

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Wednesday 26 November 2025

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Erin Johnston, General Manager, Group Sales, and

Rod Barton, Lead, Government Relations, ManpowerGroup Australia.

The CHAIR: I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the various lands on which we are gathered today, and I acknowledge that this is a virtual environment. We are gathered on many different lands, and I pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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

Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries.

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.

I want to thank Rod and Erin for being our first witnesses today. Thank you very much. Rod and Erin, what I might do is allow you to have a few moments for opening remarks, to be followed by questions from Committee Members. You will be able to see the committee members' names underneath, but I will ask Committee Members to introduce themselves if they have got a question. As we go around I will indicate who is asking each question. Erin and Rod, I might hand over to you, and thanks for joining us today.

Rod BARTON: Thank you so much. We would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay our respects to Elders past and present. I also extend that respect to any First Nations people who are joining us today.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to be here. My name is Rod Barton. I am the Lead for Government Relations at ManpowerGroup Australia, and after being several years being part of parliamentary committees it is nice to be here supporting committees in a different way. I want to say up-front that the work of these committees is incredibly important. This Inquiry looking at how we prepare young people for in-demand industries is not only critical today but fundamental for the jobs of tomorrow. The work my own grandkids will do may not even exist yet. Work is changing fast. It is fluid. It is not static. That is exactly why transferable skills matter so much. Young people need skills they can carry with them as industries shift and new opportunities emerge.

I am joined this morning by my colleague Erin Johnson, our Group Sales director. Erin leads some of our largest national workforce programs across government and industry, and she works directly with employers who are feeling the squeeze of skills shortages every day. Much of what we will talk about today comes from the insights Erin's teams see on the ground: what jobseekers are looking for, where young people get stuck and what employers need to help bridge the gap. Together we represent ManpowerGroup Australia, part of ManpowerGroup, one of the world's largest and most experienced workforce solutions organisations. We operate across every state and territory in Australia, helping people find safe, secure and sustainable work. That gives us a strong sense of how young people enter the workforce and where the biggest pressure points sit for the industry. This morning Erin and I want to share what we are observing across the system, what employers are saying about job readiness, what young people tell us they want for their futures and where we see training providers and industry working together. We will also highlight a few opportunities that in our view could strengthen pathways and give young people a clearer direction as they as they move from school to work or further study. Thank you again for having us. Erin and I are happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Rod. We will jump straight into questions. I am just going to go around my screen as I see it so it might be easier for me to manage. Anthony, I am going to come to you first. Oh, it looks like Anthony has just dropped off. Nicole, you are next on my screen.

Nicole WERNER: Thanks very much, Rod and Erin. I appreciate what you are saying. We have discussed before that there are these future career pathways and, particularly with digital innovation, that there are careers that might exist that we do not even know about yet. I think of, specifically for myself, I grew up in an era where you went from dial-up internet to now what we know as wi-fi and internet and all of that, and AI obviously came to be in our lifetime and that kind of thing. I suppose it is hard to know what to match them

with—I mean with the things that we do not know that are yet to come. But for the areas where there are young people with career aspirations, what is your experience in how that compares to then the demands of the labour market at present?

Erin JOHNSTON: I can pick this up, Rod. Definitely, Nicole, you have touched on the whole generational gap, right? What we are talking about is you have probably grown up in gen X, gen Z is where we look at our young people and gen alpha is the new one. Who knows what that will even look like. I think the biggest thing at the moment is there are kind of two parts to it. There is the awareness and exposure. Most young people do not actually know where the real demand is. The world is evolving. The workforce in particular is evolving. Roles like tech, trades, health and care are just not getting the right information or early enough. You have got to remember this gen Z grew up with internet, and that for them is their second environment, and they are heavily influenced by social media and, dare I say it, influencers. That is where they go to for their source of truth and that is what they trust.

Secondly are the education and instant work trade-offs. When we talk about these in-demand jobs, which is where that skill shortage lies at the moment, most of these in-demand jobs require post-secondary qualifications. What we are seeing with rising inflation and cost-of-living pressures is young people are choosing that immediate income over that longer term opportunity. The same thing is happening with apprenticeships, right? The low pay is becoming a major barrier to staying on course. We are hearing a lot of ‘Why am I working for \$18 or \$21 an hour when I can get \$35 an hour just doing labouring or freelancing?’ These online jobs—they love that they have got the full flexibility.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Nicole, do you have a follow-up question?

Nicole WERNER: No, no that is great. No, that is precisely it, and I am seeing that. My generation is also the generation under. I suppose because we are looking at in-demand industries, how then do we meet that gap of where people prefer to work because of the nature of, I suppose, how they have been influenced versus where there are needs and shortages in the workforce?

Erin JOHNSTON: For a lot of these young people, as I said, high-profile jobs to them are online. They are the digital workers. They are the online entrepreneurs, the influencers, creators, traders and freelancers. That type of work gives those young people the control, the work-life balance, the flexibility that they are really wanting. There is a lot of interest as well in side hustles. There is a lot of that popping up, a bit more increase in part-time and casual work as well. It is chasing that kind of quick win, limited effort. They are doing something that they really, really love, and the idolisation of being seen, being heard, being famous and, you know, being rich. I know that sounds crazy, but that is the path they are going down. Young people do not get that visibility or the idolisation of these stable, well-paid roles in trades, tech, health or care. These are not being promoted regularly through the channels that they rely on and that they trust. It is not necessarily, I think, a lack of interest; I think it is more of a lack of exposure, education and awareness.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Erin. John, did you have a question?

John MULLAHY: Yes, I do actually, and it sort of leads on from some of the evidence you gave there, Erin. Thanks, Erin and Rod, for being here. You mentioned about the high cost of living that pushes students to these other jobs, some of it insecure but some of it paid better, but if they stuck with their education they would get paid better in a different industry, and so it sort of undermines their study and career plans. You are saying that employers in high-demand industries are understaffed while students are juggling informal or unrelated work. I am just wanting to find out what is causing the disconnect between the employers and the students, what you see and how it could be addressed.

Erin JOHNSTON: I think one of the biggest misalignments, and we touched on this again looking at the generational stuff, a lot of employers sit in that boomers and gen X generation, and with young people coming in in gen Z, they work really differently. They communicate differently. They learn differently. Their drivers, their aspiration and their values look different. We spend actually quite a lot of our time educating employers and companies on how do they navigate and prepare their business and operations to create that harmonious, cross-generational workforce, which adds to keeping them there, the retention, retaining them and making sure, especially with apprenticeships where they are embedded in a business, getting through their four years.

John MULLAHY: We are not blaming the kids, though, are we? It is a generational thing.

Erin JOHNSTON: I just think that we see the world very, very differently between each generation. So it is not necessarily stick the square peg in the round hole. I am not sure we can do that. I think we need to kind of get to a point where we have got a bit of a square with roundish edges.

John MULLAHY: That ‘back in my day’ sort of stuff—make sure that they understand it is a bit different now.

Erin JOHNSTON: I cannot believe that my teenage kids are going through it now, and they have had issues with their apprenticeships as well. But I sit there and try and understand their drivers, their values, and I just think how it is such a big disconnect: ‘I can just do work online, Mum, and earn this much money.’ Okay, great, let us do that.

John MULLAHY: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Dylan, you are next on my screen. I am going to go to you.

Dylan WIGHT: Great. Thank you. We have spoken a lot about in-demand industries and skill shortages within the labour market. A lot of these in-demand industries—construction, tech et cetera—have traditionally been considered male-dominated industries. How are we, both as government but also with the work that you do and also the work that schools and the tertiary sector do, encouraging females into these in-demand industries?

Erin JOHNSTON: So, Dylan, it really needs to start early before those stereotypes set in. I think that is key. I remember myself back when I was, I think it was grade 1 at school, and a female police officer came in and spoke about her job and what she did and her role in the community, and to say that I was inspired would have been an understatement. I genuinely was in awe as a young girl. I was, ‘I can do anything. She’s a police officer.’ Role models, mentors—they really matter. That is what matters when it comes to women entering into a male-dominated industry. The other really big one is around culture, so women need to feel that they are safe, they are respected, they are supported onsite, and that messaging needs to be really clearly articulated and showcased. It needs to be broadcast out there with a very male-dominated industry that women are welcome—‘We feel safe here. We’ll look after you.’ When that all happens the female uptake increases, and we have seen that with a number of customers.

Rod BARTON: Can I just jump in there, too. The Victorian government did some work around women in transport. We thought that was pretty proactive, and we should be seeing some more of that. It is going to show my age here—when we had horses and carts—but actually when I worked for Holden many years ago in the early 80s we had a couple of ladies who were motor mechanics, and we thought ‘How bizarre.’ But I wonder what the percentage of female motor mechanics is these days and how far we have come. It is better, but it is nowhere near as good as what we should be. And I think for me one of the areas that I feel strongly about is—I do have some background in the industrial side of stuff and vulnerable workers—we need to see more women in blue sector work. We need to see them in transport. We need to see them in logistics. We need to see them in all of those areas, and there is opportunity there. But there is also a challenge for organisations like ours to work with our customers, of which we have hundreds, to take on females in those roles which are traditionally for men. And I know Vic gov has done some work around female train drivers and bus drivers and things like that, but I would love to see more of those sorts of things getting done.

Dylan WIGHT: Brilliant. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dylan. Kim, I might head to you.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Good morning, everyone. I have not got much of a voice, so I am hoping you can understand me. I have got a bit of laryngitis, so I will give it a go. And I am sorry I had trouble logging in. I am really interested to hear a bit about people from diverse and multicultural backgrounds. I am not sure if you have covered that, because I was coming in a bit late, but I live in a very multicultural community and we try and work through opportunities for everybody. I am just wondering what your experiences are, perhaps even Erin with that, in regard to helping people from multicultural and diverse backgrounds to have career path opportunities. Is that something you—

Erin JOHNSTON: Definitely, especially when we talk about young people in this space—the barriers they face are really different to what other young people would face as well. There is the cultural safety, the digital awareness, there is the transport, and the disrupted schooling a lot of the time, especially when we talk about First Nations as well. The key is that culturally safe training. It is that strong mentoring, and it is the real partnerships within the community. What you will find is there is community set up that you can start to engage in and support. If I look back at my time in recruitment, which has been I feel way too long, especially when you start looking at certain industries like horticulture and agriculture, you can actually lean on an entire community and work with them. Once you kind of put those things in place, it seems to all thrive because they have got that common—they have got Mum supporting, and Uncle and Aunty; they are all there wrapped around them and making sure that they are successful in employment.

Kim O'KEEFFE: And the point you made about mentoring, yes, obviously that is really important when you have that, and we have got some really great multicultural leaders in our community that are working with the younger people. I think that is a strength a lot of the time, that they can see the opportunity and possibilities. That is absolutely apparent when you talked about that. But, look, it is a challenge, and we have got to try and work through those language barriers.

Erin JOHNSTON: A lot of the time what will happen is businesses in particular will put the hard yards in at the very beginning, so it will be the attraction piece, and how do you get the candidates in? They bring the candidates in, and then they just think, 'Okay, we're good now. We've ticked our box. They are in.' The way you need to wrap around them is very, very different, and I would say in the Indigenous space in particular, or First Nations, you really need to wrap around them, because the support and mentoring that they need is ongoing.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes, we have heard that quite a lot over the hearings in regard to how we work with Indigenous but also, yes, people from diverse backgrounds. It is so important for communities, and not every industry—you have to have the language. There are lots of opportunities, and it should not be a complete barrier for many of those industries, whether it be out on the farms and packing in the sheds or working alongside the leaders in their organisation. There are lots of opportunities on working hard in that space.

Erin JOHNSTON: Yes, I agree.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Anthony, I think we will have time for one more question from you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Erin and Rod, for coming in. I will just acknowledge Rod's longstanding advocacy in this space, as well as being a former MP but also a long-time TWU advocate as well. I really appreciate and acknowledge your submission. I think it best summarises a lot of the things we have been hearing around limited awareness and career guidance, skills mismatch and industry demand, financial and social pressures, regional disadvantage, and insecure employment outcomes. I thought it was interesting, Erin, what you were talking about around gen Z and younger people being very interested in the tech and digital jobs, but a lot of those are very much, as you say, insecure, despite the benefits around flexibility. But your submission talks about the shortage around engineers as an in-demand industry, that we need 28,000 extra engineers by 2034—40 per cent of today's engineers. I guess my question is around: do you have any examples that Manpower has worked on around successful industry collaborations and pathways, whether it is around engineering or other sectors, that potentially we could look at and consider further?

Erin JOHNSTON: In regard to if there are set roles that we have focused on, I would definitely say forklift is one that we looked at, especially coming out the back of COVID. What we found, coming out the back of COVID and actually even throughout COVID, there was this need to find forklift operators, and they needed to have not just the qualifications—they cannot just have a ticket—but they needed to actually have the training to be able to do the role, because a lot of clients will come to us and say, 'We can't have someone that doesn't have experience,' and you will hear this all the time: 'Great, you've got your qualifications; you've got no experience.' Well, how are they going to get experience if you cannot get them out there? So we worked with a number of customers with getting candidates to come in. A lot of them were from a disadvantaged background or a diverse background, as Kim mentioned. We gave them that opportunity; we got them the forklift and

worked with them to get them to be able to operate at 100 per cent without that full supervision. The one thing I would say is that is an easy one, to get their forklift ticket.

With these other roles, with engineering, with apprenticeships, it is a four-year trade, so in trying to keep someone engaged the prep needs to be done in the early stages. You need to get them onboard, you need to get them trained, keep them there and get them through the four years. We have not nailed that one, if I am really honest with you, Anthony. We have not been able to do it where we can get a cohort come through and feel successful that they make their way all the way through and then they commence in a full-time role, fully qualified. I think there is a lot of work that needs to be done in that space. Maybe it is to do with—and I mentioned this to Rod only earlier—does it need to be four years? Can we find ways to make it shorter? Can we find ways to make it look a little bit sexier? For this generation, can it be more like a licence, where they do their first part and they have passed their learners, now they have got their Ps, so they are off the tools a little bit, it is less supervision? I just think we need to look at doing things a little bit differently. But all out there for thoughts, anyway.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

Rod BARTON: Anthony, I have just got to say, we know that about 50 per cent of apprentices do not finish their time. That is a massive failure by everybody—by where they are working, for the companies, for the apprentices and for the economy. We get the kids to start, but we have got to find a way to keep them. We are competing against the alternatives out there: more money, easier work, all that sort of stuff. I think that is something we really need to look at and work really hard at, to change the apprentices not finishing their time.

Erin JOHNSTON: I think the other part of that is, we have spoken a lot about gen Z, which is the current young people. The next generation is gen alpha—it is a completely different world that they live in, so once we get ready for this, wait, because gen alpha is not far away. I think we have got to learn to evolve because otherwise it is going to be a really challenging journey and the future will look interesting, to say the least.

The CHAIR: Well, thank you so much for that, Erin. I think our Committee has got some work cut out for it, thinking about that next generation. Thank you, both of you. I am sorry, I am mindful of time. We could keep chatting all morning, I think, but your submissions were really interesting, and thank you for answering our questions today as well. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.