

# TRANSCRIPT

## 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

#### WITNESS

Greg McMeel, Executive Officer, South West Local Learning and Employment Network.

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

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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.

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Thank you so much, Greg, for coming along today and answering a few questions. If you can just maybe state your name and title and maybe a little bit about your organisation and then we will jump straight into some questions.

**Greg McMEEL:** Yes. Greg McMeel, Executive Officer at South West LLEN, which is an organisation that places students in work experience and structured workplace learning across the region of Apollo Bay through to Warrnambool, Hawkesdale, so it covers that sort of region there, and I have been there for 2½ years.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect. Thank you, and thanks for coming today. Roma, I will go to you.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Greg, I suppose I was hoping you would explain to the committee today the challenges we have particularly around transport. It is something you and I have talked about in the past. It is all very well for us to put supports around kids, but if we cannot get them to where those supports are, how do we actually help them?

**Greg McMEEL:** Yes, Roma, we are not living in Melbourne, so we do not have public transport. The way that we transport students is through buses, and the way we do that is to negotiate with the bus lines to connect it. I think the issue is more broad than just transport. What we have got is an inundation of students taking up the vocational major, and with the inundation there is a lot more pressure on us to get students into VET classes and of course get students to work placements to complement that.

Our job at South West LLEN is we place about 600 students each year, or this year we will place about 600 students, in a year 10 work experience program or a structured workplace learning placement. So there is a lot of pressure on us to sort of get students here and there. There is a lot of pressure on employers to take them on, because there is only a limited number of employers there. Transport is one issue, but so is the structure of what is in the vocational major, now the VCE vocational major. My focus is really on how do we find those students placements. How do we get them to the classes, and how do we keep employers on side? It is a real challenge, I suppose, to make sure that all of those parts are sort of working together. If you are in Timboon and you need to get into a class because that is not offered at Timboon – they only offer engineering at Timboon – then you have to go to Camperdown or Terang or Cobden, or you might come to Warrnambool. There are limited options that are available to students in the more remote areas, and they are heavily reliant on transport or their parents to transport them around.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you. You talked to me once about rather than trying to find a teacher for a speciality in Camperdown, Terang, Timboon and Warrnambool, it is smarter because of the lower population to actually find one teacher and bring the students in. Can you just elaborate a bit more on that?

**Greg McMEEL:** Yes. The major provider here is South West TAFE, in our region. They have obviously campuses in Colac and Warrnambool. We work with a cluster of schools. We work with the schools in the Warrnambool–Hawkesdale region, we work with the schools in the Corangamite region and we work with schools in the Colac–Otway region. Three different schools, a small group of schools, working with the principals to try and work out what are our needs from our perspective and how can we work together as schools to create those opportunities that the students are looking for. The emphasis is on the collaboration between the schools, the goodwill to make that happen. If we have got things happening at the school level, then there is an opportunity to have less reliance on the transport to move people around. But sometimes that is not the case and sometimes we need to sort of move them into Warrnambool or they might go out to an agricultural class out at, say, Glenormiston. There is enormous pressure on us to sort of make sure that we have

got those students transported, that they have got the transport to go there – also the safety concerns around dropping them off later at night, because if you are going out to Glenormiston, it takes sort of the best part of three-quarters of an hour; you are coming home at a funny time in the middle of winter and you are being dropped off at Deakin. There are serious safety issues around students coming from those classes.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Kim, I am going to head to you online.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Thank you, Greg, for coming in today. I really appreciate it. On the back of that, one of our former presenters did talk about maybe having to modify the work experience model. Would there be the suggestion around maybe pooling two or three students together going to a worksite? He suggested that would perhaps open a broader opportunity to get through more students and to provide more opportunities. Do you see that that could be an opportunity to improve the work experience opportunities with industry to have more like a cluster of – is that harder to manage? I do not know, it was just suggested. Would that be an option? Because obviously, as you said, it is difficult to get through so many students and to get that opportunity. Perhaps that model might need to be looked at.

**Greg McMEEL:** Thanks, Kim. Possibly, but we are working with schools – we are trying to work with what the students want to do at the end of the day. If there is a group of them that want to work in the same workplace, then sure, that will work. But the way we need to structure it is that we have to timetable all of the schools at different times of the year to go out to the different workplaces. The most critical factor here is looking after the employers, and we have not cracked it with a lot of larger employers here. We are talking medium-size and smaller employers, so they are not equipped to take multiple students. They need to take singular students there to do a lot of that activity. So yes, that might be an issue, but what we are trying to do is deliver to the students' needs, and that is our answer to that.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes, thank you for that. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Greg. My question is around disadvantaged students and how South West LLEN supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access pathways to in-demand industries. We have obviously spoken about some of the barriers in regional Victoria. Obviously having a spread-out population is one of them, but there is, like in most parts of Victoria, also a large cohort of disadvantaged students who face their own sort of barriers to getting into further study and the workforce. I was just wondering if you could elaborate on that.

**Greg McMEEL:** Thanks, Dylan. The responsibility, we are told, of having the student ready for work is the schools and not ours. So what you are describing is the sort of student that has more needs, more wraparound, and that message is not necessarily getting out to schools. We need to be careful about obviously which students go to which workplace, so if a student is disadvantaged, if there are issues around that particular student, we need to be across that so that we can support that student to their needs. The disadvantaged students take up more time because they have more issues and so we need to be able to address those issues to make sure that they are safe in the workplace, at the end of the day.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Dylan. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Greg, again for appearing. My question is around local job and student pathways. You have sort of touched on this in various ways through some of your other answers. How can students in regional areas be better informed about local job opportunities and student pathways? But particularly, I am interested in how we can improve the role and elevate the role of career teachers within secondary schools. Is there an opportunity potentially for the work of the LLEN to potentially be embedded or to support or leverage that work? Are there opportunities for every school to be supported with a dedicated full-time resource? Is there a hybrid sort of model? Happy to hear more from you on that front because we are hearing of a lot of shortfalls in that respect.

**Greg McMEEL:** Anthony, I do not know whether you are aware of the Silver review that went on, that recommended that LLENs do not continue in 2027, but I will try to answer it anyway. The way it is structured is that we face the employers, and the reason why we face the employers, and the careers teachers face the students, is alternatively it is carte blanche and we let everyone go and ambush the employers. In a way, we need to protect the employers from multiple people sort of banging down their door and the whole thing falling apart at the end of the day. So in answer to your question, we work closely with the careers practitioners. I think schools need to understand – and I heard Matt speak earlier around what vocational education is. That question needs to be answered at the school level, or from a government point of view, to inform the schools that this is what we need to do. I think that having careers teachers, as Matt sort of described, go out and embed themselves in the thing – they just do not have the time. So we are making the best of both worlds. We make the best of Neil Porter Legacy because they are bringing the exposure to all of the students. We are the next step and then we are making the placements. It works reasonably well in partnership with them and with the schools, so that it is all manageable from a tight labour market point of view. So it is quite a balance to get it all right at the end of the day.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Yes. I note as well that not all the recommendations in the Silver review were adopted by government, but that is a side note. In terms of specifically the career coordinators in the schools, would you agree that a lot more needs to be done to support those roles?

**Greg McMEEL:** I think so, and I think the whole concept of a vocational major – I mean, you need to look at the curriculum and why vocational major? It falls into the one, two, three, four sequence. So if you are doing a vocational major, you will do two years of VET. Do you necessarily need to do two years of VET? I think you need to question whether that is, you know, something that needs to happen, because the way it currently structures is three days in the school, one day at the VET class and then one day at the workplace, if they are lucky. And some students stay too long; they stay 12 months in a workplace and clog up the system. So the whole thing needs to look at whether we need to do two years worth of VET classes. Do we bring in some vocational experiences through the VET classes rather than sit around the table and learn academic sort of stuff that may or may not, you know, meet the need?

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Yes. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I just wanted to touch on that, because you said there was a VM uptake, and we are hearing the same – that more students are staying engaged in school now, and they are completing to year 12 because they have got the VM option. I am just sort of parking that for a moment. And then you have got industry, who obviously have a skill shortage – some industries or a lot of industries – especially in the regions. Are the skills coming out of the VM or the VET sector matching what industry want? Are you hearing that that is getting better? And are we preparing our young people to be job-ready?

**Greg McMEEL:** Well, as Matt described earlier, there are some rules around supervision that prevent the number of students that might want to take up electro sort of work. You know, we are trying to manage that, but there are some placements that you just do not have the employer market for, so they are opting to do something else, which does not help at all. So you need to unclog the system, the employer market, some way and limit what exposure you are going to give to students if a rural region is going to survive and be able to cope with the number of students that are taking up vocational major.

**The CHAIR:** And is industry telling you that that is – I am sort of trying to get a perspective of what industry are saying when students are coming in to do work experience or coming out of a VET course, a VM course. Are they ready for employment?

**Greg McMEEL:** Well, in some cases, not, and that is something that the schools need to sort of take on as well. I am not critical of schools, because I know that they are strapped. But there are students that are obviously not work ready, that need some tutoring and whatever. But there is no good putting them – you know, letting them sink – in a workplace that they are not going to survive in, so there does need to be careful consideration about which students are going where and whether we are meeting the expectations of both the student and the employer.

**The CHAIR:** And then obviously having a VET sector here that can support them and encourage them or give them confidence in going back into the field –

**Greg McMEEL:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Greg. Roma, do you have one more question?

**Roma BRITNELL:** I just want to explore that a little bit more. I was hearing a lot a few years back, and we will probably hear more from Midfield soon – you know, we were hearing some years ago that kids were coming out of school and they were not looking people in the eye. They were not confident to answer the telephone. They were not, you know, ready to do face-to-face with customers. I just want to explore that a little bit more. Is that something that is still happening, and is there more that needs to be done in that area?

**Greg McMEEL:** Yes, there is. That is still happening. I mean, we have structured it at our place. We focus on work experience in year 10 to actually get that going, I suppose. That is an important step before they are sort of embedded longer term into a work placement. The whole point to a work experience program is to give them a vision of what it is in a workplace and how you need to behave. So we have got a booklet regarding what are the expectations of the student as they come in. It does not always work, and we have to work with the employer when that all goes haywire. That is just par for the course – and look, that is not going to be new. And so it is just something we have got to work on over time.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Do you think industry feel they are getting the support? We do have a desperate need for more people, so we are just having to nurture and bring people through the system and skill them on the worksites sometimes. Do you think industry are feeling like our institutions, such as TAFEs and the LLENs, are actually responsive to the industry's needs so that they can be at the workplace when they are needed?

**Greg McMEEL:** Sometimes, not always. But there are some constraints in what we can do. There are some workplaces that will not take a student until they are 18 years of age, or they have not got the necessary health and safety or whatever it is to work in there. We are doing the best we can under the circumstances, I suppose is the answer.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I am so sorry, Greg, we have run out of time. Thank you for taking our questions today. We really appreciate it.

**Greg McMEEL:** I much appreciated the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. We will now end the broadcast.

**Witness withdrew.**