

# 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 Thephanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

#### **WITNESS** (*via videoconference*)

Ms Rachel Reilly, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Australian Association of Social Workers.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. 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 by 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 remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

Thank you, Rachel. I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thanks for being with us this afternoon.

**Ms REILLY:** Great. Thanks so much for having us here today. We really do welcome the opportunity to speak before the Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee regarding the Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills. The AASW is the national professional association for social workers. We currently have 16,000 members across the country, and about 4300 of those are in Victoria alone. We are appointed by the Department of Home Affairs to assess overseas academic social work qualifications and post-qualifying work experience for international migration and employment purposes. We also do set the standards, the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards, or the ASWEAS, as we call them, and we currently accredit 12 courses provided by Victorian higher education providers against the ASWEAS.

There is no public data available on yearly social work graduates, but we have estimated that it is approximately 800 in the 2020–21 graduating year in Victoria across the 12 accredited courses. Further compounding that lack of data is the fact that social work is an unregistered profession, so there is not actually any comprehensive data available on the actual numbers of qualified social workers working in Australia or Victoria—just estimates.

In terms of the social work degree, it is a four-year bachelor degree or it can be taken as a two-year masters qualifying. But both of those pathways require a student to undertake two work-integrated learning placements of 500 hours each or approximately 65 days full-time equivalent for each of the two placements. The work-integrated learning component of a social work degree intends to equip graduates with the right skills to be able to quickly go into the workforce upon graduation, and there is a significant commitment, as you can see, made by students to complete these placements.

In terms of social work and the labour market and the challenges, the social work profession does work across the broad spectrum of industry and sectors. In terms of this Inquiry, they work a lot in two of the identified priority areas of health and community services, and our most recent member survey indicated there is approximately 57 per cent of our members who would fit into those two identified industries there. More broadly across Australia we know that 48 per cent of our 16,000 members work in the mental health and health sectors alone, so they will be critical in the COVID recovery both in the short term and the long term. We also know that the social work profession is one of the fastest growing professions in Victoria. The nowcast of employment by region and occupation, or the NERO, data shows a strong growth in the whole of Victoria, from Melbourne's west through to Bendigo in particular.

But with this there are still some challenges, and that is that there is a disconnect between the institutional learning and the industry needs to have adequately skilled graduates ready to enter the workforce when they do graduate. There is also a lack of partnerships or relationships between the higher education providers and industry to facilitate adequate and appropriate work-integrated learning opportunities, and as I already mentioned, there is a significant commitment required from the students to complete their work-integrated learning placements. Running off that is the insufficient supports to students to be able to undertake this in the metropolitan, but even more so in rural and regional, areas. We think without addressing these challenges the development of an adequately skilled pipeline workforce, particularly in the rural and remote areas, will remain unmet.

I guess more in terms of what some proposed recommendations may be—and likely you saw in our submission—we do think that the recommendations from the Bean and Dawkins report *Review of university-industry collaboration in teaching and learning* could really work to support this inquiry. Primarily we think that enhancing the higher education providers' engagement with industry to assist in shaping the learning outcomes could be a good possibility there. We think in doing this it will more accurately reflect the needs of industry to then ensure that we have an adequately skilled pipeline workforce. We also think there needs to be greater fostering of cross-sectorial partnerships. That will immediately enhance partnerships and pathways, enabling greater work-integrated learning placements and therefore greater relationships between students and industry when they graduate.

We also think that this partnership needs to be undertaken with the Victorian Government, the higher education providers and industry for it to be successful, so this will make sure that we are looking at addressing both the priority areas to meet future workforce demand as well as the early learning outcomes to match the industry requirements and supporting the development of a pipeline of qualified social workers who can be job ready upon graduation. Also greater incentives for the social work students—as you can imagine, 1,000 hours of placement is a huge commitment, and oftentimes people studying social work are not from privileged backgrounds and have limited or no financial support from their families. Oftentimes they have actually chosen to enter into the social work field because they have got lived experience of those support systems. It would be really difficult for them to take that 1,000 hours out of their regular jobs or support networks to be able to complete those components of their studies.

**The CHAIR:** Rachel, I am just time conscious. There are questions that we would like to ask, so if there are any pertinent statements you would like to make, just finish it off if you can.

**Ms REILLY:** That is fine. I think I have given it a good go.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kat, a question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair. Rachel, thank you for your insights so far. My question relates to that paid work-integrated learning for social work, and you kind of were getting there in what you were saying just now. Your submission states that completing work-integrated learning is difficult for students who need to engage in employment while studying their university degrees, and I suspect that issues of disadvantage are weaved into that. What in your mind are the impediments to implementing paid placements for social work students?

**Ms REILLY:** Paid placement for social work students—that is a very good question, and I might need to come back with a more robust answer for you. My understanding is that it is not something that the association has investigated in the past. It is part of their learning requirements to undertake the placement. I guess I would flip that on its head and say that the students should receive some sort of stipend, scholarship or support to actually do the work-integrated learning placement rather than the place of the placement or the higher education provider providing a financial incentive for them to undertake it, if that makes sense. But I can definitely come back to you with a more robust answer to why we would not advocate for it to be implemented through a paid work-integrated learning placement.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Sure. That would be helpful, and it gives time for others to ask questions too.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Rachel. Juliana—question?

**Ms ADDISON:** Thank you very much, John, and thank you very much, Rachel and your association, for making such a detailed submission to our Committee. I am interested in addressing social work shortages in rural and regional areas. I was wondering if you have got any suggestions about how improved collaborations between universities and TAFEs and universities and professional bodies could help address this shortage.

**Ms REILLY:** Thank you for your question. Again, there are multiple barriers in terms of—host industry providers are not actually aware of what is involved in a placement, would not know necessarily how to execute that placement and may not have the resources available, whether that be human resources or the more specific resources around hosting a specific social work student. There are requirements around field education, task supervision and those sorts of things, so they may think that they are excluded because they might not have a social worker on staff—so again, lack of awareness. It is about ensuring industries—so the providers—know

that there is this opportunity available and supporting the universities and the providers to connect to adequately support those placements.

Then if we sort of come at it from the student perspective, again it comes back to the financial issues. That is both the physical, so removing them from their potential accommodation into a place where there is a lack of accommodation; not being able to work, so there are the financial issues; but also, and we know this obviously coming out of COVID, just having the normal social supports around a person. When they are uprooted from that and put into rural and regional areas, how well will they flourish if they do not have those sorts of supports? So it needs to be both the physical, the financial and the social supports that are implemented into those rural and regional areas to really entice and allow people to flourish if they are doing those sorts of placements out there.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Thank you. Chris, did you have a question?

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Rachel. I appreciate your time today. Just a quick one: what is your view on non-financial support that could be provided to students relocating to rural and regional areas to undertake mandatory placements?

**Ms REILLY:** Yes, and thank you for your question. When you say non-financial supports are you referring to, say, some supported accommodation initiatives and some other program initiatives?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes.

**Ms REILLY:** Yes. Absolutely. I think if we are going to create those real incentives, they have to be meaningful, and we know how much accommodation is. And it is not just how much it is; it is difficult even finding it and finding it in adequate areas that are safe, I think, for people as well going into new communities. So I think we really need to think outside of just financial and actually those non-financial supports as well, and I cannot stress enough that that must include those social supports. Just jumping ahead, I know there were some questions around ensuring that we have got cultural diversity in our rural and regional areas, so we need to make sure that those rural and regional areas are culturally safe. It could even be programs around ensuring that the staff in those organisations or the community are aware of particular cultural backgrounds.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, we are aware of the housing situation. So obviously that is a challenge for placement.

**Ms REILLY:** Yes, absolutely. Particularly for people who may wish to take that leap of faith and go out to rural and regional areas where they have not been connected to before, to then find that secure housing—it is a big barrier for students.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Rachel.

**The CHAIR:** Gary—question?

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, John. And thanks, Rachel. So just coming back to rural and regional areas again, how can universities partner better with local communities and organisations in rural and regional areas to provide placements for social work students in these areas?

**Ms REILLY:** Yes, I feel that that is in the statements that have been made. I think partnership with industry, so organisations, I think, you know, it can start with the bigger rural and regional areas, say, where there might be a hospital or facilities that employ a lot of social workers, so developing those partnerships, but developing partnership with the communities as well. So yes, it all comes back to partnership and supporting the students into that community.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** I guess you may have already answered this, but what role could your organisation play in supporting this process?

**Ms REILLY:** Good question. Most certainly we have reach into the universities in terms of the AASW. We also have obviously reach into the social work community. In terms of supporting partnership and collaboration, we would not necessarily have an active role, but we could most certainly be contributing to

communication and awareness raising, whether that be into the social work community workforce or whether that be through our networks. But I am not sure how much we would be playing in that collaboration and partnership development.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay. Thanks, Rachel.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Rachel. I might just finish off with one question, and it is in relation to the impact of funding and fee changes on social work enrolments. Back in January 2021 the Australian government changed public funding levels for domestic students and student fees for university courses through the Job-ready Graduates package. Have these changes impacted on students' enrolments in social work courses, particularly from disadvantaged groups?

**Ms REILLY:** We actually undertook some significant advocacy on that, and the fees for social work did not go up very much at all. So to our knowledge there has not been an impact on enrolments in social work degrees. If anything, the impact has been more around COVID and the loss of a significant amount of international students which had enrolled in social work degrees.

**The CHAIR:** That is a wrap. Thank you so much.

**Ms REILLY:** Brilliant. Thank you, everyone. Good luck.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for your contribution. It is wonderful. Thanks, Rachel.

**Witness withdrew.**