

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)*

Kit McMahon, Chief Executive Officer, Women’s Health in the South East; and

Polly Britten, Founder, LinkUp Careers.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for 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 the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of their transcript to check.

Thank you both Polly and Kit for being with us today and for your submissions, very interesting and very different perspectives for our Inquiry to consider. We have got a few questions for you today and hopefully you can answer those. Kit, we might start with you, just your role and the work that you do. Maybe just a quick outline and then we can go to Polly.

Kit McMAHON: Yes, sure. My name is Kit McMahon. I am the CEO of Women's Health in the South East, which is what our submission was from. Just for context, I am also convenor of Women in Adult and Vocational Education, I sit on the board of Tradeswomen Australia and I am the co-chair of ICOS, which is the Independent Collective of Survivors. I am across a few of the Building Women's Careers projects federally, and I have done a few projects in Victoria—Training for Respect, which was funded by WorkWell to stop gendered violence in RTOs and learning environments, and also applied the gender impact assessment, most recently with Chisholm TAFE in the manufacturing pipeline, so kind of coming today with those sorts of experiences and lessons learned.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. Polly.

Polly BRITTEN: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I am a 2023 Churchill Fellow. I did international research looking at opportunities for women and the leaky pipeline for women getting into the trades, so the recruitment, retention and support of women. I have just founded and launched LinkUp Careers, which is essentially a support network and a resource opportunity for schools to tap into—teachers primarily—and it includes role models and resources. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Wow, that is something that we have been talking about, so fantastic. We will certainly ask you some questions around that, Polly. John, we might start with you if you have got a question.

John MULLAHY: Yes. Thanks very much for appearing. We in the Legislative Assembly just recently debated the Bill regarding restricting non-disclosure agreements and sexual harassment at work. And so what I wanted to ask was around inappropriate behaviour and how prevalent is gender discrimination and harassment in male-dominated workplaces and educational settings? How does this impact female students' career pathways, and how can male-dominated workplaces and educational settings be made safer and more inclusive for female workers?

Kit McMAHON: Chair, would you like me to start off on that one?

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Kit McMAHON: Workplace gendered violence is prevalent over countless reports from government and research reports for women in male-dominated trades. In fact I have been on the record as part of work that I do with Powering Skills Organisation to say actually sometimes I worry that we are being culpable in putting young women and women in trades at the moment. The Training for Respect project that we did in Victoria, which involved an ethically reviewed prevalence survey, actually showed that for the students that answered they consider workplace gendered violence—their experience of what we would define as workplace gendered violence—as just part of learning, which is not on and very sad. We also know from research done by Anne Summers called *The Cost*—she investigated the impact of it on learning pathways for women—that it is a significant contributor to women not finishing their learning. You can go to the bank to say it is a prevalent problem and not question that.

In terms of how you address it, the really good news is that there is evidence about how you do it. For vocational education and training careers, it is not about fixing one thing. It is not about saying that career advisers just need to recommend it more. We need more people like Polly Britten around. Polly Britten is

exceptional, all right. This has got to be systemic, and we have got to address it for everyone. We know how to do this: we address the systemic structures that drive behavioural norms, because it is considered normal, right. And it is multilayered. It is campaigns. We have got to build the capacity of our VET system so that the teachers, the managers, know how to address this, and the employers know how to do that. I am part of a piece of work at the moment where I am working with group training organisations across Australia asking them what they see. They are opening their arms at the moment to say, 'What role can we play in it? How do we develop the capacity of field assets?' It needs to be as systemic as it is prevalent in our system, and that discrimination is absolutely preventing women from becoming part of male-dominated trades.

Polly BRITTEN: I will just add an example in there based on the international research I conducted last year. In Denmark they were able to do a whole-school approach on diversity, equity and inclusion. That is in the training organisation. They partnered up with the training organisation and they could see, through addressing every layer of management—so through supervisors into the classroom, the peers and all the students—they were able to see 106 per cent retention rate versus the 74 per cent reduction, so how much they dropped out when the program first started. That is 106 per cent, and that is because the women were moving from other courses to get into, in this case, building and construction.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you.

John MULLAHY: Would it be when we have more vocational majors stuff happening at the secondary school level, when we have girls and boys learning together and breaking down that male-dominated area and making it normal that females are in this space?

Kit McMAHON: If I could speak to that, I think that is one thing that needs to happen. There is also evidence to say that women-only learning spaces are more safe at the moment. You also need to have educators not only at school but across the pipeline. Parents have a role. I mean, you have heard all of this before; this is no surprise. But let us also say that it is as much about talking about men in care work as it is about women in trade work. If you are going to address the thing that drives this—you know, we do whole campaigns to get people to stop smoking, we build capacity of our medical systems, we invest in research. This is legacy-building behavioural norms, and the same amount of effort needs to be taken to do it. I think across the multiple pieces of work I am doing at the moment with organisations and parties and partners, the way you address this, the evidence on that is clear, but it needs to be multifactorial and long term, and you need to invest in the capability of the people in the system to actually address that.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. I think we have lost Polly, but I am sure she will pop back in. Nicole, I might go to you next.

Nicole WERNER: Thanks. Kit, in light of that, what then can be done to make trades more attractive careers for all students?

Kit McMAHON: You had the colleagues from I think it was the union movement before that, and they ended by talking about safe workplaces. That is key, right. I think the WorkSafe laws that have come in around psychosocial risk and positive duty are going to go a long way to doing that. I think in Victoria we are very lucky too, if I can say that, in as much as things like the *Gender Equality Act* and procurement reform have actually driven the conversation in the construction and those so-called male-dominated environments. We need to continue to support that. This change is not going to happen in a year or with another advocacy program or campaign; this is 10-year change reform. The way that we make those sites safe is by ensuring we have long-term reform.

We have also got to be really clear that this is not about girls saying that they do or they do not want to go into trades; these are the things they pick up in the news, and these are the things their parents pick up in the news. When I talk to fathers of daughters, fathers who might be in construction, more often than not they say, 'There's no way my daughter's going to go into construction.' So the way to make it more attractive for everyone is to actually do the deep work to actually make it safer, and when I say safer, I mean that psychosocial risk being reduced.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks, Nicole. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Kit and Polly, for appearing today. We have heard across this Inquiry pretty consistently about the need for a sort of holistic approach with students—

Kit McMAHON: They were great.

Dylan WIGHT: the educational sector, the industry and also parents. So my question is: how do parents' gendered misconceptions and stereotypes influence their children's career pathways?

Kit McMAHON: Well, they absolutely do, right? So how do they? They do: 'I will do what mum or dad say to do.' Even through the work that I am doing with the women's pain inquiry, by engaging with young women and teenagers in the community, they do listen to Mum and Dad. The best way to change that is to go and work with parents, and I know that sounds pretty obvious, but even in some of the work that we are doing with consent or cyberbullying, parents want to know how to work the system. They want to know how to help their children. The best way to do it is to go and work directly in community with parents at the points of connection. TAFEs already have an incredible connection with their community; they already have the networks, and they have already got great partnerships. Can we task and resource them to engage? They already do engage with schools more; the teachers already try to provide that optimum career process. Yes, I hear the bad stuff more often than not—it does not surprise me that parents are worried about those sites and settings. So the best way we can help parents is by actually doing the deep work to address those perceptions that they have got, which, in my experience, are pretty well founded. Parents are not saying, 'We don't want our daughters to go there because (a) we don't think they're clever enough or (b) we don't think that they should earn more money,' they are doing it because they think that is where it is best for their daughter to go. I think unless you embrace the fact that they are trying to do the best thing and take it from there, that is the best step forward, by actually working with the parents. Hey, Polly.

Polly BRITTEN: My apologies, I have not been very well this morning, so I am just—not fun.

The CHAIR: Well, we hope you are feeling a bit better at some point, Polly, and we appreciate you joining us when you are under the weather. Polly, Kit it has been great; she has been talking about some of the challenges in terms of particularly females going into certain industries, but Polly, I might ask you a question around your research that you did in your report. You talked about a Canadian cooperative education model, or a co-op model. Can you just talk a little bit about that, what that looks like on the ground?

Polly BRITTEN: Yes, of course. Co-op, or cooperative learning that was introduced in Ontario was an opportunity for young people to essentially sit in the classroom and learn about careers one day a week. So every Monday they were committed to do this from year 10 to year 12. They were in there with the same cohort, so the same students, for the duration of the times. They were able to build those connections with those individuals but also with their teacher, and the teacher was able to learn who they were and where they could go in the future. But in saying that, they were also given the opportunity to get exposure to industry; industry came into the classroom. There was that commitment every Monday where they got to learn. They were doing résumé writing; they were practising their industry employment skills, so transferable skills; and they were also looking at ways of meeting industry expectations: so, what does it mean to have your mobile phone within an industry setting? You cannot actually be on your mobile phone. For a young person, that is new information, so it is really about showcasing what industry requires and meeting industry expectations.

The CHAIR: In those classes or in those opportunities were they also developing their soft skills or skills about going into an industry and what it looks like?

Polly BRITTEN: Absolutely. There were a number of them—they are called a different name in each state, but there were essentially three states that I visited that had the same model in Canada. During the summer period, which is 10 to 12 weeks, they went out and did a summer work experience program, but you would not call it work experience, because they are there for a longer duration of time, not a week or not five days. They get paid apprenticeship wages, so there is more enticement for a young person to actually go and succeed. But they have also built up these connections with these industry representatives that are involved in that summer holiday program for the last one to two years, so they already know these individuals and they are able to build that rapport prior to going out onsite.

The CHAIR: Some of the young associates that presented to our committee as well talked about that they may get a survey, the Morrisby survey that they do here in Victoria, where they can find their passion, but then

sometimes they are not connected to the right work experience in that passion. Obviously there is passion, but there are also in-demand industries. Where are the jobs of the future? If we do not need any more hairdressers, should we be encouraging hairdressing? I am just giving that as an example. But does Canada try and link better with the in-demand industries, where the jobs are going to be, or is it directed to the students' passions?

Polly BRITTEN: It is both. It is localised, recognising that it is place based, and they do bring in industry to talk to teachers and keep students up to date on what is happening within the industry. But it is a combination of both. Students have been exposed to those particular industries, they have had a walk-through, they have had a site visit, they have met multiple levels of job descriptions and then they are able to choose those. But they are all local, so recognising that. Interestingly, I am going to steer away from Canada and point out Germany, where they introduced labour market discussions and excursions in day care, so child care, recognising that stigma and stereotypes are determined between the ages of five and seven, prior to getting to primary school. That had a profound effect. They have been around for 22 years, and in comparison to our 3 per cent of women in skilled trades, they are up around 10.5 per cent, so you can see the knock-on. In addition to that, the research tells us that at the current snail's pace that we are taking in addressing stereotypes and stigma from really in high school it is going to take us about three generations to make those changes in addressing the fact that we need to meet these demands, meet these requirements from industry as far as workforce development, but also those stereotypes and stigma that are established so early on.

The CHAIR: Do you have a best practice, around the world? Is there somewhere that is doing it the best?

Polly BRITTEN: I think the overall common denominator is those role models, which is why I set up LinkUp Careers. But it is also access to multiple, consistent, sustainable programs that have been running for 10-plus years, some of them 40-plus years. Students expect that they get to try those things, so TAFEs and registered training organisations—or colleges, as they are referred to overseas—run these programs every year consistently so the students know that is what is coming and they can have a go. If you look at it, there are multiple that start in kindergarten—you have got Germany that starts in child care—but it is all about consistently, year on year, having a go and seeing if this is something that they like so therefore they are making an informed choice when they are leaving. My thought is that would have a knock-on effect to the dropout rates during college or your training time in vocational education and training.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that. Are there any other Committee Members that have some other questions they would like to ask? Thanks, John.

John MULLAHY: We had some evidence earlier from the Country Universities Centre about some of the successes they have had for female education and then getting them into the in-demand industries. What I would like is your opinions with regard to the main barriers for female students living in regional areas entering in-demand industries and how they can be addressed.

Polly BRITTEN: Kit, do you want to take that one first?

Kit McMAHON: Yes, sure. Rurality is a disadvantage, yes—distance. And let us be really honest, women are often going into learning, whether it is in engineering or manufacturing or anything, with those care burdens as well—more often, as I understand, with those care burdens. If the shift starts at 7 am and you have not got access to child care or child care nearby, you have just cut off that workforce. That is the first other thing. There is also financial precarity. If you have distance, you have got to fund the transport, the travel, the gear and all those sorts of things like that.

If I think of government policy settings and what they can do, it is going to be about flexing the guidelines or the policy around how training can be distributed and implemented. Let us get really tactical. If we think about nominal hours, it is how VET and apprenticeships are funded. Could there be a way if you are in a rural area that somehow those nominal hours are extended or increased to allow for more time or more flexibility of the provider and the employer in those sites and settings? Is there a way that we can actually flex the expectations about what an apprenticeship looks like?

My reading of all of the models, wherever they are—and I have been on the record as saying this—is that we actually in our mind construct the apprentice gendered. They are probably in our mind a 19-year-old, white, able-bodied male who has got access to a car, lives in the city and probably lives at home with his mum and dad, who do the washing. If that is our assumption—and I keep seeing that reference man reflected in all the

policy documents—it is no wonder that if it goes outside of that internal reference, everything else gets difficult. So I think one of the things that we can do in Victoria is flex those policies for capacity building, for training and for apprenticeship experience to accommodate the fact that actually the modern apprenticeship experience is very different to when it was first constructed in Australia when Kangan was a lad.

I think the other thing we have got to do is stop fixing the student. The reason the students are not progressing or going into it is not because they cannot do it; it is because of everything that surrounds them. The *Gender Equality Act*—the request for GIAs—is doing a lot to drive thinking. Federally we have got some push to think about it. The gender economic study from the feds was very helpful to drive conversations. The Victorian Skills Authority is alive to this, but we have to resource the work so it is more than project-based fixing of women, fixing girls, or ‘If only they knew about it more, it’d be better.’ We have been doing that for a long time, John, and it has not shifted the dial, right? I think there are those two things.

Really what I am saying to you is let us look at what those settings and policy settings and procedures are for vocational education and training. How can we flex them, and can we start to recognise that maybe we build them around their reference [Zoom dropout]

John MULLAHY: That is good.

Polly BRITTEN: I am going to throw three more points into that. I work for an organisation on a federal level, and we recognise that the small–medium enterprises are 76 per cent of the employers that take on apprentices. We really need to have large employers put their hands up to meet this demand, because they are currently not. That would be one point there.

Another one would be, just to give you an example, Tenaris, which is a national company, a manufacturing company that is over in Canada, managed to consult with multiple tradeswomen to find out what was required. Through that consultation they in turn built a childcare facility in their local community to meet the demand, so actually opening the doors for women in the local communities to come in, and they are regional and remote communities. They were able to retrofit a nursing area within their office so that return-to-work women could nurse their babies. They have got child care, and they have got a nursing area. It is meeting those demands and that flexibility piece that Kit touched on.

It is also worth noting there were a number of programs in my research that included as part of taking on either a pre-apprenticeship or an apprenticeship that they met the barrier, so that is your PPE—or your personal protective equipment—that does not fit. They were able to provide equipment that actually fit, and that is your clothing as well. They recognised there was financial assistance for PPE, dependent care, transportation and mental health support, so really that wraparound support from pretty much the day of them either starting an apprenticeship or starting out in their training.

Kit McMAHON: Could I just make another point, Chair, if that is okay. In Victoria we have got these amazing things called trade schools. They are brilliant. They enable the VET system to flex. They are a great starting point. And we have invested money into things like centres of excellence that actually, from my reading, sit just outside some of the really strict policy structures as well. I think that is a really good opportunity. I think the other thing to also see is that at the moment we say that the standard of requirement for VET teacher is a cert IV in TAE and they have got to have industry capability. Maybe we can do a little bit more about building their capability, about working with young people, about managing expectations and about being bystanders in the classroom. We get regular reports back from forums and focus groups with women in trades that that is not a consistent experience. So there are things that we can do now to do the prevention work and to do the equality work that is evidence based. It is not opening up another building, unfortunately, but we do know how to do those change pieces of work, and we have got the sites where we can start doing that in a really public, transparent way to show and share with people how it goes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks, John. Anthony or Nicole, do you have anything? Otherwise, I can. Anthony, yes. Thanks.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. It has been a really fascinating discussion with really great insight, so I really appreciate it, and really your comprehensive submissions as well. I have been really absorbing all the different questions and discussion points that have been happening. My question actually is the inverse, I guess. We have so many strong female-dominated industries which are doing amazing work in social work and in the

health and wellbeing space in particular. What opportunities do you believe are there to potentially get men to think about and encourage employment into those sectors as well?

Kit McMAHON: Yes. Polly, I might go. You ask a really important question, because as much as girls are told that they cannot do trades, men in this country are told that they cannot do care. And men in childcare at the moment—I met this morning with a public provider of childcare. They are doing very special care work of the men that work in childcare at the moment. But it is the same thing about men in beauty therapy and men in hairdressing. There is research about how those stereotypes affect them and their work. So like we talk about trying to address the stereotypes and discrimination that exist in one sector, we need to do it for the other. It is the same principles, Anthony: how are we making sure that the environment is safe, that behaviours are appropriate and that we are not discriminating? We have female change room conversations in this sector; do we have male change room conversations over here? And I think in Australia this is really unique, because in this country we really like women's jobs and we really like blokes' jobs—men's jobs—and we have this highly segregated labour market that actually results in the fact that the lived experience of workers is that they work in homogeneity. And you can go to things like the Man Box to see how those stereotypes impact on men, and we had the launch of the great Jesuit Social Services adolescent project a couple of weeks ago. So you ask a really important question. And if we are actually doing gender work correctly, it is not a woman's problem, it is everyone's. So yes, great point, great point.

Polly BRITTEN: I am going to throw in an example there as well. Going back to Germany and the international research, they implemented girls day—that went back 20 years ago—that is, one day a week when girls from year 5 to year 12 go out into a male-populated industry. And after the success of the first 10 years, they have since implemented the boys day, recognising that that actually needs to be an opportunity for all genders to get out into an industry that may not have been showcased to them. They do that consistently again, year on year. The students expect it. It is a national approach in Germany, so teachers and schools expect it well. And it is on the same date every year, in the first week of April, so they know that it is coming.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you so much. I am so sorry, I am mindful of time, and I need to wrap it up there. But I really appreciate the conversation we have had today because it was very insightful. And Polly, your work and report are just incredible, so thank you; it was really interesting to read that. Thank you so much.

Witnesses withdrew.