

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

Dr Corrie Williams, Chief, Public Affairs (*via videoconference*), and

Bianca Florent, Manager, Outreach and Future Skills (*via videoconference*), Master Builders Association of Victoria; and

Steven Wojtkiw, Deputy Executive Director, Victoria, Housing Industry Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the panel's 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 have got a couple of people online, and Steven, thank you for joining us here in person. We will just do a little bit of a Q and A; it will be a pretty informal chat. We will have some questions from the Committee. There might not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question, just depending on how we go for time, but if there are any important points that you do not have an opportunity to make during your session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing.

My name is Alison. I am the Chair and the Member for Bellarine.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianfalone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: Steven, if you could just say your name for Hansard and your title, and then we will go online.

Steven WOJKIW: Yes, thank you, Chair. Steven Wojtkiw, Deputy Executive Director, HIA, Victoria.

Bianca FLORENT: Bianca Florent from Master Builders Victoria. My title is Outreach and Future Skills Manager.

The CHAIR: Corrie, we are having technical problems with your connection.

John MULLAHY: This is Dr Corrie Williams, Chief of Public Affairs, Master Builders Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for joining us today. We know construction is one of the big industries that we need more skilled workers for, and we have talked a lot about pathways into the construction industry. Thank you for answering any of our questions today, and your submissions were fantastic. We will go straight into some questions, so John, I will go to you first.

John MULLAHY: All right. Job readiness is very important, so from your point of view, what skills do young people need when entering the construction workforce, what do employers find are the main areas of graduate skill gaps, and also what can the Victorian government, educational institutions and employers do to ensure graduates are job ready?

The CHAIR: Just a big question, Steven; we might start with you.

Steven WOJKIW: Thank you. Thank you, John, and it is a big question with several parts to it. In so much of what employers are looking for, we get regular feedback from Housing Industry Association members that the skills gaps are, more often than not, the soft skills rather than necessarily the technical skills when it comes to residential construction. I am talking about skills around aptitude and the right attitude—often employers tell us that there is not really always the willingness to learn, the willingness to adapt. The attitude is important—having the right attitude—because many employers tell us that skills can come through experience and time. Some of the other gaps are around emotional intelligence in terms of candidates and students having the ability to understand, to use and manage their own emotions, to understand and recognise the emotions of others, also the soft skills around things like communication—written and oral—teamwork, problem solving, planning, initiative and resourcefulness, and of course technology too, because that is a fast-changing part of the construction industry. Training providers often face difficulties in keeping up to speed and educating students with the ever-changing way of working and new technologies in residential construction.

I should say, lastly, business or commercial acumen is also something we cannot necessarily expect young people to have, but it is important in the residential construction sector. That is why we have particularly championed the need to really review the curriculum and way of learning and teaching to look at developing, over time, a new credentials framework that facilitates a blend of technical and commercial learning relevant to the construction sector. An example would be something like a diploma-level qualification that combines an apprenticeship, for example, with a business qualification. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you, Bianca.

Bianca FLORENT: Thank you. Very much to echo what Steven said earlier as well, I think an obvious one in terms of job readiness here is first of all white card training, making sure people come onto site already equipped and ready with a sense of safety. That induction card is a requirement there, as well as working at heights and other safety training online—these modules are really easy to get under your belt, and having this is just one less thing from the employee perspective that they have to worry about or ensure that that student already has available to them and completed. But also, Corrie, I know she has got a few things to add into this space as well.

Corrie WILLIAMS: Thank you. I apologise for my technical issues just before; it froze as you announced my name. I would like to add to the two previous speakers by talking about working in teams. It is a soft skill that, very much as we look at modern methods of construction and multifaceted teams across our construction industry, is going to be more and more important so that the whole workforce understands how they fit into a construction build, so that the tilers are not putting a hole in what the waterproofer has just done or the electricians are not doing the same into a nicely insulated building.

The CHAIR: Yes. I am just going to ask a question on top of John's; those soft skills and teamworking skills that you talk about, you probably would like to see them at a high school level or being built in within a high school curriculum so when they come into the apprenticeship or into the TAFE system they are building on those extra skills—you would like to see them embedded in the high school system?

Steven WOJTKIW: Oh, very much so. In some respects the changes or reforms that the Victorian government has made to what was previously the Victorian certificate of applied learning, the new pathways if you like, do really lend themselves to embedding some of those softer skills into the education of young people. But it is also a role too for employers, and that is where mentoring and other forms of work experience, for example, can also inculcate if you like the technical skills, but sort of embed some of that training in and around the teamwork, the initiative, the lateral thinking that needs to also accompany the technical skills that young people might bring to a role.

The CHAIR: Yes. Good point. Thank you, Anthony, I might head to you for the next question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for appearing and for your very comprehensive submissions as well. My question is around collaboration with education providers. I am just picking up on your point there around opportunities for job readiness, how we can further strengthen those collaboration and pathways. Just going to HIA's submission here, where HIA, you say:

... conservatively estimates that the trades workforce in residential building needs to increase by at least 30 per cent to enable the level of home building required to meet the Housing Accord's target of building 1.2 million homes over the next five years.

...

Data from the Victorian Building Authority shows the number of registered applications to become a domestic builder has actually fallen by 23 per cent since 2017/18.

Some really stark stats given the importance we are placing on housing and getting more housing workers. So how can we get in as early as possible to collaborate with education through the high schools, VET and other parts of the education sector to get more young people thinking about and encouraged to take up a career in construction?

Steven WOJTKIW: Thank you for your question. And you have pointed, rightly so, to the very stark statistics that point to the skills gap. We do need more builders, because a lot of builders are retiring—we have got an ageing demographic—and of course tradespersons. Our own research, for example, has pointed out that we are going to see a significant shortfall, as we have seen over the past decade, in skilled workers in

construction, particularly residential construction but not exclusively, and that is not going to change overnight. We really do, as you say, need to tackle it at several levels.

In terms of what industry is doing, there are some good examples. Melbourne Polytechnic's Future of Housing Construction Centre of Excellence, for example, in Heidelberg is a great example of where industry is getting together—industry being manufacturers, suppliers and builders—and really developing a range of short courses on prefabrication, modular construction and volumetric construction, for example. That is working well—early days but working well. We also have the Victorian government playing its role in terms of responding to changing industry demand with its funded skill set lists to reskill and upskill workers. And of course the private sector, the HIA and other associations, are active in that space through their own professional development and learning and development courses. There is a lot underway in terms of trying to bridge that gap, but it is not something that is going to change overnight. It goes to a range of issues that I am sure we will speak about further today, and that gets to societal values, the cultural sort of values around vocational education and training and apprenticeships, for example, which are in stark contrast to, I guess, traditional norms and expectations for many young people to follow a university pathway.

The CHAIR: Corrie or Bianca.

Corrie WILLIAMS: We have been doing quite a lot with the LLEN, and I think strengthening the student placements through groups such as that is something that we could really work on as an industry. It could be built upon. Our research early on has shown that a lot of especially girls are making career choices in late primary school. We have traditionally worked on the lower secondary school and middle secondary school as our target, but we are looking at how we can possibly get more information even into primary schools, slightly changing the focus of what we are doing, because it is something that we need to get in earlier for all students, not just girls.

The CHAIR: I am going to lead on from that and trying to get more women in construction. Obviously it is a big focus for us also to look at the cohorts and the barriers that we are having at the moment. Maybe Bianca or Corrie can talk to what you are seeing and what are the things that are working to encourage more women in the construction industry.

Corrie WILLIAMS: There are quite a lot of programs going on. The equitable futures panel is doing a wide sweep of programs to look at this at the moment, and that has only just started in its current form. One of the things we are finding is women are getting attracted into the industry, but it is the retention piece and the culture piece that we really need to look at. It is not just the attraction, it is also that recruitment, also the retention. But yes, we have still got a fair way to go. The federal grants, the women's building careers grants, are really just getting some momentum as well. The Women in Construction grant that is there has 18 partners led by Incolink and is doing quite a bit of work in how we can do this better. But it is not just one answer. I think we have got to go in multiple directions.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Steven WOJTKIW: If I could just add to that, Chair, associations including HIA are doing their own work in this space too. We have a Building Women luncheon, for example, that really goes to talk about these career paths, success stories of women in construction, showcasing what can be achieved, the diversity of roles. It is not always on the tools; there are often office and administrative tasks too that go with the industry. We are also developing a training program with Bendigo TAFE, for example—early days but again it is one where we are looking at the language, looking at the settings and perceptions that women and those gender-diverse, non-binary individuals, for example, might perceive in the workplace and trying to address those to ensure that the wider workforce understands the differences in those individuals and can really provide a workplace for them that is a safe and welcoming place. It is about changing that language and the way in which, I guess, a largely traditional male-oriented industry interacts with different individuals, including women.

The CHAIR: In my mind that is a job for industry or a job for employers to be doing to attract that workforce.

Steven WOJTKIW: Yes, very much so. We know our own members would love to see more women in this industry. Again, I think only around 15 per cent of the construction workforce are female, so it is very low compared to certainly many other sectors in the economy. As Corrie and others have pointed out, we need to

get in early, even at the primary school level. We have a book, for example, that is called *The House that She Built*, which is really almost a storybook that just goes to show the diversity of occupations and career pathways that are available to young persons—young ladies and young girls, particularly—in the construction sector. So it is about changing the mindset at a very early stage.

The CHAIR: John, it might be your turn.

John MULLAHY: We have got young students who might be interested in getting into the construction industry but might not be able to do any workplace or work-based learning opportunities. What are the main barriers for employers in the construction industry to providing work experience placements or other forms of work-based learning opportunities for students, and how can the Victorian government support employers in the construction industry to offer more work-based learning opportunities?

Steven WOJTKIW: Yes, work experience is again something that I think is really underdone in terms of Victorian industry—and this sector no less—in terms of making available more opportunities for young people to really have a taste for what could occur, should occur or does occur in the industry. They are up against a number of barriers like time and resource constraints. Many small or medium-sized builders just do not have the time and resources to devote to mentoring and supervising, as they rightfully should. There is a bit of a hesitation around whether they will get a return on that investment, because we recognise that young people are going to be largely observing rather than doing work, so they are not as productive as they could be. They themselves as employers find it difficult, just as others do, to find suitable candidates and go through that screening process. Then there is the paperwork burden. I looked just recently at what needs to occur for an employer to take on a young person in the work experience space, and the compliance extends from everything from the *Child Employment Act*, the WorkSafe regulations, the *Fair Work Act*, the OH&S regulations, a working with children clearance and the *Health Records Act* to liaising with the school coordinator, supervisory staff needing to be in place and the school having public liability insurance in place, and of course then there is the requirement that work experience cannot exceed certain days in any particular school term. Not to say that those requirements are not necessary or are not important, but for a small business—perhaps a mum-and-dad builder—that is a lot of paperwork to have to navigate to put someone on.

John MULLAHY: So for a year 10 student who wants to do one week in the construction industry, the barriers are almost too high for a small to medium business?

Steven WOJTKIW: Well, they almost are. We see this even with the TAFE level with more mature students. The blocks of study for which students can go offsite and work are not always necessarily aligned to the needs of a business, in terms of working hours and the nature of project life cycles, and there is a rigidity there that means that it is not always going to be a good match between when an employer could use a young person—whether it is an apprentice or a work experience student—and when they are available in so much of their studies.

The CHAIR: That is true. Bianca or Corrie.

Bianca FLORENT: Thank you, Chair. I will jump in on this one. It is very similar to what Steven has said. First of all, there is that perceived liability and burden, especially from a safety perspective here. It is such a high liability having someone under the age of 18 onsite, especially with safety it can be a very difficult thing. That is a very big perception that comes from our members here. Another one has already been highlighted, but to echo that, our members also say there is a cost to the employer of having to supervise that student. There is a time cost and there is also a money cost. Having that from both sides is very tough from an employer's perspective. The way we put it in our submission is actually as the 'babysitting' perception of having to oversee or make sure that this individual is okay for a very long period of time. The way these placements are designed, they are meant to be short. They are not meant to be long, and they are meant to be for a few hours or however long it may be. Again, because of that, there is no return—or perceived return—in terms that this potentially could turn into an apprenticeship or something a little bit further. In this scenario, yes, it can and it may, but unfortunately those are not the cases that we hear.

Lastly as well, it is just hard to coordinate a placement in terms of finding the student and then making sure they get onsite and have transportation. All these different barriers as well are quite difficult, and they make it less and less attractive for an employer to then take on a workplace student.

The CHAIR: I just might add that I have got a 15-year-old son, but he has done a taster at the TAFE and he has tried all the different constructions and some other things. Would you be supportive if that is where the taster is, instead of being on the site?

Bianca FLORENT: I think it is both parts, yes. So we have got programs that we do with our members where they are onsite for a couple of hours; they go to another site. As an example, I think of the Geelong region. They start on a domestic site, go to commercial and then from there they end up at the TAFE. But it takes a very strong careers coordinator or a very strong local learning and employment network to coordinate these things. It takes the support of employers that are really behind it and willing to put their hand up and open up, or shut down their worksite for a day. Again, it is that time and that money cost here. So again, I think it is a really great thing to have students onsite. We are talking about construction, and construction is to do with your hands, most of the time, and having the student onsite is really important, but it is the other side as well from the employer perspective, where that cost is hard and where employers may not be as supportive and wanting to get students like your son there onsite where it may be too difficult. Unfortunately, that is when we then cannot expose students to what construction has to offer.

The CHAIR: Thanks for that. Anthony, I think I have got time for another question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks again, Chair. Just going back to what Steven was talking about earlier around the barriers and the red tape challenges around taking on apprentices and work experience students, my question is going to apprentices and traineeships specifically. According to your submission here, page 4, the Victorian Skills Authority estimates some 68,000 new workers will be required in the construction occupations, ranging from construction managers to carpenters, joiners, painters, electricians, plumbers, building and plumbing labourers. That is a lot of new apprentices we are going to have to try and encourage and recruit. You spoke about some of those barriers, but what are some of the solutions to help encourage more employers to take on apprentices? What are some of the incentives that we could look at and consider and recommend, potentially?

Steven WOJTKIW: Thank you for your question. Yes, there is no doubt about the barriers that you have spoken to. The real challenge is around those solutions, and there is probably a range of them. Clearly there is a need to maintain if not expand or certainly better target the priority wage subsidy, which currently assists by offsetting the costs of apprenticeship wages for up to three years, and they vary depending on the apprenticeship, whether it is full-time, part-time, mature age, different industries and so forth. So there are financial incentives in place there for both the apprentice and the employer. They need to be, if not maintained, certainly strengthened, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises, and there has been a recent federal review into the whole apprenticeship incentive system. So it is important that SMEs—they do not have necessarily the capital and other resources to take on an apprentice, as we have talked about today, so they need particular support. There is additional financial support to apprentices. It is more often broadly based around youth allowances or rent assistance, and even at the state level there are things like a vehicle registration concession, so they need to stay in place. Clearly we need to reframe perceptions of apprentices, their value and their earnings potential, and that is often lost on young people and families and wider communities, teachers and friends. Celebrate successful apprentices through awards programs, expand industry-based mentoring, and even some industry associations—and we certainly support this—would be supportive of employer offset payments for taking on, for example, mature and higher wage apprentices for those over 21. So there is a lot of things that can be done, no single solution, and nothing will necessarily switch the dial quickly. But there is a need to really target a range of approaches to get more young people to look at this industry closely as a very viable and a very interesting, diverse and unique sector that does provide for careers and certainly very substantial earnings.

Corrie WILLIAMS: I also make the point, and I agree with Steven—another one is the transport of apprentices to and from. Often it is the parents doing a lot of driving. The idea of lowering the age of students getting a car licence—we find in the cross-border areas with New South Wales that is something where students who take up an apprenticeship, if they have got a New South Wales licence, are able to get to and from the job site much easier than those in Victoria. So that might be something that could be a useful addition to our system.

Steven WOJTKIW: If I might add, we also have, as Corrie has touched on there, some particularly unique challenges in regional labour markets to mobilise young people. The pool of labour generally is smaller than it

is in metropolitan and other larger city areas. Many young people we know—we have heard this for many, many years—train or study in the regions, and as soon as they have completed those studies, they move to the cities for employment opportunities. There is a lack of student accommodation too, which makes it hard to attract and maintain people to undertake studies. And of course, as Corrie has pointed out, the travel distance, time and costs can also be prohibitive, whether they are working or studying. So regional Victoria faces some particularly unique challenges in getting young people to train and work in those regions and stay in those regions rather than migrate to the major cities.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask about the apprentice wage then? It has been raised a couple of times, and I think you have touched on it a little bit. Obviously apprentices may be undertaking a Free TAFE kind of system, but they have still got tools, they have still got their transport, their costs, and then they are also trying to live on an apprentice wage. Have you got thoughts around that? Can you maybe just talk to the apprentice wage?

Bianca FLORENT: Yes. I am happy to go first if that is all right. An apprentice wage is very low, and it is low in terms of the cost of living and things that they have to pay for as well. I think of a scenario where there is a mature age apprentice that potentially has a family to support and may be the sole income earner of that family. It is a very tough thing to have to navigate. Yes, the trade support loan is there and has been there for a very long time, but a lot of apprentices are not aware that this loan is available to them as well, and some are not comfortable with taking out this loan. In terms of those wages, they are unfortunately not enough for an apprentice to survive on, especially in this scenario. But for a mature age apprentice with families—and we hear this all the time—making ends meet is quite difficult, so reviewing the wages as well on that subsidy program is I think is highly suggested here.

The CHAIR: And, Bianca, do you find that some leave the profession because of that reason?

Bianca FLORENT: Unfortunately, yes. Most definitely.

Steven WOJTKIW: I will just add, Chair, if I might, to that. There is a real challenge here to balance the need to offer a competitive wage or earnings for apprentices and young people while not pricing them out of the market. At the end of the day someone has to pay for that, so we need to get that right. When I say ‘competitive’, competitive against comparative roles, other roles. Those might even be labouring roles, which these days in some industries are paying quite highly. That is the rub there to get that balance right. But we have to also remember that apprentices are not taking on HECS debts. They are not taking on debts that university students ordinarily would. Like a university student, an apprenticeship is really learning with a view to lifelong earnings that are going to be more substantive. We know full well and we hear the stories and the anecdotes that many apprentices, upon qualifying, go on to earn quite significant money, often more substantive than their university counterparts. It is often lost in the translation as well that the earnings potential for tradespersons can be significant, whether they are working for an employer or they inevitably, as many do, start up their own business.

The CHAIR: We have heard evidence of a lot of young people deciding to go down that path because of the earnings at the end of their course, rather than going to university with a big HECS debt at the end. Certainly it plays on people’s minds and decision-making in where they go. I have only got a few minutes to go, so I thought I might ask, just on making a decision whether to go into the construction industry and follow a VCE VM, a vocational major, or go through apprenticeship, about the perception around doing VET in schools and career advice and schools promoting it, as opposed to VCE and getting an ATAR score. Have you seen perceptions change? Do you think the VCE VM has improved this? Do we need to do more in promoting VET in our schools?

Steven WOJTKIW: The short answer is: I think it is working, slowly working, with the changes to the secondary school certificate. The pathways are there now, or better pathways. There are good resources out there around what is available through things like the Victorian Skills Gateway. But the universities have been at this for some time. They are very good at this in terms of promoting and making available information—very clear, concise information—about what is available in terms of a university career pathway. When it comes to the VET system and VET careers and pathways, that is where it gets a little bit busier, and it is often hard for parents and young people to make clear and informed decisions about what exists. How could that be changed? Clearly by continuing to do more in terms of promoting those existing networks and mechanisms. I have always been a big supporter of, for example, what I define as online job portals that advertise regional local

projects and the in-demand jobs that exist around those local projects, and I have seen that particular approach being particularly helpful for sectors like tourism and hospitality to recruit workers based on seasonal demand or major events, for example.

Ultimately, they will need to continue to invest in professional development for all school staff to ensure that they can actually answer questions around VET subjects, not just university ones, and provide students with the information they need to make informed decisions. And ultimately, what really goes hand in hand with that is the need to continue to invest in school facilities and resources to enable more schools to deliver VET subjects within school grounds and, at the moment, we do not see that.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is a bit patchwork across the state.

Steven WOJTKIW: It is.

The CHAIR: Bianca or Corrie?

Corrie WILLIAMS: Yes, we would agree wholeheartedly. I think that it is that resourcing piece but also that exposure to VET as a viable working opportunity. Many schools still have a perception that ATAR is the ultimate measure. Structure drives behaviour, therefore while that is still the perception, it just keeps going. We need to do more of the 'VET is a viable option and with fabulous career pathways.'

The CHAIR: Yes. Oh, do you have something?

John MULLAHY: I was just going to say that you said earlier to the teachers that there are going to be jobs for you out there if this does not work out. It is the same for the construction industry for me as a previous carpenter.

The CHAIR: After being a politician, you will be a carpenter. Well done, John.

I am sorry we have run out of time. We really could have kept talking all afternoon, I think. But thank you for your submissions and thank you for answering our questions today. It has given us a lot of food for thought, so thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.