

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills

Melbourne—Tuesday, 14 June 2022

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Deb Tsorbaris, Chief Executive Officer, and

Dr Michele Lonsdale, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, and Director, Policy, Research and Advocacy, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken at this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. 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. Could I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thanks very much, Michele and Deb, for being with us today.

Ms TSORBARIS: I am happy to start with my opening statement. Thank you so much. I am Deb Tsorbaris, the CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and my colleague Dr Michele Lonsdale is with us this morning. As you know from our submission, the Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. Our member agencies provide a wide range of services from early years to out-of-home care and young people interacting with the youth justice system. As the industry body for our sector the Centre has a key role to play in supporting the creation of a pipeline of skilled workers and high-calibre graduates so our member agencies can support the needs of Victoria's most vulnerable children and families. We also work with the education sector from early years education and school education through to further and higher education across several programs to make sure all children and young people, no matter what their background or family situation, can engage in and benefit from learning.

The centre is currently working with the Victorian Government on a workforce paper that will guide a more strategic approach to workforce skills shortages in child and family services. We co-chair the ministerial advisory group which is overseeing the development of the paper on how we can create a workforce pipeline of high-calibre social workers in Victoria. As part of this work the Centre has recently completed a literature review—that is, Dr Lonsdale has—of international and national evidence relating to attracting and retaining professionals in child and family services. A key theme to come out of this review is the need for better collaboration between universities, the community sector and other stakeholders, rather than each working in a silo without each other.

The Committee's focus on the topic of Victorian universities' investment in skills is of great interest to us. There is some urgency to create a pipeline of trained and capable workers to meet escalating need. For many of our children and young people and families the global pandemic has intensified existing situations of hardship and disadvantage, adding further economic, social and health challenges to the daily lives of vulnerable families in Victoria. The centre is involved in several workforce initiatives with universities to support students and to deliver graduates with the skills needed to understand and support families with significant and complex needs.

We mentioned Raising Expectations in our submission. This has been an extremely effective collaboration between our community services and three partner universities. The program was initially funded by the Myer family and more recently by the Department of Education and Training. Raising Expectations works with universities and now every TAFE in Victoria to better support young people who have been in care to access and complete post-secondary education. In 2021 our partner universities had around 700 care-leaver students enrolled in courses. When Raising Expectations started in 2016, there were only 43 care-leaver students enrolled. These are staggering numbers. The program shows what can be done when universities work together with the not-for-profit sector to deliver better outcomes for vulnerable students.

We also referred in our submission to a paid internship pilot initially funded for a modest sum by the State Government. This pilot involves working with a small number of community service organisations and universities to implement a paid placement that enables social work students to be paid by the community service organisations while they are doing their final placement. The pilot is still in the early stages, but feedback from the community sector organisations in the trial, students and the two universities so far has been very positive. We are also currently trialling a highly innovative unpaid internship working with Victorian

universities to link students wishing to gain research skills with CSOs needing assistance with research projects. There is great interest from the universities and from our sector in coming together in this way to solve the challenge of student placements for universities and the research needs of our sector.

We look forward to the findings and recommendations of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, and as the industry body for child and family services in Victoria the Centre is keen to contribute to the activities that will flow from the work of the Committee. We welcome the possibility of a long-term strategic and collaborative approach to addressing workforce challenges, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. A pipeline of high-calibre graduates is in the interests of all Victorians, not only our most vulnerable children, young people and families. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deb. I might kick off with a question. How can the Victorian Government promote innovative partnerships between universities and the community services sector to encourage more projects like Raising Expectations and your internship pilot?

Ms TSORBARIS: In many ways it really is about scaling some of these great ideas, and we go into some detail in our submission in relation to Raising Expectations. It is quite small, and so is, as I mentioned, the internship pilot. These are small. They are, in many ways, test and try. And now it is about scaling those initiatives to the degree that we would like to see. Something like Raising Expectations, if it were to be scaled across Victoria, would mean that all care leavers would have access to this initiative, not only those that are currently gaining access. There is an enormous need for student placement coordination and these internship pilots that I talked about. We are getting phone calls every day. We know that it fast-tracks social workers when we use these internship models. It is awful to say it, but in this circumstance most of this, from our perspective, is not about innovation; it is actually about the resources to be able to expand them. Thank you for your question.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deb. Gary, did you have a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, John. Thanks, Deb. In relation to diversity in university enrolments, what measures can universities implement to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds, including disadvantaged students, such as care leavers, to study courses leading to careers in child and family services? What role has the Victorian Government in supporting diverse enrolments in these courses?

Ms TSORBARIS: I might ask my colleague Michele to make a start, and then I will add to her answer. Michele, would you be happy to make a start?

Dr LONSDALE: Thank you, Deb. In terms of care leavers, the Victorian Government has funded Raising Expectations, which enables the partner universities but also other universities that have come into the program to provide a dedicated part-time worker whose responsibility it is to connect with those care-leaver students on commencement but also to offer things like bursaries and scholarships that are tailored for care leavers. So there could be similar measures with other equity groups as well if that was a model to be adopted by universities.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks Michele.

The CHAIR: Chris, did you have a question.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your presentation this morning. Just in terms of the workforce, your submission points to a significant shortage of staff in the child and family services sector and the absence of an adequate strategy to boost the sector's workforce. What would be the key components of a strategy to increase the child and family services workforce, including in particular in regional Victoria, and what role should the Victorian Government play in developing such a strategy?

Ms TSORBARIS: I am happy to start with that question. In terms of a strategy, we would start with a definition of what this workforce is and does and its critical importance to keeping families safe and thriving. Our child and family services workforce played a key role through the pandemic in supporting children and families to get the material goods and services they needed. But not everyone knows about their work or what we do, so raising the profile of these workforces is really important. We know about the child protection workforce, but the public does not know a lot about this workforce.

The child and family services platform needs to be very clearly articulated in such a strategy. There needs to be an excellent understanding of current and future workforce needs and the capabilities that will be required in the future. The strategy needs to be a clear plan of actions to support growth of these capabilities to deliver the sustainable pipeline I talked about earlier and obviously highly capable workers with appropriate professional development opportunities and career pathways. Many workers are looking for a plan for five years, not just for the year or the first couple of years in which they will be employed. We need to also then evaluate the success of these workforce planning strategies in meeting objectives but also be able to be nimble should some of those strategies look like they are not fit for purpose in those first couple of years. In terms of the role of the government, as I said earlier, it is building on what already exists: investing in workforce development models and programs that are promising or proven, and we have mentioned a couple of those; investing in us as the child and family services sector industry body to lead the development and delivery of training, which we already do—so again it is about investing in what we already have in place in terms of infrastructure; and evaluating the strategy to determine the extent to which objectives are being achieved. I know I am harping on about the evaluative element, but it is actually really, really critical because times have certainly changed—some things do not change, but certainly things have changed—and we have found that few workforce development strategies are in fact evaluated. We should really measure our implementation success and invest in, as Michele has described and as I have described, what we call ‘innovative collaboration’ and programs that bring stakeholders together rather than those that have a single focus or operate in a single-focus way.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Juliana.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you very much, John. Deb, it is lovely to hear your voice even though we cannot see you. It is great to see that you have made a submission to this Committee. I was just wondering if we could talk a little bit more about the Raising Expectations program. Your report talks about it being a collaboration by universities, including Federation University—which is obviously important to me, with such a strong base in Ballarat—TAFEs, the government and the community sector to enable post-secondary education for people that have experienced alternative care. What have been some of the challenges you have faced in implementing this program?

Ms TSORBARIS: Michele, I might let you start and then I will jump in.

Dr LONSDALE: Okay. Thanks, Deb. Probably the initial challenge was making sure that universities and the community services sector understood the business of each other, and so all the partners put a lot of time into that first year to really develop the relationship. That has been critical to the success of the program. We have learnt from that, so that each time a new university or TAFE comes on board—all of the TAFEs in Victoria now have come on board—we have been able to provide resources and materials that clearly explain the purpose of this program and the roles of the different stakeholder groups and make sure that everybody understands what each other’s role is, what the philosophical framework is, what the funding infrastructure might be and what outcomes we are collectively looking for. So that is probably one factor.

Another factor for us has been funding. We have got a terrific program, but if there is funding uncertainty it means that you are limited in some of the recruitment that you might undertake and the commitments that you might make. So in the first three years, that very first year we had three years of funding to look forward to, and we could do a lot with that. Then in the second three years we had the Department of Education and Training funding that over three years. In December that funding runs out. We are now in a position where we want to consolidate and expand the program. We want to more actively involve a couple of universities that have been on the margins. We want to build up the peer mentoring program that we have started with TAFE and actually expand that to universities as well, where we have experienced care leaver students mentoring new care leaver students coming into post-secondary education. Those things are limited, though, knowing that the funding runs out in December. So I think for us that is probably the most significant challenge—having the certainty and the security of ongoing funding. Deb, did you want to add to that?

Ms TSORBARIS: I would say that I think government—and we know we are onto a winner here—if you couple this with extending care in Victoria, it means that hopefully with those 800 children that no longer need care, if you couple that with this initiative, you have a recipe for success. I would have to say that we need these children to be working. When we talk about the pipeline that we talked about earlier, we need everybody who

wants to learn and wants to work to have the opportunity here in Victoria, because we would love to think that some of those young people will end up working in childhood and families here in Victoria. As you can see, Michele and I are really passionate. This is something we developed with private money over a number of years, and so it really is quite a remarkable initiative. I would have to say that we do not really want to turn back universities either, and I think every now and then we have gone, 'We hope there's not too much demand on us with this initiative'. But if 800 kids a year leave care—not that they need care in the same way these days; we are very fortunate about that—and even 50 per cent of those children go on to higher education, it would be great to measure that. So Michele and I are pretty keen to get those numbers right up.

The other thing I will say that is often invisible with this initiative is that these children end up often caring for their own parents, who are unable to care for them. The economic value of Raising Expectations, which is now well documented by Deloitte Access Economics, is generationally impactful. So thanks for asking the question. I could go on about it all day. Good job

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks, Deb. Kat, did you have a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Deb and Michele, for your input into this. As someone with a three- and a four-year-old I speak very regularly to all range of parents with kids in that bracket who face many different challenges, and the work that your sector does is absolutely vital to us here in Victoria, so thank you. My question relates to how universities and the community sector can better collaborate to deliver job-ready graduates but also to promote community services to current and prospective students. I guess it is a pipeline question. How can universities and the sector better collaborate? Thanks.

Ms TSORBARIS: I am happy to make a start, Michele, if that would help. Certainly there is a huge challenge at the moment around student placements in our system. We had some early conversations with our university partners about what that would look like if we were to be the coordinator of those placements so that you are immediately getting some insights for those students into our sectors and we can match prospective students, prospective employees, through our membership. That would make it incredibly efficient, but also you can breed loyalty with those students in our sector by having such close proximity.

I must say that increasingly we are having more input into curriculum that universities are developing, and particularly in terms of the use of evidence. We run a portal and some research to practice work through the Centre, and we are being more and more asked for advice about the sorts of curriculum that we want students to undertake in order for them to be ready for the workforce.

Also universities could consider incorporating guest lectures by child and family services leaders to social work students a bit more than they currently do to ensure up-to-date knowledge of the sector. We have also been running a CEO for the day type initiative for students in placement and for some of our very own workforce as well. University staff could also attend more of our annual symposiums, which we have each October, to hear the latest in promising programs and approaches being implemented by our sector and also maybe establish a peer mentoring program between universities and CSOs to encourage what we call that cross-fertilisation of ideas about innovative social work practice. This could then be reflected better in the design of social work courses. So there is sort of a long, long list of things that we could do. Some of this is really a matter of having time to invest in these types of conversations and cooperations, and we are all trying to do bits of this at the moment, but a lot more of it would be great.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Michele, did you want to add to that?

Dr LONSDALE: I think Raising Expectations has been a bit of a Trojan Horse. It has enabled us to get into more universities across the state and through that to be able, particularly the partner universities, to support them with better data collection, because when we started there were very few statistics around care leavers and the numbers that were going on to post-secondary education. We have been able to work closely with those partner universities to better define that equity group to capture data about enrolments, where those students are enrolling, in which courses and the completion rates. So there are benefits to having a program like that where you can find other ways to work with universities, not just through that program.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes your presentation. Thank you so much for your contribution. It has been wonderful.

Witnesses withdrew.