

# **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**

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

Warrnambool – Wednesday 25 March 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

### **WITNESSES**

John Flett, Director, Strategy, Research and Clean Economy Initiatives, and

Kathy Hall, Executive Manager, Education, South West TAFE.

**The CHAIR:** I begin today by acknowledging the Peek Woorroong and Gunditjmara people of the Maar nations, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

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

Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones 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.

Thank you, Kathy and John, for being our first witnesses today, and thank you so much for the tour that we had this morning as well. It was a great insight into who you are and what you do here. Can I get you to introduce yourself, your title and maybe your role here, and then we are going to jump straight into some questions. You have already given a submission, which we have read, and we will ask you a few questions just to get into the nitty-gritty of some things as well. Kathy.

**Kathy HALL:** I am Kathy Hall. I am the Executive Manager for Education here at South West TAFE. My portfolio is all the education teams, from plumbing and beauty to horticulture and everything in between, so the teaching teams in all the areas across the different campuses.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**John FLETT:** Welcome to Warrnambool. I am John Flett. I am the Director of Strategy and Research on the clean economy at South West TAFE. I work across the various divisions of the institute, particularly with Kathy's portfolio in the education area but also the corporate services area, on campus projects and what have you. It involves working closely with industry partners and other stakeholders to identify the sorts of training that we need to be planning for in the future and the facilities and the programs to run those.

**The CHAIR:** Great, thank you. We do have two other committee members also online with us: Kim O'Keeffe, the Deputy Chair –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Good morning.

**The CHAIR:** and Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Good morning.

**The CHAIR:** We will go to them for questions as well. Roma, seeing how it is your area, I am happy to go to you first if you would like to ask a question.

**Roma BRITNELL:** As we were talking about the tour, one of our biggest challenges is attracting students into in-demand areas. TAFE do a very good job of providing those opportunities, as we have just seen, in different areas where we do have careers that we need people in, such as aged care – a real problem – and child care. What do you do to actually attract the students, though? What is TAFE's biggest way of attracting students into the sectors?

**Kathy HALL:** Well, we start while they are at school. Apart from our VET in school programs, even prior to that we have got a couple of new programs, the VET taster programs. One is a year 9 program that we started last year. They come in one day a week to try something very hands-on, and they also have an industry visit. We do that in partnership with Westvic, Warrnambool College and Neil Porter. They help organise the industry visits. So it is a first taste of what a career in the industry might look like. Then the year 10 program is an eight-week program, one day per week, and across that they will get two different streams. It might be building and horticulture they spend the week doing. There are no assessments. It is very focused on the hands-on and what the industry is like. Our engineering students get to make trolleys, you know, so they really get a taste of what it

is like, because at that age they are very unsure of where they want to go. So we see that as an opportunity to decide what they do like but also perhaps to decide what they will not want to go into.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Do they get to choose the two?

**Kathy HALL:** They do. We have options there, and we run that in Portland and Colac as well. There is child care, health services, the different options, so that then when they go into the VET in school program, they are already starting to refine their choices and their interests.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Just one question further: one of the barriers is transportation, because we do not have bus services – well, we have them to schools, but we do not have them to accommodate kids in year 9. So what do you do for kids who are at, you know, Heywood or Woolsthorpe or somewhere that is not very close to a town?

**John FLETT:** Those particular programs that Kathy was just talking about then are part of a pilot that South West TAFE is one of four TAFEs doing. The pilot program is funded by the Department of Education, and they cover the cost of transportation. It is a bit more challenging for the – we have our own year 9 taster program, which has run for many years, which is sort of a 2- or 3-hour experience. I think the schools cover the cost of the buses for those.

**Kathy HALL:** It is generally closer – local. We find it hard once we get out in the regions, because they are not funded –

**Roma BRITNELL:** So Hawkesdale you cannot work with, or –

**Kathy HALL:** Oh, we can, but where the funding comes from is always the biggest issue.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Kathy and John, for having us along for that magnificent tour this morning. It was fantastic to see the new facilities and the campus in action. I am just having a look at your submission. It says 1300 new trainees come through all your campuses each year through 60 trades and vocations and that you guys have helped produce 90 per cent of the trades in the region, which is phenomenal. But just picking up off Roma's point around the barriers, I guess: beyond transport, what are the other barriers that are preventing perhaps even more students enrolling, particularly with the new facilities coming online, hopefully by the end of this year? What are some of the other barriers? Is it cost barriers? Yes, there are transport barriers, but are there other barriers that you can sort of elaborate on?

**Kathy HALL:** It is not all cost barriers, because there are some free TAFE options, but we are finding the feedback at the moment is it is just purely the cost of fuel and getting here, especially for those that have got to travel any distance. We are working at the moment to try and find some ways of adjusting our delivery models to try and ease that burden for students. But that is probably one of the biggest challenges.

**John FLETT:** Yes. There are others too, though, around fitting everybody into the facilities that we have got. For example, for the VET delivered in secondary school programs, timetabling is really challenging, because there is only one day a week that the schools will let them come. Then we have got to try and fit everybody in on that one day, whereas if we could spread the load over four or five days a week, it would be much easier for us. Having said that, though, having suitably qualified, experienced teachers to deliver those sorts of programs is important, especially for the VET delivered in schools. You do not want them to have a boring experience, because that will turn them off forever.

**Kathy HALL:** You often need your best teachers in those cohorts.

**John FLETT:** Exactly. And we do try and get the message out there. We have our skills and jobs centre staff out there talking about careers in TAFE. We have the information sessions that we run several times a year at all of our campuses. They are all ways to get the message out there to young people about the pathways, whether they are at a VETDSS or an SBAT or it is a full-on traineeship: finish school, get a job, earn while you learn. But those challenges, yes, apart from distance and what have you, it is facilities and –

**Kathy HALL:** Facilities, resourcing, teachers and being able to offer a broad range of options too can leave us a bit thin in some areas as well. So in our VET in school this year we have got 660 students, which is a 10 per cent increase on last year, so it is a very, very popular program. One of the challenges that we have had in the past is the lack of awareness on how important a vocational trade is in comparison with others. The focus on the ATAR score has been quite narrow, and so we are seeing a bit of a change now. Last year the dux of the school was also the dux of the VM, which is great – that recognition is there. But that has been a bit of a challenge because it has not been seen on the same level as the option to go to university, and yet it is very much in need. And we still provide those pathways for students to get to university.

**John FLETT:** Just to come back to your point again, and one more thing, I think – Kathy just alluded to it then – is parental expectations or parental aspirations for their kids. There is a lot of research that shows that if kids are coming from trades backgrounds, they are more likely to do a trade. If parents are university educated, they are more likely to do university. Breaking down that sort of prejudice, or perceived – ‘prejudice’ is probably the wrong word – but that perceived problem of ‘Oh, it’s not university, so it’s not going to be good enough.’

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** That is a common theme we have heard throughout some other hearings, particularly for young people. One thing just picking up off the barriers issue I wanted to ask about was: I was fascinated by the outreach agricultural bus that we saw downstairs. Would you say that if there was more opportunity to have that proactively going out to a lot of those different smaller communities like Roma was talking about, or even other areas more broadly across the region, that could play a role in reducing barriers and also encouraging more people to study particular areas of in-demand industries?

**Kathy HALL:** Absolutely. It gives the students a chance to see it up close and not just reading it in a course guide or an ad in the newspaper. That is our skills truck. We have also got a skills lab that goes out for aged care as well, and we saw a huge increase in traineeship take-up there. So it is able to get out into the communities.

**John FLETT:** Regional people seem to have a preference to study locally. There is a bit of a brain drain, if you like, towards metro Melbourne in terms of the population profile, and people kind of drift back in their sort of 40s and 50s. But being able to offer things in your own backyard is what everybody likes to do. So those mobile apps are going to be really important, and we would be looking to –

**Kathy HALL:** We use those – back to that first question – in careers expos and careers nights. And it is really the exposure to show the opportunities and to give young people in particular the idea of the choices, and for young girls – it is not just nursing or child care; there are a whole range of options.

**The CHAIR:** Great, thank you. Kim, I might head to you.

**Kim O’KEEFFE:** Good morning, John and Kathy. I am in Shepparton. Sorry I could not join you today, but we have a fantastic GOTAFE here in Shepparton and a great campus, and I have been very involved with the campus here. But on the back of what you have just been chatting about actually was something I was quite keen to investigate a bit further. In your submission you have got that:

TAFE/VET providers – need to engage with schools and provide engaging experiential and taster programs and activities for students.

That is something that is really important, I think, because we know there is an issue with retention and completion. It has been raised across this inquiry: how do we actually make sure that students are aligning? I mean, you are never going to get it right 100 per cent of the time, but are they aligning to something that will actually lead to their completion? So those sort of taster programs, how would they work?

**Kathy HALL:** They are great. We do several. We do have four hands-on big taster programs generally out at our Sherwood Park campus. We have all the trades set up, and they get to go and work their way through the different areas. They might be braiding hair one minute and then they are over putting nails and timber together for something else. It is really that first exposure to just see what is out there. It is very hard to know how to align the student absolutely correctly, because I believe that students these days will not stick with that one career anyway. They will start with something and go sideways and try all sorts of different things. It is a good option to do that. We have careers expo days, same thing, where they can just talk to people about it. Our staff will go into schools and talk to students. Last week I think our head of department in plumbing and our

women's careers coordinator went and spoke to some girls who were interested in plumbing apprenticeships and how to get into there. I think the information is the first thing that is really important and trying to give them as many opportunities.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Is there a gap? When you say you need to engage with schools and provide engaging experiential and tester programs, it sounds like we need to engage. Is there a gap at the moment?

**John FLETT:** I think it probably varies from region to region and TAFE to TAFE potentially. We have got a really high exposure in south-west Victoria: 67 per cent of all vocational education students come through South West TAFE, which is the highest in the state. I think the other element or aspect to what that point in our response was, in addition to the programs and things that Kathy was talking about, having schools themselves do more vocationally oriented programs. School curriculums are often quite academic in nature, and it is understandable. They have got a curriculum standard framework that they are working towards where their teachers have got to get through various topics and concepts. But we have seen with some of the early tech schools that have been built around the state that having programs running in the feeder schools that link into what they will do when they come into the tech school for a day or two is really important, really valuable. It makes that experience much more meaningful than if they come to the tech school for a day and it is like 'Great, it's a day out of school' and it is a 'going to the show' sort of thing. It makes that learning experience more extensive over a longer period of time.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. I suppose I am also wanting to know if you are experiencing, as we are hearing, that students are not finishing. How are you managing that? How are you addressing that? What do you think needs to happen to get a better outcome to make sure that students are completing? I do not know what your ratio is, but we have heard across the inquiry that it is a bit of an issue with free TAFE, which we love – we think it is really important that students all get that opportunity – with regard to students completing.

**Kathy HALL:** Our completion rate is over 63 per cent. We are number one, so whatever we are doing is working reasonably well. I think it goes right back to trying to ensure that we are lining up the student with the best, most suited course for them. That is across the board, not just talking about young people. We do that through interviews and assessment-type things as part of that enrolment process. We will not always get it right, and we are seeing that some of the withdrawals that we get are often for work-life balance – 'I have to go and work; I can't afford to not work' – medical reasons or all sorts of different things. But the big one seems to be finding the balance between 'I need to work' and 'I want to study'. Our challenge has been designing our courses to suit as much as we can where we can. That might include some virtual classes or some evening classes as well. We try and get ahead of that as much as we can.

**John FLETT:** Yes, and completion rates – those figures need to be measured carefully, I suppose, in the sense that they do not show perhaps the whole story. A lot of completion rates in many courses are because people only wanted the three units that they needed to do for a particular skill set for a workplace.

**Kathy HALL:** Like plumbing.

**John FLETT:** Plumbing is a good example. We have got qualified plumbers, they come in and enrol in the cert IV because that is the course you have to enrol in, but they only want to do the three roofing units, so it looks like they have withdrawn before they have completed the course. Well, they were never intending to do the course. Or they come in and do the first aid unit; they get a credit unit of competency, they are enrolled in their course, they have got what they want and they go. The other factor that TAFEs and the VET sector experience more generally, I suppose, is that we are dealing often with the most vulnerable and challenged people in society. We are taking a lot of students on who have many barriers to learning themselves. They are coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, they have got health or disability issues, they might be suffering from substance challenges, First Nations people – a large proportion of our students have those challenges, so sometimes it is those inherent problems that they bring that also affect their ability to stay on and finish a course.

**Kathy HALL:** Yes, and probably the other thing to add to that is that we often have students that will start something and then they will get employment. So that is actually a success story and a really good outcome, but they will still show up as a non-completion in whatever course that was. Or they may start a cert II, get an

apprenticeship and so go into a cert III. We are still seeing a non-completion in the cert II, but behind it is a success story. Often with our students –

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That is great. So I suppose you do not see it as an issue. Is that what you are saying? I have spoken to a couple of educators here in Shepp and, yes, it is interesting. They are really great educators and they are wanting to do the best they can for their students, but yes, I have heard quite a bit of concern around completion. It has been a big thing that has been raised. So I am just interested if you do not see that as an issue or one of the barriers you have talked about, how do you address those barriers –

**Kathy HALL:** I would not say it is not an issue.

**John FLETT:** It is not 'not an issue,' no.

**Kathy HALL:** We are just pointing out that the data is not always – there needs to be a narrative behind some of it as well.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes, and how do we address those challenges, I totally agree with you. But 63 per cent for me is still not high enough. I think we should be obviously aiming for better across all of that. And that is why we are here: to really try and hopefully improve things so that we can get better outcomes for the campus and the students.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Kim. Dylan, I will head to you.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, John and Kathy, for appearing today. There is obviously a lot of really strong industry out in the south-west of the state. We have spoken about health and aged care; regional manufacturing, which has sort of been big in that part of the state for a long time but probably sort of less so of an in-demand industry now; and the meat industry – I noticed that we have got Midfield Group appearing today. How does South West TAFE work with local industry both to ensure curriculum alignment but also to take advantage of work-based learning opportunities as well?

**John FLETT:** Thanks, Dylan, that is a great question. We really pride ourselves on our industry connections and our industry partnerships. Over the past five or six years we have probably had eight major projects that we have received grants for, which have all been on the basis of industry feedback and industry input. We have seen a few examples today, like the agriculture skills lab, an upgrade to our nursing facilities and early childhood facilities and our trades areas as well. We get industry asking us to do certain things, and we will then look for ways to meet that particular challenge. That includes even organisations like First Nations traditional owner groups and what have you. There was a long-time demand for a certificate III in conservation ecosystem management to be delivered in the region, and no-one could make it work. We were fortunate enough in getting a Workforce Innovation Training Fund grant and we were able to run a statewide program to train First Nations rangers across the state. That has involved multiple stakeholders – it is everywhere. It is absolutely critical. Kathy can talk more about the relationship we have with Industry Connect and the apprenticeship programs.

**Kathy HALL:** Yes, we have got very high focus on meeting with industry and designing our programs around that. We do have constraints around training packages and how we have to teach and what we have to assess on, but we are very focused on working with industry. Every single course has industry consultation. We have been able to get out into industry and have some placements in our nursing programs and our aged care programs – really put people into positions so that they can coordinate those relationships and make sure that the students are getting the best opportunities and training that they need. More broadly, across all industries, we have a business development team who get out and liaise with industry on our behalf. We have an industry connect and conferencing team – the same sort of thing – focusing on what industry is saying, what they need from us and how we can meet those needs.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. I have just got a question that I would like to ask about that connecting. From school to TAFE to industry or to a career, is there a magic wand? Is there something that we can streamline or is there something that you would like us to consider for this inquiry around how we could do that better?

**John FLETT:** I do not think there is a magic wand, unfortunately, Alison. We would have found it if there had been. We have been looking. It is probably even more complicated than that because it is not just about from school to TAFE to work or industry, it is from school to TAFE to work or it is from school to TAFE to university. A lot of our programs here, pathway to Deakin – would you say, Kathy, 56 per cent are nursing students?

**Kathy HALL:** Yes, 56 per cent of last year's class went on to Deakin to study nursing.

**John FLETT:** But we also want Deakin graduates coming back here to do some stuff. There are programs here – even though it is not a degree, there are vocational programs which can add value to the degree that they have got. The conservation one is a good example. An applied science degree probably does not give you many hands-on skills, but come and do the cert III with us, and you are out in the field getting your hands dirty. I guess the secret sauce, as it were, or the magic wand is really having those connections with industry partners and being responsive to what they are looking for, to go back to Dylan's question, I suppose. We are really mindful that once upon a time TAFE was really slow to respond to things. I used to work in the water industry as a training manager for about eight years. We had our own RTO. We tried to get TAFE to run courses for our people, and it was like, 'Well, you have to do a certificate II or III.' We just wanted a unit. This is where Kathy's team does such a great job at being able to be flexible about the way we deliver and where we deliver. We are delivering a meat project up at Stawell with Thomas Foods International, training up their team.

**Kathy HALL:** On their site.

**John FLETT:** Onsite as well. So yes, it is those connections. We have got really strong connections into Deakin. We work closely with them. We share our site out there with them – or they share their campus with us really. But there are others as well – Fed TAFE. We are involved with networks across the TAFE sector more broadly. If we cannot deliver it, we know a TAFE who can, so that is how we –

**Kathy HALL:** Yes, we try to embed industry into the courses a bit more. It might be excursions, it might be where people come in and speak to the students. We have a speed dating type event for our graduates and industry to try and get them to connect.

**The CHAIR:** That connection, yes. So then it is really about being job ready – the course is getting them ready for the field or for their career with industry – and industry being confident that they are ready.

**John FLETT:** Yes. That is always our goal. It is a win-win for everybody. We want the students to be satisfied and confident that they can go out and work in an industry and know what they are doing and for employers to know that, okay, they will not know everything, these young people – and they are not always young people; they are often people changing careers – but they will be able to safely work, and they will pick up the other experience as they go along.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I am sorry, we have run out of time for questions today. Thank you so much for hosting us and for this morning's tour. It was just fabulous to see what you do.

**John FLETT:** You are welcome. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much – appreciate it.

**Witnesses withdrew.**