

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Friday 28 November 2025

MEMBERS

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John Mullahy

Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Nicole Werner

Roma Britnell

Dylan Wight

Anthony Cianflone

WITNESSES

Imogen, Student (VCE VM), The Gordon, and

Hiwan, Student (VCE VM), Gilson College, Victorian Student Representative Council.

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

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

We are going to just do a bit of a Q and A—some questions—and if you can help us answer some of those, that would be great. If you both want to answer the question, you can, or if it is just relevant to you, then maybe just one of you may like to answer. We will try and get through as many questions as we can. I am Alison, the Chair.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Member for Pascoe Vale, Anthony Cianfalone.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Anthony. John, I am going to start with you.

John MULLAHY: Excellent. A lot of the evidence that was in the submission was regarding the lack of clear information around vocational pathways not being given it at the right time, all that sort of thing. What career education activities have you participated in in school, how effective were these activities and what other career education would you like?

HIWAN: I am a VCE VM student, so in my school we go on a lot of excursions. The only thing that I kind of have an issue with about the excursions is they are always based around the same industries, so we are always going on excursions that are about trade, about business. We did go on some nursing excursions, but I would love to see more industries participating so that the vocational major is seen on a bigger scale and not just put to only a couple industries and that is where you should go.

John MULLAHY: Any ideas of what industries you would have been interested to have a look at?

HIWAN: I joined the vocational major because I want to partake in IT, so I would have loved to go on some excursions specifically in that industry so I could learn more for myself. There are other industries, like agriculture and community services, that I know other students would love to go into as well.

The CHAIR: Great. Imogen.

IMOGEN: I think that I have to agree to an extent. I think a lot of the vocational major is based around trade still, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. A lot of vocational major students want to be tradies; that is factual. But personally I do not want to get into trades, and I am a vocational major student. I think it would be important to have more of a range. But in another aspect, in years 9 and 10 particularly, a lot of the excursions we went on were to universities. I do want to go to university, but I think it was all based on 'Let's go to university and go do this' and it was all based around 'Do VCE' essentially. That was my experience. It was like, 'These are the things that are going to prepare you for VCE.' I sort of felt left out a bit because I did not want to do VCE, and a lot of those excursions and programs that we did that were related to careers education were just centred around, 'Here's what to do to get into university and get the highest ATAR.'

HIWAN: I just have to agree. I feel like all conversation leading up to year 10 is straight VCE. I do not really remember ever really hearing about the vocational major, and any time it was brought up, it was not in a particularly positive light or in a way that would steer people in that direction. It was kind of, 'If you're not that great at math and English or if you want to do a trade, then the vocational major is for you,' rather than making it seem like these are two great pathways and depending on what you want to do maybe this pathway is for you.

John MULLAHY: So you wanted to do the vocational major but obviously not be a tradie. What attracted you to wanting to do vocational major? What areas were you interested in?

IMOGEN: I think what attracted me the most was that I have always struggled with exams, and I have struggled with that sort of structure. I think, particularly since the pandemic, I have struggled with the VCE-level structure. I did used to want to do VCE, but the pandemic did impact that a little bit. I think, particularly when I started getting into years 9 and 10 and they kept talking about VCE and doing exams, my mind just went 'ugh'. I do not want to do exams; I feel like that is just too much pressure. I researched vocational major myself. What I saw was that it was all about the actual real world and workplace skills, and those were skills that I want. I want to get into youth work, and while I am taking an untraditional pathway for youth work, I think that I am learning skills that will help me in that career as well, based on what I have seen and what I have been doing so far. I think that it was definitely a mix of different things, but it was more because they are real-world skills and I do not have to worry about the stress of exams and doing subjects that I am not really interested in, because not a lot of any of the subjects are youth work related, except psychology, essentially. That was my main reason.

The CHAIR: Do you mind if I jump in there? You talked about excursions that you did and that you had to research the VM, vocational major. What other career advice are you getting at school then, at a school level?

HIWAN: All the career advice I have really heard has been kind of always just on the same thing—it is not really feeling like advice. I feel like they are giving us the bare minimum education and they are kind of telling us to go with it and see where you get to. I think a lot of students nowadays do not know what they want to do in the future, because they are not thinking about their career. They are thinking about their exams. They are thinking about the marks they are getting when really it should be based around their interests and where it can lead them. Honestly, I was kind of the same: I had to do a lot of my own research, which led me to the vocational major. Me figuring out what I wanted to do—that was all in my own time. I do not think there was anything particularly in school that led me down that way. It was always just kind of, you know, look at courses to see what prerequisites you need. It has always just been around your exams and the best grades you can get and the best uni you can get in rather than what career you want.

The CHAIR: We have seen an uplift in students doing the VCE VM, and it seems to be that there is an appetite to have a different pathway to VCE, and it is better. It is putting it on a level playing field with VCE so VCE or VM, it does not matter which pathway you take. Do you feel that that has changed or have you seen a difference in that then? Choosing different pathways does not have—there is a different perception, less stigma?

HIWAN: I think it has improved, but if I am being honest, very slightly; I think there is still a very, very long road ahead. I think there are still a lot of stigma and stereotypes surrounding the vocational major. I think it is still seen as the pathway that is lesser than VCE: VCE is the smart way, and then you have VM. That is the connotation that honestly I kind of hate; I do not understand why a pathway is seen differently to another pathway when it really should be about a student and what is best for that student. I think, yes, more students have taken it up, but I think there are also some schools where they have not chosen to take it but their grades have fallen so they have been pushed in there. They are not choosing to do it, they have been forced to do it, and I think there is still so much stigma around it not being seen the same and the pathways not being put on a level playing field. I think it is still going to take a lot of work for that to happen. I think particularly in year 7s and 8s and early years bringing it up more so that in every careers lesson you are not just hearing about exams in VCE, you are being told that there is another pathway. You are hearing that there is a vocational major. You are being told by your schools that you can do what you want as long as it is what is best for you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might go to Anthony, if you have got a question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes, thank you, Chair. I just want to start off by basically saying thank you for appearing, and you guys are tremendous advocates for your generation. I mean, you are both in year 11, let us just keep that in mind, and I know from my perspective the last thing I would have imagined doing is appearing before a parliamentary inquiry when I was in year 11. You guys are presenting very well, you should be very proud, and you are doing a great job on behalf of the Victorian Student Representative Council, so thank you for appearing.

In many ways this is an Inquiry that is about you guys and your very generation. Hiwan, you said something very interesting to the Chair's question just earlier around students being more preoccupied and thinking about their exams and what marks they are getting as opposed to their career. My question is about that part of it, the

career side. Putting the exams to one side, what is, in your opinion, the mood and the sentiment amongst your peers and your friendship groups and your circles and networks in the youth community around their future career prospects? Just generally, what is their mood? What is their sentiment? Is it positive? Are they excited about what is next after high school? Are they a bit uncertain, a bit concerned? And the second part of that is building off the other question as well: what is the influence of parents in directing your course as a future career as well?

HIWAN: I think for the first part, for a lot of students I have seen, it is fear—a lot of people are scared for their future because they have no clue what they want to do. They are so preoccupied with ATARs and exams they are not actually thinking about, ‘What do I like?’ They have lost this big part of creativity and personal interest. So a lot of the students I have seen in my grade, in year 11, they are scared for year 12. They do not want to do their last exams, because they do not know what to do after. They are lost in school, because once they sit their last exams they do not know where to turn to anymore.

The second part is obviously I think every home is different, and every set of parents are different with their influence. I think a lot of parents are still in the mindset that they want their kids to be the best, and right now, in their eyes, VCE is the best. So for them it is about their kid getting the highest ATAR. Whether it is relevant to their course or their future, I think a lot of parents, because they have the idea that VCE is the best, that is what they want their kids to do. I think they have the right intentions in mind, but because of what parents have seen online and what they have been told, they are going off their assumption that VCE is the best way to go and that is what they want their kid to do. So I also think a big reason why students are held back from the vocational major is their parents, because their parents know a lot of the stereotypes, they think the stereotypes are true, and they are passing them on to their children as well.

The CHAIR: Imogen, do you have anything on that?

IMOGEN: Yes. I would say that definitely parental pressure is a big thing for a lot of students that I know. I think another thing is, as you were mentioning before, Hiwan, there is school pressure as well. I had a friend at my old school who did not necessarily want to do VCE, but when he spoke to the career pathways coordinator about it, she basically said to him, ‘Oh, well, you are really smart, so I wouldn’t waste your potential, do VCE.’ I also heard after I left that school that the days where they would hold year 11 and 12 assemblies were on the days that VM students were on work placement, so the VM students were being left out of assemblies and students were being forced to do VCE when they did not want to because they were told it was the better option for them. They were left with not-so-great ATARs and subjects they did not really want to do, because they did not want to do that in the first place. I just think it is more that school pressure that a lot of mainstream public schools have of ‘We want to have the best reputation and the best way to have the best reputation is by all of our students getting high ATARs.’ It is just unfair, and it has just made VM students feel really left out and not even part of the school community like VCE students are.

HIWAN: Yes, and I also think there is an added pressure from peers as well. I think on top of school pressure, it is like when you are surrounded by your peers of same-age people, if everybody around you is judging you for this pathway, you are not going to want to take that pathway. We know that teenagers are impressionable—we want our friends to like us. I know that when I joined VM I faced my own criticism and backlash for joining, because a lot of people said, ‘Why are you doing that?’ They thought I was joking. The fact is that we have a legitimate pathway that is seen so negatively that some students are not picking it purely because of pressure from other people.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Thanks, Anthony, for the question. Can I ask about work placements or work experience or having an experience in an industry that you are passionate about? Could that be better? Some of the other panels that we have chatted to said that industry needs to do better at trying to connect and talk to the next workforce coming. So maybe if you could tell us your thoughts around that work experience.

IMOGEN: I did not do any in year 10, but earlier this year I actually did a work placement with a politician.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Who was it?

The CHAIR: It was not me, no.

IMOGEN: It was not you. That was very interesting to me, but it was not necessarily my first choice. My first choice would have been youth work, but it is incredibly difficult to get youth work placements when you are in high school, because even though I am 18, they still are like, 'Oh well, you are in high school.' Industry is kind of like, 'We do not want to take you,' which I get to a certain extent. Obviously there are a lot of child safety legislation and concerns that have to be considered when it comes to youth work, and I get that. But I think that I had no other option but to do work placement with a politician, because it was the only other thing that I was interested in that was relevant to what I wanted to do. It was either that or I worked in a community centre, which is just not what I am interested in. Although I did a community services VET, that is only because I could not do a youth work VET. I think that there need to be more options for people who are not tradies and who are not getting into early childhood education. That is not to say I did not enjoy it—I loved my work placement—but I think that there just needs to be more options for students who are getting into more in-demand industries and pathways. I think that youth work is such an in-demand industry, but how are students going to know that they want to do that if they do not have the ability to experience it firsthand?

The CHAIR: And to experience it earlier on, because then you can work out whether you like it or not, right.

HIWAN: I did work experience in year 10 for one week. I also did one where it was not my first pick. I spent weeks calling different companies, and every company just told me, 'Well, we don't do work experience. We don't do work experience.' And it was the same answer over and over and over again. I know a lot of my peers had the same issue just like me where they were left in the same spot, where they were just going to Chemist Warehouse or Woolworths and doing their work placement there, when work experience is supposed to be where you want to work in the future, but how are students supposed to do that if no company wants to take them? I understand it is a lot of extra work for that company to have a student on board for five days, but then it kind of gets rid of the whole point. If we are going to have work experience, then it is kind of important that we have companies who are willing to take on students. Or there are companies who would say, 'Sorry, we already have a student,' so their max is one, and then that company is going, 'You have to find something else.' I think work experience is something that is great and I think it can really help students, but in its current state, with the lack of industries, I do not think it is really helping anyone.

The CHAIR: Thank you, John.

John MULLAHY: I am just interested to know—is there any education around what in-demand industries there are? You said you know that youth work is needed, but was that told to you, or is this more your interest that led you to wanting to do that? Is there any sort of education around what current in-demand industries we need here in Victoria, and have you been shown what the pathways are for that?

IMOGEN: I mean, I think now being in a very alternative school environment where teachers are a lot more, I feel, educated about that sort of thing, and they care about the individual student a lot more than I had at mainstream school, definitely if I asked, I would be told what the in-demand industries are. I think a lot of VM students want to get into in-demand industries. It is very common. A lot of the students in my cohort are either wanting to get into trades or they are wanting to do early childhood education, and I know that those are in demand. But I do not think I was ever explicitly told what the in-demand industries were. I just kind of researched it, and a lot of them I could kind of gather myself just based on what I had seen. I do not think, especially at mainstream school, I was ever explicitly told, 'These are the in-demand industries.' It was more like, 'Here are the things that you want to do, so here's what you should be doing.' And it was less sort of like, 'Here are the things that we actually need workers for.' That comes more when you actually get into VM. When you are in VCE, from what I have heard, it is less about that. It is more about, 'Get the good ATAR and get good exams'. They only seem to care about careers when you are doing the 'career pathway'.

The CHAIR: Yes.

HIWAN: Yes, I have to agree. I think anyone, if I was to ask them, the only jobs they know are purely based on assumption rather than fact. They are just assuming. Obviously we do know things like trades are in demand, but any other jobs outside of that, it is just assuming that this is in demand or they are not even bothering to check. When I was doing careers in year 10 it was never really talked about. It kind of just felt like we were doing bookwork. It was not really anything that I felt from year 10 I actually took any information from to help build my future or my future career. Everything I have done personally, I think like Imogen, has been

personal research. It is what I have personally gone out and looked for and sought. But even now, if you were to ask me the top 10 most in-demand jobs, I do not think I could tell you. I could guess maybe four, but it is again guessing rather than knowing.

It feels like if we have students leaving high school and they are supposed to be prepared for the real world, they should know what is in demand, so then when they are picking uni subjects, their course, a lot of students like stability. They want to pick a job that they know they will be able to have a degree in that will work for it, and students are not being told that right now. Joining VM, though as well, I think I have a lot of teachers who are a lot more helpful and able to give more time, and if I was to seek help, I think the same—I would be able to get that information. But I think it should be standard that the information is given to students, rather than us having to ask something that seems like it should be foundational information that everyone knows.

John MULLAHY: So having more information about in-demand industries earlier would influence what careers you would pick or what careers your friends and cohort would pick?

IMOGEN: Yes.

HIWAN: Yes. I think especially in year 10, before you are picking your pathways, and especially for VCE students that are doing subject selection, I think it would help sway them a lot. Also I know students at my school are always told, 'Pick the subjects you love rather than the ATAR,' but obviously students are going to pick for their ATAR. Well, most will because that is their biggest priority, but if they are told the in-demand jobs and they can plan what course they are going to do and figure out what they need for it, then we can see students maybe picking what they want to do more often.

John MULLAHY: Do you think year 9 would, probably? Because some people take on vocational major stuff in year 10, so you would probably want to have that discussion a little bit earlier. Do you think that is probably better timing?

HIWAN: Yes.

IMOGEN: Again, I think that I do definitely know now a lot more in-demand industries than I did a couple years ago because my teacher, specifically for work-related skills, is very big on teaching us about that. If we ask him questions, he will answer any of them. But I think that it would have been important to know a lot earlier. I was very grateful I guess that I did my own research, right, so I already knew these things. But I think that a lot of students do not know them, and they need to know them, you would think.

The CHAIR: They have barriers to accessing that information.

IMOGEN: Yes, exactly.

The CHAIR: Anthony, I will head to you next. I think we have got time for one more.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. Thanks, Chair. We have heard a lot about the influence of employers and people in the business and non-government sector around barriers to work experience and work placements, the influence of teachers, again of parents and others. But my question is around going to the understanding of student voice in this whole process and in senior secondary pathways and skills pathways. Your submission actually talks about how students are the experts in their own educational experience and must be involved in actually shaping their own vocational pathways for them and their peers. It goes on to say, in light of this the Victorian Student Representative Council recommends the Victorian government collaborate with student-led organisations to inform education policy and establish mechanisms such as steering committees and communities of practice, which should include diverse student voices. So my question is more about how you think that could work. How could we better embed your voice and the voice of many other students to influence how the student pathway should unfold through school and into in-demand industries?

HIWAN: I think it is very important to remember that while I and Imogen are here, we are only two students out of how many in Victoria. We can only speak so much to our experiences and what we have seen in our peers. Even if you were to ask us what we need to do, this is only based on what we think. I think it is so important to gather a committee of students from across Victoria. I think education has become a thing of students working around the education system rather than the education system working for them, which to me

does not really make any sense. We join it because it is meant to prepare us for life, yet students are doing all their decisions based on the way the system is set up. I think it would be really important and beneficial for both the government and for young people and parents to have a committee of young people working with the government, working with people from the Department of Education, to give their valuable opinion and to say what needs to change, to figure out solutions and collaborate together. I think that is the best thing to do moving forward to ensure that the education system is in the right place to benefit students as much as possible.

IMOGEN: Yes, and to build off that I would say that VicSRC is already doing a lot of work in that space, and I think, like it was stated in the submission, rely on them for that support. VicSRC want to help, and they want to make sure that student voices are represented and heard, and I think that that is a really important connection to have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Anthony. I think it was an excellent question. It is one I was going to ask as well. I think it is your future, so it should be centred to your voice and what you would like to see. I think you two would be great heading up something to work with the Department of Education.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I will second that.

The CHAIR: Yes, Anthony will second that. Thank you so much for your time today. I am sorry we have run out of time to go any further, but you have both presented amazingly, and it has just been a really great conversation to give us some things to think about. When we present some recommendations to government, your voice and what you have said today will be really important to that, so thank you very much for your time.

HIWAN: Thank you.

IMOGEN: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.