

TRANSCRIPT

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

Kylie Busk, Deputy General Secretary, Victoria and Tasmania Branch, and
Sarah Collins, Organiser, Victoria and Tasmania Branch, Independent Education Union of Australia; and
Justin Mullaly, President, Victorian Branch, and
Briley Stokes, Deputy President, Victorian Branch, Australian Education Union.

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

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

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

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

We are going to run this session like a bit of a Q and A, with some questions from the Committee. If you wish to answer them, you can just indicate, or if it is not relevant to your organisation, you do not need to. But there might not be an opportunity for everyone to answer, just depending on time. If there are some important points after today's session, though, that we have not had an opportunity to discuss, you are welcome to provide additional information.

I will start too, but I will introduce the Committee and then also if you can introduce yourself and your organisation at the start, that would be great. Thank you for taking the time to come in today. My name is Alison. I am the Chair and Member for Bellarine.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianfalone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: I might start this end—maybe if you can introduce yourself.

Briley STOKES: Thank you. I am Briley Stokes. I am the Deputy President of the Australian Education Union.

Justin MULLALY: Justin Mullaly, President of the Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch.

Sarah COLLINS: Sarah Collins, Organiser for the Independent Education Union, Vic and Tasmania.

Kylie BUSK: Kylie Busk, Deputy General Secretary of the Independent Education Union, Vic and Tas.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks so much for coming in. I am going to start with John.

John MULLAHY: I am just going to start with, we have had some evidence from quite a few people with regard to vocational education and training and the perceptions of that. How well do teachers and career practitioners understand the value of vocational pathways, and how can teachers better be informed to understand and promote the value of vocational pathways?

The CHAIR: Who would like to start?

Justin MULLALY: I can start, if you want.

The CHAIR: Great.

Justin MULLALY: Our Members, particularly in secondary schools and of course in TAFEs, deeply understand the value of vocational education and training and the pathways associated with that. I think that the depth to which they value it probably varies, and I think that in some ways that fairly reflects the cohort, particularly in secondary schools, in some schools compared to others. You get some natural variation when it comes to vocational pathways versus alternate higher education or workforce pathways for students as they leave schools. To continue to focus on schools, and I will jump to TAFE after that, I think it is fair to say that in terms of the valuing there is a fair bit of longstanding media conjecture and a longstanding community perception around the differing values placed on vocational pathways versus, say, higher ed pathways. You will notice I did not use the word 'academic' pathways because I think that probably is at the heart of some of the challenges that we face, that there is an artificial distinction between vocational not being somehow academic, which is just a nonsense. I think our Members widely recognise that. However, they too are members of the

community and so in some ways they too will be subject to some of the dynamics that sit around the storytelling and how students engage and parents engage in stories about what steps they should be taking at school and post-school. Part of that is in the context that vocational education and training is at times devalued, and that dialogue—that discourse—does not serve anybody particularly well. I do not think that emanates from teachers. I actually think that is something that circles around teachers and in the broader community and that can affect the way teachers engage at times.

In terms of TAFE, I think that it is what it says on the label. A TAFE teacher deeply understands the value of vocational learning, both the theoretical side of that learning as well as the practical side. In terms of the core consideration around their work, being industry professionals is a critical dynamic. That means that they are able to bring to bear in their teaching those industry understandings. In that fashion it only serves to really value vocational education and training.

In terms of the promotion side of that, there is no doubt that they are the receivers of people who have already decided that they want a vocational education. Part of the challenge—and it is a challenge that is not new but certainly more significant than ever—is where you have got students who need a lot of additional support. It is not just about the enrolment, it is about teachers being well placed to promote completing, because as everybody knows, completion rates are not what we want them to be. Part of the promotion of the valuing of vocational education and training has to be in the context of not just enrolling but also completing, let alone getting work or extending on the work that you might already be doing if you have a job in a particular industry. I think that all of that is underlined by some chronic problems, and the biggest chronic problem is the amount of resources available both in our schools and in our TAFEs.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Kylie BUSK: Hi. How are you? I just want to declare I am an ex-pathways coordinator and a careers education teacher, so this is a particular passion area, and we are really happy to have the opportunity. I will start with the resourcing issue. In order for the passion of teachers in finding pathways for students to be realised, it is a fairly labour-intensive type of work. It is a case management approach with students, and it often requires much more of a partnership arrangement between the different TAFE or RTO providers in our sector, the LLENs and the networks that support. There is a lot of time in ensuring that the educators at the heart of supporting students are well informed about the options. That sort of investment in terms of resources is often really quite a stretch in schools at the moment while they are dealing with shortage in general. Those issues have really made it a struggle. It is now 16 years since I was a practitioner myself, but I have maintained really strong relationships with people who are doing this work, and many of the supports and structures that have helped them in the past are clearly struggling to keep up with demand.

The way that presents itself in senior secondary environments is that it is normally somewhere around year 9 to 10 that you are starting to have some conversations about the different options that are available for students, and while the students themselves might be really quite keen and know their aspirations in terms of pathways, a lot of that work is actually with parents. Again, it is a labour-intensive type of work. Sorry I am forgetting about you, Anthony. I am not sure where the camera actually is. So it is those challenges that really make the work of even the most passionate teacher in this space more difficult. Coupled with the issues that have been raised around supporting students with additional needs and the transfer of information between their host school and the TAFE that might be taking the VET element of their program, those sorts of things are real inhibitors to the success of some of these programs, and we are seeing that in terms of the success rates.

The CHAIR: That is great information because it is what is actually happening on the ground.

John MULLAHY: Can I just ask a follow-up?

The CHAIR: Yes.

John MULLAHY: Just the changes to vocational major, so going from VCAL to vocational major two years ago: would you say that that has made a difference to perceptions of VET?

Justin MULLALY: I think it has, and I think it has been a positive change. I think, though, that it certainly has not resolved the perception issue. I think that part of the challenge there, as one of our career teacher members said when we were putting together our submission for this Inquiry, is that there is at least a twofold

problem—it is multidimensional, as they saw it. They talked about the fact that at the point, as Kylie said, when students are thinking about their pathway at that year 9, year 10 and even into year 11 stage, the complexity of the choice is actually significant, and that is not just between a VM stream versus a straight VCE stream; it is also within that. We do not actually afford young people the time it takes, let alone the time that it might take parents, to be able to even more meaningfully engage. We do not afford them that time very well. Partly that is about how early you start that conversation, and I think that the comments that the IEU made are supported by us and very relevant. But it is actually at that critical time when decisions are being made and there is not the right prioritisation within the school day, if I can sort of construct it that way, for these sorts of things. Partly that is because of a resourcing issue: the amount of time that a careers practitioner in a school might have available to them as the expert to work with students is very, very, very limited. With that comes generality, and with generality you do not have the depth that you need to actually support the best kind of decision-making.

I think the other thing that is important is that we actually often see the choice in the context of subjects or streams. The choice is actually a much bigger choice going on than that. I am all for making sure that things are broken down in such a way that they are able to be grappled with and decisions are able to be made in a meaningful way, but it is a true statement, I think, that the pathway that a student is choosing when they are selecting the stream that they are in, or the subjects within that, leaves a very defining impression on what they do for the next couple of years and well beyond that, even if they go on a completely different pathway, which many people do.

Kylie BUSK: I think that is a really valid point, that idea that a young person feels locked into a stream at quite an early stage before they have really had an opportunity to even have exposure to some of the industries that we know need further support.

The CHAIR: Can I just build on that—sorry, John. The LLENs—do they need a review of what their role is then in schools to support that work?

Kylie BUSK: I strongly believe that they do need a refocus. There are some real inconsistencies in how those particular networks are operating.

The CHAIR: How would you like to see them work, then?

Kylie BUSK: Well, at their strongest they are actually the conduit between schools and local industry, and that is a really meaningful and well-developed relationship. We were talking about it in preparation—the type of work that they do with employers to allow success in placements and those sorts of things, for them to have an understanding of the young people that they are going to have coming into their industry. You know, they are not a fully formed worker; they are there to have a learning experience that hopefully helps to engage them with the industry. I think that they are a partner. Again, the school still needs to have a role in it because they have got the majority of the relationship and the support structures for the student. For anything that has got that partnership element, the time involved in actually maintaining that is significant, but at its best it works really, really well. But I think that it is a bit of a hit-and-miss sort of experience at the moment.

Justin MULLALY: Yes, I think we would say that there is a lot of variation between the lenses. I do not think, though, that it is necessarily an evaluation, or re-evaluation, because they have been subject to a few of these processes over the years, of the lenses itself is actually necessarily the step, as much as it might be that that is part of the step. I think that there is a real paucity of engagement by industry and business in student pathways. You look at other jurisdictions, particularly in Europe, and you have business and industry much more deeply embedded in investing money but also other resources that are obviously resource-based but less so in terms of time and expertise in a fashion we just do not have here, and has been a forever problem. Where we have great examples, they are great. Funnily enough, the pathways that young people or workers more broadly are able to get on lead to great training outcomes and great employment outcomes. Where you do not have that—not least in social services, where there is a massive issue I think on this front, with the expansion side of jobs—you miss massive opportunities for there to be real experiences of what work might be like, let alone being able to access what is up-to-date experience in the workplace, which is really critical when you are wanting to be as job-ready, as the euphemism goes, as possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for that. Anthony, I will head to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. And thank you, Kylie, Sarah, Justin and Briley, for all appearing, and I acknowledge the great work of all of our teachers as well. I am, like Alison and John, obviously a big supporter of our teachers, and I very much attribute my career journey to the inspiration and support of my teachers in primary and high school. I acknowledged that in my first speech as well. Yes, the impression a teacher can make on a young person is quite profound, so anything we can do to support our teachers we do. But of course teaching is also an in-demand industry in its own right as well, so how can we look at encouraging more young people to consider teaching as a career option, and particularly around recruiting and training more career education educators too?

Justin MULLALY: It is a really important question. It is an important question always, but it is particularly important in the context of a significant shortage of teachers and the way in which that shortage has perverse outcomes for our most high needs communities. When you have got a shortage in some of our more well off communities, you know what our more disadvantaged communities are really struggling with. So from that point of view, getting the pipeline of folks into initial teacher education, getting them to complete initial teacher education, let alone letting them have the time to be effective teachers in the first couple of years in the profession so that they actually stick around in the profession, is incredibly important. The statistics speak for themselves, and I know we highlighted those stats in our submission, but in very simple terms I think around about 50 per cent of all ITE enrolment—folks who enrol—do not complete ITE. When we survey our student-teacher members, they say that cost is the biggest issue, and it is the cost associated with studying in the context of either somebody who is relatively young, maybe leaving school, having to hold down multiple jobs whilst they are trying to do dozens and dozens of days of practicum, or whether it be somebody who is making a career change—and the majority of people who enter initial teacher education are people who are already in the workforce properly, as opposed to somebody who is a school leaver. So from that point of view making the transition and being able to take the financial hit is one thing; being able to sustain it over a number of years to get your qualification is the biggest reason—they cannot make ends meet.

It also adds to people delaying the course and people going part time, so you actually have challenges when it comes to getting the right amount of supply simply because people cannot get through in a full-time fashion. We have got to address that. Government has made some important steps in the right direction over the last couple of years around secondary teacher financial support when somebody is studying to be a secondary teacher. That needs to be expanded, and it also needs to actually link itself to questions of employment. If you do not actually offer security of employment and if you cannot do that in a shortage environment, then you are actually missing out on an opportunity to say to somebody, 'If you want a great career doing a great job, doing a really important job in a way that has massive influence on individuals and on our society,' and if you cannot do that in a way where we can get you through, we can support you and we can make sure that you have actually got employment, then I do not know what we can do if we cannot do that now. We are not doing it, though, and that is because somehow we think that it is more important that we are a little bit more hands off. Well, I think now is the time to be hands on, because that is the way you actually secure your workforce.

I think the other challenge is in terms of people who get through initial teacher education and get into schools, and the attrition rate. The attrition rate is incredibly high. The number varies, but 30- to 40 per cent of folks who start within five years have left the profession. Not only have we invested a whole bunch of public money to support them, not only have those folks invested their own money and their own time, but they have also been invested in when they have commenced in the workforce with their colleagues who are there. This is not a slight on somebody who decides that they will not continue, but we are really not investing very smartly if that is the outcome. And part of that is actually making sure that the complexity of the work of a teacher is recognised as being that much higher when you first commence. I think many people will say you learn how to really be a teacher once you start to be a teacher. That is not to pass judgement, particularly on ITE programs—that is another topic—but what it is to say is, like in a lot of professions, you learn how to do it when you are doing it, and that is not unusual. That is okay, but unless you have got the right level of support, unless you have got the time away from actually doing the core task, so being in the class with children, with students, and you have got time for planning, you have got time for those conversations with colleagues, for those check-ins and for the mentoring—if do not have time, and time costs money, you do not have the investment, and then we are actually underselling.

Anthony CIANFLONE: And just on that, if I can pick up on that point, Justin, as well, I mean, your submission on page 3 highlights it. You say here nationwide primary and secondary enrolment is expected to grow by 11 per cent over the next few years. However, initial teacher enrolment data released by the

Department of Education in Victoria shows the number of students enrolling in school teaching degrees has declined by nearly 9 per cent in the last couple of years, so the demand for teaching is certainly going up, and your point about time is that there are more time pressures, given the numbers of teachers for that higher enrolment. But what is your view around us considering opportunities? We have heard some other evidence earlier around the need for more career educators in schools to alleviate teachers from that sort of pressure, but more support staff required in schools to alleviate teachers generally, mental health support workers and social workers potentially too to really help those disengaged students stay on the right track, which in many ways can also help teachers. What is your view on those opportunities?

Justin MULLALY: Look, when you are the lowest funded public education system in the country by a long, long way, when your teachers are the lowest paid in the country by a long, long way and where allied health staff are equally not valued in the right way, it is no surprise that we find it hard to attract a workforce and keep them. I think that the broader step that you point to, quite rightly, is how do we not only shore up what we have got but expand the number of positions? And you cannot do that unless you have got a funding base, and we do not have a funding base in Victoria as it stands—to Victoria's shame.

I think, though, that one of the critical things to recognise, and your question goes to it, is the complexity of student need has grown exponentially. It has been quickened by the pandemic, but it was already there, the trajectory was already there. And it is no surprise; our lives have become pretty complex, whatever the reason for that. And for that, you need a lot more adults in schools. We also need to broaden the notion of schooling. Schools are seen in that traditional sense by most people. The site of a school, though, actually needs to be doing a lot more for young people in our community. In that way the notion of full-service schools is a notion for now. It is a really important idea. And that is where you do bring to bear the allied health staff, the social workers, the psychologists, other education support workers, so that you can actually enable teachers to focus on the core work that they do, not leaving aside all the other needs that children have, whether they are in the at-risk category or whether they just need a further extension because they are already going well.

The CHAIR: Kylie, do you want to add to that?

Kylie BUSK: I echo everything that the AEU have presented there, but I also just want to speak to that teacher experience that what is reported to us from members is that feeling that you are never doing enough for students really does link strongly to the allied health and other supports in place in schools and how difficult it is, because there is also workforce shortage in many of those areas—a very competitive market for qualified psychologists and school counsellors and the like, and it is because of that dramatic change of needs. I agree with Justin that that commenced well before the pandemic, but it certainly was exacerbated by COVID and all of the issues around schooling during that period. But it is something that comes through significantly in the surveying that we do of members around the impact it has on them to feel that, despite every best effort and enormous work, there are still students that they can identify in their classes that they are not getting to give the support to. Ours is a profession that prides itself on care of students and young people, and to feel like you are never doing enough, that is not the fault of Members; that is the fault of the resources that are put in to help support that work.

The CHAIR: I am an ex-primary school teacher, and I still carry a lot of that guilt. There are a few students that still play on my mind. You are there to care for the kids in your care, and yes, it does grate on you sometimes. But it sounds like I will have a job in teaching after politics probably too; there will be plenty of work. We have not really talked throughout the Inquiry a lot about school-based apprenticeships. There has been a decline in that, so I just would like your thoughts on why or what is it that we could be doing better to give students maybe that option to have the apprenticeships while they are still at school? I would imagine this is very resource intensive as well, I get that, but is it something that we should be really thinking about how we do this better?

Kylie BUSK: Yes, I think there are a lot of supports for the students that are trying to take on those programs and their families. I can speak to how, in the building and construction sort of area, the need for getting a student to a site at 6:00 in the morning is an enormous extra struggle on top for families. If we put that into the context of a regional family with no access to any meaningful public transport, it is an impossible task. I think that that is a very big barrier to access what might otherwise be a really good pathway. But I also think that sometimes the sort of maintenance required to keep those programs, again, going is sometimes beyond what is available in a school to properly support.

Justin MULLALY: Yes. I think that it is a challenge enough to support a young person when they are there at a school five days a week. You introduce, purposefully, transition points and others into that child's learning experience and experience of work, and the degree of difficulty inevitably goes up. So with that, and I think the way you asked the question points to it, you have got to resource those moments that are the transition moments. If you do not have the right number of people in a school to support those students doing an SBA, then you are inevitably going to have issues with students from time to time having conflict in the workforce, having misunderstandings in the workforce or in their other training institution or with the expectations being misunderstood. All of those things create moments where you have got failure points, and what we always do in our profession is to try to manage those failure points. The more points that you introduce in terms of transition, the more failure points you are introducing, so you have got to resource that. Maybe the simple way of putting it is that we do not wrap around the resources enough to make SBAs as successful as they could be, and that is what we need to do. In the past there has been funding available that has sought to do that better than what it is now. That is both at a state and at a Commonwealth level. I think that if we are going to rejuvenate that as a pathway, it has to be in the form of other adults in schools, whether they be teachers or not, to actually be able to maintain the links and the supports across employers, schools, the student and their family.

The CHAIR: I suppose LLENs could be doing more in that space and maybe industry could too.

Justin MULLALY: They could; I think that is right. But I think that at the heart it is: where does a relationship best emanate from? The truth is it is the school, because that is where the relationship starts. How the school can be supported by a LLEN, how it can be supported by industry and business, I think becomes the question, because we do not want to manufacture scenarios that are not at their heart where the relationships are. I think that that is something we often do in education: we do not build on the strength, and we kind of add somewhere else.

Briley STOKES: I think, on that, what we hear from students in this space but also from school staff, the teachers and education support staff, is that they do not have all the answers and do not know who to go to. So you have a student who might be considering this pathway, but they have to wait for that part-time employee to work and then make an appointment to speak with them. When you speak with them, they might not know the intricacies of the answer, so they have got to go off and find it. Then another week goes by until they are back doing that work. The resourcing and the relationships only work if you have got the time available to really invest in them with the students, and I think that is what is driving some students to not continue with certain pathway decisions, because it becomes too hard. The staff are trying to answer and support, but the school is not resourced to employ enough of them, or enough time fraction of them, to be able to put that work in.

The CHAIR: The ones that I have seen succeed are just because of family, friends or business. It has only worked through a network; that is the only reason why it has worked.

Kylie BUSK: It also works because there is a relationship at the heart of that. Again, to take that back to the school, it has already got the relationship, and we are not giving enough resource to actually support that being the anchor to a successful experience.

The CHAIR: Good point. I am so sorry; we have run out of time. We could have kept chatting I think for the afternoon, but we have more questions to get through. If there is something, though, that you feel that you need to add after today, please come back to us, and the Committee can consider it. Thank you for answering our questions today and for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.