

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries**

Melbourne—Monday 17 November 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

#### **WITNESS**

Nina Bekker, Executive Officer, Adult and Community Education Victoria.

**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 mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

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.

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Thank you so much for coming in this afternoon and taking a few questions. We will quickly just introduce ourselves, and then I will hand over to you. If you do want to make opening remarks, that is fine. If you do not, we will jump straight into questions. I am Alison, the Chair and the Member for Bellarine.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Hi, Nina. I am Kim O'Keeffe, the Member for Shepparton. Welcome.

**Nicole WERNER:** Hi. I am Nicole Werner. I am the Member for Warrandyte.

**John MULLAHY:** John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. I might hand over to you, Nina, if there is something you would like to say first.

**Nina BEKKER:** One, ACEVic, or Adult Community Education Victoria—'ACEVic' is much more condensed—are really pleased to be represented here and have that community voice heard in this setting, so thank you. I am the Executive Officer, and like I said, I am really pleased to be here today.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Nina. We will jump into some questions if that is okay. Kim, I will go to you first.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes, sure. How do Learn Locals support learners to explore vocational pathways prior to enrolling in TAFE or higher education?

**Nina BEKKER:** The Learn Locals are in a really good position to be able to support learners prior to going into Free TAFE programs or higher education. It is a real bridge between informal learning and then formal learning. Hence its name, I guess, 'pre-accredited'. The pre-accredited programs that are offered really across the state—there are over 200 Learn Locals—really do focus a lot on foundational skills, which is quite a buzzword at the moment. But they also have been known more as employability skills, or in the sector we like to call them life skills or soft skills, those sorts of things. So yes, a lot of the programs focus on language, literacy, numeracy, digital skills—those employability skills—and also just connectedness to their local community, where it is very place based.

Learn Locals offer taster programs—I was watching earlier today, and I could sense that there was quite a bit of chatter around that already—in lots of different areas. It really is very localised. It might be around aged care or early childhood, manufacturing, warehousing, building and construction, hospitality, cleaning services or business administration. It is very varied. And most of those would be quite short; they are not months and months long. They are pre accredited, not accredited. You know, they are giving people a taste of what that industry is.

They also, really importantly, are giving people language around the industry that it is. I often laugh—and I am sure you all have your own parliamentary language as well—when new people come into this sector and the acronyms just blow them away. Every sort of industry and sector has its own language, so those pre accredited vocational tasters are really important in terms of bringing in some of that language and also workplace expectations and being employment ready, I guess, as well.

A little anecdote: a number of years ago when I was still on the floor teaching face-to-face. It was an early childhood education taster. I went around the room, and there were varying ages, from younger people to older, more mature women in the group. The person who had most recently been physically in a childcare centre was

one of the young ones, and it was when she was physically at childcare. So that is not a great way for people to be choosing potentially their TAFE or higher education pathways. Those Learn Locals are in such a great position, as I said, right across the state to focus on the local industries, make those partnerships with industry and really co-design those programs. Again, a number of years ago there was co-design with early childhood just around even the programs that they were using to document the children's learning journeys, you know, and bringing that into the vocational taster so that the people in there would then be aware of what was going to be expected of them before they made that decision to either enrol at a community RTO or go on to TAFE.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Nicole.

**Nicole WERNER:** I have one that maybe you are not prepared for, and I am sorry.

**Nina BEKKER:** That is okay.

**Nicole WERNER:** I am really interested in—and I appreciate the topic is young people—people in my community that are young women that are re-entering the workforce after perhaps taking time off to be with their children, whether it is a year or two years, sometimes decades. What work do you do in that space in terms of engaging with young women—not necessarily young by the definition of under 25, but even in their 30s or 40s—to re-engage them in work so that they can feel job ready to re-enter a workforce that is a bit different to perhaps what they left behind when they were working?

**Nina BEKKER:** Yes, definitely. I normally am not very good at, you know, going on with stats—

**Nicole WERNER:** Sorry.

**Nina BEKKER:** but I do actually have that one there. In 2023, 69 per cent of students in Learn Locals were women. So we do it a lot; the providers do a lot. They are experts at engaging vulnerable or disadvantaged or just sensitive learners. I think one of my questions here was about how we support older learners. And it is not necessarily just older learners but—you are right—people coming back to education from a gap. It might have been caregiving. It might have been employment, you know, but they had not upskilled or they might have been vulnerable in some sort of sense. And look, I know of some Learn Locals that are exclusively supporting women, and sometimes it is quite informal. It might be a playgroup that the parents are interacting with or the caregiver is interacting with. And then, you know, some is just by osmosis really, and it is by the nature of the staff in Learn Locals. It is predominantly women. It is a female-based workforce. Often some have shared the journey of the participants that are coming in. Some of the staff may well have started by doing programs there. There is a real empathy, I think, a real understanding and a real genuine care that everybody that walks in, who by the stats are a lot of women, is genuinely supported. People are genuinely interested in their stories, where they would like to maybe end up—if they do not know, that is okay—and that they come to some social connectedness programs. Just through that gentle and supportive nature of the staff, people really do find their journeys and their learning pathways. The interaction can be quite varied, but it is always supportive.

**The CHAIR:** John.

**John MULLAHY:** Following on from the female cohort, obviously culturally and linguistically diverse people were 49 per cent in 2023.

**Nina BEKKER:** Yes.

**John MULLAHY:** What additional supports do learners from CALD backgrounds need to ensure they are job ready?

**Nina BEKKER:** Sometimes it may well be having access to bilingual tutors and also some language support. That can be easier in some areas that are already very diverse, like—I will say, Frankston, Dandenong and then up into the western suburbs perhaps, because they just spring straight to my mind. To be able to have like for like—your tutor is also from perhaps an Afghani background, so therefore that is a lot easier. I would say in regional areas that might be a little bit trickier, but again, that is dependent. There are quite a few pockets. You are from Shepparton.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Yes.

**Nina BEKKER:** There are pockets around the state where it is not so Anglo. Having some sort of access to that is definitely beneficial. Again, this is what is so good about pre-accredited; it is so flexible and able to have visual and hands-on learning to be able to demonstrate what is happening. Then literacy is maybe a barrier. That difference between pre-accredited and accredited is often quite black and white. The pre-accredited is just more flexible, so you are able to do some of those things. There are also extended timeframes. The opportunity for people to be able to repeat is that adult learning principle. It is: 'Come and learn it and go away and have a go at doing it, and if you need a refresh, come back and try again.' I often joke and say whenever I need to move the cursor down in an Excel spreadsheet I have to google it every time. Being able to repeat programs is really, really important. There is also ongoing emotional and cultural support.

My board, the ACEVic board, and I had quite lengthy discussions around what we wanted to present here today. Some of it was that the non-training support that happens in a Learn Local is just amazing. Often that is not funded, but it becomes that genuine support and care for the individuals. Some of the CALD community may be overcoming some trauma, maybe low confidence and some isolation perhaps as well. Learn Locals are very good at referral processes. They understand that they are not the be-all and end-all for everybody, but they sure as heck know where to get that help for that person, depending on what it is. You have also got some Learn Locals who are also community RTOs who hold a Reconnect contract, and that is about one-on-one support over about an 18-month period of time for a person. Again, if a Learn Local does not have that contract, they should have a contact for someone that does. That also offers that one-on-one support, so that can be really quite vital as well in that circumstance.

Also, just to do with that question, they provide supports through individualised learning plans. You may well have a class of, say, eight to 12 migrants who are coming to learn English but that all have different skill levels. You are not just teaching to the one level in the one class, whether that is formalised or not. That trainer or that teacher or that staff member will know what each individual person's goals are and where they are at with them now and where they need to be moving on to. They also provide many different occurrences to focus on improving English language, and that could be pre-accredited or accredited, with programs such as the adult migrant English program. Some of the programs would also include education on Australian culture and etiquette and communication for job readiness and building on digital skills. It is that sort of cultural overlay I think as well which is quite supportive there.

Learn Locals also take quite a front-foot approach in communicating with potential employers on how they as an organisation, or just as an employer, can then support the employee in a more culturally safe environment. Often Learn Locals might, where they are able to, provide some volunteering opportunities for the CALD community within their organisation, which can then assist those participants to have references, because they often come and they have no references and therefore that pathway into employment is a bit trickier as well. I know in the past some providers also have just provided a character statement just from a student point of view, because they really not had anything yet.

**John MULLAHY:** Thank you. Comprehensive.

**The CHAIR:** Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks for appearing, and thank you for your work, and everyone out there in the Learn Locals. I used to be the chair of a neighbourhood house for a long, long time. We were a Learn Local in Coburg. It is very important stuff and probably does not get the attention it deserves a lot of the time too, because it really fits into those gaps. The work that you guys do speaks for itself: 69 per cent female learners, 21 per cent early school leavers, 28 per cent unemployed learners, 20 per cent learners with disability and 49 per cent cultural and linguistically diverse communities. That is huge. We have heard from the university sector, from dual-learning institutions, from the TAFEs, from the RTOs just before as well and from some people from the business community. How do you envisage your part of the whole learning ecosystem evolving and solidifying itself in a place that fits in and complements all the other work going on but really keeps targeting and elevating its work to help those in need over the next 10, 20 years, especially with AI and the evolution in technology as well? You know, the increasing importance of people wanting more in their local community, whether it is shopping, learning, living.

**Nina BEKKER:** Definitely. The ministerial statement from a number of years ago—which I think might have even been launched in this room, but anyway—really included Learn Locals at that next tier post

secondary education with TAFE and with university. I know a lot of Learn Locals have partnerships. I personally have partnerships with TAFE in my role here, and it is vitally important. A number of years ago—this is just anecdotal from when I myself was at a quite large provider—when Free TAFE came in, our traditional students from our Learn Local or the community RTO had a go at Free TAFE. Therefore the next level of students that came in were even more sensitive and a little bit more vulnerable. What we really encouraged, if we were aware of some of our local people going to our local TAFE, was saying, ‘Hey, if you need study support, come and see us.’ I do feel that there is a space for pre-accredited and Learn Locals to work absolutely in partnership with universities and TAFEs in supporting the students to get better outcomes for everybody—and completion rates. There are programs around at the moment—one is called Gaining the Edge; I think I have got it noted here somewhere. That is in partnership with Foundation Learning, which is in Narre Warren and Chisholm. They have this program that is pre-accredited that runs alongside, I am pretty sure it is, the certificate III in early childhood education care to support those students on how to study and how to understand plagiarism. It is absolutely supporting that student for the best outcome.

Where you have got a Learn Local involved with a TAFE it is also a bit of a safety net for those students as they are going along their learning journey. If they just are not going to complete, even if there is potential for some support, there is also a referral process there. If the Learn Local and the TAFE have a really good relationship, the referrals can go both ways. Often it is thought of as a pre-accreditation and then maybe it is a pathway just to TAFE, but it can be both ways. I feel, in a perfect scenario, it would be that the end game is success for the students and completion rates and upskilling and filling in-demand industries, having that support from the Learn Local, who are experts at supporting students not to just get a certificate but to be more well-rounded by the end of their course. I do not have the stats on me, but there is good feedback and good percentages from the NCVER results when you do look at the community RTOs—I do not like to say the word ‘versus’ because it is not a competition—in contrast to TAFE and also private RTO feedback.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Do you see opportunity to work more closely with even local secondary schools or local learning and employment networks—we heard from them today as well—local traders associations and things like that to really connect those pathways? Do you see a role there?

**Nina BEKKER:** Yes, definitely. I think so. I know when I put this together, I know a lot of the questions were talking about initially looking at secondary school students and how to support them. I think supporting the secondary school students and their families to know that there are Learn Locals out there is really key. A lot of young people come out of school not really knowing what they want to do, but once they have exited, they qualify predominantly for funding in that Learn Local sort of setting. Even if it is just connectedness to community in that local place, I think that is a really good start for some young people as well. It is coming and doing some of those tasters as well—just ‘I don’t know what I want to do’, ‘Let’s go and do a two-week course on early childhood and see what your thoughts are there’ or whatever it is.

But definitely I think just spreading the word is key. A lot of young people may know of their Learn Local because they did attend childcare or they did go there or their grandma goes there for another sort of engagement program. But I think widening the knowledge base that there are Learn Locals, well over 200 of them right across the state, is quite key. There are a number of community RTOs which are also Learn Locals. A lot of them will offer VET in schools programs, so the young people will be attending those. They are smaller in number. But there will be some secondary schools that have quite strong relationships with their community RTO/Learn Local.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for all the work you do in this space. I think that you really fill a gap in our community, and you give confidence to people to be connected to their community but also to open the doors to other possibilities, so thank you for the work you do. I just have a quick question, if I can ask it, even if it is just anecdotally, around those who come to you. How many would go into the workforce or how many would go into further training? Do you have kind of that sense of—

**Nina BEKKER:** I do not have any actual data.

**The CHAIR:** No. That is okay.

**Nina BEKKER:** And that is a bit of a ‘How do we measure these things?’ But I guess, anecdotally, I would say—and again I am generalising—if I think of what a typical kind of pre-accredited student might look like, it is that they are maybe coming to re-engage. It is a little bit like what we have talked about. They may have been out of the employment space, they may have been caring for children for a number of years or they may be a recent arrival, perhaps a refugee migrant. They are coming to reconnect. They may well be attending because there is a maternal health nurse within the space, so they have become familiar and it is a trusted space, which is really important. There was out in the outer east—south-east more so—a group of Afghani women mostly who did not drive. But a lot of the centres close over the school holiday period—a lot do not, but some do. I was talking to the manager, and she noticed that during the school holidays—I will just say Thursday at 10 o’clock—the group of Afghani women and their children were actually in the park right next door. So she went over and was talking to them, and it was because this was their routine, and this was a safe, trusted space. So ‘We’re okay to come here, because although we’re not in the centre today, we’re right next to the centre, and it’s safe.’ Those women may have been attending that centre for a number of years, but along that journey they may well—because these are stories that I read and hear and love listening to—have got their licences. They may well then be quite proficient in English after a number of years. They have made friends. Their confidence—there is the example of that modelling for their children. So many wins—and then eventually they might be volunteering or then there might be some employment.

**The CHAIR:** It is not always a means to an end.

**Nina BEKKER:** No, it is not.

**The CHAIR:** It is more about that connection.

**Nina BEKKER:** But also, with students that, and again I witness this firsthand, come in for a vocation—they are coming into a community RTO for a certificate III in individual support or something like that to work in aged care—alongside some pre-accredited familiar and local staff, the success rate, the completion rate, is anecdotally, I will just say, about 90 per cent. I wish at the time I had more time to actually collate that data, because it is amazing, it really is. So they do then go on to employment. It is very varied, but I think also our sector is very good at highlighting those other outcomes, which are difficult—

**The CHAIR:** Are just as important.

**Nina BEKKER:** Yes, definitely.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for your time and coming today to speak to us. We really appreciate it. You are a very big part of what the inquiry will be considering for recommendations, so thank you so much.

**Committee adjourned.**