

# 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

#### **WITNESSES**

Madelyn Bolch, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, Vocational Education and Training, and  
Caryn Phillips, Director, VET Operations, Swinburne University of Technology;

Wayne Butson, Chief TAFE Officer and Chief Executive Officer, TAFE, Victoria University;

Mish Eastman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education, and Vice-President, and

Iain Lockie, Associate Director, Lifelong Learning, RMIT University; and

Darren Gray, Pro Vice-Chancellor, VET and Pathways, and Chief Executive Officer TAFE, Federation  
University.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to this panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones 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 this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

We are going to run this panel session in a Q and A format. Committee members will ask some questions. If you wish to answer, please raise your hand, or you can jump in—it is a pretty informal chat; and to make sure that it is easy for our Hansard reporters, could you state your name and your organisation before you speak. There may not be an opportunity to answer every question that we put to you. It might be something you do not feel you need to answer, but if we have two or three speakers on each question, then we will move on to the next one. It is important, though, to note that if there is anything that we do not raise today or ask you today that you think you would still like to have an opportunity to talk about, you may submit additional information in a written form.

We will quickly introduce the committee members, and then I am going to hand over to you. You can introduce yourselves, and then we will jump straight into some questions. I am Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine.

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

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

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

**Dylan WIGHT:** Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit.

**Madelyn BOLCH:** Madelyn Bolch, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive at Swinburne University.

**Caryn PHILLIPS:** Caryn Phillips, Executive Director of VET Operations at Swinburne University.

**Wayne BUTSON:** Wayne Butson, Chief TAFE Officer and CEO of Victoria University.

**Mish EASTMAN:** Mish Eastman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education, and Vice-President, at RMIT.

**Iain LOCKIE:** Iain Lockie, Associate Director for Lifelong Learning at RMIT.

**Darren GRAY:** Darren Gray, Pro Vice-Chancellor for VET and Pathways and Chief Executive, Federation University.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Anthony, I am going to go to you first.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair; and thank you all for being here and for all your respective submissions as well, which are very much appreciated. I am happy to be part of this committee, obviously, but more so as a former RMIT student myself; we turned out okay. Just to kick us off very generically and simply, I think to get us on the right trajectory here, how do dual-sector universities facilitate student transition from TAFE to university and from university to TAFE? Happy for anyone to kick us off.

**Mish EASTMAN:** We have, I think according to statistics, the largest number of students who pathway through from vocational education into further learning, both on NCVER data and also on VET stat data. How we do that is through supporting learners in their experience in the vocational environment to build not only capability and learning how to learn but also learner confidence. Many of the learners who come through a vocational pathway first did not have an aspiration to go on to further study and in fact often are low in learner confidence because they are by nature kinaesthetic learners, and our secondary school environment does not usually welcome kinaesthetic learners—learners who learn through doing. That is at odds with the traditional

secondary school, particularly higher secondary school, environment. The good news is the VDSS system helps with that—VCAL previously—but really it is about understanding the learner, providing that level of competence and confidence build and then being able to show them guaranteed credit-bearing pathways. Someone who completes a diploma at a vocational level at RMIT will have the equivalent of the first year of a degree as an outcome. They do not have to keep going straightaway; they can come back to us, because many of our learners are not just secondary school students. They are also mid-20s, mid-30s, mid-40s and mid-50s.

I will hand over to my colleague. Oh, the other one you talked about was from higher education into vocational education. We have a range of those learners who come back to us. Usually it is about making sure that the program is going to match with their stage of life and their ambition. They are looking for a solution that is going to help them either in their current career or in the next career that they are wanting to move to. Part of that is about access to the learning environment, supporting learners in how to learn, which is active and quite different potentially from their first learning experience, depending on their age and industry area, and also being really clear on what their commitment might be not only on campus but also in wraparound experiences—if there are big blocks of industry placements they might have to do, for example, being clear from early on that this is what the program will require and getting that match through student advice before learners commit so that they know what they are coming to.

**Wayne BUTSON:** I would add to that a little bit. I suppose we are second on the pathway list after RMIT, and that is a really important thing for our students, and we are really big on that equity base too. So for a lot of our students, they like the idea of the pathway. They like that idea of getting straight into second year and not having it forestalled. But most of our students we find actually perform better in the second year because of the wraparound service they get doing that diploma-based model than those that normally commence that first year, so that is a really important aspect for that. But a lot of that stuff is also around that pretraining review about where they are best suited. We do a lot of work with our skills and that network to make sure when we are talking about the offer, whether it is undergraduate or TAFE, what the best thing is for them to do to start. We make early offers before they have even finished their exams to say ‘You’ve got an offer. You’ll get a program here’—it might be the TAFE for the first year or the undergraduate program—and then ‘We’ll sort it out, once your ATAR is in, where you start off.’ I think that is an important thing that the duals are able to do. We are all pretty similar in that pathway and those other options. And that difference with coming is our students, even if they are only in a TAFE program and do not have any idea about going to undergraduate, can come back later and do it. We find a lot of that in nursing. But all our students say they go to university. That is a big difference. So when you are talking about the barriers and the difference with TAFE, our students see that they are doing a university qualification.

**Madelyn BOLCH:** I will just add to that. We are very similar for most of those points, but probably at a really pragmatic level, for our VET students going into HE as a pathway, we have very connected staff between our HE schools and our VET. So it is really about that connection for the students. Very early on in their study they meet the teachers that they would meet if they went into a bachelor degree. They get an early offer early in the year as a VET student: ‘You can take up the opportunity into a bachelor qualification if you choose with this amount of credit.’ And they are well-established pathways. I think just in addition to the things that were talked about there, that is something that is really pragmatic and practical that is done for the individual student in terms of raising awareness and raising confidence, as in, ‘Oh, I can do that.’ Yes, you can, and here is the way for it to occur.

The HE to VE: in addition to what Mish has just spoken about, we run a number of programs for our existing bachelor students, who can pick up some of the certificate qualifications in VET to just really sharpen up the skills base that they take into the workforce. That is in addition to students coming in and out of a dual-sector university, because they become a lifelong learner with us and quite loyal. It is also about the current bachelor students being given an opportunity to study a VET qualification that they find really, really valuable. I will not repeat, but those other matters are very similar for Swinburne.

**The CHAIR:** That is a really great start for our conversation, so thank you for that. John.

**John MULLAHY:** Twenty-three years ago I started an applied physics degree at RMIT, and we had three women out of 60 people that took up the applied physics degree. I am just hoping that there is going to be some evidence here that it is a bit better. But how do our universities encourage and support female students to enter into and complete courses aligned with male-dominated industries?

**Darren GRAY:** Thank you. Darren Gray from Federation University. There are a number of programs that we have implemented, and importantly, one of those has been the women in trades program we have done through Head Start. We have done that over three years, and it has had a significant impact on exposing young women to opportunities in the traditional trades. We have seen a step up in our enrolments from young women in the trades as a result. And another program that we have sought funding for that is working really well—it is in its early days—is the vocational taster experiences pilot program. It has been funded through the Department of Education. We proactively sought that funding. We are one of four TAFEs that have got that funding—I think there are two metro and two regional. That provides opportunities for school students in year 9 and 10, in Ballarat—Central Highlands and Wimmera—Southern Mallee—just under 700 of the —to come in over an 18-month period to have hands-on experience in in-demand areas such as renewable energy, construction trades, hospitality, cookery, engineering, baking and a range of others. We are seeing great take-up from the schools, but also significant feedback from the students and the schools on what this is meaning for potential pathways and also an opportunity for lifting the profile of VET within schools.

**Mish EASTMAN:** We have been doing very deliberate work—I have been at RMIT for six years, and prior to that as well. Across the organisation we contribute and are active in the Athena Swan program, so uplifting women in STEM and STEM-related areas. That has expanded from higher education into vocational education across our organisation. We also have invested in a Women in STEM program specifically for vocational education where we now have over 200 ambassadors, so students and participants that we have employed on internships who then facilitate and support other women coming through. So the statistics have improved. There is still a long way to go, I would say.

Part of the other example I will use is understanding the pressures on many of our female students, whether they are from school, and then that is about the environment of learning and gendered models of employment. But also we have had success with a Commonwealth program wrapped around the diploma of IT for existing workers, also in regional areas of Victoria, so taking what was a one-year higher education diploma but based in a skills pedagogy and extending that over two years to allow those women to continue to work, often on farms and supporting their regional communities. That has had great success. We had 70 women commencing that program, we have had great retention and we now will have completion rates at the end of this year. We also then took a further midyear intake this year of another, I think, 35 students. That was a discrete Commonwealth government grant that was defined—like, did not have as many of the bureaucratic steps as you need to get through with some of the Victorian grants. It is an excellent model for supporting people or women and AFAB-identifying in staying in work, staying in their communities, learning remotely and creating a network and a community for them to connect with each other.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That is probably a good segue into my question, so thank you for that. Shepparton is in regional Victoria, as you are very aware, I am sure. If you are not, I would love to tell you more one day.

**Mish EASTMAN:** I am aware of Shepparton.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Just what challenges do dual universities encounter in providing courses in regional areas, what challenges do regional students face in accessing university courses and how do universities support these students? I thought we might head over here.

**Darren GRAY:** Federation University Australia is Victoria's only regionally headquartered university, so I am well positioned to make comment. I actually grew up in Shepparton as well, so I know the region well. We have got campuses—

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** That means we are related, I am sure.

**Darren GRAY:** I did my secondary schooling in Shepparton, so I know it well. We have got campuses across Ballarat, Wimmera, Gippsland and Berwick. We have the goal to become Australia's leading cooperative university. We are number one in Australia for first in family—have been for the last seven years—and number one in Victoria for social equity. The co-op model is really important for addressing disadvantage and equity and access to education in regional areas. I will give a couple out of the Wimmera region. One of our partnerships is with East Grampians Health Service, based out of Ararat. It is an hour or thereabouts either side of Ararat to a Federation campus, whether that is at Horsham or at Ballarat. It is a community that faces a number of challenges; education attainment is below the state average. We have worked closely through our

co-op model with East Grampians Health and the CEO there to deliver the certificate III in individual support and the diploma of nursing onsite. The majority of those students go on to work at East Grampians Health or another health provider in the region. These are individuals that do not get the opportunity, for whatever reason, to travel, whether it is caring responsibilities or costs.

We have utilised Free TAFE as part of the diploma of nursing program and the co-op model around co-location and co-investment to provide not only a job outcome for those students but a career pathway that would not necessarily be available to those students. We are doing the same in the Wimmera Southern Mallee with our nursing traineeships with over six healthcare providers. It is an earn-and-learn model where we keep young people in particular in those small regions in the west of the state, places like Dimboola, Edenhope, Kaniva and Murtoa, where one or two health workers can make a big difference to those communities. Because it is earn and learn, it means they are working in the hospital. We go out to them, they come in to us, and Free TAFE has provided the scaffolding to enable those individuals to access training.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you. Just on the back of that, you may be aware I have a very large multicultural community. Is that considered as well as part of this program?

**Darren GRAY:** A really excellent story: as part of the delivery out of Wimmera campus we delivered to the Karen community. They have made a massive impact on the Horsham and district community in terms of addressing skills needs within the health and care sectors more generally. We have a program, particularly around individual support for the aged care sector, where we work hand in glove with the Karen community and other stakeholders to get a skilled workforce.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Thank you.

**Mish EASTMAN:** Say, at scale, the four dual-sector universities are also working in a consortium with Local Government Victoria on a model to create earn-and-learn solutions in the 79 LGAs. That is about taking the best of our expertise and working in a cooperative co-design framework around key priority employment requirements that Victoria's LGAs have, harnessing then our different but complementary expertise in mixed-mode learning, in learning design, in discipline areas and building on that. The principles and the framework of understanding who the learners are, where they are based and what is or is not possible as far as access, either in person for summative skill building or remotely in live-time learning environments, are part of how we assist the state of Victoria to uplift that capability. I think complementing that concept of co-creation and co-design is RMIT, who also work with Grampians Health on a skill set around cybersecurity and cyber safety. Those models of understanding what is the need in a particular region, how you solve for that without duplicating resources that are already in the space and activating the right level of expertise across different domains are really important.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Has that been successful with your local government?

**Mish EASTMAN:** Yes, we are at the end of year 1.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Okay, year 1.

**Mish EASTMAN:** And we have had hundreds of workers go through a number of prioritised skill sets, and then we are moving to design different solutions around full qualifications next year.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** You need to let me know if I am taking all the time, but the barriers as well, if there are other ways that they be improved through this report—is there something else that could be considered to make that more efficient or to give others opportunity when it comes to multicultural—

**Mish EASTMAN:** I think part of it is understanding that every one of the 79 LGAs has difference with regard to the communities they are serving and the size and scale of that. Being really clear on urban solutions and metro solutions versus regional is part of the priority.

**Madelyn BOLCH:** I think in addition I would add, from a VET perspective, at Swinburne University we have 20,000 enrolled students; 10,000 of those are online students. Those students still receive the same support services that any Swinburne student receives. We are noticing an uplift in our Indigenous enrolments and our female enrolments in that space as well. That also carries through to the higher education qualifications, but our

online learners are choosing that. I guess those numbers indicate there is a definite preference for access anywhere, anytime but with the support of a very large organisation wrapped around you. We are finding that to be a very successful model. Clearly there are also students who choose to come out of the regions into more metropolitan areas, and as dual-sector universities we can offer accommodation, so there are other opportunities there for regional students. I think what I have been most surprised about is the numbers of students really wanting to do an online qualification from home, fitting in their work schedule, and they have been a very successful opportunity for us. We even deliver things through other partnerships into regions—so with Best Practice Health we deliver some non-emergency transport into Gippsland, and there are many, many examples of those partnerships where we are making outreach into regional communities.

**Wayne BUTSON:** I suppose the last bit is that many of us have different pathway relationships with a lot of the rural providers, so though we might not directly deliver unless it is hybrid, they get the same credit arrangements into the second year of our undergraduate program. We have an arrangement with the Gordon where all the students from Geelong have that same option; it is the same as if they were VU students.

**Caryn PHILLIPS:** Kim, just to touch on another aspect: technical schools are hosted by Victorian TAFEs, including the dual-sectors. At Swinburne I know our technical school hosts at least 12,000 students each year, and that is really encouraging that exposure to STEM and further study; the students also have access to the university campus and exposure that way. In terms of engaging with regional students, we have actually delivered in Warrnambool, Shepparton and a number of other regional secondary school centres. This provides exposure to the students as well as the staff—high-quality STEM training—and quite often through those introductions the secondary schools choose to come and spend more time at Swinburne. They bring the students back, and again they have an exposure to the university. So it is another way, again, of encouraging students from all walks of life, all sectors, to be exposed to further tertiary study.

**The CHAIR:** It opens doors to them—options. Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Thanks, Chair. We know that mandatory unpaid placements cause a financial burden to students, and we also know that they can be restrictive when aspiring students are selecting courses or going through course selection. I note that the federal government has done a little bit in this space in the education sector. I am just wondering what the sector is doing to try and alleviate some of that financial burden on students.

**Mish EASTMAN:** We are very pleased with the Commonwealth approach to supporting, financially, paid placements in the nursing and education sectors. The request that I would suggest for Victoria to focus on is what that looks like in a range of other, particularly female-dominated, workforces. Community services, youth justice, mental health work, disability and aged care all require the learners to have periods of intensive work placement. At RMIT we have looked at and validated where we can do student-led clinics where we can involve learners in preparing for placement in a way that might be different but might have the same level of high-fidelity simulation and experience, but there are required and mandated hours that must be in industry. These are often human-centred industries provided by NGOs, so that tension remains around recalibrating that when students are on work placement, they are doing work—they are not invisible, and they are not adding value. So I think thinking about how we reward and recognise that in a new framework is really important.

The other element I will just slip in there also is that what help learners be successful are more extensive models of earn and learn, because the financial pressure and the burden that students have are significant, and needing to stop your work that might otherwise be part-time and supporting you and your family or extended commitments or even your own rent is absolutely problematic and a huge stress for learners. We do have scholarships and other financial elements that we make freely available to students, and we work very closely with our philanthropy areas to try to support those—but there is never enough for every student. But at a system level I think looking particularly at roles that are in the human-facing domain and areas that the state could consider to complement what the Commonwealth is doing would be very welcome.

**Madelyn BOLCH:** I think at a system level as well there may not be awareness that at times we are asked to pay for those placements. Our base funding model does not include funding for placements for students, but in order to support our students to get the placements there is often a dollar value attached to those placements. Again, they are in healthcare and social assistance areas. If there was to be some recognition of that, that the base funding model does not include the opportunity for TAFEs to fund that—but we have to, or else our

students cannot graduate and cannot get the placement. But I think there is an industry responsibility sitting around this too. Making more placements available in local areas where students do not need to travel as much makes it much easier to access a placement around your current and existing commitments. But that is just my addition.

**Wayne BUTSON:** Because it is such a broad issue, often we have looked at specific industries and done a specialist program. Early childhood, for example: we have done a deal with a local LGA in Melton for them to provide placements, but it is a specialist program for First Nations kids that have always thought of getting into early childhood but never had the opportunity to do it. Besides doing that placement in a different manner than we do through the LGA, we are also providing hygiene products and we are feeding them during the class-based stuff. These are young people that are otherwise, without that opportunity for that program and those placement opportunities done for that deal—we just had a group of 17 young women come through. They have done the cert III and they have now done the diploma. All of them are now employed in council. So we are all doing ‘make a way’ little stories while we are waiting for the bigger picture to change. I think that is what dual sectors do.

**Darren GRAY:** Our rural and remote students, particularly in the west of the state, have particular barriers when it comes to work placements with travel in particular. Some are travelling hundreds of kilometres to get where they need to go. Increasing the incentives to other areas, particularly for regional students, I think would be a really practical idea, but also incentivising, as Madelyn mentioned before, local employers to take students for placements, whether there is some sort of incentive that could be implemented to assist with that similar to the apprenticeship and traineeship model where there might even be payroll tax exemptions to create an environment where there are those opportunities, particularly in the regional areas.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I have got time for maybe one or two more questions. I would like to just ask about industry and the connection with your sector as well. The last witnesses were talking about how industry could do a bit better and uplift some of their connections with maybe the schools first and obviously then tertiary. Can I just ask you a very broad question around your connection with industry and how that could be improved?

**Wayne BUTSON:** I might start this one if I can. We have got a bit of a model where we say it is not a university campus unless we have got an industry partner actually on campus, so that is a big part of our model. One example at the moment about new course deliveries: we are working with Microsoft about developing a new suite of courses for their workforce. It is based on the New South Wales model, but we are doing some tinkering with that, and that will then be shared with the other duals to roll out new course delivery. That is informed by industry about directly what their needs are in a growing industry. We are taking the learnings from that to work with another organisation that is big in the west with the advent of data centre creation, STACK, who want some of those units modelled to them. The best thing about those models is that Microsoft is on board and half paying for it and the government is matching the next of it and STACK is the same. They are willing to contribute to course design and unit designs and look at that assessment model that works for them. So I think that is one of the things we can offer. As duals we can offer that because they are also interested in that applied research at the end. So we are able to connect that with our undergraduate and our discipline-based people to do that feedback back in. I think that is a really important connection.

**Mish EASTMAN:** Yes, I would say we work on our 120 programs that we offer in vocational education with industry and with industry advisory committees in very close connection. As a university we have deep connections through all of our colleagues working across faculties and also through research. So there can be a range of solutions with researchers at the front end, and we are looking at what the impact is on the workforce for that.

The other question you posed was about industry—connecting them with schools and career practitioners et cetera. I think reshaping that framework would be really helpful. There is still a very old mindset about what, for example, advanced manufacturing might be and perceptions that it is a dirty, fitter-and-turner kind of old world. It is far from that. It is advanced technology and high-level activity going on in so many businesses. So reframing those kinds of elements is really important.

Thirdly, at a system level I would say in Victoria in high school education we celebrate and recognise through billboards ATAR achievement—you get responses to what we celebrate and recognise. Imagine if we also

celebrated a number of schools who had graduates who started their own business, or how many of our alumni are now working in trades and the built environment. I think looking at the levers that you utilise at a system level can create dramatic change when we also recognise outcomes from schools that are not only academic pathways.

**Darren GRAY:** Federation University's cooperative model has deep connections with industry and community. I will give one example—we are broadening this into other industry sectors—the establishment of the Asia Pacific Renewable Energy Training Centre. That was co-designed, co-developed; we now do co-delivery, co-assessment. We have had co-input from a financial point of view but also in terms of expertise, and we co-locate at our Mount Helen campus. We have got facilities there to do blade repair, global wind organisation and safety training as well as turbine technician training. Those turbine technician courses have been registered through the VRQA and co-designed and co-developed with industry. And that is just one example of the depth that the cooperative approach can give, particularly in regional communities.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect. I am just mindful of time, but is there anything that you would really like to press on this committee, and particularly in terms of recommendations or things that we can change or consider?

**Mish EASTMAN:** I think understanding that learners will have a multiple of careers and that while they might not be successful in their first, or they might choose not to complete their first program, that can actually be a good outcome because they have gone to employment. But is about how we make learning accessible for those throughout their careers. Technology is rapidly evolving. The world of work is rapidly changing. So as a state, making sure we measure what matters and provide ways for learners to come back to us in their mid-20s, mid-30s, mid-40s and mid-50s, is crucial for their economic success, and thinking about earn-and-learn models at a lifted level—degree apprenticeships—and thinking about the vast capability that is within that. We have been involved in those and are at the forefront.

Many workforces need technicians as well as those that come out with a degree, and then excellent researchers as well, so how can we support industry through incentivising their buy-in to new models, rather than waiting for degree graduates or even vocational graduates to complete. Looking at that model of co-investment and making sure that the levers are there to incentivise that for small- and medium-sized enterprises I think is a crucial way forward.

**Iain LOCKIE:** Yes. And I would just add to that, we see more and more the mid-career or the working-age learner being the learner that we need to focus on in order to re-skill across the economy. It is very obvious what the biggest barriers are to those who want to study but cannot. It is time and money. Those mid-career workers who are most vulnerable are disproportionately female, disproportionately in the outer rings of metropolitan capitals and already have paid employment. I think, just buttoning down on Mish's contribution, being able to blend work and learning and get both the pedagogical benefits of that but also the work-based or skills-based transition supports us to move the workforce from areas of diminishing economic and skills demand into some of those in-demand industries at scale. And it just so happens that dual sectors are right at the sticky point between VE and HE, between Commonwealth and state. That is where the interesting skill level is, that kind of advanced mid, what we would call skill 2, area. I think that is the area for policy focus and opportunity.

**Mish EASTMAN:** It is opportunity for Victoria, with four dual sectors who each bring excellent expertise to it.

**The CHAIR:** It was a fascinating conversation and thank you so much for all your submissions and for your work and answering our questions today. If there is anything that you think desperately needs to be said, please write back to us and we will consider that as well as part of the Inquiry. Thank you for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**