

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills

Melbourne—Thursday, 16 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*)

Mr Dan Mabilia, Director, Advocacy and Policy, and

Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Victorian TAFE Association; and

Dr John Flett, Director, Strategy and Research, South West TAFE.

The CHAIR: I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the various lands on which we all gather today and acknowledge that in this virtual environment we are gathering on many different lands, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Before we get to the witnesses, 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 please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I think there are two presentations to be made. I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by some questions from us. So thank you very much for joining us today.

Ms JONAS: Thank you. I will speak first. I am Pam Jonas. I am the Senior Adviser for the Victorian TAFE Association. My colleague Dan Mabilia is also from the Victorian TAFE Association, and our colleague John Flett is from South West TAFE in Victoria. I will just speak briefly to the submission that the VTA made, and I assume that John will make a short statement according to the submission from South West TAFE.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry. The submission was made by the VTA on behalf of our standalone members in particular, and our dual-sector universities who have made their own submissions to the Inquiry.

Given the current concerns around skilled worker shortages in many industries and the future demand for skilled workers we support the efforts of universities to be part of the skilling solution; however, we do have some concerns about higher education investment in skilling. It is not necessarily the quantum of investment, but we are concerned about how universities could direct their own investment to better support the pipeline of skilled workers rather than on how they are directing their own investment. We consider that investing for impact should be the priority focus. This means investing in creating additional capacity and innovation capacity by learning from the examples of dual-sector universities and TAFE colleges who are non-university higher education providers.

As I said, we are more concerned with looking at the way that universities might invest in partnering with TAFEs for skill development and delivery, not actually in developing or recreating the same delivery capacity in universities that exist in TAFEs. We consider the Inquiry should look broadly at the ways Victorian universities can invest in skill development through collaboration with TAFE, the value of which is demonstrated by many of the examples that we included in our submission and many, many more that are included across the state through TAFE and higher education partnerships. We believe skill development obviously is a shared responsibility and should be looked at from the perspective of who is doing what in the skills space, what sort of learning is needed and where it should be acquired, building off the shared base rather than, as I say, duplicating skill development in separate sectors.

So from our perspective, that is probably as much as we need to say at the moment. We will be interested in the sorts of questions that the Committee may have, but we are concerned, I suppose, more with what the Committee is asking for about skills investment by higher education and why the question is being asked rather than what the question is about. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Pam. John, did you want to make a contribution?

Dr FLETT: Yes. Thanks, John. And thank you for the opportunity to talk to the Committee today on the topic. I am really bringing, I guess, a regional perspective to the discussion. Pam has given a very good outline of the Victorian TAFE Association's overall comments. To put things in perspective, in south-western Victoria here we have around 125,000 people scattered over 25,000 square kilometres. So in training markets we have a very widely dispersed set of industries, mostly in food and fibre. That health and social assistance sector is big, and so is building and construction, and manufacturing as well.

Some of the challenges in regional areas for higher education or further education, whether it be vocational or university, is the low unemployment rate. I think we have it across Australia at the moment but regional Victoria down here is very low as well, below 3.5 per cent, which makes it challenging to encourage people into training and education. Having said that, we are pretty proud down here that the vocational education achievement rates are higher than the state average, including Melbourne, for that matter. On the flipside, our university attainment rates across the region are somewhat low, so I think there is definitely scope for improving the higher ed outcomes, and that might well be through better partnerships with TAFEs and universities.

The TAFE institutes in regional areas are often the only major public provider delivering post-secondary training and education, and we have a variety of locations throughout our regions—for example, we have got four different campus sites in South West and I think TAFE Gippsland has something like nine different campus locations. And they can become very valuable resources for study or digital skills hubs that can enable university students to attend. At the moment, though, we do not seem to be able to have a lot of that happening in our space, and I think that is perhaps a reflection of where the focus of universities is compared to, say, TAFE institutes.

In the regional areas we know our industries and our communities very well. We have very close relationships with our employers, not just through our apprenticeships and trainees—you know, we have got 1,300 of those at the institute—but our teachers are embedded in their local communities as well, and that gives us an inside running in terms of what a particular local community might be thinking about or what a local industry might be looking for.

The clean economy is a big emerging sector for the south-west of Victoria and I think for a lot of regional areas. There are an enormous number of wind farms across the south-west here, and we are now starting to look at hydrogen generation as a possibility, not just in Gippsland but down this way as well.

I guess the last thing I would say is one of the challenges that we face in providing skills for industry as a TAFE is that we also have a really, really strong obligation to provide access and equity to the less advantaged cohorts in our societies and our communities, so meeting the needs of those from lower socio-economic demographics or culturally and linguistically diverse communities is also a big focus. And that is a bit of a tension sometimes for TAFEs. Look, I will stop there, and I am happy to take questions after that.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, John. You will be pleased to know the current members that are all present here are from regional Victoria, so we are well represented here. Thank you for your very important words. Just to get back to some of the comments that Pam made, obviously this specific Inquiry is really directed at universities, but it is about making sure that we maximise our opportunities about how we can interlink or collaborate or cooperate with universities and other teaching institutions to make sure that we can supply to the demand that is coming our way in terms of skill shortages that we have in this country and this state. We have got a huge pipeline of investments that we want to do as a state and there are lots of opportunities that exist. We want to just make sure. That is why we value your input into this Inquiry—to find out from you how you can cooperate with universities, or vice versa, on how we can get a better outcome for the state. So with those couple of comments, I might fire off the first question. How could universities and TAFEs work together to increase access to higher education in rural and regional areas? And what role could the Victorian Government play in supporting university and TAFE collaboration to improve access to higher education in rural and regional areas? Whoever—John or Pam or Dan.

Dr FLETT: I will go first, John, and I will let Pam or Dan jump in afterwards. Look, we have a really strong relationship with our regional universities in the main, particularly in Warrnambool, where we are based. Deakin University have a campus here as well, and we are working on a number of projects around the clean economy with them at the moment, which was highlighted in the VTA's paper. We also have Federation

University, or Federation Training, as part of those discussions as well. So there are lots of links at the regional levels to our regional university partners. There are limitations, though, with how far those collaborations can go. They are very, very much dependent on individuals at development institutions. It is often difficult with universities, and I really do appreciate the challenges that they have with workforces of about 5,000 or 6,000 people rather than a student population of 5,000. It really does make it difficult for them to explore new pathways in terms of education and qualifications and how you can even get credit transfers between VET qualifications and university ones. But certainly communication is the key and helping universities understand that there is a benefit in them working more closely with a TAFE partner in lots of different ways can benefit the work of them and their students as well. The final point I would make there is that there seems to me to be a real opportunity to encourage or stimulate more interest in dual qualifications, where students might study at both a TAFE and a university. Examples might include something like that the certificate IV in disability course might be done at TAFE concurrently with a bachelor of social work. There are some really good benefits that come out of the practical applications that are part of the VET qualification that can apply then to the degree qualification. I will stop there, and I will throw to Pam or Dan.

Mr MABILIA: Dan Mabilia here. What John said is exactly right, but I think that what we are lacking at the moment is probably we are not looking at higher ed and vocational education and training as one system. They are very, very separate systems, and sometimes that does not lead to good opportunities for students to easily transition from vocational education to higher education, because, you know, sometimes there are hurdles that they need to jump over and things like that. So there is opportunity for universities and TAFEs certainly to establish smoother pathways for students to go from vocational education—whether that is certificate, diploma or advanced diploma level—into higher education. Now, that already exists. In lots of examples it is already there, and in fact some TAFEs are delivering their own degrees. Where there is an emphasis on skill development in that particular industry many TAFEs have developed their own higher education programs so that they can take advantage of their capacity and capability to train skills as part of the higher education programs.

My point is: how we can encourage more people into higher education? By creating more opportunities. And the more opportunities can come by allowing or providing the mechanisms for students to have an easier pathway into higher education from vocational education. When they are completing their high school and they achieve well and they get the appropriate ATAR score to go directly into a degree, that is fine. Many students do not do that, and they choose to go and take a different pathway into vocational education but then realise that they can adapt, they can learn how to learn and then take opportunities to go into higher education.

I do recall when I was teaching at a TAFE that there was a student who was in the VCAL program and from the VCAL program completed the equivalent of year 12 but did not get an ATAR score, went into a certificate III in cookery, then went into a diploma in hospitality, then an advanced diploma in hospitality, then a degree in hospitality and tourism and then went on to do a masters degree, and that was in the same institution. So when the pathways are there then there are those possibilities.

Ms JONAS: It is Pam Jonas here again. I am sorry, I might be having a few internet problems here. I might have a little bit of instability in my connection, but I just want to say there has always and continues to be a sense of competition between TAFEs and higher education, which impacts the relationship that we have both ways, and often there is a sense that we are competing for students and that we are competing in each other's arena if you like. That really should not exist. As Dan says, we should have the sorts of relationships and we should be fostering the sorts of relationships, and we do in many ways, but there exists this sort of overhang of competition between the two sectors and therefore giving up the little of what we do either way to make those transitions easier and more fluid for students is in some ways institutional rather than for any particular—for any good reason, I should say. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Gary, did you want to ask a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, thanks, John, and thanks, Pam, Dan and John, for presenting today and for your submission. Both of your submissions provide examples of effective collaboration between universities and TAFEs to address skills needs. Can I ask, what are the key elements of effective collaboration between universities and TAFEs, what opportunities are there for improved collaboration between universities and TAFEs to address Victoria's skills needs and what can the Victorian Government do to encourage collaboration between universities and TAFEs?

Mr MABILIA: I could start by saying that for the collaboration to be effective there needs to be an agreed and recognised need. There needs to be a problem that needs to be solved and then recognition of who has the appropriate capability and skills to put into solving that problem. In the case of a university program wishing to introduce more specific skills that could certainly fit into the vocational arena, they should be collaborating with a TAFE, for example, on how to deliver those skills and involving the TAFE in delivering those skills. But it is that recognition of who has the capability to do what and then having an agreement and an arrangement for that to happen. As Pam mentioned, you have this level of competition. Well, it is about forgetting that the competition exists, there is a problem that needs to be solved, so how do we best solve that problem through collaboration and agreement?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Dan.

Dr FLETT: I might just add a couple of points. Dan is absolutely right, as is Pam, around this feeling that there is a competition between TAFEs and universities, and it starts very much back in the secondary school system. Post-secondary education is pretty binary—there is TAFE or higher ed, it is not both—which brings us back to my earlier point, I suppose, but I think that there is a role potentially for the government to play in encouraging universities and TAFEs to cooperate more actively and in different fields as well. Some of that is starting to happen. We have the Workforce Training Innovation Fund, which is a great way to enable TAFEs to bring university partners in. What we really need, though, is the opportunity for funding bodies that fund universities to encourage universities to partner with a TAFE as part of their particular projects. We have had one recent example: Deakin University has been successful in getting some Trailblazer funding, and that has involved several other universities but has also included about four different TAFEs. I think the Gordon is one, ourselves, TAFE Gippsland and Swinburne as well. That is terrific, but too many commonwealth funds for industry-based work are purely directed at the higher ed sector and it sort of freezes out the vocational education and training sector, which it is a real shame because it is fantastic to develop new technologies and new processes, but unless you can train the technicians and the operators of those new technologies, there is going to be a problem, and it is not a problem that you want to be solving the day after the plant gets installed and the suppliers walk away. So I guess we need some incentives. We need to make sure that universities include TAFE and other private providers from the VET sector in their thinking. We have been very fortunate here that we have had some pretty senior people at Deakin understand that, but again it goes back to it happens in pockets. There is no systemic approach to it at the moment.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, John.

The CHAIR: For the universities that have worked it out, that collaboration is good for their business as well, they are on the right track. So hopefully as a consequence of this Inquiry we might point out that collaboration and cooperation is the way to go. Chris, did you want to ask a question?

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Thanks, Chair, and thank you all for your contributions today. I certainly believe in our TAFE system and the valuable role it plays in our community. Just in terms of skill shortages, and obviously we have touched a bit on that and the difficulties across the state but also in regional and rural Victoria, how can universities and TAFEs improve their outreach and student services to attract students to study in priority skill areas?

Mr MABILIA: John mentioned earlier that it starts in their secondary education, and I think there are some incredible things happening at the moment with the secondary-school reforms—the VCE vocational major is replacing VCAL, and then there is the Victorian pathways certificate. I mean, just the description implies that there is an opportunity for you to go from a foundation program into vocational training or into other types of work or apprenticeships or training. But I think at the school level, with the VCE vocational major and all of the work being done to encourage students in years 11 and 12 who are focused on the VCE, who may be focused on going to university, there are also the options for them to select a variety of VET programs as part of their secondary schooling. There is a whole new language that is going to be used in terms of how that is communicated to families and friends, but all of that plays a significant role in encouraging students to move into their next adventure, their tertiary education or their vocational training or their apprenticeship or traineeship. They are talking about now how to promote that and how to best represent those opportunities to younger people. To me that is probably more significant than universities reaching out to people, ‘Hey, come and study here and learn this, you’ll develop these skills and you’ll get a career’. It is the same as TAFEs. TAFEs often struggle with getting the message out there about opportunities. We have had free TAFE, and that

has encouraged a lot of new people into looking at opportunities, but it is difficult to get the message out there to everybody. It has to start when they are in school. That is my point.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

Ms JONAS: Chris, just to add that, sorry, that theme we have been talking about of collaboration is one that needs to extend to our collaboration with industry and to have industries working very closely with TAFE and the universities to promote the skill priority areas. Sometimes our students and our teachers in our schools and in our TAFEs and universities are not aware—really aware—of what the opportunities are in some of those new and emerging industries. We are talking a lot at the moment about the clean economy, for example, but we are unsure about what the clean economy is and we are unsure what skills are going to be needed in the clean economy. We need a very strong collaboration with industry with industry promoting what these new jobs look like and what these new skills look like to encourage students to become involved. We are not just talking about young people in schools, we are talking about people who are transitioning from careers, who are leaving the old industries, if you like, and moving into new places. I think one of the issues for us is that TAFE is stereotyped, I guess, in many ways as the area for apprenticeships, when in fact the grand majority of our students are over 30. They are upskilling, they are reskilling. We are looking at people coming from all over the Victorian community to go into education and skills or qualifications. I think it is a broader collaboration between industry and the education sector and a broader collaboration between industry and government and the education sector to be working together on promoting these things and explaining to people what the future looks like—in fact what now looks like. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Pam. Juliana, did you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, John. Pam has really gone to the issue that I am very interested in as well. You made lots of really good points, Pam, but I am just wondering: what could the role of the Victorian Government be to actually support this collaboration? Obviously we have got a lot of projects on the go across Victoria in all corners of the state, but what could the government actually do to increase this collaboration with industry, so if you could just focus on that part of the collaboration.

Dr FLETT: Juliana, just before Pam goes, I think there are a couple of things that the government may be able to do in relation to that. A lot of the reason some industries are struggling to recruit their workforce is that they have really negative images. The food and fibre sector has got critical workforce shortages, and people tend to talk the industry down. Everyone thinks you are slogging around in gumboots and mud. I think there is perhaps a role for the government to think about a marketing campaign of sorts. It could address any of those industries that have got skills shortages. The health sector has got a bit of a reputational problem at the moment because of COVID, and aged care has got a problem because of COVID-related issues. We need to change the mindset, and it is not just the mindset of kids, because another part of the problem is careers teachers do not know enough about industries and opportunities within them, so there is a piece that could be done there perhaps back through the schools area. But parents are one of the biggest influences on students and their choices. They need to hear, as Pam said, that there are really exciting careers—not just in these emerging industries but in some of the existing industries that we have got that have got shortages.

One final thing is to attract people to training you need to be offering what looks like the state of the art, with the best sort of facilities and the best sort of people doing the delivery of the training. That excites people, they want to come and do the training. If you are coming into shabby workshops and labs and things like that, it is not particularly engaging or exciting, and it does disadvantage the sector. So there are a few things to consider, I suppose.

Ms ADDISON: John, certainly that is our approach that we have been taking with our schools across Victoria. We have upgraded 1,300 schools. We are saying, ‘You can’t expect world-class learning to be happening in Third World classrooms’. It is consistent across our primary and secondary schools. I know what you are saying about TAFEs as well, so thank you for that.

Mr MABILIA: I would also like to add that to look at the skills that people need you need to be ahead of the game. You need to be able to determine what the skills are in two or three years. Those young people have to go through a training program to end up with the skills that we need now, so they would have had to start two or three years ago. I think the good thing is that is what the Victorian Skills Authority is looking at, and you

would be aware perhaps of the Victorian Skills Authority looking at regional profiles, identifying what future skills are needed in particular areas. I think that is something that TAFEs and universities can leverage off and start planning and looking at what we can do now to meet what the Victorian Skills Authority has identified as skills that are going to be in demand in two, three, four and five years, and I think that is pretty critical as well.

Ms ADDISON: Dan, I totally agree with you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Look, I know that we have gone a bit over time, but I think one more question is in order. Does anybody want to ask any questions? No. Can I just ask: the VTA submission highlights the need to avoid credential creep and credentials inflation and identifies that TAFEs and universities should work together to see how credentials could lead back into learning for reskilling and upskilling. Could you please elaborate on the issue of credentials creep, what it means for learners and the education system as a whole, what role microcredentials could play in preventing credentials creep and how TAFEs and universities could collaborate in this area? What is the role of the Victorian Government in promoting the uptake of microcredentials and providing clearer rules about microcredential courses?

Mr MABILIA: A Pandora's box.

Ms JONAS: Pandora's box, yes. In terms of credential creep, we need to be clear about what qualifications people actually need. Many people go into qualifications that are far higher than what they actually need in their job, and they are encouraged to do that because they can do a university course in many cases for cheaper than they can do a TAFE course. We do not want to be pushing people into courses that they do not really need. And we need to look very carefully at how we build a person's qualification profile, if you like, as they go through their education. I guess in terms of creep we do not want to, as I say, push people into qualifications they do not actually need, but we do want to have the opportunity so that you can build your qualifications over time and you build them according to your need as you move through your career or you move through the transitions in your work life—and there is a role for microcredentials there.

Microcredentials seem to be, with all due respect, the flavour of the month at the moment. TAFEs and private providers have always had short courses—small units of qualification that they have added to people's qualifications as they have gone. In some ways 'microcredentials' is just another name for short courses—it is another name for the way we build our skill profile—and short courses, microcredentials, have their place. But we do not want to see microcredentialling become, I suppose, the way that everybody goes. Microcredentials have a place within the system; they are not the system. There will always be a place for full qualifications, the sort of deeper qualifications that people take at universities and at TAFEs, and I think we need to be careful about getting caught up in the dynamic at the moment around microcredentials as being some sort of panacea to building the skills that we need across the state. Dan might want to add to that.

Mr MABILIA: Yes. I would like to just add to that, Pam. I know we are short on time. It is easy to confuse—you know, you have short courses and you have a small credential, a micro-credential. A credential is a badge. It is something that you can show someone; you have achieved something. I recall when I was at RMIT five years ago and the initial discussions about microcredentials and how they would be used. How they would be used would be an engineering student trying to demonstrate to an employer that, 'Yes, I can do all this engineering stuff, but do you know what? I have got a microcredential in team building. I have got a microcredential in communication'. So I can show the employer that I have got this little RMIT credential that says I can do this and I can do that as well as my engineering and what my qualification brings to me. But it is not a replacement for a short course. Short courses have been developed specifically for industry by TAFE for years. An employer comes to a TAFE and says, 'I want to teach my staff how to do this' and 'They need to learn how to do this better'; 'Okay, we'll develop a short course; we'll do some training. It's as easy as that'. Now they are calling that a microcredential. Is it a microcredential? Yes, I suppose it is another word, but now we are in the situation where the government is looking at the framework, the governance around it—do we have to get microcredentials accredited?

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. We have got to wrap it up there—but very valuable inputs. Thank you all for being here today.

Witnesses withdrew.