

T R A N S C R I P T

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

Carley Brennan, Director, Engagement and Partnerships, and

Peter McKinnon, Executive Director, Growth and Student Experience, The Gordon Institute of TAFE.

The CHAIR: I begin today by acknowledging the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nations, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I advise that the session today is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with LA standing order 234.

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, Carley and Peter, for being here today as our first witnesses in Geelong. I am very excited to have a hearing in Geelong and hear about what we are doing in this region, so thank you for that. You have got a great submission, and I can also see you have got great recommendations, which is really helpful for us when we are deliberating. If you could just introduce yourself, your role and maybe a little bit about The Gordon, then we will jump straight into some questions.

Peter McKINNON: Not a problem. Thank you, Chair. My name is Peter McKinnon. I am the Executive Director of Growth and Student Experience here at The Gordon. The remit looks after obviously student experience and the wraparound student support services that The Gordon offers as well as a range of other non-education functions – marketing, communications, the First Nations space, which you visited earlier today – to really get that holistic education support. I will let Carley introduce herself, then I will go back into about The Gordon.

Carley BRENNAN: Hi. My name is Carley Brennan, and I am the Director for Engagement and Partnerships at The Gordon TAFE. I have been employed at The Gordon for over 20 years. I have a human resources development background, but I have the privilege of working across the portfolio responsible for bringing industry and community voice into the organisation to inform our products, services and programs.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you.

Peter McKINNON: Thank you. Thank you very much, Chair and panel, for the opportunity to present today and for considering our submission. From an opening point of view, I just want to point out that The Gordon is a really uniquely placed public TAFE institution across the Victorian landscape. We have on average around 12,000 to 14,000 students per annum, which is quite a large cohort. That is going from our year 9 secondary school students all the way through to adult learners, in about 150-odd education programs. I think what is really important from The Gordon's point of view is we are uniquely placed in terms of our growth corridors. The Barwon region and Geelong itself are very fast growing – I think we are one of the fastest growing regional cities in the country – and we also service and have a couple of campuses up in the Wyndham region, which is, as we all know, one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country as well. The overall population of both the Barwon and Wyndham regions is close to a million and growing, with a big youth cohort. As one of the few public TAFE providers within that region, we are very much uniquely placed.

Beyond that, we play a real lead coordinating role in that regional education and environment ecosystem. We are a really good intersection when it comes to our relationship with our schools and our secondary centres as well as our independent school network and, as Carly mentioned, our community organisations, industry partners and government. We are, I guess, that real bridge between a whole range of sectors around that education experience.

We are also well aware of the importance of the role that a public TAFE provider plays for particular student cohorts, noting disengagement with mainstream education, particularly in the secondary school system. We are becoming more and more prevalent as an alternate provider, and you will see in our submission a lot of our growth in that youth cohort, in particular, around VETDSS students and other programs that we run where we are attracting more and more of that – I guess I am going to say disaffected youth cohort who are looking for that alternative education pathway. As you would have just seen with our First Nations visit, having a range of

students who have not been involved in education for a number of years – how do we make sure we have that safety net in place?

We have just gone through a new strategic vision in line with our OTCD and government, which was signed off by our relevant minister only a month or two ago. It is a really ambitious plan around a Gordon student from every community for every workplace. Now, that is an easy thing to say, but the deepness in that strategy is really important for us – that we are about accessibility for all, we are about inclusion for all and we are trying to obviously get that employment pathway through. We support upskilling and reskilling across the life course. We are obviously engaging with industry and then working out pathways through our tertiary education partners and other universities, whether it be Deakin here in the Barwon region or VU and others up in the metropolitan region. That is, at a really high level, what The Gordon is about.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. We might just go along the panel and ask some questions. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Great. Thank you. Thank you so much, Carley and Peter, for having us here today, and thank you for presenting. The Gordon has obviously had a footprint here in Geelong since Jesus was playing fullback for St Mary's. You have got a smaller footprint up my way in Wyndham as well, with really strong industry connections. Can you maybe talk to us firstly about how those really strong industry connections help guide you or shape your curriculum? Also, in terms of in-demand industries, there are some really common threads across Victoria, but they do change from region to region. From Warrnambool yesterday agriculture is a really in-demand industry, but probably less so in a provincial city like Geelong. Can you maybe talk us through what the in-demand industries in this region are?

Carley BRENNAN: I will kick off, and then Peter might add some commentary around our work in Wyndham. In the Geelong region, obviously, we have been undergoing significant structural adjustment over the last 10 years, and that has seen our region change from an industrial base to a more diverse knowledge-based economy. Advanced manufacturing is still really important, and I know you will hear from the Geelong Manufacturing Council later today. It is really important that we actually pivot our offerings as well. We have a long history of actually supporting workers to transition to those new and emerging industries in the region through some of the work that we undertake and through Skilling the Bay, but then also through our changing product mix and our delivery modes. We have been working really hard on that over the last few years. The impact of COVID has seen us move further into that than probably we would have without that impact. But we also need to make sure that we balance those different delivery modes with that hands-on experience, because that is what the students really gain the most benefit from. It is about having that mix.

In terms of our industry composition in the region, we have seen the growth in health and community services of course because of the growing population and ageing population. We also have, as I said, still a strong advanced manufacturing sector. The education sector itself has seen huge growth and building and construction, so it is no surprise to you that they are our areas with the highest enrolments. That also presents another challenge in terms of our capacity to deliver for those sectors. Again, we need to consider our delivery modes. That is where our working relationships with industry and our industry collaboration really come into play.

The clean economy is something that is really important to our region, and The Gordon has just signalled a significant partnership with the Geelong Port to support our work in renewable energy and the renewable energy hub that we have at the east campus that is developing with the Geelong Tech School and The Gordon. Also underpinning all of these sectors are digital technologies, and they are pervasive in every sector. So how are we upskilling and reskilling our workforce, and how are we supporting our young people into jobs with the digital skills and capability to perform and thrive in the workplace? They are some of the things that we are working on.

Peter McKINNON: Just to add to Carley's conversation in relation to a sector, in terms of the Wyndham experience, it is very similar. Health and community services are the major skills gaps for that area. Having said that, professional services is a really big piece in Wyndham, which is quite unique – I do not think you see that often – as well as your more obvious supply chain logistics and trades. It is important to point out in the Wyndham region the actual public TAFE provision is very low in terms of TAFE providers. Most people who want to engage in the VET network need to go private or go into the city, so there is a real gap in terms of provision. Between us and Victoria University, who are a reduced dual-sector, I think we are about 10 per cent

of market share. We are only a very small footprint in offering, but we know with that youth cohort and especially the large numbers of five- to nine-year-olds in that city, in the next five or 10 years there is going to be a massive demand for that public providers in that part of the world.

Dylan WIGHT: I am working on it. That is fantastic. All good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Roma.

Roma BRITNELL: How do you actually identify what industry needs and those industries in demand? Some of them are quite physical – I mean, hospitality, health and the aged care sector, for example. People are struggling to want to go into those more physical sorts of activities of work, so how do you address those in-demand industries that are quite physical that we are not seeing as much interest in as we do with digital economy and those sorts of things?

Carley BRENNAN: I might start to address that for you, Roma. We have a range of different initiatives, and they probably span the whole gamut of our offering at The Gordon. We have a range of education and pathways programs that are really aimed at that senior secondary school cohort to actually provide exposure to those industries and create awareness of the job opportunities that are available in the region and kind of demystify it a little bit. A couple of examples of that that you will see in the submission are around an apprenticeship and traineeship forum that we hosted. It started off with about 30 people and a few businesses coming along, and over the last few years we have seen that grow to significant interest, attracting over 270 registrations and approximately 200 people attending. That is students, parents and –

Roma BRITNELL: 270 businesses?

Carley BRENNAN: 270 people, but as part of that I would say we had 60 businesses represented. We really have to work hard to connect industry with the different pipelines of students. That is an example at the secondary school level. Then we have industry immersion programs that we deliver through Skilling the Bay, and that involved around 108 industry employers last year who were actively involved in that program – opening their doors, coming in to host information sessions and experiences for students.

Roma BRITNELL: Coming into secondary schools or into TAFE?

Carley BRENNAN: The secondary schools come to TAFE, but they also go out into the industry. So those immersion programs are not just a one-day experience. They are often over three days and spaced out across the calendar, if you like. But we work in partnership with the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network, for example, or the Geelong Manufacturing Council, or we coordinate those ourselves. That is an example at the secondary school, but then we also have other opportunities for our mature age or people looking to re-skill or upskill. Today we have got a community services expo actually happening in the gallery, which we were hoping to take you over to. That is an opportunity to connect businesses and students aspiring to work in those businesses and demystify that a little bit as well. Then of course to inform our products we have industry reference groups. We have an advisory board that sits over the Skilling the Bay program, and that is made up of different industry members as well. At all times we are really trying to ensure that we are coordinating with industry but bringing their experiences and then also mirroring back and working through schools to make sure that it is as easy as possible to connect.

Peter McKINNON: As an internal process we have what is called a product plan development, which is our education product. Within that criteria are obviously industry voice and business voice so that we are testing not only the product itself but then the delivery of that product with industry experts to make sure that we are industry relevant, because we know we have to change and adapt. And that is not always easy. There can always be some challenges in that regard, but that is a key consideration as we consider putting new products back on scope for our education offerings.

The CHAIR: John.

John MULLAHY: It is wonderful to be back in my home town of Geelong and be here at The Gordon, which has served the Geelong community for so long. I know my brother studied here 30 years ago, and I know my dad was in construction for 45 years down here and had many workers come from The Gordon, who were

trained up here. What I would like to ask you about, though, is: how does The Gordon work with secondary schools to promote VET pathways to the in-demand industries?

Carley BRENNAN: Thanks very much, John. I think next year we celebrate our 140th birthday. That will be a big milestone for The Gordon. But in terms of how we actually ensure that our young people are aware of the many and varied career opportunities in our changing employment landscape, we really, as I said, have a multitude of pathways programs. One example that we have not touched on is the Geelong Tertiary Futures Program. That is a program that is offered to all year 9 students in all the public schools in the region. That is, 13 public schools. The year 9 students undertake a career preview program where they can choose from 26 career previews that The Gordon offers, and they come in and have up to five or six experiences at The Gordon over a period of time. As part of that program they can try trades, they can try hairdressing, beauty or health care. We have introduced a supply chain option. We have also introduced a clean energy option. I would have to check the figures about the uptake there, but they are emerging – and building and construction, as I said. They get to taste a few different career previews, and that is at the year 9 level. Then what we do is actually encourage our students, if they have enjoyed an experience there, to see what is next. In year 10 they can actually have an industry immersion program in one of those areas that I talked about. Those industry versions exist in health and community services, STEM and manufacturing skills, and professional services. You touched on the changing economy. Our professional services have increased significantly, with the headquarters of the NDIA, WorkSafe and the TAC, for example, here. I have not met many students that say, ‘I want to go and work in the public service,’ but they are really important career opportunities. We want a diverse public sector, so how do we create a pipeline into those as well? There are some examples.

We also have the Geelong Tech School. The Gordon hosts the Geelong Tech School, which is just up on the corner here, and that is really focused on STEM programs and working with industry to solve industry’s problems and challenges. Over 6000 students came into the Geelong Tech School last year to have a STEM experience that was based on a project or a problem that industry have that is posed to the students. On a lot of these programs we have worked really hard to connect across the region so that there is always a pathway from awareness to aspiration to action and that you can go on that journey.

Peter McKINNON: Just to add to that – I think it was in our submission – we have got an internal initiative right now to try and set up a priority program for our youth cohort, like a VIP passport, so when they come and do those immersion programs at year 9 or 10, they have got their student ID with Gordon so they can come back and get that experience. We are trying to develop a system which makes it so much easier for enrolment later on down the track. That is an internal initiative in line with the Tech school. That is the next name or iteration of that work.

John MULLAHY: It sounds excellent. I wish I had this back in year 9 instead of my one week at Dymocks up the road here.

Carley BRENNAN: Yes. Work experience is a real challenge for people and especially if you have not had an environment where you were exposed to a working life as well. As we know, in Geelong region we have some vulnerable communities and vulnerable cohorts within the community, so we also offer a range of programs that support those people into employment.

The CHAIR: As a parent who had a year 9 student go through the taster program and absolutely loved seeing the wide range of opportunities just to taste them, it is fantastic, so thank you. I have got a question. We have not had a lot of information throughout the inquiry around the Skills and Jobs Centre. Can you talk just a little bit about what you do here and how that links into the region – I suppose in a sense of the view of whether we could do it better? I know it has been going for a little while now, but is there a chance to do this better to really get those pathways a bit more streamlined?

Carley BRENNAN: Okay. The Skills and Jobs Centre is a model that was born out of an initiative in the Geelong region. We set up one of the first three Skills and Jobs Centres in the state, and the model was expanded across the state. The Skills and Jobs Centres play a really important role I think in connecting job seekers with the education system but also across the employment ecosystem. For example, in the Geelong region last year we had over 2300 personalised career counselling sessions, because it is quite challenging for people to navigate the system, if you like, especially if you have been out of the system and you lack confidence. To re-enter an education pathway can be quite challenging. To re-enter employment can be really

challenging. I think as part of that the Skills and Jobs Centres offer workshops as well. The Work Wise Women program is a really established program in our region, and that has seen a number of women actually go through that program, build their skills and confidence and then gain employment. We could certainly supply information or a case study on that as well. Also, the Skills and Jobs Centres are working to change some of the practices in the employers' space as well, including being more inclusive in terms of their workplaces, but they have to work across other providers and other parts of the ecosystem. The Skills and Jobs Centres – at the moment there is a lack of clarity around their future role, but we see them as a really important part of the jobs and skills ecosystem in the region. Certainly for The Gordon our career services are provided through the Skills and Jobs Centre, which we just walked you past at the front.

The CHAIR: So you kind of act like a careers adviser like a school would offer a careers practitioner at a school level, and we have heard that is not functioning very well.

Carley BRENNAN: No.

The CHAIR: So you were acting like that careers adviser.

Peter McKINNON: Yes. I think to answer part of your question there, Chair, whilst it is the auspice of The Gordon, I think it is a really important function to sit within each of the public TAFE networks. I think there is a perception that the Skills and Jobs Centre is only for Gordon students or people who are involved in the TAFE network. As we know, the Skills and Jobs Centre is open to all, so I think there is a real opportunity around seamless delivery around –

Dylan Wight interjected.

Peter McKINNON: Yes, providing broader provision, making sure that schools, as you said – I think there is a real opportunity to connect a few career services functions within established institutes like the TAFE network, because I think that would be one challenge that we have. People do not realise they can just walk through the door and get that support, and I think it would be good to get some messaging and some opening up and seamless connection across some of those other career service providers.

The CHAIR: But that centre does not go into a school and offer that career advice.

Carley BRENNAN: No, it does not.

Peter McKINNON: No.

Carley BRENNAN: The guidelines are very clear from the Victorian Skills Authority about where those services can be provided and to which priority cohorts. It is jobseekers outside of the school setting. However, at times within the region and in place-based areas, if you have got access to somebody who can actually promote a variety of jobs or offer industry insights, you are going to want to tap into those. But in terms of the career advice and employment services, like getting job ready, job fit and practising those interviewing skills, your resume writing and accessing services, the Skills and Jobs Centres are increasingly seeing people from – well, they have always been aimed at seeing people from vulnerable communities and those transitioning workers but also a lot of structural adjustment restructures from large industries and that hidden unemployment. People have got no access to employment services through employment services providers, so that is where the Skills and Jobs Centres careers advice comes into play. It is really those people who fall through the gaps and that kind of hidden unemployment.

The CHAIR: Yes. Great. Thank you for explaining that. I think it is really important that we note that for the inquiry. Dylan, I think we have got time for a couple more questions.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, sure. I went to school in Geelong and graduated about 19 years ago. Back in the mid-2000s, I remember, in about year 10, you went into VCAL, as it was called at the time, or you stayed in – I think they were crude enough to call it 'mainstream schooling' on your way to VCE and an ATAR score. In those days, whilst the kids in VCAL had some support, it was really like: 'Okay, you're here. How can we get you an apprenticeship?' or 'How can we get you out into a job?' Maybe talk through a bit how vocational education training has developed from then, how it is going in a provincial city like Geelong, what the gaps are and how the government can support it to be as good as it possibly can, because it is so important. I forget –

you guys will know the percentage – but some obscene majority of jobs in the next 15 years are not going to require a university degree.

Peter McKINNON: Yes, that is a really good question. It is growing in terms of its evolution. It is actually our highest growth cohort. The VETDSS impact is around about 30 per cent up from last year, and that is continuing to increase. There is much better connection with our secondary school system and what the TAFE sector can offer when it comes to our VETDSS courses. It is certainly also big in the Wyndham region around our trade training centres and building those pathways to trades. So it is growth, and I think there is a better connection. Going back to my original comment, that connection to the school network is so important, so we are making those inroads. I think the other key element when it comes to how that network is improved upon really talks to how the new emerging technologies and new skills are being developed and whether we are listening to the school community. I think what comes with that are the support services, and I think this is what has probably been a challenge for us as a VET sector, and not just The Gordon. With the complexity of youth and the complexity of students, have we got the capabilities and confidence as an education institute to take on that new cohort with a range of different elements to what your traditional plumbing trainer or traditional tradie trainer would have? We are becoming more and more aware that we need to upskill ourselves to make sure we are confident from a workforce – I think that is a real issue for the sector, and we are working on that. And you might have seen we are in the midst of constructing our new Centre of Excellence and Disability Inclusion, which is about that, and there are a whole range of extra funding opportunities in play there to try and build that upskilling piece. But we see not only in the Barwon region but in the Wyndham region that that is our future student, and if we are not getting ourselves prepped, just like the secondary school system, we need to be careful, because we will have these students falling through the cracks. That is probably the next level of evolution we need to work with, but it is a really key point that we are obviously continuing to work on that pathway with our VET students and our school systems.

Carley BRENNAN: Just to add to what Peter was mentioning there, when Peter spoke about the increase in the VETDSS students, that VET pathway for senior secondary students equates to 500 additional students that have come through just in the last 12 months on top of our usual numbers. And in terms of that broader work to promote the value of vocational education and training, all of our programs are really aimed at working with career influencers as well – that is, your parents, teachers – who are a significant influence on a student's pathway. A lot of our programs actually focus on re-educating teachers or raising awareness as well about what VET can offer. And just in terms of those pathways, nine out of 10 jobs now and into the future require a post-school pathway. However, the interesting point is that TAFE education can deliver 80 per cent of those future jobs, so that is where we see we have got a really important role to play. And I think some of the investment that the government has made in terms of outcomes and recommendations from the Firth review, in terms of the VCE VM program, is also having an impact, and people are equating, I suppose, a vocational pathway as being equally important as university pathways or other options.

Peter McKINNON: That university pathway is a really key point. I think that is that evolution that you were talking about before, in that you can do your first couple of years of a diploma of nursing through the free TAFE system and then pathway to – we have got arrangements with a number – tertiary providers to get that last year in. As a young person, that is such a great option, rather than paying three years worth of HECS, whether it is nursing, engineering or accounting. I think there is an opportunity to really promote those pathway programs, and we have got a number of arrangements in place. That is certainly an evolution, probably from what we were doing 18 years ago, where we have got an ability to build the free TAFE system, which has been such a big reason for the growth.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am so sorry we have run out of time. We could have yakked I think all afternoon, but thank you for answering some of our questions. If there is anything that has sort of sparked from today or if you think you need to add something to your submission, you are more than welcome to contact the committee as well. Thank you for the tour, also, this morning.

Witnesses withdrew.