

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Geelong – Thursday 26 March 2026

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESSES

Jackie Taylor, Chief Executive Officer, and

Julie Noonan, Program Manager, Scholarships, Western Chances; and

Andrew McGuckian, Chief Executive Officer, and

Charlotte Bracey, Programs Coordinator, You thrive Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the panel hearing 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, even on social media, may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

We thought we might run this a bit like a Q and A session where the committee members will ask some questions, and if you would like to answer that question, you can just indicate or jump in. It will be a pretty informal chat. But if there are any important points that you do not have the opportunity to make during the session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing to the committee.

I would like to start by asking each participant to state your name, position and title and a bit about what you do, and then we can jump into some questions. We might start at this end.

Julie NOONAN: Thank you. My name is Julie Noonan. I am the Program Manager at Western Chances. I have been with the organisation for around three years, and I manage our scholarship and our Links program across the organisation.

Jackie TAYLOR: Jackie Taylor. I am the CEO of Western Chances. I have been with the organisation eight months. Prior to that I worked in five different universities across Australia in the student support, curriculum development and academic area. I was director of education, global, here at the Gordon as well.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Sorry, can I just ask: you do Western Chances now, but it has Geelong?

Jackie TAYLOR: Yes, it is incorporating Geelong. We had a pilot, which is concluding shortly, but we are looking to expand the program due to the need here.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: Good morning. I am Andrew McGuckian. I am the CEO at You thrive Victoria. We work exclusively with young people in rural and regional communities outside of Geelong and Melbourne all across Victoria.

Charlotte BRACEY: My name is Charlotte Bracey. I am the Program Manager at You thrive Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you. All right, we are going to head straight to questions. Roma.

Roma BRITNELL: One of the things we have been hearing is that it is hard to find employees in the regions, particularly south-west Victoria and this Barwon area as well. It is hard for kids to actually understand what opportunities and different careers are available. You are coming from the youth perspective. What do you think the challenges are for youth to be encouraged into the in-demand industries that we are seeing a big need for into the future?

Jackie TAYLOR: I am happy to start. We work with disadvantaged young people and their families across Melbourne's west and Geelong. The trend that we are noting is that a lot of families often make decisions around the career progression of their children. With the fast-changing nature of technology and the advent of new industries and new ways of working, particularly post COVID, there is a strong disconnect between what families feel is secure and would be financially beneficial for their children in the long run versus the actual skill sets needed within the community. A lot of our young people's families are newly arrived in Australia, so their background, history and understanding of that range is not as broad as may be the case with other families. Therefore getting that information out, often in multiple languages as well, is a real challenge.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: We find that many of the young people we work with in more remote communities, whether it be for work or further education, are needing to relocate, so the cost involved in so doing and the disconnect from their home communities is a significant challenge. We run several scholarship programs, and what we hear through the application process repeatedly is, yes, the financial barrier is significant, but it is the social and the psychosocial challenges that they are going to face through needing to relocate, along with all the other accommodation challenges living out of home. I think career educators are

doing a significant amount of work in the space of preparing young people around their options, but there seems to be a gap in understanding about – we call it in our organisation – adulting and preparedness for moving away from your home community and moving out of home.

Charlotte BRACEY: And I think for lots of rural young people you cannot be what you cannot see, so depending on what happens in your town, it can feel like your path is already dictated for you. So I think, yes, increasing the opportunities to know what is out there and why it is out there and how it can happen can be really important in different parts of the state.

Julie NOONAN: I think just adding to that, the imposter syndrome that you mentioned is really, really strong within our cohort that we work with. I think they are often limiting themselves to what is possible and what is available. Particularly if they are first in family at university, as most of our young people are, they do not have that network at home that is actually telling them what is possible. So yes, obviously the career counsellors are doing an incredible job within schools, but we have had examples of where career counsellors in some schools are also limiting young people's expectations. For our organisation it is about making sure we provide as much information as we can and really let them know that actually any opportunity is available to them and any pathway they choose to follow is open to them, and we work really hard to overcome that imposter syndrome that they often feel.

Roma BRITNELL: Can I just explore that a little bit more because we have not heard much about what you have said. We have not prepared our young people for adulthood. Is that what we call it?

Andrew McGUCKIAN: Adulting.

Charlotte BRACEY: Adulting.

Roma BRITNELL: Moving away from home – 40 years ago when you were a teacher, you had to go to Mildura or whatever. You just accepted and understood that. What have we not done to prepare people to think about that? Or is it not their psychosocial stuff? Is it economics? Is it both? What can we do better?

Andrew McGUCKIAN: I was listening to earlier respondents to the inquiry, and I heard mention that the school curriculum is very full, and it certainly is; we hear that repeatedly. I am not sure that there ever was space in the curriculum for it. But with the wind-down of technical schools and with the shift away from other life-focused courses in schools, I think that has created a gap. I think the complexity of moving away from a small country town is greater than it used to be. It is not as simple. There are more options, more choices, and then when young people do relocate for education, there is a significant challenge in building new connections. University campuses are not at all what they used to be. The social environment of a university or even a campus is not what it was when any of us studied. So I think they are part of the challenges that young people are facing.

Jackie TAYLOR: Yes, and we had this conversation just earlier, having been on the university campuses during this period. The removal of the tech school environment, because the TAFEs also went online, as did the schools and the universities – there was a massive social impact that we have not recovered from. I think Andrew was mentioning the young people who are on residencies in campus, and they are staying in their rooms and relating virtually rather than socially, so we think there is a massive social change that has happened. I do agree that the amount of choice is overwhelming. For a lot of young people the previous structure meant you had something to fight against, to get out of that structure, to go and be something else. That is no longer in existence. There is way, way, way more choice than there used to be. And my experience with young people is that choice can be overwhelming, and it can actually limit them in terms of what they do. If you look at the data in terms of structured programs in either universities or TAFEs, where it is very structured and there is limited choice, you have greater retention rates and higher success rates. I think there is a myth that we have believed that an open choice, free for all, is something that is a positive, and there are positive elements to that, but it is also extremely overwhelming for young people who are in just those formative guidance parts of their development.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: I think too the critical point – and it is the juncture for a young person that we focus our work on, presuming they stay in secondary education until year 12 – is at the conclusion of year 12 it is just overwhelming. They lose the network of connection in their school. Many of them, if they do move

away, lose all those connections, be it through their football, sporting clubs, whatever it may be. At that critical point in time the support mechanisms are not what the young person has been used to.

Charlotte BRACEY: The amount of commentary we hear from the young people we work with about social anxiety – it is easy to be anxious about the financial situation of moving out, and they will talk about that and finding housing. Those practical things still exist, and I think they existed in different ways for a really long time for lots of people. But it is the sense of connection and belonging. Is it because we went online for a long time? Is it because we have changed how we do it? I do not know, but young people are really genuinely very worried about being able to connect with other people and feeling a sense of belonging again, particularly rural people. That makes them make different choices than maybe they would really love to make or have available to them.

Roma BRITNELL: Interesting.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that insight. John.

John MULLAHY: What are the main barriers to regional young people accessing vocational education and training in secondary schools, and how can these be addressed?

Jackie TAYLOR: I can talk with my former Gordon hat on, just in terms of SBATs – cost is a huge player in this. When we were looking at school-based apprenticeship training – and I was only dealing, just to be clear here, with Geelong and the region, but I grew up in regional Victoria myself – I was just looking at the choices young people make and their parents make based on cost. If you look at the TAFE structure – and I know that there are more free TAFE spaces available – the cost was always the one that would tip the parents over as to whether they could do the cert III or cert II while they are at school. I think, to be fair, finding the right teaching staff with the right currency, who are willing to travel – if you look at the cross-campus travel for teaching staff at the TAFE level, it is complex. It takes a long time. A lot of the hours that we would be contributing to in terms of the cost to the TAFE organisation were around the cost of travel between the campuses and between the schools, and in remote areas that just is exponential depending on distance. And the virtual model does not work, as we know.

Charlotte BRACEY: It is also really hard for VET teachers to have to do industry days – you have to keep your qualifications. My partner is qualified in that, and he has to find 20 days of the year that he can go and work as an auto-electrician whilst working full time as a teacher. That is a really big burden. Then if you put that in a rural context, where are you finding that? I think the other thing is that school-based apprenticeships can be amazing, but also finding the placements for the students to go, where someone can either pick them up or a parent can drop them off and get back to work – the logistics of that, when you take it out of a metropolitan setting and have limited choice and limited availability, are incredibly challenging; it is a really complex thing. Then the school has its own demands. It can just be really hard to put the puzzle together.

John MULLAHY: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Kim, we might go to you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for your submissions. They are really great, and it is such a good group of summaries with some points to really be considered. I was really interested in everything you have said, but I am really interested in, as you have started to touch on, the financial hardship. As you are probably aware, I am from Shepparton, which has a very high multicultural community and a very large Indigenous population. We do find, obviously, there is a roadblock when it comes to finances and supporting students to continue, let alone move away. I suppose my question is: how should career education be tailored to support regional young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also their families? How can we do more to give these kids the opportunities and remove the setbacks and roadblocks? It is not an easy fix, but we are here for this purpose, to try and really work towards much better outcomes and particularly retention – keeping kids at school at all levels, let alone then moving on to higher education or a traineeship or apprenticeship. How can we support families in particular, and also, as I said, tailor education support around that?

Charlotte BRACEY: I think one thing we have noticed – we do scholarships for going on to further education, and Shepparton would be one of the regions this happens in and we work across Shepparton too – is

that sometimes the family expectation is that a young person will continue on, particularly in farming or a family business, because if that person goes to study or changes career path, that is a financial burden to the family as well. So yes, I actually do not know how we fix it. Our scholarships go to young people themselves, but are there other ways to do it? I do not have an answer, but it is a genuine issue and limits potential a lot of the time.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: We do work in Shepparton and other regional and rural communities where the financial support of a scholarship makes a significant contribution, but the other expression I heard earlier today is the wraparound component particularly, again, coming back to when a student moves away, or even if they stay at home, in dealing with that new environment. Often they are first in family to pursue further education, particularly from multicultural backgrounds, and it is having somebody who understands the system and the ins and outs of it that they can turn to to answer what might seem sometimes quite silly questions about how things work. If you have not got somebody, a sibling or somebody in your family to turn to, where do you turn to get those answers and get the support you need? So when we issue a scholarship, the young person is connected with one of our staff, who is in regular contact with them to provide that care and support, that wraparound, and that is critical to young people concluding. I think it is also reassuring for the family to know that there is another support mechanism there for their young person.

We had a great day on Sunday. We awarded our scholarships, and we have a Hazari family from Mildura who have moved to Melbourne so that her three sons can pursue further education. They are totally disconnected from their home community. Mum knows virtually nothing about our further education system, so it is great that we are part of that partnership with the family to give the support that they need – and it is not just about the money.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Do you think that is happening enough, being able to connect with the families like that? That is a great outcome. I mean, that is what we would hope – that families are supported. It is a shame they have to move away. We want to keep them in our regional communities to fill those positions. But I know exactly what you are saying and we hear it, but that is a great example where family – I mean, a shame, they have moved, as I said – have been really supported. We do hear some of those logistic gaps, you know, when there is a language barrier or they do not want the kids to move away. How we give more support around that I suppose is what we are hoping to achieve moving forward as well.

Jackie TAYLOR: It is interesting, when we talk, the difference between regional – because community is community, and we find some of our young people in Geelong going to Melbourne. It would be as large as going from Mildura to the city, and also in Melbourne's west, crossing the river and going to the other side is actually as large a move. It is more a psychological move than just the physical move, which is really interesting. But I might defer to Julie because Julie looks after the Links program, which is our holistic wraparound support, and it will give a sense of just how many players are involved and how much work is involved in linking young people in their families to the kinds of support needed just to keep them in education. There are certain acronyms I will not refer to, but what does 'TAFE' stand for? I know enrolling at university – I have been there for 30 years and even I struggle with my own children to get them enrolled. There are multiple levels. It is a communication issue as well as the use of language. My daughter thought a bachelor was an unmarried man, which it is, and I have been in the sector most of my life and she would have heard that language daily, but even for her going in, there are a lot of barriers. But I might just, if it is okay, hand to Julie, because Julie works in this space very closely.

Julie NOONAN: I think our young people realise in year 10, when they are offered work experience, that they do not have the social capital, they do not have the networks, and I feel like it starts from there. That is the first example where they are provided with an opportunity, but they actually do not know how to go out and access that. Obviously schools provide some support, but in many schools that is limited. For my children, they came straight to me and we used our contacts and were able to connect them to different industries to provide work experience, but our young people do not have that. I feel like that is the earliest example of how disconnected they are to industry, networks and further opportunities. For us, by the time they get to years 11 and 12 and they are looking at university, they are thinking: 'Am I going to travel from the depths of the western region across to Monash or Melbourne? How will I get there? I still have a role' – which many of them do in supporting their family, not just financially, but often they will be the ones who are up feeding other siblings, often making sure siblings are ready for school, in some cases driving siblings to school, doing a whole lot of chores, including all of the shopping and the cooking at home. That is not unusual, for our young

people to also have that role to support their broader family. As Jackie mentioned, getting from the west across to Monash and Melbourne can feel like it is a completely different world and also not doable because they do not have the capability to spend that much time or have the financial resources.

Coming back to the networking issue, we address that through our Links program, and that is a network of organisations who provide free opportunities for our young people to tap into maths tutoring, particularly in those year 11 and 12 years, and further support in any other VCE subject that they might be studying. We also run leadership camps and networking opportunities such as our West Connect series, which taps into industry leaders and opportunities. We are trying to broaden their horizons, and we are trying to create those networks so that when they are looking for internships or work placements when they are studying we are trying to create as many opportunities as we possibly can around that because we understand that they are not going to get those opportunities or networks from their families. That is the additional role. In terms of a financial scholarship, we set them up with the items that they need to fully engage in education, but we are trying to meet that professional development social capital need as well as much as we can across the west and in Geelong.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: If I may, similarly too we run a branch-out mentoring program for year 11 and 12 students across many rural schools. Our aim is to connect with the young person before they finish and depart their secondary education and then be alongside them through the pathway of whatever comes next. If we do not connect with them before they vanish out of the system, it is really, really hard for them to reconnect or for us to connect with them, so it is similar to what you are doing. You follow them through that whole transition period as long as is needed for them to find their pathway.

Dylan WIGHT: Can I just ask a follow-up on that. With disadvantaged and at-risk youth, we know that them continuing to be engaged in education is such a huge driver of young people continuing to engage in their community and society in a fruitful way. In particular, as a rule, in your experience, are secondary schools doing enough in those really critical years, years 10, 11 et cetera, to keep young people that may be at risk engaged, whether it be in VET or education et cetera, et cetera? You have given really good examples of how community organisations are helping do that as well, and it takes a village, absolutely. I am just wondering what your experience, as a rule, is with secondary schools and the role they are playing.

Charlotte BRACEY: I think anecdotally for those that get to year 10 and are not academically inclined but whether for family reasons or community expectations are staying in school, it really depends on the school's capacity to run an amazing VM program and how well resourced that is. Unfortunately, in lots of schools it is looked at as the second-best option, and then it is funded and supported as the second-best option. These young people are not wanting to sit in a classroom and learn for 6 hours. That is not the type of learning that they are inclined to do – which is perfectly fine – so we are kind of setting them up to fail. We are trying to keep them in this space that is not equipped for them. There are some schools that do an amazing job and have great community projects that are really invested in that stream, but I would say across the board that is not the general picture of it. Those young people are at real risk. It is also learning not to like learning, so it is the first step towards 'I'm never going to go back and choose to learn now', and then you have really limited the potential that young person has.

Jackie TAYLOR: I think at Western Chances we are dealing with a different category of student, but if I put my Gordon hat back on with VCAL and that disengaged group, I really feel for the schools here. When I was in Geelong we worked with the Geelong Project, which was dealing with homelessness. We worked with the local LLEN. There were so many people involved in keeping young people at school, but I would absolutely, totally agree with Charlotte: we had a VCAL school here, and there were other, alternative education pathways. I think by keeping them in school all we found was that it was draining resources. It was exhausting teachers, and they were expected to be worried about and caring for students in a way that was way beyond their remit. So we had specialist teachers in the VCAL environment. We had trained counsellors. It was a different structure, and it was not in the same school setting. We had classrooms, but they were very intermittent. It was mostly hands-on, and that was extremely intensive. If we had actually channelled those young people earlier into this channel, we may not have reached that kind of barrier to learning that we see around year 9, year 10, where previously they would have gone off to the tech school. And so that pattern has not changed in 50 years.

Charlotte BRACEY: My partner teaches VM, and he is an auto-electrician by trade that has only just qualified as a teacher. So he has gone back in, over 40, and he feels like he has to be a social worker. He is just spot firing constantly, and the stories he comes back home with are just outrageous.

Jackie TAYLOR: Yeah, they are shocking.

Charlotte BRACEY: And he has run a business. He went into teaching thinking he was going to do this really great, impactful stuff, and he is like, 'I spend most of my time talking about what's happening at home.' And he is happy to do it, but yes, it is not a productive learning space.

Roma BRITNELL: So are we still being too 'academia stream', even though we are talking the language of understanding that different learning style for someone whose brain is not necessarily the academia stream; it is a hands-on – I am even sounding like I am being condescending in the way I am approaching that, but yes.

Charlotte BRACEY: Yes, it is just different. But we are putting them in the exact same space and saying we are going to do it differently, but it is not being delivered differently.

Dylan WIGHT: And that is a school-by-school choice, isn't it?

Charlotte BRACEY: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: But we are asking academics to deliver it though, aren't we?

Charlotte BRACEY: Well, they are the same qualifications. Whether you are teaching VCE or VCE VM, you are the same teachers. And we are in the same school setting. We are in the same classroom. We have the same timetabling. It is all the same, so it feels like it is being spoken about but not enacted. And individual schools might take it on in a different way, but across the board, I think it is fairly consistently disappointing for those students.

Jackie TAYLOR: And there were simple, simple structural things that we found at the Gordon, which was not wearing a uniform for some young people was seen as growing up. There were certain levels of expectation, so we could raise the bar a little bit. But then at the bottom end we literally had students who had not eaten, were sleeping in the hallways, had no work boots, or had taken the work boots home and could not go back home to get them. They were just all of these, every day, for 172 students. There were issues at that level, and that was burning out the teachers at a rate that was just unprecedented.

The CHAIR: But the Gordon presented and seemed to say there has been an increase of those student leavers –

Jackie TAYLOR: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: so mainstream school leavers coming to do years 9, 10, 11, 12.

Jackie TAYLOR: Yes. And if you look at the funding, the way the schools are funded on completion, I think it is a burden on the school. Instead of early identifying that young person and saying they would be better in this learning environment than that learning environment, they are tasked to try and keep them there. And so there is a tension there that I think is very burdensome for the schools as well.

Julie NOONAN: We work across 42 schools across the west and Geelong. And I think what we find is that the schools where it works, that career counselling and the pathway counselling where it works the best, is where there are dedicated resources, and the leadership teams within those schools have really invested heavily in their careers counselling staff, and those staff go above and beyond. So they are working longer hours, they are doing scholarship applications and other things for us on weekends to support their young people. So there is the capacity to get around to every student, to understand what their pathway is and provide them with expertise on what their options are, but I think there is also a piece around how they are delivering that information. We are finding more and more that young people – maybe it has always been that way – just are not reading the information that is being presented to them in the way that we would imagine that they should. And so we are trying really hard to understand from a young person's perspective: how is it best to get that information? How do they absorb it in order to make decisions? And it is a process we are still learning. We send out shorter and shorter emails. We try and embed videos. We understand that they do not respond to

emails or phone calls – you need to text. But even so, we can deliver all the information, and they will still not really understand what their options are, and so they are missing opportunities. It is a learning process for us, really trying to understand how to get that information out. You can have all the careers counsellors in the world, but if they are not communicating in a way that a young person understands, then there is a gap there in what could be possible.

Andrew McGUCKIAN: Where our year 11 and 12 mentoring program works best, and this relates to what you are saying about schools – there is the culture in some schools where we go in, they say okay and the students opt into the program. But they will offer it, and there is an overemphasis on transition to university – ‘You’re going to help students get ready for university.’ We explicitly say, ‘No, our program is preparing them for whatever comes next, whatever that might look like.’ But there is still an overweighting and overemphasis on the value of university education. In our organisation we gave away I think 53 scholarships the other week. Two-thirds of them are vocational, and we strongly acknowledge, particularly in rural communities, that vocational pathways are equal and important and highly valued. That is not the view in many, many schools.

The CHAIR: I think the VM is trying to do that. We are sort of on a path to try and elevate what you are talking about to try and do that.

Charlotte BRACEY: VM has all the potential in the world. If you look at how the curriculum is written, these personal development projects and the community development projects are amazing. It is just allowing the schools to break the traditional structure and actually do them, not fit them in the same timetable that they are fitting everything else in and not structure it in the same way. The program itself has incredible potential.

Jackie TAYLOR: I think from the university end, having worked in the student support end and with the new university support Bill, overencouraging young people to go into university means that the first year of university has now become a clearing house for young people, with the number of young people who leave after the first year because the content is way below what they expected or it is a repeat of years 11 and 12, because you are bringing all of these cohorts together and you have got this disparate expansion that first-year university has now become. Unfortunately, if you look at some of the curriculum – we did a lot of work at this when I was at the University of Newcastle just recently – keeping them engaged and interested while you are teaching it online and they are paying \$4000 per unit is just not working.

Dylan WIGHT: I have had lots of examples of parents in my electorate that will not let their children have a gap year. They go through this brutal year 12 experience, are burnt out going to university and they are done in six months.

Charlotte BRACEY: For your self-esteem and your self-worth, the feeling that you failed at that is really detrimental – pushing people in any direction which they do not genuinely want to go in. If you think about how much young people are still developing at 18 and their self-identity is what they are focusing on, that failure, which they will internalise and see as their fault, sets them back a really long way. It is so disappointing.

Jackie TAYLOR: Yet we are very fortunate at Western Chances to have the other end, where a gap year is not a possibility in getting your education, so we have got both ends of the spectrum.

The CHAIR: I am so sorry we have to wrap up this, because it has been a really interesting conversation. Thank you for all the work that you do in our communities – we really appreciate it – across Victoria and across our region. It is really important work, and it is great to have your insight today. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.