

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 20 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Colin Brooks MP, Minister for Skills and TAFE; and

Matt Carrick, Secretary,

Lill Healy, Deputy Secretary, Skills and TAFE, and

David Miller, Chief Executive Officer, Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting, the lands of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to them and their elders past, present and emerging, as well as to elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings, and anything you say, no matter how quietly you say it, can be picked up.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

I welcome the Minister for Skills and TAFE the Honourable Colin Brooks as well as officials from DJSIR. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Colin BROOKS: Thank you very much, Chair. At the outset, can I introduce the officials with me today. I think you all know Matt Carrick, the Secretary, who appeared I think yesterday. We also have Lill Healy, who is the Deputy Secretary, skills and employment, and David Miller, who is the CEO of the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, with us at the table today. As the first minister up, can I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Colin BROOKS: I will just run through this presentation. As members would know, the skills and TAFE portfolio helps to strengthen Victoria's economy by backing in free TAFE and providing opportunities for Victorians to get skills they need and to address skills shortages. Since 2014 the Victorian government has allocated more than \$5.7 billion to TAFEs and tertiary education, including \$714 million in TAFE capital projects. As of March this year free TAFE has helped over 245,000 students save a total of \$816 million, and that is a saving per person on average of around \$3300, so a really great cost-of-living relief measure for people looking to skill up or to re-skill.

The Victorian skills plan guides learners and industry and providers, with Victoria expected to gain more than 373,000 new workers by 2028, including at least 185,000 who will need a VET qualification. So that is effectively setting out the task in front of us, making sure that workforce is skilled up.

Next slide. Compared to 2022, there was a 13 per cent increase in TAFE enrolments and a 29 per cent increase in free TAFE enrolments. In 2025 more than 55,000 people were enrolled in apprenticeships, and more than 12,000 were apprentice electricians, a 27 per cent increase in apprentice electricians over the last five years, something very close to my heart as a former electrician. The apprenticeship completion rate was 63 per cent in 2025, the highest it has been in almost a decade. 82,931 government-funded VET students completed their course, the second-highest figure in five years. More than 60 per cent of VET completers reported improved employment status following their training.

Next slide. Since eligibility for subsidised training and free TAFE was expanded in 2023 – some members will remember us expanding that eligibility to allow more people to participate – more than 83,000 Victorians have reskilled, and more than 60 per cent have been women. Free TAFE is such an important labour market activation tool, as I mentioned before, attracting people who had previously not been willing or able to enrol at TAFE. You can see on the slide some of the cohorts that have accessed free TAFE since 2019.

Next slide. The 2026–27 budget includes funding of \$459.4 million over four years for initiatives in the skills and TAFE portfolio. \$244 million will provide for 59,000 more subsidised training places, including around 15,000 more free TAFE places. In total for the 2027 training year, we will continue supporting more than 300,000 Victorians on their career journey. Many of those places will be taken up by people starting an apprenticeship or a traineeship. Those new apprentices and trainees will benefit from \$5.8 million for support services and to improve safety and increase the number of apprentices and trainees completing their qualifications, including, importantly, the continuation of the Apprentice Helpdesk.

Slide 6. Earlier this year, we made the TAFE funding guarantee law – members will remember that going through the Parliament – meaning that at least 70 per cent of VET funding will go to TAFEs, including through free TAFE. This budget delivers on that promise and includes \$87.2 million for the TAFE Services Fund to continue to provide wraparound support services for TAFE students – services we know help more people to start TAFE but also, importantly, to complete their qualifications. The fund supports around 250,000 Victorian students who are currently enrolled in TAFEs. There is \$10 million for upgrades to TAFE campuses, including the funding to make TAFE campuses more accessible for people with a disability, and new equipment for students at Wodonga TAFE who are studying clean energy training. There is \$5.4 million to deliver in partnership with the Australian government a VET educator academy. This will help to retain teachers by offering professional development and attracting new talent into the system with earn-and-learn pathways for people starting a career as an educator.

Next slide. In partnership with the Australian government, we are also investing in three new TAFE centres of excellence, which will lead the nation in applied research and industry collaboration.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 7 minutes is going to the Deputy Chair.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. Minister, I refer you to page 81 of the ‘Department Performance Statement’, table 16. Minister, why has one of your first acts been to cut the skills training budget by 4.2 per cent?

Colin BROOKS: What was the budget reference, please, Deputy Chair?

John PESUTTO: ‘Department Performance Statement’, table 16 –

Colin BROOKS: Yes.

John PESUTTO: and the DJSIR questionnaire, pages 94 and 95.

Colin BROOKS: Sorry, I have got the reference in front of me now. That output has not been cut. If you refer to the note attached to that table, it indicates that there is in fact a slight increase in the funding available for skills and TAFE. What has changed over the budget papers has been the apportionment of training not delivered by this department to other departments to be better reflected in the budget papers.

John PESUTTO: Minister, why does Victoria have the lowest government vocational education and training as VET funding in the nation?

Colin BROOKS: I think I heard you say that in the debate on the free TAFE Bill, Mr Pesutto, so I beavered away and found the figures that you were referring to. Firstly, the figures I think come from the report on government services by the Productivity Commission or the NCVER report. That data is based on informational data from 2024, so it is not recent data. But even if we look at that, I am advised now that Victoria funds more expenditure per student than three other states or territories, so the claim –

Richard RIORDAN: The Northern Territory, Tasmania –

Colin BROOKS: No, two states and I think one territory: ACT, Queensland and South Australia. We are not at the top, and I think there is a fair point to be made here that we want an efficient training system. Victoria has some advantages in terms of its geography and existing strength in TAFE infrastructure and VET infrastructure, so you want an efficient system. If we were here spending by far the most per person in TAFE expenditure, you would be asking me why our training is much more expensive than other states. So the most recent data puts us above a few states and below a few others. It is important to note that data as well, Mr Pesutto. The data shows that in that 2024 year, which is the most recent data, which I think you were referring to as well, per person expenditure rose by 7.7 per cent from 2023 to \$376 per person aged 15 to 64 years compared with the previous year. So it has risen, and we are not at the bottom.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Minister. The Productivity Commission's findings in February this year show that real recurrent VET expenditure per annual hour in Victoria has plummeted by 18 per cent from \$23.77 per hour in 2020 to \$19.44 per hour in 2024 and is now the lowest in the nation. Why is your government spending the lowest on training students in the country?

Colin BROOKS: I think you have just asked the same question that I have just answered.

John PESUTTO: Referencing other data, do you care to respond to the Productivity Commission itself?

Colin BROOKS: I think that data they are referring to is data from 2024. Let me come back if that is not right, but my understanding is that data is 2024 data, so the answer that I would give to that question is the same one: we are not at the bottom, we are not spending the lowest and in fact in 2024 expenditure per student rose by 7.7 per cent.

John PESUTTO: Minister, Victoria has skills shortages in most sectors, including education, construction and the care economy. How can you meet industry needs if your government has the lowest VET funding in the country and is further cutting the training budget by 4.2 per cent?

Colin BROOKS: It is a good, genuine question. I would say to you, though, firstly, that I would reject that premise that we are spending the lowest. I have just indicated that we are not and there has been an increase. What I would say is that the figures that I mentioned in my opening presentation – just more than 185,000 VET-trained workers required by the year 2028 – mean that we have a task in front of us to make sure that we train those people up and in particular that we train them in those priority areas that the economy needs and where people want to work. It is exactly why we have the Victorian skills plan, to set out the priorities in skills and training, and then we commission a sector to deliver training in those priority areas. If you take free TAFE as an example, the investment that I spoke about in free TAFE and the increased uptake of students coming into free TAFE, that provides training in those priority areas to make sure that we are targeting the training dollar at where the priority needs are in the economy, so the care economy, construction, manufacturing and so on.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Minister. The Productivity Commission has also found that Victoria continues to have the lowest rate of students completing VET qualifications per capita in the nation, with the exception of the ACT, with student satisfaction levels at or below national averages. Minister, do you accept Victoria has the worst skills and training outcomes in the nation?

Colin BROOKS: No, I do not. I think this is a question that gets a run every year at PAEC around completion rates. The first thing I would say around completion rates is that the data that is often cited in relation to completion rates includes overall VET data in Victoria. We are not really comparing the same datasets or apples with apples with other states. For example, here in Victoria some of the data includes people who were in VET programs in prisons and VET in schools, which is not included in other states' data. Firstly, there is an issue around comparing apples with apples. NCVER, for example, an organisation who reports on

this, has publicly acknowledged that that is the case. The second thing is that NCVET has reported that Victoria has a 53.8 per cent completion rate for Skills First–equivalent programs in 2025. That is above the national average for equivalent programs, of 51.7 per cent. I would also argue that completion rates are only part of the picture in terms of judging the success of the skills and training sector. It is important to remember that one of the main reasons people enrol in TAFE, if you look at the data from the surveys for people coming into the VET system, TAFE and skills, is people primarily –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. I will stop you there. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister, Secretary, officials. Thanks for joining us. Minister, budget paper 3, page 63 talks to investment in further TAFE centres of excellence. Minister, what is a TAFE centre of excellence?

Colin BROOKS: Thanks very much, Mr Galea. We are really proud to be partnering with the Australian government to deliver four centres of excellence in key priority industry areas, which goes to the question that was just asked by Mr Pesutto about the particular areas where we need to see an increase in training. This is jointly funded by Victoria and the federal government through the National Skills Agreement. I had the privilege – based off the hard work of the previous minister Gayle Tierney, who I should pay tribute to at this early stage for the work she has done in the portfolio – to officially open and announce funding for the TAFE centre of excellence for renewable energy down at TAFE Gippsland in my first couple of weeks on the job. It was one of those ones that we have funded with the federal government. They address the key skills needs in priority areas and then build a curriculum and courses. The concept is then, importantly, to share that excellence with the rest of the TAFEs across the whole country. The four that we have announced with the federal government here in Victoria will effectively lead the way for these critical areas in the economy for TAFE education and training right across the country.

I have mentioned the TAFE centre of excellence for renewable energy. There is a digital AI and technology centre of excellence led by Chisholm down in Frankston. There is a Home And Community Care Centre Of Excellence led by Holmesglen Institute, and there is the Future of Housing Construction Centre of Excellence led by Melbourne Polytechnic. I had the chance to visit very briefly that centre of excellence a couple of weeks ago as well. Members will be aware of the critical importance of us growing our modern methods of construction, the prefab housing sector, to help meet the housing challenge we have, so this is a great opportunity for Victorians to get the latest skills in that sector to be able to help us meet the housing challenge with jobs of the future in many respects.

Independently from the Australian government and those four centres of excellence that I have mentioned, Victoria has for some time, due to the work of colleagues at the table here and the previous minister, established centres of excellence in Victoria, standalone centres of excellence, where the concept will be to share that excellence with other TAFEs across Victoria. Those centres of excellence are Kangan Institute's Automotive Centre of Excellence at Docklands; Melbourne Poly's Advanced Manufacturing Centre of Excellence in Heidelberg; – again, I had the chance to visit that centre, a great place, and meet some of the apprentices there who are working either in an apprenticeship with employment or doing a preapprenticeship course – Kangan Institute Health and Community Care Centre of Excellence in Broadmeadows; and the Gordon Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion in Geelong, which commenced construction in March 2026. Four of those are national centres of excellence at TAFE, and four are here in Victoria.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. It is obviously great to have the skills and everything that comes with it not just in a central location but across the suburbs and across the regions. You touched on the one at Holmesglen, the Home and Community Care Centre of Excellence. Can you talk to me a bit more about that?

Colin BROOKS: Yes. This will be located at the Moorabbin campus of Holmesglen. Again, it will provide for the development of curricula and training that are world-leading – things like home-based care, virtual care, telehealth and telemedicine, making sure that Victorians moving into that field have the very best training in those particular parts of the care economy. The key feature of the centre of excellence will be a smart house – there is a gag there about Parliament, but I will not go there – with adaptive technology where learners can train to deliver safe and effective in-home care in a simulated environment using AI and robotics. The centre of excellence will also develop and implement the innovation testbed for technology and product developers and a co-location site for existing research in educational institutions, healthcare providers and community service

providers as well. So it is really bringing research into the centre of excellence, along with training of students as well. New micro-credentials will deliver skills to fulfil new and different roles emerging through technological transformation in home and community care. This is a really important facet of all of the centres of excellence, the ability for them to be able to provide micro-credentials or modules that people can build into their careers. It might be a nurse or a care worker who is looking to get a qualification in a particular micro-credential or module and then be able to skill up in that particular area. As I said, it is immersing students not just in the great training there but having the ability to engage with industry as well.

Michael GALEA: I am particularly keen on the digital AI and technology one, because it is in my electorate in Frankston, certainly with the brilliant new Chisholm campus there, or upgraded Chisholm campus – a very, very impressive site right in the centre of Frankston. Can you talk to me about what this program is going to do and how that is going to support the local industry and economy in Frankston too?

Colin BROOKS: Yes, absolutely. The Victorian skills plan calls out the need for us to really prepare the Victorian workforce for AI and changes in digital tech, and this centre of excellence will be right at the very heart of that learning. It is the ability for people to upskill or re-skill and take advantage of those new technologies. I think there is a great level of concern amongst many people in the community at the moment about what AI means for their jobs, and what we are aiming to do with this is to make sure we give people the skills to utilise and harness AI rather than be affected in a negative way by it. So this will accelerate those pathways, and as I said, those learnings will be shared right across the TAFE network. Some key features of that centre of excellence will be, at the Frankston campus for Chisholm, foundational digital skills, which are really critical to bringing people in who have got very low digital skills and getting them engaged in the workforce, AI and big data.

Michael GALEA: It sounds like it could be for our committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister. Morning, officials. I want to talk about – the reference is ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 81, table 16, ‘Output summary’. Minister, the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union on 5 May this year was scathing of your budget, stating:

The Victorian state budget released today ... fails to invest properly in Victorian TAFEs.

Do you agree with the union that your budget has left TAFEs undervalued and underfunded?

Colin BROOKS: Can I just check: when was the date of the comment that you are referring to?

Jade BENHAM: 5 May this year.

Colin BROOKS: And who made the comment?

Jade BENHAM: The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union.

Colin BROOKS: Okay. I was not aware of that comment.

Jade BENHAM: Do you agree with it?

Colin BROOKS: I was not aware of the comment. I would say that our budget invests strongly in TAFE and skills across the state. I am here to talk about the investment we are making, and I have just outlined that to you.

Jade BENHAM: They were commenting on that on budget day. So you do not agree with their assessment?

Colin BROOKS: Well, I am just saying I am not aware of that comment, so I am not going to reflect on a comment that I am not sure of.

Jade BENHAM: Well, Minister, the AEU also stated:

There is nothing in the budget papers to suggest the Allan Labor Government is doing anything to close the funding gap between Victorian TAFEs and TAFEs in other states and territories.

Do you agree with that assessment of the AEU?

Colin BROOKS: What I would say is that there has been a significant investment in skills and TAFE in our budget, investing more than a billion dollars a year in Skills First training places. This has continued into 2026. The budget, as I have just mentioned in my opening remarks, invests some \$459.4 million into the skills and TAFE portfolio – the 15,000 free TAFE places, the training in the centres of excellence that I have just talked about. So this is a big skills and training budget, I would say.

Jade BENHAM: Those comments from the Australian Education Union are printed on their website in the media section. So you are unaware of a major stakeholder in your portfolio making those comments?

Colin BROOKS: I am not going to refer to comments. People are welcome to make comments about the budget, and different stakeholders have different views.

Jade BENHAM: It is a pretty big stakeholder, though.

Colin BROOKS: You are asking me for some opinions on things, and I am just telling you what my opinion is on the budget, which is that it is a strong skills and TAFE budget.

Jade BENHAM: So what was the figure then? You were speaking about Skills First training. Haven't you cut that funding?

Colin BROOKS: No, we are investing over a billion dollars in Skills First training places.

Jade BENHAM: What were you spending?

Colin BROOKS: About the same as last year.

Jade BENHAM: About the same as last year – what were the exact figures?

Colin BROOKS: I can run through it if you are happy for me to take the time.

Jade BENHAM: Please.

Colin BROOKS: Thank you. There is more than a billion dollars a year in Skills First training places, and this investment continues, including funding for more free TAFE places. As I said, there are 15,000 new free TAFE places – that is part of the \$459.4 million in initiatives for the skills and TAFE portfolio. There is \$243.9 million to deliver government-subsidised training; \$87.2 million for the TAFE Services Fund; \$50 million to deliver the Victorian Renewable Energy TAFE Centre of Excellence at TAFE Gippsland, connecting hubs in Ballarat and Warrnambool; \$30 million to deliver the digital, AI and tech centre of excellence that I have just spoken about at Chisholm Institute's campus in Frankston; \$20.7 million to deliver a Home and Community Care TAFE Centre of Excellence at Holmesglen; \$10 million to make TAFE more accessible to people with disabilities and additional needs –

Jade BENHAM: So what was the figure last year?

Colin BROOKS: There is more, so hang on. There is \$6.5 million to turbocharge the VET workforce, improving the skills and capacity of the VET workforce in clean energy manufacturing construction; \$5.8 million to improve safety and support for apprentices and trainees; and \$5.4 million to deliver, in partnership with the Commonwealth government, a VET educator academy at Chisholm Institute.

Jade BENHAM: So what was the figure from last year?

Colin BROOKS: Which figure?

Jade BENHAM: The total figure for the Skills First training. I do not need a breakdown. That whole figure comes to a sum of parts.

Colin BROOKS: I am just getting you the output out of the budget paper.

Jade BENHAM: That would be great.

Mathew HILAKARI: 15,000 extra students – I thought that was the relevant number.

Colin BROOKS: It is in the budget paper, on page 95.

Jade BENHAM: Which budget paper?

Colin BROOKS: It is the ‘Department Performance Statement’ 2026–27, at the bottom of page 95, ‘Total output cost’. I think this goes to a question that was asked by Mr Pesutto, so I am just checking that it is the same question or a different question. The 2025–26 target was \$2.2 billion, and the 2026–27 target is \$2.294 billion.

Jade BENHAM: \$2.294 billion?

Colin BROOKS: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: That was last year’s.

Colin BROOKS: I will give you the exact figures.

Richard RIORDAN: But your expected outcome was \$2.3 billion, so it is actually less than last year’s.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, I was going to say – so how is that not a cut?

Colin BROOKS: Because we are budgeting more this year than we budgeted for last year. It is not a cut.

Jade BENHAM: That appears that it is less. I am not quite sure how that math maths. We potentially need a TAFE course in maths.

Colin BROOKS: No, no. The 2025–26 target was \$2.2017 billion.

Jade BENHAM: \$2.2017 billion – yes.

Colin BROOKS: The 2026–27 target is \$2.2943 billion.

Jade BENHAM: What were the actuals from last year?

Lauren KATHAGE: Page 95.

Colin BROOKS: It is on the budget papers here.

Jade BENHAM: What were the actuals from last year?

Michael GALEA: Do you have the budget paper there?

Jade BENHAM: I do have it in front of me.

Richard RIORDAN: The minister can read it.

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Colin BROOKS: The expected outcome is \$2.3395 billion.

Jade BENHAM: \$2.3395 billion – okay, so why is the budget for this year less than what it actually cost the government this year?

Colin BROOKS: If you look at the notes to the budget papers – have you got the budget papers in front of you?

Jade BENHAM: I do.

Colin BROOKS: So you will see the note that explains that just below the figures.

Jade BENHAM: And that is? I would like it on record, please, Minister.

Colin BROOKS: Do you want me to read it out or do you want to read it out?

Jade BENHAM: That is fine. It is fine.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is on record. The budget papers have been published.

Colin BROOKS: There is a note to the budget there.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, I know. I am trying to understand Labor maths and how the formulas seem to be different for the Labor government than it is for the rest of us, that is all. I am going to move on now. In the TAFE annual reports tabled last sitting week, can you explain why the aggregate spending across all TAFEs on general consultancies is at least \$32 million?

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Chair, Minister and officials. I am really excited to ask about free TAFE, and I can see it listed there on page 63 of BP 3. Are you able to explain what sorts of opportunities are available through free TAFE?

Colin BROOKS: Yes, thanks very much for that question. I am really proud that free TAFE has been taken up with such gusto by Victorians and people moving in to do training. In the current year we have some 80 different free TAFE courses without the cost of tuition fees, as I said before, in industries such as construction, health care, community services, cybersecurity and agriculture. They cover a range of different qualifications and short courses – so, not just different topics and subject matter but also things like certificates, diplomas and advanced diplomas, pre-apprenticeship courses, which are very popular, and short courses.

Now, as you will know, we have enshrined the free TAFE guarantee in legislation, and we are doing this to make sure that we have got that pipeline of skilled workers. As I mentioned before, the Victorian skills plan identifies that we are going to need 185 VET-trained workers by 2028, and free TAFE is a key part of our plan to make sure we meet those targets. For those eligible for free TAFE, all the tuition fees are covered by both the Australian and Victorian governments, who partnered to fund free TAFE. More than 245,000 students have benefited from free TAFE since it began in 2019, and that has saved more than \$816 million in total. That averages out as about a \$3,300 saving for each student. That includes 61,900 students who study in regional Victoria.

Since 2019 free TAFE has also benefited 141,600 women, 73,800 multicultural students, 24,700 Victorians with a disability and 60,300 unemployed people. Not only is it a great way to boost participation in core areas of training that we need for our economy and not only is it a great cost-saving measure for Victorians who are obviously impacted by the global cost of living and Australian cost-of-living issues but it is also really important for many people in those cohorts that I have just mentioned, who would otherwise find barriers to getting into the workforce or into training. It plays a really important role for those people in our community with disability, people who are unemployed, people from multicultural communities and women who are looking to return to the workforce, for example, to be able to get in and make sure that they are all able to participate fully in the workforce.

Lauren KATHAGE: What about this year? How many are we expecting this year, and what is that trend like? Is it increasing?

Colin BROOKS: Yes, this year we are expecting to train around 59,000 students in subsidised places, including 15,000 more free TAFE places, and ensure that people who are currently in that free TAFE course do not have to pay tuition fees. As I mentioned earlier – it might have been to a question that Mr Galea asked or maybe Mr Pesutto, I cannot remember – commencements in free TAFE increased by 7 per cent in 2025 compared to the previous year, and that growth has continued into 2026, with an 11 per cent increase in free TAFE. You can see the popularity and the success of this program by the really significant increases in uptake of the free TAFE courses. I might leave it at that. Thank you.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Why is the government investing in free TAFE? Why is it a priority?

Colin BROOKS: It goes probably to those issues that I just spoke to. One of the key reasons is that it provides a significant cost-of-living relief measure – that is, people who would otherwise struggle to find the

tuition fees, or businesses who might pay the tuition fees for a TAFE student, do not have to bear those costs. It helps Victorians to get those skills that they need in the areas that we have determined as priority course areas, and they are specifically chosen to make sure that we have got in those priority areas a pipeline of workers coming through the system.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. That investment then, do you see it as reaching or delivering the outcomes that we are wanting?

Colin BROOKS: Yes. Again, I did mention this earlier on, but aside from the completion rates, the really important measure here, when you look at the data for the reasons that people do VET training, do TAFE training, is around improving their employment prospects, either a promotion to learn new skills at the current workplace or help them get back into the workplace. Recently the Victorian TAFE Association released some work by the Nous Group, which shows that 91 per cent of TAFE students achieve their employment-related study goals. That is an incredible figure – 91 per cent – and that means really high levels of satisfaction that people have with the TAFE sector to be able to deliver those employment outcomes. The very reason that they go in, in most cases, to study in TAFE is borne out in the stats once those people have left, that they have achieved those goals either fully or partially in terms of what they went to TAFE for in the first place.

Completion rates I have mentioned for free TAFE: 52.6 per cent of students who commenced a free TAFE course in 2022 completed it by 2025. By comparison, the national average completion rate was 48.6 per cent for students who commenced government-funded vocational education and training in 2020 and completed their courses in a four-year period, so good completion rates. Nonetheless, as I say, that should not be the only measure we look at when we look at the reasons that people enter free TAFE.

Lauren KATHAGE: Just going back to that page 95 and the difference between actuals last year and the target, I can see that funding was released from contingency for boosting access to free TAFE so even more people could participate in TAFE last year because the demand was so high. I think it is great that the government showed that flexibility to make sure that everybody who wants to access free TAFE can, and it will be interesting to see what the actuals are then for this financial year.

Colin BROOKS: Absolutely. That might be a question that comes soon.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Thank you. Minister, to finish off the question that my colleague wanted to ask: in the TAFE annual reports tabled last sitting week, can you explain why the aggregate spending across all TAFEs on general consultancy is at least \$32 million?

Colin BROOKS: I will take that one on notice.

Richard RIORDAN: You will take that on notice. Okay, that is great. On that note, I assume you will have to put this on notice as well: what are the main reasons for TAFEs engaging with so many consultants? Like, is it a special project or is there a lack of skills within the department to deal with it?

Colin BROOKS: I might ask Mr Miller to answer that question.

David MILLER: Thanks for the question. It is typically targeted around particular projects. The reason for TAFE engagement with consultancies often goes to ICT uplift around key systems and things that need to be continually improved. It is a level of expertise that just does not exist within the sector, so they need to buy in additional support. It is also for major capital and infrastructure projects where you are bringing in a lot of design consultants to inform the different processes and steps along capital build projects.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Thank you. Minister, a Silver review recommendation supported by the government was that the TAFE sector should undertake shared service reform to reduce duplication of processes, deliver efficiencies and improve student experience. Silver said these reforms could result in \$36 million in savings over the next four years. Is there anything in this budget that helps to achieve those expected savings?

Colin BROOKS: Yes. In relation to the Silver review, it is probably important for this committee that I just put on record the government's response to the Silver review as it pertains to this portfolio. There were three

broad recommendations that I will just quickly run through. I should say that these recommendations will be implemented through a continued system approach that seeks to overcome sector fragmentation and that seeks to improve efficiencies and support the delivery of high-quality services. In relation to the first recommendation, the current work towards shared services, common platforms, improved digital infrastructure and stronger administrative capability across the network will continue so that TAFEs can operate more efficiently and focus on student outcomes.

Richard RIORDAN: So for example, Minister, in this budget, what are you –

Colin BROOKS: I am going to come to that. Let me just quickly – the second recommendation was that mergers of TAFEs will be considered only when they are voluntary, such as the recent creation of Northern Victoria Institute of TAFE, which is the new entity bringing together GOTAFE and Wodonga TAFE to enable shared capabilities and resources to benefit students in the north of Victoria. And the last one, just quickly: the TAFE network will continue to assess its land holdings in line with Victorian government land-holding policies. In relation to the specific question around the budget, I will hand over to Mr Miller again.

David MILLER: Thanks, Minister. Thanks again for the question. There are a couple of key investments over the last couple of budgets that have supported and continue to support TAFEs transitioning to more shared services models of delivery. One of those was in the 2024–25 budget that provided support for the development of shared courseware. This goes to the –

Richard RIORDAN: What does this budget have in it, though?

David MILLER: That was over multiple years – the funding that was there for that year. Some of the other work that you would say contributes to that work is in the COEs that were funded this year.

Richard RIORDAN: Are we seeing in this budget – and then perhaps predicted into the next budget – any of that \$36 million worth of savings?

David MILLER: I would not describe them as savings per se but freeing up the capacity at TAFE to focus on other types of activities. I note that they are identified in savings –

Richard RIORDAN: So does that mean you are ignoring the Silver review on that?

Colin BROOKS: No. I have just outlined the government's response.

Richard RIORDAN: You have outlined what the Silver review did, but I am just asking: in the budget specifically, how is it identifying that \$36 million? It is not.

David MILLER: No, the budget does not specifically identify those.

Richard RIORDAN: If you are not acting on the \$36 million worth of efficiencies – the third point you made, Minister, was about asset sales. Have you identified or done a shortlist of any potential asset sales from TAFE?

Colin BROOKS: This is a work in progress. It is something that I have not made any decisions on at this point in time. Can I say that not only will this proceed on the basis of the Victorian government land-holding policy, I will ensure that there will be no TAFE campuses closed, unlike what happened under a previous government.

Richard RIORDAN: Well, we know how you opened up some TAFEs.

Colin BROOKS: And there won't be –

Richard RIORDAN: I will come and show you some closed TAFE properties if you like, Minister.

Colin BROOKS: There will not be any campus closures and there will not be any impact on the delivery of TAFE services.

Richard RIORDAN: So just to be clear on the Silver review, for your department there were \$36 million of efficiencies which we are not acting on and you have not yet done a list of \$500 million-odd worth of potential asset –

Colin BROOKS: What you have just said does not represent the answer that I have just given you. I have just –

Richard RIORDAN: I am just putting it back to you. I am just trying to –

Colin BROOKS: With respect, I have just outlined our response to the Silver review, the work that is happening, and Mr Miller has given you an answer about that.

Richard RIORDAN: But the work that is happening is supposed to result in savings to government, right? Do we agree on that?

Colin BROOKS: Yes.

Richard RIORDAN: So we have not got anything in this budget for the \$36 million in efficiencies, and we are not really taking action on assets.

Colin BROOKS: No, that is not what I said.

Richard RIORDAN: So you have got a list that is identified asset sales?

Colin BROOKS: That is not what I said. We are working through –

Richard RIORDAN: How can you have asset sales if you have not identified them?

Colin BROOKS: We are working through all of those recommendations that I have just mentioned to you.

Richard RIORDAN: Right. So there is no benefit to the budget, certainly this year.

Colin BROOKS: Mr Miller has just answered this question.

Richard RIORDAN: So there is nothing this year. Okay. All right.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Riordan. Do not put words in the mouth of the minister. Minister, if you just want to clarify –

Richard RIORDAN: Well, we have to have a definitive outcome. The question is: have we got efficiencies in this budget? And the answer is no. And I think the committee can work with that. I think that is the answer. This budget is not delivering on the Silver review recommendations for this year.

Colin BROOKS: It is not so much putting words in my mouth but possibly the way in which you are interpreting the answer.

Richard RIORDAN: Well, I am happy for you to identify what is in this budget that delivers savings to the budget from the Silver review specifically.

Colin BROOKS: And I have outlined our response to the Silver review and the way in which we are proceeding.

Richard RIORDAN: Minister, \$93 million was taken out of the Treasurer's advance in the 2024–25 year to fund various TAFE programs. How much has been taken from the Treasurer's advance this year?

Colin BROOKS: I will just seek advice from the department.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Riordan, we are out of time. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Minister and officials, I refer to budget paper 3, page 63. Minister, can you explain how the TAFE Services Fund works?

Colin BROOKS: Thank you very much, Mr Tak, for your question. I will just outline the way in which the TAFE Services Fund works and the sorts of activities that it funds – things like asset maintenance, to make sure that we avoid deterioration of important assets in TAFE; public provider funding for the delivery of additional services that TAFEs might provide; student support services. This is a really critical part of the TAFE Services Fund, stuff that is delivered outside of the classroom to really help student retention and wellbeing and wraparound support services for students, again to make sure that some people in those priority cohorts who might otherwise struggle to enter or complete training are able to be supported – things like student welfare and wellbeing, study and learning support, student engagement and experiences and student resources and amenities.

There is priority access funding, top-up funding, to support delivery of free training courses, apprenticeships and traineeships that might have low enrolments that the government prioritises for skilled workforce purposes and needs, and that might be, for example, subsidising the cost of delivering free TAFE at a small regional campus where it otherwise might not be financially viable. It is an important part of the funding package that is in the budget for skills and TAFE. Some of the activities and services that I have just mentioned that are funded under the support fund are directly linked to improving student wellbeing, including more targeted support for vulnerable learners – again, increasing attainment for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners and at the same time increasing workforce participation through the training of those students with the connection into employment.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. What role does the TAFE Services Fund play in thin training markets? I refer to budget paper 3 on page 69.

Colin BROOKS: Yes. Thanks. I just mentioned priority access funding. That funding is provided to support TAFE to deliver essential courses, like I said, when low enrolments might make them financially not viable. It ensures that communities, particularly in regional areas, can retain access to training pathways and support local industry needs, and it is again targeted towards high-priority courses, things like free TAFE, apprenticeships and high-value traineeships.

In some cases some of these courses might not be available for people to undertake for many hundreds of kilometres, so making sure that those courses are supported where you have those thin markets is really important. An example I have got here, in 2025 priority access funding supported South West TAFE to continue to deliver the diploma of nursing and the certificate III in electrotechnology electrician, which I think is just the old-fashioned electrical course, to students in the south-west region and supported SuniTAFE to deliver the certificate IV in mental health to students in Mildura. This is the way that this fund makes sure that those important courses are still funded in areas where they might not have the enrolments to necessarily justify the course otherwise running.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Following on from your explanation there, how does this support TAFEs to become more inclusive for people with disability?

Colin BROOKS: The direction that we have been going as a government in schools and TAFE, under the leadership of the previous minister and the wonderful executive we have here, has all been about making sure that everyone has got the very best chance to develop the skills that they need and to contribute to our society and to our economy. We are growing these opportunities in the Victorian economy for the participation of people with disability through enabling access to this quality education and training that is being provided. As I mentioned at the start, free TAFE has removed financial barriers to training for many students with a disability. As an example, since 2019 free TAFE has supported more than 20,000 students with a disability to gain the skills that they need, so it is a really important equity measure. Our Building Better TAFEs capital works program is also ensuring that physical barriers are removed.

We have invested \$36 million in the Gordon's Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion, and that is to make training in Victoria more accessible for people with disability. That will drive improved access, inclusion and employment outcomes for students with a disability across Victoria's TAFE network, and it is planned for completion in 2027. As I said at the start around the centres of excellence, this is about building a centre of excellence around teaching and learning and then replicating that across the TAFE network more broadly. This is a key one for us in disability and inclusion. Some of the key aims there will be evidencing, showcasing and amplifying good practice to support learners with disabilities across their educational journey, building

capabilities and cultures of disability equity and inclusion in and across the TAFE network to improve the transition, participation, retention and completion of learners with disabilities – again, making sure that we remove as many barriers as possible for people with disabilities – and bringing together industry, the TAFE network, learners and graduates with disabilities, researchers and the whole disability sector to improve workforce training, education and employment pathways.

It is worth noting that every TAFE in Victoria has a TAFE disability transition officer, and they provide free support to senior secondary school students who have a disability and want to enrol in a TAFE course after they finish school, so a really good support service there. I also note that, since its addition to the free TAFE list in 2023, enrolments in the diploma of Auslan have increased by 343 per cent, and this funding makes it easier for students to get the qualifications they need to support Victoria's Deaf community and have a rewarding career that we know is in demand.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. As part of that removal of barriers, Minister, what is the Allan Labor government doing to invest in new TAFE campuses and also in new buildings to create greater accessibility?

Colin BROOKS: Yes. Can I just say, all the new –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. Just to pick up the question that we did not quite round out earlier regarding Treasurer's advances. In 2024–25 there was a \$93 million Treasurer's advance to fund TAFE programs. How much will be required in this budget?

Colin BROOKS: What was the budget reference? Just so I can –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It was page 81 of the performance statement, I believe.

Lill HEALY: And Mr Puglielli, just the specific question?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: There was a \$93 million Treasurer's advance required to fund TAFE programs for 2024–25. How much will be required for this budget?

Lill HEALY: We will take that on notice, thanks.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Moving to budget paper 3, page 63, the TAFE outputs. The government has promised 15,000 additional places in TAFE. Can you assure this committee that there is enough investment – we have spoken about it a lot today – to resource those additional places?

Colin BROOKS: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Okay. Do you anticipate deploying teachers across more classes or increasing class sizes or reducing per course funding in ways that effectively cut student instruction time in order to deliver those additional places?

Colin BROOKS: No to the last part of your question, but just in terms of the operation of those new places, I might refer to Mr Miller to answer that question.

David MILLER: Certainly not in terms of reduction of sizes or even increasing class sizes above suboptimal levels. What you have seen in the annual reports that was reflected in line with the increased delivery and commencement numbers in TAFE, you have also seen an increase in the number of staff employed at TAFE to deliver a lot of those training services. As training needs grow, you know, TAFEs grow with that and use the funding that they receive for training delivery to bring in additional staff to be able to cater to additional needs. Obviously that is supported by the investment that also provides the infrastructure that they need to deliver that additional training.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Should we expect to see student instruction time increase or decrease over the forward estimates?

Colin BROOKS: It is not really a budget measure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How do you figure? How is it not a budget measure?

Colin BROOKS: Well, I am not sure how it relates –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We fund our TAFEs. I am talking about student instruction time.

Colin BROOKS: Yes. We are certainly not expecting that, but can we take that one on notice as well?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, that is fine.

Colin BROOKS: There is no problem with the question. It is just coming out of left field, that is all.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is all right. You can take it on notice. Thank you. On another matter, earlier this year, during the upper house consideration of the free TAFE bill, I had some discussions with the previous minister about the classification of Aboriginal community controlled registered training organisations. At the time she informed the chamber, and this was regarding the national process of classification:

I have instructed Victorian officials to work with and use this process to propose RTO classification change to appropriately acknowledge Aboriginal community controlled RTOs as a pathway to National Skills Agreement funding.

Do you have any updates on this work?

Colin BROOKS: I can maybe ask the Deputy Secretary to respond to that question.

Lill HEALY: Thanks, Minister. The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association and the Bubup Wilam RTO that formed that VET alliance have been working beside the department and also beside the national association of community controlled Aboriginal organisations to work with the regulator at the national level to identify under the Closing the Gap work the idea that ACCHO RTOs, as the acronyms go, have a very specific role in their communities. That work is going on at a national level to identify if there are grounds for a new classification. In Victoria we are supporting that work at the national level. We anticipate that that will run through into 2027. It was raised at the recent ministerial council and noted by all ministers for that work to be undertaken. In the final part of this it will be a decision for the national regulator. Victoria strongly supports that work, and we will continue to support it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Minister, that ministerial council meeting – was that you present?

Colin BROOKS: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It was the previous minister.

Colin BROOKS: I was just going to say – thank you for raising this matter. I have been briefed on this matter, and the Deputy Secretary mentioned it at a very sort of high level. But it is good that you have raised that matter, because I think it is an important piece of work. I will be able to pursue that now with more knowledge, thank you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. No, that is all right. Moving on – I think still the same budget reference, though – Infrastructure Victoria has identified that TAFE facilities are expected to need 20 per cent more teaching space by 2036. How, over the budget estimates, will we see this addressed?

Colin BROOKS: There are, as you would be aware, plans for new TAFE campuses in Sunbury and Melton. One of the challenges I think for the TAFE network is to meet growing demand for TAFE places in places where there is growing population, so that will be a key focus. As I said, I have just mentioned two of the initiatives that have been and will continue to be funded through our portfolio to meet some of those growing needs. Further to that, in terms of the ability, I might let Mr Miller answer the question. If that is okay, I will refer it on to Mr Miller.

David MILLER: As the minister referred to, there are a number of commitments for expansions and infrastructure across the TAFE network that are yet to come online. Melton and Sunbury are the most recent examples of specific infrastructure funding. Further to that, as the minister spoke to earlier, are the centres of excellence. A lot of that is supported by infrastructure development that will also look to increase capacity of

training once those come online. That builds on a range of previous funding and allocations that have existed in previous budgets, including the Broadmeadows centre of excellence that the minister referred to earlier, which was completed a little over 12 months ago or 18 months ago that has now come online. There are other investments, including in regional Victoria, such as the GOTAFE, now NVITAFE I should say, in Archer Street in Shepparton, which was also completed in late 2024. So you have got a pipeline of those things that will continue to come online to continue to grow the infrastructure and overall capacity within the TAFE network.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Thank you. Is the department satisfied, though, that that will be sufficient to meet that need that Infrastructure Victoria have identified?

David MILLER: I think it is an ongoing question for what the need looks like and the forms of training. Obviously it is not just about physical classrooms all the time. You often have other approaches to support increased training.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Miller. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this morning. Minister, I am going to take us to budget paper 3, page 69, around shared services and equipment that are being used across the TAFE sector in Victoria and supported by the department. Usually this is a pretty good idea when there are services and systems that are required across multiple organisations. I am hoping you could speak to how this budget supports that.

Colin BROOKS: Yes, absolutely. I am just going to get the budget reference from –

Mathew HILAKARI: Page 69, budget paper 3, ‘TAFE Services Fund’.

Colin BROOKS: Yes. Great. Thank you. It does on page 69 talk about shared services and equipment between TAFEs. As we have just heard from Mr Miller in his answer to the previous question, TAFEs do operate in an evolving environment in terms of where we need to provide education and training services and also the types of training. And so those centres of excellence speak to the different types of training, not just a classroom with four walls in the current environment. We are funding the TAFE system to develop a pilot for an enduring network model for courseware development as well. This collaborative model draws on the TAFE system’s unique experience and expertise and collective resources for shared benefit. So as you can imagine, there is lots of experience and benefit across different TAFE institutes and campuses, and it is about bringing that together and sharing that for the benefit of all.

Mathew HILAKARI: On the centres of excellence, we would always like to see one in the south-west of Melbourne.

Colin BROOKS: Duly noted.

Mathew HILAKARI: The East Werribee area is a fantastic place, with Victoria University and the Gordon operating cohesively together, so keep us in mind.

Colin BROOKS: Duly noted. I think you are the first member of Parliament who has asked for a TAFE centre of excellence in their electorate, so well done. That program I was mentioning has supported the TAFE network in working collaboratively and demonstrated early success in shared resources development.

We have also been working towards establishing common ICT platforms, inclusive of a student management system, customer relationship management, human resources information systems and a learning asset management platform. So there is a lot of IT work that needs to be done as well in terms of moving towards shared systems, but of course there are obvious benefits in completing that work.

Mathew HILAKARI: We heard from the Minister for Education the other day in his evidence talking about some of the protections that that provides as well, a common platform, in terms of ICT security, which is an ongoing issue which we see across the state.

Minister, I might just take you to apprenticeships and budget paper 3, page 63. I am just checking. There is \$5.8 million over two years to support apprenticeships. What does that mean in reality?

Colin BROOKS: Yes. We all know the apprenticeship system, and so individual apprentices who are part of that, they play a critical role in our economy and our workforce. They are the qualified trades- and craftspeople of the future. This budget backs them in with \$5.8 million over two years for ‘Safer and fairer apprenticeships’. Just to unpack that a bit, this is about continuing the Apprentice Helpdesk to provide apprentice–employer support services. This is really critical for apprentices who are, in the main, young people starting out in their career, unsure of their working conditions, the support they can get and workplace advice, so being able to have one helpdesk that they can contact for support is really useful.

That funding also supports the establishment and transition to a stronger apprenticeship regulatory framework and also supports the workplace rights apprentice training program to ensure vulnerable apprentices know their workplace rights and entitlements, which is absolutely critical. It adds to funding of \$22.8 million over two years that was provided through the 2025–26 state budget to support apprentices and trainees, and this includes funding to continue the apprenticeship support officer program, which provides free confidential, independent and individual support to apprentices, as I mentioned before, and to implement the recommendations from the Apprenticeships Taskforce, including apprenticeship regulatory reform.

As you will know, in October 2024 the government announced the release of the *Apprenticeships Taskforce: Final Report* supporting all 16 recommendations either in full or in principle, and the funding has been provided in this budget to support the continued implementation of these recommendations. This is a really, really important piece of work to make sure that apprentices are treated properly and feel safe and secure in their workplace. Reforms arising from that taskforce that I mentioned seek to provide more support for apprentices and their employers. They also address unsafe workplaces and some of the unfortunate incidents we have seen of bullying and harassment, underpayment or unpaid training, equality and fairness at work. I would like to think that in the main most employers are really good employers with their apprentices, but we need to make sure that that all employers are doing the right thing and that apprentices feel safe and secure in those workplaces.

Our response to that was initially backed by a \$9 million package that improved safety and mental health support for apprentices and trainees, including through the delivery of the Apprentice Helpdesk and additional resources. Then in May last year the Apprentice Helpdesk was launched, offering free information, as I mentioned before, support and advice to anyone – as I mentioned before, to apprentices but of course also to employers who want to ask questions about apprenticeships and traineeships. And then in November last year, digital resources supporting apprentices and trainees were launched on the Apprenticeships Victoria website, covering essential information about pay, rights and responsibilities, health and safety and where to get help for all apprentices and trainees, no matter where they are in their training journey.

Mathew HILAKARI: I take it that you were a former apprentice yourself. How much is this a change from the period when you were going through your apprenticeship versus today?

Colin BROOKS: Well, I am sure apprentices in trades are still asked to go and get the left-handed screwdriver –

Mathew HILAKARI: Did you find it?

Colin BROOKS: Just as an observation before maybe answering the question in more detail, I think one of the really important changes that I have seen as I move around TAFEs and training facilities and workplaces, even in my role as –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister and officials, thank you for appearing before the committee this morning. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee’s request. The committee will take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for industry and advanced manufacturing at 9:45 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.