

# 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

Ken Massari, Assistant Principal, and

Richard Ellson, Centre Manager, Geelong Industry Trade Training Centre, Northern Bay College.

**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, Ken and Richard, for coming along today. We really appreciate it. I know who you are and what you do in the region, but I am sure the other committee members will have some questions about your experiences and your insights. What we might do is get you to introduce yourselves and your role at the school, and then we will go into questions.

**Richard ELLSON:** I am Richard Ellson. I am the GITTC Centre Manager. I have worked in the space for about 10 years, firstly as an engineering trainer with a fitting and turning background, as a high school teacher as well, and then I moved into the centre manager role two-and-a-bit years ago. That role encompasses mainly the day-to-day running of the centre, liaising with our host schools or our home schools that we deliver VET for as well as our other users of the space and their management teams, so lots of liaising with people, day-to-day running and looking after some curriculum things as well for our VET-delivered spaces. That is about it.

**Ken MASSARI:** I am Ken Massari. I am a longtime principal at Northern Bay College. I have been in that space since about 2007. I have been a principal for just on about 30 years. My role has been quite diverse. I find my current one is around student enrichment and community partnerships, and the management and oversight of the trade training centre is one of my favourite roles. We have had a lot to do with regard to compliance – as you can imagine, a workplace like that comes in contact with groups like VRQA and WorkSafe – so lots of that sort of stuff, making sure we remain compliant. But it is an exciting place and constantly emerging place.

**The CHAIR:** I suppose the difference, just for the other committee members, is it is at one of your campuses, one of your sites and it just looks like it is part of the high school, but it is like a mini TAFE, I would describe it as, onsite.

**Richard ELLSON:** Absolutely.

**Ken MASSARI:** It is on our Goldsworthy 9–12 campus, and it was built by a consortium of seven schools originally. When the federal government put out the response to the global financial crisis, that was to build trade training centres. We have a 25-year-plus history of delivering VET to a cluster of schools across the Geelong area, so it was a natural place for them to pool their money and say, 'Why don't we build one solid place, rather than all of us having a little fragment that we probably couldn't sustain separately?' It was used to prop up five main industries that we run.

**The CHAIR:** That is great. We will head to some questions that will I think help us with that. Dylan, I will go to you first.

**Dylan WIGHT:** The trade training centre is just an elite asset to assist local students with their VET pathway. Can you just expand and elaborate on how it does that?

**Richard ELLSON:** The trade training centre exists to provide vocational education and training, delivered to school students across our cluster schools in Geelong. We currently deal with about 17 schools this year.

**Ken MASSARI:** Government and private, just to stress that.

**Richard ELLSON:** Yes, government and private. They come to us Monday afternoons, Wednesday afternoons, Thursday afternoons. That fits in with their timetabling, trying to deal with a lot of schools and their individual structures. That has been a longstanding timeframe. They come to us across five different areas – so we have automotive, building and construction, cookery, engineering and salon assist – and we are always looking for other areas that we can deliver as well that meet student needs and industry needs. The students are working towards a certificate II in each of those areas alongside their normal high school studies. You have to be enrolled in a high school to be eligible to participate in those courses.

**Ken MASSARI:** On top of that too, on any given day you come to the centre you will see Victoria University running English level 1 and 2 classes for students between school – wanting to go to TAFE and finishing up their secondary schooling but not quite having the English skills to do that. We run a cert III in building and construction for VU as well onsite, which is a great pipeline for our cert II kids to see where it goes to after that. We also have Nelson Park, a specialist school next to us, where their students come and do their VET with us. They will bring in about 100 students to that program. We run our make-and-bake RTO, which is a cert II and cert III in bakery for students with disabilities, so it is quite inclusive at all times. It is a facility that does try to cater for everyone at all times.

**The CHAIR:** Is that all you have?

**Dylan WIGHT:** That is it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Roma.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I do not know, so excuse my ignorance, but why do you have a school in Geelong that does trades, is a mini TAFE and does the same thing as TAFE? Why don't the kids just go there full time and get the trade and the education in English, maths and whatever you need? Why does it operate the way it does?

**Richard ELLSON:** That is a good question.

**Ken MASSARI:** Probably if you look at the new VCE VM pathway, it is encouraging children to choose a subject that might lead to a career pathway for them. I guess being in that space they get that literacy and numeracy related to work in their own sites anyway. We offer five streams that we run our VET delivery –

**Roma BRITNELL:** No, I understand that, but why? Why doesn't it offer the whole education package and have a trade focus full-time? Why is it doing same thing as what TAFE are doing two days a week?

**Richard ELLSON:** As in you would have, say, a student that might be at Geelong High School –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Yes. Why aren't they just at your school?

**Richard ELLSON:** Why don't they just come to us? Probably location. They can be at their school, in their local neighbourhoods with all their zoning and whatever else applies, and then the transport that we rely on to get students to us. We are a very specialised area.

**Roma BRITNELL:** The system does not work for them.

**Richard ELLSON:** It would be very hard to have what we have got in their schools to the level that we can deliver it.

**Roma BRITNELL:** No, but why couldn't they just come to you?

**Ken MASSARI:** I would say it is the same answer –

**Roma BRITNELL:** The zoning.

**Ken MASSARI:** back to front. To us, we do not need to put in welfare staff and all the other mental health services we would see at a general school. They are not necessarily sure at that age what they want to do for their career pathway, so to commit to a program and leave their other school to purely align would be like going to an old-fashioned technical school. We say there is a need to have the technical subjects but still in a place where if I change my mind and want to do VCE and go on to university I could.

**Roma BRITNELL:** That is the difference between 40 years ago and today: the flexibility is more. They can flex back the other way.

**Ken MASSARI:** Yes. As Richard was saying, we have facilities that other schools would not be able to duplicate. Our technologies are probably a bit like a Geelong tech school here. You would look at the idea that: why would every school buy it to use it a couple of times a year, when they will use it all the way through the year here? We will focus on the one part, which is their actual five –

**Roma BRITNELL:** Okay, that has answered the first part of the question. The second part was: how are you different to TAFE?

**Richard ELLSON:** Our biggest difference to TAFE is that we are still a high school, so from a –

**Roma BRITNELL:** That does not answer the question for me as a non-teacher.

**Richard ELLSON:** I am getting there. A TAFE teacher will focus on more adult learning. As a high school teacher, we tend to work more with teenagers and their stage of learning and where they are at in their educational career.

**Roma BRITNELL:** I thought TAFE were doing year 9 and 10 transitions. That is what we have heard. Is that right?

**The CHAIR:** They can, but they are not attending a normal high school. They are outside of their school.

**Richard ELLSON:** Our core business is year 7s to 12s, so from a wellbeing point of view we are probably a bit more switched on with high school students than what a TAFE may be.

**Roma BRITNELL:** Gotcha. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I am just going to build on that. Are you finding it is students that may be considering disengaging from school and that your options give them a chance to try something new that is a different setting? Because mainstream is not obviously for everyone.

**Richard ELLSON:** When you say ‘setting’, the change in setting can actually be a trigger in those students. If they are at their normal high school, sometimes their behaviour does not change between classrooms. They come to us – they have had to hop on a bus, they are going to a different facility, and they mature with that. There is an expectation that they are going to behave and do the right thing and engage in the learning.

**Ken MASSARI:** We had a group of year 10 students who came to us that the school was really just trying to keep to year 11 and thought they needed to do something practical to do it. We said to them, ‘Those kids are amazing.’ They said, ‘You’re kidding me, aren’t you?’ Back at school they were struggling, but then they used that lever to say, ‘If you don’t do well at school, you can’t access this program,’ so we had probably 20 amazing year 10 kids that were switched on and focused. I think the setting can draw out some really good qualities if they are supported with the right gear.

**The CHAIR:** Just for our committee, because it is difficult if you have not seen it, it is almost that bridge. It feels like a little bit of a gap filler between maybe a TAFE and leaving school but still being in school, which has the supports and the networks that some of us have talked about. It is almost a bridging gap.

**Richard ELLSON:** And that bridge – you get to year 10, ‘What am I going to do? I can’t get an apprenticeship; I’ll do a VET course.’ You are successful in that, you have got some experience, and you go and get an apprenticeship. That takes you into the TAFE model, where that blends between the two.

**The CHAIR:** John.

**John MULLAHY:** How does Northern Bay College engage with local industry, and how can the Victorian government support collaboration between schools and local in-demand industries?

**Richard ELLSON:** We have some affiliations with local industries. In building and construction we have a network, essentially, with a local employer, so they can ask us, ‘Have you got any good kids that are suitable for an apprenticeship or anything?’ – work placements, all that sort of stuff. That is probably our biggest one.

**Ken MASSARI:** The VACC – we have got a strong relationship with the peak bodies. We work with the Master Builders Victoria, which is to align our programs to make sure we are still pitching the right messages that they are actually looking for in industry. We have had trade days where we bring in trade organisations and businesses to come and work and meet the kids and be involved in that space, especially for kids who have not had someone in the home who is working, necessarily, who could impart that information on. We see that as our biggest gap: for kids who do not have a network, we have got to try and find somebody for them. There are

many kids who maybe do not get involved with local sport where they might come into contact with another plumber or a carpenter or someone like that. Trying to build those to come into the building and meet our kids on a regular basis is an important step.

**Richard ELLSON:** We have a relationship with Victoria University, with them providing apprenticeship training as well. Our certificate II students are in the same building. They see what is happening down the other end of the room with the apprenticeship training. They are familiar with those trainers – the trainers are familiar with our students – and quite often our kids go off, get apprenticeships and come back in and do their apprenticeship training under the same roof. It is showing those pathways, that there are progressions through industry – ‘You can pick these courses and it’s not a dead end.’ We are always wanting to build on those as best we can.

**Ken MASSARI:** I think in some ways originally that partnership started because we did not get maintenance money for the trade training centre when they set them up. They gave us the shell and the original set-up, but beyond that we needed an income stream that was not going to be put back onto the students. Having VU want to hire the venue and use half of it, we just did not realise how amazing that partnership would become. Often if we have got a student who is not sure where they are going, they can go and speak to someone who is actually on a building site two or three days a week, meeting with apprentices, to say, ‘This is when you know you’re ready, this is what you’d be doing, this is how you feel about your job.’ It became a really good opportunity for us that way.

**Roma BRITNELL:** So you were set up with no sustainability, and you found your own way of being sustainable?

**Ken MASSARI:** We had to. We hire out the make-and-bake, the RTO that runs out of the National Food Institute – they hire our other kitchen, and then five days a week they are running their programs and school-based apprenticeships for students. So it has helped us that way. Last year we got our first maintenance money, and we were able to finally put air conditioners and things into the place that make the facilities more modern. This year we had the challenge of having to put a couple more air conditioners in, because every room is being hired out for different purposes. It is a nice way, and I think it adds to what you see on a given day in the centre that people are talking. Kids can speak to apprentices, our English learning students can be having conversations with other people and building that English skill up. It is working quite well.

**Richard ELLSON:** There is a busyness to it. It is a really nice place to be.

**The CHAIR:** Kim, we might head to you.

**Kim O’KEEFFE:** Thank you so much for joining us. Sorry I cannot be there in person today. I am actually interested in what some of the main challenges are that you are perhaps facing as a regional school when it comes to student career education, and how can the Victorian government support regional schools to overcome some of these challenges that you can present to us?

**Richard ELLSON:** I think one of our biggest challenges, certainly from a VET perspective, is getting kids to our facility with bus transport. There is lots of talk around our VET cluster that we meet regularly with about funding for buses and how tight that funding is. We can offer many classes, but if we have not got the bus funding to get kids in at particular times or dates, we cannot run anything. We cannot provide it.

**Kim O’KEEFFE:** That has become a common theme, actually. Transport has been a major roadblock that we are hearing.

**Richard ELLSON:** Yes. And in a regional centre we do not have those connected transport services where you can hop on a tram or a bus or a train and go from point A to point B. Usually in a place like Geelong a service is going to come from an outlying suburb into the city and then have to go back out again, as a hub. That takes a long time. In a car or a bus what might be a 20-minute or half-hour journey could turn into a 2-hour journey on public transport, and for students that is not a viable exercise.

**Kim O’KEEFFE:** I am based in Shepparton too, so – yes, sorry to interrupt you.

**Richard ELLSON:** Yes, you would be the same.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** In Shepparton we feel it across the board, across everything, not only education transport but as a community. It is very different, yes.

**Ken MASSARI:** One of the things compounding it too is if we then get a structured workplace learning opportunity for a student to go and work with a builder – same issue. They have got to get to a building site. If it is greenfields and it is in a suburb that is just emerging in a paddock somewhere, getting from your area to there can be really difficult if you are meant to be there at 6 o'clock in the morning or 7 o'clock in the morning. It is looking at: does the City of Greater Geelong put on a bus for tradies that comes from an outlying place and has certain pick-up points in order to get them to these building sites? So we can do all the work to prepare somebody, and we have found probably in the last 12 months we went from seven building construction classes in 2025 to dropping back to five this year. Our numbers are coming back a little bit as people go there are not many jobs out there and it is difficult to get to a building site. If you are in an area which is high density and the building is going on all around you, again, you might be able to use your local transport to get you there, but the more regional you become, the quicker you are on an outskirt with no transport.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Kim.

**Richard ELLSON:** One of our other funding issues that is popping up is because of the age of our centre. It has been in operation for around about 14 years. Some of our equipment is – and I am not talking necessarily cordless drills and things like that – lathes, milling machines, big table saws that they use in building construction. It is getting tired and it needs replacing, or there is a new piece of equipment that is now more used in industry than what we have got. So we need to have some sort of –

**Ken MASSARI:** Innovation grant.

**Richard ELLSON:** innovation grant of being able to replace that equipment. It is not something you do every year. They are 10, 15-year life cycles, to be able to be at the forefront of that technology, so that we are able to deliver what is current to our students. That is another factor that we need to look at.

**Ken MASSARI:** A good example of that would be our plasma cutter, a wonderful tool for students to link using a computer for 3D CAD drawing, applying it to a machine and then getting a piece of product being built at the other end. The software just cannot be updated. It has reached its life. It would be like us using our computer at home for more than 10 years. You would start saying there are certain things you just cannot update, and so ours are hitting those sorts of milestones.

**Richard ELLSON:** And that is a \$40,000 to \$50,000 replacement for that machine. So it is not cheap.

**Ken MASSARI:** We are talking about –

**Richard ELLSON:** But it gets used every class, almost.

**Ken MASSARI:** Things like our welding tools – do we go to a laser type of welder instead, which is starting to enter the industry, and show young people: this is the next wave of tools, so if you are going out, this is what you will be expected to use on your site? To go back and say, 'We're still using technologies that were fine 20 years ago' – we are not going to be contemporary, and our training packages take a while to update. So they can remain sort of where they will say something like, 'You can use this, but you are not limited to it.' Really it is starting to open the scope up to say, 'Think about what is contemporary,' and I think that is not possible when the costs of some of those machines are really exorbitant.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, we are nearly running out of time. I am really conscious of that, but I just really want to ask a quick question around – you are giving students a real taste, and we have heard that that is a really important part of seeing what they like but also maybe not like. Are you finding your students are continuing on with the trade when they start with you and go off to do an apprenticeship? Are they staying with it?

**Richard ELLSON:** Usually.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Richard ELLSON:** We do get an element of students that come to us because it is part of their schooling and they are not sure of what they want to do. The majority of our kids have got a fairly well defined idea of what it is they want to do.

**Ken MASSARI:** Our completion rates are high.

**Richard ELLSON:** Yes, very high.

**Ken MASSARI:** The interesting one is that a student might do building construction – we do the carpentry stream – but they might finish up and go into electrical or into plumbing, which we think is great, because they have got an idea of how to use tools and they have got their white card and they have maybe learned how to use scaffolding and so on. It does not deny them going into other pathways. They have gone into a trade, and we think that the exposure they have had in the two years with us has helped them learn how to study in an adult learning environment.

**Richard ELLSON:** And a high percentage of our students that actually do not finish our courses have actually gone and got an apprenticeship before they finished our course.

**The CHAIR:** Right. Before they finish – so that is the path they have chosen.

**Richard ELLSON:** That is a great outcome for us, because we have given them that ability to go and get an apprenticeship.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I am so sorry, we have to wrap up, but thank you for all you do, because you are very unique in what you are offering and it gives us a great insight into what possibly could work, because we are looking for new solutions. Thank you so much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**