

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Ballarat—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

#### MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### WITNESS

Ms Jannine Bennett, Executive Officer, Highlands LLEN.

**The CHAIR:** All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I think you will be presenting us with a 5-minute presentation, and then we will ask questions after that. Thank you.

**Ms BENNETT:** I think you are all pretty aware of the LLENs across Victoria—31. I have proudly been in the role for six years. Fortunately we have just been re-funded for two years. You might be aware that Minister Merlino had made that announcement.

**The CHAIR:** We are very aware.

**Ms BENNETT:** I can assure you I am pretty rapt about that.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, good.

**Ms BENNETT:** We have been focusing at the LLEN for quite some time on youth unemployment and strategies within the community to assist that transition from secondary school into employment. What I have put together here is some of the data that specifically relates to Ballarat. We have a different pattern here compared to Melbourne—sorry, across Victoria generally. Our young people tend to not go on to further education or training at the same rate as other Victorian young people do. They tend to go into full-time employment at a 3% higher rate than in Victoria. The part-time employment rate is a lot higher, and I think that is one of the key issues we have here locally—underemployment of young people. The looking-for-work rate is pretty similar. This is based on the On Track data that is collected in May each year for the students that graduated or left school the previous year, so I am talking about the latest statistics here.

For early school leavers, it is fairly similar to the statistics for Victoria, but it is those Year 12 completers that really are a bit different. Why does that happen? I am not quite sure. I suspect it has been fairly consistent over years. It may be more cultural here in Ballarat, or it may be the regional city effect. I do not know why the difference occurs. The other area that we have been looking at for quite some time, and you have got a big graph that we have been developing, which is the second sheet with the blue lines over it, to look at Ballarat's youth unemployment over time. We have always thought that we have had a youth unemployment problem here, but you will notice more recently, I think, we do not have the same degree of problem as we have had in the past, which again is interesting. The rate from the statistics that we collect is that we are under the Victorian average. Why is that the case? I wonder if it has something to do with the government programs that have been given to Ballarat. We some time ago developed this resource called Jumpstart, and the reason for developing it for young people was that Ballarat was really fortunate that the Federal Government and the State Government have given us a lot of different programs, and it became confusing for parents, educators and young people—'What are they? How do I access them? What are the criteria?'—so this is why this was developed. It has a front sheet that covers all of the government, state and federal, programs.

**The CHAIR:** Do we have a copy of that?

**Ms BENNETT:** It is on our website, but I will leave this with you.

**The CHAIR:** If we can keep a copy of that, that would be great.

**Ms BENNETT:** Each of the sheets is a single sheet. It means that educators or whatever can hand this out to young people and they can choof off to the various services and access it. That has been really well received. As I said, it is also on the website. I wonder whether this focus on unemployment in Ballarat really has had a bit of an impact, and perhaps that is the case. So I thought that would be interesting for you to be aware of.

Another element that I want to comment on is the entry-level positions. On the table that is presented, as part of 'C. Jobs availability snapshot'—this is Australia wide; it is not Ballarat—we know that level 5 is the entry-level positions, and it is sitting at about 10% of the jobs advertised across Australia. I think Madam Mayor

commented on that as well. So we do know that entry-level positions can be a challenge for young people getting into the workforce.

If we move over the page, another area that I want to comment on that I think is a little bit unique in our region is that the LLEN manages a number of different contracts, and one of the programs that we manage is the local VET cluster. The VET cluster manages about 25% of the total VET students who participate in VET as part of Years 10, 11 and 12, and of course it is a terrific pathway into employment or further study, both at TAFE and university. Our VET participation numbers in total have been declining for some reason locally, and this is concerning to us. I do not have the 2018 data, but you can see that there is a trend line down. Usually we sit at over 2,000 total enrolments for VET in our region, highlands region, but that has now dropped down to under 2,000.

**The CHAIR:** How do you get that data? Where you get that data from?

**Ms BENNETT:** The VCAA collect that data, and each year they provide LLENs with what they call the data disk. It is all of the enrolments for VCE, VCAL, VET et cetera. Many of us do a forensic of that data to look at our local trends, and we have been doing that for some time.

The other area of concern for us locally as a pathway into employment is SBATs. Now, we know we have Head Start in our region; however, the SBAT numbers have been declining here as well.

**Ms ADDISON:** Jannine, what is SBAT?

**Ms BENNETT:** Sorry; school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. That is another area that is a concern. It will be interesting to see how Head Start impacts, and will we notice an improvement in the numbers? I am very much hoping that that will be the case, but I guess what I am presenting to you today are some of the trends that we are seeing in our region.

The last point on this handout is looking at the post-school destinations for Year 12 or equivalent completers who have studied VCE only without doing any VET, those that have studied VCE with VET, and then those who have just done VCAL, which means that they have done VET. And what is interesting is that the young people that undertake VCE with VET have really good outcomes, if you look at the very low percentage that are looking for work, the strong figures for how many of them are employed, the number that go onto apprenticeships, and whilst they are not participating at bachelor level as highly as you would expect, the other outcomes are really positive. So I think that just speaks to the importance of growing VET participation in our region.

I guess that is a lot of information that I have presented to you and I guess it probably will help to feed into the questions that I am expecting you will ask, so now over to you.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Can I just ask straight off the bat, what do you want to say to us that the State Government needs to change to do things or improve things for disadvantaged jobseekers?

**Ms BENNETT:** I think that what has been happening so far has been really good. What I would like to see is some evaluation of the programs that have been delivered to measure their effectiveness and then consideration through consultation with young people what they feel should be, I suppose, introduced going forward. Or should JVEN services be continued, should they be modified, should we look at something new?

**Ms CONNOLLY:** How do you think we can improve JVEN?

**Ms BENNETT:** From my perspective I know the two services that have been working here. I have not seen an evaluation of their effectiveness so I really do not feel I can comment because if I did it would just be anecdotal. We do have quite a strong relationship with Westvic. We do also occasionally catch up with Qualify. They are the two that we interact with. The work and learning centre: we have had a really strong relationship with them in the past—not so much these days. Their focus tends to be not so much on young people; they are working more with adults. I do know that service pretty well, but not how it has morphed more recently.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Do you think that jobseekers need more assistance to be job ready as they apply, and more post-placement support—like those kinds of practical, tangible improvement?

**Ms BENNETT:** Most definitely. Employers so often tell us that the kids are not what they call job ready, but I also believe employers are not young-person ready. We just recently ran a workshop as part of our B31 month here to educate employers on how they can get the best out of this young generation, because there is so much that they can offer that I often think employers are not aware of or do not focus on. They tend to be my generation, so they have particular views about young people. So that is an area I would like to see change.

I really am impressed with the mentoring program that operates in Bendigo and have been for some time wanting to look at introducing that here—the Young Industry Ambassadors program. I think that any support that we can give young people once they can get into the workforce would be really valuable.

**Ms ADDISON:** There are some really great statistics here that shine a positive light on Ballarat, but the underemployment one is a really big challenge for us. What strategies could be implemented in schools and post-school settings to reduce the risk of underemployment among young workers?

**Ms BENNETT:** Most definitely giving them opportunities to work in different industries as part of school, as in structured workplace learning. Obviously Head Start is going to be really positive because that is a more intensive structured workplace learning program. What else? A lot of the kids here have part-time work. I have not got the statistic on that but just talking to some young people recently at Phoenix, for example, it is amazing how many of them work, and probably work too much.

**Ms ADDISON:** Just so everyone else knows, Phoenix Secondary College is a local high school in Ballarat.

**Ms BENNETT:** With a very low-SES cohort. So that is, I think, positive, but I guess one of the downsides with part-time work at school is that it then gets the kids kind of locked into the retail or hospitality industry, and they tend to carry that through once they leave school. So it is a challenge.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Jannine, what more do you think can be done to get other industries and other employers talking and collaborating with schools when kids are at that stage where they are doing that work experience, so that they are not just going into the retail and hospo space but are getting a broader view of what industries are available in their regional area?

**Ms BENNETT:** I guess what you have just summarised is the new contract that the LLEN has next year, for two years. This year and the past we have been focused on disengaged young people, but we still have really focused on employment. So I think that we will be, when the new contract rolls out, looking at various different models of how you can improve that awareness of industry.

There are a few things that we have been doing already. For example, we have been educating. In cooperation with the City of Ballarat we have produced a set of slides that talk about the future of Ballarat and where the jobs are going to be. And the reason for presenting that to young people and to educators is to make them aware that this is a pretty amazing city, there is a lot happening, as you have heard from Madam Mayor, and that there are so many opportunities here for young people in lots of different industries. The purpose of that is to raise awareness and aspiration. So that is one strategy that we have done. I think I have kind of lost my way a bit on the response there.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Any examples that you have got in that regard are really helpful to us, because we can look at them and see where they can be rolled out more broadly.

**Ms BENNETT:** Another program that we have run locally in partnership is over in Daylesford. It is called The Cook, the Chef and Us—it now has some longitudinal data to look at and it is being reviewed—a partnership with their local health community. It is taking young people at Daylesford who are ready for disengagement; they have had enough of school. They obviously have a strong hospitality industry, so the idea is to partner with community health, the hospital, local chefs and local industries to give young people an immersion for 12 weeks, one day a week, into that sector. And the outcomes have just been astounding. Now we are able to track the kids that started in the first year. Next year will be its fourth year. That is funded through a grant project, and I cannot think of the organisation—it is an alcohol and drug organisation. It is not

highly expensive, but we know it is effective, because the kids are staying at school and are then more likely to undertake VET hospitality and then obviously get employment locally in the hospitality industry. That is just one example that we are pretty proud of.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent.

**Ms BENNETT:** And again that is a really strong partnership between School Focused Youth Service as well and the local community and the school.

**The CHAIR:** Can we seek your views on careers guidance and advice that school leavers are getting at school, whether that is adequate or whether there is a mismatch in terms of the expectations of that student and the job opportunities that exist, and whether they are getting the right training for the jobs that are available in the community? Do you think there is a bit of a mismatch in terms of the expectation?

**Ms BENNETT:** I think, definitely. We have a really strong career teachers network here, and they I think do the best they can with the time allowances that they are given. I am really pleased about the new initiatives that have come in from government around career education. I am optimistic that we will get some data out of, for example, the Morrisby quiz that kids are now doing in Year 9. It will be interesting to see what that is showing us about kids' abilities and therefore to look at, 'Does that match the job opportunities here in Ballarat?'. So that is one thing that I am looking forward to in the future.

I think that schools generally are not aware of the skills gap areas. For example, if you look at civil construction—desperate for workforce, have to import. So wouldn't it be great if we could train young people into that industry? It is now a VET qualification that we can deliver.

**The CHAIR:** But do the young people want to do that job—

**Ms BENNETT:** No, they do not.

**The CHAIR:** or is there a stigma attached to it? That is the issue.

**Ms BENNETT:** That is right. We have tried to introduce laboratory skills. We have strong health research focus here in Ballarat. Two kids applied, so we could not offer it. It is so frustrating when I know where the jobs are going to be.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Is that conversation being had—'If you want employment medium- to long-term, these are the industries where that is likely to occur and this is the alternative'?

**Ms BENNETT:** You probably need to ask teachers in schools. I wished I knew how to solve that problem and how to get to kids. It is hard. I think parents, too, are another group—from a LLEN perspective it is very difficult to reach them. So I do not know what the answer is except that we keep talking about where the growth industries are because we are well aware of them. So yes, it is a problem.

**Ms ADDISON:** Jannine, free TAFE has really looked at those 30 courses—I think it is up to 32 now, with child care.

**The CHAIR:** Thirty-three.

**Ms ADDISON:** Thirty-three, with our three-year-old kinder and our kinder programs as well becoming part of the free TAFE offering. What is your firsthand experience in Ballarat in terms of the level of interest in free TAFE and whether we are promoting free TAFE enough to make sure that students or young people know that that is an option for them?

**Ms BENNETT:** I think that people are well aware. The TAFE, from what I can see in many cases, cannot meet demand, so that has had an impact on the work we do, because, for example, VET health is delivered by ACU and BRACE because Federation Uni cannot accommodate. Community services is delivered by an external RTO because the uni do not have enough staff to teach the classes that they have already got, so they cannot offer VET. So I think that demand and take-up of free TAFE here is amazing. Health is just a great

example because of the pathways that you can go through and end up doing nursing, and how you can really reduce the cost of that is phenomenal.

**Ms ADDISON:** The diploma of nursing would cost you \$15,000 a year, and now it is free, so it is extraordinary.

**Ms BENNETT:** That is right. And then it takes 18 months off a bachelor. Actually at the moment I am having a conversation with the uni about how we can, with secondary school students, tap into that pathway.

There was another part of your question I do not feel I answered very well—about the impact of free TAFE. I was expecting that that might impact on the number of kids who undertake VET. In other words, they might think, ‘We’ll hold back and then do free TAFE’. I am not sure that that has been the case. I have not seen evidence of kids leaving school earlier to do free TAFE, but that is anecdotal.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions? Anything further you wanted to add?

**Ms BENNETT:** I guess just tapping on the questions you raised about social procurement., we are really fortunate that we were chosen to host the GROW program which, as you well know, is from Geelong. It has been progressing quite well. The cohorts that we are focusing on here are young people—obviously that is our expertise—but also mature female jobseekers and Indigenous young people, and young mums are another area of focus. We are really looking quite closely at social procurement and the challenges that our local businesses find in meeting social procurement targets.

I know that through RDV Anthony Schink will be taking some of the challenges that we are hearing from employers through to government soon to discuss that. I am probably not on top of it enough to speak today, but I think that feedback will be helpful, because there are not that many social enterprises here, and then the problem is employers knowing about what they are. If you use the services of Social Traders, for example, that comes at a cost. So it is a bit of a challenge. I think it needs tweaking a bit.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for being here.

**Ms BENNETT:** I will leave the Jumpstart resource with you.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please. If you can.

**Ms BENNETT:** The other final thing probably to say is that I really want to emphasise the voice of young people, and Madame Mayor did that as well. This report that we produced a couple of years back looked at case studies of 16 young people who disengaged from mainstream education, and it talks about the reasons why and what could have been done to make a difference. So it is a rich document.

**The CHAIR:** Did you produce that document?

**Ms BENNETT:** We did, yes. And I did the interviews too, which was such an honour—to hear what they had to say firsthand. And we used their voice to tell the story rather than me summarising. I have two copies, if you want two, or I can leave one.

**The CHAIR:** One is enough, I think.

**Ms BENNETT:** Okay. I will leave both of those there.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you.

**Ms BENNETT:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

**Witness withdrew.**