

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Friday 28 November 2025

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

John Mullahy

Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Nicole Werner

Roma Britnell

Dylan Wight

Anthony Cianflone

WITNESSES

Yolanda Robson, Director, and

Angus Leech, Outreach Organiser, Young Workers Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

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

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

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

Thank you so much for joining us today. I believe you have got a 5-minute opening statement. We will let you go to that in just a moment. My name is Alison. I am the Chair.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianfalone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We might hand over to you.

Yolanda ROBSON: Beautiful. Thank you. My name is Yolanda, and I am the Director of the Young Workers Centre. With me is Angus, one of our wonderful Outreach Organisers. Angus will give our opening statement. But before we begin, we would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands which we are gathered on today, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the mighty Kulin nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and young workers we would like to champion, and we congratulate the state on the recent achievement of treaty for Victoria, an absolutely wonderful step and a gift for all Victorians. I will now pass to Angus.

Angus LEECH: Thank you, Yolanda. I would just first like to start off by saying thank you to the Committee for hearing the Young Workers Centre speak today. It is a great privilege. My name is Angus, and I am an Outreach Organiser at the Young Workers Centre. My job is to educate young people about their rights at work and advocate for fairer standards across Victoria. To date, in partnership with your government, we have delivered workplace rights training to over 70,000 students and apprentices and recovered over \$3 million for young workers in Victoria.

Before I became an organiser I worked as a qualified fabricator, one of the in-demand pathways being heavily promoted at the time. Like many apprentices, I experienced underpayment, unsafe work, intimidation on the job and a culture where you were expected to just put up with it if you wanted a future within the trades. So when I joined the Young Workers Centre I was not surprised to see how widespread those issues still are. In my current team we speak with young workers every day, and the story is always the same: wage theft, unsafe jobs, bullying and employers that just see apprentices as cheap labour rather than learners. Survey data released from Melbourne Law School earlier this year shows that around one in three young workers experience wage theft. At the Young Workers Centre apprentices make up the bulk of the young people reaching out and seeking help. That tells us these problems are not isolated, they are systemic.

Even in workplaces where they do things by the book, the structure of the system itself holds young people back. Junior wages legally allow employers to pay young workers far below adult rates, and many apprentices are actually stuck earning junior wages that place them far below the poverty line. These are not bad employers—this is built into the way the system works. When young people cannot afford rent, food, transport, it should not surprise us why so many apprentices are leaving their apprenticeship before completing.

When we talk about job readiness and the skills young people need, we often focus on communication, teamwork, problem solving, digital literacy, and those skills matter; however, it does not matter how job ready a young person might be if the job they are about to walk into is not safe, fair or sustainable. Young people need workplaces where they can learn whilst they are supervised, respected and paid enough to live. That requires employers and schools and governments to work together, not just to train young workers but to create environments in which they can thrive.

School career education also needs real improvement. Too many students tell us they are pushed towards university by default from their university-educated career counsellors, with little meaningful information about

trades or VET pathways. Vocational education is still treated as a backup option rather than the foundation of many essential industries and rewarding lifelong careers. If we want young people to consider these pathways, we need to fix the perception problem, and part of that is showing them that these careers are safe, respected and viable. The decline in apprenticeship commencements and completions does not happen in a vacuum. Young people are not walking away from trades because they lack resilience, they are walking away because these conditions push them out.

We commend this government for accepting either in principle or in full all recommendations put forward by the apprenticeship taskforce. The taskforce made it clear that better supervision, safer workplaces and stronger mentoring are essential. Young people entering the trades deserve support and not just sink-or-swim environments.

We also at the Young Workers Centre see that access to VET in secondary school is uneven. Rural students, low-income students and students with additional needs often have the hardest time accessing this training. When young people transition from school to TAFE and then into work, they need more than just a qualification; they need education on their rights, mental health support, mentoring and pathways into secure work. Young people are motivated. They want to work. They want to learn. They want to build careers. The issue is not young people; it is the current system that undervalues their labour, underpays them by design and exposes them to risk. If Victoria wants a strong, skilled workforce it must ensure that these young workers are supported and respected from day one.

We would like to thank the Members of the Committee for their time today and commend the government's commitment to building a stronger, secure workforce where young people are empowered and informed.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Angus. That was a very strong opening statement, so I think we have got lots of questions for you. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Yolanda and Angus, for being here and presenting to the Committee. And thank you for the Young Workers Centre and the work that you do in educating younger workers about their rights onsite, clawing back money for underpayments and things like that. We really appreciate that work that you do. I am going to start off with career education from a school career educator point of view. How adequate is school career education for students, and how can it be improved?

Yolanda ROBSON: I am happy to kick off, Angus, if you want to chime in after. Yes, I think it is a real mixed bag, and it is individualistic. It is dependent on the school's understanding and investment into a particular individual who has stepped up to take that role. Quite often we see or hear that teachers undergoing that sort of role in schools sort of see it as a task on as opposed to it being a dedicated and respected role within the school ecosystem. And I think, like Angus touched on, teachers—the majority of them—are university educated, it is the same with careers counsellors as well, so how can you advise on something if you do not have that lived experience? So I think we would love to see something similar to an apprenticeship support officer type role being implemented around schools in Victoria, even if they are not there permanently, but if they are doing a roadshow and it is a consistent presence around schools, it becomes a familiar and viable option for students. I know I am far out of the school system, but it was never discussed with me about TAFE being a legitimate and viable pathway.

John MULLAHY: And Angus, in your opening statement you mentioned about the regionality, where some places will not have vocational majors or will not have access to them.

Angus LEECH: Yes. I have actually experienced that quite recently. We deliver outreach across Victoria, so we do spend a fair bit of time in these rural communities. I have seen in a couple of specific instances where apprentices are actually being forced to travel hours out of their home town and are being forced to pay out of their own pocket for accommodation, which costs hundreds of dollars a day, and oftentimes they are not even making that much. That in itself is putting them into debt essentially.

Yolanda ROBSON: In one of our most extreme cases Angus was out near a border town—I think it was Swan Hill or Mildura—and we had apprentices sleeping in swags in the car park. I am sure there are support mechanisms there for those types of emergency cases, but where was the visibility? They did not know that maybe there was support out there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Anthony, I will go to you for the next question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Yolanda and Angus, for appearing and for all the great work that you do through Trades Hall to support workers rights and young people's working rights. My question is around just generally working conditions for young people and the impact that working conditions and perceptions of working conditions have on the attraction and retainment of young workers into and through in-demand industries. Your submission here on page 4 really gives us a bit of an insight into that—and you sort of touched on this in your opening remarks too, Angus—where you say that 70 per cent of the centre's legal clients were apprentices and they predominantly sought help and representations with wage theft, bullying and harassment and OH&S issues. That is particularly concerning considering that, in conjunction with that, there is a 53 per cent completion rate for VET courses, so that is undoubtedly having an impact. You make two recommendations here that I would love for you to talk to in that regard: recommendation 8 around the Young Workers Centre being funded to deliver workplace rights training to every Victorian high school and TAFE student; and recommendation 9 to fund Trades Hall Council and Victorian unions to deliver safe, respectful workplace training to VET staff and employers free of charge. Can you just talk us through how that may work, and are there any other jurisdictions around Australia or around the world that you may be aware of that could be a benchmark for what we could look at?

Yolanda ROBSON: I am happy to take that on notice around sort of best practice internationally or in other jurisdictions. For context, Young Workers Centre and the work that we do, given that we are both an outreach organisation as well as an accredited community legal centre, we are the only type in Australia servicing workers under 30, which plays to our strength I think around that barrier to entry for young people who are not familiar with or have any interactions with the law. We are fronted by young people. When young people call up our centre, they are met with someone who is under the age of 30, so therefore it is a little bit less intimidating. Sorry, would you just remind me of your question again? It was around training and—

Anthony CIANFLONE: It was really around working conditions for young people and the impact that has on attracting and retaining young people to want to complete their course and qualifications for an in-demand industry. And then just specifically on those two recommendations around if the Young Workers Centre and Trades Hall are funded to provide that training to schools and to TAFEs and workplaces—how would that work? How do you envisage that working and being embedded in the curriculum and being rolled out? Would it potentially commence as a pilot around particular regions where we have high uptake of apprentices, or are there other models?

Yolanda ROBSON: Absolutely. I guess the pilot is us. We have been running for 10 years with smashing success. It is kind of two-pronged, right. Whilst we have got an industry and an apprenticeship system where we are seeing those low completion rates due to wage theft, due to the working conditions, there is also that issue where we are encouraging young people and we are encouraging women to enter the trades but there are no support mechanisms for those employers to actually provide a safe workplace. And then you have got these diverse cohorts entering the industry and being like, 'What the hell is going on?' The statistics that we have seen for those non-completion rates are what you would consider the stereotype young tradesmen like Angus. If the juice is not worth the squeeze for them, how is it going to be for a First Nations woman entering those types of industries? So I think the first thing—which is what we try to address through the work that we do—is going into high schools and actually educating people on their rights at work in terms of the minimum standards for what young people need to expect at a workplace. You cannot advocate for your rights if you do not know what they are. That is the first thing—in lieu of having the perfect system where every single employer is the model employer, we need to have our young people educated on what their rights are not only so they can advocate for themselves but if they see something that is not right happening to the colleague alongside them, they can notify them and have those conversations and build a sense of community, camaraderie and potentially collective action if it ever gets to that point.

To the second point around our apprenticeship education and what we hear consistently from TAFEs and apprentices, we are currently funded to deliver our workplace rights and apprentice readiness training to first-year apprentices. The consistent feedback is that we are asked to come back and deliver a more nuanced or slightly more sophisticated training to second-, third- and fourth-year apprentices once they have had their boots on the ground for longer and they are able to tangibly tie what we are saying to the lived experience of being on that worksite. We would love to be able to expand our training because—and Angus can talk to this as well—when we get classrooms of mixed cohorts, which sometimes just happens in TAFEs, the reception and

the feedback we get from those second-, third- and fourth-year apprentices is, 'I didn't actually know a lot of this stuff either.' This is the same feedback we hear from TAFE teachers. TAFE teachers are calling out for us to—and we have started to do this a little bit with apprenticeship support officers and TAFE teachers—deliver our same training so that they are able to have those conversations with their cohorts as well, because there are still gaps in knowledge from our learning staff.

Angus LEECH: It would be wonderful if we were able to expand our education, just like Yolanda said, to VET staff and even employers, because oftentimes we find that when employers are not doing the right thing, it is not always a malicious attack on these apprentices, it is just a lack of their own understanding in general. I believe the Apprenticeship Taskforce does go a little bit into that. However, I believe that funding would be a really great step towards improving apprenticeships.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask on top of Anthony's question: do you refer to or use the Apprentice Helpdesk?

Yolanda ROBSON: Certainly. So that has been established recently and, yes, we refer apprentices to the help desk or the help desk refers apprentices on to us. We have a lovely symbiotic relationship with that help desk, and it has been a fantastic resource for us as well as apprentices. Obviously, though, it is still in its infancy stage. It is that awareness.

The CHAIR: Yes, I was going to say I think that is an awareness piece that we could probably do better as leaders in our communities, but as a government too. It is relatively new, but it is good that you are getting those sorts of referral-type pathways between you. You touched on sort of not wage theft but even just the minimum wage that is below the poverty line basically and that then we are asking students to also do unpaid placements when they are studying as well. Can you talk a little bit about maybe what we could do better? I know the federal government has some schemes where some will be paid in their placements now, but what else could we do to support students doing placements?

Angus LEECH: Any sort of financial subsidy or incentive that the government can provide, all the better. Obviously at my age I have a lot of friends and people within the community that are on these unpaid placements. Honestly, sometimes the conditions in which they have to live seem almost borderline criminal. So anything the government can do to support these people within that process in terms of financial aid, all the better.

The CHAIR: Do you think industry has a place in that too, though? I know they might carry a financial burden in having those placements. I am trying to think of what that might be, but I am just wondering. Some others who have presented said the industry needs to step up as well. Do you have any thoughts on what they could do?

Angus LEECH: I think it could be done in conjunction with one another.

Yolanda ROBSON: I think—sorry to cut you off—the state government has a real opportunity to step into this space as well. At the Young Workers Centre we have been advocating for the abolishment of junior wages across every single award, including the junior apprentice rate system, including paying superannuation to workers under 18. In saying that, I understand that is not necessarily the state government's entire jurisdiction. We would love your support, though, in our journey for advocacy. But for us, I think the state government has a real opportunity to be a model employer for young people in getting rid of those placements for state-run worksites and those sorts of industries. I would love to see that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John, do you have a question?

John MULLAHY: Your submission recommends that the Victorian government promote vocational education as the foundation of the tertiary education system, so instead of having TAFE and university, seeing that TAFE can be the pathway where you can do some skills here and move there. How do you think the Victorian government should do this? How should we change that landscape?

Yolanda ROBSON: I think it is a big thing around the narrative piece. Like you said, rather than it being one or the other, have them be associated one and the same almost in terms of legitimacy, because it is two legitimate pathways—it is just not viewed or communicated in that way. Angus, do you have any thoughts on changing the narrative?

Angus LEECH: Yes, sure. Even having them connected, like you say, by, for instance, having the units passed within TAFE or VET education move on to be interchangeable with university degrees, I think.

John MULLAHY: I think we have got evidence from a couple of TAFE/universities—RMIT, Swinburne—that do that very well. And I see the VCE change of VCAL to vocational major as a similar sort of step to that—you can do your academic stuff as well as your skills-based stuff and bring it all together. I think that is probably a good piece that we need to work on.

The CHAIR: Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. We have heard a lot of evidence about a lot of things obviously, but one of them is around just how fractured the work experience system, or lack thereof, appears to be for young people, particularly in year 10 and year 11, trying to get that first taste of working in the sector that they are actually interested in and they are thinking about having their career in. Does the Young Workers Centre have a view around how that could be improved and better streamlined and better connected into industries that are in demand, employers that need workers in those sectors, the high school system, the TAFE system and the labour movement as well?

Yolanda ROBSON: Getting young people into that sort of work experience is kind of two pronged. The first piece is you cannot be what you cannot see, right? So I think the state government has a real opportunity to champion diverse employers in those industries and ensure that they are model employers for young people, young women, First Nations people or people with additional or differing needs to step in and do placement under or within those sorts of employers that the government has championed and has vetted as model employers to give a really genuine and well-meaning experience for those young people.

Angus LEECH: Absolutely. I actually entered my trade because of my work experience. That was the employer that I ended up going into the trade with. I, to be honest with you, had little interest in metalwork and fabrication prior to that, and that really was my pathway into that apprenticeship. I do believe that the government can do a stronger job, being one of the largest employers of employees across the state, of really ensuring that those options are available for students.

Yolanda ROBSON: And I think additionally, I am sure this has probably been touched on, but particularly around trades and apprenticeships, it is a lot of who you know. You have got people whose family either run or work for the business, and so the younger siblings naturally will be offered a place. But if I, back in the day, wanted to step into an apprenticeship with no family connection, how would I even break into that? And so, yes, creating those additional pathways where it is not just who you know would be a very big help.

The CHAIR: I think I have got time for one more question around that transition from school to a workplace, or school to a TAFE or whatever that looks like. I think—and this is just my own experience, I suppose—that we do quite well at a school level to really have wraparound support, and teachers know their cohort of kids and they know when wellbeing might be needed or some other extra support. But then they leave school, the wide world is just there and they have to explore it. Is there something that you think that we could do for that transition to be better?

Yolanda ROBSON: I think the ASO, the apprenticeship support officer, role is fantastic, and I think that should be supported more. I understand that some ASOs have up to 500 apprentices that they are seeking to service—how can you do that?—so we would love to see that sort of thing expanded. Like you said, I agree for the most part that schools do a fantastic job of providing that wraparound support. When students leave school, I would be surprised if the majority of them were looking for that same wraparound support. I think they understand stepping into the world is scary, but young people are capable. I think it is more so around educating and empowering the students themselves. Again, having knowledge about their rights, being able to have a casual conversation that does not feel overly intimidating when something is wrong or feels off, and you cannot do that unless you actually know what your rights are. Then, in saying that, once they have potentially identified that they are being underpaid or a comment is actually harassment, having those mechanisms, community legal centres, properly and aptly funded to be able to respond to the influx of inquiries.

Angus LEECH: I think having things on a local level, making pathways or support networks less intimidating. I think sometimes a lot of these, albeit having been put in the right place, can be quite intimidating for young people to access. For me personally, the ASO was the biggest person for me. Generally speaking,

they are an ex-tradesperson, they understand, and I did not feel that sort of level of intimidation. So any sorts of support networks that are easily accessible for young people are really important.

The CHAIR: Or a mentor, because if your family is not that support network, then who is it that you are going to for that advice?

Angus LEECH: Exactly right.

The CHAIR: So having some type of mentor.

Yolanda ROBSON: Completely. Yes. One other thing I just wanted to touch on was around the junior wage system. It would be remiss of me to not just note that I think the junior rate system really puts young people at a disadvantage, not for the obvious reasons but we have a lot of young people who are school leavers because they have to be, because they are seeking to escape unsafe situations at home, family violence. How can they do that on \$12 an hour, if they are trying to better their own lives and they cannot afford to put fuel in the car to get to work?

John MULLAHY: And the fact that it changes if they do it just before their 18th birthday or one day after their 18th birthday, it just makes no sense at all.

Yolanda ROBSON: Make it make sense, yes.

Angus LEECH: Can I just add too, I think a big misconception with junior wages is that it is for 18 years and younger. If you are an apprentice that starts your apprenticeship a day before you are 21, you will be put on junior apprentice rates throughout the entirety of your apprenticeship. So that means you can be in the fourth year, 24 years old, making like \$16 an hour. I mean, I do not know how they do it, honestly—I do not know how I did it.

Yolanda ROBSON: They don't.

The CHAIR: Yes. My husband did an adult apprenticeship, so it was the same. He was a lot older, and trying to live with a family, trying to live on an apprentice wage, very much Struggle Street for a little while.

Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate your insight, and you have given us a bit more to think about in terms of further recommendations for this Inquiry, so we really appreciate your time. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.