



# Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

## Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

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**Bio:** Yesha Khandel is a 21-year-old Mechanical Engineering student (minoring in automotive engineering) at RMIT University. Living in Melbourne's western suburbs, she has a strong interest in the intersection of engineering, technology, and future mobility, and is passionate about improving access to hands-on and practical learning pathways for young people. As part of the Parliament Youth Associate Program, Yesha sought to amplify the perspectives of TAFE students, women in male-dominated industries, and culturally and linguistically diverse youth, ensuring their experiences and aspirations are represented in discussions about Victoria's education and training systems.

### Summary of consultations:

A total of 21 young people were interviewed for this consultation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years and represented a diverse cross-section of Victoria's youth. Most were current University students, while several were university students or early-career workers in technical fields.

The group included women working or studying in male-dominated industries, participants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as well as students undertaking trade qualifications. These perspectives provided valuable insight into the barriers and motivations influencing different education and training pathways.

Interviews were conducted individually, both in person and over online calls, using a consistent set of guiding questions. Participants were contacted through personal and educational networks, ensuring a broad range of lived experiences from metropolitan Victoria. Discussions focused on their experiences with career guidance, post-school decision-making, vocational education and training (VET), and perceived barriers to study or employment in in-demand industries.

### Interview results:

#### 1. Choosing What to Do After Leaving School

Interviewees commonly based their post-school choices on personal interest, strengths, and long-term stability, rather than on labour market trends. Many spoke about wanting to "do something I'm good at" or "what I could see myself doing for a long time."

Family influence was significant, particularly through parents, cousins, and teachers. Some participants used tools such as school aptitude tests or online content to guide their choices.

Supportive teachers and exposure to diverse subjects helped some students identify suitable pathways, while some participants described limited discussion of non-university options and a strong pressure to attend university.

Many participants recommend that broader career exploration should be introduced earlier in secondary school and should present multiple successful pathways beyond university.

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#### 2. In-Demand Industries

Most interviewees had limited awareness of in-demand industries when choosing their study pathway. Interest and perceived ability outweighed workforce demand as deciding factors.

Awareness of certain sectors, like health and construction, has improved through media and outreach, with government ads being a common outlet. However, Participants felt that information about these industries was too general and rarely explained specific job roles or environments. Career expos were described as “focused on marketing universities, not actual careers”.

Many suggest that to battle this, providing realistic insight through industry-led sessions, “day-in-the-life” programs, and targeted awareness initiatives such as *Women in STEM* events, could help provide valuable insight when making these decisions.

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### **3. Quality of School Career Development/Advice**

Participants rated school career development as limited or only somewhat helpful. Some valued individual teachers who took time to discuss their interests, but most described a lack of structured or practical guidance.

Many had positive experiences when they had access to motivated teachers and some external career programs, while counsellors were seen as under-resourced and unfamiliar with VET or trades. One participant noted, “We were told about university open days, but not about what trade options actually exist.”

Some suggest that training for school career staff on vocational pathways should be strengthened and increase collaboration with industry and TAFE institutions for workplace exposure.

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### **4. VET Delivered to School Students**

Several interviewees had direct or indirect experience with VET in school. Those who participated found it useful for gaining practical skills, while others had chosen not to participate due to unclear benefits or scheduling conflicts.

It did provide participants with the opportunities to earn certificates and practical experience during secondary education, although course descriptions were often misleading, and students were uncertain about how VET affected their ATAR or future study options.

To improve this, many suggest that communication regarding VET course content, entry requirements, and outcomes needs to be worked upon; ensuring that subject timetables and assessment loads are compatible with VET participation.

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### **5. Perception of VET**

VET was widely viewed as hands-on and suited to trades or applied fields, but many participants perceived it as less academically prestigious than university.

Students valued the practical experience and employability gained through VET placements, however the stigma persists around choosing VET, particularly for high-performing students who may have interests in the subjects provided through VET.

Participants recommend promoting success stories of VET graduates and emphasising pathways from VET to higher qualifications or well-paid employment, to help change the narrative surrounding VET.

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## 6. VET Pathways

Understanding of VET pathways varied. Some participants were aware of how vocational qualifications linked to employment, while others described only a general understanding.

Students with direct VET experience felt better informed about career options, while many found it difficult to navigate information about progression from VET to university or employment.

This can be improved by increasing promotion of clear pathway maps, accessible online resources, and peer-based guidance from former VET students who have transitioned into work or higher study.

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## 7. Barriers to Further Study

Key barriers identified included financial pressures, unclear information, stigma, and logistical constraints.

- VET students highlighted timetable clashes and uncertainty around how participation affected university entry.
- University students mentioned cost of living pressures and competitiveness.
- TAFE students reported stereotypes that framed their studies as “lesser” compared to university.

These challenges can be improved upon by simplifying the interaction between VET and academic qualifications, providing targeted financial support, and improving public messaging to normalise diverse study choices.

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## 8. Tailored Support for Certain Cohorts

Interviewees identified that women in male-dominated fields, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds face additional challenges.

Women in trades or engineering fields cited a lack of mentors and representation, however awareness of diversity-focused initiatives, such as *Women in STEM* programs, was seen as a positive for many participants and helped some participants decide their career paths.

Whereas, for participants from CALD backgrounds described language barriers and a lack of culturally safe environments to be a common challenge.

Overall, a common approach to overcoming these challenges could be through mentorship and networking opportunities for women and CALD youth, to expand culturally responsive teaching, and introduce paid or subsidised placements for students facing financial hardship.

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## 9. Completing Qualifications

Students who did not complete, or considered not completing, their studies cited financial strain, lack of academic support, and misaligned expectations as major factors. Balancing work and study commitments was particularly challenging for TAFE and university students alike.

Some institutions were recognised for flexible assessment extensions and accessible support programs, which helped many students meet deadlines which they could previously not meet without these arrangements.

By Encouraging flexible study modes, clearer communication of course expectations, and consistent wellbeing and academic support systems across institutions, many students are better able to successfully complete their qualifications.

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## 10. Influence of Cost on Course Choice

Government initiatives such as *Free TAFE* and HECS adjustments had mixed influence. Some participants said these reduced barriers and made study more accessible, while others felt that financial support alone did not guarantee job outcomes.

Cost reductions encouraged more students to begin VET studies, while many interviewees remained uncertain about long-term job security or progression in low-cost courses.

By pairing financial initiatives with improved transparency around graduate employment outcomes and wage expectations, ensuring that affordability aligns with genuine career pathways, could be a potential step towards overcoming these challenges.

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This report was developed with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools for drafting and editing purposes. All content has been reviewed and finalised by the author.