

# 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)*

Sarah Fordyce, State Manager, Victoria, and

Carlene Egan, Senior Sector Support and Policy Officer, National Disability Services.

**The CHAIR:** I would like to start today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the various lands on which we gather today. I acknowledge, in a virtual environment, that we are gathering on many different lands, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

A statement about the live broadcast: I need to advise you today's session is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website, and rebroadcasting of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with the LA standing order 234.

Thank you today to Sarah and Carlene for being our first witnesses. I just need to also let you know that all evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. Any evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, but 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.

Just because of the tight timelines we have today, what we will do is: if you could just introduce yourself and your title and maybe give your workplace, then we will jump straight into some questions, because we appreciate you have already submitted a submission as well. Thank you. I might go to you first, Carlene.

**Carlene EGAN:** Hi. Carlene Egan. I am the Senior Sector Support and Policy Officer with NDS.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Sarah FORDYCE:** And I am Sarah Fordyce, the State Manager of National Disability Services in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for your time today. I am going to go straight to Kim O'Keeffe, who is our Deputy Chair, to ask you a question around this interesting topic that we have been trying to explore around students going into pathways into in-demand jobs. So, Kim, thanks.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Sarah and Carlene, for your submission and also for the great work that you do. It is really valued. I want you to know how much we appreciate it and also really appreciate you really contributing to this, because it is so important to us that we hear from people like you, particularly from such an important sector when it comes to disability, people with disability and disability services. So my question to you is – and I know you have touched on this in your submission, but I would like to have that conversation: what barriers do people with disability face pursuing employment in in-demand industries, and how can education providers and employers support people with disability to overcome these barriers?

**Carlene EGAN:** Thanks very much for that question, and thanks for having us today. In terms of the opportunities for young people with disabilities to step into employment, we are aware that roughly one in five young people will participate in the workforce. So those opportunities really need to be targeted to providing the right supports for young people coming into the workforce. There are some great initiatives that have been developed and delivered. At the moment we are really looking at some of those persistent challenges that occur for people with disabilities moving into the workforce. We would encourage a customised employment approach that is really person-centred so that they are able to identify the areas that they would like to go into through either vocational training or through employment, really customising it to their individual strengths and addressing any barriers. Sarah, do you have anything that you want to add?

**Sarah FORDYCE:** Yes, thank you. I think that some of the challenges begin right at the society level and in almost early days with children with disability, what the expectations are, what their parents' expectations are and what the community's expectations are. When they see a child with a significant disability, are they thinking that person will be contributing in the labour force through their life? Those expectations are really critical for the child and for everyone around – the teachers and so forth – in terms of setting expectations. There is some terrific data showing that if young people with disability are given the work experience opportunities that other young people are given, that then leads step by step into further education and into the labour market.

Linking into what Carlene was saying, to create some of those work experience opportunities for young people, particularly those with more significant disability, it is that collaborative approach between looking for a customised work experience opportunity that is going to meet the differing needs of the young person – a bit of

flex and responsiveness – and drawing on that community around the school, the education, the parents and the community to create work experience and then going from there. We refer, I think, to the Ticket to Work initiative, which we see as a great example of some of that.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Can I just ask: how is that working right now? Yes, we know that that is what should be happening, and we know that having work experience is really, really important in getting those opportunities, but is that happening? To what level is that happening? Yes, that is probably my question: is it working with what is happening at the moment?

**Sarah FORDYCE:** I think it works in some instances where you have got those very committed and passionate people, often driven by committed, engaged parents or a community around, but we know that there are many people that, just with life and circumstances, do not have that. It is taking it from situations where there is community around particular individuals to try and scale it, isn't it? That is a challenge in our society, and we have got the model –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Sorry for overspeaking. You are talking about customising, and I think that probably is a really good point, so that it is a good fit and it does work and it is more successful. So that is a really good point. Thank you for that.

**Carlene EGAN:** I was just going to add too: I think that the awareness for providers around how to support people with disability is really important as well. That disability awareness training that can occur in the employment sector as well, whether it is open employment or supported employment, is really important. There are some initiatives such as Let's Talk Disability, where we have people with lived experience providing awareness around what supports can be easily implemented and I guess mainly how it really impacts their experience of employment. That would be something I would add as well. So it is around supporting young people. We know that young people with disability are twice as likely not to enter into the workforce as older people, but it is also the other part of that employer readiness and awareness and engagement.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Kim. Dylan, I might go to you next for a question.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you. Thanks for appearing today and the submission. We have heard as part of this inquiry from a number of career practitioners. I was just wanting to ask a question about career education for people with a disability through secondary school. How adequate do you think that is, and how, perhaps, could it be tailored to better support people with a disability?

**Sarah FORDYCE:** Carlene, do you want to jump in?

**Carlene EGAN:** Thanks, Sarah. In terms of the support for students, it is around creating those pathways and the connections for young people to be able to get the support that they need to identify areas that they would like to be working in and then having a collaborative response, so it is the school, it is the person with a disability, it is the family, it is the training organisations that might support them into employment and then it is also around those providers. I think in terms of the design and the supports that are needed, programs like Ticket to Work and the School to Work program within schools in Victoria do a really great job of trying to meet the need. But it is really individualised, and I think having that targeted approach to each individual is really important – that customised approach.

**Sarah FORDYCE:** And I suppose, if I can jump in, over the years NDS as a peak body – we are really interested in obviously young people with disability and disability workforce issues. We have done a number of projects with, for example, the Department of Education over the years in terms of supporting people with lived experience going into the schools, not just presenting to the students and the teachers but also to the teachers giving career advice to explain that actually there is a world out there that people with even very complex disability can contribute to in the paid labour force and giving examples and demonstrating and really educating people. On the back of programs like that we have worked with, for example, the Victorian career adviser teachers; there was a program we had. We have been funded over the years for a whole series of these rather short-term initiatives, each of them with some terrific outcomes, but they have been short term and not then taken to scale in terms of the lessons. Perhaps that is a little bit of a frustration, but we are in it for the long term around this. That is what we have seen – this series of different things. We have had a great program educating the career teachers about disability, but then that stops and we keep going.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks for that.

**The CHAIR:** John, we will head to you.

**John MULLAHY:** Good morning. I was hoping to see if we could look into how employers can be supported to promote careers in the disability sector to young people.

**Carlene EGAN:** Thanks for that question. In terms of the disability sector as a workforce, we are hoping to really encourage that, that it is seen as an attractive area to work in. That workforce attraction piece is really important. That does start with raising awareness that working in the disability sector is really broad; there is such scope for employment options. It is very much seen, in terms of jobs, around support work, but it is really vast, and there are so many opportunities for people to be stepping into.

In terms of supporting providers, providers are facing quite extraordinary times at the moment with reform changes. So we need to find a way where providers have the capacity to take students on if they are wanting to do student placements or coming through on traineeships or other opportunities. Providers have limited capacity and students also have limited capacity around student placements in terms of student placement poverty and the challenges there. I would also highlight that for providers in rural and regional areas sometimes there are just fewer opportunities as well to be able to support people coming in either on a placement or traineeship or through work experience. Sarah, was there anything that you wanted to add?

**Sarah FORDYCE:** Yes. I would say that there are those big issues in our sector. You are probably hearing that from every sector. We have got really big, big challenges, and employers face lots of challenges, but they have real workforce challenges. We have churn of about 25 per cent a year of casual workers, costing a fortune. It is I think 16 per cent percent of permanent employees. There is a real demand for employees – skilled, appropriate employees – and that is going to continue. We know that is growing. What we feel works, which we have put in – is that collaborative work, often with the peak body pulling together the employers, working with the TAFEs or vocational training and the students, pulling it together, supporting the initiatives and calling out some of the challenges.

What we find is that there can be a challenge with, one, the students not really knowing what they are getting into, like Carlene was talking about, so part of it is lots of education in the schools about these being the actual jobs, but also these nice kinds of taster programs – I think we flagged the one around Yooralla – where there is three days of getting in the interested young people and giving them some training but exposing them to people with quite complex disability, talking about what is actually involved and helping them with their checks and so forth. There is some real support, and that means the ones that keep going after three days are actually a bit more engaged – less drop off, which is a key cost in the system. What we have also highlighted is that need that we find I suppose not just with young people but particularly it seems with young people for those wraparound supports as things go up and down and mental health and lots of different things. The wraparound, flexible, responsive, culturally appropriate kind of supports: things like having a buddy; having coaching in there – not just a supervisor but a coach, someone to sort of keep an eye on things; a suite or a package of those kind of things in that first year or so. Nice taster stuff with those wraparound supports – we get great outcomes, and that benefits all involved. The employers do not get the drop-offs. They get good skilled workers, and the workers get an ongoing permanent role, so there are some win-wins if we collaboratively can help pull together that nice mix of supports.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Sarah. Sorry, Carlene. I am really sorry to do this because we have got questions for you. We have a tight timeline today, but thank you for answering our questions today. If there is anything that has been sparked today that you think you would like to add, please do not hesitate to write to the committee as well. Thank you for your submission too; it was very comprehensive. We will be able to consider that when we when we come to our final report, so thank you so much again for your time today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**