

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

Roqya Hussein, Deputy Chair, and

Erfan Rahimy, Member, Cultura Youth Council.

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 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 so much for coming in today and answering maybe a few questions from us. I know who Cultura is. My other committee members might know who you are. Do you want to maybe introduce yourself and maybe a little bit about the role you play in the community, and then we will go into questions.

Erfan RAHIMY: Yes, sure. Nice to meet you all. My name is Erfan, and I am a member of the Cultura Youth Council. I am representing the Geelong Afghan community as well. We have just recently joined the council actually, at the end of last year. Probably Roqya can speak more about it. She has been there for longer.

Roqya HUSSEINI: Hello everyone. My name is Roqya, and I am the recently appointed Deputy Chair for the youth council. Our youth council is very unique as it involves lots of communities here in Geelong that have settled here and call it their home. I think that is the unique part about it. It is not your typical youth council where you might all be Australians. We represent our communities – for example, I represent the Hazara community of Geelong – and we talk about things that we face as young people, especially settling into a foreign country where we might not know the language or how we can access education or things like getting involved in the community and how we can support our young people so that we can stay relevant in our cultures and not forget about our language and our past and the struggles that we have faced.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. Our inquiry is really looking at that young person's journey to education and maybe TAFE or maybe employment. I know Kim has got a very multicultural community in her community, so I might go to Kim first to ask a question if that is okay.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you so much, Alison. Welcome, and thank you so much for coming in. I am in Shepparton – yes, a very large multicultural community. We are very proud of that. I have a young year 12 boy, Safa, who works casually in my office, which is great. You cannot be what you cannot see. It is a really strong message to my community on how important it is to not only look after our younger people but to be inclusive of all different cultures and backgrounds. We celebrate that really well here. Of course there are challenges, but there are also, you know, opportunities. We try and blend the two and work through what the challenges are and how we can create opportunities. Your work is so, so important. Safa is actually our youth adviser and youth community connector. We are doing a forum ourselves – running a youth forum about people from different backgrounds, you know, and what the issues and the challenges are. So we are doing a little bit of stuff ourselves, but today I am really interested to hear from your perspective. How are people from different cultural backgrounds supported when it comes to education, and how do we manage some of those challenges?

Erfan RAHIMY: With education especially – I came here when I was year 7, so when I came to Australia I had no English, nothing at all, so you start from alphabetical order per se. Then it was great because in my school, North Geelong Secondary College, they had this program, GELS. In that, they help you with your English. You do mostly English classes – a bit of maths, a bit of science, but mostly you focus on English – which is very supportive because you get to meet other people also and other people from the same background or people with the same struggle. That kind of helps you make connections and also make friends when you come to a new country, which I reckon is great. It is a great program that helps a lot of youth as well these days – after I finished high school I went back, and I was working there with the students as well. So when I see them, I see them improving and they are getting their confidence back and also understanding and being able to learn about Australia and how to basically try to fit in with people around them as well and learn a bit more about the culture – like how Australians behave compared to other people, because people have different behaviours and different ways of connecting with each other. That gives you the option, which I reckon is great. I am pretty sure a few other schools also brought in this program, and they are helping out with the multicultural students who have English as a second or third language.

Roqya HUSSEINI: Just to add on that, I was a bit more fortunate. I started school here when I was in year 2, so it did give me that place where I was able to fit in and learn the language. But I am currently also working at Northern Bay College as an MEA, and I see the struggles of students who come very older, like 17 or 18 years old, and they do have to leave after a certain age of schooling. How can we support these types of students, where their English might not be the strongest, or they might not even know any English? But they come to school, and we see many students miss out on wanting to go to university because of their limited English and not being able to go into VCE because of the English. So yes, if there are any programs or anything – I mean, we do have facilities like GELS, where it is held at a different school, but the students end up coming to us. But then again, going to a normal year 10 class, for example, as a 16-year-old, compared to going to a GELS class where they teach a basic science, basic maths and basic English, and then the big jump suddenly, is shocking for them, and sometimes it really discourages them. Their confidence just goes down. You can really see it in the student's face. There is a big challenge right now in Northern Bay College because we have so many newcomers, which is a good thing, but they come at such an unfortunate time. And it is not their fault, it is not anyone's fault; it is just the timing.

The CHAIR: Cultura, though, run English programs as well, don't they? For the whole family.

Roqya HUSSEINI: Yes, I am assuming.

The CHAIR: Yes, I am pretty sure they do.

Erfan RAHIMY: Yes, I am pretty sure they do. They help a lot of people who did not go to school before then. They have English language classes for mostly adults, like parents et cetera, so it is good. It is also supportive, because back when Cultura was Diversitat, my mum used to go there herself. When we came to Australia, she was going there as a student, so it was good.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Do you think industries do enough? Of course we have the schools and the education, and I see what is happening, and yes, there needs to be more support. But do you think industry and workplaces also have a role to play, and what could that look like?

Erfan RAHIMY: Absolutely. You learn more English around people who speak the language, and spending more time with them you get to learn English a lot quicker, from my experience. So when I was at school, I was learning, I was doing okay, but then I started working, and my first job was at McDonald's, so I was working with a lot of people. It was fast paced, with different people, young adults, and you get to meet a lot of new people. You learn different accents et cetera, so you adapt and learn a lot quicker. But sometimes what happens in the industries as well, what you find out, is as soon as they see the name, they send an automatic reject. Working inside and seeing things and seeing résumés get sent through – as soon as they see the name, they are like, 'Oh, okay. Decline,' and they say, 'Oh, we have too many applicants.' Yes, I understand that, but you also have to be able to give equal opportunity to every single one of them. You never know, that applicant might be more perfect for that role than anyone else. So that is one thing. I reckon it is happening a lot, and it happened in a few places like, as I said, McDonald's when I was 17. I was trying to go higher up in the ranking, and one of the issues was that one of the supervisors at the time did not really give the opportunity to certain people from certain backgrounds as well. So what did we realise? I thought it might be a mistake or something. Then when I got into it, and other people with different backgrounds also felt the same way, then we ended up making a complaint to the head office and managed to get that sorted, which was great. But at the same time, he discouraged a lot of young people who quit their jobs and left their jobs, and basically he was either cutting shifts or being very rude toward them to the point they resigned and left.

The CHAIR: It is really unfortunate to hear that.

Erfan RAHIMY: Yes, it is quite unfortunate.

The CHAIR: I might go to Dylan for another question.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. Thanks for coming today. I am the Member for Tarneit, which is the most multicultural electorate in Victoria – I would think one of the most multicultural anywhere in Australia. And I love what you said about going through your schooling but how incredibly important cultural identity and language in particular is for young people from a CALD background. Are we doing enough in secondary career

education to tailor those programs for multicultural youth to be able to keep that cultural identity et cetera as they move through their schooling, their career, education and then into employment?

Roqya HUSSEINI: That is a hard question. I think I was well supported in my schooling. I think I am more fortunate because my school is very multicultural. I think we have about 54 different cultures in my school, so that was the big thing for me. If you ask any students at my school, Harmony Day will be their favourite day of the year, which is a really good thing because my school had their challenges of racism, things like that happening as well. I think we were well supported. But another thing is a lot of Aussie teachers do not understand the cultural difference for why certain things happen – things like if a parent comes to the school and says ‘Hey, my son is acting like this’ or ‘My daughter is acting like this. How can we get support?’ Sometimes it becomes more of an ‘Oh, it’s the parent’s job’ kind of thing. I think there should be more of an understanding in the teaching degree and I think in general there should be more of an understanding of multiculturalism and how each culture basically sees different things differently, if that makes sense.

Dylan WIGHT: Sure. Yes.

The CHAIR: You would be a great teacher, I reckon.

Roma BRITNELL: I probably come from the least multicultural electorate in Victoria, and I come from an area where we do have a lot of employment needs. In my experience personally – because I worked in an industry where we had to employ people from all over the world, and that was fantastic; it was a great experience for my children and my family – I have noticed in the very small country communities that different people, such as Filipinos, have come into Hawkesdale and have absolutely been embraced, because we really need people. The school head prefect – whatever it is called these days – was a young Filipino boy a couple of years ago. There are really great stories because people are embraced. How, though, can we get it right rather than get it wrong? Because there is a real opportunity for families and different cultures to come into these areas where we actually still have some housing and we do have opportunity, but we struggle to attract people because we are 3 hours from Melbourne and people want to go to the city rather than the country. How do we get it right, so we do not have racism becoming embedded because people are unfamiliar with different cultural aspects that they think are strange and do not understand they are not strange, they are just different. I think there is a real opportunity to get something right this time rather than –

Erfan RAHIMY: Yes. Well, you could always try to reach out to the leaders of the communities and ask them if they can organise, let us say, a presentation. Have the schoolteachers gather for an hour and have someone from the community come and have a chat with them and explain the culture, or organise a PowerPoint that we can send through to the teachers so they can read through it and kind of understand and get a bit of a better background of how we operate, what are our beliefs, what do we think is good, what we think is bad – just because I think it would be more informative. Like, for example, if you go to the schools these days, you get educated on everything, every aspect of culture – politics, gender studies, LGBTIQ et cetera. We need to have one for cultures as well, and people from different cultures, because that can be, I reckon, as important as other subjects. Because as you said, the cultural mix is growing everywhere. To be able to attract them, you need to have attraction everywhere and people need to be able to understand that. Let us say, for example, the Dandenong area – there are a lot of Afghans over there just because they feel at home, because there are a lot of Afghan shops and a lot of people who speak the language et cetera. But at the same time, it is well known how their culture works – even people around them who are non-Afghan understand their culture. For example, if they have events, if they have Eid celebrations, if they have Ramadan, people kind of know what is going on and know what to do and what not to do – they kind of understand what to respect about them. I reckon if you do a bit of education towards organising – even if you send them a PowerPoint and a presentation, they can have a look at it. It does not have to be that big – probably 4 pages, 5 pages; we do not want to bore everyone out either. Or even asking them to make a video of about 5 minutes covering everything. I am pretty sure the communities will be happy to do that. Personally, in our Geelong Afghan community we would be more than happy to organise something like that and send it out to everyone so they can have a look at it and understand it.

Roma BRITNELL: I think we are doing a bit of that with the councils and the cultures, but we have got very few different cultures that we are exposed to at this point. I am sure it will change too over time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: I think this is absolutely wonderful – what you have got and what you are doing here. As a proud Irish Australian migrant who grew up in Geelong – my parents arrived down here in 1981 and I was brought up with my culture and heritage here, playing Irish sports, music, that sort of thing – I think what this is is absolutely wonderful. What I would like to know is: how do cultural factors impact the career choices of regional students from culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Roqya HUSSEINI: I think this impacts the perspective of parents as well. Parents really push you into a career where it will get them saying in the community, ‘Oh, my son is a doctor,’ and they will hold their head up. I think when I was enrolling a couple of students the other day, the teachers jokingly asked, ‘Can you translate to the parents what they want their son to be or daughter to be?’ And they all automatically said, ‘Doctor.’ I think changing that perspective on how not only being a doctor is up there but something like community work or things like that, which are kind of looked down on in our respective communities, especially by migrants who look up to the high-paying jobs or the high-title jobs. I really think that should change because we will need more people in different fields, but our parents are the main problem in this question, I am sorry.

John MULLAHY: That is on the record.

Erfan RAHIMY: It means supportive. They always support us into doing that.

Dylan WIGHT: You know this is on Hansard.

Erfan RAHIMY: To add to that, definitely I would say parents are very supportive. Coming from war zone areas, it is something they wanted to do and they never got the chance, so they want their children to be able to live their life, if that makes sense. That is why they are trying to push you to the best of your limit, if you understand. For example, my own mother pushed me either to be a lawyer or get into finance. I moved into finance. I like numbers more than reading a lot of legislation. I was like, ‘Oh, great, I’ll just move to that.’ There is an option. A lot of parents want that for their children – as she mentioned, a high-paid job and respect. Respect is a very big thing in our community, especially if someone is known as a doctor or a lawyer or engineer et cetera. But we need them to try to understand as well that other jobs are also as respected. She mentioned community work, also trades as well, and farming, which is basically the backbone of every country; without farmers we cannot have anything. Also trades as well – if there are no tradies, there are no bricklayers et cetera, we will not have any housing or buildings like where we are having the broadcast now. There are other things they need to be understanding of as well. It is a bit hard for some of our parents to get over the fact that ‘I flew out of the country just for my son to be a tradie,’ if that makes sense. Maybe the next generation – probably for the first generation it might be hard, but for the second or third generation it will become normalised, I reckon.

The CHAIR: You are not the first to say it to this inquiry. Young people have said that their parents are a big influence on what they want them to do. There is a bit of education maybe to do for parents as much as for students for careers.

Roqya HUSSEINI: Yes.

Erfan RAHIMY: Correct.

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

Erfan RAHIMY: No, it is all good.

The CHAIR: It went really quickly.

Erfan RAHIMY: It did.

The CHAIR: We could have chatted all afternoon. It was so wonderful for you to answer our questions. Thank you for all that you do in your communities, because it is really important. Thank you very much. We will end the broadcast.

Witnesses withdrew.