



Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Template for Youth Associate final report to Committee

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Bio: Sienna Seychell is a 21-year-old university graduate from RMIT, where she studied Journalism. She has a strong passion for writing and storytelling, particularly from a community standpoint. She goes by she/her pronouns and lives in Coburg, working at the local Woolworths, and knows her community well. She is currently job searching for her next position after completing her degree. Throughout her studies, Sienna has completed three internships this year with Nine News Melbourne, The Canberra Times, and SEA Today in Jakarta, gaining experience across television, print, and online platforms. She has a strong desire to amplify local voices and explore connection as seen through her stories of finding community.

Summary of consultations:

I have interviewed 20 youths aged 20-25 across all parts of Victoria, focusing on the Pascoe Vale area. Although many came from varying educational backgrounds, the majority were or had completed university after high school. Many of the participants were female and a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. No participants with a disability were interviewed; some students were from rural/regional Victoria. Several participants were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Many sought university as an after-school education, others took gap years, and some sought a trade. The interviews were taken in person as well as via phone call, and some participants chose to answer their own questions as I interviewed them and sent them to me after. Participants were friends, family, acquaintances and colleagues.

Interview results:

1. Choosing what to do after you leave school

Most of the participants said that their own passions influenced their decisions the most. The youths were led by their interests, and the majority didn't feel pressure from outside sources. Many stated that going to university was assumed as the next step they took after high school and the path that they had been told to follow since they were in the younger year levels. Alternatives, including VET, were hidden or seen as an inferior education.

A male from metropolitan Melbourne, 22, believed "it was the next logical step after VCE."

A female student, 25, who had dropped out and then came back to complete her degree, said that she "wanted to attend university because my teachers and parents encouraged it."

2. In-demand industries

Many didn't consider an in-demand industry over what they were truly passionate about. Many thought about the idea of cheaper education and the benefits in regard to employability, but ultimately, students prioritised their personal interests. Although many did note a lack of knowledge in VET and in-demand industries contributed to this idea. The majority of the interviewees shared that more talks and information from earlier year levels about career options may have influenced them.

A 20-year-old female from regional Victoria said she "didn't consider it, but [she] might have more information was given."

A 21-year-old male from rural Victoria said, "Teachers focused on VCE scores, not what jobs were available."

3. Quality of school career development/advice

The majority of those interviewed claimed that the career advice in high school was only somewhat helpful or not helpful at all. Participants called for ongoing and practical career advice that began earlier in high school, which would help students explore their passions earlier and without the cost of a HECS debt.

A 24-year-old university graduate living and working in metropolitan Melbourne said, "Careers was a tick-the-box exercise."

A 21-year-old female who is exploring fashion studies and studied at an all-girls Catholic school said, "I wish we'd learned resumes, cover letters, and how to build a folio."

4. VET delivered to school students

Most participants had not completed VET courses, and some did not even know that VET was an option. Students who attended a private school were more often than not unaware that it was an option, even alongside VCE. Some students had completed VET courses and found them beneficial, even if they sought a university degree after.

Both quotes are from two different 21-year-old females who studied in metropolitan Melbourne and went to a public high school.

"My school had strong VET programs like dance and social work."

"VET was viewed as the easy option, but it's actually important."

In contrast, another female who was also 21 and studied in metropolitan Melbourne said, "We didn't even have it offered at my school."

5. Perception of VET

The majority of the participants said that VET suited students who didn't thrive in the confines of a traditional classroom. Alternatively, others argue that the options for VET courses should be broadened to cover more industries. Many believed it may benefit students who know what

they want to do in high school and who want to build their skills in something that isn't just a trade. Many believed that there is a stigma associated with VET and the students who do complete VET courses. Many students felt misled by their careers guidance counsellor and school, as they had not explored VET as an option and believed VCE was the only choice. Many got information for VET through friends and family, and it was spread by word of mouth, not through their education system.

A 22-year-old female who studied in metropolitan Melbourne hadn't even heard of the trade that she is now pursuing. She was sitting at the dinner table with her girlfriend and her family when an uncle began talking about his experience in that line of work. That is when she sought family support to do a trade. She now calls for careers counsellors to be fully equipped in different careers, and if they are not, to seek outside information to best inform students about their options. She felt like she had lost time and stress in high school thinking about her future, but now she is completing a trade in an in-demand industry because of a dinner conversation.

6. VET pathways

The majority of the participants answered aware but not pursuing. They advocated for earlier talks in high school and panels from industry professionals that would help them understand their options. There was a general lack of understanding and information about this pathway.

Quotes below are from female metropolitan Melbourne students aged 21:

"We should have learned about it earlier, like in Year 7."

"It wasn't really explained to us."

"Only heard about it through friends."

7. Barriers to further study

The largest barrier for the participants was cost, particularly for regional students who had to leave home to access further education, like university. Whereas metropolitan students also agreed that the cost of living and the weight of a HECS debt made accessing university difficult as well. Regional students who did complete a VET subject claimed that the teachers who were assisting were "useless" and didn't know the subject well enough to be a teacher, as resources are strapped in regional Victoria. Many students requested further monetary support and scholarships for regional students and those living out of home.

A 21-year-old male from regional Victoria who had to relocate to Melbourne to study said, "Distance and expenses are major barriers."

8. Tailored support for certain cohorts

Survey participants recommended financial support alongside guidance from younger year levels. Many also wanted to see more inclusive programs for women and LGBTQIA+ community students. Some even advocated for universities to be responsible for more mental health

programmes that help students adjust to university life, particularly if they come from a disadvantaged background.

A female regional student, age 20, said, “We need financial aid for travel and living.”

A female student from metropolitan Melbourne, aged 22, said, “Having mentors for women in trades would help.”

9. Completing qualifications

Participants mentioned that the cost of living has affected their ability to complete qualifications at university, with unpaid placements for studies that aren’t considered in-demand. Even apprenticeships for in-demand industries pay very little, and it is not financially viable for some to complete these degrees, particularly for those without help from parents. Some dropped out of their courses due to a general lack of interest and the toll on their mental health.

A 21-year-old female who lives and studies in metropolitan Melbourne said, “I deferred and changed fields...it was the right move.”

10. Influence of cost on course choice

Free TAFE was praised as many had the opportunity to discover what they enjoyed without the additional financial pressure. Ultimately, those who had or were completing university degrees felt that no pressure from the cost of university impacted what they wanted to study. Two participants mentioned the impact of Scott Morrison's hike in university fees in 2019 had on them. One male participant got into an arts degree right before the cutoff and considered themselves relatively privileged in that aspect, but still is against it as “it isn’t deterring students from completing arts and humanities degrees”, and rather just getting students to rack up an enormous debt so young. A female student who is currently completing her degree and has to pay upwards of \$2000 for a subject is outraged, but stresses that it did not impact her decision to study what she was passionate about. Only one participant “considered cost when choosing [her] uni subjects.” Another female student, 22, also impacted by Scott Morrison’s change, said, “I didn’t let policy dictate my choice, but the cost is always there.”