



Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Template for Youth Associate final report to Committee

Name: Rowan Farren

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Bio: Rowan Farren works in the Talent Acquisition space within a regional healthcare provider which has allowed him to build a deeper insight into the workforce needs, he has served as Chairperson of various committees within the Mooroopna and Greater Shepparton region. He has focused on increasing opportunities for young people, both professionally and in his advocacy work since he graduated in 2022. Now 21, he continues his works, including recently securing \$650,000 of funding for the KidsTown adventure playground for children and families, as well as supporting local organisations through his work as Chairperson of the Mooroopna Steering Committee. Working with his community, he is involved in various projects both focused on young people, and ensuring the growth of the region more broadly. Rowan and his Wife Joy are expecting their first child in early 2026 and his ongoing advocacy in the community has always been about providing better opportunities for young people, and the future generation. He also thanks his wife for allowing him to present on his findings, at the half-way point of their honeymoon.

Summary of consultations:

Within the scope of the consultations, there were a total of 20 young people engaged ranging from freshly graduated 18 years old, to those at the end of the youth bracket at 25 years old. Most of which were currently working in some capacity, whether it was in a casual, part-time or full-time capacity. With the bulk having recently or currently studying at either TAFE or University. Reflecting the rich diversity of our region, a number of the interviewees were also members of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse or LGBTQIA+ communities.

Consultations were conducted in a one-on-one format, across both in-person and digital consultations to accommodate the needs of interviewees. Broadly, this entailed thirty-minute consultations with each individual. Having worked across a broad span of roles, and worked with young people through advocacy, interviewees were sourced through colleagues, local further education institutions (University and TAFE), and through previous Parliamentary project engaged individuals such as the regional youth consultations program in Kyabram and Shepparton that I supported the running of, as well personal contacts who had an interest in education.

Interview results:

Question 1

(a)

Underpinning the factors which influenced most interviewees was the educational culture of their school, which very often provided a constricted and segregated mentality for students. Regardless of whether they were in public or private education, the consensus was that the challenge comes in changing the narrative of the default answer being University after secondary school. Improving culture and reducing stigma of alternative pathways were two big factors considered for improving outcomes.

“One of my considerations was whether I would be able to get work after my degree, as it didn’t make sense to do a degree if there was a low job field”

Broadly, those who did not pursue further education cited that their main considerations were family obligations and financial challenges associated with opting for anything other than full-time work. Other factors included mental health, geographic location which restricted their access, and similar accessibility factors.

(b)

Interviewees, broadly reflected that the biggest influence was either their family, or their teachers, however there was a mix as to whether this was a positive or negative influence.

Question 2

(a)

Generally interviewees commented they had little consideration for construction or trades, as there was a stigma against pursuing non-university pathways, with this being relegated in their mind for those who 'couldn't handle academia'. Consideration for both social assistance and healthcare were higher than trades and construction, however most commented that it wasn't their top pick.

(b)

Consultations revealed that young people didn't feel as though they received much information around alternative pathways into these industries, and felt that changing the perception of more hands-on industries in school information settings would have improved their awareness and their interest in in-demand pathways.

Question 3

(a)

Answers were varied, but for those who found no benefit from career development the biggest issue was an assumption of having things decided – i.e. they were deemed as needing no support, or lack of contact from support officers. Some young people found it beneficial, however this was largely for those who found University being the suitable pathway, with those wanting to pursue alternative pathways not finding much in the way of support.

(b)

Respondents broadly felt that the blanket approach to career development, which is intended to catch the most students, actually fails to provide quality education to most students. Having individualised advice, which would require more staff investment, and recognizing the diverse pathways that can be pursued would improve both the outcomes, and feeling of support for students.

"We would have loved to have people come in from different careers, and to hear their journey; rather than just hearing the 'go to university and get a good job' advice over and over"

Question 4

(a)

Building upon the reflection on education culture, many of the interviewees had either not been informed, or did not participate in the VET system as they viewed it as something for 'kids who are academically challenged'. However, of those who knew people, or participated themselves, the feedback was relatively positive, with a note on the workload challenge across mainstream education and VET courses.

(b)

Creating a school culture where practical courses are not viewed as being lesser than more academic courses, as well as offering higher levels of qualifications, one of the identified challenges is that while VET courses can offer a taster, especially in healthcare and social assistance, they are often not enough to get into an entry level role. “When applying for jobs in Allied Health, the Cert III I did wasn’t enough for employers, so it basically wasted my time”.

Question 5

(a)

Reflecting on the earlier identified stigma, most respondents indicated that when in high school they viewed it as being a back-up option for kids who weren’t as smart, now they recognise it would have been a valuable tool for people wanting a head start on their careers.

(b)

Young people recognized TAFE as being better fit for direct employment outcomes, as they felt it created a talent pipeline, whereas University often felt too broad and didn’t always qualify for a role specifically. Quality of learning was often considered comparable, however the level of independence in University often didn’t suit many people who wanted to pursue healthcare journeys but struggled with independence in studies.

(c)

Most responses ranged from parents and family members to various staff members, but many students also recognised that information was shared amongst young people – however the validity of this information was often questionable.

Question 6

(a)

Commonly participants identified that they didn’t really understand the breadth of opportunity that came with VET, as it was only suggested for those pursuing VCAL (now VCE VM) as a supplement, rather than a pathway in its own right.

(b)

Students felt as though having people who are either alumni of VET programs, or current VET teachers present to students on the different options would have more impact than existing formats of conveying information through bulk emails and messages. Within individual career development sessions, they also felt it would be a good recommendation for people who want to pursue in-demand industries, rather than being pushed straight down a university pathway.

Question 7

(a)

Challenges that students face when pursuing further education across the spectrum of options, mainly centre around financial and family constraints. However, it was also noted that accessibility to online studies, and limitation of certain courses being only available in metropolitan centres were restrictive of options, especially within Allied Health and other healthcare courses. Young people also face a stigma when they are interested in trades, where it is considered a ‘drop-out pathway’, the cultural barriers and expectations placed both explicitly and implicitly on different demographics of students can often manifest in self-doubt and sabotage as well.

Question 8

(a)

Broadly, while there are individual challenges which face each cohort of young people, the responses received from respondents who identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, LGBTQIA+, AFAB, Low SES, or others as listed; there was a note that environmental and social factors played a large part in their decisions.

Young people commenting that it was an expectation of their family, or their community to pursue one path or another, and very often this created a misalignment and a misunderstanding of professional goals. While these factors may broadly be beyond the Department of Education control, there were notes that cultural change within an education environment, to emphasise diversity of opportunities and pathways, and to support young people through exposure to industry would enable the culture around the education institution to change as well.

Question 9

(a)

Young people reflected on their personal experience, and suggested that the largest factors which caused students to cease their studies were financial in nature, and oftentimes there was a mis-match of ambition and course outcomes.

Interestingly, when discussing the options for subsidisation and free courses, some students commented that because there is no penalty or cost for dropping out of free courses, students also had less 'skin in the game' which meant they could drop out easily without much consideration.

(b)

Supports included further accessibility, ranging from flexibility in studies to complete regardless of geographic locations, time availability and online/in-person availability. However, there were also comments on financial support through study payments, scholarship opportunities, as well as creating social settings for young people – especially those who have had to relocate for studies – to feel supported and build a strong network.

Further recommendations were to embed an expectation that people should take time before commencing university, as a large commitment, it would be better to encourage a culture where young people are able to work, and explore their personal interests before commencing university and unintentionally ending up in a situation of non-completion.

Question 10

(a)

Majority of respondents considered the impacts of government initiatives on their study and career choices, however it wasn't enough to encourage them down a pathway they weren't otherwise considering.

(b)

While the bulk consensus was that these initiatives have a beneficial influence on people being able to further develop their skillsets, it was also noted that they only cover part of the problem, especially with those who have obligations in family, and workplace settings, as they are not able to take a step back to pursue education without external financial support. It was also noted in a small portion of respondents, that they felt free programs allowed for less accountability.