

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

Jeremy Crawford, Chief Executive Officer, Geelong Chamber of Commerce;

Leanne Nelson, Program Manager, Geelong Manufacturing Council;

Robyn Stevens, Chief Executive Officer, and

Greg Haynes, Service Delivery General Manager, Gforce Employment and Recruitment; and

Ashleigh Nugent, Manager, Learning and Development, and

Alison Laing, Chief People Officer, Symal Group.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the panel's hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of 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.

We are going to run this session a bit like a Q&A format, and committee members will ask some questions. If you wish to answer the question, you can just jump in or indicate that you would like to answer it. There might not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question, though, just depending on time. If there are any important points you do not have an opportunity to make during this session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing to the committee.

Maybe if we start with this end, just introduce yourself and your organisation or company, and then we will jump straight into questions. Thank you.

Alison LAING: I am Alison Laing. I am the Chief People Officer of Symal Group.

Ashleigh NUGENT: My name is Ashleigh Nugent, and I am the learning and development manager at Symal Group.

The CHAIR: Can you just quickly explain what Symal Group does? Is that all right?

Alison LAING: Yes, that is perfect. Symal Group is a self-performing contractor that operates in Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia through civil, construction, energy and other different industries as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Greg HAYNES: Greg Haynes, Service Delivery General Manager from Gforce Employment and Recruitment. Gforce is a not-for-profit, registered social enterprise. We are a full-service employment and recruitment business. We are also one of the biggest employers of apprentices and trainees in Western Victoria.

Robyn STEVENS: Thanks, Greg. I am Robyn Stevens, and I am the Chief Executive Officer with Gforce Employment and Recruitment.

Leanne NELSON: Leanne Nelson, Program Manager at Geelong Manufacturing Council. We are an industry representative body representing the manufacturing interests of around 72 members in our region.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: Jeremy Crawford, CEO at Geelong Chamber of Commerce, a membership organisation representing thousands of leaders and businesses across the region, with about 95 per cent SMEs as part of our membership.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. Thanks for your time today. We will jump straight into questions. Roma?

Roma BRITNELL: Yes, many and varied. What is the greatest challenge your businesses that you represent face in finding employees?

Leanne NELSON: I will start, if that is okay. For us, it is awareness of careers in the manufacturing industry. We have had a history in Geelong where some of our major manufacturing employers have closed, and the general perception in the public is that there is not a great deal of manufacturing happening anymore, which is not correct. To have young people understand that there are opportunities in the sector is something that we work really hard on, and we work with the Gordon delivering one of their programs to do that but also, as Carley just mentioned before, work with their students' trusted advisers, as we call them – so teachers, parents, peers – to help them understand as well what the opportunities are within the sector.

Ashleigh NUGENT: I will add to that one in the sense that I think as well as the awareness it is the perception of still going through that higher education, and going through the VET sector is not a preferred method. We think that that comes from parents and career advisers. In our industry as well, I think looking at the skills that you can bring to your job is sometimes more important than the qualification itself. 'Let's go back down to that granular level of what skills you can bring and then show what a career in our industry looks like' is really important for us. It is not necessarily 'You need to come in and be a civil construction worker.' You can have all of those fringe benefits, you can work in HR, you can work in marketing – what are those skills? Then show those career pathways into high-demand industries.

Roma BRITNELL: We have heard that consistently. What is the answer to the problem that we are seeing? As a region really, I think that we have got not enough people to fill the jobs, which is what I heard from you. What is the answer? We have heard that we have got career advisers in schools, which is not working. We have had other organisations who I think have grown out of that need of going, 'Hey, we're a great industry to work in. We're here, come join us.' But it does not appear to be working if we are still having the same issue that we have been facing now for nearly 20 years.

Greg HAYNES: To answer that question and to go where you have just left off, it is very fragmented. There is some great work happening in the community to increase the visibility of VET pathways and the value of pursuing a traditional trade qualification. But it is not a big campaign to dispel the rumours that you have mentioned around the stigma associated with VET pathways, which still exists in some social circles. There are schools and there are spheres in the community that do not talk about VET pathways as favourably as they do about some of the university pathways. We have just heard the TAFE talk about the value, the wages, for example. The ABS are doing a good job to put data out there as to potential career earnings if you take a VET pathway, and it sort of cuts through to people who already know that. But the message is not necessarily cutting through to all corners of the community, so organisations like Gforce and the GMC are working hard with the schools that are receptive to it – that is, getting us in front of, say, female students to encourage participation in male-dominated trades. But it still feels like a piecemeal approach. We are not really cutting through to the masses. I think the fragmentation is one of the challenges. If there can be a bigger piece of work where it is a bit more uniform and cuts through to many more of these interested parties and stakeholders, then that might see more of an uptake in these opportunities.

Roma BRITNELL: Did I just hear you say that we need to break down the barriers and get a campaign going that tells people –

Greg HAYNES: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: the career influencers, which is a term I have not heard before, to understand the value of careers that do not necessarily have a university degree, which is probably a 40-year culture that we have had in society.

Robyn STEVENS: It is that and also integration across the system. Just hearing what the Gordon has been talking about and the members on the panel today, particularly when you are looking at transitioning from school into employment without the integrated model that supports the education system – because teachers have a massive and difficult role, and we heard a little bit in the earlier presentation about the role of careers advisers – there is the opportunity and the flexibility for industry, and that includes group training organisations like ours, to be able to work more closely with schools and integrate those programs as well. It is not about just having the information and presenting it for people to uptake, it is actually actively and proactively distributing that to where schools and young people and families are, but also where industry can integrate and work together. I think Jeremy has probably got a bit to say on that topic as well, but certainly that approach of bringing things together.

Roma BRITNELL: We keep hearing that the school curriculum is crowded and teachers are really struggling and under-resourced, so it does not appear there is room there for this to occur. That is certainly the message I have been hearing.

Robyn STEVENS: I think that is probably the message I have heard and seen through the research that I have done and just in reading the submissions previously. But it is a challenge that I think we should explore and think about, how we can create models that address that. The TAFE and the tech school taster program is an example of that – that is one component – and schools have taken that up really well. So what are the other

innovative ways, as an industry and industry groups and training organisations, that we can collaborate on building another model perhaps that might address some of those issues, particularly for in-demand sectors?

Greg HAYNES: Yes. And it is not just the school that is an influence on that young person's decision-making; there are so many other influences, including family, friends, peers. That is where I think there are some great career advisers doing good things, telling students really relevant and helpful information. Yes, it is true that there are many that would benefit from some more professional development, but we have got to somehow find a way to cut through to the rest of the community because these people are influencing decisions around commitment to VET pathways and TAFE courses.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: I probably come from slightly the other end of the scale, which is from the employer side, representing a lot of the SMEs. You mentioned the word 'campaign' before, which sends a little bit of a shiver down the spine. Greg did mention it as well. We look at this in terms of, do our SMEs feel supported to take on some of the responsibility for this? I do not know that that has been explored to its full extent in the past. If we look back over, for example, the last decade, there were often campaigns to incentivise students choosing different career pathways. There were often campaigns to try and get employers to think about taking an apprentice. But there is a fragmented component in the centre, which is what level of support those SMEs get to either put aside time or to put aside resources – potentially there is a financial impact if they want to become involved in the training and some of the facilitation of that education. I would like to explore what that might look like if we are genuinely trying to change the model. I think just getting more students to be able to select different pathways is one part of the problem. I can tell you that, from the information we have gathered, there are some other challenges that SMEs face – for example, supporting those with a disability, supporting international students. There is a transport issue in our region. Students who need to use public transport to get to an industry placement have some incredible difficulties. So there are some other systemic issues circulating around this, which is not simply about getting more people applying for more industry placements and more careers in the vocational sector.

Roma BRITNELL: You are the first person to mention, other than transport, the employer challenge of no margins – so how you put aside time, which is money, and then maybe even prevent a person being poached, because we have got such low unemployment in the regions and you have put all that effort in. So thank you, that is something I have not heard.

Robyn STEVENS: Could I just add to that. That is a really important point, Jeremy, and really a key focus area where group training organisations like Gforce fit into this picture, because we fulfil that role. There is a model there that can be built on. Funding models change all the time, and that is one of the challenges that we face as a sector in group training. But we do know from other jurisdictions completion rates and data, particularly around school-based apprenticeships but also other apprenticeships and traineeships, with the wraparound supports addressing those very challenges that you have just really beautifully highlighted, Jeremy, is where the group training model can fit in and provide that support. There are a whole range. I think the Nyaal Banyul project here in Geelong was a really great example of early employment support for people from disadvantaged backgrounds: addressing barriers to employment, helping participation for people from non-traditional – women in trades, people with disabilities, Aboriginal people – to participate in that. There are some things that we can build on, so it is really important that we do not just go back to first principles and start again but look at where the strengths are in our own jurisdiction and also others. There are models in other parts of the country that are seeing better uptake because of how the supports for people are structured in getting people from school into employment pathways, addressing those barriers and recognising that employers are trying to run a business too. You want a productive participant in your economy. So how do we address those things that mean that the employer gets what they need, the employee gets what they need and the educational outcomes are achieved.

Roma BRITNELL: I feel like I am dominating a little bit, but we heard this from Westvic training, which is probably your equivalent in Warrnambool. One of the points that was raised was that we do need more wraparound services, because the children of today do not have the same resilience, I think was what they said, to come into the workplace and just sort of suck it up. He mentioned that we just keep being at the bottom of the water where someone jumps off and we need to be up at the top where the ambulance is, so how do we get back further in the education system to actually support the student before they get to the workplace and do not know how to have eye contact or answer a phone?

Jeremy CRAWFORD: I would probably argue that that education should actually start with the employer. We can provide students with as much support as possible, but if they are not supported by the workplace, then that training is not supported when they are in the workplace physically doing the work. I think some consideration should be given to particularly the leverage that a lot of these organisations have, including ourselves, and the literally thousands, if not tens of thousands, of interactions we would have a year directly with industry and how that might be leveraged as a network, because the students end up in a situation – employers and leaders become mentors. You transition out of school where you have got that teacher network and you have got that parent network. You might transition into, for example, the Gordon, where you have got that community supporting you and careers advice and lecturers. When you are in the workplace, you really do need that support from within. There are some great organisations here that do that, and we know they do, but there are some that just are not skilled and trained to be able to look after staff. So all of that training that is happening on one side almost has a negative push-and-pull effect in the employer side if that employer is not enabled enough to be able to support the student that is there in the first place. As they become employees, those mentor relationships become much more important. You want to be able to walk away from a business at some point and say, ‘They were one of the best leaders I’ve ever had.’ We see a big gap at the moment, particularly in the hands-on trades and skill areas, where the leaders are often on the tools and simply do not have a lot of that support available.

Greg HAYNES: Yes, and to take that a little bit further, we have many examples of small businesses who would buy from Gforce, who would like to employ an apprentice or trainee through our organisation, but they cannot afford it. They have tried the direct hire thing. They see the value of group training and that mentoring aspect, the wraparound supports. So they have considered it and believe it would be advantageous to their business. They have come to us, but because of their margins and because of the way their business works, they cannot afford the GTO premium. Westvic probably mentioned it, but the GTO funding has not changed in Victoria for over 20 years. There are more GTOs now in Victoria than ever before, but the funding envelope has not changed, so there does need to be more support for small to medium business to access a proven model in group training. I think that is in many of the submissions.

Robyn STEVENS: I think, Jeremy, clearly there is still a gap, but the support of group training organisations is for the business as well as the apprentice or trainee. So it takes that HR load, addressing the psychosocial, some of the health and safety and all of those risks for businesses, but it is obviously something that still needs to be strengthened further if business is still not feeling that that is an option. The lack of access to group training for people, whether it is through lack of awareness or lack of resources, is something that could be explored further.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: I think investment into the awareness of those, because they already do exist. But rather than investing into increasing the demand and the volume of the activity, increasing the awareness of those training programs that are available and starting with the employer side gives the confidence that there is a place and there is a support available before the demand starts to come through. We speak to a lot of businesses that just do not know what it is they could do and how they could be supported. So on a case-by-case basis that is that is a really laborious task to go through, but with the right approach, it could be something that could be done sector by sector or region by region.

Leanne NELSON: I think each of the points that have been highlighted are really important and really relevant once the student has chosen a career or is on a path to a career. We are still facing the situation where many of our employers just cannot get anyone even interested. Our experience in dealing with those young people is they have no perception of what the roles are that exist or, as you said, that manufacturing is grubby or uninteresting and boring, where that is quite often not the case at all. So yes, there needs to be support for employers and for students and for mentoring on the job. But there also needs to be a great deal of work done while the young people are still in school so that they understand what their options are and their advisers understand what the options are.

Ashleigh NUGENT: We look at it as a bit of a different lens, where we do have the ability to directly hire apprentices and trainees, and we have a significant work experience program. And for me, it comes down to the career advice reform. So when we have kids coming in for work experience, we are actually explaining to them what a career in our industry looks like and taking them through the career pathway. What we are looking at here is not just what an apprenticeship or a traineeship can look like, but what the actual career pathway – I think what we get lost on sometimes is when we are looking at our university and higher education, we are

looking at the end goal: 'I want to be a CEO, I want to be a project manager, I want to be these types of things.' When we are looking at the VET sector, we look at the first step and then we stop there. We go, 'Okay, you can do an apprenticeship or a traineeship in this' but actually showing students, as they come in for work experience, what the entire career pathway looks like gets them excited about it. So that has been a huge piece for us. We have already seen students going from our work experience program and now joining us as full-time employees in apprenticeships and traineeships, because they can see the full pathway. So that career advice reform is the big thing for us.

Alison LAING: I think there is also a piece to talk to – so we have spoken a little bit about financial incentives for employers, but what does that also look like for the trainee or the apprentice, particularly around training and apprentice wages? If we are talking about mature-age apprentices, again, that appeal of 'Join this industry through this pathway.' But is the pathway and the wages also restricting for people pursuing that?

The CHAIR: Especially if you have got a family or you are more mature age.

Alison LAING: Absolutely. It is the realities of life and we know all the other data around what the population is starting to look like, and multiple careers potentially throughout a working life. So yes, there is a really important piece around students and careers advisers and attracting from that segment of our community. But what about for those that are also further into their working lives and their careers that might want to make a change, where those things become an inhibitor.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: All right. How do working conditions impact regional industry's ability to recruit and retain workers? And how can working conditions be improved to address skills shortages in these industries?

Greg HAYNES: I will go forward and just talk about pay and conditions. So it is probably worth mentioning the plight of the low-income young person in regional or rural parts of Victoria, where they are not really in a position to commit to one of the pathways, say an apprenticeship or traineeship pathway, let alone get to a TAFE or college nearby to do a pre-apprenticeship course. So right from the get-go, they are at a disadvantage because they are just not financially able to commit to that. They find themselves stuck in that cycle of income support dependence without the backing to either relocate or move and take up one of these opportunities. Then if they happen to get some support to take on an opportunity, they are still living on the breadline or below the poverty line. This is the case for mature-age apprentices too, who may have pivoted, had a career change, but cannot afford or barely afford to keep their family afloat over the course of the mature-age apprenticeship. Whether there are loadings in particular areas – I am not sure what the answer is. But it is particularly challenging, and mature-age apprentices will often concede that they are going to go backwards for a period of time, until they get a little bit closer to the qualification milestone.

Leanne NELSON: Again, I think the apprenticeship model, the earning-while-you-are-learning model, is something we should really highlight to young people in schools, because they can be well ahead of their university-educated counterparts by the time they are 24 – owning houses and driving better cars than I do and all sorts of things. That is, again, something that students are not necessarily aware of. And there is a long history of secondary schools talking about VET as the second-best option when, in reality, it is something that schools should be promoting as an amazing option for someone who is interested and that is going to set them up really well for their future.

The CHAIR: In the interests of time, I will go to another question so we can keep going through some of the themes that we have got.

Dylan WIGHT: Cool. Thank you. On job readiness – we have obviously got Symal here, who are employers, but everybody has interaction with employers. Is there a particular skill deficit or a deficit there in terms of young people that come into the workforce and how job ready they are? And is there a particular gap through the vocational education system that needs to be addressed to help address any deficit if it is there?

Ashleigh NUGENT: We have seen positive outcomes through our school-based apprenticeship programs. When they come in through that program, what we are seeing is they are trying before they buy. And with that, when they join us as that first-year apprentice, in their second year, they are coming with that job readiness. So that has been a really helpful tool for us in being able to create them to be job ready in a meaningful way.

Robyn STEVENS: A range of pre-employment programs that we run through Gforce go to addressing some of that. And just reviewing some of the information that has already been presented, young people have raised psychological and cultural safety. There are other things around work, health and safety and those sorts of elements, and transport and the more technical things I think that have already been mentioned. Some of those things about how to operate in a workplace, how to be part of a team, that get addressed through pre-employment programs, like the ones that we have run for the Nyaal Banyul project but we run them in a whole range of other areas, go to addressing some of the help for the person to be able to present as job ready, to understand what the expectations are in a workplace, because they are not the same as a school setting. So there is probably an element of how that can be better connected into the conversations that Leanne was talking about in terms of career pathways and understanding what happens for a young person or a person who is changing jobs when you move from a setting into a new professional setting, whether that is through an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Dylan WIGHT: Obviously, a classroom and a workplace are entirely different. It can be a huge shock to a young person. What I am sort of hearing is to get that workplace learning and work experience as much as you can through your year 10, 11, 12 or your vocational education pathway.

Robyn STEVENS: And it is also the wraparound supports that are then provided through either the pre-employment program or moving into a group training placement from our perspective – I cannot speak on behalf of others. But that is still there to address some of those things where young people might have presented with either a physical or mental health issue and to work through some of those barriers that might impact on their ability to achieve sustainable employment and completion of a qualification.

Greg HAYNES: Yes. The most successful pre-employment programs we have delivered have just as much emphasis on core skills – they used to be called soft skills; things like problem-solving, customer service, teamwork – as they do on the practical. Handling tools safely is really important but, equally, many employers expect that these other core skills, that the candidate has or possesses those things when they come into the workplace, even a completely green first-time worker. Yes, definitely cannot underestimate how valuable investment in those skills is.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: The other side to that coin, particularly for businesses that do not have those HR and support functions, is to have a look at how employee ready they are, rather than job readiness, because you can be as job ready as you want to, but if there is not a brilliant first day, first week, onboarding, support et cetera then that job readiness is useless without having the right support in the workplace.

Roma BRITNELL: If you have just started your own business five years earlier and you have worked your ring off and you have put your head up and have seen you need a staff member and so you just go and grab someone and you are not ready, how do you help that individual? Because that is a pretty common experience.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: Where there is a high proportion of on-the-job training there is a little less friction because you are sort of by the side and you learn et cetera. But in environments where you need to move into, say, a workplace or an office-based environment, the job readiness goes so far. The employers can definitely do with some further support there.

Roma BRITNELL: But how do you support an employer who has never employed before, who has just started their own business and they have no idea? They are just a hardworking person, which we see all the time, and then they burn someone because they have no idea how to be an employer.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: Well, the answer to that is some of those support mechanisms already exist. We get asked by our members quite often. But at the end of the day, if we are trying to solve some incredible issues and gaps at scale, there needs to be some support programs and mechanisms in there that can be taken out to industry and offered at scale as well. We will always be there on the end of a call when someone needs help, but we do not have resourcing at the chamber to do that in a proactive, outbound manner to get SMEs ready to accept new employees three, six, 12 months down the track.

Ashleigh NUGENT: Even when you are at a size where you are able to support having these programs, sometimes the red tape that you need to cut through and having a different experience with every different school and every single TAFE can mean that someone is coming to you on the first day and it is not that smooth transition, because you are still trying to work it out for yourself. It can be incredibly complicated.

Roma BRITNELL: Even when you have got the system in place that you have got.

Ashleigh NUGENT: Even when you have got the education and knowledge about it, it is still, especially for school-based apprentices, an incredibly –

Roma BRITNELL: One thing I try to say when I hear that is ‘red tape’ is a throwaway statement. It is really important for businesses to actually come with the specific red tape and say, ‘This has got no outcome. This is just extra work without any outcome or a very small risk that I haven’t seen for 40 years.’ That is really important to bring forward.

Ashleigh NUGENT: Do you want me to talk about it? For us the difference is making sure that we can have people there in a meaningful way – sometimes being able to cut through. When a school-based apprentice or apprentice is going offsite block units do not always meet the needs of the requirements onsite; the sign-up process can sometimes be complicated. We are seeing some schools implement their own rules in the sense of every single person that is around a school-based apprentice needs to have a working with children check. That sometimes, when you are looking at a large site, can be a really significant burden in creating that. We want to make sure that we have a safe space as well. But each of their schools are now implementing some of their own rules, so when we are dealing with different schools for each of these programs, it is the administration.

Alison LAING: Or it is not just the administration, it is the difference and the complexity because of that difference.

Roma BRITNELL: Lack of continuity.

Alison LAING: Absolutely.

Jeremy CRAWFORD: I appreciate red tape sounds like a complete blocker, but the regulatory burden in compliance is significant. Whether you are hiring one person as an SME or tens or hundreds of people a year, that process – from a documentation perspective, from a compliance perspective, from a legal perspective – does scare a lot of business owners potentially from even hiring in the first place.

The CHAIR: I am so sorry. I have just checked the time, and we have gone a little bit over. Thank you so much for coming along and answering our questions today, and we really appreciate all the work you do in our region. I know you are all on the same page that we want this to work better for our region and for our state. We have got some big challenges, and we appreciate your insights today.

Witnesses withdrew.