

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne – Friday 20 March 2026

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Deng Mading Deng, Board Member, Shepparton Ethnic Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries.

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 as well.

Thank you so much, Deng, for coming along and answering some questions for us today. Kim, who I know you know, was really keen to have you, and we can ask some questions. So Kim, I am going to head to you first maybe to ask the first question.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, Alison. Good morning, Deng, and thank you so much for joining us today and also obviously for the great work that you do, which I am very, very aware of. I have just let the other committee members know that the Ethnic Council of Shepparton does incredible work across the whole region and is very well known to be connected to our multicultural and very diverse communities. So yes, it is a really important opportunity for you to come into the hearing and actually put in a submission, which we are grateful for. Deng, maybe you can just explain to the committee what the main barriers are for students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and their backgrounds. And how can we help them access education and training pathways? How can these barriers be addressed?

Deng MADING DENG: Thank you very much for having me [inaudible]

The CHAIR: Deng, we are just having a little bit of trouble with the connection.

Deng MADING DENG: That is better? Okay.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you. That is a lot better.

Deng MADING DENG: All right. Thank you. So what was the question again? I think I should maybe go back to the question again.

Kim O'KEEFFE: That is okay. Thank you. What are the main barriers to students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities accessing education and training pathways, and how can these barriers be addressed?

Deng MADING DENG: The barriers mostly can be linked to advice on the career path to take. When people who are from multicultural backgrounds, especially the youth, make choices of what kind of industries to be involved in, such choices are heavily influenced by parents. I think the model we have here for career advice does not involve parents in the process. If we can include that – have a family-inclusive career guidance model that can allow parents to engage in the pathway discussion where appropriate – that will actually enhance the willingness or the chances of these students to get into the right industries.

Kim O'KEEFFE: So you are saying that a lot of the families are not understanding those opportunities and not given enough information that could actually enhance their children's chances to then have better educational opportunities?

Deng MADING DENG: Exactly. It is also because they think they can guide their child in terms of what direction to take into the future. They also might influence them towards a different pathway which may not be relevant to those students. In my line of work, I work as a job coach with Workforce Australia, and I work on planning pathways towards employment goals. Employment goals now involve identifying the industry and then identifying what kinds of qualifications are required in that industry, and then we develop what pathways would be relevant for these participants to get into those industries. My experience with young people – the latest one was last week, when we developed a plan with a participant who was barely 20. He had not completed high school – he dropped out at year 11 – did not know what to do and thought maybe he should work in community services: 'I would like to work as a disability support worker.' We developed a plan. The first thing was to do some training in disability, but before I had enrolled him into the college where he would get that qualification, he called back a few days afterwards and said that he had had a discussion with his mum,

and his mum had disagreed with that decision. That is the barrier. This particular participant, who had just dropped out of high school and would be facing such challenges, now would be more confused. But if the parent had been involved in terms of career advice, maybe they would have come up with an appropriate direction. I referred that participant back to TAFE because TAFE offer career advice. I do not know whether TAFE will include the parent. That is in itself a very big challenge, and it is happening to many of them.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is interesting. Thanks, Kim. I think we have heard a lot about parents influencing their younger children about their career paths, so that is interesting to hear that from you as well. Dylan, I might head to you for another question.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Alison. Thank you so much, Deng, for appearing today. Mine was about communicating labour market information, as somebody that also represents a really diverse community. How can the Victorian government better communicate up-to-date labour market information to culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Deng MADING DENG: I think the best thing to do maybe is to support partnerships between TAFE, employers and employment services agencies, as well as community organisations, to create practical pathways. Career advisers are not engaging with community-based organisations. In that way, I think the government should encourage partnerships between all those organisations.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. John, we will just head to you next.

John MULLAHY: Earlier you discussed how you actually assist students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to access education and training pathways. What I would like to know is: what additional government support does your organisation require to provide this assistance? What can we do as a government?

Deng MADING DENG: I think funding is critical. The employment services agencies have some employment funding, but it is not tailored to a specific cohort. Maybe if that funding could be tailored to that specific cohort to run activities that give information on career pathways and actually having some intentional campaigns in terms of getting into the community directly and letting them know that this is what we want to do. I think it comes back to funding.

John MULLAHY: Thank you. Thanks, Deng.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Deng, I am going to ask a question about foundational skills and things that your community may need to get young people job-ready. Are there things that you do in your community to get young people job-ready?

Deng MADING DENG: The only things we do are the study hubs – this is what the community has – and also community organisations, such as the ethnic council, will provide settlement services, where they deal with providing solutions for general problems. It could be in education, it could be in employment, it could be in many things. But there is also a need for well-informed training. There are some industries like, especially in Shepparton, the agricultural industry, which most newly arrived members of the community would engage with. The only information people have about agriculture is about harvesting. They do not consider the entire process that leads to harvesting. Let us say, for example, it is fruit picking: people know only about fruit picking and not what other components orchards have, like planting the trees. So some kind of education is lacking, and maybe there should be well-informed education on such issues.

The CHAIR: Are industries around you saying that as well, that they need skilled workers and they want people to be trained?

Deng MADING DENG: That is right. Sometimes they fall short of workers, because where workers do not understand most of what the industry requires, they do not engage long term, so they just do it as survival work and do it only for one season and that is it; next season they are nowhere to be found. And the farmers as well are struggling with how to retain these workers.

The CHAIR: Do industries also want workers that are trained at TAFE?

Deng MADING DENG: Yes, because TAFE provides skills which are required for most of the industries available. I think apprenticeships are not provided as they are demanded in the community. There are cases where some young people do not get into some of the industries. Plumbing is hard to get into. Some other skill-based apprenticeships are not even accessible. So there should be some flexibility in terms of engaging this specific cohort.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kim, we do have time for one more, if you want to come back. I know you were struggling with the internet as well.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Sorry, I did miss a bit of that, because I did have trouble. I suppose my question is: what is probably one of the main things that we should be focusing on? We know that people have challenges when it comes to multicultural backgrounds, and you have talked about families, but I suppose from an education perspective – and you have talked about how schools could perhaps be doing more – what is one of the major things that you think is a roadblock? I know we have talked families, but are there other things? Whether it be workplace or whether it be schools, is there a specific thing that you think is missing? I know that is a big question, and I might have missed some of that, but is there something that could be making such a significant difference in this pathway to education?

Deng MADING DENG: Maybe in terms of employment. Some employers fear that employing someone with low English language skills will be a liability in terms of maybe this employee will not understand the safety rules and things like that and they might end up getting some workplace injury that could cause maybe the employer – or something of the sort. But there are some employers who have come up with a model of pairing two workers from the same community or who speak the same language. One would be literate in English and the other one would maybe have low English language skills. Pairing them together at the workplace helps a lot – it will help this employee who does not speak English – so maybe if more employers adopted that kind of a strategy, that would help a lot.

For the longest time employers have always not been employing workers from multicultural backgrounds in high numbers or as they should because of language – the language has been used. There are instances where English language education, which is the adult migrant English program, will work for some but not with others, especially those who arrive when they are above the age of 45 and never went to school, not even in their own language. These individuals find it very hard to study first, acquire English language skills and then get employment – it is a long process for them – so maybe adopting such a strategy of pairing workers would be very helpful.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for that, Deng. Thank you for participating today. I really appreciate it.

Deng MADING DENG: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will say thank you as well. Sorry, Deng, we have run out of time. We could have had a chat for longer today. Thank you for answering our questions so we can understand your community's challenges – and in Shepparton as well some of the challenges. Thank you very much for your time.

Witness withdrew.