

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Friday 21 November 2025

#### MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair  
Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair  
Roma Britnell  
Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy  
Nicole Werner  
Dylan Wight

#### WITNESSES

Atharva Nerlikar,  
Bianca Baldwin,  
Dylan McBurney,  
Harlequin Goodes,  
Matilda Ryan,  
Rowan Farren,  
Shanay Gao-Kuhlmann (Jacobs),  
Sienna Seychell, and  
Yesha Khandel.

**The CHAIR:** I start today by acknowledging the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nations, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and future and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I advise that the session today is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcasting of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with LA standing order 234.

I welcome the youth associates to this roundtable for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. While we want to run this session as informally as possible, there are just some formalities that I will cover first.

Today's round table is being recorded by Hansard. While all evidence taken by the committees is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

All participants will be provided with a proof version of their transcript to check, and transcripts will be published on the committee's website. Please make sure now that your mobile phones are turned to silent.

I just want to acknowledge all the work that you have done and undertaken as youth associates. The committee appointed 10 youth associates to assist with this Inquiry because we were keen to hear about the perspectives of young people. You have done invaluable work consulting with your peers across the state. Each of you has done a great job summarising your findings in a written report which is now on our website. The committee members are keen to now hear more about your findings and discuss these with you today. We are going to run this round table as informally as we can, but think of it a little bit just like a chat with the committee. We will have 12 topics for discussion, and each of you have been allocated one or two of these topics to present. After each person's presentation there will be an opportunity just for a general discussion. If you wish to speak during that, you can just raise your hand or jump in.

With that, I will just formally let the committee introduce themselves, and we might get you to also introduce yourselves and maybe where you are from. I am Alison, the Member for the Bellarine.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Good morning. I am Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. It is great to have one of my locals here, Rowan, and great to have you all here.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I am Roma Britnell. I am the Member for South-West Coast, which is the far west of the state, right through to the South Australian border and across to a little town called Terang, so quite a big area.

**Dylan WIGHT:** I am Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit, which is out in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne.

**Nicole WERNER:** I am Nicole Werner. I am the Member for Warrandyte.

**John MULLAHY:** John Mullahy, the Member for Glen Waverley.

**The CHAIR:** I think we do have Anthony online—possibly online, or he may join us online—the Member for Pascoe Vale. I might start with you, Sienna.

**Sienna SEYCHELL:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the committee for joining us all here today. My name is Sienna Seychell, and I go by she/her pronouns. I will be focusing on two main topics. I will expand on how young people choose what to do after high school and how much consideration is put into in-demand industries when making these choices.

I interviewed 20 youths aged between 20 and 25 who reside mostly in the metropolitan Melbourne area, with a mix of rural and regional Victorians. This group formed a mix of career paths after high school, including trades, university, gap years and alternative pathways. In my interviews I found that passion and personal interest were the biggest drivers of career choices and pathways after high school. Not many interviewees felt impacted by their parents, friends or alternative means but rather their own joy and that they followed something that they identified with.

A 22-year-old male from Melbourne said choosing uni was simply the next logical step after VCE. A 25-year-old female who dropped out of university and returned later said she wanted to attend uni as she was encouraged by her teachers and her parents. Those who had ultimately changed their decisions after high school still chose to focus on their passions and interests rather than on money or employability.

During my research many participants said university was assumed as the best pathway after high school, as other alternative pathways were not nearly as thoroughly discussed. Many students who were interviewed were not informed about alternative pathways until later on in their education, and there was deep stigma around anything but university, as VET was perceived as hidden or inferior.

One participant said she felt misled by careers counsellors during high school because VCE was portrayed as the only real pathway, and she did not even hear about the trade she now works in until a dinner conversation with her girlfriend's family. This information was spread by word of mouth rather than through a clear and easily accessible system. It took her longer to find out what she wanted to do. Most participants described school career advice as somewhat helpful or not helpful at all, with one participant saying careers education at their school was just a tick-in-the-box exercise. Another said:

I wish we'd learned resumes, cover letters, and how to build a folio.

During my discussions with many participants they asked consistently for meaningful guidance from earlier year levels, as well as practical skill building and exposure to real people working in different pathways.

I also came across a massive divide between students in public and private schools, as private school students often did not even know that VET was an option, compared to public school students, where they had access to VET, although stigma was still tough. Regional students described VET delivery as unpredictable, with some teachers lacking the proper training. With a lack of information surrounding VET and university being framed as the default option, the factors as to why young people do not always consider in-demand industries became clearer.

Worker shortages were not unknown to students in broad sectors like health care and trades, but nearly all my interviewees claimed it did not outweigh their passion. A 20-year-old woman from regional Victoria said that she did not even consider it but she might have had she been given more information. A 21-year-old from rural Victoria said teachers focused on VCE scores, not what jobs were available. This reflects a disconnect between opportunities with career pathways and the information available and the way the education system is not necessarily geared toward in-demand industries. Many participants did not understand what VET pathways looked like, which jobs are actually in shortage, how to enter those industries and exactly what 'in demand' even means in practical terms.

From my consultations, young people clearly want earlier exposure, easier access to information, better trained careers counsellors and organised panel sessions focused on in-demand industries and career pathways, as well as actively working towards eliminating the stigma around VET and highlighting its value and opportunity. That is all. Thank you. I am happy to take any questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Sienna. That is excellent. Is there anyone else that would like to just add to that presentation to help us with anything they found? If not, we will jump into questions. Okay, we might do questions and then we might just dig a little bit deeper. Are there any committee members that would really like to ask a question of Sienna?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I might just start. Thank you so much for that. I have read your application, and it really good. There is quite a common theme across the board with some of those issues that you have raised, particularly in the early access. How do you see that change looking like? Was there that discussion with some of the students about what would work for them?

**Sienna SEYCHELL:** Yes. The change looks like, from year 7, prioritising it as an option equally with VCE. A lot of students thought that the goal of the end of high school was VCE, completing years 11 and 12. But I personally did not even have the option of VET when I was at a year 7 level. So just try to frame it differently, make it a larger option and make the school's framework clearer, to have alternative pathways and to try destigmatise VET in itself.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** And earlier?

**Sienna SEYCHELL:** Earlier, yes. Earlier.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes, very good. That was quite a common theme.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Sienna. I am very proud to have Sienna on the panel, as someone from the Pascoe Vale electorate. Thank you for your work, and all of your work as well, which has been fantastic. You said something very interesting around there being a disconnect, which you have found, between what students are thinking and the views of teachers and careers counsellors in terms of what they think the priorities should be for kids and what young people think should be, or are, the opportunities. Yes, starting earlier definitely is one thing, as is socialising the other opportunities earlier from year 7, but practically, in the school environment through a careers counsellor or other opportunities, what else could the government do to influence young people to think about those other options outside of just going to university?

**Sienna SEYCHELL:** A lot of participants came back saying that they would like more panels and more panels of other options besides tertiary education. This would mean people coming to the high school and being able to talk about what their job is and how they got there, because that is not as spoken about as university and paths like 'I want to be a doctor one day, so obviously I followed the mainstream'. But being in the trades or in something alternative is not spoken about. So definitely having the careers counsellor be knowledgeable in all areas, as well as being able to inform the students properly about their options.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Yes.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** I just want to add to that, specifically on the disconnect between educators and students. This is not a diss to teachers; I am actually studying to be one myself, and I understand the important role they play in our society. But I did find in my high school that we were given a survey and asked what in year 12 we wanted to focus on, which was during a little break session, to do things that really mattered to us. I found the students were begging—like, we were actively asking them to teach us how to write a resume, how to do an interview or how to get a tax file number—all things like this. Then the whole year, all we did was mindfulness colouring. So even though we were actively like, 'This is what we want,' I feel like the adults said, 'Okay, but your mindfulness is more important than your future job prospects'. Ultimately, they should be weighted equally because they are both very important, and we were getting way, way too much of this mindfulness colouring and gratitude and not enough to actually prepare us for the real world. So I think letting educators and specifically the adults know what is important to young people and to actually listen to their voices when they ask for something is incredibly important.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** You are going to be a good teacher.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, amazing. Absolutely. We are going to move on to the next topic, if we can. Thank you so much.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** Good morning. Thank you, everyone, for the opportunity to speak today. I have a bit of a shorter speech on school career advice and development. The quality of career advice in schools varied greatly across respondents, more so than any other questions. For students that attended private and selective schools, the opportunity to connect with alumni and industry experts was seen as the most beneficial support that they had, while others responded that individual teachers had the greatest impact on their decisions after secondary school. Many felt that the careers counsellors were only helpful when the student knew what they wanted to do specifically and only offered different pathways to get into different courses.

On the other hand, when students were unsure of what direction to take after school, career counsellors only advised based on standard aptitude testing and no other information was provided about in-demand industries. A largely unanimous opinion across all respondents was that standardised aptitude testing, like the Morrisby test, was not helpful and was poorly interpreted. Many students suggested that the careers had no correlation with what their interests were, nor did they have any correlation with areas of high growth or demand. Teaching students how to research a career, as was mentioned before, where to look for jobs and exposing them to a greater variety of industries were all opportunities that students felt that career development in schools missed. Further, almost all students felt that industry exposure and mentoring from alumni would have been significantly helpful in providing guidance and support in this critical juncture. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. It was something that we certainly heard from some experts in our last committee hearing talking about school career practitioners, as they call them now. So yes, thank you very much for that. Any questions? John.

**John MULLAHY:** Atharva is from the Glen Waverley district. I thank you for all the work that you have done. I just wanted to drill into some of the perceptions of vocational education and what evidence you have received back from the respondents, especially from the Glen Waverley district, as to what the thoughts are on that.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** As you are probably aware, I think in the electorate of Glen Waverley tertiary education is seen a lot more as university. That is the kind of stereotype or that is the sort of status quo. So even though within the area there are a lot of really strong other pathway options like TAFE and apprenticeship programs and things like that, it is not something that is pushed heavily and it is not something that is pushed by schools unless you go to specific schools. I can speak from my experience in Glen Waverley; we were not even given a brochure about a TAFE or things like that. So it is very different to other schools where I interviewed some people where they were encouraged actively to pursue other pathways, explore other things like VCE VM or VET courses and things like that. But in the area of Glen Waverley, I think it has a lot to do with the kind of societal thing, a lot of parental influence. They want their children to go to university and become an engineer, doctor, lawyer—something with a nice big title and a nice name.

**John MULLAHY:** For Chinese, Indians and Sri Lankans, it is education, education, education.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** Yes. I think the greatest challenge, especially in an area like Glen Waverley, is more so changing the perception of other tertiary pathways and giving a bit more advertising and a bit more information to students to introduce them to those topics.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thanks, John. Any other further questions around career? Dylan, you said that your father was a career counsellor at school.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes, he was, well back in the day when they called them careers counsellors. To get off that slightly, I think from my point of view we heard a lot when we had some hearings on Monday about barriers to tertiary education and further studies, and you have sort of got a piece in there. Can you just maybe elaborate on, during your interviews, some of the common themes in terms of barriers, whether they were cost or information or incorrect information?

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** There were three main barriers that I found. Personal reasons were of course barriers—things like family circumstances, health, loss of interest as well as academic performance and pressure. That was probably the biggest factor that influenced whether someone would want to pursue that tertiary pathway or not. The second thing was, of course, financial pressure: prices of accommodation, access to a tertiary education provider as well as things like study resources—just having a laptop that you can use and not having to go into the library to study every time you need to. The third was, and this was probably brought up the second most actually, that many people felt that—in Glen Waverley a lot of the people only study in university, the people that I spoke to, so I can only speak on this—the kind of opportunity cost that universities provided was not as great as what other pathways like teaching themselves something would have offered. People found that even after getting a full honours education they still were not employable. They would go into internships and things like that and come back thinking, ‘Wow, I’ve learned nothing in uni that is applicable to the actual job market.’

I have got a bit of a case study, if I can share that with you, about a student who felt this. After gaining hands-on experience through an internship, the student felt that the university did not teach them the skills or prepare them sufficiently to excel in the IT sector, which is what this student was going into. Ultimately, this student decided not to complete their qualifications, instead then opting to teach themselves coding and programming skills and enter the workforce directly. So the quote from them was: ‘If I am going to be paying thousands of dollars for an education, I want to know that at a bare minimum I can be employable, that it has prepared me for the workforce and that it is not something that I can learn by myself.’

It is a common thing that you hear a lot from the industry as well, that, ‘We want to hire all these graduates here, but they don’t have the skills. We spend six months of a graduate program training them to be a good employee before they can actually start working.’ That is something interesting, and that is something that I felt

as well. I mean, I have got decent marks, I have done lots of internships, but to get a graduate-level or entry-level job, there are eight rounds of interviews, there are thousands of employees looking to get into that same role, so the university education is not enough to get a job anymore. I think that is largely because there is a gap between what industry wants and what universities are providing in terms of skills.

**The CHAIR:** Amazing information.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** So how would that work better? How would you see your opportunity rise in a different way now than what you are getting at the moment?

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** So how would you solve that?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I think something that is quite easy I will say it is easy, but it is probably not—is probably more consultation and collaboration with industry. So making sure that curriculum setters, whether that is at a university level, but also probably at a VCE and school level, that the industry has input—‘This is what we’re going to actually be wanting from graduates, this is why we need them, these are the skills that they need so they can be strong employees and they have sustainable careers in whatever industry they’re going into.’ I think involving them in that curriculum-setting process, involving them in what the students are actually going to be learning, is going to be the most important, because the private sector is probably the biggest employer in Australia, so I think it is important to recognise that fact.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** And how you stand out—that is probably the other thing, isn’t it? When you said there are so many people going, maybe connecting to that industry in some sort of trainee program or something where you can connect with work experience or something where they can get to know you as a person, and then hopefully your opportunities are greater, and you are not just a number. How do you stand out when you are just a number? It is tricky.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** Definitely.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I used to work in the education sector as well. I had a training school for 18 years. We had a lot of trainees, work experience and industry connections, mentoring, trying to get programs where they actually linked with the business, and that person could hopefully then progress into that next role.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I think that is something that health sectors do particularly well. They have mandatory rotations through the actual industry that someone is going to be taking part in. Whether you are a physio or a psychologist, you have to do a certain amount of hours in an actual hospital setting or in a clinic setting. That is something that is not available in engineering, IT or even construction-related fields. I think that is something that is really valuable to a lot of people, and it makes someone ready to be employed and sets them up for success in the future.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. I am sorry—I forgot to open it up to anyone else who would like to talk about careers in schools, but we will have an opportunity. Dylan, have you have got something?

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I just wanted to say that it was actually the least varied question in my interviews. There was one person who said it was somewhat helpful and everyone else said ‘not helpful at all’, which may be an insight into how they are equipped to support people with disability in particular. I will get to it, but—

**The CHAIR:** Yes, interesting. Thank you for sharing that. Shanay, we are going to go to your topic if that is okay. We will have time at the end for a very general discussion if you think we have missed something, so we will come to you. Shanay, you are going to talk a little bit about VET in schools, but also the perception of VET. I will leave it to you. Thank you.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** All right. As mentioned, my name is Shanay, and I just wanted to thank Alison because she is the one who nominated me for this program. It has been absolutely wonderful, so hopefully I can do you proud. Today I am presenting students’ thoughts on VET subjects and how they can be improved. I interviewed a predominantly female, regional and diverse cohort of 21 individuals. While most of my interviewees described VET as a negative experience, the general perspective of VET cannot be equated to good or bad as it is entirely subject dependent. Some students absolutely love their course, while others find it

of little benefit. A positive students had with VET was that they were able to essentially dip their toes into different industries without fully committing to them and begin practising industry-related skills earlier in life. Conversely, it was reported that some subjects failed at teaching the level of content students were expecting and some students also found they simply just did not enjoy the content once they started practising it. Most prominently, though, the reason students dislike VET is because of the stigma surrounding it, and it is often considered a last resort for those who are simply not smart enough for VCE. The biggest issue consistently and passionately mentioned was this very stigma. To improve VET, the stigma surrounding it must first be eliminated.

Students found that teachers specifically had an impact on this stigma, as some accidentally proliferated the negative idea that VET is for those who are seemingly not smart enough for VCE. Having these negative thoughts coming from teachers, who are members of authority, diminishes student potential. This must first be targeted, and will systematically change the views that students have surrounding VET. Additionally, extra work is required to educate parents who experienced VET in their high school days and have their own perceptions. Showing them that VET is now equal to VCE is essential in reducing and ultimately eliminating the stigma surrounding trade subjects. Interviewees attributed their knowledge of VET mostly to teachers as well as family, friends and online resources. When your teachers and parents and even the sentiment held online all tell you that VET is an inferior choice, though that being wholly untrue, it pushes the stigma and reduces student pride, desire and passion to continue down those paths.

In almost every interview respondents used the term ‘hands-on’ to describe who VET is best suited towards. This is great, and really shows us how the program gets students active in their learning. But through reading between the lines, we can see the darker message behind this sentiment. Respondents answered as such to avoid stereotyping, and most reported that they did not want to say it is for those who are not essentially built for VCE—that being that they are not as dedicated or intelligent. However, the interviewees reported that that is essentially the typical sentiment held, though being untrue. This once more demonstrates how the stigma runs rampant and is limiting students’ ability to confidently engage in VET subjects. The stigma pushes the notion that VET is for students who are disengaged or more likely to consider dropping out of school, when in reality it may be for those who already have an understanding of the path they wish to go down, and VET just offers them a more hands-on or specific experience. This stigma likely comes from adults’ prior experiences with vocational study, as in the past it was billed as a second option. But as the education system continues to develop VET now exists as an equal, alternative path, not a shameful plan B.

Moving on, the quality of VET in comparison to university is heavily course dependent as well, but was seen as very similar because both do have their own pros and cons. Some courses offer the much more hands-on experience mentioned, such as a trade in comparison to a university degree. For example, if you were to participate in a hairdressing VET, that would easily open pathways to hairdressing. However, it is limited to that specific pathway. Conversely, a bachelor of science can lead into hundreds of different job outcomes, but may require additional effort to enter said professions because it is not a direct pathway. As you can see, which path you take is very dependent on the profession you see yourself in in the future. Likewise, it is how you want to get to that path and the time spent doing it. Nursing, for example, can be accessed through both VET and university depending on the type of experience one desires. One respondent describes VET as such: ‘It’s about learning how to do something physical and apply it elsewhere, where you can gather real-world potential and lifelong skills.’

Some ways to improve VET also include the following: content-wise, students desire mixed practical and theory elements within the courses, because some sway too far in each direction. On the same note, students reported that assessments were too easy. Having non-challenging assessments does not promote learning and instead allows students to sit stagnant, not taking in any information. Additionally, discussing VET in detail and investigating alternative pathways and the opportunities offered is crucial. Likewise, providing more resources and hosting conversations about VET will aid students in understanding what it is at the heart of the program. For regional or for rural students, developing facilities to host VET would be of immense help in allowing them to participate in a trade. Likewise, transport subsidies, mental health aid, free counselling, medical support and financial subsidies will help all students in general, but be life-changing for rural and regional students.

In all, my message to you today is: reduce the stigma. This is what is holding students back and is ultimately adversely affecting industries that are accessible through VET studies. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Shanay. Very thorough, and I saw lots of nodding going along as you were speaking, so thank you very much. Just in the interest of time, I am going to go straight to questions, if I can, from the committee. Has anyone got a burning question for Shanay?

**Dylan WIGHT:** I can kick off. Thanks, Shanay. That was really comprehensive and fantastic. You are going to be an amazing teacher. I am glad that you have chosen to do that. You spoke a little bit about and we have covered a little bit about career pathways and the assistance provided at school. In your view, during your senior years of secondary college was the sort of information and the guidance provided by the school, or whoever the career practitioner was, sufficient to prepare you for life after school? And if not, what little tweaks and changes can be made, do you think?

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** I love this question, because that is actually what I was going to mention in the last question. My career counselling, to put it bluntly, was not very helpful at all. I remember I asked the career counsellor once what she was going to do and she was like, 'I'm going to have a sit-down meeting with each of you. We're going to talk it out.' I am one year into uni now and that never happened, so there were a lot of false promises. I urge you to please go back to my report because there are direct quotations, and while I cannot remember them right now, one of the respondents even said that the career counsellor pushed her in the opposite direction. He literally said, 'You're not smart enough for university. I don't think you're going to be able to get into this.' Maybe that is what some kids need, but it is also way too harsh to tell an aspiring student who has dreams. There was no discussion of alternative pathways—you know, getting a diploma, going in in one year and then switching over. There was none of that.

I found that was very similar as well at my school. My careers counsellor was definitely not as harsh as telling us we could not do it, but there was definitely no additional help. It was just, 'What uni are you going to go to?' And it was like, 'I'm going to go to this university and do this.' There was just nothing else. Specifically for the students who did not know what they were going to do, she just wrote it down as a gap year and that was it. There really was not enough aid in actually choosing where we wanted to go. I know many students now who have already changed courses because they got into the real world and they found out things that they actually wanted to do instead of the path that was pushed through school, because it was really only 'Be a lawyer, be a doctor, be a teacher or go do a trade'. Those were kind of the only options.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Great. Thank you. That was an awesome answer.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any more—

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I am mindful of taking all the questions, but I did highlight something actually in your report that I did want to raise. You did raise the pressure to get to an ATAR score. I had two daughters go through school and get to year 12, and one did really well and one did not. The pressure of, you know, 'If I'm not going to do well, what is next?' In here you said:

There is so much pressure to get an ATAR, and it is a big reason for high school dropouts and student depression, but it is ultimately not that important because alternate pathways exist—but these are not greatly advertised or supported. I think that is a really good point. There is so much focus on year 12 students to get their ATAR but not about if that does not work. And how do they get that early on without making them think they do not have to do enough—you know, that sort of balance. I think it is a really good point, because I know a lot of kids in year 12 struggle and have a lot of issues and anxiety, and that can lead to depression. It is a really harsh time for them and their families.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** Yes, it definitely is. Thank you for bringing that up, because I know I took a different stance in year 12, and I faced a bit of academic burnout. I was always the high achiever, and then I got to year 12 and I said, 'Is it really that important? Should I put my mental health on the line, ruin my sleep schedule, ruin my social life just to get a super high ATAR?' And I did not. I did one or two practice exams per subject, I walked into the exams and I did great. I got a good score and I got into the course I wanted, and it was not at the sake of my mental health. And then I saw my friends who stayed up night after night after night and did not have contact with anyone. They were so depressed, and they are still struggling even now to rebuild that social life, all for a score that maybe did not even get them into the course that they wanted. I found there is so much pressure—when you can do a diploma, you can take a year, do something else, and then enter another course as a mature age student. It is not the be-all and end-all if you do not get an ATAR above 90.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. What a great message. Rowan, I am going to head to you next, and you are going to talk to us about the topic of that awareness of pathways and VET pathways. Over to you. Thank you.

**Rowan FARREN:** Thank you to the committee for having me.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Rowan FARREN:** My name is Rowan. I am from Kim's electorate of Greater Shepparton. I am here to talk about students' understanding of VET and the awareness. Echoing much of the sentiment that you have heard so far, it really does rest on two general pillars—of stigma around VET as well as having asymmetrical information. Across the 20 young people that I talked to across private and public education, across LGBTQI groups, across culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the fundamental issue was that some students were given information and some students were not. For instance, for one of the young people I talked to, when they were in a private school, they were interested in VET. They actually had the information there earlier on in their high school experience, but when they went to seek advice from their careers counsellors they were actually advised, 'You'll need to go to a public school, you'll need to go to X school to actually be able to pursue this sort of academic pathway.' One of the biggest challenges that they had was they were aware, but they were not able to access it.

Broadly, though, the stigma is around the misunderstanding of exactly what VET is for within high school, and TAFE further on—being for students who are less academically inclined, so students who might drop out in year 10 or students who might not necessarily get the best grades, get the best ATAR or go to university. One young person I interviewed, who came from a culturally and linguistically diverse family, felt as though he was pressured actually to study business at university. When he considered the pathways that were available to him, social studies was one of the things he was interested in—social assistance health care. He was not informed of those VETs back in high school, and they were not an option that he was aware was possible to pursue. One of the biggest things in improving awareness around VET is creating a culture where practical courses are not viewed as being lesser than more academic courses but actually offering equivalent pathways to a career in and of itself. In talking to another young person from a multicultural community about exposure to VET and broader career tools, they communicated that they would have loved to have people come from different careers, come from TAFE, come from wherever and actually present to them about their career journey, and how just hearing 'Go to university and get a good job' advice over and over from their careers counsellors was not cutting it, broadly.

Largely, one of the things that people communicated that they needed most in improving awareness around VET was having generalised information as well as one-on-one communication. As you previously mentioned, having that one-on-one communication is essential in ensuring that students have a tailored journey, so whether that is accessing VET or whether that is accessing university, they do understand what steps they need to take to get where they are going. But then having that generalised information is also fundamental to making sure all students do get access to the information that they need.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I might ask a question, if I can, around that awareness and information. We have heard from others that parents are really a big influence, or their peers are a big influence, and they are not really getting the information they want, and we have touched on it with your careers or with your school. They are big influences in young people's lives and making decisions. Who do you think then would be a priority to have that awareness education? Is it parents that we need to be talking to more, or—

**Rowan FARREN:** Yes, absolutely. There is definitely a need to communicate with parents as well as the students themselves, because even if we give all the information in the world to students, if they go home and get shut down by the parents, they are not going to consider it. I have had people from different communities and different groups say 'We really wanted to go do a VET in nursing,'—so a certificate in nursing—or 'I wanted to do a diploma' or 'I wanted to do XYZ', but it was very much hammered on the head with 'No, you've got to go study this at university' or 'You've got to go do a pathway to a JD or a pathway to a medical degree'. And a lot of the time, students who were given that exposure very much were in that burnt-out university camp; they dropped out and they never actually continued on in any form of study. So making sure that you bring along the parents on that ride and on that journey of education and awareness is one of the fundamental things to making sure that not only within an educational environment are we supporting people to

pursue VET and in-demand industries but we are also supporting parents and carers to actually help their students in their journey throughout the entire process.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Can I just elaborate on that slightly—and probably everybody on the panel can comment on it to some degree. With the responses from your interviewees, how much was that pressure at home from parents a determining factor in how hard they would study, what they would study, whether they would even take a gap year or not? How much did that flesh out?

**Rowan FARREN:** I know we have time to talk on regional students, but obviously being in a regional environment, it was actually a very large element and influence. Being regional students, you kind of had two pathways: you either moved to the city or moved to a larger area—so Geelong, Melbourne or Bendigo—or you kind of did not ‘do much with your life’. There was that understanding that if you did not go to university, you were not going to achieve as much. And that pressure from family was very much pushing students towards that destination of ‘You’ve got to go off and do what we are saying you’ve got to do’ rather than—

**Dylan WIGHT:** Melbourne Uni law or something like that — that sort of thing?

**Rowan FARREN:** Something to appear as though you are achieving something, yes.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** The aspirations are a bit different, yes. Does anyone else want to talk about parents and answer that question?

**Dylan WIGHT:** You can get it off your liver now.

**John MULLAHY:** Get it on the record.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** In a lot of my interviews, where they were all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or culturally and linguistically diverse, culture plays a massive part with pressure. People think of their families and they want to make themselves proud, and they put pressure then on their children because of cultural upbringing. So it is about how we, in a system that is built differently, support students in that way as well and understanding that—and I will talk about it as well—you are living in two worlds; you have to live in your culture world and then you have to live in the world where you go to school and you make all your decisions. So it does play a huge part, the pressure of family and the pressure of school and not being able to escape that. Yes, it is really interesting.

**The CHAIR:** Interesting, yes.

**Matilda RYAN:** I think I would like to add: a few of the respondents that I had were from out-of-home care or in home-transition environments—and the assumption that there is advice from a parental figure is also quite assumed, so it is a consideration for any individual to have that kind of support and input.

**The CHAIR:** I think you raise a really great point. Thank you. Any other questions? I will go to Shanay.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** Sorry, I feel like I have so much to say. I am just really passionate about these topics. I can add on to the cultural note, because coming from an Asian household, there was definitely a push by my mum and even my grandpa. They were like, ‘We’re going to take you to China if you get into Melbourne Uni’—that was the prize. So they were a little bit shocked when I was like, ‘Well, actually I want to go to VU because they offer primary and secondary together and I don’t want to waste my time doing a bachelor and then a masters at Melbourne,’ and that was definitely a shock. There was definitely a pushback, because Melbourne Uni is the place, right? It is considered the top university. My family always said, ‘You’re going to become something, right, and you’re going to get really rich.’ When I said I wanted to be a teacher, it was definitely like, ‘But you’re going to be poor.’ There was definitely the pushback there. It took a lot of fighting and standing up and making an entire PowerPoint presentation to tell my mum, ‘Look, I can do this and still be well-off.’ I know that cultural background, depending on your family’s beliefs, where they come from, specifically if they are migrants like my family is—they have this, ‘We came to Australia for a better life,

so we really need you to carry that on.' I can be a testament to how big that cultural background really impacts where you go.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. That is a really great point.

**Yesha KHANDEL:** I just want to add to that. Coming, again, from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, I feel like it is not just the family, because I was fortunate enough that my parents did not force me, but there is also the community and the pressure around it. Even now, even though I chose engineering because I love it, I feel a little bit of pride when I go out and tell someone not from my family that I am studying engineering, and so there is the pressure from community. I feel like raising awareness within the communities through parent—teacher nights and informing them that there is not just one pathway to being an engineer, lawyer or doctor and there are alternate pathways could definitely be very helpful.

**Nicole WERNER:** Can I just say, also from that cultural heritage and background, that is why it is so important we have this diversity of voices here today, because with your lived experiences that then inform our work as we undertake this Inquiry, we are really grateful for you guys to be able to share that lived experience and tell us not just from consultation broadly but also from what you have gone through, because that absolutely resonates. I know what you are talking about. It is a question that we have asked already, particularly John the other day with the electorate of Glen Waverley, which has got a big number of people with South-East Asian heritage. We discussed with the people who are in that field, 'What are you doing to bridge those barriers and to also break down those stigmas?' There is work for us to do in order to do that. We thank you again for letting your voices be heard here.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to move on now to Harley. Thank you so much. You are going to speak a little bit about those barriers that you may have heard from your interviewees, and then we will open it up for discussion. Thanks, Harley.

**Harlequin GOODES:** Yes, very much. I am really going to be echoing what you have heard today. I think the barriers are quite intense for young people. I spoke mostly to rural Gippsland young people. A lot of those barriers through VET, TAFE, university and even apprenticeships can look like physical accessibility. There are young people who I interviewed who never had the choice to do VET because they could not keep going to high school because they could not physically access a high school within two hours of their home. There was also just a complete lack of information about VET courses at their school. The only young people that I interviewed that said it was somewhat helpful were the ones that did have career counselling at their school, and even then a majority of those young people said there was a total absence, that there was just no career counselling, no-one was telling them anything. If they wanted to know what they were doing, they would have to push really hard. They did not even know what to search online.

For TAFE it is kind of similar. It is easier to get information about TAFE courses, especially Free TAFE and those in-person classes, but the issue is course availability. While there are a lot of TAFE buildings and schools around Gippsland, if there are not enough young people or enough people interested in the course you want to do, there will not be a physical course anywhere near you. That comes to issues with the internet or if young people simply are not able to do online learning and they really need that in-person learning. It just puts a hard wall against them getting a further education, no matter what societal or home pressures they might have to seek that higher education. It does not matter if they want to; they physically cannot.

These barriers carry on to university. Prior learning, your ATAR that you need for university—if you are not able to attend high school or there is a lack of resources at your school or lack of ability, these young people genuinely cannot make that choice. There is really a lack of choice and physical accessibility all the way through. Young people regionally have to move if they want to go to TAFE, let alone university. So you have got young people who really want to further their education—they would prefer a job in a different sector—but they already have work where they live, and they have to make a really difficult decision between education and further study and working now.

There was also a massive statement from all of the people I interviewed about their luck with apprenticeships: that they just simply could not find apprenticeships. There was no easy way for them to access that information. I even had a young person who did do an apprenticeship who said that that because of the way, at least in their community, that they traditionally do apprenticeships—where if a young person would like to do an

apprenticeship, someone knows someone in the community who is looking for an apprentice, and they set it up then—that is not so easy to do anymore. It is just a lot of echoing, honestly. I do not have much else to add. There are just a lot of hard, hard walls for young people.

**The CHAIR:** That is fantastic, Harley. You have really summed up too from a lived experience what we have heard from other experts as well around apprenticeships. If I can drill into one of the questions—it has been raised before—around the cost of doing things, the cost of moving, the cost of an apprenticeship, the cost of tools or the cost of having to study. Did any of the students talk about a financial barrier?

**Harlequin GOODES:** Yes, absolutely every single student, regardless of whether they were personally suffering with issues with money, had raised that. Even the well-off students were saying that in their experience their friends could not go to school, because they simply could not afford it. That can even come to transport. If you live an hour away from the school you want to go to and you live near public transport, sometimes that can still be too expensive. The trains are wonderful right now depending where you live in regional areas, but if you live somewhere with a bus that comes once a day, you cannot go to school. You have to find somewhere to stay or you are on the street. Yes, the cost of living—very much so. For young people, even if they can find other young people to room with, to go somewhere for education is still too expensive, and it leads to unsustainable overcrowding. For young people, they literally financially cannot choose education.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Nicole WERNER:** Thanks so much, Harley. That is so insightful, and it is something I have heard from young people a lot. Noting that you asked mostly regional people, I would be keen to hear more broadly—as it is something that I hear from young people, that it is a barrier—about the cost of living and the cost of university. I think you noted it as well, Sienna, where it is just not an option. You want to go to university, you want to do further studies, you want to do VET you want go to TAFE—for many that is just not an option, because they need to go out into the workforce and earn money, so it is something for later in life—everyone is nodding. I just would love to hear from you as to how real that is right now for your demographic and for people your age.

**Sienna SEYCHELL:** Yes, I have found that quite real. A lot of the people that I interviewed had the privilege of living at home with family, so they were able to access university, to travel there, and were not having to balance the cost of rent as well. But the people that had to pay rent and were travelling from regional areas and were living in metropolitan Melbourne I found had to get help from parents still. The parents were always helping the young people because they were not able to access things like Centrelink, because their parents earned too much, but they were still living out of home. Some were not as fortunate and were taking gap years and working, even if they had moved to metropolitan Melbourne, due to the fact that it was just too costly to balance university and work enough to pay rent, live life and have a social balance. As well as doing apprenticeships—someone that I interviewed, a 22-year-old female, is currently doing an apprenticeship, and she is earning \$16 an hour. If she was not living at home, she would not be able to afford a social life or rent or any of those sorts of things. It is truly a massive cost-of-living struggle for all students. But those who have the privilege of living at home have it a lot easier than those who have had to move out.

**Rowan FARREN:** I might just add to that on a number of the people from regional Victoria who do move to the city. A majority of those who went off to study university that I have talked to have actually either ceased their studies or have taken an extended leave of absence. I myself moved to Melbourne basically straight after graduating year 12 and went to University of Melbourne to study a bachelor of commerce. One of the fundamental challenges was that accessibility from a financial perspective. I was not able to really get anything from Centrelink. Scholarships were obviously a support, but there is a limitation to how much that can actually alleviate at times. A number of the young people I talked to just could not financially sustain either living down here or making the commute. I myself, when I did decide to move back and potentially try to continue studies, had to leave on the earliest train from Shepparton, which I believe was about 5:10 am, three or four days out of the week. Then I was not home until 9 or 10 pm the same day. As much as I might be able to study on the train, trying to fit in work and a social life and everything else becomes unsustainable. If you do relocate down, you financially cannot afford to live there a lot of the time. If you try to remain in your home town—as you said, some people, especially those who live in the city, are fortunate enough to stay in their homes. It is not sustainable either way, whether you move down or you do try to transport yourself down living in the regions.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** Adding to the financial aspect, there is a lot of pressure from parents, if you are financially dependent on them, to go and study what they want you to study. Someone I spoke to, their grandparents paid for their university, but it meant that they had to study what their grandparents wanted. They did not get a choice. I also think in looking at the youth allowance, like Rowan mentioned, and not being eligible for any Centrelink, it is based on the income of your parents. What if your parents have a substance issue? What if they have a gambling addiction? What if they are irresponsible with their money or do not give you access to their money? You are kind of abandoned on both fronts, which makes it difficult.

**Yesha KHANDEL:** Just to add a quick case study to that, I met a friend at uni; she is 23 and she is studying engineering and working part time. When I asked her 'What's your favourite coffee order?' she stated it would be a flat white because she gets more milk in the cup. That just shows the realities of prices, having to live alone and afford just daily coffees and commute along with having to study and balance the hours. On top of trying to go for the option that gave you more coffee, she would also work night shifts on top of studying. You can see the influence that it has when you are not relying on your parents and living independently.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** I just want to really echo the financial issues. I know I moved out the moment I turned 18 to go study, and I moved to Melbourne. It took me eight months to claim independency just so I could get Centrelink aid. Without that I simply would not be able to study. I am currently doing uni three days a week. I am working five days a week, minimum wage, so \$17 an hour, just to study and be in a place where I can do that, because in Geelong there is only really one option, Deakin, and if you want anything more than that you do have to move, because the commute being 2 hours from where I am on the outside of the Bellarine was simply too much to do for a 3-hour class. So yes, you have these students whose schedules are jam-packed. Each day I have got work, uni, something going on, and that ultimately can lead to big mental health issues, and that causes lots more issues down the line. That also leads to the dropouts that all of us, I believe, probably mentioned in our reports—that is definitely a big cause of it. So all of these financial issues and these build-ups of having to work, having to study simultaneously—specifically, if you want to come to Melbourne and study differently or be independent, it is definitely a big challenge.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Just a quick one to Harley: you talked about apprentices finding it difficult to access the knowledge of where to find an apprenticeship. Do you think there is some sort of disconnect between people who are employing, because there are a lot of apprentices that are needed, and people wanting to employ? They tell me they cannot find the youth to fill them. Do you think the social media disconnect between the old and the young might have anything to do with that?

**Harlequin GOODES:** I think so. It is not even about social media; it is that with all job listings currently almost everything is online, so it makes it really difficult with businesses and things that are traditionally not done online, and there is no real structure for that. I think there is a lack of space that seems appropriate for it. More corporate entities and larger companies will advertise their apprenticeships on jobseeker websites, but to a point I do not know how accessible that is to people who themselves are running a small business who are looking for an apprentice. So I think it is lack of knowledge and communication between them. I am not quite sure how to fix that, but definitely even just more large-scale operations seeking more apprentices, especially these new industries that are coming in, would be wonderful, and it would create, maybe, that platform for would-be apprentices and those looking for an apprentice.

**Roma BRITNELL:** There might be a market in that for someone, I reckon.

**Harlequin GOODES:** Yes.

**Matilda RYAN:** I might just throw a little teaser: I have got a huge amount to speak about that later when it is my turn.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you, Matilda. We are going to head to Bianca now. You are going to talk to us around the topic of supporting First Nations and CALD students and female students in male-dominated areas. Thank you.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Cool. My name is Bianca. Over the past months I interviewed 34 people, all women aged 20 to 25, in the construction industry, specifically. Eighteen identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander, and 16 were culturally and linguistically diverse. Although the stories were very different, every consultation pointed to one core truth: young people do not just need pathways, they need safe pathways. And safety is more than physical; it is cultural, social and psychological.

Cultural safety is not optional; it determines whether young people want to stay or leave. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and CALD young people I spoke with, cultural safety was the single biggest influencing factor in whether they felt they belonged in the industry. One woman described it powerfully. She said:

Some days I feel like I'm two different people—one that knows who she is and where she comes from, and another that has to leave that at the gate just to get through the day.

That feeling of needing to split yourself in two came up again and again and was described as not just uncomfortable but mentally exhausting. Participants identified code switching as a significant barrier to mental wellbeing. Many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and CALD young people reported modifying their communication, cultural expression and behaviour in order to avoid judgement or stereotypes. This repeated adjustment created psychological strain and contributed to feelings of isolation within the industry.

Young people told me without cultural safety they struggled to speak up, they hid stress or mental concerns, they feared being labelled as overly sensitive and they doubted their place in the industry at all. For some the emotional toll was heavier than the physical work. Even when workplaces are providing PPE training and physical safety measures, many participants said that they did not feel psychologically safe. Young people describe racism or banter that crossed the line, pressure to downplay accents or cultural identity, being the only woman or only Aboriginal person onsite and fear of judgement if they shared mental health struggles. Because of this, many interviewees told me that they just kept to themselves even when struggling. For Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander participants, this lack of cultural understanding intensified the mental load. For CALD participants, stigma, language barriers and fear of misunderstanding made it even harder to seek support. Cultural safety is not a bonus; it is a prerequisite for retention, confidence and performance.

Not only being culturally and linguistically diverse, or Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander, being a woman in construction in the industry is also another barrier. Cultural and gender barriers intersected a lot. A lot of my young people described it as needing to constantly prove their capability, microaggressions and tokenism, a lack of facilities that acknowledge them, limited female mentors and no safe space to report discrimination. Many told me even though they love the work, the culture made them question whether the industry loved them back. What young people said that would actually help were culturally safe training and workplaces, which is training delivered by culturally competent staff; spaces where young people can express their identity without fear; onsite cultural awareness led by community leaders; and flexible arrangements for cultural obligations. Another one was having visible and diverse role models in place for people to see—so First Nations tradespeople in leadership, CALD women teaching and supervising, and mentors who understand their lived experience. This representation is not just symbolic; it shapes confidence, belonging and mental health.

Another thing that came up a lot was mentoring and peer support networks, which is something that could be done quite naturally and quite easily—it does not cost money, it does not cost time. It is about bringing people together to talk. Participants said they feel safer and more resilient when connected with others who get it.

Early and clear pathway information—many CALD and female students felt that they stumbled into trades due to limited or confusing school advice.

This is a big one: normalising mental health and culturally safe support. Young people want wellbeing embedded into apprenticeships, culturally informed mental health services, leaders who model help-seeking, and psychological safety discussed as openly as physical safety.

Across all interviews, one message was unmistakable: young people are not asking the industry to change who they are; they are asking to have permission to be who they are. If we want First Nations and CALD students and young women to choose and complete qualifications in in-demand industries, then cultural safety and psychological safety must sit at the centre of the approach. When young people feel safe, seen and respected, they do not stay in the industry, they thrive in it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Bianca. That was an amazing presentation. Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** I have one of the most multicultural and Indigenous populations across the state, the highest Indigenous population outside of Melbourne. I am all over this. I love it. I love this presentation. You tell me if I am seeing this differently, but I think it needs to start younger, like maybe in primary schools. We work so hard to, you know, appreciate each other's differences, and Indigenous people need to fit. What always concerns me is we do not see enough particularly Indigenous young kids in McDonald's and supermarkets working because they do not feel culturally safe. I have had this conversation with one of our local guys that owns four McDonald's stores. How do we actually engage with that cohort of people, the Elders or whatever it takes? I just want to get them into those roles. But I personally feel it needs to be in school. One of my daughters is a schoolteacher. She is a vice-principal, and we have had this conversation too. She is working in a very multicultural school, and they are making some significant change. I love seeing what is happening. How do we all do that? So I suppose my question to you is: when does this sort of change need to happen, should happen?

**Bianca BALDWIN:** I completely agree with what you said there. If you look at anything in life, if you embed something early, it becomes a practice. It becomes something that you are taught, something that you learn that further along in life shapes the way that things turn out. So embedding things nice and early and normalising it ensures that later on, when you are going to be in industry, there are going to be less violent or racist attacks, there is going to be less feeling a certain way, because you have been taught, you have learned and you actually know that you are not allowed to say that. We all say, 'You don't know?' Some people actually do not, and that is what was very apparent in my report. The casual racism is a really big thing in Australia, and we try to act like it is not, but it is. Casual racism is awful.

So, yes, if we are starting early and implementing different schemes and implementing education early, that means that later, hitting industry, people are going to thrive and people are going to have that opportunity to turn around and be like, 'Hey, that's not okay. You can't say that' or, 'Hey, let's delve deeper.' And on the flip side of that, people who are not as educated will feel okay to come forward and say, 'I need more education, I need more training on this,' because when you do not, you just shut yourself off and ignore it.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** One thing in your report you highlighted very well was that a lot of workplaces do have training, but it is tokenistic, and you have mentioned that. They tick it off and then the behaviours are not accountable. So how do they do some sort of accountability? When things do not go well, how do they do monitoring of that? I think that is the thing—they probably just tick the box and they probably do not come back and revisit how it is going with their staff. I think there needs to be a progressive approach to address that.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Absolutely. I think any job you start, you do your modules and you do them all online, and it is just a tick-a-box run, for sexual harassment, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders—tick a box. But in my opinion, if you started with an executive level, if you were getting your ALT/AMT undergoing cultural safety and cultural awareness training, because they are two different trainings, that can be then embedded into the practice of how the work flows throughout the workspace. But yes, it is definitely—

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** A lot gets pulled under the mat, doesn't it?

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Yes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** And you think, how do we bring it up as an everyday discussion, if it needs to be called out.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Exactly right. It is raised, and it is just part of the normal—

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** It is really important. Well done.

**The CHAIR:** I will go to Anthony and then I will come to you, Nicole.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Bianca. Thank you, Chair, and Nicole as well. You are, I think, from the northern suburbs area. I have represented the heart of the northern suburbs, in many ways one of the most multicultural communities, and I am the son of migrants too, so I very much appreciate where you are coming from. Excellent presentation and findings, by the way. I suspect there might be a reflection going on here with what the views are of multicultural young people and those misconceptions from the older generation of some industry. So you have got the situation where older parents have misconceived ideas about particular sectors,

and they discourage their children, steering them away from there, whether it is grandparents paying for the fees and the like. But on the other hand, you do have young people—young women, multicultural, First Nations people—that want to work in particular sectors like construction, where you need a trade, or in retail or in the social services, and they are feeling they have an interest, but they perceive these barriers or experience these barriers. So there is potentially, in what you are saying, a way to acquit the two misconceived ideas and notions from two generations, if that makes sense.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Yes.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Would you agree generally with that sort of sentiment?

**Bianca BALDWIN:** I feel like it is a big process.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** It is a bit, yes.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Yes, to a certain degree. Like I said, a lot of my experience was in the construction industry. Going into it was very daunting. But yes, there is that barrier. I work in the construction industry now, so I go out onsite and I see the very distinct difference between generations. I do not really know how to answer, to be honest.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Yes, sorry. It was more of a statement, I guess.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Well, Anthony, that is our job as the committee, I think, to come up with those. Thank you. This is a big jigsaw piece we are trying to put together here, so it is a lot. Dylan, I am going to come to you. I am just watching time, so that we do not go too over and we make sure everyone gets a really good amount of time. I will head to you next, and then we will open up to some more questions.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** Yes, no worries. I am Dylan. I guess I can be Dylan Jr here.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Don't you forget it.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I am a disabled person, and I spoke to disabled young people about the barriers that they face. It is difficult to look at these kinds of experiences, particularly in the transition from high school to higher education, because I think that young people with disability are being failed to an extent throughout. It is similar to what you were saying—it has to begin young. The current supports are quite lacking. I am going to talk first about the supports that are in place in universities. Obviously they are not consistent across universities, but from what I heard, there are ones that are quite easy to access, like extended due dates and physical accessibility. Those are good, but students with more complex disability are being left behind. One young person acquired a brain injury during their studies at university. They wanted to start a conversation with the access worker at the university about the degradation of their disability. The person was just not trained to have that conversation, and eventually they did get removed from their course, because of that.

There is a lack of transparency from universities, TAFEs and RTOs. They really like to use 'wellbeing' and 'accessibility' as buzzwords to get people in the door, but there is not that care for each individual student once they are there and once they are paying the fees—for example, even with physical accessibility. It is great to have lift access, but for one young person when classes were starting the lifts would be full of people standing. There was no procedure and no etiquette for students to actually make room for someone in a wheelchair, and he would show up to class half an hour late because he had no way of getting to the building.

I want to give you a bit of an insight into the process of getting formal supports in higher education as a disabled person. Obviously there are the barriers to graduating high school in the first place or finding an alternative path. You have to have a formal diagnosis, and this is something particularly that affects women and gender-diverse people. It takes six to eight years to get a diagnosis for endometriosis, on average, so one in seven young women in high schools are getting failed by that—and then into higher education as well. You have to have the money and the time to put aside a GP appointment to do the paperwork. You have to have an understanding of your disability and what supports you actually need, which a lot of young people do not have—for example, if you acquire a disability or are late to be diagnosed. You have to have the ability to self-advocate or bring an advocate to essentially barter for your access needs and for what supports you can get

offered. And then you have to rely on the ability of each individual teacher or lecturer to then implement the supports. They do not have the necessary understanding or training in disability, and they hold ableist biases.

Getting to this point a lot of young people with disability have already had traumatic experiences in high school, where their disability has been brushed aside. There are low expectations and isolating treatment for those who do have a diagnosis, and there is just a lack of belief in their symptoms and their experiences if they do not have a diagnosis. An interviewee said about not seeking support in the university, 'I must make myself as small as possible.' They had had experiences where they did not feel they could be open about their invisible disability.

We need to make sure that students are empowered throughout primary and secondary education and to advocate for their needs and understand what they need—not just to reach the bare minimum that everyone else does but to genuinely be supportive with their disability and their style of learning. In my report of young people from special schools and who work in ADEs, or sheltered workshops—these young people are segregated from a young age, and it continues throughout their life. That is what I want to acknowledge was lacking from my report. This isolation and kind of segregation happens in mainstream schools as well for young people with disability—setting low expectations for them; or, in the case of high-performing people with psychosocial disability, they do not get a chance and the information to follow TAFE, which might be a lot better for their mental health. One young person that I spoke to was consistently clear that they wanted to do VCE and wanted to go to university, and they were given their timetable in VCE VM. They had the choice taken away from them to pursue what they wanted to pursue. So there is no easy fix for each barrier that young people with disability face in higher education and in secondary school. We need to treat every student, regardless of a diagnosis or any other trait that they have, with empathy, flexibility and care, and it will benefit everyone. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Very good, Dylan. Thank you so much. Any questions, in particular for Dylan?

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** This is so important, so thank you. I think we do not do it enough. Two years ago I broke my ankle and I became a disabled person, and do you know? People treated me differently. They left me out of things. They did not invite me to things. I was still mentally fine. I had a broken leg, but I could do things. And just accessing different things—footpaths—gave me a whole new understanding. I was a mayor at the time too, by the way. In saying that, it is really interesting hearing it from an education perspective. I notice in your report—something I highlighted—that there are also things that sound as simple as no subtitles being on recorded lectures and things that we would think would normally be things you could easily access. They are, to me, small barriers but they are big barriers, because they are there.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** Yes, and there is also not having the permission to use access requirements, like a screen reader, for example. It is the lack of understanding and the lack of consistency, not just for each RTO but also each specific course and each teacher. It is not centralised, so it wildly varies between institutions.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Do you think that living with a disability—I mean, I have worked with lots of people over the years, and I had a business with a couple of people with disabilities and one with mental health issues, and we managed that the best we could because it is a disability, in my mind, that needs to be protected and nurtured and understood and respected. When you are in the education sector, how can things change when it comes to someone—and look, I did not see my broken leg as a disability; it was a short-term thing. But even someone with a long-term disability, that is the norm for them. You know, that is their life—that is how they live it. How can it become the norm for other people? I think this is an area that needs so much consideration.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** It requires a societal shift. But I think even more in the short term it is about treating people as individuals, not as their diagnosis and their grades—

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** One hundred per cent my point.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** but really genuinely understanding who they are as a person. It is very deficit based, the view of young people with disability in education. I spoke to someone who wanted to become a nurse. She has autism, and she was really fascinated with wounds. She said, 'The grosser they are, the more I like them.' And that to me was like 'We need this person working as a nurse. This is the ideal person for that industry.' But because all they look at are the deficits—they look at how her disability impacts her negatively, at the ways that she cannot participate in education—I think we lose out on so many valuable and talented workers.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Do you think educators, teachers, are trained enough in this space? Do you know what I mean? Is there an opportunity for them to do more?

**Dylan McBURNEY:** Overall I would say no, and it is because it actually does not just take training. It takes a shift of thinking on actively unlearning biases, which is something that everyone at this table and everyone in the world has to do. It has to be an ongoing part of your life. I think particularly TAFE and university teachers are overworked. In particular, TAFE lecturers are underpaid, and they have to do it on top of their teaching requirements that they already have. There are definitely teachers, when they are proactive—there was a teacher who 3D printed some mobility tools for one of these young people. That was great. That teacher was great in that unit. But you have, over the course of three or four years of studying, a different teacher for every single subject, and you kind of have to re-explain yourself and justify yourself and the supports that you need. So there are definitely structural things that need to change and the more societal mindsets that need to change, and there is no easy answer.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Sorry, I am taking a lot of time. Statistics prove that people with disabilities often do not progress right through to further education.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** Yes.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** The figures are very low, and it almost aligns with the type of training we were talking about prior.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** And employment statistics have remained stagnant for the past 30 years.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes. Thank you. Well done.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I would love to touch on the point of quality of teachers. I am lucky enough that my mum works in a school for children with often quite significant disabilities, Glenallen. In situations like that, I think the teachers are phenomenally skilled, and I think they showcase the best of humanity. They treat each child with a different pathway and a tailored approach, and I think that is something that I have never really seen in regard to disabilities in tertiary education. So I think it is important to recognise that it goes beyond training and it is a mindset shift as well. It is not just about improving accessibility through providing lifts and ramps, it is also about learning about what it takes to treat someone equitably in all aspects.

**The CHAIR:** I am really sorry; I am going to have to keep moving. We will come back to this topic. We will, because we will come back in the general discussion. Atharva, we are going to come to you next around completing qualifications. Is that okay? Are you prepared for that?

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** All good. Thank you.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** Throughout the recent consultations in the electorate of Glen Waverley, the question of completing qualifications raised some interesting topics. There were three main findings of this, but I would like to note that the views that I am presenting today were largely based on people that participated in university programs, and it did not capture the views around tertiary pathways, largely because of the demographic of Glen Waverley. So the first reason was personal reasons, ranging from family to health and academic challenges but also a loss of interest. This could result in a student gradually disengaging with curriculum content, but also they could be falling behind quite rapidly. Many tertiary education providers offer adjustments to facilitate completing qualifications but at a slower pace, but many students still fall through the gaps. Proposed solutions regarding this tended to be quite broad, addressing the longer term completion of qualifications rather than the shorter term, which is often what is measured. However, they were all founded on access to a clearly defined pathway that allows the students to recommence their study in an adjusted fashion, while still providing sufficient headspace to navigate personal challenges.

The second issue that was identified was, as mentioned a lot before, students felt forced to transition out of full-time study and into full-time work due to financial pressures, from transport to accommodation and study resources. This all exacerbates that kind of impact on a student's budget while they are often managing part-time and low-pay work with full-time study. A solution raised to minimise this issue was subsidising access and

accommodation further—so things like making sure that the free tram zone in the city goes right up to universities, rather than cutting off just there, simple things like that to deal with those issues. This ensures that tertiary education is equitable and accessible for all students and does not create a barrier by introducing financial constraints.

Finally—I touched on this a little bit before because I was not sure if I would get a chance to speak again—students often felt that the value of tertiary education was not as high as what they would be missing out on to take part in it. I explored this through the case study before, so I will try and skip to the more interesting part. The solution that was brought up was ensuring consultation and communication between tertiary education providers stays strong and collaborative. Programs must equip students with the skills and knowledge that is required in a given industry and, crucially, must offer better opportunity costs than what is offered by learning the skills independently. So that is it.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks so much for that. What I am going to do, because I am just looking down the list—Yesha, we might come to you, because you are talking about costs of courses and cost barriers, and it kind of links to maybe why students do not complete qualifications. So we might try and combine these two topics, if that is okay, and as I said to you, then we will do some questions.

**Yesha KHANDEL:** As mentioned, I am focusing on the influence of cost on course choices, which emerged as a common theme across all the young individuals interviewed. For many of them, financial considerations were not just a part of the decision-making process, but often they were the deciding factor for many students. One participant explained this very honestly when they stated, ‘I thought a lot about future debt when choosing my subject, and it swayed me from a course that would have been significantly more expensive.’ Comments like this were common. Young people weighed their interests against what they could realistically afford now and in the future. For many, HECS was helpful in reducing the immediate cost of study; however, it did not always remove the underlying financial anxiety. Some participants were unsure whether the career they were training for would provide them with the stable income needed to pay off the debt. One example came from a student who shared that although HECS allowed them to enrol, they were still uncertain about the prospects of a job through that career path, so eventually, again, there was that repeated problem of whether they would be able to financially pay off their debts and just the longevity of their finances.

Participants also noted that the significant variation in the cost of courses placed pressure on them to ‘choose correctly’, as higher levels of debt can influence long-term financial planning. That includes housing; independence, as we talked about earlier; as well as future family planning. So there was a huge weighting on that as HECS was a long-term financial investment, not just to enrol immediately. Beyond just the course fees, participants highlighted the everyday financial pressures they faced while attending uni. Again, that involved transportation costs; the cost to buy equipment, which was common for TAFE students; as well as the reduced income due to study commitments, so having to balance uni along with part-time jobs.

And another issue that was raised was the burden of unpaid placements and internships. For some, this made appealing careers not seem like a financially viable option. Because of the unpaid time that they had to dedicate, it was difficult to balance again with other commitments outside of university. But overall, the message from young individuals was quite simple, which was financial pressure shapes educational choice just as strongly as interest or ability, and many participants felt that they had to be practical and cautious with the decisions, not because they lacked ambition, but simply because the financial risks just felt too high.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. That was really great insight into the people that you spoke to. Any questions?

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes, I have got one. Thank you. That was awesome, and the report is fantastic as well. In Australia and in Victoria, but probably more broadly now as the federal government have picked it up, Free TAFE is supposed to make tertiary education accessible for everyone. But I think, as you said, what a lot of people do not speak about, particularly publicly, are those associated costs that go with studying that we have heard basically from everyone, whether that be housing, travel, textbooks, internet access, laptops, whatever. What more do you think the sector—the university and TAFE sector, but also underlying that, government, federal and state—can do to just try and make it more accessible and a little bit easier, particularly for students that do not have the financial support from home?

**Yesha KHANDEL:** I would say definitely covering the ongoing costs could be a start to helping that, because transportation costs, although you have a tertiary concession and it might just be \$6 a day, they can add up over time, and even living in the metropolitan areas, there would be university campuses which are outside of the city. So having to travel from, let us say, my personal experience of travelling from Tarneit to Bundoora because RMIT has courses there, it would take me 2 hours through public transport. For a round trip that would be 4 hours I am spending on public transport. Driving would be the easier option; however, there would be the cost of petrol, which adds \$20 a day. So I feel like the ongoing costs, if they could also be covered, could definitely be a start.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Covered through a scholarship process or covered—if you are talking about associated costs covered through HECS, so that is included in your HECS? I mean, we talk about the burden of debt; that is probably not the best because you end up paying interest on your associated costs.

**Yesha KHANDEL:** I feel like just subsidies and incentives. The concession we have is definitely helpful. It has made the option of not having to take a car to uni—because of the cost of petrol, that has definitely helped. But similar things like that, even just reductions and concessions, could definitely help.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes, okay.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I would like to touch on that a bit as well. I think I mentioned when I was speaking things like ensuring public transport goes all the way up to tertiary education providers. I think that is something that is so easy to do because for the one in the city, it is one extra stop.

**Dylan WIGHT:** We are building a tunnel to one of the universities, aren't we? Two universities—Monash and Deakin.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I think things like that, because if I am going into the city, it is going to be 10 bucks and it will take me about an hour to get there. But on the other hand, if I was to drive there, it would take maybe 25 to a half an hour and I would have to pay for city parking prices. I think everyone knows how annoying they can be. I think just basic things like accommodation and accessibility would go really far.

**John MULLAHY:** It will be quicker next year when the Metro Tunnel opens, so you will be there a lot quicker.

**Atharva NERLIKAR:** I graduated this year.

**John MULLAHY:** Oh, you did. Okay.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** That is actually something that I have heard from a lot of people, who are paying a lot of money for their courses, and then they go and pay their university to park in the car park. And it is like, 'Well, am I not already paying you enough for my education?'

**Dylan WIGHT:** Then they give you a ticket. They have got their own little parking officers.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Just while we are talking about money, can I raise something. Rowan, in your report—and we do not want to fine people or make students have to pay more money—you raised something really interesting when it comes to Free TAFE. You said some students commented that, because there is no penalty or cost for dropping out of free courses, students also had less skin in the game, which meant they could drop out easily without much consideration. I have got friends that teach at GOTAFE and they have this exact same issue where they spend a lot of time, and halfway through the year they start to have students dropping off. But how do we do that without financially making things even harder but managing it so that we are not getting this high rate of drop-out because we have already covered that cost? We need to have value for money; we want to make sure students are getting valuable education for that. That is a very valid point. Do you have something to add, through the Chair?

**The CHAIR:** And Harley looks like she has got something too. Rowan, is there anything you want to speak to on that?

**Rowan FARREN:** Yes, absolutely. Just broadly on that, there was a reflection from both ends and, to be a bit of a contrarian, there was that assessment of some students saying, 'It's really helpful,' and then there were

some students saying, 'With no cost we don't stick to that sunk cost fallacy of them already assuming we spent all this money.' So there is no necessary element holding them into the course. If they do want to drop out, they can. Fixing that is obviously a bigger challenge and based more on how we structure the fee system, how we structure the debt system and whether potentially there is that placeholder fee so that if the students complete their course the government comes in and subsidises it or does some sort of scheme like that, whereas if they drop out—obviously it is not an ideal situation where a student gains a debt—they have a structure where there is that delayed process of paying it off, rather than it necessarily being that they go in, they have paid nothing aside from, obviously, costs associated with transport, books and everything else and they do not necessarily have anything holding them there anymore.

**The CHAIR:** Harley?

**Harlequin GOODES:** I did have an interesting conversation with one of my interviewees, who spoke about this. It was not exactly about the dropping out, but they posed an interesting solution for being able to do those TAFE classes and opening up those availabilities. They said something kind of like HECS but smaller was something that they would be interested in—something where they can go do the course and they can pay it off later once they get their job, potentially something like that. Definitely Free TAFE is great for driving that engagement with in-need industries and stuff, but something along the lines, I think—

**The CHAIR:** Complicated, isn't it, when we think it is so great giving Free TAFE.

**Harlequin GOODES:** But that they can go into it without having to pay up-front or while they are doing their education is be really important—something where you do owe something but it is when you are in a comfortable enough situation where it is not going to cost you your standard of living.

**The CHAIR:** Shanay, then I will come to Dylan.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** Rowan just briefly mentioned this, but my idea was along the same lines. I am currently doing teaching, and my course is government-funded. If I complete the course and then do two years working in a public school—I think that is a great idea, and you could do that with TAFE as well. If you do not complete the course, there is a fee—obviously it is not outrageous—but if you do complete the course then it is funded by the government, which I think is a great way that gives you that: 'I don't want to pay this fee; it's better if I get the qualifications.' Obviously you have to be aware of extenuating circumstances. If someone has an injury or something that means they literally cannot continue partaking in the course, then they should not have to pay for it, but just to avoid the people simply dropping out because of some other reason. Or if someone, for example, wants to drop out of a course—say they have had a family member who has passed or a situation like that—you could have accessibility in terms of 'Well, we can extend the course', where you have a little break or it is only one day a week or something, just to really push them into completing and getting those qualifications.

**The CHAIR:** Incentivising. Dylan?

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I actually studied a course that became free the year after I studied it, and I think that I got a much better quality of education because of that. Because it was a theatre course, you had to work in teams. It was very communal, and there was, similarly, not having skin in the game, a lot of people not showing up to class and eventually not completing the course. I think that a really important reason why is not actually anything to do with the student not engaging enough or not being up to the task, but actually there are a lot of benefits for students which are great. For example, if you are a full-time student, you can stay on your parents' private health insurance. You can get subsidised medical care as well and food and electronics. Your university or TAFE might have in-built medical or wellbeing supports, and you get a concession Myki and things like that. There is a really crucial group of young people who are still financially struggling but are not full-time students, and they have an additional cost of living that the people they know who are studying do not have. So maybe it is about extending those supports to people so they do not enrol in a course they do not really want to do in the first place.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and I think that you have already touched on having the education at a school level to ensure what you are going into is maybe something that you are either passionate about or motivated to keep going. I am going to have to keep moving. We will go to Matilda. I am really interested in hearing yours, because we have had a lot of other evidence around going into the workplace and then what industry are doing

to entice or to support that transition from education to industry and to work, so I am really interested to hear what you found. I will come to you. Thanks, Matilda.

**Matilda RYAN:** I think I am going to find it really difficult to not repeat what everyone else has said. I am actually really excited to be the last one speaking, because I think I am just going to echo everything that everyone else has said, but the transition from education to work is individual to everyone. The point at which you are exposed to the work world is where most of the young people that I had responses from realised that there was an inefficiency in the education system when it came to building the skills and the mindset that it takes to be able to explore pathways that are meaningful to you and ones that you can have access to in that time. Most of the Victorian rural young people that I spoke to identified the importance that transport has on our careers. Being from south-west Victoria it is a 4-hour train ride just to get here, and then it is about an hour train ride to get to anything that is not Warrnambool within our circle, so city centre or country or rural. The meaningfulness of how a person spends their day is currently at the forefront of a young person's mind. If I am spending 8 hours travelling today, it is going to be a lot of time to think about how meaningful this day is. But the learning environment and the imagination that our generation gets is mostly towards working on something that is motivating our passion, and without that passion and motivation, there is a significant lack of productivity.

The readiness of young people—they did not have readiness for the induction processes and the tax file number, the referees that you have on your resume, and the difference that all of that makes for your first job. A lot of the people I spoke to referenced all of these things. If you picture a 16-year-old, when I was at school my lived experience, if we are going to reference that, is I did not really learn about the importance of having a licence and how it would impact my careers in the future. We had one guest speaker that spoke about trauma on roads, so the one lesson that I suppose I did learn in about year 10 was not to pull out of the driveway too quick, or else my life will be over. That was the most I got on licensing and road-readiness and the impact that having my licence would have on my career. Post schooling I have been in the employment industry for a while, and the ability to gain a licence without a family's support is huge. It is 120 hours for a young person in regional or rural Victoria with unsafe roads and unsafe cars—if you are able to afford a nice car, that is awesome. But yes, the public transport is nil, hence why I brought it up so late. You definitely need your licence because you cannot even consider public transport. The train into the city is amazing, but if you are in town looking for a job out on the farm, you need a licence, you need a tractor licence—that is the agricultural pathway. If you are out being raised on the farm and you need a licence to get in but your parents are not able to help you with those hours, it is incredibly difficult to get to your courses, to get to further education and even to get to extra support systems that are not on the farm or at home.

My career, as I said, has been within the education system and employment sector for young people. I spend a lot of time around career coaches, employers, young people and other stakeholders within my community. When delivered effectively, this is the network that young people need for a successful pathway. Employers struggling with the attitudes that young people have is paired with the challenge that is training new staff properly. It has been found in regional and rural workplaces, especially those of trade industries, that the attitudes of employers towards young people can be brutal. The majority of apprentices and trainees that I spoke to have the support of external training providers, who are detrimental to successful outcomes being delivered effectively. But that is also with the barrier that this training provider, who you seek support from—a supervisor or something—is probably going to be speaking on your behalf, and you will not be able to deliver it the way that you may wish.

Within south-west Victoria, there are a number of programs and supports built in to providing young people and all community members with the knowledge to gain employability. School speakers and industry visits were the most highlighted references in the survey responses, like the road trauma speech that I got, but also having industry visits. They were the career options that seemed like the most viable. You cannot be what you cannot see. We did not know these opportunities existed until they were delivered within the school.

I suppose the personal lived experience story that I have got is that it takes a huge amount of investment from those that are around you. If you are on a traineeship or an apprenticeship, everyone has spoken about the amount of factors that impact your ability to be work ready. There is a huge gap with career advice and careers counselling or career practitioners—or the new name; I have forgotten. But there was a fact that blew my mind: when I left school I reflected on the fact that in seven years of schooling, with 1200 students and one career counsellor, one meeting was all I got. They knew that I liked playing football, so they said an admin role at one

of the AFL clubs would fit me perfectly. There just seem to be a lot of gaps with the readiness between leaving school and getting into pre-employment opportunities or study opportunities. I could talk about it forever. So please, any questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will come to you in a moment, Roma, because I know Matilda is from your region. One thing we did hear from our last hearing was just about industry connecting with young people and them being ready for the work, and there seems to be very much a disconnect.

**Matilda RYAN:** Absolutely. One thing I love quoting is that most employers start a business to sell things, not to hire people. Their ability to train a new person if they are young, if they have a disability or if they are neurodiverse—they need frameworks and they need specific components that need to be addressed with respect and with care. Business owners have not got a space to learn about this.

**The CHAIR:** Not always, no. That is right. Some do better than others. Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you, first of all, Matilda. I imagine you got on the train at 5-something this morning.

**Matilda RYAN:** I got to stay the night last night.

**Roma BRITNELL:** But it does highlight the challenges we have in rural and regional Victoria. It is not just getting from Warrnambool to Melbourne, like you said; it can be from just outside of Hamilton down to Warrnambool, which is a 50-minute drive with no way of doing it with public transport, and mums and dads are often getting up at ridiculous hours and going home to work. Like you said, you were the last on the list of presenters and you would repeat a lot, but you also brought in a lot of differences. One of the things I think you highlighted really well was this work readiness and that employers are not necessarily the best people to give support. Having some sort of intermediate I think was what you were suggesting, where you could have that mentor between the workplace and the employee to help both understand what it is they both want to see. I remember when I started work I had no idea what I thought the glamorous role of a nurse would be. It ended up being mostly human excrement and all the things that I had not thought about. It was quite a different ideal to what it is. That is a terrific suggestion.

Also being able to be ready to get your licence, investing into that space so that those of us who cannot jump on a train and then a tram, who do have the need to have a licence—it is not just about getting your licence, it is about making sure you are ready to be safe on the roads and to have some sustainability in your life rather than getting into accidents or having problems with potholes, for instance. They were two really different perspectives that we have not probably heard an angle on, so thank you. My question is: how do we make sure that if we put in place something that helps the employee and the employer we get that balance right for a youthful person to not be overwhelmed in the workplace but also for that mentor to actually really understand them?

**Matilda RYAN:** Speaking from a small regional/rural town perspective, I think the ability to build community is huge—and having a support network of all of the stakeholders involved. Everyone needs to understand the importance of hiring a young person and the impact that it could have on the business. There needs to be almost like a hand-holding of these new employees for that first six months. It is critical to ensure that you are investing in them and everyone is on the same page. I think there are probably champions within the community that are leading this already, employer wise, that have an incredible reputation. Word of mouth is huge within small towns.

Then from the young person's perspective, I suppose one word I really despise to use is 'resilience'. I find it something that is probably not taught, and it is a difficult thing to learn, but a young person's ability to face a risk and expose themselves to an employer that might make them vulnerable but might teach the employer something that they have never heard before—it takes a lot of resilience for a young person to do that. Otherwise they may just be the quiet ones and try not to cause a ruffle, but squeaky wheels will get oils. I think that programs that help young people visit industry and expose them to what those conversations will be like helps build that readiness.

**Roma BRITNELL:** That is a very insightful answer and a very valuable contribution to the Inquiry today. I think we are very fortunate. There are a couple of programs that are specific to our area that have been started by industry. One in the last few years with Matt at the—

**Matilda RYAN:** Neil Porter Legacy.

**Matilda RYAN:** Matt Porter, that is right, and the Timboon agricultural program, which brings industry, so we get that connection. When the committee does come to South-West Coast—because we are planning to go to Warrnambool—I hope they will be presenting, because you are absolutely right, they are quite valuable programs that would be good for the Inquiry to be made aware of.

**Matilda RYAN:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. We have a short amount of time now. We are really going to focus on regional experiences, if we can, but at the same time I am going to open it up to anything else you think we have missed today that you might have thought that you would like us to know before we wrap this up. What I might do is just go to anyone who has got anything specific they would like to talk about from the regional experience, and then we will open it up a little bit broader than that.

**Nicole WERNER:** May I ask a question?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, you sure can.

**Nicole WERNER:** You referenced before that you had spoken to people who did not have those parental figures in their lives. I think that is important to put out here, because that was something we talked about in our last Inquiry—that that is the most defining influence on the career pathway a young person chooses to take. Can you give us those insights from young people from out-of-home care who did not have that figure, because I think that is valuable to know.

**Matilda RYAN:** From the way that I have seen it work, it is working. The out-of-home care system, foster care, has provided a support network that will have someone, somewhere with advice on how to have that conversation on career readiness and pathways. But I feel like there may be a stigma or bias within our community of how hard it is to get to Melbourne and how hard it is to find housing and to join uni pathways. It is probably a second option career-wise and for career development. I think the TAFE, the apprenticeships and even just climbing a career ladder within one workplace are pushed a lot more than it is to leave the community. That sense of community is huge within regional rural areas.

**Nicole WERNER:** Which I suppose goes to your question, Chair, about the regional lack of services or accessibility and to then be able to overcome those barriers to choose to have those further studies.

**Matilda RYAN:** Yes. With the culturally diverse topic and disability topic, I have found that in the programs that I have worked in that build around accessibility, inclusiveness and diversity, once we are able to address those that are the most disadvantaged, it suits everyone. It is not going to disaffect anyone else within the workplace if we address those that need it the most within regional communities, and half the time it is just changing people's mindsets around that casual racism.

**Nicole WERNER:** Thank you.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Can I just add on transport: I live in the Greater Shepparton district, and we have lots of small towns 20 minutes away—Rowan knows this very, very well—with literally no bus services, so that is a huge issue for kids just to get to GOTAFE or get to whatever education they need to get to across the board. One thing that has been raised is actually dropping the licence age to 17 from 18, because parents even struggle. You are clapping for that one. It is hard if you have not got a car. Some parents might have two cars in the house and might say, 'My son can have the car, and we'll make do,' because parents often start at different hours, they are struggling to get their apprentice son to the site. I have seen businesses really support that where they carpool and do everything possible. I am interested in your opinion on that. I know people worry about road safety and road accidents and all that, but it has been successful elsewhere. Do we need to consider that to help people get transported in another way, more accessibly?

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I think this is particularly important for rural and remote people, almost like a recognition of prior learning. A lot of country kids when they are 18 know how to drive. Doing the 120 hours is just more burden that their parents have to take on. I think that there has to be a balance there, because there are certainly people that are 17 that have not logged a single hour that are better drivers than people with their licences.

**Rowan FARREN:** Talking to a lot of young people back when I was in high school, we all perceived 120 hours as both too many as well as too few, because it really is dependent on the individual driver. Having the test already in-built as that checkpoint of needing to go through and do both the written test as well as actually sitting through and making sure that that is reflective of everything you need to know would probably prove to be inherently enough. Because that 120 hours can very often—as you said, some people cannot access parents or someone to take them out driving, but they might already demonstrate that they have the capacity to drive themselves, and they will need to get their drivers licence.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Even just to get them to work where they need to go.

**Rowan FARREN:** Absolutely. And then there are some people who need more than that, but it all comes down to individual capacity.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** Young drivers I actually think are some of the safest because they understand there is a probationary period where if they do something wrong, they are going to get their licence taken away. I think the bigger concern is for your older drivers, who probably need to check because—sorry to out my father, but I do not think he has gone the regular road speed in like 20 years. I know something that I mentioned in the Youth Parliament program was that we need to have a retest. That is a bit irrelevant.

**The CHAIR:** A whole new Inquiry.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** Yes, exactly.

**John MULLAHY:** We are back to the road safety behaviours.

**Shanay GAO-KUHLMANN:** I want to echo that idea that specifically for rural and regional kids—I am from Geelong, which is still considered regional, but it is a big area. It still took me an hour and a half just to get to school in the morning because my bus literally had to go around every single bit of the Bellarine before it took me to school. When you look at that in a tertiary setting as well, university parking is so expensive. So it really pushes people to take public transport, and I can say that is really good for the environment, but when it turns a 20-minute trip into an hour it can be very detrimental on students wanting to actually participate in that.

I am aware that this might be my last time to speak. I just want to add one more thing, and this is in relation to disability and inclusion and how educators might not necessarily be able to cater for students with special needs. I am not an expert on this and I kind of want to open it up, but I believe that when you segregate students with disabilities into special schools it takes them out of the traditional schooling system and then you have students and teachers who have never seen a student with disability because they are taken out of that system. I am just wondering if maybe that leads to the lack of resources and understanding of how to deal with students with disabilities, because they have been segregated from a young age.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I would say this is true and not relevant to this hearing, because the issue of special schools is a whole can of worms.

**The CHAIR:** Harley.

**Harlequin GOODES:** I have two things, just quickly, that I wanted to say earlier, about disability and supports in schools. I interviewed a few people that I know who do have varying disabilities, and those that have learning disabilities or mental health issues, significantly, said that they would have preferred a teacher's aide or someone to roam the class or the school to be able to help them if they needed it rather than getting more personal attention from the teacher. They did not want that to take away from the class time. They wanted more supports, regardless of whether they or other students in their class were diagnosed. If they need more help, they need more help. That is a specific request that multiple of them brought up. They want more supports without having to prove it, other than obviously needing it.

**The CHAIR:** Harley, do you have another one?

**Harlequin GOODES:** I definitely do, but it is—

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I want to raise one more thing that I think was not covered, at the end of going through schooling up to higher education and transitioning to work. A lot of in-demand industries are in demand for reasons that need to be addressed—I think particularly child care, teaching and nursing. I spoke to a young person who studied child care—they are about 23—started working in the industry and had burnt out already, and they are in their early 20s. They were being put in charge of rooms that they were not actually legally qualified to be because there was a lack of employment. So there actually is. It is not that we need more teaching graduates so that they can go and get jobs, it is that we have to retain the teachers that we already have. And then there will be a case study for every single in-demand industry. Bianca talked about it. I am sure that not all of these women are going to stay in the industry.

**Bianca BALDWIN:** Exactly, yes.

**The CHAIR:** That is a really good point. Thank you. Rowan.

**Rowan FARREN:** I think another thing that has been touched on—aspiration and also a lot of those barriers and accessibilities do not start necessarily at high school, deciding where to go next; they actually start much earlier. In Shepparton's education plan they are working on grade 5 aspirations and a variety of other programs under that. But addressing the challenges, such as having that commute between Melbourne and wherever—for a metropolitan student it might only be jumping on the train and an hour or two's trip just to go and check out a few universities, but for a lot of students, and I know this was true for me, it is a 12- to 13-hour day. You would get up at 6 am, you would catch the bus and then you probably would not be back at school until 6, 7 or 8 o'clock at night. While there are limitations on resources from universities, it is about making sure that the outgoing effort comes from universities and TAFEs and everywhere else as well to engage students in the regions and engage students that might not necessarily have that accessibility. A trip taking two or three staff from the University of Melbourne, RMIT or wherever it might be 2 or 3 hours north and then bringing them back for a 2- or 3-hour session is much less intensive than a school having to get together 30, 40 students and have the amount of staff that they need to manage all that—and there is the cost of the buses and everything else. From a resource standpoint it would make a lot more sense potentially for them to meet students where they are—not necessarily at every single school but by having hub days and stuff like that. I know we already have them in a number of regional centres, but expanding the access to those sorts of days is definitely something that was noted by a number of students that I talked to as well.

**The CHAIR:** Interesting. Harley.

**Harlequin GOODES:** Just something that I think affects everything we are talking about is when you are young you only really get supports if people like you. It is very much a social game and a charisma game. Right now a lot of students who might go on to VCE, VCAL or what have you are only finding out about that from teachers or people or other students that like them and think they are a cool guy and that they should do this thing; otherwise they are just completely left in the dust. It also works for apprenticeships. You only know about them if someone has thought about you because they like you. I think there is a lack of way for young people to be able to advocate for their own needs and get the help that they need in ways that do not mean they have to win a social game within 15 minutes of meeting someone, for when someone decides whether they are worth their time or not.

**The CHAIR:** Sometimes people describe it as a bit of a lotto game, depending on your networks and depending on your situation.

**Harlequin GOODES:** Yes, I think we have a lot of emphasis on it being like a personal drive thing and young people not having the drive or determination, where even things like personal drive, determination, self-worth come from parents or adults around you that like you when you are a kid.

**Dylan McBURNEY:** I guess it is about the students too that are put in the 'too hard' box or that act out, and so they do not have those relationships.

**Harlequin GOODES:** It very much a charisma game and less of a thing where we support young people regardless. A kid might be snarky, but they can still be good at stuff, you know.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Harlequin GOODES:** I think it is just one of those themes that underlies the whole thing.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That is often their personality too. Different personalities—some people will speak up, they are quite confident, and some might be quite introverted and just stand back. And how do you sort of—

**Harlequin GOODES:** But we will never know if they do have opinions if we do not talk to them.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** In my education sector, I saw that a lot, and I would make sure that those people that were not speaking up because of their personality, or they were scared of saying the wrong thing. It is very interesting when you have a whole group of people with all different personalities, trying to manage them.

**The CHAIR:** I am mindful of time, and I wanted to have the time to thank you all for all your work. You have done an incredible amount of work on your submissions, your interviews and coming here today. This is very unique for committees and inquiries, to have youth associates go out and do this work and then come back to us. You have been part of history-making, really, and it is incredible work that you have done. We are very proud of all of you and all your submissions and your work. If you can just stay where you are just for one moment, we will have some time to gather as well and have a bit more discussion. But I just need to wrap this up by saying thank you to everyone for participating.

**Committee adjourned.**