

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Melbourne—Monday 17 November 2025

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

John Mullahy

Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Nicole Werner

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WITNESSES

Ian Smythe, Chief Academic Officer, Aviation Australia;

Daria Walczak, Program Director, GradWISE, WISE Employment;

Nikki Noack, General Manager, genU Education & Training, genU Training, and

Lorna Mackie, Director of Strategy, genU Training.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

We are going to just run this like a Q and A forum format. The committee members will ask you some questions. If you wish to answer, put up your hand or you can just jump in. It is a pretty informal conversation.

Just to make it easy for Hansard please state your name before speaking. There might not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question, depending on time, but if there is anything that you think we have not raised today or any further important points you would like to add, you are more than welcome to submit further additional information in writing to the committee.

I will just note as well that the CFMEU Education and Training representatives have had some unforeseen circumstances and will not be joining us on your panel today.

I am Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine, and I will let the other committee members introduce themselves.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I am Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton.

Nicole WERNER: Nicole Werner, Member for Warrandyte.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: I will let you introduce yourselves, and then we can jump into some questions.

Ian SMYTHE: Ian Smythe, Chief Academic Officer for Aviation Australia.

Daria WALCZAK: Daria Walczak, Program Director for GradWISE at WISE Employment.

Lorna MACKIE: Lorna Mackie, Director of Strategy at genU.

Nikki NOACK: And I am Nikki Noack, General Manager for genU Training.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today. These are really interesting submissions and really diverse. We have had really great conversations today, so I think this is going to be really great, because you have a different perspective for us to ask you some questions about today. Kim, I might go to you first.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Welcome everyone. It is great to have you here. We have had a really interesting day. It has been great having this diverse range of people. I am going to start with a question: how do RTOs improve regional students' access to VET—I am from regional Victoria, from Shepparton—and how do RTOs ensure the quality of virtual and online training? Obviously, a lot of people train online, but it is even more common out in the regions and rural communities.

Ian SMYTHE: I am from the aviation sector, and one of the greatest challenges for regional Victoria and regional Australia is how we service communities. Aviation Australia has some 900 apprentices across the country in some quite diverse locations, so our focus this year has been very much on curriculum development. It has been very much on providing what we call instructor-led online delivery, as opposed to online delivery, which I think has a few warts on it due to people's differing experiences. But I do think the aviation sector in regional Australia faces some real challenges. General aviation is a training ground for the large commercial airlines, and there is an exodus from regional communities to the large airlines. Our focus very much is being able to service all of those industries, and I think that the development of the curriculum is absolutely central to

that, as is the flexibility of how people can access that curriculum. It is vocational education. It is hard to do practically online. So how do you connect with industry, and how do you create the correct curriculum so that the students can access it? It is going to be a challenge that will be with us forever. It is a big country. It is a big state, and we need to work very closely with the industry, work very closely with the owners of the businesses and work very closely with the government to ensure that the funding programs are targeted to raise awareness and to also identify those priorities that the government has identified as key industries for the future. For us, it is about a little bit of a refocus, and our submission talks a little bit more about that.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Your point about raising funds for awareness is a really good one too. There may be gaps in connection to what you are actually offering and how you get that out to the regions as well.

Ian SMYTHE: Yes. Look, aviation is an industry that I do not think people really genuinely understand. Aerospace, the guided missile industry and advanced air mobility—all of these things require a new skill set. Some of the recommendations that we have put forward in our paper have been around raising awareness, such as a pathways program that partners with industry to look at how we can give some genuine experiences. In our case, the best programs we have identified are run in secondary school. They identify some STEM skills, but they tap into industry and show students the pathway, which I think is part of the issue—‘Where does this career end up? What have I got to do to get there?’ I think that is a genuine partnership between industry and government.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Do you want to speak about anything online, because you have a very different—

Nikki NOACK: I was going to say that it is probably more that online is not suitable for every learner. So it is also about being able to work out how you can deliver face-to-face training in a way that works for everyone, that is affordable and that you have the resources available for but that is also drawing on what digital capabilities these days can support that remote, long-distance learning, because we have VR, we have AI, we have so many interactive things and we have got gamification as well. They can be tools to not only help teach and learn through the pathways but also to deal with that engagement piece, because it is also how we get the engagement to be able to continue the learning journey. We have also talked about, and I think it is in the papers, the stackable units. Maybe there is the opportunity to introduce short, micro, stackable units to start with so that then there is that self-select of, ‘Yes, this is a learning style I like, it's learning that I want to do and I'm also invested in it,’ so then it can be credited and used moving forward.

Lorna MACKIE: If I can add to that as well, I think the stackable micro-credentials are a really interesting way to take this forward, because we know across a whole range of different industries there are similar things. The one we were talking about earlier was that if you think about core modules in health and human services, which could be first aid, manual handling, healthy body systems and speaking to person-centred care, that would take you to a range of industries. You do not need to have different courses for each one. By identifying what those common modules are that can have those different pathways, we could make that regional development much more affordable, if you were not having to fund individual courses for each one. I think it would pick up on the same thing as we were just talking about there with aviation, where a lot of students are not aware of what pathway is possible for VET. There is this kind of preconceived notion around what VET is and where it could take them. If we were able to say, ‘Do these three or four courses, and here are these five career options you could have by doing that one thing’ and draw some of that out—I think the industries are all changing so fast at the moment. We do not know what the job skills are going to look like in five years or 10 years. For all we know, we could have a new type of support worker in health and human services emerge that is focusing on training people on AI voice communication or something like that. So I think it is about looking at what those core components are and what the potential pathways are and trying not to narrow the pathway too early.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you. Nicole, we will go to you.

Nicole WERNER: You piqued my interest with the gamification. Can you give us an example of that in practice?

Lorna MACKIE: We have been looking at a tool recently around gamification specifically for support worker competency training in the health and human services area, which is an app. We have not rolled it out;

we are still looking at it. It does, essentially, micro credentials. But because it is all mobile phone and app based, one of the challenges in health and human services is that it is a largely mobile workforce, so getting them actually in to do classes is very challenging. It uses push notifications, progress pathways, nice graphics, prompted competency assessments, that sort of thing. That is just one example of a tool that would give gamification and keep the engagement.

Nicole WERNER: Kind of like Duolingo.

Lorna MACKIE: Yes, Duolingo for training. I think there is an option. I think people are already engaging with learning in these other ways, and rather than shoving them into an RTO way of learning, maybe we need to adapt to the way that people want to learn.

Ian SMYTHE: I think a key challenge too with that is STEM has been a discussion point in education for so long now and very few have really cracked the code—it is not a play on words either—to get it into a genuine curriculum area. Our focus has been working with industry—again, a company that we have partnered with to deliver a program around a cert II in autonomous skills has a product that they develop at the end. It is a coded vehicle that they can drive, and in our case it is a coded drone that they can actually fly at the end. I think that that taps the relevance into it as well. Education is always the place you go to when you want something to change with your young people. It gets very full. It has to tie into an industry outcome. It has to tie into a pathway or a direction.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: How do RTOs collaborate with schools and career practitioners to encourage students to undertake vocational education and training?

Nikki NOACK: I can answer some of that. There is a lot of networking as well with the schools and meeting with the relevant stakeholders to really understand what the interests and the needs are within the cohorts that they are delivering the training to as well. I think one of the biggest challenges that we have seen is also there is not always enough support, particularly when you are working with students that may have a disability or are disadvantaged around some of their literacy and numeracy. So it is having enough support available in that classroom to be able to make sure everyone has that accessible and inclusive learning in a fair way to learn as well for everyone.

Ian SMYTHE: I think the current structure around vocational education in Victoria, working with the LLENs and the RTO, sometimes takes away the individual pathways for young learners. Understanding something like aerospace and advanced air mobility is a difficult thing even for us to get our head around, because it is looking into a crystal ball. A more focused approach with individuals that allows them to access the funding that is available for them to pursue on the back of the priorities chosen by government is something that—we have a group of 14, but we believe that the demand for Victoria going forward is going to be significantly greater. The current aviation sector alone will consume most graduates that are coming out.

So rethinking about and relooking at how we might tap into individuals' needs and perhaps even smaller industries—because we have no expectation that LLENs and school principals are going to be able to get their head around the next opportunity and what that looks like as a curriculum offering. There is a bit of work to be done around how we interface with schools around the funding that the government provides already for vocational education.

Lorna MACKIE: I think there is a teacher PD aspect to this. One of the things we notice is often the teachers themselves are not aware of the options available that they can engage with. We have done some work around connecting with teachers and briefing teachers on the range of options available. We have also had some success in Western Australia around disengaged students and offering VET outside of the school—still run through the school but in a non-school-based environment—which has been really quite successful, because we know that students who have been disengaged do not necessarily want to go back into the school environment but they are still theoretically part of that structure. That has been quite successful as well, taking them out of that environment but the school still having the oversight.

The CHAIR: Daria, do you work in schools? Because it is more school leavers I thought you worked with.

Daria WALCZAK: School leavers, yes. As an employment service provider—we are also an RTO—we do a lot of networking as well with the schools in order to build relationships with career counsellors and also obviously with parents and students. The challenges are that the information is inconsistent and not all students and parents are aware of the services that are available. If they do not access, let us say, disability employment services, now IEA, in the final year of schooling, unfortunately they cannot connect if they are a full-time student until after they have finished. At GradWISE we specialise in the higher education space, but what that typically means is that students are graduating and then only beginning to work on their career development after they have graduated, which then only extends their unemployment and makes it more challenging downstream. We started working with university students from their penultimate and final year in order to bridge that gap. We have found that that is creating a much smoother transition into employment. It also means that students are more empowered. They are building career skills and also experiences that build their portfolio.

What we are doing now is trying a pilot with Swinburne University within the VET sector to see whether that would work as well. The pilot is going to be with the community services faculty to begin with. It is just about embedding that early career education. The other thing we are finding is that students with disability, who may be undertaking placement to build those experiences, if they are not equipped with the right information and supports to make those placements accessible, are having a bad experience and then they are becoming career students or falling into long-term unemployment.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. My question is around industry engagement. Thank you all for your submissions. They are all very good and talk to your respective areas of expertise. I want to focus on the aviation sector, if that is all right, because it is one of the most burgeoning industries when you really take a look at it—200,000 aircraft movements, 460 aerospace companies, 27 per cent growth annually in aviation technology and 900 apprentices. You mentioned something in your opening remarks around employment and the regional areas facing a lot of challenges when it comes to aviation, but when it comes to metropolitan Melbourne it is actually the opposite. We have got aviation far exceeding the employment growth of the average general employment rate. My community is right next to Melbourne Airport and right next to Essendon Airport, so I have got a lot of workers in my area that service both those airports.

In terms of industry engagement, you make two recommendations in particular that are obviously quite relevant for aviation but potentially applicable to other sectors. You talk about the need to establish a gateway for students wanting to pursue a career in aviation. Potentially, if you can, talk a bit more about what that looks like in other jurisdictions that might have that sort of set-up. Recommendation 1 would be around establishing STEM industry schools almost dedicated or focused on the aviation sector. I have got Strathmore college. You may or may not know they have a longstanding partnership with NASA, sending kids over to NASA over in Florida, which you also talk about in your submission. If you could talk potentially about those two recommendations and what that might look like in Victoria.

Ian SMYTHE: I think with the true employment trend post-pandemic it will take us till about 2033 before we start to see the impact of all of the strategies we are putting in place now. Our recommendations, we feel, are already a little bit behind the eight ball. But the gateway program is one of introducing students to experiences and opportunities from the grassroots level. I think people look at aviation and they think of the person sitting in the front of the plane and they think about the people that are walking up and down the aisle looking after the passengers, but it is such a diverse industry. The emergence of advanced air mobility in aerospace—we are still yet to quantify the skills or qualify the skills that are going to be required for that. I think a gateway program excites students about the possibility. The program that is currently running in Queensland runs across over a dozen different industry areas. In aviation, for us, we have somewhere in the vicinity of 14 schools that have come on board as gateway schools, where they run programs that are a balance of working with industry, experience and study. It is about opening the doors of what is possible at both a vocational level and also through to a higher education level. You mentioned the connection to NASA. Every year we send students across on the back of some good industry partners, because their involvement is absolutely critical, where they can see that pointy end of the industry. They all come back wearing a spacesuit

and with photos and memories that last a lifetime. Certainly that opens the doors in every industry, particularly emerging industries where perhaps we do not fully understand what the full career pathways will be.

For the second part, there are schools that are strategically located geographically that lend themselves to focusing on quite specific industries. One of the schools in Brisbane—‘Aviation High’ it is referred to—Miami State High School on the Gold Coast, focuses heavily on aviation, from aeronautical engineers through to aviation maintenance engineers. It is a full range of career opportunities. I think that for an industry that perhaps is not quite as public as many others, those types of programs, with a modest investment from the government—it is not a not a huge investment—actually do create pathways for people and create opportunities.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am just mindful of time, but I would like to ask a question. Today we have spoken to various witnesses around that pipeline of school, getting career education, going to do some training and then into a job. That pipeline should be seamless, and we hope that it works really well. But there are obviously cohorts in our community that have different challenges and the disability sector or those with severe disadvantage that you, Daria, work with at WISE. If you had the magic wand, what wraparound supports do you think are needed to do that transition into a workplace? That is a big question, sorry.

Daria WALCZAK: I see it as an ecosystem working together, with the student being at the centre of that. There need to be the institutions along with industry and the service providers working together to provide different parts of support to prepare the student. A lot of courses now embed work-integrated learning and placement, and we think that is great. It is giving practical experiences. The challenges are that when there are silos, they are not speaking to each other. Students are also unaware of the supports that are available to them to make the most of those opportunities to then translate them into careers downstream. What I think would make that experience seamless is for career education or employment assistance to be available to students earlier in their journey, so from their final year, in order to build that pathway and a smoother trajectory into ongoing gainful employment that is aligned to their field of study.

The CHAIR: Are you finding, though, that there is a moment in time where they have done their study and they go in to the workforce but they do not get that support at that point so they leave or the retention is not—

Daria WALCZAK: It is very demotivating. More specific to the university sector, the higher education sector, if students do not start that graduate recruitment process in their final year, unfortunately they have missed the boat on opportunities for the following year. They are unemployed for a year, and then they are seeking alternative opportunities, if they are, or they are considering further education simply just to fill the time and be productive. Unfortunately, the more time that they spend out of the labour market, the more destructive it is to their confidence, their motivation. We just see their resilience dropping. When we start that process earlier and there are almost tasters into the workforce, whether it be through internships or placements—but supported placements with employers who have been educated on inclusive practice—the confidence is a lot higher, and we do then see that students are able to secure employment in the year after their graduation.

The CHAIR: Do you see that with inclusive industry or inclusive workplaces?

Nikki NOACK: Yes. I was going to say we use a similar word. We describe it as the ‘ecosystem’ as well, and that is looking at what supports are available, not dissimilar to when you are working in the employment services, where for people that need it there is that job customisation that really speaks to their skills and needs. It is really no different when you are looking at developing a student on their learning journey and then also that movement into that employer placement. It is making sure that there is that real bespoke customisation in support and follow-up and wraparound services, not only from when they start studying but through to when they go into that employment. That sits with us as well around what student support services we have. We have success coaches and we have mentors and supports. Those may be very different from one individual to another, but we do know now that students that do have a disability or might need extra support really do need to have that individual learning focus and that extra transition support as well.

Lorna MACKIE: I think that is an important point of it. We mentioned it being like a pipeline, but I think for a lot of students with disabilities it not a pipeline, it is a spectrum. There is no ‘I transition from education to

VET to employment'. It is that longer term, gradual transition and building time into that transition for them to adapt to the changing circumstances. I think that is something that we need to consider in the structure of funding and programs for those students, that it is often going to take that bit longer. The funding needs to reflect that. That is where our DES colleagues come in, the employer education. There are disability-confident recruiting credentials. There is training that is available for employers. But again, I suspect a lot, from our experience, are not aware of those things being available either. So it is that kind of whole slice. Practically what it shows up as is there are employers who we partner with who are good at this and who are in the market. So I think part of it is how we expand that network of those employers who are good at this. I think there are some ways that government can encourage that through perhaps large funding programs that government is giving out. So if we are going to give a large infrastructure contract to someone, actually, let us build in 'You will participate in X amount of disability employment'. I think there are levers that government could pull to encourage more of those larger organisations with capacity to be a really hospitable employer in that sense.

The CHAIR: That is great. Daria.

Daria WALCZAK: I think another part as well is that what we typically see is that institutions are great at providing supports to students within their studies, and they all will have learning plans that will be accessible. There are a whole range of employers that are becoming far more confident in applying adjustments, but what is missing sometimes is the translation of accommodations and adjustments from the learning environment into the work environment. That is where I think that service providers like DES and IEA could play a part in that, in educating the student on what the work environment will look like and what the types of supports are that they may need, and then obviously providing that bridge and educating up the employer on how to do that. But what we have actually seen is that when we launched the program in 2018 we were doing a lot of that advocacy for students. There was a really big fear about disability disclosure, but it is a part of our everyday conversation with the students that we work with. Where we are now is that our students typically advocate for themselves, and it is a part of that independent career management. It creates self-sufficiency, self-leadership, because people with disability will disclose time and time again, whether it is after a promotion or within shifting employers or changing departments. A part of that is the education to the student as well around how you advocate for yourself.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. I am so sorry, we could keep talking all afternoon, but I am running out of time. If you have anything further you would like the committee to consider, please send that to us. Thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.