

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

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Chris Ronan, Chief Executive Officer, Country Universities Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries.

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Thank you so much, Chris, for having some time with us today. I know you have got an extensive submission there, and we have had a look at that and we have just got a few questions for you. But if you would like to maybe just give your title and your role, and then we can jump into some questions.

Chris RONAN: Thank you for making the time for us to appear. My name is Chris Ronan. I am the CEO of the Country Universities Centre. It is a network of 28 community-run centres across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Norfolk. I am obviously representing the Victorian centres here today, and I am based in Bendigo as well.

The CHAIR: Perfect. It is great to have regional Victoria represented. Dylan, I might head to you first.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much for appearing in front of us today. Across this Inquiry we have touched on a lot about career education within secondary schools in particular, but there has been commentary around that needing to begin particularly in those later years of primary school. In regional areas in particular how do you think that we can improve career education within that secondary school setting—so career practitioners—but also how can we improve the support and knowledge of in-demand industries for both students and parents?

Chris RONAN: Thanks, Dylan. A couple of things: I think there is that school component, as you mentioned, and there is also the parental piece, and those two things are not independent of each other. They certainly do coexist. The question is really: how might we coordinate those two things better together and connect them across? I know you have heard from other witnesses around how stretched careers advisers are in schools and things like that and also from students. But from a CUC perspective it is something where the CUC plays a role as a coordinator across the community. The centres run widening participation, so outreach into schools. That is co-designed with universities, vocational providers and the schools. That really is right down, starting in primary school, because we know that is where that careers advice and nurturing aspirations have to begin. The centres are really looking at it as: okay, there is an existing resource in schools, which is great, but how can we augment that earlier on—from primary school through to the secondary schools piece, which is usually where the focus is—and then also the transitions out and mature-aged students, which I can touch on as well. We have Commonwealth funding to support that widening participation work, so that is funded by the Commonwealth. There are hot and cold patches of that across the state, and obviously it depends on specific communities, and regional communities have other challenges but also other strengths. What I would put back to the Inquiry is that coordination of that is probably where the biggest strength is, because there are lots of isolated projects going on, but—this is also from a CUC perspective—how might we bring these communities together and share things in a more coordinated way that still has that subsidiarity approach and local tailoring and support—a few things to consider there.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. So not operating in silos in particular regional areas and having more of a broadbrush approach across regional Victoria.

Chris RONAN: Yes, and I think you can do both. Obviously, the CUCs all work together, we share things, and that is the same in that widening participation and careers approach. But how it manifests in each of the schools is totally different, as it should be. I think often there is a tendency to have a cookie-cutter model that is centrally designed and then placed in communities, especially in regional and rural communities, so we are trying to flip that around and say, 'How might we better co-design that?' It is just a subtle change, but it obviously has greater buy-in from the schools as well, which is really key.

Dylan WIGHT: Great. Thanks, Chris.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. Kim, I might head to you next, being a regional MP.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, Chris. Thank you for that. Look, it is so important. Regionally we constantly have this sort of disconnect where we seem to be a bit behind. Excuse my voice. I have got laryngitis. I hope you can understand me. But it is really important, and obviously we feel a little bit disconnected often in regional communities, particularly in my community, being a very multicultural and diverse community, in how we work through that challenge. That is another question, but what I was going to ask you about is some submissions to the Inquiry that argue that Victorian secondary schools do not adequately equip their students with digital literacy skills. Do you agree, and if so, what can be done to increase secondary school student digital literacy?

Chris RONAN: Yes, it is a challenge. Just for clarity, there are two types of students. One is obviously a school leaver that comes to CUC, but the majority of students are actually mature age, so over 21, in terms of the classes. I guess that is a caveat here. Digital literacy is key. There are two components. There is access in terms of the actual technology and familiarity with the technology, and then there is also actually moving through it. I would not say, from a CUC perspective, it is a huge challenge that we see. But again, probably the consideration there is who is coming into the CUC from a school transition point. Probably the question, Kim, is whether the challenges are earlier, before they are seen at the CUC. That also goes back to that connection between not just CUC but vocational providers, universities and everyone and how we can better prepare for it. But there is a challenge around where things are certainly lacking in schools. This is not unique to Victorians. It is nationwide, where universities, hiring providers, CUCs and TAFE providers are being asked to move down into supporting further what is the school setting. That is a challenge nationally and has come up through a whole bunch of other inquiries as well. It is not a great answer potentially for you, Kim, but anyway.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kim. Anthony, I will head to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair; and thank you so much for appearing, Chris. Just looking at your submission here—thank you, it is a very good submission—74 per cent of the students going through CUC have transitioned to the in-demand fields of health, education and community services, and 77 per cent of the students are female. Then 48 per cent go on to also work within the Victorian government, which is great. What is your advice or insights around how the government could potentially learn from what is working there, given you have such a high success rate of students, particularly in female-dominated industries, going on to actual jobs in in-demand industries? How can that potentially be leveraged and applied to other sectors through the work of the Inquiry and through government?

Chris RONAN: It comes back to coordination, because everything is place based, and that is the key. You are right, the stats are quite strong—and there are some updated stats since that submission came in, so it is actually two-thirds that will end up going on to work for the Victorian government. That obviously will change from semester to semester. In New South Wales, as a comparative example, the state government does support the CUCs financially but also from that coordination approach. For example, if we look at, TAS teaching or early childhood—they are two examples which we can draw on—the state government already funds existing programs in regional communities in New South Wales. The role that the CUC plays is actually, in a place-based way, coordinating those and having greater impact through connections, through things we know are valued in community, rather than trying to come from the state government.

There is a question around how existing state government resources and programs, especially in communities where a CUC exists, are best utilised in doing that. I think the other piece for us is we have huge demand for the regional university study hubs. That is the Commonwealth funding that supports a lot of these centres, and from Portland to Murrindindi shire a whole bunch of communities are ready and raring to go in this model because they see the success of it. So in many ways it already is solving a lot of the workforce challenges, and we find that people actually know where those in-demand jobs are. The Productivity Commission a few years ago did a great report that essentially says that students make great choices on their own volition, especially in regional areas. They know where those jobs are. It is just the road map and the actual laying it out on a platter so they can get there. I think that is why the CUC has been successful, because it has focused on coordinating things from school but also from mature-aged people and career lifters and shifters to get the transition.

I think the other piece that is probably worth noting is almost 80 per cent are female. It also skews to parents and carers. There are also trends that we see of people in their late 20s and early 30s, for example, who have

had an existing career, usually have kids and are now looking to transition or to change. Having a place where they can go that — we specifically do not allow children into the centre, and that is because it differentiates that place as a special place for study. So there are really small things that we can do and that the community can recognise that can support that transition as well. Sorry, a bit of a wandering answer, but I think that state government piece in New South Wales is interesting around coordination and then also the reasons why people use the CUCs in Victoria.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Would you say most of the jobs that they go on to work in off the back of the CUCs are physically located in the regions or in Melbourne? And as part of that, how do you envisage or do you envisage the potential changes around working from home and remote working as a benefit to all that as well?

Chris RONAN: Across the broader network, not just Victoria, we have 98 per cent of students stay in the community where they study because these people are already deeply embedded. The reason why they access the CUCs is because they either do not want to move and leave their community or they cannot. It is flipping that model around, so the type of person that walks into the centre is already working, is already connected, is staying. So it is just lifting the capacity that is already there in place.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Anthony. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Chris, for your evidence today. Just following on from Anthony, where you have obviously got great successes with regards to probably mature-aged women students in the country heading into female-dominated industries like health and education. I am just interested to see what the CUCs are doing to support female students to enter and complete courses aligned with male-dominated in-demand industries.

Chris RONAN: It is really interesting, in preparation for this we spoke to a number of the centres in the state, and one of the things that came through from CUC in Ovens—Murray is that in their programs working in communities up there, those rigid gender norms actually exist right back into primary school. In their work around career aspirations and nurturing those aspirations, which is what those programs are set up to do, they see really strong trends in their data that say they are formed very, very early, and that is especially the case in regional Australia. So I think it is sort of like, where is the intervention point and what are the policy mechanisms at the different intervention points? I think from our point of view it is actually probably much earlier than where it currently exists. Government initiatives especially are often focused on that transition, so year 11–12, 10, 11, 12, around then, when people are making decisions, but by then a gendered overlay already exists in terms of the careers. Ovens—Murray and a number of other communities in this work with schools are actually shifting to a younger cohort. It is longer-term, it is not a quick, golden-bullet solution but I think that is where it is coming in terms of transitioning—because we also see the reverse in terms of male transition to predominantly female industries, and those gender-rigid norms also coming into place at that early age.

John MULLAHY: Are you able to provide the supports for women who are trying to get into male-dominated industries through the CUCs, or are you finding that they are not applying for courses through the CUCs?

Chris RONAN: I think it goes back to that coordination piece. Still riffing off that Ovens—Murray example, they have a partnership with RMIT, for example, around women in STEM projects because that has been identified in those communities, so I think the communities are very much aware that this is a challenge. The universities are trying to do their best, communities are trying to do their best, and that is where the transition point exists. Within our data in fact I can take it on notice and can provide more data if it is of help around, for instance, engineering, like what are the gender breakdowns in terms of engineering and transitions, and how does that track against your data as a state government and/or the department more broadly, because I think that comparative piece would potentially be really helpful to see if it is making a difference in that way.

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Nicole.

Nicole WERNER: Can I just pick up on that, Chris—we have spoken a lot about women going into male-dominated industries, but not the reverse, and I think you are probably the first that has actually raised that. We would love to hear more about that in terms of the work that you have been doing and just your observations in that, because I am sure that is the case in the in-demand industries like — a really stereotypical example maybe — male nursing or something like that where there is a shortage in healthcare workers. If you could speak to that, that would be really interesting.

Chris RONAN: Yes, and I think just to develop that a bit further, Nicole, often it is focused on transitioning vocational to higher ed rather than higher ed to vocational as well. And I think in that harmonisation piece, just the framing as well needs to shift. Just as an example, in the Bass Coast—so down there in Wonthaggi—there is a gentleman who was a plumber for a very long time and he wanted to go into education. It was really interesting watching that journey and the support that the centre provided, not in the study component but actually in the build-up to that in terms of normalising how he could change, how he could shift into that profession, so there is a value-add there that I think is missing. If the CUC was not there, then going from plumbing right through to education is a huge leap, so that transitions piece is probably from a policy intervention or consideration where the greatest bang for buck is.

That is one example. We also see from other states outside of Victoria at about the year four or five mark we have a trend change in terms of the demographics. As I mentioned, mature age students are initially big users of the CUC, and then after a few years it actually slides down to being predominantly school leavers. It is interesting when also the stats on gender start to change and the different study paths that they are choosing. It is probably too early to equivocally say, but the trend we see anecdotally through data from sectors that have existed longer is after that four- or five-year period those gender norms do start to change slightly, and also the acceptance of transitions out of school. So I think there are a few leading indicators there that can be drawn on.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. I am just going to jump in with probably the last question, mindful of time. Can you talk a little bit about the wraparound support that the centre offers for students, but particularly we have talked about mentorships or wraparound support that we need to transition into the workforce. Can you just talk about what the centre offers and what you think you do uniquely?

Chris RONAN: Yes. If you were studying in a regional area, you either had to move or you had to study online. So predominantly students will come in and get face-to-face support—a learning community of other students. Often they will know the people in that community but not know that they were studying, so there is a connection point around study that is really key for normalising it. And then there is also the technology and things like that in the actual facilities.

In terms of transitioning out into the workforce, it is a knowledge base that sits with the staff in the centre, so the greatest investment is actually the centre managers and the people who are connected to those key industries, because often the local health district or the hospital will come to the centre and say, ‘I am looking for A, B, C, D. Do you have anyone who’s graduating soon?’ That is a very common story. So it is that human connection, and in a rural or regional community that is where the best transition support is, because a lot of the people in some of the examples that I have used have come in and focused on the study, but then obviously there is an unknown unknown about how they then transition out. So they know those jobs are out there, whether it be in health or whatever it might be, but just mapping that through. And I know placements is another thing as well, and the centre also helps facilitate those placements locally. We see students choose universities or providers based on the ability to do placements locally as well, so that is also just prior to that transition.

The CHAIR: And just a follow-up question to that. Are you hearing from industry that once they are in the workplace there have been challenges of that transition? Do they have all the skills that they need to be successful or stay or retain in that job or industry?

Chris RONAN: Yes, and often, because they are so in demand, before they even graduate or finish their course they are already working in those jobs and industries anyway. So it is actually a very smooth transition, and because they are embedded in the community—like I said, the majority of students do not leave the community after studying—then there is a sort of investment that comes. There is investment from the

employer which is really strong because they know that person is probably not going to leave and there is an investment from the individual because they have this opportunity now, so those two things work in concert, whereas often employers, if it is a placement student or a student coming from a metropolitan area or another community, the likelihood of them staying is actually much lower, so there is a different investment and a different relationship that exists.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you so much, Chris, for your time and answering our questions today. It is given us real food for thought I think in terms of how to do this really well in a play space. You talked about play space; I think that has really been highlighted today. Thank you very much for your time. We really appreciate it.

Chris RONAN: Thanks, everyone. Cheers.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will now end the broadcast.

Witness withdrew.