

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Bendigo—Tuesday, 22 October 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Khayshie Tilak Ramesh, Youth Mayor, and

Ms Annika Ritchie, Deputy Youth Mayor, City of Greater Bendigo Youth Council.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you for being here for this very important hearing that we have in Bendigo. We will take the presentation that you make on board because we want to hear from the cohort that we are looking at in terms of trying to assist in employment opportunities for young people, so we are happy that you are here with us today. What you say here is protected by parliamentary privilege, but if you go outside and say some of the things that you say here, you may not be protected by that privilege.

The transcript of what you say will be provided to you so you can proofread it and make sure it is all accurate, and we will give you any copies of presentations in terms of what you present to us today. Also, going forward, hopefully we will come up with recommendations that will suit particularly the young cohort of people that we are trying to assist through this investigation.

So thank you very much for being here. If you want to give us a 5-minute presentation, then we can ask you questions as we go along. But it is a relaxed atmosphere, so relax.

Ms ADDISON: And do we refer to you as Mayor and Deputy Mayor?

Ms TILAK RAMESH: By no means. We are from the Youth Council of Bendigo. Youth employability is something that we have been tackling a lot since the Brotherhood of St Laurence statistics came out, which were quite alarming about Bendigo. We had some questions that were emailed to us, and they are more about our personal journey through what we have done. Annika and I have had quite different experiences. The context is I am 22. I studied at a public primary school, a private secondary school and then went to La Trobe and studied in Bendigo. Annika, you are considering Collarts; is that correct?

Ms RITCHIE: Yes. I just finished VCE studies last year just up at the local Bendigo senior high school. I am currently 19 and doing a bit of a gap year because I do not actually live in Bendigo; I live in Heathcote, which is about 50 minutes out but still under the City of Greater Bendigo. I got accepted into a private university in Melbourne that I will be going to attend next year.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: I think a really interesting point of what Annika's journey is is that she was telling me about the costs associated with moving to Melbourne for Collarts.

Ms RITCHIE: Yes. As I said, because it is a private university it has a bit of a different kind of layout and everything. The course itself is very expensive—I would say about double the price of what most people would spend, if not three times as much. They do not have HECS; they have FEE-HELP, which is a little bit different. That means there is a 25% interest on top of it. Being a student, that is really intimidating, and it was something that scared me off.

Ms ADDISON: Annika, what industry or what sector is your course?

Ms RITCHIE: It is entertainment management. That is at Collarts, so that would be looking specifically in the music industry. I can talk about that. That is one of our questions as well. For me, I took this year off because I felt as though I could not make the commitment to jump straight down to that and I did not have the funds or the experience to move to the big city or anything. So I am still living rurally in Heathcote and just travel up to Bendigo several times a week to do mostly Youth Council things.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Is that a common experience of people your age, to be staying in the region and then commuting?

Ms RITCHIE: Yes. So even just within the Youth Council—and I have plenty of friends outside of that—I find a lot of people are staying in Bendigo and just commuting down to Melbourne for university. Some of them just find it a bit too hard and have actually terminated further studies because of that, and they felt as though they could not afford to move down to Melbourne.

Ms CONNOLLY: We today have heard some great presentations from people locally about the really alarming youth unemployment rates here in this region. Why do you think those rates are so high in youth unable to find employment?

Ms TILAK RAMESH: I think it is difficult because it depends on who you ask. We as a Youth Council have looked at a lot of qualitative research rather than quantitative. We have been going out and asking people what the real issues are surrounding it. I think there is this perception that there are a lot of jobs out there, but the jobs are not the ones that the young people want nowadays. We have lots of factory work and we have lots of early-morning, late-night shiftwork, but they are not exactly the jobs that suit study, and I think that is one of the problems. I have got a lot of friends that work at KR Castlemaine and they are doing shiftwork, but that is not sustainable with studying as well, whereas with the people who are studying like I am and like you, you work around your study and hope that university will be flexible around those sorts of things. But there are lots of cyclic barriers as well. Retail, for example, requires a licence. If you do not have parents who can take you on those 120 supervised hours and you cannot afford to pay for driving lessons because you do not have that job yet, which is contingent on this licence, you are kind stuck in this rut of: what do you do? And we do have programs like L2Ps and that sort of thing, but they are at their capacity at the moment. I think there are a few proposals to carry forward different programs; I believe MatchWorks is one of them. But in the interim it is quite difficult.

Ms CONNOLLY: What if I said to you to catch public transport?

Ms RITCHIE: Some employers just refuse it these days. That is something that I have had to do, and as soon as you say that you live a bit outside and you have to rely on public transport, they are just like, 'Phew, thank you!'. That means that you just may not turn up. So, yes, it is a bit hard.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: It comes down to whether you can fill a shift quickly. If you do not have the reliability of being able to be there within 15 minutes, a lot of jobs, I think, you are discounted out of. But even with public transport it is a lot of time and it is a lot of wear and tear on students being in those areas. Also those sorts of public transport gatherings and those hubs are areas where there is a lot of turmoil, I think, within our city. If you look at the mall, people complain about it—they have been doing so for the last 30 years—but if you look at the bus stop that has been put there, it is because it is an area where people congregate, where a lot of those tensions rise. There are students and parents who do not feel safe in those areas as well, which also makes it quite difficult. I relied on public transport for a long time. I only got my licence when I was 21, so last year. But looking at it now, there were a lot of things I avoided because it was too inconvenient to get public transport.

You are limiting opportunity by looking at capacity. So if you have to take public transport somewhere, you might weigh up the value of going to these things. When you look at extra lectures, when you look at extra educational opportunities, extra forums, ways that young people can have their say on politics, ways that young people can do workshops and upskill, if you are relying on public transport, the likelihood is that you would weigh the difficulty of getting public transport—aligning the timetables is another huge thing—with going, and sometimes you might just not go. I think that is definitely an issue.

The CHAIR: Can I ask in relation to stigmas attached to certain jobs, is there a certain stigma attached to certain industries by the young population? And do you think there is a stigma attached to young people by employers?

Ms RITCHIE: I would just very loosely say probably yes to both sides of that. Yes, I know that for myself and a lot of other people my age, we tend to avoid quite a large amount of jobs, I guess, and we look at really specific industries. So I guess the main ones that we would look at are hospitality and retail because they are usually just quick and easy ones that are just a bit more personable. They are usually good starting off jobs is the other thing.

The CHAIR: Particularly when you are studying, I suppose.

Ms RITCHIE: Yes, exactly, and it means it is a bit more flexible and it can work in with studying. As Khayshie said before, some of those other jobs could be factory work that are early morning or late evening. It can have a bit of a strain on people and definitely loses appeal.

The CHAIR: Just the other way around, do you think that there is a stigma attached by employers not to employ young people for varying reasons?

Ms TILAK RAMESH: Yes, it is something that I have looked at recently, because RDV, Regional Development Victoria, is doing a discussion called a deep dive, I think on 7 November. That is where they are looking at—like, I have been talking to Haley, who was just in here before, who has a lot of great things lined up—the benefits and the incentives to employ young people. There are actual grants, I believe, that you can get in terms of assistance employing people from disadvantaged backgrounds, employing young people. But the knowledge and the awareness of these allowances, I do not know.

Ms ADDISON: Do you have much Uber or Deliveroo here? Has that made it to Bendigo? And are young people working in that, I would say, new industry or the gig economy? Tell us about Bendigo and what new jobs are in Bendigo.

Ms RITCHIE: So that has come in recently. I think Uber just came in at the end of last year and Uber Eats has just kind of happened this year, sort of thing. That comes back to the whole licence issue. So a lot of young people probably are not tapping into those jobs because we cannot get up those 120 hours because of multiple reasons, and a lot of people are not getting to their Ps until later on. Like, I have not even got my Ps yet—I am nowhere near the hours—and I know plenty of other people who still have not got to their green Ps, which means they cannot carry more than one person, which means they are not really eligible for Uber.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: The other thing is cars. With Uber you have to have cars past a certain date of manufacture, and whether young people can afford cars within that span is the other question. For example, I live in Kangaroo Flat, which is 15 minutes that way, and Uber Eats does not stretch that far. I was so sad about it, you have no idea.

Mr ROWSWELL: Your bank account is very happy with it.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: Yes, that is true, for now—Domino's still stretches. But, yes, there are different barriers that way. But the gig economy is quite interesting, because I think that in Bendigo—I have been doing a bit of research for my own thesis about regional disadvantage—there are certain affluent families and certain affluent people who disproportionately influence the statistics around disadvantage in Bendigo. So looking at the gig economy itself, there are a lot of people, like young people, who have started businesses and have started consultancies, like myself. I am doing a public speaking workshop sort of consultancy, which is only possible in today's gig economy where we can get those casual positions.

But I think the other thing that disadvantages us is that we get put in casual roles, which is great for us because in the short-term you are like, 'Oh, great, more money—I don't need benefits, that's fine'. But when you look at things—for example, I wanted to lease a laptop recently—I do not have a credit history because of that. But also in terms of casual work, it is not secure employment, so when you are looking at getting loans, when you are looking at stepping into that next stage of life, you are actually hindered by this immediate attractiveness of casual work that is floating around.

Ms ADDISON: Insecure employment, yes.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Can I just take you back to your Year 11 and 12 years? Do you feel that the education experience you had through those years helped you or put you in a good position to secure employment after you left school? And also I would like some comment around the careers advisers, with your experience through those couple of years—11 and 12.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: You are probably closer to it now.

Ms RITCHIE: Yes, I just finished last year. Bendigo Senior Secondary College do have a careers counselling service, and quite a large one. I did not have too many interactions with them. I was always umming and ahing and a bit nervous with those kinds of things, especially living out where I did. It was like, 'Well, I shouldn't really be worrying about that yet because it's not going to happen until I finish school'. But I do remember there were a couple of times when I tried to book in an appointment—I forget, it could have been about a career or it could have been about looking at uni options—and they just said, 'Oh, look, we're really busy at the moment. Try making a booking for another time', and then it just kind of never happened. That was my experience, but I have heard positive things from other people who really did utilise it and found it encouraging.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: I think it also depends. I went to Girton Grammar School, which is one of the private schools here. My mum and dad came over as migrants 30 years ago, so in their mind it was like, 'Education is what we need to get and private school equals great education'—that sort of thing. So when I was in Year 12 you really got pushed, which I needed. Now I am doing law at La Trobe here. But the conversation about regional universities does not really touch private schools around here. We do our VCE conference where we go and tour different universities in Melbourne. We go to Deakin, we go to VU, we go to Melbourne and Monash, but La Trobe is not a part of the conversation. So there is already this hierarchy a lot of the time. Kids in regional areas will always say, 'I want to go to the big smoke; I want to get away from my parents, get away from this deadbeat town and leave'. As much as that is a teenage mentality, it does come down to that job opportunities here are really slim. Looking at law, if I am going to be biased with my own career, I am working with the Portable Long Service Authority at the moment, which is a new government department only established in July this year, which is here. I am so glad it came because the only other opportunities you have are law firms, and law firms are not exactly what I wanted to do, and then if you want to go government, you go elsewhere. So there is a lot of intermigration between Bendigo and metropolitan cities.

But in terms of career coordinators, I think it depends. We outsourced ours from Melbourne, so that was really hard. They did not know a lot of the regional challenges. We had an external consultant, which already adds a bit of finesse when you say, 'It's an external consultant from Melbourne'. So they came down—

Ms ADDISON: That is exactly what my school does in Ballarat. We have Melbourne consultants come down to tell you what Melbourne universities you can go to.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: Yes, that is the thing. I had a consultant another time—my parents came with me for this whole thing—and they said, 'Khayshie, what do you want to do?'. At the time I wanted to do medicine, so I was like, you know, that is it. So they asked me what subjects I did, and I did business management, psychology, I did chem. and English, which are the two prereqs, and then I did photography and digital media studies, blah, blah, blah. I straight-up got told, like, in confidence, 'Khayshie, why are you doing the dumb subjects? If you want to do medicine you have to do the smart subjects'. So my parents were like, 'Okay, scrap that—let's do all the smart subjects'. So I did specialist maths, further maths, maths methods, English language, biology, chemistry—managed to sneak in the psychology and bus. man.—but I had a really awful Year 12 where it was sort of like, 'I'm doing these subjects to get to a place'. But had I have done the subjects that I loved, they would not have scaled down as much as what they thought they would, whereas if you are aiming towards these subjects that scale up, if you do not enjoy them you are not going to do well in them anyway. So it was a really difficult transition.

But even speaking from a university perspective, I am finishing my law degree at the moment, so at that back end of finishing. There are a lot of law firms that only employ from certain universities in Melbourne. I was looking at a placement, for example—I think it was with King & Wood Mallesons—and they were saying, 'We want your raw scores from all of your subjects at uni'. So I was like, 'Fair enough'. They wanted your weighted average, then they wanted your individual VCE study scores and they wanted your ATAR—and this was five years on from VCE. So it is not something that gets forgotten. It is something that is really quite difficult for us in regional areas, where VCE is quite reflective of the opportunities that we are given.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I ask: you talked about wanting to do medicine initially and then law, and Annika, you want to be involved in the entertainment industry; did you do work experience in these areas?

Ms RITCHIE: Kind of. I was lucky. I went to Bendigo South East College, and they were pretty big on work experience. They set you up really well for that. They were like, 'Right, we have this week allocated at the beginning of the year at and the end of the year. You have to have it in and ready. You need to have it done for you to go and do work experience. If not, then you're stuck working with a teacher in the school'. So most people were like, 'I don't want to do that. No, thank you!'. They really helped you out. They would spend one day a week leading up to it to get your résumé ready, to allocate time for you to contact these people and everything like that. I was lucky in that I actually got to do my work experience at the Australian contemporary art gallery—it is ACCA; I have just forgotten exactly what it stands for, but it is one of the big art galleries in Melbourne. I was lucky because I knew the education coordinator of the art gallery and just emailed her personally and got it through that. Originally I wanted to actually get into the arts—so visual arts. I wanted to

do art curating and things like that. That was my passion for a very long time, and I just kind of changed it at the drop of a hat.

Mr ROWSWELL: I did work experience at the Melbourne Theatre Company, which was a really, really cool thing to do. So you have grown up here and you have studied here in your secondary years, and ideally you would study here in your tertiary years and you would then find employment within this community. So what are the summary points? What are the main barriers to that being achieved?

Ms TILAK RAMESH: Graduate opportunities are really slim. Coming out as a graduate everyone wants to apply for graduate programs, because you feel like they are going to baby you through it and it is not a real job yet. So you go for those. The only one in Bendigo that I know of so far is agribusiness with Bendigo Bank, which is fantastic. The other one, which only just newly came up, is this Portable Long Service Authority one. They contacted me because they were like, 'Oh, we know that you're in the community. You said there's a lack of opportunity. We have a job for you'. Because a lot of it is reliant on networks, and that is something that we see throughout our whole schooling. It is all about who you know and not what you know—that sort of thing.

In Bendigo there is a trend—and I think in a lot of regional areas—where you have three splits of kids. You have the ones who are really high achievers, and they are told from the beginning that, 'You need to make it to the big smoke in Melbourne'. So no matter what they will take the job in Melbourne, because they think that that is where there is career progression and where the climb up the ladder to the corporate sector is going to be. Then you have the middle ground that stays in Bendigo because they either have networks here or they have family businesses that they take over or they find other employment. Then you get the ones that slip through the cracks, which happens during the transitions between schools. So that is the Year 6–7 transition, the Year 10–11, the Year 12 to uni, or after uni where they are stuck shiftworking for the moment. I have got a friend who has finished law, and at the moment she is still working at the sushi place at the marketplace because she is finding it difficult that she does not have experience just yet. So a lot of the law firms in Bendigo will say, 'Go get experience in Melbourne and then come back'. So it is that whole employing-your-own sort of mentality, which I think is quite difficult, that is definitely a barrier.

Mr ROWSWELL: So it is potentially a lack of opportunity and a lack of vision splendour. So people do not see their medium to longer term place necessarily here because of the perceived or real lack of opportunities that might exist.

Ms TILAK RAMESH: Yes, and that is the thing. If you talk to business, they will tell you opportunities, but you have got to ask first, and that is what is not happening. If you go and seek opportunity, I truly believe that you will find it, and there are a lot of people who will, but in terms of if you are canvassing job opportunities and you look at Melbourne, there are all these advertisements for legal trainees. There are advertisements for entry-level jobs, all this sort of stuff. In Bendigo need to know the people to get them, and it is not that outward-facing, 'Here are all the opportunities we can offer you'.

A very easy example is the redevelopment of the Bendigo law courts. You would think they would play that up. You know, 'We're going to get a brand-new court. There's going to be so much legal action here. There are going to be so many jobs'. A lot of law students do not even know it is happening. But in Melbourne there are heaps and heaps of opportunities in terms of, 'Here's what we can offer for grads. Graduates are going to come through here. We have these flash-bang graduate programs where you meet a cohort'. Everyone is craving that community, and that is what they advertise, and I think that is really difficult. But even, you know, when you were talking about Collarts, a lot of people here probably do not know what Collarts is, so you would probably have to find it.

Ms RITCHIE: Yes. And I guess that is probably where we were lucky at our school, where they really did push for the local uni in Bendigo—so just La Trobe—but then we had a few come up from Melbourne to have a little stall during the uni day just to show you what was open. It was definitely one of the smaller ones that had basically no attention, but I noticed a couple of things that were similar to my interests and just happened to go to it, which—

The CHAIR: We have gone way over time, but one last question: from the State Government perspective, if there was anything that we could do in terms of policy, programs that we could provide young people to advance their careers, what could we do to help?

Ms TILAK RAMESH: I think a lot of it comes down—I know everything is money—but scholarships, even funding for regional universities, because the big thing that we face is that our courses are getting cut midway through. I have got a lot of friends who were studying, were two years in and the course got cut, so they just have to try and find something else, because the funding follows what is popular at the moment. What is popular, for example, at La Trobe is criminology, it is engineering. So these new degrees are beefing up, but there are other opportunities like strategic communication that have been cut. So that is one of them, but the other thing is immersion programs, I think, in metro, because in regional areas people idolise the metro dream but they do not know, whereas if you gave them placement opportunities in metro areas and really pushed local business to give placement, you can kind of weigh up the two and it is not this mysterious unknown that is going to be amazing. You know exactly what it is.

The other thing is InsideSherpa is something that I have used recently, which is an online placement. They give you a virtual placement in a law firm where you go and you do all these activities, and then at the end they are like, ‘You’ve done your placement with us’, and it just helps you with your resume in regional areas where you cannot actually go and do it with them but at least you have the name on your résumé. It is looking at, ‘What can we do to provide stepping stones for regional kids to attain where they want to be instead of settling for what they think they can get?’.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.