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—Friday 28 November 2025

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair
Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair
Roma Britnell
Anthony Cianflone
John Mullahy
Nicole Werner
Dylan Wight

WITNESSES

Dr Gregory Gow, General Manager, Community and Sector Capacity Building, and

Afnan Matti, School Support Officer, Foundation House;

Anastasia Magriplis, Head, Humanitarian Operations and Resilience, and

Moin Zafar, Manager, Vocational and Empowerment Pathways Program, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre; and

Charles Hertzog, Principal, and

Sarah Gray, Head, Partnerships and Development, River Nile School.

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

I advise that the session today is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcasting of the hearing is only permitted through accordance with the LA standing order 234.

Welcome to the panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

We will run this session in a bit of a Q and A-type format with the Committee members and me, and we have got the Member for Pascoe Vale, Anthony, online as well. But if you wish to answer any questions as a panel, you can just raise your hand or just jump in. It can be a pretty informal chat. If there is not an opportunity for everyone to answer every question, though, we can accept anything further if you would like to add anything after today. You are welcome to provide additional information.

My name is Alison Marchant, the Member for Bellarine and the Chair.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: We have got Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale, online. If I can just get you to maybe introduce yourself and your title and your organisation, then we will jump into some questions. I think I might start at this end.

Sarah GRAY: My name is Sarah Gray. I am the Head of Partnerships and Development for the River Nile School.

Charles HERTZOG: I am Charles Hertzog. I am the Principal of the River Nile School.

Moin ZAFAR: My name is Moin Zafar, and I manage the Vocational and Empowerment Pathways Program at ASRC.

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: My name is Anastasia Magriplis. I am the Head of Humanitarian Operations and Resilience at the ASRC.

Afnan MATTI: My name is Afnan, and I am a School Support Officer at Foundation House.

Gregory GOW: Gregory Gow, General Manager, Community and Sector Capacity Building at Foundation House.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for being here today. This is a really interesting Inquiry. You are probably representing a cohort of students that we have not really delved into, so this will be a really interesting conversation, so thank you for being here. John, I am going to go to you for the first question.

John MULLAHY: Thank you all for being here and also for the work that you do for some of the cohorts that find it very difficult to navigate our educational systems, so I am very interested in the evidence that you will give for us here today. What I would like to start off with is regarding career education: what types of tailored career education support do school students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds need, and how can school career practitioners be supported to provide tailored, trauma-informed career guidance to students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds?

The CHAIR: Who would like to start us off?

John MULLAHY: Do not be shy.

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: I can start from the perspective of people seeking asylum; that is our cohort that we work with. In terms of tailored career education support, we really see a gap in career support officers in the school system actually in understanding what the barriers might be for this particular cohort of students, which means that they are not understanding the temporary nature of visas, the fact that tertiary education programs are not really available to this group of students and, regardless of their academic capabilities, their only pathways really are vocational education programs. It is a missed opportunity, and that is something that we would definitely advocate for—being able to have a sort of careers adviser education program around the particular nuance of people seeking asylum through the school system, particularly as they are exiting the school system. They have the same ambitions as their fellow students. There is a lot of sort of trauma around the inability for them to actually pursue what their talents may lead them to, which often does align very closely with the vacancies that we see across the state. So we are missing out on some talent and letting down some pretty, you know, special kids.

Gregory GOW: Can I just build on that. I think in terms of the cohort from refugee backgrounds, with schools in partnership with families making decisions together about pathways and careers advisers having those relationships, being able to connect with families, one of the big patterns that we see is that often those conversations happen too late, and the families themselves are not really aware of the viable pathways for their young people, apart from university. So we really think skills training around trauma-informed work, cultural safety, refugee experience and its impact for career staff is really critical and building those partnerships with families.

The CHAIR: Can I ask: do you think that is certainly lacking? I mean, we have heard from a cohort of students that do believe the careers practitioners and the career education in schools are pretty minimal at best. So then there is an extra layer that you are talking about, and does that really not exist then in our school system?

Gregory GOW: Well, it varies across schools of course; some schools are doing it really well, but I think the pattern that we see is it is very difficult, and often the families arrive with disrupted education themselves or virtually no education experience, so there is a lot of work to be done around the understanding of careers and what does it mean by 'career'. So yes, I think that there are some schools that are really doing well, but at other schools the kids just get lost, particularly large P-9 big schools. Yes, it is quite a challenge.

Charles HERTZOG: Just to build on that: with any sort of careers program, where we see success is where there are intensive literacy programs that support the student before they get to a point of career decision-making. I think you can have incredible career practitioners, and if that student and family have major literacy gaps, there are real challenges in navigating that next step. I would say the same for wraparound wellbeing programs: so you can design the amazing careers piece, but if we have not funded the wraparound models around wellbeing that sometimes eliminate access to those, it gets to be a real challenge. We definitely see exposure to industries as being a real key point. So as a quick example, our students are 15 through 24; if we do an initial screening of our students of career interests, it really leans towards service industries that they have touched in Australia: teaching, social work, medical fields. Once people are aware of different types of jobs and earning capabilities, that can really shift. So we partnered with an organisation that came and did coding for our students, which was not necessarily a skill or an aspiration. Once we started that partnership, it became our most popular elective; we added a certification in applied technologies, then the next year we added the cert III, then our students can leave and go into that field, but the targeted exposure is really helpful.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Yes. Thank you. Anthony, I am going to head to you if you have got a question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. Thank you, Alison. We have started off with the student side of things, but I want to touch on the parent side of things as well and just the barriers, in your view, for parents coming in as refugees and asylum seekers in being able to access good, secure skills pathways and then employment, and your respective submissions actually go to this quite substantially. The ASRC submission talks about how 63 per cent of asylum seekers and refugees—63 per cent—have no right to work and that 77 per cent of people with work rights who accessed the system through ASRC's employment programs actually went on to gain employment when eligible in some of the most in-demand and in-need industries. What that to me shows is that asylum seekers and refugees are very much willing to work hard and contribute and build a future of a better

life, like most migrants are. But then there is a great case study that you point out to in the Foundation House submission, a case study around a young girl by the name of Rania, whose parents, despite their best efforts, were not able to afford a laptop for her or textbooks, but with the support of Foundation House she was able to access those resources, then go on to complete year 12 and then go into a bachelor of biomedicine, which sounds like a very great success story. So could you potentially just talk about those barriers and how we can help parents get on the right path so that they can help their children in the next generation?

Moin ZAFAR: Okay. I am happy to start. One thing which we do see a lot with our parents and with school-going kids is they do not have the capacity to navigate this environment in the best possible manner, not having that understanding. And then specifically with our cohort, people seeking asylum, they do not have any safety net. That does not allow them to pursue the career pathways they would like to pursue. So what we would like to see is to have more opportunities of free childcare support for them, so that those parents—and we have a lot of single parents as well—if they have that opportunity to pursue those pathways, that will ease up a lot of opportunities for them. As Anthony mentioned, when we see that within our cohort we advise them how to navigate this landscape and what the skill shortages areas are and to follow those career pathways. And 77 per cent, as Anthony mentioned, follow those shortage areas like early childhood education, allied health, aged care. Another thing which we are really focusing on at the moment is renewable energy, because it has been projected by Clean Energy Australia that by 2030 there will be a shortage of 42,000 workers in that space. Unfortunately at this stage our cohort is eligible for apprenticeships, but the barriers, because of federal government subsidy, put them in a very awkward situation where a lot of employers and group training organisations are not keen to take them on board. So that could be something which the Victorian government can advocate for or maybe have some sort of a new scheme in those apprenticeships areas. Because if you look at the report from the national council of VET education research, there is a 54 per cent apprenticeship completion rate, which is very low—like, 50 per cent of people do not complete. But this cohort, our cohort, is not being used in the best possible manner where they might have some prior experience in their country of origin with those industries and with those trades.

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: I will just add to what Moin said, and that is, you raise a really key point, Anthony, around if the family does not have its basic needs met—its basic access to housing, food, a community, even extended family and the kinds of support that community can bring—then it is very hard for them to be able to create that stable environment for their kids to be able to pursue their educational goals but also for themselves to be able to enter the workforce. We understand that the Victorian government cannot really influence the visa status and the fact that people's visas are often three- to six-monthly in duration, which creates incredible instability and trauma for families. But it is something that we would really encourage, and we know that the Victorian government and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs does advocate to the federal government for fixing the system that is keeping these people in this space of destitution and trauma and not allowing them to contribute fully.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. Well, just picking up on that point, I guess you have sort of crystallised it in terms of how I was trying to describe it earlier. But yes, the ASRC submission here is very clear:

> As of December 24, **9,000 people were on a bridging visa E in the community without work rights** …

And that is, mainly, we are talking about parents. So if they do not have working rights and reliable means to sustain themselves and their family and their household, what does that mean for the children?

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: You know, what we are seeing is that the children have become the glue that is keeping their parents sustained throughout this pretty traumatic process. That is a huge burden for those children. And as a child of immigrants—and I know there are many people here—what did we do? We were the interpreters, we filled in the forms, we kept mum and dad happy when the pressures were huge. That is a big burden, and these kids have also endured the trauma from the home country and their own insecure status. So they are pretty talented kids, and I am sure you guys will be able to attest to that, and they are special Victorians, I believe—just like all of us little Greek kids.

Afnan MATTI: Can I add to that, also, the biggest barrier for the parents is the lack of awareness and lack of knowledge about the education system in Australia. It is quite different to back home, so then they cannot support their kids in selecting pathways, and that is where we have got a cohort in schools where they are called MEAs, multicultural education aids. If we can get them upskilled and trained and more involved in the career pathway selection, it will be very beneficial for the families. They act as a bridge between the schools and

students and families. That will be another way of breaking those barriers. Obviously another barrier would be their lack of English. So MEAs do a lot of interpreting as well, and they build those connections. It is a person to go to, a trusting person to go to in the school.

Charles HERTZOG: Just to build on that, I think in all those barriers that families face, that is certainly the largest reason for non-attendance that we see with our cohort, which is 'I need to take my parent to a doctor,' 'I need to translate this event' or in some cases 'I need to be earning and providing income to the family.' The most success we have seen is where schools are able to centralise the removal of those barriers in, like, community hub models, so where, for example, we have a doctor onsite, we have a dentist onsite— 'I can bring my family member there'. School is a part of that process, and it allows the student then to centralise their time in school and focus on their career.

The CHAIR: Yes. Excellent. John.

John MULLAHY: I literally doorknocked someone yesterday who had fled a country; got here in 2015; was tertiary educated in the country that they had left, which was not recognised here in Australia; spent many years on a visa to try and be able to go back to university and study; learned English—has done all of this—but then still cannot find a job here in Victoria in the field that they want to get back into. You touched on it just before, but I would like to get a bit more of the detail around the visa status issue. What are the main visa-related barriers to students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds in accessing education and training pathways, and how can that be addressed? Can we just get a bit more information on those issues?

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: I am happy to start, and Moin can give you some detail if I gloss over things. The main barrier is the temporary nature of every visa that a family may need while they are staying in the country, and often it is the parents' visa that is the biggest barrier. So while kids are at school they have some stability around their visa status. As soon as they leave school then they become subject to the bridging visa system. This means that their status and their access to various supports—including work rights, Medicare, education—are limited, based on what that status might be.

John MULLAHY: And those bridging visas are done in short periods of, what, three months, six months?

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: Absolutely. Three to six months.

John MULLAHY: Anything longer than that?

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: Sometimes one month.

John MULLAHY: Really?

The CHAIR: Oh, wow.

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: Yes. It is quite discretionary. I mean, if you follow the ASRC and you know anything about the asylum seeker movement, you will know that we are pushing hard for systemic change through our migration legislation to clean up this legislation so that people can have certainty and also have an outcome within a timely manner. We have got families that we have been supporting for up to 15 years, and they have just been languishing in the system. Often their situation is dependent on who the lawyer was that first put in that claim, and one wrong move by one migration agent or lawyer at the start of the process can leave people in this perpetual almost hell of our bureaucracy and uncertainty, and that impacts people. That is a hugely traumatising experience. Often these people have fled trauma and persecution and are asking for protection, and the response of our system is to mistrust everything that they are saying and then put them through another traumatic and humiliating process. And many of the people seeking asylum that we see are people who have come from careers, from having a life and a future in their country, and things have turned bad for them, and they end up in a country that does not recognise that. So there is a shame, there is a humiliation, there is a trauma and there is a not being able to protect your family.

Sarah GRAY: I think you can also talk to our students as well, the girls. A lot of our students are also fighting for their families to come over to Australia. So they are in that legal process while trying to study, while trying to look after their own selves. I think it is an added pressure that is probably very unfair to a young person.

John MULLAHY: You mentioned that the kids are the glue of the family, and in this case it is the exact same thing: one of the kids is at a selective public school and another one has graduated and is now a pharmacist, but the parents are still struggling.

Sarah GRAY: Just talking to the universities about getting in and those kinds of things, we have many students who want to go on to do these courses but cannot get through the IEL test as well, which is an English language test that I do not believe a lot of Australians would probably pass, to be fair.

Gregory GOW: I think it is important to differentiate between refugees who are formal refugees who have come under the humanitarian program, and then, as the ASRC has described, the asylum seekers are really at the pointy end in terms of stress and being unable to make plans. We work in that sort of second tier where you have students who have permanent residence and their families came under the humanitarian program. We generally say they are middle tier in the sense that they are at risk, but if we put in place the right things—the right kind of MEAs, the right family connections, interpreters and translators—we can actually see many of them go on to succeed. We work with the Department of Education, and they use the likely refugee background algorithm to count schools' refugee background population across Victoria. About 80 per cent of them actually have permanent residence, which means they do have access to all of the things that come with that. I think having a strengths-based approach to thinking about how we can actually enable that cohort so that mainstream interventions work for them means we need to just tailor things a bit more. If we do that, the vast majority of them will actually go on to succeed in careers. I think it is important that we have that sort of strengths-based understanding about this group.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I wanted to talk a little bit about the sort of cultural influences that might be at work here too. Students have told us that even if they are in the most privileged position where they have got all the wraparound support, they are still finding it very difficult, so I can see that there is another added complexity with students from different faiths. Do the cultural elements influence the projection, the advice and the way that they support? Is there something here that is different?

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: I am happy to start.

The CHAIR: You are doing well.

Anastasia MAGRIPLIS: We know that with social cohesion and the rise of certain racist elements in our community that voice is significant, and it is impacting not just the communities we support but multicultural Victoria. From the perspective of feeling unable to marry their cultural practice with the mainstream community, it is there and it is an element for this community. In terms of the ethnic cultural fit into the Victorian community, I think it is no different for the people we support to other multicultural communities in Victoria. They are incredibly resilient, they want to belong and they in fact love Australia and love being a part of a multicultural community. Every day we host community meals, and we have 150 people from all ethnicities, including staff and volunteers, sit down and just eat food together, and everybody is enjoying each other's company. The most popular dish that we serve right now is cheesy cauliflower, which is a very Australian dish. We have dahl and we have all of the offerings from every country in the world that is very familiar to people, but everyone is going for the cheesy broccoli and cauliflower and loving it. So that is my contribution to this.

The CHAIR: I might need to just explain a little bit more what I mean too, because we had some examples where a certain cultural group said 'Well, we only want you to go to university'—there was a cultural sort of perception that university was the only pathway—or 'I'll pay for your degree, but only if you go and be a doctor a lawyer.' So just maybe if you can expand on that.

Moin ZAFAR: I certainly would like to add a few things and just basically give you a bit more perspective around it. When we talk about culture, basically there is two sides to it. As you said, people—specifically people seeking asylum and refugees—most of them are coming from high-context cultures where Australia is considered as relatively low context. When we say 'high context' and 'low context', basically it is a group feel—with high context, everybody is part of that decision-making. As you said, when parents are talking to their kids, they are telling them, 'This is the pathway', and these are certain pathways available to you. You do not have to explore all of them. That is where it is important from their perspective to have an understanding of what Australian culture is like, and also for practitioners, the service providers, to have cultural competency.

This is something which we have provided a module to the Departments of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions on, how to build that capacity with service providers. They should have an understanding of it, because otherwise—we have to marry together, so if we are working in vacuums, it is not going to work. So we are building that capacity with our cohort, but we expect that other side of the coin will have that capacity as well to understand where the differences are. And nobody can become 100 per cent culturally competent; it is just a scale. It is a spectrum, but if you are in that spectrum, you can continue to progress further.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Afnan MATTI: Just to add to that, yes, there is a lot of pressure from parents on kids in choosing certain career pathways, because our cohort who are refugee-background families, they all believe the successful careers are doctors, lawyers and engineers. Then kids are under pressure when they cannot get the right ATAR, or they might be even pushed away from doing VCE at some schools because it has been assumed they are not capable of doing VCE. Then that means they cannot become those and choose those kinds of careers. So again, I will go back to my point: lack of awareness for parents and knowledge around how the system works in Australia and that there are so many pathways, not like back home where only certain careers are successful. As we know, in Australia we have got plenty of opportunities and options to choose from. Even if they do not go straight to the course that they are choosing, they can go in a longer kind of pathway, but this kind of information does not make it to the parents. That is where lack of awareness of parents of the education system has a big impact on their kids, and a lot of pressure on these kids.

Charles HERTZOG: I would say with our cohort, our student cohort is all young women between 15 and 24, and there are definitely different gender expectations around careers and skills within our community. But I do not think that is the root cause of the problem, and I do not think it is insurmountable. I think to build on the point there, the challenge is making sure that those families have access to enough services and exposure to enough industries and earning and learning that they can make informed decisions around that. For the students that are engaged in that, in that age range in a program that offers that, it is a much easier decision for them to readjust what is a financially viable career and what is an acceptable career. If you are not engaged in a program, especially in that post high school age, so for that 17 through 24, and you have not been able to engage in a TAFE, it is very hard for that family to engage in that decision-making process or be exposed to that new level of information.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Can I add to that, Chair? Is that all right?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I just wanted to build on what Charles was saying, because in your submission here you say, and it is a good point, students from refugee backgrounds often have minimal exposure to in-demand industries due to limited time in Australia and education gaps. And interestingly, you point out career aspirations are frequently influenced by the professionals they encounter most, so social workers, health workers, settlement officers and educators, leading them to a very narrow understanding of potential career pathways. So I guess the question on that, to build on what Alison was asking, is: what can the Victorian government do to broaden their awareness about other in-demand industries and careers that are out there, outside of that social and service space?

Charles HERTZOG: I think there is a way to formalise partnerships with in-demand industries and key people working in that space. Nearly every time that we talk, we describe who our community is to an organisation, a company or a not-for-profit that are in a new field. They express a real interest in having our students understand their work, be a trainee and work in those spaces. But it is an individual organisation carving out a partnership and then other organisations trying to replicate that process. If we can standardise that in some capacity, if we can centralise, so rather than each high school trying to develop its own partnership and its own innovative program, we say we really want women from refugee backgrounds in this field; let us create a community hub of these resources, willing partners, and can we incentivise that for large companies, for all of those companies that have in their mission statements equity and inclusion, can we leverage that and standardise that in a way that each organisation is not reinventing the wheel?

Gregory GOW: I mean, related to that too I think are year 10 work experience placements, which we know families have great difficulty finding for their children, and often the schools do not come up with options. That is really a critical experience for those young people to think about 'What could I do?' And those sorts of placements in in-demand industries can play a key role. But as River Nile was sharing, we actually need to be able to broker those because the families do not have the connections. I think if we were able to inject some resources at that critical point, having a smorgasbord of options in terms of placements for year 10 work experience could play a key role.

Sarah GRAY: I can give you an example of that in that our team at River Nile are very lucky in that we have a pathways person—that is their role—and she was able to broker a work placement experience with the Red Cross for our girls. It was a very trauma-informed placement; Red Cross are obviously a humanitarian organisation. I have got to say seeing the girls from when we did the first day of placement versus five weeks down the track, after doing one day each week for those five weeks, they had completely changed. I think it is not just about workforce placements that might be, you know, 'Just go and do that thing at the local shop or whatever.' But by being really strategic around what those placements look like for the girls or even boys and making sure that those organisations are supportive and entering into a proper partnership, not just because they can tick something off, I think the value in that is hugely life-changing for those girls.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. I am sorry; we could keep going all morning. We had a few more questions. But thank you for your time this morning. We really, really appreciate it. If there is something that has been sparked here and you think we are just missing a little gap or something, please come back to us if you think we need to have a better understanding. Thank you for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.