



6 May 2022

Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Via uniskillsinvestment@parliament.vic.gov.au

To the Committee,

The Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills.

VTHC was founded in 1856 and is the peak body for unions in Victoria. VTHC represents over 40 unions and more than 430,000 workers in the state. These workers are members of unions that reach into every industry across Victoria.

Since winning the Eight Hour Day in 1856, VTHC has had a long history of fighting for and defending the rights of workers, including university staff and students.

Through consultation with affiliated unions, VTHC makes recommendations below to ensure that Victorian universities are investing in their workforce in order to support the delivery of the skills most needed to build Victoria's future.

VTHC's recommendations point to a broader consideration of how university workers are supported and resourced to deliver the best possible tertiary educations to our emerging and growing industries.

In the pursuit of a clean economy, a productive workforce and the satisfaction of regional skills demands, tertiary education staff will be at the forefront of delivering the skills and qualifications that build the physical and social infrastructure of our future.

Getting job security, fair wages and reasonable workloads in our universities will make or break Victoria's skills ambitions.

If you have any questions, please contact Politics and Research Lead, Ted Sussex, at tsussex@vthc.org.au.

Sincerely,

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Introduction

Victorian Trades Hall Council welcomes the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into universities' investment into future skills. Aligning Victorian universities with the skills needs for a better future is important, but ambitious goals for the university sector will remain out of reach if systemic workforce and governance issues at universities are not addressed industrially.

Students, lecturers, professional staff and administrative staff at universities all have a stake in a future built on skills demand being met, a clean economy, and strong regional essential services.

The Victorian Government's reforms regarding the Victorian Skills Authority and the TAFE Network signal a desire to unify tertiary education behind the goals of the public good.

However, the governance of universities remains largely beyond public scrutiny, with minimal student and staff representation on boards, universities are amassing profit without being held to account on community expectations. With universities being told to clean up their act on wage theft by the Victorian Government, the corporatisation of universities has resulted in the casualisation of university staff, wage theft and overwork and therefore the deterioration of student satisfaction.

Victoria's universities are some of the best in the world, but they need to invest in their own workforce. The mass terminations of university staff during the pandemic show that this investment is currently not being made. If universities are to play the role we expect them to play in shaping Victoria's future, lecturers, tutors, professional staff and admin staff need to be given the resources they need to build upon their expertise so they can deliver the high-quality education that students expect.

There is no viable future skills plan or clean economy boom without a well-resourced and adaptable workforce able to teach the relevant skills. And there is no viable way to ensure much-needed skills are available in the regions if the governance of our universities is uninterested in the public good.

The deep, systemic issues of university workforce and governance, raised repeatedly by affiliated unions, need to be addressed by this Inquiry.

Future skills

In order to fulfil the skills demands of growing industries, Victoria will need well-resourced teachers to deliver high-quality higher education qualifications in those industries. This will be particularly important with industry closures as the world of work changes and those workers need access to high-quality education to secure good jobs.

While the Victorian Skills Plan remains under development, projections by the National Skills Commission help us understand what industries are predicted to grow across the country. According to National Skills Commission projections, 52.6% of new jobs will require a bachelor's degree or higher.¹

¹ National Skills Commission (2022), Employment Projections, National Skills Commission: <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/employment-projections>.

The National Skills Commission projections predict that four services industries will count for 65.4% of the total projected employment growth up to November 2026. There are:

- Health care and social assistance,
- Professional, scientific and technical services,
- Education and training, and
- Accommodation and food services.²

These projections show that a significant number of growing occupations require a bachelor degree or higher qualification obtained at a university, and that they will likely be in established industries such as health, scientific research, technical services, legal and accounting services.

To meet future demand, serious investment is needed to strengthen the teaching offering at universities related to these established industries, to educate students at the highest possible standard because they will make up the future qualified workforce of these industries. A high-quality educational experience and qualification cannot be delivered without well-paid teaching and support staff with job security at Victoria's universities.

However, affiliated unions have told VTHC that the public need for well-resourced university staff is fraught by the corporatisation of university boards that have seen teaching staff, professional staff and administrative staff subjected to casualisation, wage theft and excessive workloads.

In 2020, 68.74 per cent of university staff are employed as casuals or short-term contracts.³ This means most university staff have no job security and are only paid for every hour worked. The difference between a secure job and an insecure one is that staff can focus on supporting students and developing resources, rather than experiencing the exhaustion of working additional jobs to put food on their table. A secure job also means university staff are guaranteed and paid for regular hours to get all their work done, instead of trying to complete excessive workloads within unrealistic rosters or under exploitative piece rates. These unnecessary yet all-too-common pressures faced by university staff are not conducive to delivering high-quality education to every student.

As the NTEU put to the Commonwealth Government Senate Select Committee on the Future of Work and Workers:

"This growing tide of insecure employment not only has profound implications for the individual staff affected but also raises serious issues about the capacity of the sector to be able to meet its obligations in relation to teaching and training of the next generation of graduates and continue to be a critical cog in Australian research and innovation.

"The academic profession is in severe stress. While there are more qualified individuals than ever before, and even though the demand for academic staff has increased in an expanding

² National Skills Commission (2022), Employment Projections, National Skills Commission: <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/employment-projections>.

³ Duffy, C (2020), 'Cashed-up university sector accused of hypocrisy over mass casualisation of workforce, job losses', ABC News, accessed: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-17/university-casual-workforce-redundancies-dirty-secret/12462030#:~:text=Labelled%20as%20the%20industry's%20%22dirty,casuals%20or%20short%20term%20contracts>.

sector, precarious employment conditions are both preventing academics moving into a career track and deterring many for pursuing an academic and research career in Australia.”

University job losses has also coincided with a drop in teaching quality. NTEU can confirm that there have been at least 12,185 positions lost in Australian universities since March.⁴ Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work uses ABS labour force data to show 40,000 tertiary education jobs – one in five positions – have been lost between June 2020 and May 2021.⁵ At the same time, 2020 saw a significant drop in student satisfaction around quality of teaching. This may be attributed to the loss of experience in staff dismissed, as well as the increase in workload for staff remaining.

According to the Student Experience Survey National Report, student ratings of Teaching Quality in 2020 declined to 78 per cent, its lowest level on record. Students also rated the ‘Overall education experience’, which encompasses Teaching Quality, this measure also declined by 9 percentage points from 78 per cent in 2019 to 69 per cent in 2020.⁶ This suggests a relationship between the mass sackings of university staff and the worsening quality of education delivered to students, to the detriment of any future skills plan.

Universities need to invest in their workforce as their core asset, rather than a ‘cost’ to the business expendable during economic downturn. The quality of teaching and student support at universities is fundamental to the success of any national- or state-level future skills plan, especially given the National Skills Commission projections above. To improve the quality of higher education, university workforces need to be protected from casualisation, wage theft and excessive workloads.

To be better attuned to and accountable to the concerns of university staff and students around wages, job security, workloads and teaching quality, more staff and student representatives need to be on university board positions.

Working towards a clean economy

As detailed above, the clean economy will be supported by a workforce qualified to provide the services that a clean economy will demand. Many will receive qualifications at universities to take on the professional, scientific and technical occupations of the clean economy.

These occupations will be needed across many relevant industries including scientific research, agriculture, transport, waste management and energy, which will require strong qualifications to build the infrastructural and institutional foundations of the clean economy.

⁴ Kieran McCarron (2020), ‘The jobs apocalypse. It's happening now!’, Sentry Magazine (NTEU National Office), accessed: <https://www.nteu.org.au/covid-19/article/The-jobs-apocalypse-It%27s-happening-now%21-%28Sentry%2C-Oct-2020%29-22388>.

⁵ Littleton, E & Stanford, J (2021), ‘An Avoidable Catastrophe: Pandemic Job Losses in Higher Education and their Consequences’, The Australia Institute, accessed: <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/An-Avoidable-Catastrophe-WEB.pdf>.

⁶ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (2021), 2020 Student Experience Survey, QILT, accessed: https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=d1237953_5.

Furthermore, as demands for some occupations shifts as Victoria continues its transition to a clean economy, it is crucial that this just transition is supported by retraining as a preventative measure to keep workers in employment. As the CFMMEU points out:

“Retraining—especially when used as a preventative measure rather than a reactive response to plant closure— is the most effective method for preventing unemployment and long-term unemployment. This training needs to occur well before retrenchment to be most effective in the transition to decent work. It should also be provided without cost to those workers”.⁷

Given the occupation growth areas outlined in the previous section, a significant number of new jobs will require university education. Universities and other tertiary education institutions therefore will play a large role in providing retraining to workers in affected industries to ensure a continued access to employment. Equity for these workers is crucial to a just transition to a clean economy.

Ultimately, the need for qualifications for emerging workforces and the need for retraining for transition-affected workforces both require a university teaching workforce that is ready to meet growing demand and work with students who may be at very different stages of their career.

This goes to reiterate the need for job security, fair wages and reasonable workloads for teaching staff, professional staff and admin staff within the university sector. This means addressing staff and union concerns around work conditions including adequate staffing, appropriate class sizes and permanent employment.

Further, educational institutions need to be deeply connected with social and economic goals in the broader community. When run as a corporatised business, the concerns of staff, students and industry are sidelined. Given the importance of universities already shown, it is also crucial for university governance to reflect its public duty. This means increasing staff and student representation on boards.

Regional skills analysis in health, agriculture and community services

Regional skills analysis will be especially important in building an equitable Victoria, and universities must also fulfil their obligation to regional and rural Victoria by ensuring that they invest in workforces and keep experienced teachers and other staff supported at regional universities. It is a matter of fairness that Victoria’s regions get the services and skills they need to flourish. The challenge comes in two parts: understanding the skills demand, and then fulfilling that demand.

Understanding the skills needs of the regions requires engagement with trade unions and other industry representatives. It should go beyond just working towards filling job vacancies in key industries. Regional skills analysis must consider the impacts of factors such as understaffing and low wages. These factors do not always manifest as unfilled jobs, but they result in an erosion of the experience of the workforce, turnover and burnout.

⁷ Sheldon, P. , Junankar, R. & De Rosa Pontello, A. (2018), ‘The Ruhr or Appalachia: Deciding the Future of Australia’s Coal Power Workers and Communities’, Industrial Relations Research Centre UNSW, accessed: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ruhrorappalachia_report_final.pdf.

Universities are well-placed to provide important knowledge about the economic and social factors underpinning regional skills shortages if such research is funded. On top of the disciplinary expertise that university researchers possess, universities also have the added advantage of having data already monitoring graduate outcomes by location, socio-economic status and other factors. However, any such regional skills shortage research by universities is, again, not possible without resourcing job security and fair remuneration for teaching, research and admin staff.

Universities can also play a significant role in fulfilling regional skills demands, too. But this relies almost entirely on having a university workforce that is resourced to deliver skills training to the highest quality, as well as targeted programs aimed at solving social challenges rather than making a profit.

Health is one example of skills demand that could be addressed by universities. During the pandemic, we saw and continue to see the immense pressure being placed on regional hospitals, which remain overwhelmed and understaffed. This has not been helped by the shortage of GPs in the regions, which pre-dates the pandemic.⁸ In Melbourne there are 409 clinicians for every 100,000 people, but outside Melbourne it can be as low as 150 in some areas,⁹ exacerbating inequality. Some Victorian universities are building programs to focus class time and practice in regional areas,¹⁰ but what must also accompany these programs is an investment in the teaching and administrative workforce that delivers them. This means job security, reasonable workloads and fair remuneration for lecturers, support staff and research staff, without whom these ambitious programs would fail.

Good governance on university boards is also crucial to ensuring that resources are used to solve systemic social problems, and that staff are adequately resourced and supported to deliver these solutions. Increasing staff and student representation on university boards is necessary to better connect with the issues faced by a university's local community and to understand the needs of staff and students.

Recommendations

1. The Victorian Government should advocate strongly to universities to address industrial issues raised by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and other trade unions on job security, wage theft and workload pressure during enterprise bargaining negotiations.
2. The Victorian Government should investigate university investment levers that can be utilised to increase job security and discourage casualisation of university staff.
3. The Victorian Government should advocate strongly to universities to increase staff and student representation on university boards.

⁸ Kennedy, E (2022), 'Regional Victorian towns are crying out for GPs', The Weekly Times, accessed: <https://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/news/victoria/regional-victorian-towns-are-crying-out-for-gps/news-story/4d5094d68501be5b6f67f11b3895fab2>.

⁹ Dewar, J. & Davis, G. (2018), 'A new solution to rural doctor shortage', La Trobe University, accessed: <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/opinion/a-new-solution-to-rural-doctor-shortage>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

4. The Victorian Government should investigate ways to connect universities with trade unions and industry to reskill and maintain the employment of workers in modernising industries using high-quality qualifications.
5. The Victorian Government should investigate methods to increase staffing, reduce workloads and guarantee job security for workers in regional health, agriculture and community services.
6. The Victorian Government should advocate strongly and support regional universities to reverse casualisation, wage theft and excess workloads experienced by university staff.