

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Mildura — 22 March 2018

Members

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Ms Dee Ryall — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Peter Crisp

Mrs Christine Fyffe

Ms Jane Garrett

Mr Cesar Melhem

Witnesses

Ms Sara Wrate, President, and

Ms Nicole Clisby-Weir, Vice President, Sunraysia Careers Network.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing for the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee’s Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; any comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Hansard is recording today’s proceedings. We will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript so you can correct any typographical errors. I would like to invite you to make an opening statement. Please state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask questions. Welcome.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Nicole Clisby-Weir. I am the Vice-President of the Sunraysia Careers Network. My colleague’s name is Sara Wrate, and she is the President of the Sunraysia Careers Network. The Sunraysia Careers Network was established over 20 years ago and has members that include representatives from district secondary colleges in both Victoria and New South Wales, and from government and private colleges, from tertiary institutions, RTOs and training organisations. We also have associate memberships from a variety of Victorian universities and colleges.

We meet monthly to discuss pathway options for secondary students, to undertake professional development for our members, to exchange information relating to pathways within the district, and we also build networks to further develop the pathways for all of our students. The SCN also provides links between the Year 7–10 colleges and the senior secondary colleges within the district. It builds relationships between the schools, which then lead to collaborations in other areas and increasing opportunities for all of our students. It includes a collaborative approach to VET courses at local trade training centres and also within SuniTAFE.

What we have found when we were talking to our members is that at present there is no really consistent title or job description for our school members that take on the banner of careers advice, but three-quarters of them consider themselves to be careers advisers within their schools. Time allocation varies greatly, from 100 minutes per week to full-time positions, depending on the school. Full-time positions generally are at our senior secondary colleges within the district. Approximately 50 to 60 per cent of our school members have some form of careers qualification, and the rest have practical experience ranging from six to 18 years each.

All of our members feel that the careers advice within the school is valued by the schools, but that value does not necessarily translate into time, which can be an issue. The careers counselling is often not seen as important enough for other staff members to take it on within the curriculum. So I know for a period of time it was thought that it could be taught as an integral part of curriculum programs within the school, but that does not seem to have happened very effectively.

The majority of the schools in the district have made a conscious decision to use a program called Career Tools as a minimum for Year 10 students, which will then lead in to them being used for Year 11 and for Year 12 students at our senior secondary colleges, and we have worked collaboratively to establish a plan for particular sections of the program to be used within our partnership schools, so our 7–10 schools, and then other sections to be used within our Year 11 and 12 program. So that is my input.

The CHAIR — Sara, would you like to add anything?

Ms WRATE — No, that is fine.

The CHAIR — All right. Thanks for that. As a career adviser in a regional school, what are the main challenges you face?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — We actually surveyed all of our new members and asked them so we could correlate some of the challenges that were faced. Some of the information that we had fed back to us was that parent involvement at the moment is quite a big challenge because our parent body does not understand particularly pathways that are not pure academic pathways. So our parents do not necessarily understand VET programs and what they actually mean—that they are just as important as the pure academic program—and we also have challenges with parents understanding what the VCAL program actually means, how it is different to VCE and how it is just as important as VCE for some students. We also feel that there is a shortage of VET teachers, which makes it quite difficult for staffing, which can have an effect on the programs that are offered. Within this district it actually does limit, at times, student options and also their subject selections.

Mrs FYFFE — May I interrupt you there? My colleagues may know, but is there a difference in the pay grades of VET teachers and other teachers?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Not to our knowledge, no. If they are qualified teachers, they are on the same.

The CHAIR — How does the Sunraysia Careers Network support career advisers in your region?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — What we do is we tend to work collaboratively together. Particularly for new careers advisers that come in we offer that support. We talk to each other in regard to programs that are available. We have a number of classes that are actually made up of students from a variety of schools in the district, so we approached the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE with a group cohort of students that we can then put into programs, whereas if we did it individually, we would find that we may not have the number of classes or be able to give the students the variety of choice that we do at the present time.

The CHAIR — How can the Victorian Government help regional career adviser networks to offer more or better services for students?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — One of the bigger issues for—and you could hear about it when they come back this afternoon—independent schools, for us, is the cost that is involved, because there are varying levels of support that is given, depending on the area the school is in. Independents get quite a bit less to be able to fund VET, which makes it quite difficult for the independent schools to then go and be able to source those programs. It is a little bit easier in the state system, but there is a gap between the VET funding and how much it actually costs to produce each of the programs. So it can be a bit of an issue with regard to where that cost comes from and how it is budgeted for in school budgets.

The CHAIR — Going back to the challenges, is there anything you need to add on the list?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Yes, I have got quite a list here; sorry. We have got things like—for us particularly, for qualifications, it does get quite expensive to be able to get those postgraduate qualifications. The distance makes it quite difficult for our careers network as well in terms of people having to travel or do it via distance education. One of the costings that we got from one of our members is that it is about \$14 500 to get a grad certificate, and that is included in distance costs. So that has an impact.

Mr MELHEM — Sorry, can I stop you there? On that issue do you have any feedback or suggestions for how that can be overcome?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Subsidies might make it a little bit easier, looking at different ways of being able to undertake those courses so that you may not need to do distance—whether it is offered in short block time periods instead of it being ongoing—because I know that if you are a teacher as well as a careers adviser, you are working on either a part-time or a full-time load of teaching, so having to then do study outside that time makes it quite difficult, particularly for different times of the year. Our busiest times with regard to pathways for students are probably mid-term 2, term 3, leading into term 4, particularly for those careers advisers that are in senior secondary colleges with Year 12s and what have you.

For us, because both Sara and I are in a 7–10 school, that time period is quite busy as well, because we actually start pathways training with our students and working out career options and subject selection from about early June, if not a little bit earlier. So we really need to be able to undertake training outside those busy times of the year so it does not add extra pressure on particularly new careers advisers.

Mr MELHEM — A further follow-up: do you think it is something to consider as part of training new teachers to maybe make that part of their curriculum—for new teachers, for example, to have a component of career advice to make life easier?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Most definitely.

Mr MELHEM — Particularly in a regional area where you do not have to be trained twice, is that something we ought to consider, do you reckon? What is your view on that?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — I think that would make it a lot easier, because at the moment it seems to be focused towards one or maybe two people within the school. The thought process was that if it was put into the curriculum other teachers would be able to talk about it, so our VET teachers talking about pathways and so forth. Our teachers that teach VET in senior secondary schools have a better understanding of the pathways. Those teachers that are teaching VET-type subjects in the 7–10 schools do not necessarily have that same

knowledge base. Even though each of the schools will talk about it being something that all teachers should be doing, a lot of the teachers do not have that knowledge and that understanding. So, yes, that would make it a lot easier and spread the workload as well, definitely.

On the other side of it, things like professional development for careers advisers too can be a little bit problematic. We try and bring professional development into a lot of our meetings, but otherwise we do need to travel for it. Again, it is distance, it is time and it is time out of the schools, which means if we have a teaching load we do need to be replaced as well, so that is an added cost. If we could look at things like professional development that is offered in regional areas, just to make that distance a little bit less. We have a regular TIS program every year, we have VTAC come up and give us briefings every year, so we get that type of professional development, but otherwise it means travelling to either Melbourne—or Ballarat/Bendigo, generally. That tends to impact upon the professional development that is done.

We thank all of our schools because each month we have an afternoon when we do have our careers meeting, and they provide reliefs for us to be able to do that, so we understand that they value what we are doing in terms of things like release time and providing release time when we need it at busy times of the year as well.

In the Sunraysia area we work across three states, which means that our careers advisers need to know and understand the requirements across those three states. A lot of us work with regard to work experience and structured work placements. We have got VET students and school-based apprenticeships as well. So our knowledge base has to be fairly broad to be able to cover all of those areas, because we are counselling students and also the parents on what options are available for them. We also counsel students and parents with regard to transitions, exiting from schools, what options are available outside of a secondary school student as well, so just that general knowledge, bringing that knowledge together. Part of what we do in the Sunraysia Careers Network is to be able to talk about that, so we have all got a general knowledge of it. If somebody does not understand or does not quite know where they need to go to get that information, we have got supports that will be able to give them that information and help them with that.

Remoteness is always an issue in Mildura. We tend to try and get around that now in terms of teleconferencing and things like that when we can too.

The other one is that we do have our local university and TAFE providers, but again, we are limited in what we can offer. One of the things that we find when we are counselling students, particularly those students that are looking at tertiary education—we have got quite a lot of them now that would probably like tertiary education, but they do not really want to move from the area. It is a significant issue for them. We do have more courses coming on through La Trobe University, but it does impact on their pathway options with regard to moving, and a lot of them will say that is where their decision pivots, whether they have to move or not.

Mrs FYFFE — Through you, Chair, would you recommend approaching universities to do a first year general university year so they could do their first year of university—I think Melbourne University is doing that successfully—because of course they are young and they do not want to go away first up, as a transition and also a taste of whether university is for them?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — It could be a valid option for them. I know we are talking to some of them at the moment about maybe doing the first 12 months at a course at La Trobe, Mildura, seeing how they like it, being able to settle in and then looking at whether it is an option for them to either transfer to another La Trobe campus or to another university. I have Year 9 and 10 students that are already looking at that as an option. So providing that and understanding those difficulties for them in terms of the distance from home and accommodation costs, because it does get quite expensive for them, and the fact that they really need to become an adult as soon as they leave the district, and they are in classes with students that are still living at home, having their clothes washed for them and things like that. It does become a significant point for them. Also just general costs—and that is with regard to PD, visiting university campuses and things like that—also have an impact on how often careers advisers will do that type of thing.

Mr CRISP — Engaging with industry is what I would like to explore now. What difficulties have careers advisers in your network faced when trying to engage with industry?

Ms WRATE — I think one of the challenges is opportunities for educational leaders to see and hear from industry, so having industry come in and really link that learning with school—a targeted approach to engaging

industry with school leaders and teaching students about specific industries, so having industry come in and actually educating students about what their industry is. I think there is a lot of unknowns in some of the industries. Students do not actually understand what industries are, so they do not explore those industries because they do not know them; also more human resources in schools to link with industry and links between industry and careers advisers. As a careers network we have really tried to strengthen that within our region by having industry as part of that careers network and looking for opportunities for where we can work with industry and have professional development for us, but there is still a greater opportunity there.

Targeting VET delivered within schools and structured workplace learning to build relationships with employers and industry within the district to really increase the opportunities for students who are completing VET subjects to go into industry is another.

We also promote to families so families really understand what different industries are and so they understand as well what different pathway options there are in our area. We have found industry visits to be quite successful. Where we have students participating in industry visits it really has opened up their eyes to different industries and what is available to them. The last one is to continue to grow university and industry days within the area to show students what we have actually available within our region so they can maybe stay home and reduce those costs and impacts of them moving away from home.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Our links with industry are becoming better. On the trade training centre executive board we have actually got three members of industry who are very passionate about making sure that students understand what jobs and what careers are available within those industries. They are quite happy to do tours onsite so that students understand that, and that has worked very well in the past. It allows students to look at the scope of career options that are available within building and construction or within refrigeration or the hospitality industry.

So we are looking at building on that now so that we have got more students who can go out and have a look at what is there and get information from those employers that are in the industry as to what it actually means to work in that particular area. We are also looking at building the structured workplace learning opportunities, so the Northern Mallee LLEN is supporting with that. We have the website that we are looking at, and we are trying to encourage students to go out and actually have some on-the-job training as well. But it is very much about talking to parents as well and getting them to understand what it actually entails.

So at our last careers meeting we were looking at the three areas of growth that have come from the skills commissioner's report. Just talking about agriculture and horticulture, as soon as you mention that to students and to parents, they do not want to be a blocky; that is what comes out. We had that conversation again two days ago with a student who is very articulate and who said, 'That's exactly what my parents would say. They would not allow me to do it because they see it as being a blocky'. So we really need to be able to educate the parents on the changes to career options that are in these industries, that they have a set thought process on and what it meant when they were young and people were going out into the employment environment.

Mr MELHEM — So what is a practical way of doing that or achieving that aim? I am interested to hear your opinion about practical issues—how we can actually make it happen. Is it government resources in centrally developing awareness campaigns or particular tools, because sometimes getting industry to come in, particularly in regional areas, might be a bit difficult to get to most students. So in practical terms and based on your experience how can we improve on that? You are spot on: parents will say, 'I don't want my children to work in the agricultural industry', and so forth, even though as we go forward it is going to be one of the most important industries in this country ...

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Exactly right.

Mr MELHEM — because we need to feed the world. In practical terms have you got any ideas?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — I think there does need to be some type of campaign that is a localised campaign that looks at what is available, what it actually means now and how it is different from what it meant even 20 years ago. I think we need to get parents talking to people within industry. Maybe the school can be that middle point, or some of our organisations in the district can be a middle point, but it is quite difficult to get parents to come in to information sessions within schools now. Everybody is so busy that unless it relates specifically to what they are interested in, it is quite difficult to get them to come in.

So I think when you are looking at a campaign or promotion, it needs to be something that goes to them, not necessarily that requires them to come to us. And how that is done—we are still discussing amongst ourselves how we can do that as a careers network even. Whether it is looking at the monetary value that an industry is going to bring into the district, getting students out to actually look at the career opportunities so that maybe we can tag team with the students in terms of students starting that discussion with their parents and saying, ‘No, it’s actually not like that anymore’. It may be providing opportunities for parents to be able to go into these industries and have a look. At the moment we tend to target it towards our students to get them to go into industry and talk to industry leaders and have a look at it, but maybe we need to look at parents as an option, because ultimately they are the ones that will make that decision or guide the students in the decision that they make.

If they are looking at agriculture and horticulture, it is being a blocky in this district. That is the opinion of parents. If it is transport and logistics, it is, ‘I don’t want them to drive trucks’.

Mr MELHEM — Is it wages? In the agriculture and horticulture industries wages will probably play a major role because it is seen as being very low paid and casual. Maybe that is one of the blockers.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — It could be one of the things. The other thing is that it might be with parents looking at it in terms of not understanding the training that actually goes into it now—that they see it as they would need to leave school and all they are going to do for the rest of their life is be out on the block, not the actual intricacies of what it means to be in agricultural or horticultural industries now.

Mrs FYFFE — If you think of anything after today, please feed it to the secretariat staff because we are serious about this inquiry and how we can make recommendations to the government. Whether the government adopts our recommendations is out of our hands, so please follow through. With the parent involvement, it is the same with city schools. It is a problem that we face across the whole of education of them going in. Cesar was very correct when he said that we have got to feed the world. The growth of the food industry in Australia is going to be tremendous over the next 50, 100 years, and how we do it, so any solution you might come up with in getting the parents—and I understand the parents feeling it that way. All parents want their children to do better than they did; it is part of the validation of yourself as a parent. Thank you. I have appreciated your comments.

Mr MELHEM — A final one on the issue about industry, jobs and so forth. What specifically can the Victorian Government do to improve regional students’ access to work experience? You touched on this earlier when you talked about visiting workplaces and so forth—because I think that is the key: you have got to be able to see and touch and feel before you make a decision. What do you think the government can do to actually make that easier or for students to be able to access opportunities to visit companies or industries and so forth? Have you got any practical ideas?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Part of it comes down to cost as well. It will cost a school every time they take a group of students out because they have to bus them.

Mr MELHEM — So funding is one.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Funding could support us to be able to do that. With things like work experience, particularly for us in this district, what we are finding at the moment is we still have all of our schools ensuring that every Year 10 student goes out on work experience. We will help students if they cannot find local employers that will take them on for the work experience program. We are quite happy for them to go to capital cities, to interstate. We have had students go to South Australia, and we have students go across the border to New South Wales. But one of the things we find quite difficult, particularly for our members that have schools that are further out—so those schools in Ouyen and Robinvale and what have you—is the scope of employers that they can put students with. They just cannot find enough employers to put their students with, and we understand the reasons why.

But the fact that they do need to have three people in that industry for our students to be placed with them does make it quite difficult, particularly in smaller industry areas. Something that I know as a careers adviser is it is one of the questions that we have to ask as soon as we understand that is a smaller one, particularly for industries like trades, which some of our boys and some of our girls go into. It is quite difficult to say to an employer who has said to a Year 10 student or a Year 11 student, ‘Yes, we’ll take you on’, to then turn around

say, 'No, look, sorry, you actually don't have enough employees or people within the business for me to be able to place that student with you'. So that makes it quite difficult.

Because of our remoteness the fact is that we have work experience students competing with VCAL students and VET students to look for placements, and then we have some of the university students that are also looking for placements. That makes it quite difficult. So our employers, as much as they try to help, do have to limit the number of students they can take over a period of time, and rightly so. They want students who are actually actively engaged. So a student who is doing that particular certificate or a course in that industry is going to get priority over younger students as well. The fact that we talk to our employers—we have to be very clear with our employers, particularly what work experience students can and cannot do. I know that there have been issues with regard to that and employers saying, 'Well, it's pointless me taking them on if they can't do these things'. So that makes it quite difficult.

Mrs FYFFE — I have heard that.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Yes.

Mr MELHEM — When you say 'doing things', is that productive work?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Even though we do send employers information on what their legal requirements are, we send them out the fact sheets saying 'This is what a student can and can't do while they are on work experience', employers will look at that and say—if they are in hospitality and they cannot use electric knives, for example—'Then it is pointless because that is part of what we use in our kitchen'. So I prefer not to ...

Mr MELHEM — Even though they do not have to pay them and they are just free labour?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Yes, because for employers we understand that it does cost them in terms of time and also money. So we are quite conscious of that. And some of them too have had negative experiences with a student, so that kind of impacts on them. I know we have got some of our bigger industries around town. We have had a conversation with one of our major retailers, who have said that they are not willing to take work experience students this year, which makes it quite difficult.

Mrs FYFFE — What reason did they give?

Ms WRATE — Restructuring of management and the manager being new in the position.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Yes, so that makes it quite difficult as well.

Mr MELHEM — Do you reckon if there was an incentive scheme put together to encourage employers to take on more work experience students, it could help? I mean, financial assistance to employers?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — It might be something to look at.

Mr MELHEM — I am just exploring ideas.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — No, it could be something to look at because the other thing that I have found has come up personally, in the last couple of years particularly, is that some employers will stick to the \$5 a day—which we understand, and we explain that to the students—and then other employers will pay significantly more. So then we have students that come back and go, 'Well, it's not fair that I did all of this work for \$5 and you got this amount of money for it'. So even though employers feel that they should be paying a little bit more, it actually causes that schism.

Mr MELHEM — On that point, and that is why I have raised it, I know from my own experience in my previous life when I used to take them on—and I did not pay them \$5, we actually paid them \$50 a day—that I thought that gave them a bit of a boost as they actually earned money and learned something and did something productive. That is why I am asking the question: would we then look at maybe rewarding some employers to encourage them to pay a bit more? That could be an incentive for your course, to take on more and as an incentive for the students to basically take a bit of a more active role. Is that something?

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Definitely.

The CHAIR — If you have nothing more to say, on behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. Thank you very much.

Ms CLISBY-WEIR — Thank you very much.

Mr MELHEM — Thank you very much for your time. It was great.

Witnesses withdrew.