go through that. We saved a lot through those two things. And then we said, "Okay, it's now much, much lower as a result. Track it down." Then we had the fruitful discussion with the union and I was able to say, "Yes, there's a jobs guarantee here." That wasn't easy to give, but I felt it was the right thing to do. We had 187 people who did exit at the end, in addition with senior staff. But all of those were voluntary.

In fact, some of the problems we have are with people who wanted a voluntary redundancy but we didn't give it to them. But we did what we needed to. You're right, there was a larger number of people impacted for other things. But as I said, the other rationale was we need to restructure our student-facing teams and the like, so we created new roles and those people weren't under threat. Many got promotions, moved into better jobs and the like. The other key part we needed to do was I dramatically needed to reduce our senior leaders and have more academic staff. I needed more people. We had 39 per cent of our staff who were academic staff. That's too low. We're a teaching and a research organisation. So I said, "I actually need that to increase."

Post-Reset, the number of academic staff is now approaching 43 per cent—many more people relative in the classroom. It's actually a net increase in academics. We're pulling out the profession cost. They do great work, but teaching is our lifeblood. The other thing, we have more Indigenous staff than when we started. That's actually increased because we're focused on our EDI obligations. We now have a majority of women in senior leadership roles. So we've gone through really carefully as we've gone, and we've actually improved our diversity and other stats. But that was, again, if you get your own people to run it, with deep sensitivity—we were very alive to these things all the way through. As much as it was awful and I wish we didn't have to do it, we did the best we could in keeping to our values about caring for students and our staff.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The wage theft remediation program has \$29 million in provisions at the moment. I was asking questions about it earlier. Your university is certainly not alone in taking quite a long time to repay wages. Do you think that it's going quick enough? Do you think that it could perhaps go a little bit quicker, to give people the money that they're owed?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: To tell you the truth, it can never go quick enough. As I said to my staff, we let people down in this area. One of our most basic and important responsibilities is to pay people their proper wages on a timely basis. As with the cyber and other areas, this is a threshold issue for us in caring for our people. I arrived in July 2024. One of the first things I did was set up a full process to look at this. I said, "I want to be assured as to where we are. I want a full diagnostic." I wasn't convinced there wouldn't be more out there. That's what was done last year. We did get a consultant for that. We didn't have the internal capability for that. That was

completed at the end of last year. We did find it was much larger than we thought—\$29 million—and now we're rapidly repaying as much as quickly as we can. We've started doing that. We estimate that will probably take a couple of years to do so. I would love to do it quicker. Every time I meet with them, I say, "How many people have you paid this week? Can we do it more quickly?" But once you've started, you've got to get it right, and that's basically, I'm told—advised—how long it takes to do it properly and accurately.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: There were zero payments made last year. Have you made payments this year?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, we have made payments this year. Again, we can get you that information if you'd like as to how much. Not only that, we've made decisions that are employer-protective. The minimum is six years. Most people do six. We're doing seven and a half, so we're going beyond our statutory obligation to the beginning of the enterprise agreement. That's good for tax, for our people and the EA, and there's no good reason we wouldn't do that. The clear direction written into our approach is: If in doubt, favour the employee. Of course, they'll get their interest and other things. But we are in a cost-of-living crisis. It is what it is. We have to do this as rapidly as we can, but it must be accurate and we must meet the obligations of FWO and the regulators. It is a complex area. I completely accept our responsibility to fix this as quickly as we can.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: If I could just touch on the Bankstown campus—the move of the campus from low or nominal rent to a private developer model at a cost of what I believe is reported as \$260 million. I'm wondering how that decision was made and who may have negotiated or managed that transition from a low, minimal campus to a private-developer, \$260 million campus.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I will defend the decision, but it wasn't me. That's simply in terms of timing; it's not a cop-out. I won't have detailed answers, if you like, because I wasn't there at that time. I am enormously proud of that move and that campus. As the Federal member Jason Clare has said, it's like there is a Batman signal on the top of our campus signalling to students—aspiration, university, come to Bankstown. The metro is coming in. The hospital is coming in. This is the right place for us to be. What we know with our students is connectivity to transport is critical. What I also know is it's been a big success in driving our partnership with TAFE. I'm very strongly of the view that we need to do much more as a university sector to assist TAFE students with articulation. TAFE has moved in. How good is that? Our students mix in the lift as they literally go up and down.

What we want to see in Bankstown is integrated education. There are no wrong turnings for students. As to the broader question, what it also gets to is—from memory, I think it is section 8, subclause 3 of our Act, which directs the university to engage in commercial activities to support its mission. That is Parliament's direction to us. We do that in a variety of ways. We are a non-profit. If we can do an arrangement like that to have a great campus in the right area or to generate revenue, then we will do that to support teaching and research. To be frank, I will use it to pay for food for our students and other things that they are in desperate need of. So it's a commercial transaction to support the public benefit.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In light of the cost change on this from a low, minimal arrangement to \$260 million, and in light of what you've just said, and I think it was a news item today or in your opening remarks, about the cost-of-living pressures on students—as to budget decisions, who signed off on that decision? Was it the board or the senate?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I don't know. It would have been my predecessors. Can I get you a proper answer on that?

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Yes, that would be great.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: What I do know is that, ultimately, we came out ahead from this arrangement, because a vertical campus like that is much more cost effective than a flat campus. Also, the vertical campus is where the students want to be. Perhaps, if you don't mind, I should also take the opportunity to respond on Nirimba, because I know you have taken evidence on that as well. That I am responsible for. It was my decision to do that. That was a decision that I made because our students were not thriving at Nirimba. We had some of the lowest success rates anywhere in the university. I visited the campus. The data was clear. The transport connectivity was poor. I don't apologise for every one of our students having access to world-class facilities and education, and that was not the case there. It is a 1950s naval base that was not fit for purpose for what was needed.

We have since moved the students into high-quality facilities, including in Bankstown. The success rate has jumped for those students. It's something that we're really proud of. We've introduced modular teaching for those students. It is a student-led decision. I'm actually really proud of the outcome. One of the interesting things is the number of students applying to come to us from that region has increased since we have closed Nirimba. We have more students from that area because they want to study in modern, world-class facilities, and we could not offer that quality. The bottom line is they're doing much better. Our students are getting the outcomes they deserve that we could not deliver at that facility.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I'm wondering if maybe you could take it on notice and provide what those academic results are that you are citing as being enormously successful.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I'm very happy to.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: I also put to you, given your reports about flocking to Bankstown, that in the absence of a campus closure you're probably going to go elsewhere anyhow.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, that's true, but there are other options as well. Are you talking about Bankstown in particular?

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Yes.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: We must be a student-led organisation in terms of our decision-making. Our students need transport connectivity, in Western Sydney in particular. We need to plan for the long term. I'm a custodian in this role. I'm thinking where we'll be in 2035 and 2050. I look at Bankstown. I look at the metro and one of the biggest hospital investments in Australia's history. That's where we have to be. That's where we have to train the nurses. It's like our placement in Parramatta at IPSQ. That was one of the tentpoles of the Parramatta development. In 20 years, people will look back and say, "The uni did something really special and important to support the Bankstown area, and look at the student results."

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: The most recent revenue citation I have from the Nirimba campus would be the highest revenue recorded by that campus for 20 years, which is over \$1 million.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It could be. But, to tell you the truth, as I say to my staff, my bottom line isn't revenue; it's actually our student wellbeing. It's the graduations I started with. I'm quite comfortable making decisions that actually we go backwards in revenue if they're good for Western Sydney and good for our students. For me, the key stat is the student success. We will get you that information. I'm proud to say that our college has achieved one of the most remarkable educational outcomes of any university in the country, over the last year or so, for the most vulnerable students. These are students with no ATARs, often with really low entry marks. They are thriving. That's success for me. We do a lot of things where, frankly—we just reopened an actors' program in Penrith. We're actually expanding our arts and humanities. We lose money on those things.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: An observation that really struck me was evidence earlier about this suggestion that the leadership of the university is not reflective of the community that it serves, and that there's a notion that the leadership is transplanted into Western Sydney. I just had a look at the board of trustees. It looks pretty white and middle class; it doesn't look like the Western Sydney that I live in. What do you say to that in terms of Western Sydney University offering a beacon of aspiration—that it should be led by the people that it serves, rather than people who don't live in or look like the region?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It's something our staff raise as well at times. Let me give you a couple of answers. Firstly, you had Bill Parasiris here this morning as well. He's a really great example of a product of Western Sydney in a senior leadership position.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: On the council. It's just one example.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: That's just one example on our board. Many of our board have deep connections in Western Sydney. We're happy to give more information about that. We've got people who've been high school principals in Western Sydney through living in Western Sydney—deep connections. Where I think it does resonate and I think there's a strong argument is that our leadership does not fully reflect the cultural diversity of Western Sydney. I think that is true. We have 170 different nationalities and backgrounds in Western Sydney. I think there is a job to do there.

One thing I'm actually going to be talking to our staff about shortly is I'm introducing a new vice-chancellor's emerging leaders program, which is focused on really finding where are the voices from Western Sydney who haven't made it to senior management—giving them a leg up, building their skills and using that as a way of developing that talent, and accentuating the fact that, exactly as you say, we are a university for Western Sydney. That is the central part of our mission. We're really proud of that, but we need our leadership to be emblematic of that as well. I accept that, and that we have ongoing work to do.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Do you live in Western Sydney?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: No. I've worked at UNSW for a long time. I've got a daughter still in a public high school where I live there. So, until she finishes at public high school, I'm not going to muck her around.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: What about the chancellor? Does she live in Western Sydney?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I don't know. You'd have to ask her the address. But, in my case, I'm a great example of—a lot of people talking about the west going east. I go west, and we should see more of that. We want people actually being drawn to great jobs in Western Sydney.

The CHAIR: I've got a couple of questions. One is about the college, which I don't know that we've spoken about, but we were talking about Nirimba. In your annual report—the one that has just been tabled—in the "borrowing" section, which is part 25, there's the current borrowings. It has "unsecured other financial liabilities". One of the line items that appears there, when you read the note about it, is actually from the college. I wondered why you have what seems to be nearly \$30 million as borrowings or as an unsecured financial liability attributed to the college. Is that what you do with all your entities?

What sort of accounting—I've asked a few accountants because I thought maybe it was just me as a non-accountant not understanding. But why is it that what would normally, I presume—it says it's a surplus—it would normally be that the earnings of this entity, I would have thought, would have been remitted to the university as a whole. But they don't appear like that; they appear as a liability. I wonder if you could explain that to me.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: As a non-accountant, I'd normally say, "Bill, can you answer that one?" If you don't mind, I will get you a good answer on notice for that. I don't know off the top of my head the answer to that.

The CHAIR: I found that a little bit perplexing, I've got to say. I had one other question, which, again, might be a little bit left-field. I understand that at the moment some kangaroos need to be relocated or translocated at one of the Western Sydney University sites. I wondered what are the plans for that or are you not planning to do that? I also understand that there have been concerns raised by the local community—particularly those who are wildlife carers—because there have been some blocks put in around the road, which means that kangaroos can't get off and are being injured, and they're having to deal with that. I wondered if you could tell me what was going on there.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I'll take that on notice as well if I can. Which campus are you referring to, in particular?

The CHAIR: I will get you that information.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: If you can get the information, I'll get an answer on that.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Certainly not Parramatta CBD.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I've not seen any kangaroos on Parramatta South either. I could guess, but let me get you a proper answer based on the actual campus.

The CHAIR: I'd appreciate that. What I do know is that there are a lot—

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Rydalmere.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: What I can say is we know these issues are large. Hawkesbury is another campus where big sustainability—flood issues are coming up all the time. Let me say one thing I'm really proud of is we are the number one ranked university in the world for sustainability. We became net zero in 2023, and uni around the world come to us about environment, sustainability and the like. We are very proud of our record in this area.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: I will start with more of an observation than a question. My observation in the first instance is one of the enduring and distinctive features of UWS and Western Sydney has been the opportunity it gives people who wouldn't otherwise consider a tertiary education or who wouldn't be given that opportunity by a Group of Eight university. I say that as someone who's the beneficiary of that. So there is a lot of goodwill towards the institution and a lot of people willing it on to success.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: We need to do more of that is the answer.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: The concern I've got, and I raise that probably more from the perspective of social licence and the importance of social licence—the role of a tertiary institution is to research and to educate. But we've seen some of the most egregious examples of institutions disregarding that concept of social licence. It's refreshing to hear what you have said as the current vice-chancellor of WSU. The concern I've got is that that is only as good as the person who occupies the chair. I just don't know that we've got the necessary governance guardrails in place—whether it's legislatively or informally—to ensure that universities don't disregard that notion of social licence. That is critically important for Western Sydney, given WSU effectively provides a ticket for people to become socially upwardly mobile. Do you have any thoughts—not bringing your personal perspective and your priorities—from a governance perspective to ensure that your successor has the same approach and priorities that you say that you do?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: After this I'm definitely going to give you a copy of my book because it shares exactly that concern. I see a system that is at odds with the fact that many students live in poverty while they study as well. As I say, one in two of our students have got food insecurity. What does it say about the system where we're in the food and education business and providing 22,000 free meals this year or that our students are suffering from loneliness in large numbers? This is the real experience of many people—Australian students—at university. It's no surprise when these things are happening and things come out like in this inquiry that people are rightfully asking hard questions. My view is the system needs to change. I don't think it's working for many students at the moment. It starts with student fees. I accept the premise on governance. I'm out there at the beginning, when I started, saying salaries, for example.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: What about councils and boards of trustees, and the manner in which they are constituted?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, I think so. I think there's work to do. I think Melinda Cilento delivered an excellent report. We had her to our board just last week, talking about these issues. We've been proactive. Our chancellor's been great, for example, in introducing, particularly, support for our student staff reps as well. I think Melinda Cilento's report was really good. We've tried to be proactive on that—regular meetings, supporting them, extra training and the like. There is more we can and should do in those areas. I think there's a critical need for ATEC as a regulator, as well, which is actually about making sure unis are aligned with the public good.

What we have is a market for higher education, and guess what? There's market failure. As I say, it'd be like having a market for hospital patients. How much sense would that make? We're dealing with education here, and we need a system that focuses upon students being looked after and universities' performance being measured against the ability to deliver for students. I strongly support that. A couple of weeks ago I was part of a new alliance, the 2050 Alliance that's been announced. We're nine universities—one-quarter of the sector—who are focused on unis delivering for students and the community. We support changed regulatory settings, including on governance.

The CHAIR: Could I pick up on that, because we have heard some frankly disturbing, if not chilling, accounts from staff and from other universities—and, indeed, very serious allegations that have landed elsewhere. You've got this group of nine. Is that nationally?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes.

The CHAIR: What role do you take in New South Wales, though? As I said, we've now spoken to not quite all but the majority of universities and senior management. By some of the comments that you've made today, frankly, you put yourself at odds with evidence that we've received from some council members, some vice-chancellors and some chancellors. You would have seen and noted, of course, the *Four Corners* story. What role do you see yourself playing amongst your peers in New South Wales?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: I suppose I would say that there's nothing I've said today that I wouldn't have said the day I arrived either—you know, these messages about student fees, social licence—and I come at this as someone who for 20 years was an academic. Interestingly, I never aspired to senior management. I find myself here, so I have strong academic instincts about the students and looking after our staff. The other thing for me is it's not just the words; it's the action. I completely accept that. I have to live up to those ideals. Ultimately, I'll rightly be judged upon how well we deliver education for our students—those two-thirds first in family we still have. Are we getting them great jobs, going on to great lives? That's the story that I think should be of higher education, because this country can't thrive without a great uni sector.

The CHAIR: It makes a difference that you've got that 20 years experience as an academic, doesn't it?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, without a doubt. For me, every day. It means, for example, if I'm making a decision, what I might do is just ring someone up in a school or a faculty and ask them, "What will be the impact on you?" I tell you what, I spent a good part of my time as an academic railing against central decisions that I thought weren't properly accounting for the real experience of academics. I have that every day. Most of my career has been in that; it's later I've come to this. But even though I've got those sensibilities, one thing I know is you can never make assumptions. Disciplines are really different. So getting out—every week I dedicate time to go to frontline teams, academic units just to listen and have a chat. That's where people are pretty vocal and direct. I know we have problems we need to fix but, as long as I'm onto them, we will work through them.

The CHAIR: I might end with a question that we've asked a lot, which is about the composition of, in your case, the board of trustees. We're interested in elected members of those bodies. At WSU, are they members of subcommittees?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, they can be. Yes, they are people and culture committee; they're there. Then it's a matter of what they want to put up their hand for. They probably gravitated to people and culture, because that's what you tend to do as an elected rep. They're well represented there. But there'd be no issue if they wanted to be on other committees.

The CHAIR: So remuneration or finance—they'd be okay to be on that?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It's not my call on that because, of course, if you get too many people, the chancellor has to decide. You can't have a subcommittee of 14 or something like that.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The chancellor decides? Doesn't the board of trustees make that decision?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: Yes, the chancellor with the board of trustees, that's right, and you go through the normal process. What I'm saying is, I don't make any of those decisions. You go through the process. They are there on that subcommittee. But I suspect that's probably self-selecting, because that's probably where they think they have the biggest impact: on people and culture.

The CHAIR: Finally, and I appreciate your generosity with your time, you mentioned "the year of the student", which seems ironic for a university because I think you intimated each year should be the year of the student.

GEORGE WILLIAMS: It's sort of ironic, I agree.

The CHAIR: You also said that you were interested in student-led decisions and outcomes. I just wondered are you then open to having more elected student—and I would also say staff—representatives on the board of trustees?

GEORGE WILLIAMS: We're already above what our Act says. It says three. We've gone to four already, so it's about a quarter at the moment, and I recognise it's one for Parliament. We're above the minimum. I don't have a firm view on what the balance is. I would also say that for students, that listening bit is critical. I want to acknowledge how hard it is, as a university leader, to connect with students sometimes. I tell my staff the story that when I started, I set up a Zoom webinar for my students, to hear from them. Out of 50,000, 25 turned up—failure. But what I did is listened to our students and went onto TikTok and Instagram afterwards. I now every quarter do a live session. I did one two weeks ago and 2,000 turned up. It's really raw—parking, food, you name it, problems they're having. Every quarter I engage directly with them. We have a very vigorous social media program.

A lot of it's me humiliating myself on social media but if it connects with, that's great. That's what you could do as a leader is connect with them. Every lunch I go out to talk to and connect with people. I've had students coming up and saying, "You're that guy from TikTok." It's a small example, but it works. Then they usually say, "What do you do here?" I say, "I'm the vice-chancellor." They've got no idea what that is and we talk about it. But that for me—I get the point. There's a balance there. But, to be frank, a lot of it is how are you connecting every day, and I'm really confident. I'm hearing stories of food, devices, loneliness and the other issues. My job is to respond to those for our students. If you want to reach them, social media is it. It's very effective in big numbers.

The CHAIR: We appreciate, as I said, the fact that you've appeared today but also that you've been generous with staying and taking more questions. I anticipate we will probably have some further, supplementary questions and I know you agreed to take things on notice, which, again, we appreciate.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:05.