

T R A N S C R I P T

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

Penne Dawe, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Centre for Career Education, and

Trevor Black, ACCE President, Career Practitioner and Mathematics Teacher, Carey Baptist Grammar School.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's 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. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

Thank you so much to both of you for being here today and also for your submission to this Inquiry. I am Alison, the Chair of the Inquiry and the Member for Bellarine. I will introduce some of the other members.

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

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit.

The CHAIR: We have also got Deputy Chair Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. I am going to give you a couple of minutes, maybe 5 or so minutes, to talk to your submission, and then we have got some questions for you if that is okay. Thank you.

Penne DAWE: Would you like us to introduce ourselves?

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you.

Penne DAWE: I am Penne Dawe. I am the Chief Executive Officer for the Australian Centre for Career Education.

Trevor BLACK: And Trevor Black. I am the President of the Australian Centre for Career Education.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you.

Penne DAWE: Trevor is also a career practitioner in a school. Our members are career professionals, and we are a founding member association of the Career Industry Council of Australia. We have a very big interest, of course, in career education in schools and helping young people into the correct pathways and correct journeys for life. Our association was founded in 1975, actually out of the department of education when the department of education at that time found careers to have become more complicated. Back then there were only two universities, and about 60 per cent of young people went into vocational trades. Things are far more complicated now.

Our association has over 1200 members, and we are very fortunate that in the last 18 months the department of education has ensured that members in its schools, career practitioners and career advisers have an opportunity to join our association and access the professional development and information that we provide to them. We provide a lot of professional development in relation to career education, resources and research, and of course we have a biennial conference. This is all to ensure that our members have access to labour market information, for example.

We work closely with the Victorian Skills Authority. We are quite connected to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. We were the sole provider of the Jobs Victoria career counselling service for two years, helping people in the community from 2021 to 23 into other work. We also ensure that our members can connect together and network, which is a very important part of being able to provide career advice to young people in schools. Trevor, is there anything that you would like to say about the association?

Trevor BLACK: Yes. We mentioned the conference. We have 350 people coming along to a conference in two weeks, and really what we are trying to do is create connections and advance the cause of career education in Victoria.

Penne DAWE: Our association is represented on the Reserve Bank of Australia education advisory panel. We are a member of the Nillumbik tech school board. We are represented in Public Skills Australia, which is a job and skills career network for defence, for fire, for government, for corrections and for police. We are a member of the Council of Professional Teaching Associations of Victoria. We are represented on the national youth employment advisory board of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the GAN Australia steering committee for supporting quality apprenticeships. We have run a lot of major projects to do with careers, including the world of work on wheels bus for the department of education, where we took a bus and STEM studies and VR glasses to about 6000 students and teachers in regional and remote schools about 10 years ago, I think you were saying, Trevor. And we are a leading career development and education association. That is probably enough for now. You have some details in the submission as well.

The CHAIR: Yes. Your submission was very thorough, actually, and I think it is very central to what we are trying to explore here and what this Inquiry is trying to find more about to have recommendations. Thank you. It was excellent. John, I am going to start with you.

John MULLAHY: Excellent. Your submission recommends embedding career education in the Victorian curriculum and underpinning it with a career development framework such as the Australian blueprint for career development. What are the benefits of embedding career education in the curriculum, and how should the Victorian government embed career education in the curriculum?

Penne DAWE: There are a couple of ways that the government can do that, whether it is a standalone subject or time within the curriculum. One of the issues we have with career education in schools is, because of the complexity we have highlighted and the increasing complexity that is happening, children need to start quite early, really at the beginning of school. In 2024 the career industry council in Australia made that recommendation to a review of the ACARA curriculum, and it is one of the most cost-effective ways of actually getting career education into a school. You have the infrastructure, you have the school buildings, you have educated people. And therefore if you could have a subject or time in the curriculum throughout school where young people can have career education, then it makes economic sense to be able to do that, and that is one of the reasons we do suggest that. Having career professionals all the way through school who are dedicated to the task—whilst we would love to see more career education professionals employed in schools, it is a workforce capacity issue that you have to overcome. You would need to have a lot of qualified people to fill those roles, and you would need to employ a lot of people. Having said that, you do need career professionals in schools to support that, but having it within the curriculum I think makes economic sense.

Trevor BLACK: Yes, certainly. And look, there are a lot of schools that are doing it, but the difference between one school and another—you have schools which have no career practitioner or very few career practitioners, schools which have 0.1 or 0.2 time allotment for one person, and what they are going to get, compared to another school that has a compulsory career education program and meets one-on-one with every student—is enormous. So it is an equity issue—completely different between one school and another at the moment. That is why a compulsory program would make such a huge difference.

Penne DAWE: Thank you, Trevor. I think the other thing is, of course, you have the blueprint for career development, which was developed for education, which is about how you roll out and measure the achievement of career development amongst the young people throughout their schooling? By having it within the curriculum, you can use the blueprint for career development as the basis for the curriculum. Then developing resources to that is not insurmountable.

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask—just to jump on that point, though—when you say ‘early’ in education, how early should we be having career conversations? Should it be in primary schools?

Penne DAWE: Yes. The career education conversations change, but really what you are doing with young people is you are getting them familiar with the language of the world of work. So young people are already pretending to be things, whether it is Superman—

Kim O’KEEFFE: Firefighter, police—the jobs we need.

Penne DAWE: a firefighter—that is right—or a princess out of *Frozen* or whatever it happens to be. What you are doing is you are introducing them to language about different jobs. So you are really just starting the conversations: ‘What do you see?’, ‘What did you see on your way to school today?’, ‘Where does mummy work?’, ‘Where does daddy work?’, ‘What do people do for roles?’ It is not what people think—that it is difficult—but you are just starting the language and starting an exploration to open their awareness about what is happening, because that is really what school is about. It is preparing young people for the world of work.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. I would just like to expand on the role of career practitioners, if I may. My dad was a career practitioner for the last 10 years of his career; I think they were called ‘careers counsellors’ then. What additional resources are these professionals receiving as part of their role—just for the changing dynamics, in-demand industries and dynamics in labour markets, I guess—to be able to advise students as best they can on priority industries and vocational education around that, and which additional resources do they need? How can we improve that?

Trevor BLACK: Well, we mentioned that we are actually developing resources at the moment. You mentioned year level a moment ago. We are bringing in resources down to year 7 so I suppose in a more formal way, it is year 7 up to year 12. But certainly that is part of what our role is, and we always try within our conferences and through online presentations to make career practitioners as aware as possible of all the different areas. But yes, that is an important part of their consideration. They need to be very aware of these things, and that is also why we encourage professional qualifications for career practitioners as well.

Penne DAWE: We did develop some of the student resources to use in the Victorian Skills Authority portal. We worked with the Department of Education and the VSA to develop those. There is the labour market information, which is important because career practitioners, certainly with the senior school students, need to be able to tell them where the jobs are and how to pathway into the jobs, so we provide resources with industry on the pathways into roles. The pathways can be any pathway from vocational education to higher education; students need to know what their options are. We provide the AQF, which is a framework where you can move through vocational and higher education across your life. We have a very unique system in Australia, and our career practitioners have that information. But increasingly parents and students need to be aware; we need resources and information about jobs.

I think it would be good to have a national collection of videos about roles and industries, because at the moment there are services that see this sector as something they can sell into. Schools have to pay for some of the products where you can see that. I think there needs to be a national bank where students can understand and go and see different roles and career practitioners can refer students to it and there are pathways and information and also lesson plans. A lot of career practitioners in schools will create lesson plans and guidelines, but they do it themselves, so there is a lot of work involved. And again this goes back to the inconsistency and inequity, depending on the time you have.

Dylan WIGHT: That is what I was just going to ask as a follow-up. I think you have already said this—there is no standardised level of training across schools in Victoria, I guess, that practitioners need to undertake as they—

Penne DAWE: Well, the Department of Education, again, has been terrific in funding career practitioners in government schools to come and do the professional development with us. That has been important funding that they have gifted to up to two career practitioners in every government school. We create 30-something professional development webinars a year, and they can access them afterwards. But you are correct. They have also funded scholarships for training for career development professionals. But again, when you are talking about lesson plans and things like that, if you are looking for what might take place in a classroom, there are varied resources that are available.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes. Thank you.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you. Kim O’Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. Sorry, I just had to duck out of the introduction there. Your submission highlights that there is a mismatch between students’ career choices and labour market reality, and that this mismatch is worse for disadvantaged students. I am really interested to hear

your feedback on that. I have a very multicultural community, so I am really interested to see that answer, including perhaps the disadvantages and challenges for multicultural people.

Penne DAWE: That was identified by the OECD in their latest research into young people transitioning well into careers. It may be more difficult in multicultural communities, because again it is about understanding, and some communities have fairly strong ideas about what their children need to do and what they should do. You will know in your own community how varied that might be. You will have people who will possibly be refugees, or people who will be other migrants who will have set ideas.

What career professionals will do in school is speak to students about their pathways. Through the Morrisby vocational assessment, young people have an idea about their aptitudes and their strengths, and they start that career exploration early. But the career professionals are really the people who can help young people match up realistic pathways. That does not necessarily mean that they are getting rid of anyone's aspirations; what they are doing is they are making their aspirations more achievable, because when young people fail, it has quite a devastating effect. It can start a cycle of despair and not finding a pathway correctly. Trevor, you can probably address this as well.

Trevor BLACK: I was going to mention the impact of work experience, because the availability of work experience, particularly the range of work experience options, varies enormously and is very unequal. We have actually got some data which we are about to publish—we have not quite published it yet—but we found that of career practitioners who were asked, 'Do you offer work experience?', 97 per cent offered work experience, according to the people who replied to the questionnaire. Very interestingly, the number who were having large numbers of students go had increased from 18 two years ago to 32 this year. This is for over 250 students in a school going out on work experience. So that is a really good story.

There is another story within that though, because is that work experience going to work with Mum and Dad for the week, even if you have no interest in it, or have you seen a career practitioner who has advised, 'This would be a really good thing for you to have a look at'? That is the difference, and that is where they need support in making that a really worthwhile experience.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Okay. Also, just on top of that, obviously when someone comes from a fairly strongly disadvantaged background, with trying to keep them in education and on pathways—career advisers, I am sure, are helping with that as well—I think we have that challenge. With kids that are from such strong disadvantage, how do we keep them in school and how do we continue to make sure that there is enough support there? That is probably the challenge that we all face.

Penne DAWE: The Department of Education have been very fortunate to have a trial extension of the My Career Insights program, which is the Morrisby vocational tool, working with select government schools across the state with students in priority cohorts. We have been doing that work for about 18 months now, and it is showing that young people who do get work-readiness support are finding benefits from that.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submission. It is an excellent submission and very comprehensive, so thank you for your efforts on that. Look, my question goes to two points: the important role of career educators in schools but also the role of teachers and the role of local industry and business in complementing that. The first part of that is: your submission recommends a ratio of one career professional per 450 students, which I find very interesting. A silly question on that is: what is the current ratio, more or less? The submission flags that in different ways. The second part of that is: even if we do get the ratio in place, as you recommend, you also highlight the issue of the lack of local jobs—11 per cent do not have suitable local jobs in areas of experience or interest, 8 per cent do not have any suitable local jobs at all to refer students to and 17 per cent of young people reportedly do not have enough work experience, according to some employers, to then be taken on—so even if you have the right ratio of educators in schools, what do we do about improving the local job supply and pathways? I guess it is a twofold question.

Penne DAWE: There are a fair few questions there.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes.

Penne DAWE: I might start with the ratio. Back in the last Inquiry, I think it was about 2017, I think the recommendation was one career professional to 450 students. In New South Wales I think there was a relationship of one to 600, but since COVID that has changed. You have to remember that a lot of career professionals in schools have also often been qualified teachers, so after COVID, people got dragged back into the classroom, as it was essential to keep the schools running. I do not think we have really got to a mandated or legislated amount in Australia. In Ireland and Wales I think it is one to 260, and it is less in schools where there are high levels of disadvantage. It is quite different here, and as Trevor said, for equity and inclusion there is not a nationally consistent number of what is determined to be required. We do have of course a very large country and a much smaller population, and we struggle with everything—delivering courses and delivering everything across the nation—and obviously the rural and remote schools can be at greater disadvantage. You have pockets of industry that are quite different, and delivering and meeting that is quite difficult.

In Geelong, though, there has been a very interesting set of circumstances that have been going for quite some time, where the career industry group down there—the university, TAFE, schools, Department of Education and some disability groups—have really banded together in a cluster that pools lots of resources in that community and that can deliver quite a lot of support across quite a diverse group or population. That has been quite successful. But the challenge of getting industry involved has existed for quite some time, as we have divested our training away from industry and from the gasfitters who used to train to really what is an open market in education and employment. Trevor.

Trevor BLACK: Yes, that is right. I was just going to say it is really important that everybody has access. I know there are great things that the Victorian government has done. Obviously, the Morrisby access but also the funding to schools. I was just mentioning the research that we are about to put out. But interestingly, 50 career practitioners reported that they did not get access to their funding. So for some reason they did not get access to their funding. Now, that is an example of how much a school is supporting career education is very much in the hands of perhaps the principal and the leadership of the school, that they are not actually getting any access to this.

The CHAIR: Fine, thank you. Did you want to follow up?

Anthony CIANFLONE: The only follow up I had was around the local jobs supply as well. So even if we do get the right amount of practitioners in schools at the right ratios, what is your advice around how those resources can help build stronger pathways into local jobs in the immediate community but also surrounding region as well?

Trevor BLACK: I think there are moves by some organisations to provide remote work experience these days, sorry, online work experience, and perhaps in a remote community that is going to be the best option. If you are talking about somewhere which is very isolated and going to have very few industries, then perhaps the virtual work experience is the best option.

Penne DAWE: I was going to say I think perhaps if there can be more resourcing at local levels to try and pull that together. I think often it is different groups working perhaps with not enough resources. But I think that if we can get more people on the ground in local regions to pool collectively and to record what is available, there might be opportunities to improve that in certain areas.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We are seeing a bit of that. We are seeing a lot of different organisations partaking in some of our discussions I know the Committee for Greater Shepparton have been very involved in helping with pathways and jobs, and particularly also our helping disadvantaged students, how they can actually get them engaged to whatever level they are at. I think we need to collaborate.

Penne DAWE: I think that is it: a collaboration. Australia is not necessarily very good at collaboration. I think if we can get that resource to the right place, we might be able to focus on that as an issue and something that needs to be solved. I think you can see differences happening in certain areas.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask a question. If a student has a good support network—parents, family, friends—they kind of get advice around careers or 'What do you want to do when you grow up' kinds of conversations happen around their own networks, but if they do not have that support, then a careers practitioner is probably

the touch point for then opening doors for their options. Can you talk a little bit about the perception you are seeing or some of the data you might have around referring students to VET, as opposed to university? Is there a negative perception still around vocational training?

Trevor BLACK: I think one of the issues perhaps with VET is the feeling of specialising too early. We give students endless information about how they are going to have 14 different careers during their life, and you have got to be able to pivot from one career to another. I suspect that one of the issues is around a student at year 10 deciding, 'No, I want to go and be a plumber, and I am going to specialise too much.' Now, I think that is one of the issues. There are obviously other issues too. The options that students now have at universities with non-ATAR pathways so that students feel that they have more options, they perhaps feel pressure from parents to attend university — 'if you can, you should' sort of attitude. So there are a lot of aspects to it, I think.

Penne DAWE: I think there are a lot of parents who do push their children. I think more work needs to be done with parents. Only the other day I was listening to someone talking about how VET is different, you know, this hands-on way of learning. And I think we need to change the language because we have always learned that way. Our entire human history was made up of learning hands-on, either farming or going into guilds. Not many of us were book-read, probably only the church. This is a very recent thing, and I think we need to bring back or normalise that this is not what certain kids did and not the others. It is what we all do. I am sure none of you wrote an essay to get here or did an exam. I think we need to change the language, and that will require more marketing, because it became embedded.

We also followed the OECD recommendation to become more educated: 'You need to become more educated into the future to manage what's happening.' But that is not necessarily the case. Having a vocational pathway or doing hands-on learning is just a type of learning — that is all. It is what we expect adults to be doing in the workplace. So I think a lot more communication needs to happen in the marketplace to normalise it. But I can tell you that kids are voting with their feet. A lot of young people out there have looked at their mates with the trucks and the tools and the \$60,000 ute and the deposit on a house and decided where they want to be. They are getting with the message themselves, but of course there are going to be gaps in that messaging as well.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I suppose just one point on that: how do we empower them more? How do we let their voice actually really be part of this conversation? Because it needs to be. We can tell them what we think and what we all recommend, but we also need to empower the younger people to make sure they understand that their voice does matter and that they can contribute to their future and be part of it. I think that is really important.

Penne DAWE: Yes, and I think part of having career education in schools is you are engaging them in that conversation to understand themselves and discuss their learning and where they are going.

Trevor BLACK: Yes. Alison mentioned before about the students who have all the different friends and the parents and everyone talking careers. But that is not unbiased information, and what we want to make sure of is that they have unbiased information and access to it.

Penne DAWE: Because they do follow their friends, as you know if you have got teenagers. They will follow their friends, even if it is wrong.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes, I have had a couple of those. They are older now, thank goodness.

Penne DAWE: My son, too.

The CHAIR: I think we have got time for one more question. John.

John MULLAHY: I was down at Glendal Primary School a little while ago. They have got a girls in STEM day, and basically they take their grade 3 girls out and teach them STEM, and you can see the girls absolutely thriving on actually getting involved in science, technology, engineering and maths, which they do not seem to get when the boys are around. I think that institutionalises this gender bias in what girls will actually take up. And so I was just wondering what you thought on what impact gender bias has on in-demand industries and their workforces. What can the Victorian government do to combat gendered perceptions of work and encourage women into male-dominated industries?

Penne DAWE: It is huge, because it is so ingrained. Young people make up their minds at about six or seven. Today I walked down here outside Parliament House, and there were some women down here with the construction by the park. That is important, because a young child of six or seven walking past will see women and men. That is why it is important to have that exposure. There are lots of good programs. There is also one that runs, I think, with young women in engineering, but that is about helping young women understand what the benefits of being an engineer are, rather than ‘This is engineering; build a bridge.’ ‘Why would you build a bridge?’ ‘Because you’re getting cars and traffic, or you’re getting water, to a community.’ I think there are a lot of approaches to attracting young women, but we do need more of those programs.

We do work with the Department of Education young ambassadors, and we have trades and women at our conference to show our career practitioners, so they can take it back to school. They are all well aware of this, but it is really overcoming — again, it is a marketing thing — the social marketing that women see, and it is a very big piece. So it is ongoing work, and it has to be continuous, and it has to start early.

Trevor BLACK: In recent years I have still heard of workplaces where there are only male toilets on site and women have to go off site to go to the toilet, which is a very clear way of saying, ‘You don’t belong here.’ Whether girls can access clothing that is in their size and shape, which again, is the message that you don’t belong here — these sorts of things are subtle, but I think they are very important.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate the submission that you have made and your answering some of the questions we had today. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.