

# 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

Andrea Vallance, Coordinator, Timboon Agriculture Project, Timboon P–12 School.

**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 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 the 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 so much, Andrea, for coming along today and answering some of our questions. It is a very interesting submission too, so thank you for that. We will jump straight into questions if that is okay. It is the best use of our time. Roma, I might start with you.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I suppose the biggest question today that has been asked is: what are the barriers for us to get our kids work ready and what are the specific issues that pertain to our part of the world versus what we perceive perhaps in other areas?

**Andrea VALLANCE:** I am so glad you asked. I have got some notes because we are calving, so I am a little bit brain dead. It is really important for students to see what is available. It is a big world out there, and there can be a lack of awareness about potential pathways or opportunities. I understand Matt Porter has spoken to you this morning. The work of Matt Porter and the NPL maths and science at work program – I do not know if he mentioned that, where they use maths and science in year 7 – and the careers expo: fantastic. There is a need to demonstrate that jobs are available in the fields that students could be interested in, and also it is really important that they can see that 'Joe Average' can do this, that you do not have to be a high-flyer. A normal person can do it. It may be a convoluted pathway, but you can get there.

Not surprisingly, to quote Geoffrey Blainey, it is often the tyranny of distance for us in this rural area that makes it difficult. For example, when schools do want to take students out, the cost of buses is prohibitive, there are timetable constraints, there are teachers who are time-poor and cannot provide extensions to classes. It is a really, really crowded, loud classroom. In addition, now that there are time-in-lieu consequences that really affect tight school budgets, additional funding for programs for regional schools to take students off-campus into the real world could be of real value.

Training opportunities with schools through VET do exist, but at times regional students are hampered by transport availability. If they are under 18, they have got to drive themselves to work, so they are dependent on a parent or a family member to get them to or from training. For example, once a week our current dairy trainee had to be driven from Timboon to Terang by his parents, who were both working, so he could complete his course. Now, he is a really good kid. He is a fantastic employee, and he is going to be an asset to any industry he goes into. But if his parents were not invested in taking him there backwards and forwards, it just could not happen. And unfortunately an Australian trait is the tall poppy syndrome. So if something is operating locally or close, often it is dismissed as not being good enough. So it is really important that evidence-based, hands-on personal introductions to these people or industries are introduced to break down these barriers.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kim.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Andrea, thank you so much for coming today. You were answering quite a few of our questions on our list actually, which is really great. My question is about what support do school teachers and career practitioners need to encourage students into the agricultural sector?

**Andrea VALLANCE:** The support would be about overcoming the challenges that are there. Career introduction at year 8 is too late. The ship has already sailed. Many students have dismissed options by then. The TAP introduction to career starts in year prep. Very subtle – it is almost like osmosis. You have somebody in to talk to the class and they do a really quick career background. Schools offering work experience placements are declining, but the opportunity for students to be engaged in ambassador programs and work placements is invaluable. It was really interesting listening to the previous speakers, because that work experience dismissal and not happening is detrimental to a lot of schools and a lot of students. That work experience allows the 'try before you buy' – so I think we need to revisit that – and permits students to learn about a career they may be interested in or had not even considered and conversely, which is just as important, learn that a career is not for them so they can make informed decisions without a big HECS debt.

It is nonsensical that careers teachers' hours are declining, and there are many obstacles for schools to run work programs that are practical and tactile. Immersive trials are vital for them to understand and get down and do stuff, especially in this digital world. Careers teachers need to be supported and physically introduced – I am talking about agriculture because that is our area of expertise – to real agricultural enterprises and other vocational opportunities to learn about the technology, the vitality, the resilience, resourcefulness, creativity, sustainability and potential of all these options. PD is also needed to strengthen teachers' and school leaders' understanding of applied vocational opportunities and pathways for careers teachers, as well as maths, science and humanities teachers to strengthen access and awareness of the careers and things we do. For example, once again, the Neil Porter industry awareness day for teachers at Brauer College, where he took teachers out of Brauer – that was just brilliant. If a lot of schoolteachers could do that – because that would negate the 'What do we need to know this for?' Because there is an example right in front of you of what it is for.

For rural and regional students, it is important to bring experiences to the students, such as travelling roadshows or centralised activities such as the Maths & Science @ Work program or the trades fit expo or the dairy day supported by Midfield previously. Parents should also be invited, because it is not just the student who makes the decision. You need to involve parents and families into these conversations as well. Rurality should not be a disadvantage when opening students' eyes to programs like Cows Create Careers that Dairy Australia have had for a long time. Introduce options and the scope of careers right across the Australian dairy industry and agriculture. They need to be made aware of these options.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

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

**The CHAIR:** Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, Chair. My question is about industry collaboration. We have had a couple of different views on how best to do that. From an agricultural point of view, how can the government support you guys to foster those industry connections within the agricultural sector? I am sure you have some already, but how can we strengthen that? As you just said, that sort of work of education is really important.

**Andrea VALLANCE:** Yes. I think industry engagement needs to be promoted to students, teachers, families and industry, because you cannot be what you do not see – that is really important. To do that, currently agriculture has been given a gift, which is the focus on STEM in schools with the education department. Maths, science and commerce teachers all can be utilised as gatekeepers. Teachers influence, and the way they talk about a particular subject or opportunity or career can really negate or improve a person's understanding of it. For example, during a maths teacher PD I demonstrated that we use 'pi R squared' to mark the circumference of our rotary before we put the footings in, and then we had Pythagoras for the slope of the underpass so the cows did not slip but the shite kept moving. We need to be able to support these things.

The introduction of, as we were talking about before, partnership brokers or learning brokers is really important. I really liked that they were talking about having people on the ground who know stuff. Aspects of the TAP and NPL have origins in the LLEN partnerships that were established in the 2000s, where networks were funded to employ partnership brokers. They acknowledged that schools were too busy and had too much on their plate to engage in leadership, so the TAP itself came about because of a partnership broker. That would be a good support from the government. In this instance, they work with Dairy Australia to support employer networks. So focus then was on LLEN senior partnership brokers overseeing these relationships, helping schools with work experience, career activities, school-based apprenticeships and to cement these connections. I recommend funding and sourcing things more like those learning broker roles, because you need people who have the understanding of local communities. I did not put that in my submission because that is my role and I just take it for granted. But it was pointed out to me by the person who employed me that I draw on people from our region because I have this connection with our region. So if you were to enable people to work with the people who are already on the ground, whether it is people like Neil Porter or local industry people, that would be great. Supporting those people to be 'bilingual' in being able to talk to industry and community is important because a lot of teachers and schools do not understand the industry constraints and industry does not understand school constraints too. So it is supporting people to be able to be in those roles. It is not reinventing the wheel, it is about just giving them the road to work on too.

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

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you for appearing, Andrea, and for the submission, which is very comprehensive. On page 5 here you have got some great quotes from some of the students that have gone through the program talking about the benefits. And you have got here a year 11 student saying, ‘The day we went out to the farm, I learned a lot. I really enjoyed sharing it with Mum and Dad.’ It just, I guess, goes to the point of bringing in the family and sharing that experience on the actual farmland. But that goes to my question, which is really around supporting girls in male-dominated roles. How is the program working to really get young women and girls thinking about a career in agriculture, especially through the STEM program, which you guys are also rolling out as part of this as well?

**Andrea VALLANCE:** When I started teaching, I was a woodwork teacher, so I am well aware of the constraints and the way teachers in non-traditional roles are perceived. Whenever we have someone involved in the TAP, if there is a female who is very good at their job, we ask them to come in, because you have to have street cred. It is no good, just because you are there, because you are a female, if you cannot walk the walk, so you have to be very good. For example, with the TAP, we had an auto mechanic, policewoman, marine biologist, engineers, an entrepreneur, the coordinator of training from Hycel, not because they are women, but because they are good at it – because it is no good having a token woman in a role, by any stretch of the imagination. And thinking about improving engagement too, ag does not necessarily have the best track record as an employer of choice, so school and industry need to target best practice and promote exciting technology, sustainable options and career pathways that exist beyond and in farm gate. So you have got to showcase people who are good at what they do, no matter what their sex is; but try to seek to find people in those roles who can cover it as well too, because kids’ BS metre is right up there and you do not want to tiptoe around that.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** No, that is right. In terms of any data, have you seen an increase in the number of girls coming in through the program?

**Andrea VALLANCE:** It is really hard. We have not kept numbers because it is a bit of a one-person show, so we have not kept that data. But when we have careers days or we have TAPs On!, our end-of-year expo, we often have student female leaders who will step up and take the lead in things. You know, they will get their way to the front and do it too. So I think it is about empowering confidence and the ability to do things.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** That is great, thank you.

**Andrea VALLANCE:** No worries.

**The CHAIR:** I am so sorry, we have run out of time.

**Andrea VALLANCE:** That is fine.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much though for coming in and answering our questions today.

**Andrea VALLANCE:** You are most welcome.

**The CHAIR:** All the best, your program is incredible. I think it is a really great local solution that you are doing.

**Andrea VALLANCE:** We need to thank Roma. I think, when it started 13 years ago, she was instrumental in getting it going. So, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much.

**Committee adjourned.**