

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

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Dylan Wight

WITNESSES

Alex White, Chief Executive Officer,

Lizzy O’Shea, Head of Policy Reform, and

Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Victorian TAFE Association.

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 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 for joining us today and for your submission as well. My name is Alison. I am the Chair and the Member for Bellarine, and I will introduce some of the other committee members. I am going to hand over to you to have an opening statement of around 5 minutes or so, and then we will jump into some questions.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton and Deputy Chair. Welcome this morning.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: And Dylan Wight will just join us maybe in a moment as well. I will hand over to you.

Alex WHITE: I will start by acknowledging the traditional owners and also thank you for inviting the Victorian TAFE Association to give evidence today. My name is Alex White. I am the CEO of the VTA, and I am joined by Lizzy and Pam, who also work with me.

The VTA is the peak body for the Victorian TAFE sector, Victoria's 12 TAFE institutes, four dual-sector universities and AMES Australia. We represent Victoria's sovereign, government-owned training and skills capability. TAFE is integral to our economy and driven by public benefit, not profit. It is driven by advancing Victoria's economic and skills priorities while delivering social benefits to communities. TAFE provides all Victorians with access to high quality education and training across 90 campuses, and eight of Victoria's TAFEs have a regional footprint and are significant anchor entities in their communities.

It is crucial that Victoria addresses its skill shortages, and TAFE is the primary pathway in key priority industries like health care, construction and clean energy. We are government's most effective lever to develop a skilled worker pipeline at scale across the state. By 2034 Victoria needs over 1.4 million new jobs, and 80 per cent of these qualifications are attainable via TAFE.

Skills shortages have many drivers, but awareness, attitudes and perceptions of students and parents contribute significantly. It is critical that students are aware of and encouraged to pursue relevant careers and their TAFE pathways. TAFE must be promoted as an equal first option to university, providing distinctive employment-based pathways. We need students, parents, teachers and career advisers to have accurate information about TAFE and industry careers and to support informed choices. To do this we need to challenge outdated perceptions of TAFE, like myths that TAFE graduates are less employable than university graduates. The reality is that TAFE graduates' employment outcomes match university graduates. Outcomes are even stronger for TAFE apprenticeships and traineeships, with 94 per cent gaining employment after training.

In terms of earnings, TAFE graduates with a certificate IV or higher report higher median earnings than university graduates. TAFE qualifications can also ensure that students get a career that is AI-proof. We need to deepen the links between Victoria's TAFE networks and schools and establish links between students and TAFEs as early as possible. TAFEs already support school-to-training pathways through strong existing relationships with secondary schools, their own VET delivery and TAFE-based technical colleges. The growth of VET in schools and the VCE vocational major are fantastic, and this should be deepened and expanded by making TAFEs the first-choice VET provider for public schools. Government should also invest more in the infrastructure needed to give VET in schools the best chance to succeed. This would include more co-location of TAFEs with schools and building new fit-for-purpose TAFE facilities closer to schools.

To address skills demand we also need to train, upskill and reskill workers and enable people to return to the workforce. A significant barrier for workers starting and staying in TAFE is access to public transport and child care. We, the VTA, encourage the government to further invest in public transport to and from TAFEs and to support the construction and operation of child care and kindergartens co-located at TAFE. Expanding Free TAFE support has removed significant financial barriers, and we encourage Free TAFE funding to be increased. This should include more funding for TAFEs to deliver support services to students.

Finally, our submission speaks to the interventions required to support skills development and retention in industry, including improving wages and working conditions, especially, I might add, for apprentices. To address skills shortages we need shared ownership across schools, TAFE, government and industry to ensure all efforts are aligned. Above all else, we need to share the facts: that if young people want a prosperous future, they should be looking to the TAFE network to deliver this. I can answer any questions, and I will also hand over to my colleagues to answer some of the more detailed questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much, Alex. That was fantastic. Your submission and answering our questions today are very central to what we are trying to achieve here. We have already had some discussions this morning around elevating TAFE, and you have touched on that in your opening remarks, so thank you for that. Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. Thank you, Alex. That was really good, and I am really pleased that you raised transport and child care. In Shepparton transport is a significant issue—I am talking about bus services as we do not have trams, by the way, or trains in town. We have small regions and towns that need to get into the hub where TAFE is, right in the centre of Shepparton, and we have heard many times that transport and lack of bus services are significant issues, so I am glad you have raised that. I would also like to ask you about what support services TAFEs currently provide to disadvantaged students and what more could be done to support these students. I always raise the students from a multicultural or diverse background. We have a very large community of that cohort, so I am really interested to hear about disadvantage and people from multicultural backgrounds and Indigenous students as well. What do you have in place to support that level of disadvantage?

Alex WHITE: Certainly. I might ask Lizzy to address the details of that.

Lizzy O'SHEA: Yes, sure. I think the first point I would say is, while you have touched on transport in the regions, we would love to talk about that more. The research that came out recently from Infrastructure Victoria on transport times and people's appetite for travel has been really useful in informing our work around what might need to be in place to support students to get them to a TAFE and really keep them at TAFE so that they can complete.

In terms of services to disadvantaged students, this is really at the core of what TAFE is providing as a public provider. This is core business for TAFE, whether it is student support services in terms of counselling or support while they are just going about their life as a student or if it is advice on different pathways for them, so maybe their qualification is not working out—what else could they transfer to? There are a lot of really good examples. I think you have got the dual sectors on next, who will have a specific set that they can all speak to, because they are all so different across the network.

In terms of some of the examples that we have seen, TAFE Gippsland also put in a submission but I think were not able to be here today, so I will speak to some examples that they have spoken of. One of the things that they have looked at in terms of support services is an inclusive learning model that looks at the different intersectional areas of disadvantage. They have taken a person-centred model that looks at the whole experience of a student at TAFE and how they can support them as a student and empower them throughout the course. They have a learning model that they co-designed with learners, families and case managers, and they also look at the transition to employment following TAFE.

So there are a lot of services that TAFEs are providing that look at the holistic experience of a student. We also know that one of the highest reasons that students list as their non-completion reason is personal reasons, which is obviously really broad, but that TAFE is offering a lot of support that is speaking to all these sorts of aspects of the student's life.

In terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which you mentioned, there is another example that we are really interested in from TAFE Gippsland, which is a Koori learner journey mapping project, where they

have taken advice from students, Elders and the community around their full experience as a student, and a lot of that goes beyond their time at TAFE. They have looked at how each of the touchpoints in their experience as a student could be improved and what the TAFE could do to support that.

So I think there are a lot of programs that are funded by the department and things like that which they can probably speak to in more depth, but each of the TAFEs will have really specific examples of what they are doing. I think one of the points we have said in our submission is if we had expanded funding for student support services, these are the types of things that one TAFE might be doing that we could look to expand across the network. Where we have got really good evidence, I guess pilot evidence, from one TAFE that they are getting really good results for their completion and retention through these programs, how could we expand those across the rest of the network? Pam or Alex, would you add anything to that?

Pam JONAS: The only thing I would add is that previously TAFEs were funded for community service obligation. It was specific funding that they received. That was removed a number of years ago. The community service obligation, if you like, the wraparound services for students, for example, now sits under a broader funding bucket, in which case the discretion to use that is with the TAFE, and the discretion to use that is determined by the other pressures that they have for other community activities. So the need for dedicated funding for supporting disadvantaged students and encouraging disadvantaged students is probably something that we would be very interested to see.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Would you say multicultural students would fit into that?

Pam JONAS: Absolutely.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We are hearing this quite constantly. I just do not seem to be hearing enough that is happening in that space. That is interesting. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submission. It is a very comprehensive and great submission. I just wanted to ask about addressing these negative perceptions of TAFE. You touched on this in your opening statement. But the stats and facts just speak volumes. Employment outcomes match university graduates, with 78 per cent and 79 per cent securing employment post study respectively—basically on par. Outcomes are even stronger for graduates from apprenticeships and traineeships, with 94 per cent gaining employment after training. It is almost a job guarantee. In terms of earnings, TAFE graduates with a cert IV or higher report higher incomes than university graduates, with \$71,650 and \$68,000 of annual earnings respectively. Not only do you basically get a job, you get a better income, no HECS and Free TAFE, so there is a lot to sell there. How can we do more or recommend the government do more, through this committee, to really promote and bolster those very good stats and facts more broadly in the community—that TAFE is a viable option?

Alex WHITE: It is a great question. I think there are a range of issues, which obviously I touched on in the submission and my opening statement. I think it is the role not just of the government and TAFEs but also industry and schools. I think there are still a lot of myths, and they are a bit outdated. TAFEs are not the old technical colleges of the 60s any longer. They are very advanced, they are modern, they have got very high-quality teaching and they are very aligned with what industry needs. We do need industry to deepen their connections with TAFEs and to work more closely with TAFEs to, obviously, fund the training themselves but also provide job opportunities for school leavers. That is certainly one of the barriers there, particularly for apprentices—school leavers leaving and looking for an apprenticeship. I think that the people who influence students, particularly the careers guidance people, need to be more aware and be assisted to be more aware of what the different options are.

I think the work that the government has done to promote TAFE, particularly through Free TAFE, is really excellent, and more of that, please, is what I would say. Then I think there are a lot of structural barriers that are actually in place, which I think we talked about before, but things like transport, child care—those kinds of things. Those structural barriers are real, and they contribute to the perception. But I know that Lizzy will probably have some additional things to add.

Lizzy O'SHEA: Yes, and I think one of the things we spoke about in the submission is that if the industry profession is not appealing then the pathway will not be appealing. The key point we have made is that we need to look at every point along that pipeline, from schools through to training through to industry, and keeping them in all of those phases of the pipeline. There is work that we can do to make the TAFE pathway appealing to students, but I think the point that Alex mentioned around doing a bit of myth busting about industry as well, particularly for more gendered working environments, is what can we do to show school students? I know we were talking about this in the earlier hearing sessions. What can you do to show students that those pathways have changed and get them interested in the profession, as well as do some myth busting about TAFE? Because we know that from the stats you mentioned from our submission, the reality is that TAFE is a really, really strong option. Alex mentioned sort of AI proofing jobs. There are pathways there that cannot be taken away by those changes, and the pathways and the professions will change and evolve, but we will always need them.

I think the key thing I remember about perceptions of TAFE—we know, as the careers adviser peak was mentioning—some of these views, particularly on gendered industries, can start really early, like primary school, seven or eight years old, and people are really influenced by whether it is family, friends or their parents and things like that. But we know no parent would recommend a pathway because they do not want what is best for their kid, right? So I think some of the work the VTA has been doing around getting the evidence around those perceptions and how they match reality is about getting the word out. Things like the Free TAFE advertising campaign recently about how Free TAFE gives all these options are really giving parents and influencers that information that they can give to their children and say, you know, 'This is what is good for you.' You can understand if people have outdated information about that they might be nervous about these pathways, but there is no reason to be. We know that advice is coming from a good place, but how can we make sure that careers advisers, parents, influencers have updated information about TAFE and also about the labour market and where those trends are going?

Pam JONAS: I suppose in terms of the perception, we are fighting against some pretty rusted-on views about what TAFE is and what TAFE does and that TAFE does apprenticeships, which is entirely wrong these days, you know. So we are fighting some pretty rusted-on views, but as Lizzy says, it is about providing understanding, providing information. We are bumping up against parental expectations. Lots of parents think it is a second choice for their child to go to TAFE rather than go to university, even if the university is completely the wrong choice for their child. So there are parental expectations about where their child will go. And I think we need some industry champions to talk about the system that we talk about in Australia as being industry led. Industry has a very big stake in promoting the VET sector and promoting TAFE. I think there are various competing forces in terms of changing those perceptions. But I think changing perceptions comes from understanding, and if we have understanding on all those levels or we can improve the understanding on all those levels of what is happening, then we have got more of a chance of changing those perceptions.

Alex WHITE: Just to also emphasise I think that it is the responsibility of all of us—members of Parliament, the government, obviously TAFEs—to be out there and talking about TAFE as an equal first solution and one of the pathways for students. I think one of the things that we strongly recommend is that TAFE be considered by the government and by schools as an equal first or as the kind of default option for VET training. And just to also really emphasise what Pam said about the role of industry, I think we really need industry to step up here. They constantly say they want job-ready graduates and they want more skilled workers. Well, TAFE is the only statewide, at-scale, quality vocational education provider that can provide basically all the skills that industry is looking for, and we really need industry to have that first-choice mentality as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: Thank you. The committee received evidence that recent changes to the Skills First program resulted in the removal of 91 courses from the list of subsidised courses. What courses did TAFEs stop offering as a result of these changes, and how many of these courses were for in-demand industries?

Alex WHITE: That might be a question that you should address to the individual TAFEs. What I can say is recently at a meeting of the TAFE CEOs, the response was that the recent changes to Skills First did not adversely, or significantly adversely, affect any of the TAFEs.

John MULLAHY: It has not affected any of the TAFEs?

Alex WHITE: The recent round of Skills First changes.

John MULLAHY: Okay.

Pam JONAS: Probably the most effect it had or impact it had was the lateness of the information. The actual removal of some of those courses was not the problem but the timing of the removal.

John MULLAHY: So there were courses removed?

Pam JONAS: Yes.

Alex WHITE: Yes. There were 91 courses taken, as you said in your question.

John MULLAHY: But I have to ask them directly?

Alex WHITE: We do not have the detailed information, unfortunately.

John MULLAHY: All right.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. I love referring to careers practitioners as influencers. It is a funny visual. My question is around reskilling. There is no such thing as a job for life anymore, with the changing economy, changing workforce and changing labour demands. Can you talk through a little bit how TAFE is catering for that changing jobs market, in particular in priority, in-demand industries?

Alex WHITE: That is a very broad question. Is there a particular area that you would like us to focus on?

Dylan WIGHT: I think priority and in-demand industries would be good. What are we looking at? Construction, health, advanced manufacturing and new technologies?

Alex WHITE: I think broadly TAFE is the leading provider of vocational training for all of those industries, whether it is the clean economy or whether it is electrical, plumbing or advanced welding. All of those are provided by TAFE, and TAFE would be the largest provider of those qualifications, certainly, for instance, with apprenticeships. Over 70 per cent of apprentices in the construction sector trained at TAFEs. So simply, TAFE is the government's largest and core provider of vocational training.

Dylan WIGHT: I guess I would like some information then about how TAFEs are being agile and adapting and changing the courses they provide to meet the needs of that changing job market.

Lizzy O'SHEA: We know that TAFEs are increasingly looking at skill sets and short courses and microcredentials and things like that. The TAFEs that you speak to individually and the dual-sector universities on next will be able to speak to how they are specifically doing it themselves, but I think TAFEs are looking at how they can chunk up the training and break it down and things like that, so that it is more suited to the person who is still working but also people who might just need a small bit of the qualification rather than doing the whole qualification. There are things like that that TAFEs are doing with the way that they teach that would help employees and people transition from an existing role to I guess an in-demand industry or keep their skills up to date.

One of the things I would say that has been really helpful is the change to Free TAFE that has allowed people to do multiple courses—the change to eligibility criteria. I think that has been really helpful in allowing people to top up or do an additional skill set. I think, again, our members would have to speak to it individually, but people are looking at what they can do with timetable and delivery and things like that to make it fit better into the life of someone who is already working or focusing that sort of engagement on people who they know are already in the workplace, not your typical school leaver who is looking to do a cert full time: how can we change the way that we deliver? Pam, would you add anything to that?

Pam JONAS: No. It was pretty comprehensive. There are only two other things that I would mention. One is RPL: there is a new emphasis on RPL—recognition of prior learning—for people coming in to upskill or to reskill. The Productivity Commission recently raised the issue again. RPL has been around for a long time, but

it has never sort of reached its zenith, if you like, so there is a new emphasis on RPL. The other thing I would say is that the support for literacy, language literacy and numeracy for older students, if you like, coming into TAFE is being supported at a personal level. But the issue I think around LLN is that it is required for enrolment into TAFE; it is part of the enrolment process, and often students, even older students, need support with those sorts of things to enable them to enrol in a course but then also to be supported in a course. So they are areas I think that we need to focus on.

Alex WHITE: Maybe to give a few additional examples of how TAFEs are responsive to industry: the government has set up these things called Skills Labs, and these are these really innovative ways that TAFEs, industry, the government, unions and industry experts sit down and develop new courses or update existing courses. So that is one of the ways that TAFEs are very responsive to the emerging needs of industry. Another way is through Centres of Excellence. The government, both state government and federal government, have funded a number of Centres of Excellence that bring industry into the TAFE and also experts from that industry into the TAFE. It also means that those Centres of Excellence work across the TAFE network. We do not just have a whole bunch of individual TAFEs in Victoria; we have got a TAFE network and individual sector universities, and they operate together, and they share resources, and they share expertise. That is one of the benefits of the system that we have got, and those Centres of Excellence are really important nodes to ensure that we are getting the best quality vocational education out there. A couple of examples: we have got an electric bus centre of excellence, and that means that we are able to train up the mechanics that we need. It is obviously a bit different when you are doing an electric bus engine and battery technology to the old diesel and gas engines.

Similarly, we have got, down in Geelong, a centre of excellence for disability. We are getting people from the disability community to work with providers, the NDIS and people with lived experience to co-design the courses and the qualifications, the short courses and so on. Construction is another one: we recently announced the future housing centre of excellence, and that will be bringing in a lot of particularly new methods of construction to address the housing shortage that we have obviously got and make sure that we have got the skills, the tradies but also the new skills that we need to develop better quality housing. Another example of TAFEs being very aligned to what industry and the government needs is a tunnelling training centre for the tunnels that have been built across Victoria, and we obviously need very skilled technical training for those things. One other thing, as an example of how TAFEs are very responsive and able to bring in new skills training into the TAFE from industry through secondments for a lot of the teaching. A lot of TAFEs get experts from industry to come in, and they are seconded into actually doing the teaching of students. So that way the training that is being provided is directly related to what is happening now. It is not outdated, it is not from years ago, but it is happening from what industry is currently using.

Pam JONAS: I will just add one more thing to that. TAFEs do not just provide training to employers; there is a lot of research and development that goes on hand in hand with industry that is creating innovation in industries, but that research and development does not seem to surface in the same way that research, for example, surfaces for higher education. There are a lot of things that occur under the radar, if you like, in terms of research and development, with small- to medium-sized enterprises and larger industries. I think that is an area that we should really give some focus to as well.

Alex WHITE: There is some really fantastic advanced manufacturing, for instance, out at Melbourne Polytechnic in Preston and other places, where you see the kind of high-tech machines that they are training people on and doing exactly that.

Dylan WIGHT: Awesome. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to ask a question. You touch on industry. I might be simplifying it a little bit here, but if a student is on a career path, a passion, career advice, selecting subjects to do at high school, obviously going into then maybe tertiary education, whatever that looks like for a pathway to a job, the end goal is to have a career in that industry and hoping that would be an in-demand industry or a growth industry and they know that there is a guaranteed job at the end. I want to go the other end. So what can industry do better to assist that whole process so that pipeline is purposeful?

Alex WHITE: I might give an example and then throw to Lizzy and Pam. But if you are doing a pre-apprenticeship at a school because you want to be an electrical or a plumbing apprentice, then at the point at

which you finish your pre-apprenticeship and are looking to start an apprenticeship you need an employer to commence your apprenticeship. So unless there is a small or medium or large business—I should say that small businesses do the absolute lion's share of employing apprentices rather than big business who do not employ very many apprentices—unless there is an employer ready to take on that student, then there could be a gap of six months, 12 months, or they might not even be able to start their apprenticeship. Not having an employer available for students completing their pre-apprenticeship at school will be one of the major barriers for commencing an apprenticeship and converting that pre-apprenticeship into an apprenticeship. It is not because the TAFE is not available, it is not because the student does not want to do it or that they are not ready to start, but because they just do not have an employer that is ready. So that is one thing that industry can do. We are talking about employers having a relationship with the local TAFE in their geographic region and also having that relationship, ideally through the TAFE because they are providing the training, to the school and connecting that up through the VDSS, VET in Schools and the pre-apprenticeship program Head Start—all of those things. But that is really one of the major practical barriers to converting a pre-apprenticeship into an apprenticeship. But in terms of other things outside of apprenticeships that industry might be able to do, I will throw to Lizzy.

Lizzy O'SHEA: I think I would just add that we have mentioned the leadership role that we would want to see industry take around challenging those perceptions of VET and TAFE pathways but also perceptions of industries. It would not be our place to sort of, you know, comment on them too broadly, but I think there are some challenges that students have when they get into their job in certain industries and certain places, that if it is not just a perception then it is a reality. I think there is an ownership needed by industry, which I know a lot of industry peaks truly do take on, on improving working conditions for women and gender diverse people in manufacturing. A lot of the manufacturing peaks are really onto that. But that kind of work: to improve wages, working conditions, so that people stay in industry once they have gone through. You know, they have gone to school wanting to do that path, they have gone through training, they have finished, they have gotten to their pathway and gone to their job and then there are problems there. We really need to make sure that they are staying in that pipeline. So I think there is a lot that industry could do to get people really activated around the pathway, but then to make sure that when they get to the end of it, the conditions are good and they have a lot of good reasons to stay.

One thing I will say on that is there is some great work that the manufacturing peak in the south-east has been doing with Chisholm Institute called Nice Work if You Can Get It, which I think we mentioned in the report, looking at basically doing a gender impact assessment of all of Chisholm's manufacturing courses and looking at how that gender lens might play out in the classroom as well and then when they go into industry. I think that collaboration between TAFE and industry on some of those challenges that are really sticky is really good to see. Again, I think we have made a call that we would love some funding for that kind of thing to be expanded in terms of what government can do, but I think there is a shared ownership of that challenge that industry is really taking on as well around what they can do so that even if we get kids interested and we get them to a worksite, they are not signing up for a path that is going to exclude them once they are there.

Alex WHITE: I think the Chisholm—SEMMA example is a really good example of how the TAFE and the industry association were able to work to create that pathway for apprentices to go from schools straight from your pre-apprenticeship to an apprenticeship and to get the job. And just to really re-emphasise: a lot of women, particularly, who want to get into those male-dominated trades talk about the culture and the structural barriers that exist. They are not flexible when it comes to caring arrangements, whether it is kids or elderly parents. It needs a cultural mindset shift happening more broadly to facilitate that or to accept people who have got different needs and people with a disability or other requirements.

Pam JONAS: I will just add that I think we need to bear in mind that industry needs to own this problem. It is their problem as much as anybody else's. In fact it is probably more their problem than anybody else's, so they really need to own the problem. A lot of TAFE courses, for example—many of the TAFE courses—are employment-based, and they include work-based learning or integrated work-based learning, and it is in those work environments that young people in particular make their decisions about staying or going. So I think there is a very strong role for industry to concentrate on how they keep young people, and the impression they give of their industry once a young person is there. There is a lot that could be done in terms of involving industry in career advice, in providing up-to-date advice around what industries do and what their particular industries do, for example. I think the role of industry cannot be underestimated in this whole process.

Alex WHITE: Just to touch on that and to go to apprentices again, the vast majority of apprentices who do not complete their apprenticeship drop out in their first year, and it is caused by either low wages or working conditions. Those are two things that TAFEs cannot change; the employer or the industry needs to change. Paying a living wage would be great, and having safer, more inclusive workplaces would have a real impact.

The CHAIR: We have only got a few minutes, but you talked about getting industry experience. They get into the job and they go, 'Oh, I'm not sure whether this is what I want to do.' But in the Geelong area I have seen firsthand the taster experiences. Would you highly recommend those types of experiences to secondary students?

Pam JONAS: Absolutely. Yes—trade tasters, trade expo days, all of those sorts of things really give students a very realistic picture of what the industry is that they are going into. And just an aside, I suppose: I think we could work with industry on much more innovative approaches to how they work with apprentices and other people in training. I am a senior adviser because I have been around a long time, and I can remember the days of the SEC, when they overtrained apprentices, and those apprentices then went out into the broader workforce. The system we have at the moment does not have that element; we have lost that element. So is there a role, for example, for larger industries to look at an innovative approach to—where they can—overtraining, to broaden the reach of employers? Although small- to medium-sized enterprises make up 97 per cent of the industries in Victoria, they cannot support the kinds of numbers that we need to go into industry in the future. So is there a role for big business to become a bit more innovative around those sorts of things?

The CHAIR: I would imagine, too, that it becomes very localised—a region might be looking for a particular workforce for their region. Your Chisholm example is that that partnership improved, so it addressed a local issue as much as a training issue.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I just wanted to really quickly ask one thing.

The CHAIR: Yes, go ahead.

Kim O'KEEFFE: It was around just the low student retention and course completion rates. We know that is an issue. I have a friend who actually teaches at GOTAFE, and she keeps me up to date on some of her industry. What are TAFEs doing to improve student retention and course completion? Because it is a big issue if they are only starting and not finishing. There are lots of reasons—some of them we have touched on—but to me that is a fairly significant issue. What are we doing to address that?

Pam JONAS: Well, we do have various support services at TAFEs. We have got apprenticeship support officers. We have got the jobs and skills centres, who assist our students. We have got wraparound services for their social issues and mental health issues. Where we can, we have support services for students and to retain them in their courses. But again, I think it is a question of preparing students for the courses that they are undertaking. The better they are prepared for the courses they are undertaking, the more likely they are to be retained in education.

Kim O'KEEFFE: You talked about where they can actually do multiple courses as well. That is the other thing: are we making it perhaps that little bit too easy? We want to make sure that they get the opportunity—when they have a choice of Free TAFE and lots of multiple courses and they are probably stopping and starting and not finishing, I think there is a bit of work to be done there to maybe look at that a little bit more deeply. Do you agree?

Pam JONAS: To some extent, yes. I think the skills and jobs centres are providing that kind of advice, and they are based at TAFEs. They are assisting people to be a bit more discriminating about what they do and about the choices that they make. I mean, the support services are there. It is a question of how much support they can give, though, in the same way that with careers teachers in schools there is one careers teacher perhaps to 400 students. You have got the same sort of ratios in TAFE, where you have got a lot of students and only a very small resource.

Alex WHITE: Maybe one of the practical things—literacy and numeracy have one of the biggest, most outsized influences in improving completion and retention. That is certainly something that TAFEs in recent years have invested a lot more in, and there has been some more federal and state government funding for that. But by far, literacy and numeracy have step-change improvements in retention across the board. Because

TAFEs provide education and training, vocational education, for all Victorians, it means that a lot of the people that go to TAFE, whether it is Free TAFE or other TAFE, come from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and they are really greatly assisted by the literacy and numeracy support that TAFEs provide. As I said, there is more and more evidence coming out as those programs mature that says that it is one of the largest, most outsized impacts that we have. There are obviously a range of other things that we do.

Lizzy O'SHEA: Can I add something very small?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Lizzy O'SHEA: I know we are very short on time, so thank you. In terms of the work that TAFEs are doing, I think that the TAFEs are getting a good sense of what some of those drivers are for why people might not be completing or might be taking longer and things like that. I think while there are a lot of services they can provide, there are things that are outside of their control that we know really do weigh on that retention and completion. The three biggest factors, I would say—the first is cost. Obviously Free TAFE has really gone a long way to reducing the fees, but we know that there are students who do not realise they will still have to pay for uniforms or materials and those sorts of other additional costs that are not to do with their fees and that those can create real pressure on their finances, particularly with cost of living, as well as foregone wages, transport, things like that. The costs start to add up once they start. And what recommendation might the committee be able to make around further support for Free TAFE students or disadvantaged students that can keep them in the course and reduce those other costs?

The second one is access to a TAFE in their area. We know that we have a really broad geographic footprint of 90-plus campuses, but there are still places that we have mentioned in our submission that do not have the same physical access or do not have public transport access under, say, an hour or 45 minutes in peak time. So long travel times really impact on whether someone can make everything work with everything else that is on. Poor public transport options—obviously, you know, we are not even talking a tram, we are talking a bus. Could we have dedicated TAFE buses like school buses that help get people to a TAFE and really minimise those times? Childcare responsibilities are a really big reason why people are not able to stay in their course, and being able to juggle that whilst, as you were mentioning, upskilling, retraining and being able to just make it all work once they get there—sometimes it is a bit harder than they thought for some of those reasons. The TAFEs can provide support here and there, and I know Gippsland have trialled having their own bus that is like a school bus. But for some of those we would really look to a whole-of-government solution for how we can make sure that everyone has access to a TAFE. I think the Infrastructure Victoria recommendation last week was \$2 billion to make sure that we have TAFE campuses in those growth areas but also specific large regional centres so that everyone has got a TAFE, whether they are getting the bus to it or it is nearby, and for what digital infrastructure we might need to make sure that if those two first things do not work, they have got access to one remotely. That would be my final plug.

The CHAIR: And very well done. Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate you answering our questions today. We will end the broadcast there.

Witnesses withdrew.