T R A N S C R I P T

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 19 February 2018

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Witnesses

Ms Megan O'Connell, Institute Director, and
Ms Kate Torii, Policy Analyst, Mitchell Institute.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing for the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee's inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Hansard is recording today's proceedings. We will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript so you can correct any typographical errors.

I will give you 5 minutes to start with and that will then allow us some time to ask questions. Please state your name before you start, for the Hansard record.

Ms O'CONNELL — Thank you. I will pass over to Kate Torii. I am Megan O'Connell, the director of the Mitchell Institute, but Kate Torii, who is my policy analyst, was responsible for putting this submission together, so I will let her make the opening remarks and then we will invite questions to both of us.

Ms TORII — I am Kate Torii. I just want to thank you all for having us here today and giving us the opportunity to share our ideas. First, I just want to set the scene a little bit about the future of work and the context for our submission. At Mitchell Institute we have done a little bit of work around how education systems can better prepare young people for the changing workforce. I am sure you have heard a lot about that, so I will not overplay it. With the rapid advances in technology and machine automation and an increasingly globalised workforce, we cannot predict with certainty what jobs are going to be in the future, but we do know that young people will have to navigate multiple careers over their lifetimes and to compete in highly competitive places.

There is a growing evidence base in this context for the power of transferrable skills and capabilities. We know that young people who can use critical thinking skills to solve problems, who can collaborate with their peers, who can communicate their ideas effectively and who have an entrepreneurial mindset are well-placed to succeed, but our education systems are not yet prioritising the types of learning experiences that grow those types of capabilities.

To quickly talk about the current situation and the youth transitions to the labour market, we have this situation of young people who disengage from education, who fail to re-engage and who stay behind over their lifetimes, but we also have this situation of young people who are in education for longer, reach higher levels of qualifications but still find challenges finding work. We see this with the increasing number of bachelor graduates who are taking longer to find work, but we also see a bit of a mismatch in terms of there being fewer young people taking vocational pathways and fewer young people who are interested in that pathway.

A survey from Mission Australia showed that of school leavers in Victoria, 77 per cent indicated that they wanted to go to university, but only 7 per cent wanted to go to TAFE or a vocational college, and even fewer—4 per cent—wanted to do an apprenticeship. That is a bit of a problem that we see, because job projections show that of the 950 000 new jobs over the next five years, half of those will require a vocational qualification. What all this means is that careers education should help with that transition, helping young people to get on a pathway to employment. But if we are also thinking about preparing young people for that dynamic future world, then learning about careers and learning for careers needs to be a bigger part of learning in schools.

We put a few policy considerations in our submission around starting earlier. Careers advice at the start of senior secondary school is too late for many young people. We also felt a broader focus on cultivating students' capabilities in school is an important step, because those capabilities are as important as doing well academically for future success. There is also a recommendation around more real-world learning opportunities in schools. We mentioned our entrepreneurial learning program that Mitchell Institute trialled last year, and we have to talk about that further. The other consideration was around how you support teachers to more effectively engage with industry, particularly those emerging industries.

I might stop there and let this be more of a discussion. Put your questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you. On youth unemployment, what are the main factors behind current youth unemployment rates, and how do they reflect on school career advice?

Ms TORII — One of the changing trends we have seen in terms of youth unemployment, particularly since the global financial crisis, is this shift towards more part-time jobs being available as opposed to full-time jobs. We are seeing this structural change in the job market where the number of part-time opportunities has

increased a lot, which works for some young people but for others is underemployment. It is the reduction of those entry-level opportunities that has got a big impact on young people, particularly those going through university and trying to find those first graduate positions.

The CHAIR — How can school career advisers better align students' career decisions with actual job availability for workforce projections?

Ms TORII — I think particularly the opportunities to bring their world of work closer into what is happening in school classroom learning is a big factor. The entrepreneurial learning program that Mitchell Institute ran last year was an example of where students had to identify problems that they saw in their communities and find ways to solve them. That was a part of their school learning. It gave them opportunities to go into the community, to meet industry people and to find their own mentors. Allowing students to be more connected through their schoolwork to what is happening outside is one way forward.

Ms O'CONNELL — I think the other side of the equation is getting better at the advice that we give to young people about where the jobs are now and where the jobs are into the future. Some young people need to understand that if you go on and do a three-year generic degree, as lots have done, it will be very hard to get a job in the future. If you go on and just do a base-level arts degree or commerce degree, then you will take five years to transition in all likelihood to a full-time job, whereas if you went on and did a certificate IV in child care or if you went on to become an aged-care carer, you could actually get into the workforce a lot quicker.

I do not think those other pathways that are really growing in the economy are made known to young people. I do not know whether this is the fault of government or industry. It is probably something everybody needs to work on together. When you think about a university qualification, you know that if you go on and become a teacher, there is a pathway there. You can go on and become a principal. You are not there at your first entry-level job, whereas I do not think we do a great job of selling VET jobs in that manner. I do not think anybody understands that if you do a childcare certificate IV, you can go on and run your centre, you could go on and be a childcare policy person.

There are a world of pathways even within VET qualifications. We tend to look at VET qualifications as, 'Do that, and forever you will be an aged-care attendant in the nursing home doing this job'. I think we need to do a better job of mapping what those various industries are for young people so they can actually see where the opportunities are. There are young people that will still want to go to university, and that is fantastic, but for some young people perhaps it would be better if they went and did a VET course, spent a few years working, and then perhaps they will want to go on and do something else. Perhaps they will want to continue on the VET trajectory.

Mr MELHEM — As a follow-up on that, would you then make it part of the curriculum or delivering training or teaching and having a presentation from the various disciplines, for example, and say, 'If you ever become a teacher, that is likely your career path', 'If you are a nurse', or 'That is child care'? Do you actually make it part of presenting to the school and early on and basically telling them and educating them about the various career opportunities? Is that what you are saying?

Ms O'DONNELL — I think it would be absolutely fantastic if children could be exposed to the broad range of pathways, because children tend to be otherwise exposed to the pathways that their parents know about. Kids in more highly esteemed schools will know about all the university pathways and not know about the other ones, so absolutely. The degree to which we can change those perceptions from earlier on would be great.

The other thing that would be really useful is to know what kids are good at and capable of. We have capabilities in the curriculum in Victoria, which are fantastic, and we are getting towards teaching and assessing them, which is good, because we know there are different types of capabilities for different sorts of jobs. You want your people working in aged care to be more compassionate and more empathetic. They are still going to have to have digital skills, but potentially quite a different mindset to if you want to become an engineer.

We can get better at earlier on helping students to identify where their capabilities lie and opening up to them what world of pathways and possibilities could be there for them given what they seem to be good at and what seems to motivate them.

Ms RYALL — You mentioned part-time work earlier. What types of roles are we talking about there? What types of jobs are we talking about?

Ms TORII — For young people?

Ms RYALL — Yes. You said that there is more part-time available than full-time work?

Ms TORII — Yes.

Ms RYALL — What types of occupations are we referring to there?

Ms TORII — I think it is largely in the services sector that we are seeing those sorts of casualised work arrangements. There has been this shift over the last 20 years of employment industries in Australia. At the start of the 21st century manufacturing was the biggest employer industry. Now that has been in steady decline, and we have seen this growth in health care and social assistance, professional services, education and training and in those services-oriented industries. That is where we are seeing it.

Ms RYALL — In those occupations like health and services like that?

Ms TORII — Yes.

Ms RYALL — Is there a reflection or is it indicative there of the assistance on transition that we are perhaps giving students about that and the realisation that that is the case, given that is what they still choose to do? Where are we directing them in that respect?

Ms TORII — There has been some research around students' career aspirations. There was a study last year by the Australian Institute of Family Studies that showed that for 14-year-old students there was a bit of a mismatch between their aspirations and what was actually available. So not many wanted to work in the services industry; a lot of them wanted to work in professional services. There was that mismatch between prestigious careers and what is available.

Ms RYALL — Are you able to advise us on what that research is? It would be interesting to know about that mismatch around 14-year-olds and what they perceive as the path that they may go down and the reality of what is there.

Ms TORII — Exactly, yes. I think the researcher's name is Baxter. Is it Jennifer Baxter?

Ms O'CONNELL — It would be, but we can forward it to the Secretariat. That would be fine.

Ms RYALL — If you would that would be interesting, because if there is a disconnect, then I guess that begs the question: what are we doing about it? Any views on what we are doing about it, or are we?

Ms O'CONNELL — I think it is an absolute challenge for the career space between what young people want to do and what is seen as the right and prestigious, to some degree, thing to do, and where the economy says the jobs are as well, and how we start to have those discussions with young people. Because to a degree you do want young people to be able to pursue whatever they want to pursue in life, but then if you end up training five times the amount of people you need in that job, is that a fair thing to be not telling young people about as they go along? I think there is a real challenge there between the economic realities of where we need workers …

Ms RYALL — Jobs of the future.

Ms O'CONNELL — Yes, absolutely—and all students matching themselves up. I heard a little bit of the earlier discussion on the ATAR side of things—that we do hear from young people that they are shop with their ATAR. If you get a 90-plus, then you should do a course that is a 90-plus, regardless of where the jobs are and what you might want to do. Actually you might have wanted to go and become a hairdresser or a plumber, but you got this score so you should become this. It is a challenge.

Ms TORII — I think the other thing, just quickly, is how we think about capabilities, even if it is a part-time job or in an industry that you are not necessarily going to work in. A lot of young people are studying part-time, working part-time, and there is a lot of value in the types of capabilities that you develop: the customer service

skills, the teamwork—those sorts of things. I think that is something where perhaps our education systems do not value as much those transferable skills, particularly for the young people who are balancing school with their outside commitments. So I think shifts in education that can start to value those broader skills would also be a good way forward.

Mr CRISP — On VET pathways, how can the Victorian Government encourage more students to consider a VET pathway?

Ms O'CONNELL — That is a really good question that we dwell on probably weekly. Part of it has to be about—and how you do this is a challenge—shifting the prestige around VET. I mean, it is far less so than it ever has been before—becoming a brickie or a plumber. VET actually is about your new high-tech industries. How do we start to sell that notion to young people? I think the Tech Schools initiative potentially is one of the levers to do that by actually showing young people that it is cutting-edge, it is innovative, you do not have to go to university for four years to get this amazing job. We need to make sure that all young people's experiences with VET are of high quality so that VET in schools actually does expose them to the highest levels of teaching and training in the best places possible. Then it is about that broader career mapping, trying to show young people that, yes, your first job in the VET pathway does not have to be your last job, that there actually is a way through, and showcasing the success stories within VET. We do do a good job of showcasing the success stories from higher education, but you do not tend to hear as much of that in the VET space.

Mr MELHEM — Just to follow up on Peter's question, is part of the problem the sponsorship by employers of apprenticeships, even in aged care, for example? You go study the theory but then the challenge is: how are you going to do the practice? Do you see any sort of improvement there? For example, the Victorian Government is currently mandating with its major projects that 10 per cent of the labour force should be apprentices and so forth. Is this something we need to focus on—for example, encouraging young people to go to VET with employers' sponsorship?

You could have a student doing plumbing, for example, where they could have four or five employers because that particular plumber has no longer got work or has moved on, and then that young person is left in limbo. Is that maybe deterring people from taking that course, for example, to do plumbing or aged care, or is it about having the sponsorship from the employers to do the hands-on part of it? Can you make any comments on that from your research or from a Victoria University point of view on this issue, particularly in low socio-economic areas?

Ms O'CONNELL — This is slightly anecdotal from discussions I have had with apprenticeship field officers and the like, but with young people and apprenticeships it is a really complex story because it is often the young people that are less suited to school and have other issues going on in their lives. So I think to keep those young people in apprenticeships we need to wrap, and we are doing a better job at wrapping, services around them, because they may need housing support. They may need mental health support. They have quite complex lives because they are young people at the end of the day.

I do think there is more of a role for employers in the VET space as far as getting and retaining employees goes. We do know within some of the industries that have the highest level of casualisation, like your aged-care workforce and your childcare workforce, that does not make them a particularly attractive pathway for young people if you do not think you are going to gain a permanent role from that. So it is about trying to develop better pathways that are more stable for young people into those jobs—and we can do that, absolutely. Those jobs lend themselves perfectly to traineeships, and there are traineeships in those spaces. Yes, working with employers on getting groups of young people that will benefit from going through and would be attracted to that sort of pathway, and nurturing them through it and delivering them full-time jobs at the end of the day would be worthwhile.

Mr CRISP — Regarding starting career education earlier, we have seen some submissions that career advice should begin in Year 7 or even primary school. What are the benefits of starting career advice in primary school? Are students ready for that sort of conversation at that level?

Ms O'CONNELL — I think absolutely. Conversations will happen at a variety of levels, but what we have seen in some of the research that we have come across is that student aspirations are pretty similar and lofty when kids are really, really little. So three, four and five-year-olds all want to be firemen, policemen, doctors—all those things—and then socio-economics start to intervene and you find in primary school kids really do

narrow down. Boys particularly narrow down. You find low socio-economic boys set their career aspirations before—what was it, 12 or something, that thing that we read?

Ms TORII — Yes.

Ms O'CONNELL — And they set them incredibly low. So if you do not get in during the primary school years, you will find your boys will go, 'Okay, Dad's a brickie' or 'my uncle's a brickie; I'm going to do that', or even quite marginal employment aspirations or none, because they do not have those role models around them, so I think we need to. For higher socio-economic kids, it is potentially less of a problem, although you may have narrowed them down to their parent's trajectory. So to make it fair for all children and young people, you do have to start early. It is not about drilling them, 'Here's all the occupations, think about what you want to be'. But it would be about having conversations from really early on with kids. 'You're a really good problem-solver. Did you know that people who build bridges are good problem-solvers as well?'. Good teachers, I am sure, do this all the time just when they are reading books and that with kids, but it is about making it part of the curriculum so all kids can access that as well.

Mr MELHEM — Just on that, in practical terms then, are you suggesting that schools should take a proactive role in directing kids to try to match a job to their ability? I suppose the other one is what is available in the marketplace. There is no point in learning something if you are not going to be able to find a job. So it is basically about schools starting to drive career development and so forth from an early age. What sorts of reforms can we put in place to make that happen?

Ms O'CONNELL — I quite like, and I am sure you have heard about, or will be hearing about, the Foundation for Young Australians work around career clusters, so not directing a kid to a particular job per se but towards a particular type of industry. You most definitely do not want to be narrowing kids down to one job, given how jobs are changing, although lots of them will remain similar but have bits added on. But you do want to open their eyes to this whole cluster of things that they might be interested in as a kid.

That is where we have found that our Entrepreneurial Learning project was really quite useful as well. It got kids doing stuff. We got some of our young people, for example, cutting up broken drums in Traralgon. Some of the kids did welding, some of the kids did marketing, some of the kids did community fundraising and it really opened their eyes to the types of roles they might or might not want to do in the future.

We know that there are programs going on like this in various little bits of the country, and in Victoria through the Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurs, where they get primary kids actually running little projects. Some of the primary kids are born organisers, some of them are born marketers, some of them just really like to write and some of them are artistic. There is already a sense of, 'This is good. I wonder if this is something I could play with into the future', and just regularly seeding kids in that manner so their ideas can grow and develop and they can head towards areas where they might thrive in the future.

Mr MELHEM — Just another quick one. Would you then encourage teachers to do these things on a regular basis? Do you encourage schools to make that one of the items to be discussed at every parent-teacher interview, saying, 'By the way, have you thought about', because the parents might have one idea for their child, and the teacher might think they might be going somewhere else. But in most cases probably they discuss it. They say, 'I never thought about that'. So would you actually make that a standing agenda item, for example, where it is part of an ongoing teacher-parent interview about what sort of career a child should have?

Ms O'CONNELL — That would be my dream. I would absolutely love that. I love that we would take a child's aspirations and capabilities and have the conversation about that as well as what they have actually achieved. So you could marry both things together. I think we probably try to do that towards the end of the secondary years, but then it is about what course your young person is going to head towards rather than having those discussions earlier on.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the Committee I thank you for your time and contribution.

Ms O'CONNELL — Thanks for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.