

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Mildura — 22 March 2018

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Witnesses

Mr Robin Kuhne, General Manager, Education, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing for the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee 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. We invite you to make a statement, but please, before you start, state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time for asking questions. Thank you.

Mr KUHNE — Thank you for the opportunity. I am Robin Kuhne, General Manager of Education at Sunraysia Institute of TAFE. I might start by saying that TAFE, certainly Sunraysia TAFE, is certainly in a rebuilding phase and a realignment process to make sure that our course offerings are still current with industry needs, growth demands and the projections of what the Victorian Skills Commissioner reports found. We are certainly making a conscious effort to position ourselves in response to that report. It is fair to say that I guess as a TAFE we have drifted away from industry, and our biggest fear is the maintenance of the currency of our programs. Our partnerships have really fallen away in recent times. We acknowledge that. We know that to move forward we need to partner, and I think that has been something in the past that we have done poorly.

I might just mention that I have only been at the TAFE for eight months, but prior to that I was the general manager of an organisation for 10 years that employed predominantly apprentices. We employed about 500 of those apprentices and had about 4000 students within that training organisation. We were quite a large labour hire firm. I guess the reason I have ended up in Mildura is to bring that skill to the region in terms of making sure that we recognise growth, but growth through partnerships.

I guess there are a lot of aspects to that opening 2 or 3-minute speech I have just made, and that is that we need to entrench ourselves in the schools, we need to get ourselves in the minds and the thoughts of the strategic direction that the schools are taking, because we see that as our up-front investment to fill full-time courses. I guess the biggest shift in the minds of TAFE is to really promote industry as our first step, and the way to industry is through TAFE's training program. That in itself is a significant move for us in terms of our culture and our people and making sure that we are probably not just promoting ourselves. An example of that is we have open days. Open days are just about what you can do at TAFE, whereas we certainly want to see that evolve into a careers expo of some description so we are promoting the end product and so there is a greater understanding of where the courses that students do at TAFE and the pathways there can take them.

I think that is something that is probably not fully articulated in the area, but my point of view is how someone can go from a Year 10 classroom to a fully qualified tradesperson in the industry of choice. To do that, step 1 for us is really aligning ourselves with some key growth areas: health, agriculture, horticulture and transport and logistics, and all the qualifications that cascade down from there.

But having said that, we have got a strong community obligation to still meet the aspirations of students who do not want to be in those three tiers of industry. That is a balance for us, and it is a slow shift; we are realigning our scope to make sure that local employment is met by local youth. We strongly believe that youth retention is a big philosophy of TAFE and that is new language that we have introduced—that is, what are we doing about retaining youth in this area for future growth demands?

Mrs FYFFE — TAFEs to me and I think to most in the community are that you train for specific skills, but we know that we need to have young people with transferable skills. How do you manage that within your organisation?

Mr KUHNE — We have moved to individual learning plans. We have moved well and truly away from off-the-shelf products, and to do that we really need to understand where industry will be in five years time. I think the trap for TAFE in general, if I was to make a broad statement, will be that it is too easy to pull a product off the shelf and deliver a certificate III in carpentry when we really do not know what the student is actually doing at the workplace. We are working our way backwards now. If we have got 100 carpentry apprentices, which is about the real figure that we have at the moment, we have 100 different training plans and different courses of learning in consideration of what the workplace needs and where the workplace is going. We have really staffed up our skills and job centre for that particular reason, because we have seen schools sitting here, industry sitting there, TAFE sitting here and it was a really disjointed conversation. We have just employed five new staff members to make sure that they piece that conversation together, and again that is in consideration of what dividend the employer is going to get out of it, what pathway the student wants to identify from it and just where the business is going to be in five years time rather than here and now.

The CHAIR — How well are school career advisers meeting the needs of students, and what aspects of career advice need improvement?

Mr KUHNE — I am not really across what career advisers pass on to their students, but perhaps the gaps that we do see are that TAFE is very much a second choice option. We want to see TAFE in a conversation as an option, not as a default position if the ATAR score the student was after is not realised. I do not think they should end up at TAFE because the university pathway was not realised. I guess if there was a message to pass on to careers advisers, and I do not know what information they are transferring on at the moment, it is to consider TAFE as an option. Further to that, I guess, is that I would really be disappointed to think that a student that is leaving a local school turns up to TAFE for the first time after they finish school or after they exit school. We are trying to get ourselves into the space that TAFE is a really familiar conversation for students from Years 10, 11 and 12, because people do not come to TAFE. We are 2 kilometres or 3 kilometres out of town and to get there you need to make a decision and put in some effort to actually come through our front door, so it is about breaking down those barriers. I see the careers teachers to be that vehicle to make that pathway for students from just the school into TAFE, because if someone does not do that, they are not turning up under their own steam.

Mr MELHEM — Just on that point of why TAFE is a second choice, why should it be a first choice like university? I agree with you ...

Mr KUHNE — Why should it be?

Mr MELHEM — Why shouldn't it be? Can you, as a representative of TAFE, give us something about why TAFE should be equal to university, which I think it is, or it should be. What would be a selling point, part of the career advice to students at Years 7, 8, 9 and 10, would be to say, 'Hey, they're the same', because some TAFE graduates actually end up getting paid more than university graduates, and that has been proven. You have got to have a selling point.

Mr KUHNE — All right. Well, 70 per cent of students locally, just from one school alone, do not go to university. They stay locally and they fall into labouring jobs that are labouring jobs for the next 20 years, so they actually leave industry with the same skills that they turn up to industry with. I think that is a big negative. We are pushing at the moment for a cadetship around horticulture, because we think the technology in horticulture is evolving so rapidly ...

Mrs FYFFE — Oh, boy, isn't it?

Mr KUHNE — We will not get away with a general labour hire force or general labourers, because we will turn around in two years time, not 10 years time, and realise we have not got any skilled workforce to operate the technology. From the point of view that it is an earn and learn type of position, you will start earning dollars from day one, you will learn from day one. We are big on pathways and dual enrolments at TAFE at the moment, which means that we do not want to shake hands with someone after a certificate III and not see them again. We want to talk, at the 75 per cent mark of their initial enrolment, about what is next, and that is just the way that we are regulated in terms of ...

Mr MELHEM — Have you got any specific programs now or are you planning any to go to the schools in your region to basically sell your organisation—or TAFE as an organisation is what I meant—to the students and say, 'Hey, it really is a broad career option'. Are you doing any of that?

Mr KUHNE — Absolutely.

Mr MELHEM — What areas would you like to improve on?

Mr KUHNE — The skills and jobs team is charged with that responsibility. I think SuniTAFE is such a big organisation with so many staff that we get lost in the conversation a little bit, so we have straightened it up to make sure that we have got key areas of responsibility that have got partnerships with industry. An example of that is we are about to enrol 246 staff from one organisation. That one organisation had about 55 points of contact and points of touch within TAFE, and it was just too sloppy to do anything about. We have got another industry that we are talking to about taking on 90 staff, and we have realised that. We just confirmed another 120 students this morning. It is all a result of partnerships. So it is about making our teachers more mobile and a

little bit more agile. We have been too rigid in the past, we have not been flexible and we are starting to change that language. In the space of seven or eight months this is the result of it. All of a sudden we are catering for industries' needs. My sales pitch to a school is and will continue to be: we have offered our Koori liaison officer as another example to have a hot desk in most of the schools around the area to make sure that when students leave school there is a familiar face at our end, because as simple as that sounds, that is the key missing link at the moment.

Mr CRISP — You have jumped around a couple of parts here, but I can see that TAFE are refocusing with their industry engagement on where the jobs are. Building that back into the schools to give those careers advisers and those schools the wide view you now share, how do you plan to do that?

Mr KUHNE — We are on the Sunraysia Careers Network, we are represented on the Mildura Region Trade Training Centre, we have got about 600 students under auspice arrangements in the VETiS program right now and that is a range of areas. I will make the assumption that everybody is familiar with the VET in Schools program. That pathway brands SuniTAFE in the eyes of the Years 10, 11 and 12 students ...

Mrs FYFFE — Excuse me. How do the 600 compare with, say, last year or the year before?

Mr KUHNE — They have been pretty stable, but our concern is that the VETiS program offering had been unchanged for a long period of time and it has lost alignment with where the industry jobs projections are. We are having some conversations at the moment with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority around creating an agribusiness within the school as a VET in Schools offering, because we have got a certificate IV in agribusiness with an articulation through to La Trobe and now all of a sudden we have got some interest at the secondary school level. It is about introducing a new offering that is going to have some employment outcomes linked to it.

I guess if I was to pick one driving philosophy from TAFE's point of view, it is that we bring qualifications to TAFE. They are going to clearly articulate into employment, and we have not done that before. We have trained for training's sake, and we have seen changes around the training sector. They manipulate a funding course list depending on where the employment demand is, and we are going through that with early childhood education right now, where they will not train positions beyond 2018 unless it is a traineeship because the number of positions is oversubscribed. It is not only us; the department of education, our ruler, are telling us, 'Align yourself more strongly with industry and continue to articulate outcomes, as we won't fund the course that you're running'. It is a necessary shift for us to make; it is a shift that we want to make as well.

Mrs FYFFE — That is good to hear.

Mr CRISP — As a regional TAFE, what specific challenges do students face and how can they be addressed?

Mr KUHNE — Transport—almost full stop.

Mr MELHEM — Buses, trains or cars?

Mr KUHNE — We run buses every day, and the buses are full. We run a quite successful VCAL program which is in direct opposition to the schools, but having said that, we have a great relationship with the schools for the students that just cannot bring themselves to be in the school setting. They come to an adult learning environment such as TAFE. We could run a 40-seater bus and we could fill it every day. At the moment we are running two small buses and we fill them every day. They are Koori students predominantly because they have got no mode of getting to Benetook.

When we talk about our student cohort, I guess, and when we are talking about our foundation skills, we have really got to break the mould. If Mum and Dad do not work, have not worked and have not been engaged in training and we expect the students are going to turn up to TAFE under their own steam, it just does not happen. So we are going to say a major barrier, and TAFE is only 5 kilometres that way, is getting someone to TAFE by 9 o'clock in the morning—so we are not asking anything extreme, but 9 o'clock is an early start for a lot of our students—plus its structure. So if I were to say our number one challenge, that would be it—and opportunities.

A lot of the training packages at the moment have 'work placement' attached to them, which I understand—and that is a shift to articulation with industry—but there are only so many work placements you can find in Mildura

for the 4500 students that we have currently got. You are relying on the same industry to have the same level of investment year after year after year. We are a little bit cautious about where the training packages are taking us, and I will use an example. Nursing is an example. We have got 280 expressions of interest in enrolment in our nursing program. We can only take 25 nurses because we can only secure 25 placements. There are 160-odd students that are missing out on their preferred option with TAFE because we cannot find placements. But what we do in that instance, I should say, is we do not say, 'Bad luck, see you later'; we offer individual support, aged care and allied health until more vacancies open up. We would love to take all 200, but the reality is you cannot pass that program unless you have got a placement component attached to it.

Mrs FYFFE — How long is the placement?

Mr KUHNE — One-hundred and twenty hours over two years. So we have got students on placement right now, but it is a challenge, and we are lucky that we have got great relationships with the three hospitals in town to make that happen. In Swan Hill we only have 15 students, which is relative to the available placements, so that is a strain, but that is a course that is articulated as a dual enrolment with La Trobe University. It provides an entry point into higher education for students that do not quite get the ATAR score that they need for direct entry into university, so they spend two years with us doing a diploma, which articulates into the university courses in nursing—two years with us, one year with La Trobe and into the open market.

Mr CRISP — Timing of career advice is something, too, that we were exploring earlier. In your view, when people arrive to enrol at TAFE, are they organised or have they had good advice? Are they ready? Because by the time they get to you, they have got to have made a decision about what they are doing. How confident are they in the path that they have come down to be at your door?

Mr KUHNE — Not confident and really ill-prepared is the answer to that, and it comes back to the reason behind us really wanting to push into the schools. I think the missing link is industry. I have mentioned about the VET in Schools program that runs; we have got 600-odd students doing a variety of courses one day a week within school settings. The missing link there is industry, is having industry come in at the start of the year, halfway through the year and at the end talking about their expectations of just what I would say are basic employability skills. How you present, how you construct a résumé and how you get yourself to work on time are all lacking. The time that our teachers spend on developing skills that are actually outside the parameters of the training package is enormous, and if I pulled it purely back to a financial benefit, it would mean that we have got a lot of unproductive hours in our teaching staff because they are teaching those types of skills—they are teaching the career advice stuff.

Mr MELHEM — Earlier you were talking about disadvantaged students, and you gave the example about the bus and about the Koori. I would like to sort of explore that to other groups. Could you give us some sort of example of successful programs?

Mr KUHNE — I have got plenty. A successful program would be our foundation program, which is very successful. This is the first year that we have been able to get ourselves to a position where we can offer foundation, intermediate and senior VCAL. Normally we have had all of them bundled in together just because of the volume of numbers, but because we run theme VCAL some of our students last year put together packs for the homeless community of Mildura. They researched it themselves, there was a project managed by the students and we presented that to Mallee Family Care towards the end of last year in partnership with Mildura secondary college.

From that, of itself, we doubled our students from last year because their learning style is completely different. We had lunch put on from our VCAL students last week. They are heavily involved in a hot air ballooning project. They do not actually get in a balloon and take off, but they organise—I do not know what a bunch of hot air balloons are called together, but they fly around. Our foundation students organise all those events, so everything they do is strongly linked to industry, and now we are seeing VCAL students progressing to other areas of our TAFE. So we did have that gap. That to us is a very successful program. Our VCAL program I would rate as highly successful.

Certainly with our apprenticeships in automotive—we have a 98 per cent completion rate across all TAFE apprentices. No matter what the traineeship or apprenticeship is, 98 per cent of students that start with TAFE complete them, and that is well and truly above the state average, and that is because our teachers are really well engaged with industry now.

Mr MELHEM — What about placements?

Mr KUHNE — For apprentices? Apprentices have got the placement before they come to us, so that is sort of in reverse to the full-time student.

The CHAIR — We do not have any further questions. Is there anything you would like to add or you want to finish with? It is up to you.

Mr KUHNE — No, I do not think so. I think the message from us is very clear, and that is: if we can get TAFE viewed as an option to universities, that is where we need to go. That is the main function.

Mr MELHEM — Most definitely.

The CHAIR — In that case, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time. Thank you very much.

Mr KUHNE — Terrific. Thanks very much.

Committee adjourned.