

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 28 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*)

Professor Meg Stuart, Interim Provost and Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic, and

Mr Ashley Midalia, Director, Government, Policy and Strategy, Australian Catholic University;

Professor Liz Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, and Acting Vice-Chancellor, and

Ms Rebecca Bartel, Senior Manager, Research Partnerships, Deakin University;

Professor John Dewar AO, Vice-Chancellor, La Trobe University;

Professor Kris Ryan, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic, and

Mr Ben Vivekanandan, Director, Precincts and Government, Monash University; and

Professor Gregor Kennedy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, and

Professor Simon Bell, Head of Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education, University of Melbourne.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everybody. I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the various lands on which we all gather here today. I 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 also advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on Parliament's website and rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Welcome to this roundtable of 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 will be placed on the Committee's website.

Could I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference. The format that we have today is we will run this roundtable as a question and answer session. If you wish to answer a question asked by a Committee member, please use the 'raise hand' function on Zoom. There will not be an opportunity for everyone to answer every question. I will allow two or three speakers to answer each question before moving on. If there are any important points you do not have an opportunity to make during this session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing.

Sorry about all of those technicalities we have to inform you of. It is obviously a big group of people. I want to thank each and every one of you for being a part of this group and giving some very important information in relation to our Inquiry that we are currently investigating. I might go to Juliana. Juliana, do you want to ask a question?

**Ms ADDISON:** Thank you so much for being here today for this important Inquiry. I was just wondering if we could start the discussion with talking about encouraging enrolments in priority skill areas. I would be really interested to know about how universities and the Victorian Government can work together to encourage enrolments in priority skill areas and also how universities can improve student services and engagement with secondary schools to attract students to study in these priority areas.

**Prof. RYAN:** Thank you for this opportunity, and we look forward obviously to continuing the participation with Parliament, industry and education providers. We already provide a significant program of access for students, particularly those in low socio-economic areas and in rural and regional Victoria. That program is developed with a mentoring aspect to it to have existing Monash students in priority areas going out to the schools to talk to students about the opportunities that are available to them. This is something that we are very keen, as always, to be able to expand, but it is an important program that we have.

Tied to that are equity scholarships, both for students who are seeking to come to university and also for those students who are providing the mentoring programs. And then in addition to that are pathway programs as well. So to that very direct point, Juliana, I think there is a range of existing programs that we have that we would be very happy to be able to expand upon. I know our faculty of science is also very keen to work with our faculty of education and also other areas to be able to enhance the education capabilities of schools throughout Victoria in fundamental sciences and mathematics, particularly in enhancing people across various demographics to see this as an opportunity for them.

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

**Prof. KENNEDY:** Yes. Again, thank you very much for the chance to participate here. Building a little bit on what Kris has said, there is certainly a range of programs that, like other universities on the call, the University of Melbourne has in terms of encouraging participation and access for students from a range of different backgrounds and in partnership with schools. I was going to take it, Juliana, to a slightly different area, which is about the ways in which we support maybe priority areas like education or health or areas of growth—areas where we think that the Victorian industry, economy and population need. All Victorian universities, I think, play a key role in that and in building up the quality of those professions and skills. For example, the

graduate school of education has partnered with the government in the area of the early childhood education and teaching workforce, and I think it is that kind of example that is a really strong example of how universities can partner with government in an area of need where there is a dedicated program to provide what are needed in areas of the workforce, whether it be in engineering, teacher education, health, nursing or social work. I think that that is one of the things that would be valuable to consider doing more of.

**Ms ADDISON:** As someone with a Dip. Ed. from Melbourne, I am very pleased to hear that.

**Prof. KENNEDY:** Excellent.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. John, did you want to respond as well?

**Prof. DEWAR:** Thanks, Chair. Look, I was going to make the point that Gregor has just made. I do not think there is a one-size-fits-all solution here. I think there is scope to be more creative than perhaps we have been in the past in identifying ways to attract students into particular priority areas, but I suspect they are going to be slightly different depending on what the priority area is. But there is certainly scope, I think, for universities and the State Government to work together to incentivise or to make particular areas of study more attractive to students than others.

**The CHAIR:** Kat, did you have a question? Sorry, Liz. I did not see the hand up. Liz.

**Prof. JOHNSON:** Thank you, Chair. Representing Deakin here, and a great pleasure to join the Inquiry today. I wanted to point to the role of career practitioners and career development services. All Victorian universities work not just with schools in terms of encouraging enrolments—and I strongly support Kris's point around mathematics and enabling courses like that—but it is also the work with career practitioners and helping students in secondary school, and those returning to study actually, to think in terms of a long-term career so that we are helping people to have their second and third careers as trends shift in the employment market. All Victorian universities do that of course. It requires close collaboration with both government and industry, and any opportunity to grow those industry linkages, supported by government, I think would be very welcome.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Any other responses that anybody wants to make? No-one has got their hand up. Kat, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for your contributions. Some of the submissions to this Inquiry have argued for greater industry involvement in the university curriculum itself so that the course content is relevant and up to date and graduates are job ready. So my question relates to what opportunities there are for improved collaboration between universities and industry and what can the Victorian Government do more in promoting that collaboration.

**The CHAIR:** Liz, do you want to go first?

**Prof. JOHNSON:** Thank you. A topic dear to my heart, and very glad to have it raised. The relationships with industry need to be deep, broad and sophisticated. It is not a matter of just going and tapping them on the shoulder and asking them to review something for you. We need to build them over time, and we need to have multiple ways of interacting. That might be on course review panels, which is fabulous, but it is also to do with placement inside industry, industry-based projects, co-development of careers, co-development of courses. At the risk of pointing out individual programs, the VHESIF grants, which are working their way through the system now, are a really good example of how the Victorian Government has worked with Victorian universities to bring industry close to the university. That is really doing great things for us at Deakin. It has brought more industry partners onto campus, and I think interactions like that, whether sponsored by government or just supported by government, really help. I think also working with peak bodies or coordinating interactions with peak bodies is very helpful. Particularly when we are working with small- and medium-sized enterprises, it is difficult for those enterprises to interact with the large conglomerate that a university is. So working with peak bodies and having those roundtable opportunities makes it a lot easier for us to work collectively.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will go to Simon Bell next.

**Prof. BELL:** Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to contribute. I mean, I agree completely. I think that the government can be an incredible facilitator of these partnerships. I know that the DJPR program on digital skills has been a great fillip for universities working with industry to design short, punchy, post-professional, ready courses for mid- to late-stage career transition or upskilling—or reskilling, in fact—and I think that has been a really stand-out exemplar. But I think more generally—and I know in post-professional learning, which is the area I am focused on at Melbourne University—the partnership with industry is becoming deeper, and we are seeing a greater appetite for industry to take part in not just endorsement of the content, to Liz’s point, but actually the co-creation of some of the programs we are building. We are seeing that particularly in the microcert space. Liz probably, with an established microcert suite at Deakin as well, you are seeing the same. But we are seeing that opportunity coalesce, I guess, most keenly at the shorter course, micro-credential aspect of the market. So we think there is great opportunity to continue to pursue partnership with industry at that particular level.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kris and Ben?

**Prof. RYAN:** Thank you, Chair. Just building on, Liz, your comments earlier, there has historically been a very strong partnership within disciplines with industry advice not only at the point of accreditation but throughout to be able to say what it is that our courses are delivering, the types of assessment and delivery that we are providing and the types of students that we are then producing as graduates. However, there is continued need to ensure that there is a cross- and interdisciplinary nature to this so that that is visible, not by bringing up within a university from each of the different faculties this information, but instead being able to see this in a true partnership that is across the university and with our partners. An example of that is the Monash Industry Council of Advisers that we have. It is chaired by Sir Rod Eddington. That is bringing together our council plus a range of industry leadership to look at the strategic direction of the courses that we should provide.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. John Dewar.

**Prof. DEWAR:** Thanks, Chair. Look, just a quick comment on this topic, which I think is an important one. As Kris mentioned, many if not most of our degrees are professionally accredited by a professional body. That means that the content of a degree, the extent of work-based learning that has to take place, is quite tightly prescribed. That is, I think, just an important kind of the context. Not all of our degrees fall into that category. Probably the health degrees are the ones where that is most commonly the case. But do not underestimate just how much of what universities teach and how they teach it is already determined by professional accreditation requirements.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Gregor.

**Prof. KENNEDY:** John has stolen my thunder a little bit in the idea that universities cover this ground quite well, so I will not make that point. My second point is a short one and picks up a bit what Liz was saying. I think the bilateral nature of these engagements is something that is sometimes not fully appreciated. When they work really well the industry partner and the student really get great benefit from them. An example would be our innovation practice program in engineering, which is both educating mentors from the industry side but also giving students authentic real-world practice projects on the student side, and it is of great benefit. So there really are opportunities for the Victorian Government to provide more support for those kinds of programs, which I think is to the greater good.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Any further comments? I might throw now to Chris Couzens for a question.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you everyone for your time and contributions. We really appreciate that. I am interested in your thoughts on what opportunities there are for improved collaboration between universities and TAFEs to address Victoria’s skills needs and also what is the role of the Victorian Government in encouraging collaboration between universities and TAFEs?

**The CHAIR:** Liz.

**Prof. JOHNSON:** I thought it was John’s turn to go first, actually. Lovely to see you again, Chris—a terrific question again. Deakin takes the view that TAFEs and universities bring distinctive strengths to the table and that we absolutely need to work in partnership. TAFEs have a different kind of mode of teaching and different kinds of relationships with industry, and we would love to—and do—leverage them. I think the important thing

to remember about interactions between TAFEs and universities is that for a student the transitions are complex to manage. So while we might have very good relationships, and Deakin does have very good relationships particularly with the Gordon in Geelong, Box Hill in the east of Melbourne and South West TAFE in Warrnambool, and while we see those collaborations as very tight and strong, students often have difficulty moving between unless we put in place very dedicated pathways. I think there is certainly work underway at the moment, and I would encourage everyone to get involved in how we can make those transitions between TAFE and university as seamless as possible for students. Remember that those transitions work both ways. It is not a linear pathway from TAFE to university. There is great value in lifelong learning that goes back to pick up learning packages from TAFE as careers develop.

**The CHAIR:** John Dewar.

**Prof. DEWAR:** Yes, what she said. But can I add just a little bit. I think there is enormous scope for state government to play a role in facilitating a more seamless interaction between TAFE and higher ed. Let me give you a couple of examples. When the government recently conducted a review of agriculture education in the state of Victoria it left universities out. Now, that does not speak of a world view that sees TAFE and higher ed as integrated. I think there needs to be a mindset in state government and in universities that we are part of a post-secondary tertiary system that needs to work together in a more integrated way. I think the department needs to see that as part of its agenda. Rather than just being about furthering TAFE and coordinating TAFE I think it needs to be about driving a coordinated post-secondary tertiary system. If that was part of the remit of our department of education, I think that would be a huge step forward.

I will give you another example: Free TAFE. It is a great initiative, but it has absolutely pummelled our enrolments at our regional campuses and it just does not speak to a view of post-secondary education that is taking a holistic view as opposed to promoting one part of it at the potential expense of another. This is a big topic on which we could talk for a very long time, but I think if there was a mindset where the State Government said, 'We have a TAFE system, a great TAFE system which we have had to rescue in recent years—but it's on its way back—and we've got a fantastic university system, and together they are the solution to our skills shortage', that would take us a long way.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Gregor.

**Prof. KENNEDY:** Building on that but just reinforcing it, I think that both Liz and John are completely on the money about seeing the diversity of institutions that provide education to a diverse population. I mean, Liz spoke about this with the partnerships that Deakin has. La Trobe University, the University of Melbourne and GOTAFE are in partnership up in the Goulburn Valley region. There are ways in which at the moment GOTAFE and the University of Melbourne work together on our Dookie campus, particularly with their VCAL program, but the student-centred approach that I think Liz spoke about and recognising the needs of students and then, as John says, recognising that post secondary there are a range of ways in which we can support students to achieve their goals in partnership I think is really important work. The kinds of strategies that we are putting together at La Trobe, Melbourne and GOTAFE would be the kinds of things that I think could be a really good example—and there would be others—of the ways in which the Victorian Government could support this.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just to feed into the previous question, obviously regional and rural Victoria are experiencing growth in population like never seen before, both sea change and tree change, and post COVID there are a lot of people working from home, I suppose, and moving to regional and rural areas, and some of them are seeking further education. So my question is: how can universities and the Victorian Government work together to address skills shortages in rural and regional Victoria, such as in allied health particularly, where there is a real growth sector, and in teaching and in agriculture? How can we better help? John.

**Prof. DEWAR:** Sorry, Chair. I think Meg was first.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Meg, sorry.

**Prof. STUART:** Thanks, John, and thanks, Chair. I am here for ACU today. I think there is probably some work to be done—for the State Government to lobby the Commonwealth Government for additional commonwealth-supported places for people who are changing career so that we are able to offer CSP places to people that want to come in and do a postgraduate qualification that is an entry-to-practice qualification, so

whether that is entry to practice in health or entry to practice in education. And that type of financial support would certainly allow more students to be attracted to this sort of program, I think, and support universities to offer more places as well of course. We have got an enduring issue around the numbers of placements—access to placements and an adequate number of placements—and I am sure that will come up today. I would be happy to talk about that when we get to that. But financial support, I think, is critically important—and a greater number of CSP places available within the environment as a whole that we could then allocate to postgraduate entry-to-practice programs. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. John next.

**Prof. DEWAR:** Yes, I agree with that. We need more places, although it has to be said that I think this year we are all seeing a decline in domestic demand for various COVID-related reasons. We do not know whether it is temporary yet or not.

But to your question, Chair, as I said before, I think we need bespoke solutions to different professions and areas of skills shortage. For example, if you take health, how can we address allied health workforce shortages in the regions? There are a range of solutions that are possible: opening up more opportunities for clinical placements might be one; better pathways, seamless pathways, between TAFE and university could be another; more CSP places is another. There are a range of solutions, but I think they will differ according to the particular skills shortage. Teacher shortages is another one, although that one, frankly, has been in the pipeline for some time. The university sector warned the State Government about three or four years ago that this was looming, and it has come to pass. So I think COVID has accelerated it, but what the solution is there, I think, is quite different to what it is likely to be in health.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Simon.

**Prof. BELL:** Thank you. I think we should also put on the table the opportunity for corporate, if you like, or institutional solutions to these sorts of problems. So, for example, work that we are doing with various hospitals, building our capability through institutional academies, corporate academies or hospital-based academies I think is a good pathway to go, whether they are fully funded by the hospital itself or what we are calling a, wait for it, B2B2C option, where there are co-payments made by the learner—that is, the employee of the hospital or the school. These are also solutions that we could look at. These are easier to propose when the entity is within a state government sort of funding umbrella but harder, I suppose, when you are talking about agriculture and other private sector organisations, but the model would work—or does work—across both public and private sector and even third sector contexts.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Liz.

**Prof. JOHNSON:** Thank you, Chair. It is a great question, and I would like to add a plea for a diversity of learning offerings—so bespoke offerings which are suitable for regional programs. I know both La Trobe and the University of Melbourne certainly do this, as we do. We create offerings that are bespoke for a rural audience and for a rural job market. In our world that is particularly around health, where we try to place health in that broader remit of health, where it is the generalist spanning across multiple disciplines rather than a series of specialists—so a multiplicity of offers. With that goes the idea of modular learning so that people who are working at the time can pick up, re-skill and transfer skills across. So that might be micro-credentialling, and the funding for micro-credentialling at the moment is an open question. It is entirely self-funded by students at the moment or funded by industry, and I think we need some further work to determine how that funding system works to support access for particularly regional and remote job markets and learners.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kris or Ben.

**Mr VIVEKANANDAN:** Thank you, Chair. Kris and I will both make a short contribution to this. I wanted just to let the Committee know that Monash University sponsored a blue-ribbon commission into looking at post-compulsory education. That was chaired by Ms Elizabeth Proust. It came up with some recommendations looking at vocational education, higher education and lifelong learning as a review that consulted with employers, teaching academia, students and broadly industry. So we will make that report available to this Committee to help with your deliberations and thinking around coming to some findings and recommendations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. Thanks, Ben. We might move to the next question. Juliana, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms ADDISON:** Yes, I did, John. I was wondering if we could have a discussion about work-integrated learning. A number of submissions to the Inquiry have emphasised the importance of work-integrated learning such as placements and internships in preparing students for the workforce. I know we have just talked about some of the challenges in education and health, but how can universities collaborate with industry to embed work-integrated learning into the university curricula, and also how can the Victorian Government support universities to do this?

**The CHAIR:** Liz, you had your hand up.

**Prof. JOHNSON:** Thank you. I think we will end up having a number of commentators talking about placements. Placements are limiting, and the key one at the moment that I am thinking about is nursing. Placements are the limiting factor in growing our nursing workforce. The other problem with that is that for a lot of health placements the university is actually charged for those placements. While I appreciate that it takes time for hospitals to provide supervision and support for students, those costs can be punitive and they definitely pose a barrier.

On the broader question around work-integrated learning, one thing that the pandemic did do for us, which was really interesting, was it brought in the idea of work-integrated learning or work-based learning online, and that has been quite revolutionary for a number of areas for us where work-integrated learning has been less easy to source on a systematic basis—so, for example, in business—to the point now where businesses are seeking online work-integrated learning and placement as much as they are seeking onsite. That is a transition, and we are working through it, but I think there is a facilitation role there for state government working with industry to look at novel forms of work-integrated learning so we can make it ubiquitous—and I think it should be.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Meg.

**Prof. STUART:** I am certainly not next. Gregor and Kris were ahead of me.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Gregor.

**Prof. KENNEDY:** Thanks, Meg. I think that this is an area of great interest across the whole Victorian university community. Liz spoke before and I spoke before about the kinds of things that happen as routine in curriculum really in many of our professional practice programs, and I mentioned one before in engineering. At the undergraduate level for our university we have got a range of ways in which we try and inculcate industry-based Inquiry projects into undergraduate programs. That is an area where support could be provided, I think, to targeted programs to facilitate those relationships, as Liz was speaking about. I think that would be a real opportunity to see the way in which we can bring industry closer to university programs in targeted ways. Then I will mention the placements issue. It is a really rate-limiting step for us, and ways in which we could foster and generate better access to places would be one thing that would be worthy of consideration.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Meg.

**Prof. STUART:** All right, I am going to go now. Thank you. I wanted just to speak briefly about regional placements and the value that they bring in terms of creating a regional-ready workforce. As you know, we have a regional-based campus at Ballarat and we teach health and education there. But in health specifically we have nursing, paramedicine and physiotherapy programs there. The students from that campus predominantly take their placements at regional and rural providers, and we know that approximately 57 per cent of our graduates then go on to take regional or rural or remote graduate places—so stay working within the regions. The challenge, I think, for us is to attract our metro-based students to regional placements—to regional careers. We are trying to do that this year.

We are running a pilot across multiple states—you know we are multijurisdictional. So in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria we are running a program this year where we are providing some financial support to the student, a metro-based student, to undertake a placement; in education we are running this this year. Our financial support covers their travel, their accommodation and some living costs. As part of that program we also connect them to a local mentor, a professional and a social mentor. So we help them to ease into the

community and become part of the community within that program. We do not have evidence yet, but anecdotally from a pilot we ran in Queensland we are seeing more of these metro students returning to regional careers on graduation, so we really think that it is worth pursuing. There is value for the provider in having additional students, value for the provider in being connected to the university and value for the student of course in expanding their repertoire. So I just wanted to let the Committee know about that. We are in pilot at the moment. We will have the results available at the end of the year. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Thanks, Meg. Kris or Ben?

**Prof. RYAN:** Thank you, Chair. We have had a look from 2017 through this year, and in any one year approximately two-thirds of our students are in some form of WIL program. When we compare the undergraduate and GPG enrolments, that dropped in 2020 to a little over 50 per cent due to COVID, the vast majority of which are in clinical or professional placement, and that has already been noted by my colleagues, so I will not dwell on that. We know we need to do more. One example is the MITI program, which is the Monash industry team initiative program, connecting with industry over a 12-week period where we have students from across disciplines working together on a particular problem that is developed in partnership with our industry partners. That has been an incredibly successful program for seven years.

As I said, we do know that we need to do more, though, so from next year will be offering the Monash innovation guarantee. We know that if we do not offer industry-based experiences directly within coursework, then students from low-SES backgrounds, students from rural and regional and other equity backgrounds, will not feel that it is for them and will not apply. This Monash innovation guarantee is part of the coursework suite across all of our courses except where there is no room, and those particular courses typically have a significant clinical or professional placement already. The key for us is connecting with industry in this framework so that they understand the value of the IP that is being generated, connecting with the students as graduates of the future and working with our students so that they can connect the skills that they are developing with the theoretical work that they have in the other units in their courses.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all very much. Chris, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. Thanks, Chair. Just in relation to upskilling and reskilling, what is the role of micro-credential courses in developing the workforce skills that Victoria needs, what is the role of universities in promoting the uptake of micro-credentials and how could universities contribute to increased clarity about the definition and role of micro-credentials?

**The CHAIR:** Simon.

**Prof. BELL:** Chris, you are speaking directly to me. It is my lived experience over the last two years. I think all the questions you raise are really big ones and very important. Look, I think they are essential. Our market research has shown that the idea of them is very attractive—inherently attractive—to learners, post-professional learners, and by that I mean 27 and above really. So the idea resonates. The difficulty is that they still do not know what they are in many respects. Part of that is the sector's fault in some sense. You could also lay some blame at the feet of the AQF and other institutions, which have given a great deal of latitude to the sector in defining what they are. But in doing so we are all rushing to colonise part of the landscape and not doing the same thing, if you like, and so the learner is sitting there saying, 'Which one do I take, an RMIT one?'—which is twice as long as ours and which is twice as long as some from other institutions and so forth—and then 'What does this badge or this credential mean at the end of it?'. So I think we have got to as a sector be better at articulating what it is that you will learn and get from it.

We are doing some work with an OPM, Edalex, at the moment on rich skill descriptors. We are trying to bridge that gap between the micro-credential and the job. So we have got to make those pathways clear to the learner. That is on us, I think. I think where we would need some support from government is in—well, funding and that sort of support of course goes without saying—bringing some coherence into what the product is and what it represents in the workplace and also as pathways on to future study. I think that is something we can do in partnership, but we are still at that inflection point in the micro-credential market. I think they are here to stay. They are incredibly compelling experiences. Our learners that take them love them, so it is really on us jointly, I think, to see how we can bed them down as an expected and a well-understood product, to use that term, within our industry.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you. John.

**Prof. DEWAR:** Look, I agree with what Simon said, although Universities Australia has attempted to impose some order on this chaos, but maybe it has not worked yet. I am looking forward to what Liz has to say, because I know Deakin have done a lot of work in this area. One comment I will make, though, is that we receive no funding for these. These have to be full fee or not at all, basically. At the moment federal government funding will cover the cost of qualifications that are formally recognised, and they could even be short qualifications. They can be certificate level or diploma level, they do not have to be bachelor degrees. But if something does not lead to a formally enshrined qualification in the AQF, then we do not get funded to deliver them. That could be an area in which state government might like to think about how they can help. There are precedents for this already—various digital skills initiatives that the State Government has rolled out, I think quite successfully, where there has been state money made available. Sorry to keep talking about money, but we have to make these work financially if they are going to happen. Over to Liz.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Liz.

**Prof. JOHNSON:** Thank you, Chair. As Simon says, this is a topic dear to my heart. At Deakin we think about this as a complex mix, and it depends what the learner brings and what they are seeking. We talk about career starters, career changers and career advancers. What a micro-credential does for you depends on where you are and where your career goes. I think the thing that we are missing around micro-credentials is a really comprehensive embedding of them in career and thinking about lifelong learning and career development. Individuals of us are doing it. I know Simon's work is doing that, as happens at other institutions, but we need to make that broader and we need to make those connections with industry so they see micro-credentials as spots on a career.

We also need to recognise that universities do not own micro-credentials. There are actually a lot of them that come from industry. We recognise them already as credit into our courses, and we need to be more systematic about what we recognise and for what purpose. So there is some framework stuff that really needs to happen here, and there is work underway. As John has pointed to, UA has published a little piece of work about interoperability—how do you move credentials between institutions? There is work that is coming out of the AQF, or has been flagged within the AQF review coming up, as shown elsewhere. But I think for me the piece that we are missing is the broader acceptance of micro-credentials across education. So that means professional development in firms, in TAFE, which really work with modular accreditation all the time, and in universities. We have got to see it across and some facilitation about how we do that so that industry can recognise ours and vice versa. That would be good.

John is quite right. Funding is an absence at the moment, so if you can make them cheap and to the purpose, then people are very willing to engage with them. If they are a bit obscure or they are expensive, then they are difficult for people to engage with, and by 'people' I mean both learners and industry partners who might want to sponsor their staff to do them.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Gregor, did you want to add to that?

**Prof. KENNEDY:** It is only a small point. I fully agree with what has come before and also the UA work that I think Liz led. The point that I was going to make was the importance of this connecting a couple of threads in our conversation about rural and regional initiatives in micro-credentialing particularly in the area of upskilling and reskilling, and it goes to actually one of the areas of the Inquiry about working towards a clean economy. I think that there are real opportunities here to partner with industry in regions, in communities, to give them a real idea of how micro-credentials can allow people to change their career after working in an industry. There is a project in the Latrobe Valley that we have been involved in that I think is a real opportunity for us and speaks to the second part of the Inquiry.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We will move to the next question. Kat, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair. In the small amount of time that we have got left—it has been a broad discussion and really interesting, so thank you—I just wanted to touch on Job-ready Graduates and those reforms and the impacts of that on enrolments. Some of the submissions to this Inquiry suggest that the Job-ready Graduates may have a negative impact on enrolments in some priority skills areas and may also disproportionately impact disadvantaged groups. So I put that to you. How can universities work with the

Victorian Government to understand those impacts of the Job-ready Graduates reforms on university enrolments the long-term implications on workforce supply?

**The CHAIR:** Gregor.

**Prof. KENNEDY:** Thanks, Kat. I do not think it was a particular part of our submission, but I am aware of the impacts that you talk about with Job-ready Graduates on softening enrolments in some areas because of the way in which the package has been designed. John mentioned before that jobs ready came in at about the same time as the pandemic, and there is a lot going on in the system in terms of low unemployment and students studying online for a long period of time and maybe just being a bit reticent about continuing education. So there are a couple of things that I think we have to unpick collectively about that story, but I did want to just suggest that it is all in our universities' agendas. It is part of what we do to equip students with skills for the future, which is at the heart of the job-ready graduate package. But at a very basic level the package really constrains, in a way, our ability to direct investment into areas which are of Victorian Government priority. It dictates the fees and subsidies for different clusters of education, with a view to attracting students and with the intent of growing enrolments in a particular area. But perversely, in practice the program incentivises in the opposite direction in many cases and really in areas that are not considered priorities. I think that is a real problem for us, so I think there is a really strong opportunity just at the moment to advocate for reforms to that, to provide a sort of review to reduce the perverse incentives, I think, in the program and in the way in which that program has been designed, particularly given the workforce demands that we are facing.

**The CHAIR:** I notice that we are sort of running out of time, but quick responses would be good—John and then Kris.

**Prof. DEWAR:** The federal government is committed to a review of Job-ready Graduates later this year, Kat. So a lot of the issues that Gregor has outlined I think will be aired then, but let us not forget that the job that Job-ready Graduates was designed to do was to reduce higher education funding by 6 per cent over the forward estimates. That is really the problem, and really looking at the funding rates and the funding clusters and all the rest of it is kind of playing with deckchairs rather than addressing the big issue, which is the overall envelope of funding. I agree with Gregor. I think the other factors that are in play at the moment, the pandemic and the post-pandemic behaviour of students, are kind of overwhelming the other variables that might be in the mix about the specific impacts of JRG on student choice.

**The CHAIR:** Kris or Ben?

**Prof. RYAN:** Thank you, Chair. Just briefly—agreeing with both the comments on this already—we are at a point of low unemployment and high inflation, so for people of low socio-economic areas or rural and regional areas the conversation that we know is happening inside homes right now is whether the universities' education is giving you what you need with an immediacy and whether you can invest in that for three or four years, particularly with students who perhaps are brilliant with their English and communication skills and are seeing that that is not something which is as valued, perhaps. Yet it is something, if we think about the multidisciplinary of all of the courses that we are providing and these particular areas, that is essential.

I also want to raise that there are concerns also particularly for equity students based on their potential fail rates and their potential loss of a commonwealth-supported place. We have a lot of anxious students and student organisations at the minute. Obviously we are doing a lot to support those students, as my colleagues would be as well, with early outreach to be able to support them through their studies, but that anxiety is something which I think may risk future students saying, 'Look, perhaps not for me right now'. And if not now, then when for an education beyond secondary?

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. That is a wrap. Thank you all for your participation today—really valuable information for us to conclude with in our Inquiry. But if there are any pertinent issues that you think you did not have an opportunity to raise today, please write to us and let us know.

**Witnesses withdrew.**