

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

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Linda Nieuwenhuizen, Chief Executive Officer,

Martina Johnson, Director, and

Karen Linford, Representative, Committee for Greater Shepparton.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways into 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.

Thank you, Martina, Karen and Linda, for coming along and answering some questions today and also for your submission, which was quite interesting and gave us a really great regional perspective. Because you are from Kim's patch, I am going to give it to Kim to ask the first questions of you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, and thank you so much for joining us. We are really grateful that we get to have this opportunity to share some of the challenges, particularly in our region, when it comes to workforce and pathways for people to get the right pathway and education that they need. I will just say to the committee that Gouge Linen and Goulburn Valley Health are two our biggest employers, so it is really important opportunity for us to get their feedback as well.

I might start with Martina. We have been chatting very recently about Gouge and the very multicultural, diverse workforce that you do have. What are the main challenges that regional employers face recruiting and retaining young workers, and how can these challenges be addressed?

Martina JOHNSON: Thank you, Kim, for the opportunity. With some of the biggest challenges we do face today in retaining younger workers, transport is definitely one of them, and transport is definitely a break which is not just a theoretical issue but an issue that we as businesses face day in and day out. Some of the things which the transport contributes to and some of the genuine challenges are we do not have transport that marries our shift timings. Some of the manufacturing businesses in Shepparton, and even the food businesses, the agribusinesses and the transport businesses, we always start early in the morning and finish late at night. We operate on different shifts across the afternoon, the early morning shifts and the night shifts.

We are based in industrial estates or regional hubs that are not very well connected and serviced by public transport. To add to that, for the townships of Mooroopna, Kialla, Tatura and other surrounding townships, there is very limited frequency. The frequency that is available is largely aligned to school or standard business hours, which are very different to a normal manufacturing cohort of businesses – often unavailable for early starts, late finishes or any weekend work. Particularly for those who do not have a car, getting to work is the hardest part of actually having a job, and that means as an employer that is our hardest part – to retain and keep talent within the region and within businesses.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for that. It has been raised with the committee as well. It is an important one to raise. Regional Victoria is very different to our metropolitan cohorts, so I think that understanding is really important. Thank you for that, Martina.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kim. Dylan, I will go to you for a question.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Alison, and thanks, Martina and Karen, for appearing today. My question is: do course offerings at local universities and TAFEs meet local workforce needs or demands, and if not, how can that be improved?

Linda NIEUWENHUIZEN: I might lead with that one generally, and then I think both Martina and Karen can add further. We certainly pulled that out in our submission. There is a table towards the back that very clearly shows the undergraduate offerings across regional Victoria and southern New South Wales, and there are considerable blanks for this part of the world. We have three courses offered currently in our region. We have teaching, nursing and social work. We are a major manufacturing hub. We are the home of GV Health, which is the largest health services provider and hospital, serving a much larger catchment that extends right up into southern New South Wales. We do not have allied health or engineering available in our region. We do not even have engineering in Shepparton or Wodonga, if you can think of those two footprints as significant manufacturing. We would like to highlight that that does not mean we want to replicate what other regions

already have. We think everyone has moved forward in the delivery of training pathways. We already have strong collaboration between our TAFEs and existing universities, and we think we are on the cusp of delivering on more innovative, more up-to-date, more flexible and more agile training pathways with the right support to embed them in our local region. Now I am going to hand over to Karen, because I think she can talk chapter and verse about what these challenges represent to something like a hospital in a local region.

Karen LINFORD: Thanks to the committee, and thanks, Lindy. If we just speak a little bit further about allied health, so that is occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dietitians, sonographers and radiographers, as Lindy said, none of those qualifications can be gained in our region, and young people – or anybody in their career wishing to undertake those degrees – need to relocate out of our region. There are a lot of costs incurred of course, so middle-income families that I speak to in our region are really struggling. They have got children finishing school and wishing to undertake those sorts of qualifications and are finding that the costs associated with moving away – the living expenses, petrol obviously at the moment as well – are all really meaning that their family budgets are really under pressure and that young people in our region are actually missing out on pursuing their chosen profession because of the cost of living. I am really speaking to middle-income families when I make that point. That is a real problem for us.

The other associated thing is that people have to move away to become an allied health professional, and we hope that they will come back to our region once they are qualified. The key pipeline for health services like GV Health for our entry-level allied health roles is that people do student placements with us. For student placements, again we have people out of region wanting to come to GV Health to do student placements, but the barrier to that is if we cannot provide free accommodation to them, then they do not undertake student placements and then GV Health loses the opportunity to have them join our workforce as new graduates. So there are quite a few different points in that process that I have just referred to that are really salient points for us that I know as a large employer we are considering. Our vacancy rate of allied health at the moment is 11 per cent, which is 26 FTE, to give you a sense of what it looks like on the ground.

Dylan WIGHT: Right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask on top of that, Karen, though, with the federal government scheme where they do the paid placement, is it just nursing? Are you seeing an uptick because of that type of incentive for your region?

Karen LINFORD: Well, it has been really interesting, the changes in nursing of recent years, and what has happened at a federal level and at a state level has made a big difference. We have absolutely seen our nursing workforce vacancies shrink substantially. Many, many more people have joined to study nursing as undergraduates on the back of the incentives that have happened. We have seen a direct correlation with that investment, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Yes, and that is great to know, because I think that is a topic that comes up about paid placements for a whole range of industries, not just in nursing. But yes, thank you, that is great to know.

Karen LINFORD: The average age of a person undertaking nursing now is sort of more into their 30s. Often I think we think of people being 18 and not having that many expenses. But the other thing that happens is that people are mid-career or people raise their family and then they are like, 'Well, now it's my turn and I would like to pursue certain careers.' We have got all these needs and vacancies around, and thinking in mind of who these people are and that they have got living expenses that they have committed to and that they must be able to cover while they are studying. And so I think some of the things you just pointed out have made a huge difference to those people.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is a good point. I think we do get stuck in this 18 leaving school. But you are right. We have a different cohort now too. Thank you. John, I might head to you for a question.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair and thanks, Karen, Martina and Linda, for appearing before us. I was just wanting to get a bit more insight into how industry communicates areas of skills shortages and workforce demand to students and education providers. How can industry be better supported to communicate these things?

Linda NIEUWENHUIZEN: So again, the other two will have more to add, but at a general level, as I spoke to earlier, there is very strong collaboration within the city. So we have multiple touch points with students beginning at primary school. We have our aspirations day in grade 5. We have touch points with work experience placements, and then there is a real commitment from industry to front up and do incursions as well as hosting excursions for school groups across the school year. All of those programs have been driven by – and I speak on behalf of – my membership, so that is about 120 businesses across Greater Shepparton. Everyone is very aware that we cannot keep poaching each other's workforces. We need to grow the scale and skills level within the overall pool. And so there is a united effort to firstly build aspiration and appetite to move into some of the careers that people may have never been aware of, but equally, to do that at scale in a collective effort. Now I might hand to both Martina and Karen to fill in some examples of that.

Martina JOHNSON: Thank you, Lindy. I think just at the back of what Lindy said, she has a beautiful foundation. There are a lot of good things that already happen on the ground in Shepparton in terms of the collaboration between TAFEs and industries. There is definitely room for improvement, and more specifically tailored to the private sector: the manufacturing, the food industries. I think what would really help to bridge the skills demand is TAFEs and industry actually co-designing trainings which actually help employers; flexible delivery that works around the shift-based model for the manufacturing industries, the private sector industries, not just sticking to the classroom hours, which make it very hard even for employers to facilitate; short, stackable credentials in areas of leadership, safety, maintenance fundamentals and even logistics, because the nature of the roles are changing in the industry regionally; educating students on modern manufacturing processes, not just the outdated perceptions of factory work, more into robotics and other industry newer processes. Also just the workplace exposure where if TAFEs can work with industry, up the ante in terms of regular site visits, industry guest speakers and real case studies from local employers, I think those are pathways we can partner with more and kind of tailor make and build in-grown talent in the region. I will hand over to Karen now.

Karen LINFORD: Thank you. In addition, a real example of what we have been advocating for at GV Health is a shared space for our local TAFE, local universities and GV Health. As you can imagine, we have many senior clinicians across many disciplines at GV Health who are really ready, willing and able to provide on-the-ground experience for students and different learning opportunities and pathways. We would see it as a real opportunity for our workforce, our senior clinicians, to step into lecturing and other opportunities too where there are shared roles across university, TAFE and GV Health and a shared learning space to work collaboratively together.

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Do you have anything further? Good. Thank you. I think we are hearing from other witnesses around better links between industry and TAFE providers or training providers that could help with that co-design, so it was really great to hear that too. I have just got one more question around school-based apprenticeships or apprenticeships out of the TAFE sector. Are you seeing students taking those up? We have heard from other witnesses that the new VCE VM is giving students a wider range of things to choose from, but do you have any insights into what schools are doing in helping that transition or in terms of school-based apprenticeships?

Linda NIEUWENHUIZEN: Yes. A lot of the industries we see in our part of the world have fantastic pathways that begin at entry level and grow with the person as they move through their career. When we talk about food manufacturing, there is a genuine opportunity for people to start at school level, the earlier program where they might pick up a unit as part of – I am still going to call it VCE, but I am probably saying that wrong. It is one unit that is far more practical and almost stacks towards an apprenticeship if they choose that path, but then they are not giving up on if they did want to go down the more traditional ATAR requirement. Those kinds of combinations are really what give the greatest scope for people contemplating what they want to do, both in their final years of secondary and as they head into tertiary.

I would also wrap around that the appetite from industry for cadetships and traineeships. I am very intrigued by the engineering model being delivered by CSU out of Bathurst, which has only two years on campus and the balance is straight out into industry. I think it is very optimistic to expect our universities – and our TAFEs, to an extent – to have the training infrastructure that is evolving so rapidly within industry, so the sooner we can blur the lines between earning and learning and being in the workplace and being in education, the quicker we

are actually transferring knowledge and building skills. Most importantly, a common, recurring concern from industry is work readiness and the ability to work within a workplace. We talk about the challenges of placements, but if you are doing a blended delivery, you do not even need a placement, because you are already working. We do not need to solve a problem if we can eliminate the problem to start with.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Karen or Martina, do you have anything further around school apprenticeships or job readiness?

Karen LINFORD: With job readiness, broadly speaking we are noticing a shift. With new graduate nurses, for example, we are noticing that year on year overall they are needing more hands-on support to adapt from being an undergraduate student into a workplace, so we are needing to provide more educator support and wraparounds more broadly for their wellbeing too than we have had in previous years. That is just an interesting cultural shift we have noticed.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am so sorry we have run out of time because we could have kept asking you a whole lot more questions, but I will try and keep everyone to the timelines. Thank you so much for your submission. If there is anything that has come up today that sparked something further you would like to add, you are more than welcome to write again to the committee. Thank you for your time. We really do appreciate it.

Committee adjourned.