

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

Melbourne – Thursday 9 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

William Naughton-Gravette, Policy and Advocacy Manager,

Ivy Sheng,

Risith Jayasekara, and

Radha Katyare, Victorian Student Representative Council.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones are switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

Before I continue I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I welcome any elders and community members who are here today imparting their knowledge of this issue to the committee.

I would like to also welcome our members today and our witnesses. Joining us are Ivy, William, Rish and Radha. But before continuing, I would like to introduce the committee to everyone. I am Trung Luu, the Chair of the committee. To my right is Deputy Chair Mr Ryan Batchelor. To my left, Mr Aiv Puglielli, Ms Moira Deeming, Dr Renee Heath. We have Ms Melina Bath and Mr Richard Welch, and on Zoom also we have got Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mr Michael Galea.

So welcome again to the witnesses, but before I continue I would like to read some information to you. As we gather evidence today, all evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and be posted on the committee's website.

Welcome again. Just for the Hansard record, could you state your full name and the organisation you are with, please.

**Ivy SHENG:** Hi, I am Ivy Sheng, and I am with Vic SRC as an exec member.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** William Naughton-Gravette, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Vic SRC.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Risith Jayasekara, Student Executive Advisory Committee member, Vic SRC.

**Radha KATYARE:** I am Radha Katyare. I am an exec at Vic SRC.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Victorian Student Representative Council. Thank you for your time here. Before we proceed, I do just like to open by inviting you to make an opening statement before we open to the panel to ask you questions, so feel free.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** Thank you, Chair. My colleague Ivy will provide an opening statement for us.

**Ivy SHENG:** Hi, everyone. My name is Ivy, and I am on the student executive advisory committee for 2024. I am in year 9 at school, and I go to MLC, Methodist Ladies College. With me are my colleagues Risith and Radha as well as William, who is our Vic SRC Policy and Advocacy Manager.

Essentially Vic SRC is the peak body for students in Victoria, and we advocate for primary- and secondary-aged students across Victoria regardless of whether they go to a public or a private school. We are also a student-led organisation. As the executive advisory committee, we are working with the board and our CEO to create policy and do all of our advocacy work. We are constantly working together and trying to amplify the voices of our fellow students.

Through talking to students across Victoria we have come to be aware of all the issues that Victorian students think are important, and these are our advocacy priorities. The report you guys have been provided with is our congress report, which has been compiled from what is our annual flagship event, which is congress. It is run by us as the executive advisory committee. As you would have read in it, it talks about issues like mental health, inclusivity and all of the issues that students in Victoria think are really important. Essentially the most important thing is that because education is for students, it should be co-designed by students so that it best suits their needs. We are really excited to talk to you guys more about these issues today.

Alongside all of these things, there is one idea that unites them all, which runs through all of our advocacy, and it is student voice. This concept we have been working on developing for many years now. All of our work essentially is focused on student voice. We want to promote student voice, and we really care about the voices of students. Thank you. I am really excited to talk to you guys today.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any other comments you want to add at all to the opening statement? Okay. Thank you for your statement, Ivy. I will open this up to the committee to throw some questions at you. Please feel free to respond accordingly. Deputy Chair, if you would like to start.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, guys, for coming along. It is great have you here and have your voice as part of this committee. As a former or, I would say, recovering SRC member at my old high school, it is very good have you here. I surprised everyone on the committee on that note.

But I want to start there, on student voice. Obviously, you play an incredibly important role statewide in ensuring that students voices are heard by schools and by government. How is it going? How do you feel that the education department and schools at an individual level are responding to your calls for greater student voice and greater student engagement in policy matters?

**Ivy SHENG:** I would say that, to kick us off, definitely a lot of work has been done for student voice, but it is also important to consider that in a post-pandemic context a lot of the things that students need have actually changed, and we think it is really important to keep that policy up to date and also for different schools. Obviously, Victoria is very, very diverse, and every school is different, so to me student voice would look different in every school. There is really important work being done right now by our organisation and by individual schools, but there is obviously still a long way to go.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** As Ivy mentioned before, I would like to add that definitely student voice is not a kind of one-size-fits-all ideology. Every school is different. Every student's needs are different, and every other education stakeholder has to make sure that every student feels heard.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Where do you think it works well, or when you think it works well?

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** I would be happy to jump in here. Firstly, let me reiterate what Risith and Ivy have both said. We are greatly encouraged by some of the progress that has been made, namely through the Department of Education. We are working very closely with them, whether it is in senior secondary reform or mental health reform. We have established student bodies to continue to feed into the reform processes there, which is a great thing. What we lack at the moment is that systemic piece whereby often student voice and working with students in that collaborative way is considered an add-on, a nice-to-have, an additional. We would prefer to see it embedded within that policy-making process.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So you think gains have been made, but we have got a bit of a way to go to systematise the engagement?

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** Absolutely. Through that engagement we have learned that there is a spectrum of understanding when it comes to student voice, both in how to apply it and what it is actually. In terms of when we talk about student voice, firstly, we recognise that almost everyone has the best of intentions

– everyone recognises the need to listen to students. But when we say student voice, we mean that listening is step one and in fact what we are aiming for is collaborative decision-making between students and adults at every level of their education, whether that is with their teachers in the classroom or all the way up to collaborating with the government on education policy. So arriving at your point, I think that where we have seen it work really well is in those very targeted settings where the government has made a really conscious effort to engage groups like Vic SRC and ask the question, to say, ‘Look, we are focused in this area. We know the value of student voice, so let’s work together on it.’ Then that conscious effort has led to great results. But at the school level especially, we see some schools do it wonderfully and other schools, not so. So that kind of imbalance is where we would really like to see improvements across the board.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Great. I might leave my time there.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Ryan. I will continue with a couple of questions, mainly focusing on the students and how you feel. I know you represent 15 schools. Hopefully, you can speak on behalf of the schools. I am not too sure of the balance of schools, whether it is public or private or who you are representing. So my question to you is: how do you feel as students about your program and your curriculum? Is that too much, or is it just right in the way it has been presented to you?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would like to say that the curriculum, as in the core curriculum, I would say it is definitely something achievable by students. But definitely, depending on the school, the curriculum does change because the school does add electives and extra programs on top of the core curriculum. I believe yes, depending on the school, it is definitely achievable.

**Ivy SHENG:** For me, I would say that because I am in year 9, there are definitely aspects of our curriculum that I have not fully experienced yet. Obviously year 9 is kind of like that transition into when you are starting to think more about your future and take courses that would contribute towards that. But I think in terms of what I have heard from the older students at my school, I would say that my school does do a pretty good job in having that broad range of paths for students to take in terms of diversity and the range of courses available. But I know that in a lot of schools across Victoria there are issues with the students feeling like the definitions of success at their school and the ideals that the subject choices are based on are not fully allowing them to explore their passions and interests. I think that is really important in moving forward – just making sure that every student has a chance to take whatever path they may want regardless of how the course they take may impact their overall academic performance.

**Radha KATYARE:** I was just going to say that it is different for every student because every student is going through their own learning journey, so you cannot really base it off a whole group of people because it is a different journey for everybody.

**The CHAIR:** Hopefully you have spoken and talked amongst yourselves, with your peers and stuff. Let me mention about tests and assessments leading up to year 12. How do you feel in relation to the tests or the assessments put upon yourself? Do you feel it is overwhelming? Do you feel that it is achievable from your standard and as you talk among your peers? I just want to hear your thoughts and your thinking about the assessments that the department has put upon you or the school has put upon you at the moment?

**Radha KATYARE:** I feel like with the tests that is also kind of different for every student, but from what I know lots of students – there are like two different groups of students. There are some students that absolutely despise the tests, and then there are other students that are okay with it, and then there are other students that love doing the tests. So really it is more personal than just saying, ‘Do you like doing tests?’ Again, everybody has their own learning journey.

**The CHAIR:** I would just like to add to that, mainly to ask: is it stressful? That is what I am trying to ask – is the stress overloading and overwhelming at all? That is what I am trying to get at.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say tests, especially. Obviously it does depend on what subject matter is being taught, and it is a very personal thing again, as Radha said, because some people may have different strengths in subjects and other learning. But I believe that schools should be implementing diverse ways to gauge a student’s progress, not just in formal tests but in projects, in classwork and in a lot of other different ways so that students could feel less stressed out and less locked in and have more freedom of expression in the way they show their progress in learning the subject matter.

**Ivy SHENG:** I would say that especially with the teacher shortage now, even though the workload itself might be manageable – for me, I find it is quite manageable, and I know that applies to some of my peers as well – because we can sense as students when teachers are overloaded and stressed, it does impact us and it does influence our mindset when we approach the workload. It is a span of different impacts, from the course material they are able to provide and the lesson plans they are able to come up with in a short period of time to just seeing them maybe have worse mental health or feel more tired at school. I think students are very heavily impacted by their teachers. I guess for me, that is what I am really focusing on as a key issue for our tests and workload. I think we should not only focus on students but how teachers feel as well.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** If I may very briefly supplement everything we have just heard – by virtue of the fact that our group this morning are all in year 9 – we have heard from many students who are in senior secondary at the moment about these kinds of impacts you are speaking to, Chair, about study stress, anxiety and all of these negative feelings and also a really prominent fear of failure and a fear of their future, because, to Ivy’s point, they are made to think that their future hinges on their test results, right? And in many cases we see that schools continue to idolise this pathway of academic excellence beyond alternative vocational applied learning pathways that are absolutely as viable and absolutely can lead to a rich and successful post-school career just as much as academic excellence can, and that is taking a real toll.

The other thing that students are really saying at this time, to Ivy’s point, is that they do not necessarily feel like they have the support that they need, especially in years 11 and 12, when it comes to advanced subjects, especially like maths and science, because of the teacher shortage. Because they have CRTs coming in all the time, they have a rapid succession of teachers delivering their instruction; they cannot build relationships with their teachers. Their teachers in turn do not properly understand what they as students need to succeed in that classroom, and a snowball effect occurs whereby they are left behind, they cannot catch up and that adds to stress, anxiety and a fear of their future, which is a really difficult thing – which in turn leads to additional stressors on our mental health and support systems.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thanks for that. Aiv.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for coming in today. Let the record show I went to high school with William, just for full disclosure. For the student representatives here yesterday, we have been talking about testing and exams, and acknowledging you are in year 9 and you are going to go into those years ahead, assuming you are taking that pathway, how, in your view – it is personal, as we have heard, and it can be diverse – do you feel that we should be testing you to really define success in your eyes? And it might be different for each of you.

**Radha KATYARE:** I feel like my school is very exam-based, very test-based. I am doing exams to get into VCE access next year, and most of it is about my test scores and how I do on my exams, which creates a big stress on me. I have just one teacher that is basing it off our learning, how we work in class and how we do our work, and I feel like if more schools implemented that and if more schools created different ways – not of testing, just seeing how students work – then it would take a major stress load off of the students, if that makes sense.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes, totally.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** As I was saying before, and as Radha said, the fundamental idea of a test is to just gauge how much the student has progressed and if the student requires intervention or more support from their teachers. Again, it is diverse and depends on each student, but there should be a selection of ways a student can demonstrate that progress rather than just students doing a test. If they were to fail on the test, or if they were not good in that high-stress environment, that could be an inaccurate demonstration of their academic ability compared to their ability to work in groups, on projects and in much more relaxed environments.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thanks. Anything further?

**Ivy SHENG:** I agree with what was said, totally. But I also think in terms of academic awards, which my school has, and I think quite a lot of schools have – there is also the idea that students and their parents are from different generations and the parents have their own set of values that might intersect with students’ but not necessarily be exactly the same. I know that with the parents at my school there is definitely a want to get a gauge – like a more academic gauge – on how well a student is tracking. But then there have been student-run

proposals at my school where students were saying that you needed a different way to track their progress – like their progress in classes, how well they focus et cetera. I think both are equally important. Just because we are listening to students it does not necessarily mean that parents' views are completely wrong. I think it is important to have that balance.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. Thank you. Just further to the points that have been raised: in that sort of standard VCE pathway, that sort of academic excellence idea that we spoke about, do you feel like we are putting too much pressure on the big exams at the end? Is that something that we kind of agree with across all the students here?

**Radha KATYARE:** I feel like there is massive pressure. What I have been hearing, from year 7, is that we are doing these tests and we are learning all of this for the year 12 exams. So we are going through all of our high school experience just for those exams.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Like cramming for it?

**Radha KATYARE:** Yes, and it is preparing us for it. But in reality, it is just adding extra stress. Honestly, it is not helping; because how is doing a test on something in year 7 really going to help me with an exam in year 12? I understand the idea of working up to it, but for my personal experience, I have been told that my whole high school learning is going to be based off the year 12 exams, and it should not be like that, because everybody learns at a different pace and everybody, again, has a different learning journey. Having the pressure from year 7 all the way to year 12 is just very stressful, and there should be a different approach to it.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say, from what I have heard from senior secondary students – not especially at my school but a lot of local government schools – they would say they have a very easy year 7, 8, 9 and then all of a sudden when VCE begins there is a huge pressure on them, and that is why they really drop out – because they are not used to that pressure and they are not used to handling, all of a sudden, the bang of stress.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** Can I very briefly say – I know we have got limited time, and I note that you are speaking to the University of Melbourne right after this – the graduate school of education are doing fabulous work in this space with their new metrics program. It is becoming increasingly obvious that high-stakes testing is problematic and also that there are alternatives that take strength-based approaches that can at the same time retain that rigorous element of academic progress and achievement – retain that measurement – while alleviating a lot of that stress by virtue of a strength-based approach per student.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for being here today. I would like to talk about school refusal or school absenteeism, noting that in recent times there have been some reports that say that since COVID, since 2021 to 2022, there has been a decline in attendance rates. I think your submission had some comments around Benalla school students. Regional school students and absenteeism has doubled since COVID, increasing up to 35 days. I am being very specific, but would you like to talk about what you feel are the drivers of students not wanting to go to school and therefore being absent from the classroom.

**Radha KATYARE:** I think one factor could be the teacher shortage, and not having support at school kind of just makes some students feel like there is no point in going. It could also just be the individual student – the student could be going through some mental health issues or some wellbeing issues, and they might not have a good support system, again, with the teacher shortage, or they just might not have a good situation at home. So there are a lot of factors that may be going into why a student has not been going to school.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I have personally heard this from teachers themselves – during tests they would say, 'None of this matters' or 'The only thing that matters is VCE.' And I feel like that compels students to be absent from school, because that idea that it is only VCE that matters, nothing else of this matters, is being driven into them from years 7, 8, 9. And that basically just removes any foresight and makes them blind to the

idea that years 7, 8, 9 are also vital parts of their education. Not only does that have a huge impact on them, it is also going to help them in the later years as well.

**Melina BATH:** And you mentioned very much about the rapport between student and teacher. That is very much an individual thing from my experience, but do you feel that the culture within the school – it is almost like teachers are feeling overwhelmed so they are sort of saying, ‘Oh, it just doesn’t matter.’ This is not all cases, but is that what you are sensing from your group?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Yes. We would say that that connection between teachers and students is also very strained due to the teacher shortage as well and the teachers having not enough time to create bonds with students and support them with their diverse needs.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. You have picked up on the CRT issue. How prevalent do you think it is? I know you have come from different schools, but how prevalent do you think it is across your peers?

**Radha KATYARE:** Recently one of my teachers was not here for I think, like, half a term, so we had a CRT for most of the classes. And what we noticed was when we got our tests back we did not do as well as we did on our other tests. So I feel like having a consistent teacher helps. It just gives more consistency, and it can help students understand topics better because they have been learning with the same techniques throughout the whole time, whereas if we have CRTs, CRTs may have different ways of teaching, and that can confuse the students and make them not do as well.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Again, building on Radha’s point, if you have a CRT for different lessons, that CRT would not have an idea on how the students are doing and they would not be able to cater to the students’ diverse needs. I would say the teacher shortage has especially impacted my school, because like Radha our English teacher has been not present at school for around 80 per cent of the term, and we had different CRTs every lesson, which meant we got basically nothing done. When the teacher came back, we went all the way back to the start of the term and we worked our way onwards –

**Melina BATH:** So that lack of continuity is impacting on that student learning?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Yes. And especially during the week I would say we have at least three or four CRTs.

**Melina BATH:** My time is finished – would you mind me asking, are you at a state-based or an independent school?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I am at a state school.

**Radha KATYARE:** Me too.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Mr Galea, do you have some questions? Michael?

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks for joining us today. I would like to start by asking about some peripheral cultural experiences at school. Obviously, academics is very important but so are a number of other things, I know, too. If you are all in year 9, you would have been in primary school when the ban of mobile phones came in, I am assuming. Firstly, was that an issue in primary schools? But secondly, how has your high school experience been with that ban? Is it something that comes up as a conflict much? Do you see a lot of kids trying to bring their phones into the classroom? And if you could talk to me a little bit about the social attitudes of your peers with regard to mobile phone use.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say that students definitely understand the mobile phone ban, and at my school they have been very complacent with the ban itself. I have not seen anyone try to bring a phone into the class or use it, because they all understand that it does serve as a distraction and could hinder their learning.

**Radha KATYARE:** I just want to add, I have a different experience completely. In my school phones are practically everywhere. Honestly, if you ask any student, they have it in their pocket. I feel like it is just more of a problem now that it has been banned than when it was not banned, because nice kids are getting in trouble for

having their phones. Was it really that big of an issue before that they had to ban it? Why was it that big? It is just getting more students in trouble than before.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I have only seen students getting in trouble with the mobile phone ban during recess or lunch. I have not seen anyone being called to an office or anyone getting caught with their mobile phones at school in classes, but especially during lunch or recess I would see it pretty often.

**Radha KATYARE:** Can I just add on again. Again, I have a completely different side. In my school kids are on their phones during the class, not necessarily in a bad way – they could just be texting their parents, or they could be looking at something. But the phone ban is strict at my school. If you get caught with it twice, it goes to the office. If it you get caught with it a few times, it goes to some place in the city and your parents have to go and pick it up. I feel like it is not very followed anyway. Even though there is a phone ban, it is not very implemented, because kids still go on their phones. I know a lot of kids that have gotten their phones taken. I am in green house, and it would go to green house and their parents would have to come and pick it up for them. I have had a completely different experience.

**Michael GALEA:** It is very interesting to have those different experiences.

**Ivy SHENG:** I would say my school is like a combination of your two schools. The students understand the reasoning behind the ban, but you still see students with their phones out in the hallways sometimes. At school you see students bringing their phones into classes quite often but not necessarily scrolling in class; they might just have it inside their laptop bag to check the time or occasionally text their parents or something like that. So it is understood, but it is followed to a certain extent, I would say.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say phones definitely do have a use in schools. If I was walking in the hallway and I forgot what classroom my class was in, I would be able to check Compass or whatever learning management system was on my phone, but I would say the negatives heavily outweigh the positives, as in, for students, if they have their phone on them, it is much easier to get distracted. So while it does have its positives, I would say, still, I understand thoroughly the mobile phone ban, and I support it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thanks, Michael.

**Michael GALEA:** It is really great to hear such a difference of perspectives. In any of your experiences, have any of you seen or heard of students filming other students or teachers in an inappropriate way, perhaps as part of a prank or something else at school?

**Radha KATYARE:** I can take this one as well. At my school – I am from a site or a place where a lot of fights happen. I have experienced a lot of students filming the fights and getting suspended for that. There are also just kids in the bathroom filming themselves vaping and stuff like that. So I feel like it is a big problem – students filming other students. When you said ‘students filming teachers’, that reminded me there was an incident where a teacher got their phone stolen from a student, or something like that, and it was all filmed by another student and shared around a bunch. It became a major problem in my school, so I feel like there is an issue of students filming other people without their permission.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Michael. Let us pass on to our next questions.

**Michael GALEA:** Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you. Thank you, guys, so much for coming and presenting. I have a couple of questions from maybe a bit of a different angle. I think there are the more, if you like – I have heard a few people say it – academic students, and then there are the ones who can take the other pathway. But what I think we would love to get to as an education system is that if you choose another pathway, it is not because you are not academic. Have there ever been times when you have felt behind and unable to catch up? If so, what is it that you would have needed in order for that not to happen?

**Radha KATYARE:** This is my personal experience. I am in the accelerated class, and in year 7 it was a big jump from just doing normal stuff to doing advanced. I feel like what I needed then was somebody to support me saying that it is normal to be confused and it is normal to ask questions when everybody else understands. I



feel like that is something that a lot of students do not get, and they get afraid to ask questions during class, which in reality just brings down their scores because they do not understand the topic but they are too scared to ask questions because everybody else does.

**Renee HEATH:** That is interesting.

**Radha KATYARE:** Yes, so I feel like a support system for that would be good.

**Renee HEATH:** That is wonderful.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Coming from a selective entry high school, I would say the transition in year 9 definitely was a huge difference and I had trouble catching up. But, again, as Radha said, asking questions and not understanding the content is heavily stigmatised in schools, especially inside home and by school peers. Not just that, I would say that pathways other than VCE are also stigmatised, and it is basically very undesirable to do a vocational major or any pathway other than VCE. That stigma stems from other generations thinking, 'Oh, you must be dumb if you don't do VCE.' I believe that it is definitely not on.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** If I may, the stigma is a major issue, definitely. And it is one of the defining barriers that stands in the way of students chasing those aspirations and doing so in a way that does not belittle them. Another thing that we have heard a lot from students is that they would really have valued additional information about their options earlier on. There is this sense that they get to year 9, year 10 and even year 11 and then all of a sudden they are drawn to make these decisions about what they want to do and how they want to approach their VCE et cetera and they do not feel nearly equipped to do that. Oftentimes when they do receive that information it is not in an unbiased fashion, which reinforces those stigmas – you know, getting all sorts of messages, whether from teachers or whether from parents or the community, about 'Oh, you really should consider the VCE' or 'You really should head to uni' and all of these things. It all contributes to that notion.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Adding on to what William said – sorry, I have lost my train of thought.

**Radha KATYARE:** I would like to add to what William said, actually. He said how students do not get enough information about it, and I have had that experience and a lot of people in my class have had that experience. We have the opportunity to do VCE access, but half the students in my class did not even know what that was. Still most of the students do not know what to pick for what careers they want to do when they are older. The only thing that the school has really done is the Morrisby test, and we still have not got any results for that. And we have to pick our subjects at the end of this term. So we get a very short amount of time to decide our whole future, practically.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** Again, students do not receive enough education or information on what their future career pathways are. Again, vocational pathways are heavily stigmatised. VCE is basically the only option that is given to us, especially in selective entry high schools. I would say that in an ideal case, students should be receiving information about how they are to choose what they want to do and what pathways are available to them as soon as possible. I would say ideally this would be from year 9 onwards. But unfortunately, I have not received anything, I have not learned anything about what my future career pathways could be, and I have had to research and read into that myself and not had somebody who is supposed to be there to guide me through it actually guide me through it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Good morning, guys. You are doing great, you are going well. I have got a couple of different questions. I will start with the best one first, I think. AI is here and it is here to stay. I think it is going to be a good thing, but obviously it creates opportunities for misuse or other issues. What is your experience of AI, what do you think the role of AI is going to be in education going forward and how is it going to affect your next three years, as well?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say the role that AI has – it has its positives, but it definitely has its negatives as well. Students use AI to cheat on assessments, especially essays and that sort of stuff, because artificial intelligence is very good at providing text. I would say even though it is very easy to catch something written by AI, I believe that schools definitely should be monitoring this more and understanding it, because

teachers definitely do not have a good grasp on what AI is, how to detect it and how to combat its use. Students are not being told the negatives of using AI because students are only thinking of the present, as in, 'Oh, I can get this assignment done and do whatever I want in the future,' but they are not understanding that this is actually hindering their learning and they will not be learning the subject matter properly.

**Radha KATYARE:** Honestly, I have a little bit of a different perspective. Obviously students do use AI to cheat on tests and stuff, but for me personally I have used ChatGPT to understand topics better, because sometimes Google can be really confusing and they use words that I do not understand. If I ask ChatGPT to explain it to a 14-year-old, it helps me understand topics better. I feel like it has a bit too much stigma around it – I understand why, because of the cheating – but it can be helpful.

**Richard WELCH:** It can be a tool, right? It can be a tool to be harnessed, in some way.

**Radha KATYARE:** Yes.

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say another key issue with AI is that it makes information up. It does not present factual information when you ask it to write something. So if I were to tell it to, say, cite a research paper on this topic, it would say, 'Okay, this is the title of the research paper from this journal,' and I search for it but I cannot add it to the bibliography because it does not exist. So I ask it for a DOI number, and it gives me a completely false one that does not exist. It is the same issue if you ask it to quote text in a book, it would make up its quotes because you cannot find it in the book. Unless you specifically give it word-by-word information you want it to cite, it will make up fake information, which is definitely not ideal for students.

**Ivy SHENG:** Sorry, can I just add, I would say has been really helpful in my school is when teachers actually tell us what things like ChatGPT could be good for. I had this really good teacher – I did an immersion program, French immersion. Half our subjects were taught in French, so that learning process was different for us because we were picking up the language; the teacher was speaking in French to us and then we also had to retain the content. What that teacher did that I thought was really good was she gave us a set of tools that enabled us to use AI in a way that, as Radha said, would help us to understand topics rather than encouraging us to plagiarise. Because of that, it actually – I forget the term for it, but do you know when you say not to do something and young people and people in general are more incentivised to do it?

**Melina BATH:** Rebel.

**Ivy SHENG:** Yes, exactly – rebellion. When that teacher did that, my class actually used ChatGPT less. We also had better results because we were able, when we needed the help, to recognise that and then use it to our advantage. That had better outcomes than I would have expected. So I think instead of banning AI and having talks in assemblies like 'You can't use AI' and demonising it – it is so useful for so many things. It is a tool for us in the end.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** If I may, a ban will never work. It is inevitable at this time – tremendous potential, I think. It is also worth noting that we are at the absolute raggedy frontier of AI at the moment. We are in the Wild West of AI. We are at a time where results are mixed, but the potential, as we have heard from Ivy, is great. I also think there is great potential in reducing the administrative burden on teachers to kill half of that paperwork and make sure that they can spend more time in the classroom with their students. So I think that if we can take that mindset into the policy-making space alongside our students collaboratively, that is how we find an effective way forward on AI.

**Richard WELCH:** I think that is a really good role for the SRC, actually, to be in that policy area.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Richard. We are just out of time. We have got a few more people on the committee who want to ask questions. Do you mind just narrowing it down to one or two questions, please, Lee?

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Yes, sure, Chair. Thank you for your submission and coming along today. I will get straight into it. You spoke earlier about the stresses and pressures on students. To what degree has social media contributed to that, and are there any ways that you can think of to mitigate that?

**Radha KATYARE:** I feel like social media has created more of a peer pressure than an academic pressure on students, but the peer pressure kind of leads to – I am trying to gather my words. Through the peer pressure students do things like vaping and wagging and other bad stuff, which in turn has a bad effect on their learning and on their academic pressure as well.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** On their mental health.

**Radha KATYARE:** Mental health, yes. So I feel like it has more of a peer pressure on students.

**Ivy SHENG:** Also in terms of the idea that in school – our friends in school are so special because we are together with them every day, and we know more about them because we are literally together with them. I have found that as people get older there is more of a sense of updating each other on friendships, having long-distance friendships. Rather than experiencing things together, you are having to update each other on what has been happening and that connection is then kind of lost. I think with social media, it is kind of promoting that in a way to me. Rather than just living in the moment people tend to whip out their phone and send a picture to their friends. In terms of academic pressure, I have not seen as big of an impact at my school, but I do think the sense of lack of connection is definitely relevant.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Right. I might leave it there. I am just conscious of time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Lee. Moira, if you want to ask a question.

**Moira DEEMING:** Thank you. My question relates to the stress issue that you are all clearly struggling with. I have been very sad to listen to you speak about education as just this one big stressful training exercise for exams that you feel unprepared for and that you feel that you are going to fail, and then you feel that your lives are going to be catastrophically damaged. This is devastating for me to hear, and I am very sorry that you are feeling that way because I am sure teachers actually do not want that to be your perspective and your experience. I think that most teachers love the job because they have so much hope and they enjoy guiding kids towards a bright future, all of them. I would like to hear that you enjoy learning for the sake of learning, just because the world is interesting – that would be great.

But stress is a part of life, and you have to do stressful things. I am just getting concerned, I think, about perhaps students not getting help to manage stress – not just avoiding it or finding ways to avoid stressful situations, which of course is not invalid, that is good, but there are going to be stressful situations. Do you feel that you are getting enough support to actually have an attitude where you can manage stress and overcome challenging situations, or do you think that is something that could happen? What is going on for you guys?

**Risith JAYASEKARA:** I would say that especially the support that schools provide, especially in the mental health context, is inadequate. There are not enough staff trained to properly give advice and support to students facing mental health issues for them to properly navigate and understand what is happening to them and how they can combat this. Again, in the Vic SRC congress report it highlighted that there are not enough qualified mental health personnel for each school and there is not enough support being given to each student regarding their mental health and how they can combat challenges.

**Ivy SHENG:** I just wanted to say: I know we have talked a lot about the problems of mental health in schools, but as an organisation we are really focusing on the problems, because our goal is to really get rid of those problems and make education something that is really enjoyable for students. There are so many positives to education that we have not really gotten into depth on today, but I totally get what you mean. Mental health is definitely a big issue, but it is not overpowering; it is not all that we think education is. So I think that is important to recognise as well.

**William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE:** And I think your comments have absolutely underscored the fact that schools need to be a place where students can get access to effective support for their mental health and wellbeing, and I would like to underscore the fact that the government is doing a lot of work in this space, which is very encouraging – a massive amount of investment. But we do think that, once again, student voice is one of these missing links that stands to translate those investments into effective outcomes. Just noting the fact that the mental health and wellbeing needs of any given group of students within one particular community at one particular school are going to be necessarily different to another group of students at another school, that is why it is necessary to make sure that students are involved collaboratively in that process when schools are

taking decisions about what kind of mental health and wellbeing support is delivered to their students, to make sure that it is what they actually need and is responsive to their needs in that way – taking a place-based approach.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Time is running out. I want to say thank you to the council for coming in and giving your perspective. It is very important to hear the students' perspective in relation to how education is going. On behalf of the committee, we wish you the best for your future moving forward, and we hope with what you have submitted we can recommend much to assist you with your study and your future. Thanks so much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**