

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

Tony Bates, Secretary,

Scott Widmer, Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Secondary School Reform, and

Natalie Garcia de Heer, Acting Assistant Deputy Secretary, Senior Secondary Pathways Reform Taskforce, Strategy and Secondary School Reform Group, Department of Education;

Lee-Anne Fisher, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Skills Authority, and

David Miller, Chief Executive Officer, Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The CHAIR: I begin today by acknowledging the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future and extend that to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with LA standing order 234. I just want to also note that we have apologies from Roma Britnell today, and Nicole will be an apology from 10:30 till 1.

I will now start also with a statement before we begin. Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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 very much to those who have joined us first this morning from the department. I will come to you in just a moment. What I will do is quickly just introduce the committee members to you. I am Alison Marchant, the Member for Bellarine.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning. I am Kim O'Keeffe, the Member for Shepparton. Lovely to see you all today.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I am Anthony Cianflone, the Member for Pascoe Vale. Thanks for coming along.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Nicole WERNER: Nicole Werner, the Member for Warrandyte.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I believe you have got a presentation. We are going to try and keep you to 10 minutes if we can, because then we have got lots of questions—we would like to dive into your submission. I will hand over to you.

Tony BATES: Thank you, Chair. Can I also acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

Chair, I might just introduce the team on this side. It is a cross-departmental operation in government. On my left are Scott Widmer, who is the Deputy Secretary for Strategy and Secondary School Reform, and Natalie Garcia de Heer, who is the Assistant Deputy Secretary for Senior Secondary Pathways Reform and has been working in this area for a number of years. From DJSIR I have got Dave Miller, who is the CEO of the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, and Lee-Anne Fisher, who is the Deputy CEO at the Victorian Skills Authority. And, sorry, I am Tony Bates from Education.

I might start the slides going and just say thank you to the committee for the chance to present this morning.

Visual presentation.

Tony BATES: As you know, Victoria's economy is rapidly evolving. Our largest employing industries, such as construction and health care, continue to grow strongly, but we are also seeing the emergence of a number of in-demand industries, including digital technologies, advanced manufacturing and the clean economy. I might go to the next slide, please.

We are forecasting that we will need 1.4 million new workers by 2034, so it is important that all student pathways align not only with students' interests but to help address those workforce shortages. Between 2024 and 2027 over 178,000 new workers are needed across the in-demand industries. As the nature of work

continues to change, we must also ensure that students are equipped with foundational skills that are transferable across industries and occupations across the course of their careers and in the future. Over the next 10 years 85 per cent of people entering the workforce in Victoria will need a post-secondary school qualification. Already employers are telling us that vocational qualifications are needed more than university degrees. Our estimates show that about 47 per cent of those new jobs will need a VET qualification, compared to about 38 per cent needing a university degree. If we are to meet this demand, we must continue to work to shift community perceptions about the importance of vocational pathways.

The work to do this starts early. Many of our government school students are accessing industry immersions and enhanced educational experiences well before they start their later years of secondary schooling. Our investment in high quality career education is supporting all government school students to understand themselves better, make informed decisions and build up their confidence about the future. We have supported more than 460 career practitioners to study a graduate certificate in career development and are providing study grants to another hundred school staff this year to do that course. The world leading My Career Insights program provides a personalised assessment tool for each student that helps them understand their strengths and their interests, identify career paths and make the choices to get them to the careers that they need.

Approximately 70 per cent of students complete work experience, usually in year 10, to gain valuable workplace skills. We are delivering 10,000 new work experience placements so that more students can gain access in the clean energy sector and other priority industries before they choose their final senior secondary subjects. We are increasing the range and quality of diversity of placements, reducing admin burdens on both schools and employers and investing in technology that assists with work experience, access, quality and equity.

Our tech schools are inspiring students from years 7 to 10 with cutting-edge STEM experiences linked to the priority industries, including health care, social assistance, construction, new technology and clean energy. We are also piloting vocational taster experiences, giving students in year 9 or year 10 a short taste of what it is like to go to a local VET program with a training provider.

The Victorian government has invested over \$775 million in senior secondary pathway reforms over the last few years. A major reform has been the introduction of the VCE vocational major, or VCE VM for short, which is changing the way our community values vocational pathways. After just two years of the VCE vocational major we are already seeing great success. 477 secondary schools are now delivering VET and work-related subjects through VCE VM, and 26 per cent more students are choosing the VCE VM compared to the previous VCAL. Last year we had 55,162 students enrolled in a VET subject, marking Victoria's fourth consecutive year of growth in school students undertaking VET while still at school. We now have 31 per cent of year 11 and 12 students across all sectors—government, Catholic and independent schools—who are doing at least one VET subject as part of their studies.

Victoria is the only state to see this level of growth of VET in schools. The increase includes strong growth in industries linked to key government priorities, such as renewable energy and engineering. Over the last three years there has been a 70 per cent increase in the number of students enrolled in electrotechnology and engineering courses, and these courses lead to careers in fast-growing and well-paid sectors.

We are providing more support for school students and apprentices through the Head Start program, which is helping students stay at school while being paid to kickstart their career. In 2024 we had 1558 students from 278 different government schools start a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship, or SBAT, as we call them, and 77 per cent of those SBAT participants were still in their training contracts 12 months later. Together these reforms to senior secondary pathways have led to a lift in student engagement and retention.

One of the really pleasing stats is VCE VM had a completion rate of 92.8 per cent in 2024. That is over 10 per cent higher than the VCAL in 2022. So that lift in completion rate has contributed to an overall increase from 92 per cent completion for all students in 2021 to 97 per cent completion of year 12 in 2024.

Regardless of where they start, every Victorian student now has a supported pathway to pursuing roles in in-demand industries. Students in government schools have access to high-quality career education starting from year 7, while Victorians who were at TAFE have access to a wide range of support services, including direct connections to skills and job centres. We are committed to positioning students at all stages of life and their

careers to pursue the pathways that best suit their needs to train and retrain as needed, whether it is through Free TAFE, university or other work and training opportunities.

I have just got a little case study here of a student, Amir, in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. In year 7 and 8 Amir starts to think about what interests him and discusses that with his teacher. In year 9 he has an individualised assessment through My Career Insights, followed by an appointment with a specialised career adviser. This helps him set his sights on a career in the health sector. His school partners with the Monash Tech School, where he gains exposure to a cutting-edge STEM program through the Superhealth program at the Monash Tech School. He can then try a vocational taster program at Holmesglen TAFE and get some work experience at Austin Health. During year 11 and 12 he can enrol in a VET course at Certificate II or III level and can also choose VCE subjects aligned with his interests in the health area. This prepares Amir with the knowledge and experiences to choose his postsecondary pathway into VET or university or directly to employment. Among the range of options available to him, Amir would have access to a range of Free TAFE courses, including allied health, health services assistance, emergency health care, aged and disability care, dental assisting and mental health. Those are just some of the 500 government-subsidised courses and short courses, including 80 Free TAFE courses for Victorian learners. Following a Free TAFE course Amir could continue his learning or take up a position in the high-demand sector. This integrated pathway through school and beyond sets Amir up for a rewarding and fulfilling career in one of Victoria's priority areas.

Our work, though, is not done. We need to keep building on these reforms to help all students finish secondary school with confidence, gain the skills they need for further education and training and make meaningful contributions to Victoria's industries throughout their careers. Submissions to the Inquiry have consistently highlighted five key areas of focus, which we are also focused on. These include ensuring equity for student outcomes, enhancing career education, connecting schools and employers, providing quality VET and facilitating a joined-up postsecondary system.

I will very briefly just mention each of those. To provide equity for all students we need to actively address biases, dismantle low expectations and aspirations in some communities and remove the historical disadvantage experienced by certain groups in our community. To ensure that students benefit from strong career education in years 7 to 12 we need highly qualified career educators who are informed about the best available information and pathways for students and the skills that the economy needs now and into the future. We also need to make sure that career education is embedded across each school's elite teaching and learning programs.

We also know that schools and employers need more streamlined ways to connect. We are exploring new channels for communication enabled by technology and effective partnerships between schools and employers for work-based learning. We are also strengthening partnerships between the department and peak industry bodies and large employers. We are ensuring the quality of VET by reviewing quality safeguards for VET providers and working with TAFEs on which courses TAFEs are best placed to deliver. We are making TAFEs the provider of choice for areas of strong employment demand and high delivery complexity.

Finally, building a pipeline of talent for priority industries requires both school students and adult students to successfully transition to and between VET and university within a joined-up tertiary system. This enables adults to continue upskilling and reskilling as their life circumstances and Victoria's economic needs change over time.

To conclude, Victoria's senior secondary pathways reform has improved participation in vocational pathways, including in high-demand industries. We are continuing to strengthen school career education as well as deliver the system and behaviour changes needed to connect more students with career options that best suit their interests and meet industry needs. We are delivering targeted initiatives to address barriers to students in regional areas and students who face disadvantage. There is more to be done, but we are well positioned to continue to build on what we have achieved over recent years. I want to thank the committee for its work and all those who have made submissions. I hope my very fast reading of these notes has given us a good start to have a discussion this morning. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Tony. Actually, the submission was very thorough, and that was a really great snapshot pulling that all together, so thank you for that. We are going to dive straight into questions so we can get into some nitty-gritty things. Kim, I will go to you first.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. Thank you so much for that presentation. I do note in a lot of those statistics there is nothing about people from diverse backgrounds, multicultural backgrounds. I am from Shepparton, a very multicultural area and community. One of our questions, which I am going to elaborate a little bit more on, is: how is the Victorian government supporting disadvantaged secondary school students, including regional students, First Nations students, students from a diverse background, as I have raised, and people with disabilities, to access pathways to in-demand industries, obviously with language barriers and the issues that they face? I hear it often. Yes, that is my question: how do you support those people from those backgrounds?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Ms O'Keeffe, for the question. I might ask Deputy Secretary Widmer just to expand on that. I talked about My Career Insights, which, as I said, is a profile we do with students where we test what their interests are a little bit. It has got a little bit of the Myers-Briggs personality types, and then we talk to them about things. But we have enhanced versions of that for disadvantaged students and for students from migrant backgrounds. Scott, I might just ask if you could expand on that a bit, please.

Scott WIDMER: Look, I think probably the first thing to say is that one of the key aspects of the reform has been expanding access for all students. One of the core challenges across Victoria that was called out in John Firth's original report that led to these reforms was that the access was really variable across Victoria. Not all schools offered a vocational program and not all students had access to a full variety of VET, and the quality of what was being delivered was really variable. So the first thing that benefits all students—and it absolutely benefits disadvantaged students, and it has had a huge impact for regional and rural students—is that we have made the vocational major a higher quality program. It is available in every neighbourhood government school in Victoria, and access to VET has been increased right across the state. We can see that in the numbers of students that now have access and are taking that option up.

Different student cohorts face a range of different challenges in accessing schooling and accessing vocational and applied learning as well. There are a range of universal reforms that are obviously assisting a whole range of students. You mentioned students with disability. Obviously the government's significant investment in the disability inclusion reforms is providing supports for those students to really be able to engage in all of their schooling. Some of the particular supports I think are worth mentioning here for vocational and applied learning. One of the particular challenges that regional and rural students face is access to VET because of distance. Distance has proved to be a really significant barrier, and that is why the VET transport program that the government has invested in has made a huge impact. Around 13,000 students have been supported to access VET that they otherwise would not have been able to get access to. These are transport options that take students to and from VET.

I think another critical barrier for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and some of our priority cohorts has been cost. One of the key things that has happened over these reforms is that access to VET certificates and access to the materials that students need to participate—we call them VET materials—has been made cost-free to parents and families, and that has made a really significant difference in students being able to access VET certificates.

One of the key ways that students who have additional needs really need to be supported in being able to access the various pathways—it might be vocational applied learning pathways, but they need in some cases additional support and guidance through the careers platform. So one of the things that the government has invested in is an enhanced version of the My Career Insights program, which runs at year 9, which provides additional mentoring and one-on-one supports for First Nations students and students with a disability to be able to really access the full offering of careers and look for options that are suited for them and provide them with some of the supports that they need to be able to engage in our careers offerings.

Tony BATES: Scott, I might just very quickly—Dave, can you just talk about the disability transition officers in TAFE who work with students in schools who have got identified disabilities? I think we have had really good success in supporting those students to enrol.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes, that is great. I am mindful of time and getting to everyone, but I really would like to hear a little bit more around multicultural students and how they are not being left behind, if there is anyone that can speak to that.

Nicole WERNER: Yes, and perhaps people with English as their second language, specifically.

Tony BATES: We do have a range of English as additional language supports in the school system. Nat, can you just quickly expand on that?

Natalie GARCIA de HEER: Yes, absolutely. I think it is probably worth calling out the universal supports for students who are new migrants or new arrivals who need additional English support. Victoria has nine English language centres throughout the state, where new arrivals often have their first exposure to learning English. Then we have a very comprehensive English as an additional language curriculum as well. With respect to careers and pathways, the enhanced MCI program that Scott referenced is also available for new arrivals and students from a refugee background. In some cases, not all cases, those young people will need additional support with their careers and pathways planning and access to work experience and other kind of pre—senior secondary programs, and we have a dedicated program to provide that additional support to those young people. And then finally—and I think Dave might have some more details on this one—we have a dedicated asylum seeker VET program for asylum seekers in the state needing to access adult VET.

David MILLER: Thanks, Nat. Yes, there is an asylum seeker VET program that supports refugees and asylum seekers to enrol in Free TAFE and other Skills First courses. There is a \$3 million investment, which includes funding for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre to also support new arrivals to access vocational training. Again, a lot of the popular courses that you see people enrolling in include child care, community disability services, nursing and allied health. I think since December last year we have supported more than 800 asylum seekers to study at TAFE, and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre itself has supported more than 250 people to study at TAFE, university or training providers.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. I can come back at the end if I need something else.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. And thank you all for being here. My question is really around how we can work to further embed skills and training pathways in the Victorian school curriculum, but also tying that into place-based approaches. I like that case study that you had of Amir, because to me, reading that, Amir could live potentially in Heidelberg, having done work placement at the Austin or potentially in Monash, doing work out Monash way as well. In my community we have got a Merri-bek secondary north education plan, which is exactly that in many ways—bringing the local high schools together to share facilities and resources. But then it is also about building those pathways beyond school. I would love to hear what we can do as a committee potentially to recommend better integrating school pathways into local industries in local areas and local jobs in need, but also embedding that into the actual curriculum.

Tony BATES: Thank you, Mr Cianflone. It is a big issue we are working with in terms of how do we get those connections. I will say that a lot of the feedback we get is a lot of industry saying, 'Schools and parents don't know about us.' It is a little bit of that saying 'You can't be what you can't see'. My late father-in-law was a civil engineer and so my wife was a civil engineer and my niece is a civil engineer. We are very conscious of the need to try and connect industry with the school system. Industry has just evolved so much over the last 10, 20, 30 years, so it is a real challenge to make sure that parents in particular understand the diverse range of things, which is particularly why we have got the tech schools where we have modern, cutting-edge technology available in those tech schools.

I might ask Scott to expand on that in a moment. Kids go for programs which can be a few days or can be a few weeks, so they go from their school there and they get to see stuff that they probably, unless they have got an uncle or an aunt or a relative who is in one of these industries, just might never have any exposure to. Scott, do you want to maybe talk a little bit about what we are doing to link industry with the schooling system?

Scott WIDMER: Yes, thank you, Secretary. I think it is really important, first of all, just to start back at the really transformational change we have seen in the last couple of years by opening up access to the vocational major and opening up access to VET right across the state. The ability of students to access pathways that are going to meet both their own interests and strengths but also tie into in-demand industries has been really significant. That is a 26 per cent increase in enrolments in the vocational major compared to VCAL over a two-year period, and a 14 per cent increase in VET over the last two years. Those are really significant numbers; those are really big increases that we have seen. We are seeing that every school with that sort of offering being

available does start to change perceptions of vocational pathways. It changes the way that we really embed that in schools and local communities.

The reforms that the government has undertaken have been focused at senior secondary and are working backwards. You have asked how we really embed industry in the relationship with schools and with communities at a local level, and we have to work backwards and be thinking about the whole of secondary school. That is why it is important that we highlight some of the reforms that are underway at the moment, like introducing VET tasters and taster experiences so students get an opportunity earlier. These are often experiences that will involve industry, so it will be out somewhere on a workplace. If we look right across that career spectrum at the sorts of opportunities that industry can be involved in and schools want industry to be involved in from sort of years 7 and 8, there will be experiences, tours and incursions—it is more a familiarisation approach. From years 9 and 10 we are looking at using the Morrisby tool, which is really quite an amazing tool and something that we really encourage parents to get involved with with their students and encourage discussions. But it links to the interests of students. They can see which VET pathway they should take. They can see which prerequisite subjects might be involved or which university course they might need to take. There are a whole lot of experiences that link to industries. They can see a day in the life of a particular occupation. At that time, work-based learning becomes a really big deal, and this is one of the key areas where industry partnerships with schools become really important, so opportunities for work experience. We are really trying to support schools—at the moment around north of 70 per cent of schools offer work experience. We are trying to support schools through the new work-based learning application to lift that and have more opportunities for students.

There are tech schools. We have 11 tech schools operating at the moment and five more that will be online by the end of next year. These are a really great way for students to engage in some cutting-edge STEM. There are multi-day programs that they can engage in. And importantly, industry has been in partnership with the tech schools. They are on university and TAFE campuses. They are a partnership between TAFE, university and industry. So that is a great way for students to get exposure. Then, as they are heading towards year 11 and 12, there are opportunities for structured workplace learning. That is the on-the-job experience or workplace experience you do when you are doing a VET certificate or a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship.

There are some critical ways we are doing that locally. Firstly, we have supported 36 VET clusters right across the state so every school has access to a VET cluster. Now, that is cross-sectoral—that is across independent, Catholic and government schools. Those are groups of schools working together to get access to VET, which has been really, really helpful to open up those pathways. Secondly, through the School to Work contract that we have that is currently contracted out to the 31 local learning and employment networks—that School to Work program provides a critical bridge between industry and schools. What can we all do? I think encouraging those local partnerships, getting involved with the School to Work contract and with your local learning and employment network and looking for opportunities to engage in or offer work-based learning programs, work experience, tours or other immersion opportunities—these would be some of the great ways at a local level we can do that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will go to you, John. Thank you.

John MULLAHY: Excellent. The Glen Waverley district is a destination for the finest public schools and independent schools, I would argue, but my fellow committee members might have something else to say. However, there is a big focus on tertiary education. I have got a significant East Asian and southern Asian migrant community, and they are all very focused on tertiary—tertiary, tertiary, tertiary—education. So I was just wondering what is being done to tackle the negative perceptions of VET, in particular with parents and students, and to understand the value of vocational careers?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Mullahy. It is a really important question. As I said in my presentation, that is why we did the reboot from VCAL to vocational major, VCE vocational major. I do not like to say it, but, you know, it had developed a reputation: the not-so-smart kids were streamed into VCAL. There was a little bit of, you know, almost segregation in some schools. It is now VCE, and you have the different types of VCE. Vocational major is part of that branding. We have now got much higher participation rates, I think as I

mentioned, with more children going through that and now completing it. So that has been a really important part of it.

We have been really clear about, as with the study with Amir, letting students mix and match so they can do some vocational major things and some of the mainstream ones. We do see quite a bit of students picking things like VCE biology as well as doing some of those VET courses. But we have done quite a bit in the marketing, social media space. I might just ask Nat to talk a little bit about that, about the your career, your future program, really focusing both at students but also at parents and carers to address that disadvantage. I will briefly say before I go to Nat—not wanting to call out any particular institutions—that the likes of Swinburne and RMIT are really great where they are dual-sector providers. They have got these really great arrangements where kids can maybe start in a VET course and then that gives them prerequisites where they can switch across later on. So also working with some of those institutions to just help kids navigate different pathways is really, really helpful. Nat.

Natalie GARCIA de HEER: Thanks, Tony. Picking up on Tony's comments, I think perceptions rely on a range of different things. I think Tony spoke in depth about the high quality offering as being the critical foundation for improved perceptions of vocational and applied learning, so we have really prioritised that. Access to that offering is critical. In your electorate in particular there are a large number of schools that now provide access to students to vocational pathways that they did not historically, so it means that they can light the path to participation. Obviously high quality careers education is critical for addressing bias in a relational way in places that build on the particular experiences of individual students. But as Tony mentioned, we also do have a fairly comprehensive campaign that is aimed at addressing biases and perceptions of vocational and applied learning. That includes both above the line activities—some of you might have seen some of the 'Your world. Your VCE' promotions; we had an activation at Federation Square the week before last—things like that. We have been engaging social media influencers to communicate more directly with students in particular, and then families. There are also materials associated with that campaign produced in a range of different languages and particular comms products and artefacts aimed at different families, different communities and so on. We have really been taking a very comprehensive approach to thinking about how to shift perceptions in various parts of the community.

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Nicole.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you. That is very insightful. There is a bit of a running theme here in terms of how we obviously all represent diverse communities. Earlier to Kim's point, you have got people that you are wanting to engage in further studies that might not have had that access, and not just people from refugee backgrounds but from multicultural backgrounds. For my lived experience, I am the first to complete university in my family, but I am also, in the same breath, of a South-East Asian background, so there is that bias against the vocational studies that my parents had. So I think you have got two things that you are battling with. I firstly wanted to ask, off the back of Kim's question: how we are engaging with multicultural communities to give them those broader options? And then I suppose, to John's point, how to give them access to vocational—which I think you have answered anyway. But I think that speaks to the equity and the access that we are talking about, and that is that objective for us. So, yes, I would love to hear about that.

Tony BATES: As Nat mentioned, we have got a range of social media and other campaigns and we do do that in a number of community languages as well. I have been down to the African music festival at Fed Square for a number of years in a row, where we had a booth and were just talking particularly about Free TAFE to get community members into things like Free TAFE for early childcare. The really important thing is that our government service workforces should reflect the communities that we are serving, so we are doing a number of those types of communication channels as well. Dave, did you want to say anything about the supports particularly in the TAFE sector?

David MILLER: Just that there are a range of different things that TAFEs do to form ongoing engagements with their local communities. Obviously in some parts of Victoria in particular you have got massive diversity. If you talk to Chisholm, for example, they have got something like 150 different nationalities represented on campus at any one time. Having the right kinds of supports and engagement orientation in terms of their staff and the way they engage with people is fundamentally important. And from the centre, in terms of government,

we engage with other bodies. I was in Parliament House probably a couple of months ago here having sponsored an award at the Multicultural Youth Awards as we are doing anything we can to promote vocational pathways for people of all backgrounds. And there are a range of other things that kind of happen that also encourage people and help them understand what the vocational options are about. A lot of TAFEs are pretty significant providers of the adult migrant English program as well, which is federal government funded, but TAFEs, along with AIM and a range of other providers, provide that support in terms of fundamental language skills. It brings people onto sites and helps them and exposes them to the opportunities that TAFE can then provide.

So there is a whole range of different ways that people are brought into a vocational environment, building on all of the importance of there being really strong advice being provided for parents and students about the range of opportunities that are provided that really celebrate the role that vocational education and training plays. That means this is not a second choice for anybody. There is a really good reason that you would want to go down a vocational pathway. And do not get me started on talking about wages. If you want to earn a buck, become a tradie—you are much better off going down that pathway. There are a whole lot of different avenues through which you can promote those vocational pathways—through students and through other people that students listen to so that they take that feedback.

Nicole WERNER: Do you mind if I follow up?

The CHAIR: Yes, that is fine.

Nicole WERNER: What about engaging young women as well in these in-demand fields—particularly, I think of construction, and I think of AI—is there work being done in that space as well?

Tony BATES: There definitely is. Again, I might ask Nat to do that, but I just saw a video a few weeks ago. We do run some girl-only skills fairs where it just gives girls that thing where they can all talk about the different things, but particularly tech. Nat just showed at our weekly call with our executive staff a video from one of the recent trade fairs, and I could just see uniforms from government schools and non-government schools. It was a really diverse group. You could see there were migrant girls there and that safety of being able to go around and muck around with the equipment and not, with the greatest respect, be pushed out of the way by the boys. Nat, do you want to briefly just talk about that?

Natalie GARCIA de HEER: Yes. Tony is speaking specifically about a career expo we run each year called Trade & Tech Fit, which is specifically for girls and gender-diverse students to provide them exposure to both trades industries but also high-growth technology industries. There are about 100 exhibitors from across those industries—and it has been at the Melbourne exhibition centre historically—that do really hands-on exhibits to expose girls and gender-diverse students to what life could actually be like in those industries. About 143 schools brought about 3700 students this year. Now, that is obviously the flagship event. I think it is worth acknowledging that there are careers-related expos and activities that are happening significantly in a place-based way, either run by individual schools or often kind of aggregated and organised by place-based partners, including regional and area workforces associated with these reforms, as well as, often, local learning and employment networks. Tech schools also have a number of girls-in-STEM-focused programs. Ballarat Tech School has a girls in STEM industry pathways program, which involves about 65 students.

The other thing that I think is worth flagging is that by having more tailored and targeted support for school-based apprenticeships through the Head Start program, you are actually providing wraparound support to girls and gender-diverse students who might be in non-traditional pathways. We think that is really important, because in addition to providing exposure and promoting and providing good, scaffolded careers advice, you actually need to make the work-based learning experience enjoyable and safe for our young people who are in pathways which are not traditional. So we think that Head Start is a really important lever in that place, particularly for some of the trades.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Did I miss something before? I just want to make sure we capture everything we need to.

Lee-Anne FISHER: Thank you. That is very kind. I was thinking about the comments that you had made and about the importance of opening up industry for young people to get a contemporary understanding of what is going on. At the Victorian Skills Authority, our job is to bring that industry side to the table. We have a series

of industry advisory groups and they cover the economy, and there is huge appetite from employers to say, 'How can we work more closely with schools?' I guess that is the reason that I am at the table, because we do work very closely together to be able to open up those employers so young people have those opportunities to come in.

John MULLAHY: Excellent. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. With work experience, we saw through your submission and your slides that we now have 70 per cent of students undertaking work experience in high school, which is a great achievement in itself. What are we doing to get that as close to 100 per cent as we can? What are the barriers to that and the challenges to that, and how are we going with getting a decent portion of them within priority industries?

Tony BATES: I might just start off and then I might ask Scott to expand a bit. Thanks, Mr Wight, for the question. One of the things that we have been working on over the last few years, which I have to say I was shocked by, is that the work experience process until a couple of years ago still used entirely paper forms. There were not consistent forms across schools, so it was almost that every school was sort of making up its own form. My kids are now in their late 20s, but I know with my daughter I was filling out a form. For those of you who are parents, you know the form is often in the bottom of the bag under a banana and that sort of thing. So we have got a modern IT system going where there is a standard set of forms which is all moved around electronically.

Dylan WIGHT: Through Compass or something?

Tony BATES: No, Compass is one of a number of providers, but it is on a Salesforce platform that the department has developed. But it is now a consistent form. It gets moved to the employer electronically, so they are not having to print things out and scan them and send them back. The other great thing it does is it gives the department—we have now, for the first time, got visibility on work experience without schools having to do manual data entry and send stuff in. So it is faster and easier for the employers, the parents and the school. It gives us data analytics so we can see which schools are doing it at what rates into what industry, so that is a really big one that we have done over the last couple of years that Scott has led the work on. Then, Scott, just the other things we are doing to try and broaden that reach to get that number up a lot closer to 100 per cent.

Scott WIDMER: Yes. Thank you, Secretary. Just to expand a little bit on that app, not only is it making it a lot easier for schools, for parents, for students and for employers, but there is the speed with which that is now able to happen as well so that students are not missing out. Some students, if a placement has fallen through or something else has happened—they have been unwell—the path from school to student to employer to parent and all the way back, for the principal to have to sign off has proved to be a barrier over time, and that would typically take many days for that to all be filled out. We have had experiences now where careers educators, working with employers and families, have been able to go through the entire process and get a placement sorted for a student in a couple of hours. That is a really significant change, and that is opening up much more time for careers educators to be focusing less on where the form is and much more on supporting students with high-quality opportunities.

There are a couple of other key elements to note. One of the key structures we have in place to support work-based learning opportunities, including work experience, is the school-to-work contract that is currently administered by local learning and employment networks. That is the primary relationship between industry and schools, and we have been working with the local learning and employment networks, the LLENs, on ways that we can increase engagement with industry to create more opportunities at a local level, because that is where the opportunities are, and secondly, to align them more to students' Morrisby results. My Career Insight, the Morrisby platform, is a really significant change as well for students because it gives them a diagnostic that really helps them start to explore and generate a bit more interest and excitement about the work experience that they will do typically in year 10. It gives a bit of guidance and assistance for careers educators and schools to think about which industries will be of most interest. I might just throw to my colleague Nat to talk a little bit about some of the work we have been doing at a local level with local learning and employment networks this year to increase the access.

Natalie GARCIA de HEER: Thanks very much, Deputy Secretary Widmer. We have been working very closely with the local learning and employment networks to orient the support that they provide to schools to students who need it most—so students with lower social capital, because other students are potentially able to generate their own work-based learning placement opportunities—and also orient those towards priority industries. With respect to the election commitment—around 10,000 new work experience placements—we have worked with the local learning and employment networks to generate so far within the first year and a half of implementation 3000 new placements aligned to priority industries, in particular the clean economy. I think that work is really critical. In 2026 for the first time schools will be given an entitlement, which is effectively a number of student placements they can expect to be supported to generate through the school-to-work contract, which means that we are shifting the focus to schools with larger numbers of students who need additional support and that schools are requesting support for specific students based on their knowledge of those students' interests and based on their identification of the students needing additional support as well.

Tony BATES: I might just repeat what Nat said. To Ms O'Keeffe and Mrs Werner's questions, people like me can probably find workplace learning for our kids, but it is for those new arrivals and emerging communities who do not have those sorts of deep networks in society. So, as Nat said, that is what we are really focusing on: making sure those children from families that do not have people they know can ring up and say, 'Can you get a spot for my boy or my girl?' That is where we want to try and really push, and that, Mr Wight, is what we think will help us get the participation rate up in work experience.

Dylan WIGHT: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to ask a question now, and I think I might show my age by asking this question. I have got teenagers. Students now are a very different cohort of kids and have grown up in a different society, and they have different skill sets. I wonder whether industry says the kids coming to them do not have those soft skills, those interpersonal skills or literacy skills, that they are after. I just want to ask about what we are doing in schools to maybe lift that for industry so they have confidence in the students coming to them without crowding the curriculum, which is already very busy.

Tony BATES: I might just very briefly talk about what is happening in the English space in senior secondary. When I went through there was English and there was English lit, and those were the two choices. There are now six different options that students can pick to complete year 12. Again, there is English, there is English Lit, there is English language, but there are specific English courses available particularly designed for students doing VET subjects that are around workplace communication and more technical, real-world stuff. The VCAA have evolved a number of those senior secondary offerings to be quite different to the traditional. I am probably older than most of you. It was just a question of how many different bits of Shakespeare you read which would determine if you were doing English or English lit. I might just maybe ask Lee-Anne or David a little bit about that, because we do get quite a bit of feedback from the sectors in terms of the skills they are looking for. But I will just repeat, we have very deliberately changed the English offering in senior secondary to try and support students who are going to all different career paths, particularly those going into VET. I love Shakespeare, but if you are going to be a carpenter or an auto mechanic, you probably do not need to be doing lots and lots of Shakespeare.

Lee-Anne FISHER: Thank you. One of the things that we do is we access this thing called Lightcast data. Lightcast data looks across literally hundreds of job sites, and within that, it is looking at the detail of what employers are asking for. What we have seen in recent years has been a real uptick in employers asking for skills around communication, collaboration, innovation. So, yes, the young people of today are not the young people of 20 years ago, but they are also bringing a lot of different skills that employers are appreciating. I think we have this default that all young people are fantastic at digital. They might be fantastic at some aspects of digital, but not all. But a lot of these other soft skills that are being held in very high regard now young people are coming out with. So it is not a deficit model, I guess, is what I would say. We work very closely with industry around that to build that understanding and we take that then into the development of qualifications and thinking about the vocational education and training qualifications and how they best reflect current industry needs and how we help bring people up to speed with the occupational outcomes that we are looking for through those qualifications.

David MILLER: Further to the diversity of English language programs now in school, literacy and numeracy support ongoing literacy and numeracy once you get into that post-school, and particularly TAFE has

been a really strong focus area. Under the new National Skills Agreement, there has been a significant amount of funding provided to support additional literacy and numeracy support while you are going to TAFE. It is not something you do independently; it is something you do alongside undertaking another qualification, so it can be contextual to the particular training that you are doing. Again, it is fundamentally important to support holding people in training. Those first 12 months of a training program are fundamentally important, and if they are struggling with aspects of literacy and numeracy, particularly related to the trade or the particular qualification they are undertaking, it has been a really strong program in keeping people engaged and helping support them through that. Those broad foundation skills, as well as targeted literacy and numeracy support, that also goes into even the ICT space, so that people have those fundamental needs of literacy almost in any workplace, are seen to be a really strong support for holding people in training and helping them complete their qualification.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. And we are hearing, quite broadly, and the committee heard many secondary school graduates lack appropriate foundation skills in literacy, numeracy and digital technology, impeding their entry into the workforce. This really concerns me. How long do we keep it happening where we are seeing this ongoing issue, where they perhaps started at year 7 level and they are finishing at year 11 or whatever—year 10 I think I read recently. What is the government doing to address this, because it is a significant concern, and it has been, as I said, highlighted quite broadly outside and in this committee.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Ms O'Keeffe. As I said, we have done a lot of work over the last few years evolving that English curriculum to that point where there are relatively new English offerings. Again, I will stop picking on Shakespeare, but it is about making sure that children have functional skills that they need, so that they can either continue their post-school training or move right into the workforce. We actually are looking at the senior secondary mathematics curriculum as well, to see if we should be doing something similar. There are already four different mathematics on offer. But as we have developed, can I call it, a much more practical foundational English offering in senior secondary, we are thinking about something similar in the numeracy space. That is work that is still underway.

Probably the other one I would just say, though, is we have had the tutor learning initiative in both government and non-government schools over the last few years, which was partly a response to COVID and the disruption to learning there. But I think what we have seen with that small group support is it has made a real difference. If you have seen this year's NAPLAN results, Victoria is first or second in, I think, 18 out of the 20 domains. So it is pretty clear that that intensive support that we have had going for a number of years has had a material impact on both numeracy and literacy outcomes.

We have also in Victorian government schools got a new Victorian teaching and learning model, which we are deep in the rollout of now, and it is a lot more about focusing on student wellbeing. So for a number of those students that are finishing school who have not got to the literacy and numeracy points they need to be at, there are a whole complex range of issues, and some of it is that we need to focus on their wellbeing, and if we can get them—we have now got all sorts of mental health programs in schools. We have got breakfast clubs in lots of schools. A child that has got either health or anxiety issues or is not properly fed is not going to learn properly, so there is a big range of supports that we have got in place now that are really trying to support students so they are ready to learn. I think that combination of health and wellbeing supports, the small group interventions that we have had for a number of years—we are hoping that is really starting to turn the dial. As I said, this year's NAPLAN results were really pleasing in that regard. We know this is an issue, but as Dave said, if students are then moving into particularly vocational training and into TAFE, there continue to be supports there as well. It is an issue we are very alive to and we will keep working on.

Kim O'KEEFFE: You did touch on COVID. We know COVID did impact students. I had a niece that did not go back to school for two years. She was in year 7 when COVID hit, so quite young, and it impacted on her mental health. I do feel she has had some support but that the level of mental health support across the board, not just through the school system, has probably let her down quite a bit. So I think when we look at younger people going through the education pathway and we try and keep them there, do you think—and I am interested in this—that there is enough mental health support? Is that their role? I know that education does play a big part, because school is such a big part of their life, so it needs to be there. You talked about wellbeing. To what extent does that also stretch out to their mental health?

Tony BATES: It is definitely an area of focus. We have got mental health in primary schools. I will say, having a long time ago worked in the health department and in the mental health program, we try and put in as much support as we can, but we cannot be a serious clinical service, so there is a point where they need to be seeing specialists.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Managed elsewhere, even?

Tony BATES: Yes.

Kim O'KEEFFE: But making sure that person is given that opportunity, directed to the right support.

Tony BATES: Yes. But we have rolled out statewide mental health programs in primary schools, in all government schools and low-fee Catholic schools. So that is getting a base level of support there for students, and then we also now have the mental health menu. So there is an allocation of funding that has gone to all government schools, and we have got, as the name would suggest, a menu of programs they can select from, and we have made sure that that menu has been reviewed for clinical impact by the department.

I hate to say it, but whenever you have got a government program, you start getting people turning up with all sorts of ideas about things. But we have put a lot of time and effort into it, and we absolutely have seen that impact post-COVID on a number of children. We are continuing to do everything we can to support them with flexible learning plans and other things to get them back and re-engaged. As I said, we have got the Tutor Learning Initiative at the moment. It will be again probably more tightly unfocused next year, but we will continue interventions for those children that we can see sort of not where they need to be in terms of proficiency standards.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think we have got time for one more. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Look, my question is around: how does the Victorian government communicate skills shortages? I draw your attention to your submission, page 61, where you actually talk quite well about the skills in demand across the Victorian government—because of course we are an employer as well and we need more nurses, teachers, early childhood workers, with the clean energy economy workers in the SEC, social workers and emergency services. The submission does quite well in going through the needs and demand there. But just more broadly, how can we as the Victorian government, or can we to government, communicate those demands and promote those opportunities in the school curriculum as pathways as an employer of choice for young people coming through, because we are competing with the private sector, of course—getting in early to talk to them about those skills and career pathways within government and communicate those?

Tony BATES: I might ask Ms Fisher to speak to this one, Mr Cianflone. But I have got it open there, the VSA workforce summary, which is exactly that. That is the forecast for the next three years and how many workers we are going to need in different sectors. With age and disability carers, you are looking at 13,000 new jobs over the next couple of years. We do make sure that that work the VSA does gets to all of the careers advisers in the school system, so we do have a very deliberate messaging method where we take that high-quality data, make sure it is going to the careers advisers. Lee-Anne, do you want to say a bit more?

Lee-Anne FISHER: Yes, sure. Every year at the Victorian Skills Authority we develop a Victorian skills plan. Part of that skills plan is an employment projections dashboard. So that is three years out and 10 years out. It is publicly available, and it is linked up with the Victorian Skills Gateway. About 1.3 million people per year come to the gateway. About 25 per cent of those are secondary school students and their advisers and influencers. It is a lot of people that have direct access to that information. You can go in and you can look by industry or occupations or you can look in regions and see where the jobs of the future will be. These are new entrants. It takes into account the way that we anticipate the Victorian economy is going to expand, so the new jobs that will be needed for that. And also, through some really interesting data analytics work, it takes into account the people that will be retiring as well, so we know what the replacement rates are.

There is information that is available that way if you know to go and look at it, but we have skills and job centres. There are 30 of them, and they are through the TAFEs and universities and in some other community

places. About 30,000 people each year come, and the advice that they provide, which is free and impartial, is based on what is in those employment projections. We do work with schools, we do work with careers advisers, and so there are lesson plans and activity sheets and learning resources that cover all of the years within secondary school from year 7 to help people work through those employment projections and what they look like.

David MILLER: And just to say it is then reflected in the kind of dedicated training programs that are then supported and prioritised by government. So the Free TAFE list, for example, and other high-priority courses subsidised through Skills First, are completely based on the work of the VSA and the priority qualifications so that all of those sorts of indicators to people about the kinds of qualifications that are more likely to lead to jobs are then reflected in those training opportunities that are better supported by government to really encourage people down those pathways, to respond to the broader economy and the job needs that exist.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry, we are going to be running out of time. We had further questions for you, and we may come with some written questions to you at some point maybe to fill in some gaps that we might have. But you have given us a really good foundation to start our Inquiry and really given us a lot to think about today and helped us ask other questions for other witnesses. Thank you for your time—we really appreciate it—and for answering our questions today.

Witnesses withdrew.