

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)*

Amanda Threlfall, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.

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Thank you very much, Amanda, for your time today in answering a few questions and also for the Victorian Trades Hall Council's submission to this. It will be a really interesting conversation, because I think we have heard a lot from students and young people, but it is really great to talk about the workforce, I suppose, and what that next step looks like in terms of industry. What we might do is if you have got an opening statement or would like to talk a bit to the submission, we will start there, and then we will jump into some questions.

Amanda THRELFALL: Fantastic, thank you very much. Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee today. My name is Amanda Threlfall, and I am Assistant Secretary of Victorian Trades Hall Council. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I am currently at Victorian Trades Hall, which proudly stands on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the mighty Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. Victorian Trades Hall Council acknowledges that this land was stolen, never ceded, and always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Victorian Trades Hall Council is the peak body for unions in Victoria. We represent 40 affiliated unions covering more than 450,000 members in both the public and private sectors across metropolitan and regional Victoria. We support and endorse the written submissions of our affiliated unions and the Young Workers Centre as well as any oral remarks they make during the hearings of the Inquiry.

Around half of apprentices in Victoria and Australia do not complete their apprenticeship because of exploitation and mistreatment at work, rampant wage theft, bullying and harassment and unsafe workplace practices. The national minimum wage is \$24.95 per hour, but an apprentice can be paid as little as \$12 an hour. If you start your apprenticeship the day before you turn 21, you are paid junior wages throughout your entire apprenticeship. If you start your apprenticeship the day after you turn 21, you are paid an adult wage. It does not make sense that workers are being paid based on the number of candles on their birthday cake. The 21-year-old loophole is contributing to delays in apprentices commencing an apprenticeship, and it is also contributing to labour shortages. Apprentices need a wage that they can live on. Apprenticeship reform is long overdue. The Victorian government established the Apprenticeships Taskforce to improve safety and fairness at work. I sat on the taskforce and saw firsthand how employers, unions and the Victorian government worked together with the common purpose of improving the apprenticeship system. In October 2024 the Allan Labor government announced its support, in full or in principle, for all the recommendations in the taskforce's report. We are looking forward to the reforms being implemented to create stronger regulation of the apprenticeship system and enforcement powers.

There are social and economic benefits of inclusive workforce participation. I am keen to highlight some of the outcomes of the job readiness program we had at Victorian Trades Hall Council. Our job readiness program supported First Nations peoples, migrants and refugees into traineeships and apprenticeships. The job readiness program supported participants to develop soft skills and work with employers to ensure that workplaces were culturally safe. Various modules prepare participants for work, including sessions around workplace rights. These services were delivered in collaboration with community cultural organisations to ensure cultural safety. As a result of the job readiness program, 59 participants secured ongoing employment. A social impacts evaluation of the project by Social Ventures Australia found that for every \$1 invested in the participants, there was \$3.70 of economic value to the community, and \$472,000 of value was created to government.

All workers in Victoria and Australia deserve good jobs, safe jobs, with enough pay to live on. A successful apprenticeship system means that we have sufficient and highly trained tradespeople to meet the demands of industry both now and in the future. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Amanda. We will go to questions. I will go to Anthony first.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you so much, Amanda, and for the opening remarks and the submission from Trades Hall and for all the work Trades Hall always do to protect workers' rights. I just wanted to ask: your opening statement spoke a lot about apprentices, which I certainly acknowledge, but your submission really spoke extensively as well around the State Electricity Commission—the SEC—and the opportunities that potentially can provide for future jobs and pathways and training, particularly in the trades sector. I wanted to sort of ask, in the context of Victoria, the Victorian government as a model employer, with the SEC sitting alongside and underneath it: how does Trades Hall potentially see the SEC as a driving force to get more young people and women and others into trades? We heard earlier evidence, actually from a couple of hearings ago, that the SEC once upon a time used to do that, not only for the SEC itself but actually used to train a surplus of apprentices that would then go on and work in the private sector and non-government sector and construction sector more broadly. How important do you see the role of the SEC in this space as it evolves and grows?

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. Clean energy is one of the fastest-growing industries in the state, and the SEC alone is expected to create 59,000 jobs, including 6000 apprenticeships. Those new jobs are expected in electricity, gas, water and waste services. These jobs are good jobs; they are well-paid, secure public sector jobs that are essential to the economy and the energy system, but more work needs to be done to ensure that students see clean energy as a viable industry to work in. So we really need to be promoting clean energy as a viable pathway for students but also creating opportunities for mobility and study and upskilling that not only bring people into the industry but retain them as well.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Nicole, I might go to you.

Nicole WERNER: Thanks very much, Amanda. I am interested in how the recruitment of diverse workers in in-demand industries can be improved.

Amanda THRELFALL: Yes, absolutely. Our submission talked about the Women Onsite program that we had here at Trades Hall, and my opening remarks talked about our job readiness program that we also had at Trades Hall, but we have also found that Victorian Trades Hall Council has a demonstrated capacity to collaborate with employers, state training providers and other education providers, and we actually won the industry collaboration award at the 2023 Victorian Training Awards and gold at the 2023 Australian Training Awards. This award was for the Women in Apprenticeships Victoria Electrical program, commonly known as the WAVE Program, and that was aimed at attracting women to electrical trades. The collaboration involves the Victorian Electrical Trades Union, Holmesglen Institute, Victorian Trades Hall Council, Australian Women in Solar Energy and the Victorian Department of Education.

A holistic approach was taken from engagement to placement, supported by strategies to attract, recruit, train and retain women in electrical apprenticeships. The program was a resounding success. Around 33 participants commenced a women-only pre-apprenticeship course. More than 100 women got involved in Try a Trade days, and 94 per cent completed the pre-apprenticeship program. As a result, many are now employed as apprentices in various companies. The Women Onsite program, the job readiness program and the WAVE electrical program we have at Trades Hall are really working with the community to break down barriers around participation for a more gender-diverse and inclusive workforce that also includes First Nations peoples, migrants and refugees. Our submission also talked about including more people with a disability, as at the moment here in Victoria that sector is still under-represented in terms of inclusive workforce participation.

Nicole WERNER: Yes, thanks. I think it was more to the latter point, not so much specifically women but more diversity in workforce, particularly with the migrant communities and multicultural communities.

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. We would absolutely be thrilled to repeat the job readiness program, because that really did a lot of work to break down barriers around employment. The other big barrier is financial support as well, even making sure that tools are bought for people to get into the workforce, things like that. But financial barriers still play a big part.

The other issue I want to talk about that is a barrier is knowing workplace rights to ensure that there is not exploitation and mistreatment at work. It is really important in terms of breaking down barriers that people are aware of what their workplace rights are, including in the apprenticeship system for young people.

Nicole WERNER: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. Dylan, I will go to you next.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Amanda. Thank you to the hall more broadly for all the advocacy that they do and for the submission, the incredibly comprehensive submission, as they always are. You spoke in your opening remarks about the exploitation of young workers and apprentices. Do you think that those working conditions and exploitation are contributing to some of the skill shortages that we see in in-demand industries, and how can we address the root cause of that and that underlying issue for the benefit of those skill shortages but also the apprentices as well?

Amanda THRELFALL: Around two-thirds of apprentices in Victoria are under the age of 25, so it is a young workforce. I outlined a couple of issues in my opening remarks around closing the 21-year-old loophole and ensuring that the dedicated regulator here in Victoria is implemented before the next election and is properly resourced. But if we want to really look at labour shortages, we need to be concentrating on apprenticeship completion. There seems to be a lot of focus around commencements and the fact that commencements are down year on year. If we want to do something about that, we have got to focus on the completions. Through our direct engagement with apprentices, the reason they are leaving their employment is not because of the educational experience. It is because of what is happening in the workplace, and often when they reach out for assistance, it is too late; they have already quit their apprenticeship. They often reach out as well with really complex and hybrid issues. They might reach out because they are experiencing wage theft, but it turns out there are also unsafe workplace practices; they are also being bullied at work. This is often their first job in the workplace as well, so if they are being empowered around their workplace rights, this will really set them up for their career, being aware of issues when they arise before they get to the stage where they have quit.

The other issue that is also happening, as well as the low wages that I talked about in my opening remarks, is about wage subsidies for first-year apprentices that are going to their employers. That is really creating apprentice churn. An employer will take on a wage subsidy for a first-year apprentice, they will then dismiss them after 12 months and then take on another apprentice. Another issue that we are hearing around completion rates is unpaid TAFE fees. I recently had someone at a TAFE say to me that they were chasing up 300 employers for unpaid TAFE fees, and then what happens is they end up following up the apprentice. The apprentice then cannot progress to the next stage of their apprenticeship. So all of these issues are really contributing to apprentices not being able to complete their apprenticeship.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, I have come across that myself as an official, employers not paying TAFE fees and trying to get apprentices to pay TAFE fees. But in terms of the subsidies that you speak of for the commencement of an apprenticeship, do you think it would be wise or better to recalibrate that and use that same amount of money for completions?

Amanda THRELFALL: Yes. The Albanese Labor government has actually just completed an apprenticeship incentive review, looking at the system and the way incentives are paid. The report was released in October last year around that apprenticeship incentive review. We are very much looking forward to the Albanese Labor government issuing its response to that report, because it really does talk about the incentive system and the issues that are happening there and what can be done. What we advocated for was any subsidies or incentives going into the pockets of apprentices and actually helping them in terms of their workplace experience and also keeping up with the cost of living to complete their apprenticeship, because wages just are not keeping up at the moment. All of those things can really help, but the other issue as well from a state government perspective is even bringing in incentives to help with completion. For example, if you are a university student, you get discounted transport cards, whether that be a Myki card, so those sorts of things really help. The Victorian government established free registration for apprentices, which has been absolutely fantastic and has made a huge difference. But also doing things around public transport as well and bringing in those sorts of incentives to help with completion will definitely assist. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Thanks, Dylan. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Amanda, for appearing here today and for the comprehensive submission from the Victorian Trades Hall Council. The Trades Hall Council represents over

half a million workers, and many of those workers come from vocational education and training. What I would like to know from the council is: what can the Victorian government do to address the negative perceptions of vocational education and training?

Amanda THRELFALL: Yes, absolutely. I actually sit on the Victorian government Senior Secondary Reform Reference Group that sits in Minister Carroll's education portfolio. On that Committee is a whole diverse bunch of stakeholders, including student representatives. What I find really helpful is when we are talking on that Committee around vocational education and training and VCE, in particular with the vocational education and training pathways, a lot of the time the responses from the student representatives are around, 'Well, we didn't even know that existed. We didn't know that pathway was available.' That has been a really eye-opening experience for the Committee, because it really demonstrates that more of that promotional work needs to be done around vocational education and training being a fantastic career pathway. At the moment schools are really stretched as well, and we need to make sure there is properly resourced career counselling in schools as well to really be able to talk to students around these different issues. In terms of the Victorian government, their role could be around that promotion and advertising of vocational education and training.

John MULLAHY: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Amanda, we have heard from some young people as well that cost of living, travel and cost of courses—just that pressure of cost of living—influence their choices around education and further training, and then add to that that if they do choose a course, then there are unpaid placements that they may have to undertake. Can you just talk a little bit about that or the information or data you have around unpaid placements?

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. Unpaid placements are really having a huge impact at the moment and are something that is really evident in the different industries if there is not ongoing funding either. If you have a public sector workforce that might be subjected to 12 months of funding year on year, that makes it really hard to attract people and have any sort of paid placement there. The idea around who a student is has really changed a lot as well. No longer are students living at home with their parents. They are actually often living away from home, supporting themselves. To have an unpaid placement for weeks on end is just impossible, and it really acts as a barrier to going into training.

The other issue is travelling over an hour to get to perhaps a worksite or a workplace. If they have responsibilities at home, that also makes it incredibly difficult. Through our direct engagement with apprentices, I am being told stories like that of a plumbing apprentice who delayed starting her apprenticeship until after she was 21 years old so she could get the higher rate of pay. Another apprentice was not only supporting herself, she was also providing financial support to her family. She was doing an apprenticeship during the day and at night-time working at McDonald's trying to make ends meet, and it just was not sustainable, so she had to quit her apprenticeship. Those sorts of stories, together with the unpaid placements aspect, particularly if you are looking at going into tertiary education, are making it a really tough situation.

The CHAIR: We have seen a few incentives in some industries to do that at a federal level.

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. There are paid placements in some industries, which are making a big difference.

The CHAIR: So that does make a difference? Do you think that that is making a difference?

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. It is making a difference in terms of not having a gap in payments, so you can still afford to pay rent, buy groceries, all of those sorts of things. I am hearing stories as well around people having to save up for a number of years before they can do an unpaid placement, which is again contributing to labour shortages because you are actually delaying when that study will happen.

The CHAIR: I am trying to link in my first question to how industry can step up and be part of the solution here as well. Do you have thoughts about—maybe it is about the work experience or the placement or being job ready—industry being part of that solution?

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. Industry investing is very important and making sure that there is that career pathway there for people to address labour shortages, but also everyone working together with the

common purpose of making sure there is a successful industry. I talked about the classic example being the apprenticeships taskforce—employers, unions and the Victorian government all working together with that common purpose—and employers stepping up in that space as well and acknowledging that it is the future of their industry. There are some employers who are doing that work, and it does make a difference.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. I do have time for another question. If there is a member that has something that they would like to ask, they can jump in, otherwise I will go. Anthony. Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. Your submission talks a lot about students and pathways for people with disabilities. In 2023 there were over 5 million students enrolled in VET and Trades Hall identified only 191,000 had a disability. That is only 3.8 per cent of students, which is very much lower than the average threshold of 15 per cent of people who identify as having a disability generally in the population.

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely.

Anthony CIANFLONE: That is a massive discrepancy in the training pathways, let alone the workforce. What are the actual tangible suggestions from Trades Hall and insights and experiences that we can have a look at and government can consider to basically boost that and encourage more people into those VET pathways and then on to sustainable employment?

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. I talked about, in my opening remarks, there being social and economic benefits to more inclusive workforce participation. It is about really needing to go to the places and spaces where different areas of the workforce are to recruit people. We cannot just stick with the usual advertising of a job, we actually need to go into the different places and the different platforms where there are the diverse areas. Things like the skills guarantee and having targets as well, that really shows a commitment from government to having a more inclusive workforce, but it also means work has to be done to reach those targets. That more targeted approach will certainly make a difference. It is interesting because this is also coming through at a federal level that this is influencing occupation shortages. Jobs and Skills Australia recently released their report for 2025 around barriers to productivity and participation. It really focused on diversity in the workplace and including more people with a disability and how much this would make a big difference to occupation shortages. There is certainly a lot of work still to be done in this space, and commitments around targets would make a difference.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

Amanda THRELFALL: And obviously accessibility goes to that as well, making sure that when people are in the workplace it is accessible.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Anthony. Thanks, Amanda. Any other questions from members? I have got one up my sleeve if we do not. I would like to understand your perspective around families, parents, students understanding where the next jobs are and the in-demand industries. Obviously we are trying to explore that, and we know there will be shortages in certain industries. But do you think that there is an awareness of where the next generation of jobs are?

Amanda THRELFALL: I feel like at the moment with changes around AI, for example, in the workplace as well, it is changing so rapidly that it is really hard for people to know where the next job opportunities are in different sectors. We talked about the clean energy sector and really doing some promotional work around that, that this is a huge area that is only going to continue to grow and there are jobs available, so making sure that is made clear. But having good, quality jobs with good pay and safe jobs as well is really important. A lot of young workers are more susceptible to injury at work as well. I often hear that from parents that that is a big issue that comes into play. So making sure we have safe workplaces, inclusive workplaces and promoting where the different pathways are and advertising them.

The CHAIR: Yes. And some have talked about that awareness and promotion, and it seems to me that young people are getting their information from different places and platforms now.

Amanda THRELFALL: Absolutely. And that is what I mean by going to the places and the spaces where young people are or where First Nations people are looking for job opportunities as well—making sure all of that happens.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for a really extensive submission from Trades Hall and also your time today to answer our questions. We really appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Amanda THRELFALL: Thank you so much for the opportunity to address the Committee today.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Amanda. We will end the broadcast.

Witness withdrew.