

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 19 February 2018

Members

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Witnesses

Ms Erin Aulich, Vice-President, Secondary,

Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, and

Mr John Graham, Research Officer, Australian Education Union.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon. Welcome to the public hearing of the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee 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 that you can correct any errors. You have 5 minutes to make your statement and then allow us some time to ask questions. But before you start, state your name for the Hansard record. Welcome.

Mr MULLALY — Thank you for the welcome. I am Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union Victoria. Can I say on behalf of the AEU thank you for the opportunity in the context of the Committee and the work that you are doing to make a presentation. The presentation from our point of view is aimed to support the written submission that we made to the Committee, and though we feel that the written submission is comprehensive in articulating the union's views around careers education and what is required in Victorian Government schools in particular but certainly in our TAFE colleges in a connected way, let me through this initial opening set of remarks highlight some of the key areas that we think it would be prudent for the Committee to continue to consider.

In that context the first and primary thing we would say is that for a long time careers education has suffered from a lack of dedicated and clearly articulated resources to enable a proper focus on careers education. We would also say that across the state what we hear our members talk about and what we have experienced ourselves is, sadly, a patchwork of very good practice but certainly by no means is it uniform and universal practice in the context of making sure that our young people get access to the careers advice that they need.

We do know it is a complex area. Providing careers advice to a young person, let alone to any worker, is not straightforward. We know that young people bring to bear a whole range of different perspectives about their life and their trajectory and in that way we think that there is an importance to embed careers education in a better way, in a deeper way in the curriculum, and that there is also pause for thought to consider including it but in an appropriate way, even in the later years of primary school, such that children at that point but as they become young people are best placed to consider what options they have but, just as importantly, learn the skills that they need.

I think the other complexity that is worth noting is of course the complexity of the world of work these days. That has changed markedly over the decades and, in changing, that is something that is confronting young people in ways we have not anticipated where our support—the support of teachers and principals and support staff, of course their parents and the broader community—perhaps may have not provided the resources schools need to do that work as well as they might.

I would just like to make some further remarks around a couple of key other areas, in particular careers advisers. Careers advisers are central of course to this enterprise, but what we know is that they are second only to the influence that parents have over young people when it comes to choosing a pathway out of school, and in that way we think that the importance of careers advisers cannot be understated.

I think the other key thing is that there has been, as I am sure the Committee has considered, a tendency over recent years to replace teacher careers advisers in some schools with support staff in those roles. Whilst we do not make a particular judgement or a view of those decisions in and of themselves, we do have a view that there is a direct connection between the role of the teacher in careers education versus that of a support staff member in that context.

I think that the other thing that is critical and what is evident to us is that there is not comprehensive provision of careers advisers across our schools, and that we would think a proper and decent resource allocation would see a mandatory careers adviser in each one of our secondary schools across the state.

Careers advice we think becomes particularly important, even more so, for some disadvantaged cohorts and in that way disadvantaged students really do need additional support when it comes to getting on the right pathway and when it comes to them making a successful transition into their life after school. We would argue that there is insufficient funding overall for disadvantaged students, not least in public schools, given that 80 per cent of all disadvantaged cohorts attend public schools. We think that having sufficient and proper careers advice that is well resourced is an important piece of the puzzle to make sure that disadvantaged students make that transition.

The other thing that we would like to highlight is in the context of post-school options. We know that in the community, whether it is agreed or contested, there is certainly a latent valuing of university as a post-school option as opposed to other pathways, whether they be apprenticeships, traineeships or TAFE. In that sense, I think that part of the challenge and part of the role of the careers adviser is to make sure that young people are tracked in the best way and get on the best pathway. We think that there is work that can be done at a broader level to make sure that we do not overtly emphasise one pathway as a preferred one compared to others, albeit that it is important that we actually make sure that young people are getting onto the pathway that will enable them to really make gains once they leave school. That is not to diminish the importance of a university pathway, but of course it may not be that university is the first place that a young person should or could go once they leave school. That might be an articulated educational experience after they access another form of education after school.

I think one of the critical things that we have noticed, and the statistics bear this out, is that there is an overall decline of engagement in vocational education and training, and that is particularly apparent in our government schools. The number of school students in the Years 10 to 12 has of course increased over the most recent periods of time—the last five, six or seven years—but equally over that period of time the number of students who are enrolled in a vocational education in school subject, a VETiS subject, has declined by around 3000 students. So at the time when you would want to be engaging people in a pathway, one of the key ways in which young people are engaged in a pathway that may take them to where they need to be after school—that is, through the VETiS program—we have actually seen less young people engaged in that way.

We also think that there has been an effect of the removal of the VCAL coordinators. These were positions in schools that were funded as an identified funding stream in our schools. Those people who undertook those roles did a number of key things. Of course they had critical relationships with students and they supported teachers who were delivering VCAL. But one of the often-stated roles, and one of the things that I think has been sorely missed in the time that those positions have not been there, is in the context of providing connections, relationships and partnerships with organisations outside the school. That might be business, it might be industry, it might be other training providers and often it was the VCAL coordinator that helped to join those links.

I think we would also say in that space, in the spirit of talking about links, is that there is great opportunity we think to better link our secondary schools and our TAFEs in a much more structured way so that students are getting access in the earlier years of secondary school to experiences that are appropriate. But equally and most importantly in those later years, where that is the appropriate transition, then that is one that can be made taking into account the whole needs of that young person. Getting them on a pathway into a career and into the world of work is important, but young people, not least those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often come with a whole range of other needs, and providing the links and better connections between schools and TAFEs is going to place us well to cater for the broad range of needs the young people have.

We would also highlight the Victorian curriculum and note that one of the critical things that we think could be emphasised through curriculum and through teaching and learning in schools is the knowledge that young people have about the world of work—their rights at work, their responsibilities at work. We have probably seen more than we ever have stories emerge in the press around young people who have been treated badly at work, who do not know how to exercise and talk about their rights as they are provided for in law. In that way, we think that there is a real role for teachers in the broad curriculum, as appropriate, to talk about the rights that young people have in the workplace. This is of course in the context where young people are already engaged in the workforce. Many of them of course undertake casual and part-time jobs whilst they are at school, so that their experience is a contemporary one when they are at school so we think that there is opportunity there.

Probably more profoundly than that, we would say that there is a role in the curriculum for a much better embedding of the long-term skills that young people will need when they make decisions once they leave school, but as we see careers changing over a period of time, skills they will forever need through their working life. In that way we think there is a greater capacity needed to ensure young people are actually equipped with the skills of advising themselves, if you like, but being able to bring to bear really clear thinking in career choices as they go on through their working life. We think that is a point that is well researched. The Foundation for Young Australians, for example, highlight that that is incredibly important, and indeed the OECD make a similar finding.

What I would say in concluding is that many of the issues that I have identified are often doubled if not trebled for students from non-metropolitan backgrounds, so rural and regional Victoria. From that point of view, the statistics are not pleasing, and in some cases they are pretty damning. The tyranny of distance, if I can put it that way, makes its mark when young people are trying to get the kinds of experiences that will support them in making decisions about where they go after school. But equally there are just some very basic geographic industry and business reasons why getting an experience in the world of work is that much harder for young people in rural and regional areas. We know also that the educational attainment of students in non-metropolitan parts of Victoria is certainly not what it should be and it is a sad admission that by very definition of not being in metropolitan Melbourne means that a student is disadvantaged. We think that in the careers space there is plenty of opportunity to enable greater support. It certainly comes to my mind to note that in the recent changes to the commonwealth funding arrangements as they apply in Victoria we have actually seen a disproportionate decrease for high-needs kids in rural and regional Victoria, compared to metropolitan Melbourne. They are the sorts of resources that we would talk about that would enable greater contribution to careers education for young people.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. Some submissions have recommended the Victorian Government make career advice a compulsory part of the school curriculum. What are your views on this issue, and why?

Mr MULLALY — I think we would say that if it is not every school, then almost every school will already attempt to give specific individual careers advice to each student. Whether or not that is in the form of a single careers adviser that is at the school, that will vary. We would, though, be broadly supportive of an investment that enshrined having access to a careers adviser as part of the experience of a young person in a government school. I think, though, one of the things we would say in addition to that is that if we only leave the investment in that way, then we will probably miss opportunities to provide greater support to young people in the careers space.

The CHAIR — How can the Department of Education and Training better support government schools to improve career advice?

Mr MULLALY — I think there is a range of things. I think primarily we would say that the level of resourcing available to schools remains a problem. In some ways, we had always argued that through the federal and state funding arrangements those additional funds that were earmarked to come to Victoria could well be used for a range of things, including improved careers education. So in that way the connection between funding and the responsibility that the Department of Education has in trying to support schools I think is a fundamental one.

In addition to that, I think that where we would say there is a great opportunity is to try and make better connections between what is good and very effective practice in some schools or in some particular areas and spread that more widely across the state. I think the Department of Education would have a key responsibility in doing that, and I think that happens in a range of ways. I think that can happen through the existing departmental frameworks and structures, but that equally there are opportunities to connect teachers, whether they be careers teachers or other teachers, in sharing the best practice so that we can actually ensure that it does not matter which school a young person goes to, that they can be afforded the greatest kind of support.

The CHAIR — From the perspective of teachers, principals and support staff, what aspect of career education would you say needs most reform?

Mr MULLALY — On the question of most reform, I think there are at least two if not three key elements to that. At the risk of continuing to repeat myself—and I suspect I will have further opportunities in this short time—funding is critical here, having the resources to bring to bear, and so funding reform in that way is important. I think that the other key thing is making sure that we have people who have the right set of skills in our schools.

Too often we have our members—teachers, principals and support staff—trying to provide the right kind of support to our young people. Yet too often they do not necessarily have the support sitting behind them, whether that is in the context of having skills themselves or whether that is being able to get access to information, connections and relationships that might bring to bear the best experience for the young person. So in that way I think that is a critical part that we really have some great opportunity to build upon.

The third thing I would say around reform is making sure that we actually do not leave the young person out of this conversation. It is absolutely fundamental in and of itself. Whilst yes, teachers and principals and support staff are there to provide critical advice and guidance together with parents, trying to ensure that the young person is central and is able to actually bring to bear the skills and knowledge they already have into that conversation, provide that space, so that this is an experience that is done with them, not done to them. I think that is really important. When we look at the outcomes of students once they leave school, those that have been most engaged in decisions that really were meaningful about their trajectory are the ones who are probably more likely to have succeeded in landing in a space that is fruitful for them.

Mr CRISP — On VET, how can the Victorian Government encourage the community to view vocational education and training as a valuable pathway for students?

Mr MULLALY — I think that one of the things we should do is recognise that people probably do see it as a valuable pathway, but I would agree in part with the premise of your question that there are other pathways that often have more value in the community's eyes, if I can make a broad and general statement.

I think one of the critical things is that young people respond best, especially if they are not as inclined for an academic pathway through university, where they have experience, where they have got a direct connection to the world of work in some way, and that comes through exposure. What we would say is that we are not setting up our young people well in terms of VET if the exposure we give them starts in Year 10. What we would say is that there should be and could be opportunities to engage young people in the world of work and understanding of the world of work much earlier than that. In that way I think that would tap into what is not an uncommon need for young people, and that is to have quite a lived experience of the world of work as best you can have when you are at school.

The other thing is that one of the challenges for young people is that they may only see VET as a pathway initially and I think one of the key challenges, especially if we are interested as a community and in our economy to have, for example, advanced manufacturing as a key component of it, that getting engaged in an apprenticeship or traineeship is just the start of a career in that way and that many people of course take the further steps.

So to come back to your question, one of the things we can be doing is actually allowing young people to see that doing vocational training or a trade may be what they choose to do for a good part of their working lives, but it may only be an element of them as they transition to other work or indeed into other roles within the industry that they have chosen.

Mr CRISP — We will change tack now and talk about careers advisers and education support roles. You mentioned that in your introduction. We would just like to hear a little more about it. Has the hiring of careers advisers as education support staff affected the profession and the quality of advice that is offered?

Mr MULLALY — I think our broad understanding is that it has not affected the quality of advice. Our view would be that people who are undertaking these roles have sufficient knowledge and capacity to do that work, as has been the case over many years. I did mention before that we think that that support, that knowledge and those skills could be enhanced, and there is no doubt about that. But I do not necessarily think that we would consider by definition that the appointment of education support personnel to those positions has had a negative effect.

I guess what we would say is that in the role that a teacher often has in the broader work of the school with their teaching peers and in the context of discussions around curriculum and pedagogy they may well be better placed than somebody who is in an education support position to engage in that broader conversation. As I said before, our view is that the opportunity to embed careers education more broadly in a young person's experience in school may place a teacher in a better situation to advance that. But I think in the end it comes down to ensuring that whoever is providing that one-on-one advice—when it gets to that—just has the skills and the experience and the connections to be able to further that young person's situation.

The CHAIR — Your submission mentions a former study grant scheme for career advisers to gain a tertiary qualification in career education. How did this scheme work, and if the scheme was reintroduced, should any changes be made to it?

Mr MULLALY — I will defer to John and ask him to respond in the detail that is needed.

Mr GRAHAM — John Graham, AEU Research Officer. Look, I do not have a great deal of information about how the scheme specifically worked. The situation we have got now, where we have got people going into the particular role without a postgraduate qualification specifically in careers, is seen as a disadvantage. We have had feedback from people in that situation who say that they really do need to have a greater knowledge of the field itself, even though they may be experienced teachers. So we would say that anyone who is in the role should either have that particular qualification or have the opportunity to study for it. On how it should change if it was reintroduced by the Department, the one recommendation we do make in our submission is that perhaps priority should be given to teachers in rural schools because of the particular situation in those schools.

The CHAIR — How useful is current student destination data, and how can it be improved?

Mr MULLALY — One of the challenges that schools have, if we think about the managed individual pathways as an example of this, is that the collection of data is only as good as the value that it may well be given for its use in any given school, and in that way I think it goes to that comment we made earlier around the patchwork. We have very good collection of that data and very good use of that data, but that is not uniform across the state. Whether or not we need to have more comprehensive data, different sets of data, that is something that we may, if the Committee was interested, come back with a more detailed view on. But in terms of what we know is already there, I think what is clear to us and what members will say to us is that you do get the variation. From that point of view, it does speak to the need of a much more comprehensive and uniform approach, which I suspect means that some of the decisions which have led to the variations, which often arise out of budget decisions in schools, need to have better coordination.

Mr CRISP — Last question: how can the Victorian Government improve rural students' access to work experience that is relevant and meaningful?

Mr MULLALY — I wish there was a simple answer to that because unfortunately it is something that I dare say many of us in this room have been trying to grapple with a better response to for decades. Having said that, I think that there a number of really key elements, characteristics, that a government could better focus on. In no particular order, we know that there are businesses that are wonderfully engaged in trying to provide opportunities for young people to get an understanding of the world at work, but we would probably say that they are the too few and that there are many more opportunities for industry to try and find ways to engage with schools. Often that comes down to relationships—and needing to have somebody in the school who can build a long-term relationship with an industry, with a set of businesses, I think becomes critical.

In that sense, given that the number of industries for a person in rural and regional Victoria will be by definition less or less accessible than for a student in metropolitan Melbourne, one of the critical things I think is not to just see a business or an industry only through the lens of the product that they might make or sell or the service that they provide. All businesses require a range of different skills, whether that be the accountancy skills, the marketing skills, the skills in advocacy and in the law—whatever it might be—or it might be fitting and turning on plant. So from that point of view I think that maybe we can advance the opportunity for young people in regional Victoria if we can unlock a little bit more of what goes on in businesses as a normal course of events.

In terms of what we do know is that schools in non-metropolitan Victoria are funded to try to take account of their rurality. We would argue that that is not sufficient. We would note that the allocation by the Victorian Government of the Gonski funding, when it was allocated in 2015–16 and 2017, that was disproportionately allocated to non-metropolitan schools. I think in some ways that is a testament to the fact that additional resources really do make a difference, whether that is the additional teaching staff to support students, whether that is staff that can be deployed to build relationships with businesses, with TAFEs. To put it in a simple way, our game is a game of relationships, and we are most successful when those relationships can be sustained and can be deeply rooted in communities.

The CHAIR — Justin, can you give some examples of successful programs that have improved career outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Mr MULLALY — Probably the one that I go to most often is the example of the Northern College of the Arts & Technology, which is based at the old Northland Secondary College site. They would, I suspect, admit themselves that it is not the be-all and end-all, they certainly have sought to make very strong inroads into

supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They have done a lot of work in trying to engage business, and as part of my go-to example they tell of the relationship they have built with Sutton Tools. It is, as I understand it, a metal forging business largely. But through that relationship they have been able to bring to bear resources at the school level through plant and other equipment. But more importantly, they have been able to get experiences of some of the employees of that business through working with students. So in that way for a young person, without wanting to be too general, it is not uncommon for them to have an experience when they come from a disadvantaged background to find it difficult to engage and remain engaged in a particular pathway, and having somebody who might be able to help build a relationship with them, through a formal schooling setting of course, is critical in that way, I think, to maintaining engagement.

Whether or not these young people end up doing their certificate III or maybe an apprenticeship, that is a different question. Often at the point where people are leaving school what is most important for a disadvantaged young person is that they have got a clear pathway that they have been engaged in choosing in a meaningful way that means that they can take those next steps, even if those steps change.

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

Mr MULLALY — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.