



Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries. Merri-bek City Council and Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN) joint response.

1. Introduction

1.1 Merri-bek City Council and the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network Inc.

Merri-bek City Council is the local government authority for one of Melbourne's most populous and diverse municipalities. The Council is a major employer in the region and plays a key leadership role in fostering economic development, community wellbeing, and creating local opportunities for its residents, including young people.

The Inner North Local Learning and Employment Network Inc. (INLLEN) is one of 31 LLENs that comprise a Victorian-wide network of incorporated associations established in 2001. INLLEN delivers the School to Work Program and develops partnerships and strategies to support young people across the inner north to successfully transition from school to further education, training, and employment.

This submission represents a joint position from both organisations. Our partnership provides a unique, on-the-ground perspective, combining the Council's deep connection to the local community, schools, and industries with the LLEN's expertise in brokering education and employment pathways.

1.2 About this submission

Merri-bek City Council and the INLLEN welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.

Our region is experiencing a significant shift in student ambition, evidenced by a 19.3 per cent increase in enrolment in the VCE Vocational Major (VCE-VM) in 2024.¹ This surge demonstrates a clear and growing demand for practical, skills-based learning that leads directly to meaningful employment.

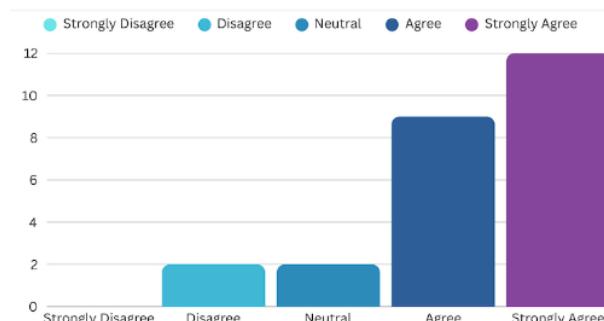
However, this enthusiasm is being met by a system that is failing to connect ambition to opportunity, due to chronic under-resourcing and a lack of mandated, real-world experience. This submission argues that while the will from students is strong, the system supporting them is critically disconnected and under resourced. We will outline practical, place-based recommendations to bridge this gap, ensuring the next generation can meet the workforce needs of our region's key in-demand sectors, including Building and Construction, Health and Community Services, and Information Technology.

¹ Carroll, B. (2025, June 23). *MORE STUDENTS GOING ON TO FURTHER STUDY THAN EVER BEFORE* [Media Release]. Victorian Government.

2. Building Aspirations and Bridging the Industry Disconnect

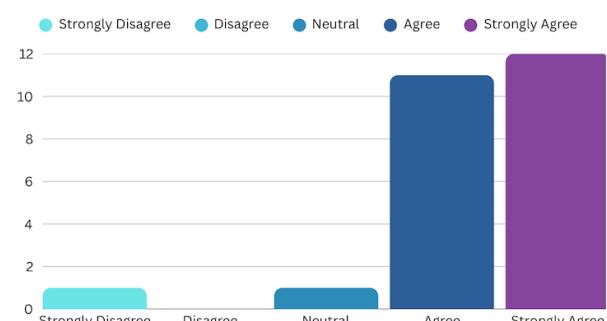
To effectively encourage students into pathways for in-demand industries, we must begin by building aspirations long before senior secondary school. Currently, the "aspirations piece" is largely missing from the curriculum in Years 7 to 10. This is especially critical for Gen Z, a generation seeking purpose-driven work aligned with their values.² To attract them to fields like construction or clean energy, we must move beyond discussing job duties and instead build aspirations by connecting these careers to the values they hold, such as environmental sustainability and community impact. This foundational work is essential to demystify vocational pathways and present them as viable, high-status alternatives to traditional university routes.

Our own local data highlights this gap between industry need and student perception. A recent survey conducted by Merri-bek Youth with students across local secondary schools reveals how young people perceive various in-demand industries. As the findings below indicate, there is often a significant disconnect between the sectors with the highest labour demand and those that students find most desirable, particularly when the value proposition of traditional trades is not clearly communicated.



"How important is knowing that I will definitely have a job at the end of my training or apprenticeship?"

N = 25



"I see trade jobs as a good career option for girls, not just for boys"

Student Priorities Reveal a System Disconnect

The survey data reveals a clear disconnect between student aspirations and the opportunities presented to them. The findings show that students' own priorities are well-aligned with the practical benefits of vocational careers; the barriers lie elsewhere.

- Students Prioritize Job Security:** An overwhelming majority of students value stable employment. The survey shows that **22 out of 25 students (88%)** agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to have a job at the end of their training or apprenticeship.

² International Labour Organization (2024). *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Decent work, brighter futures*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

- **Students Hold Progressive Views on Trades:** Students display a modern and inclusive view of vocational pathways. A strong majority—**21 out of 25 students (84%)**—see trade jobs as a good career option for girls, not just for boys.

These findings are critical. They indicate that the primary barriers to students entering in-demand trades are not their own mindsets or priorities. Instead, these positive perceptions and practical goals are undermined by systemic failures.

First, despite students' openness to vocational careers, they report that schools disproportionately promote traditional university pathways. This institutional bias, which can also be reinforced by parental expectations and opinions, creates a significant barrier for students considering in-demand trades. Research shows that parents' views have a significant impact on their children's career outlook, with many perceiving vocational careers like construction as not "aiming high enough," thereby steering them away from these pathways.

Second, and most critically for this inquiry, students overwhelmingly express a desire for practical, trial-based work experiences before committing to a career. Qualitative data from the survey, where students were asked what "one thing" they would change, reveals common themes including a desire for "more work experience" and "talks from people in different jobs, not just university." This provides direct, student-led evidence for the need to mandate and fund Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) as the most desired intervention to help them navigate their future.³

This evidence underscores the disconnect where employers struggle to find suitable apprentices while students are not given the practical opportunities they need. This is occurring even as the Victorian Government highlights the critical role of the 72,000 apprentices and trainees in Victoria in delivering its infrastructure and clean economy agenda.⁴ Stronger leadership from industry is needed, but it must be facilitated through better-resourced intermediaries like the LLENs that can manage these crucial connections.

3. The Effectiveness of Victoria's Senior Secondary Pathways: A System of

Unfulfilled Potential

A System with Strong Foundations

On paper, Victoria's senior secondary pathways appear strong and well-structured. In our region we have the Northern Melbourne VET Cluster which is an extraordinarily strong and robust VET Cluster with seventy secondary school members from the government, independent and catholic systems. The INLLEN initiated the development of the NMVC and has continued to provide support since its inception in 2006. The cluster was in response to the needs of young people to have applied learning and vocational training program options aligned to the local labour market. The

³ State of Victoria (2024). *Victorian Budget 2024/25, Budget Paper No. 3, Service Delivery*.

⁴ Victorian Government (2024). *Cross-sector collaboration: Enhancing VET pathways for students*.

development of the cluster supported the roll out of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning which kept thousands of young people engaged in education and improved their school to work transitions. The implementation of the Firth Review's recommendations to have one senior secondary certificate with a new Victorian Certificate of Education - Vocational Major (VCE-VM) has seen the enrolments and demand for vocational education programs through the NMVC increase by more than 20% in 2025.

The NMVC, for example, provides students in our region with access to 46 different vocational programs.⁵ The 19.3 per cent increase in VCE Vocational Major enrolments in 2024 indicates that students are actively choosing these applied learning pathways.¹ This aligns with state-wide data showing strong vocational destinations for school leavers, with 36.6% of non-completers and 8.2% of Year 12 completers taking up an apprenticeship or traineeship.⁶ This framework has the potential to be a powerful pipeline for skilled workers.

A Practical Disconnect from Industry

However, the practical effectiveness of these pathways is severely undermined by a disconnect between the public training system and the workplace. In the NMVC, TAFE providers deliver only 2% of the VET in Schools programs, and more critically, the pathways lack a guaranteed connection to industry. The absence of mandated and supported Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) is particularly damaging for Gen Z, who expect faster career progression and practical application to stay engaged. Leaving this essential real-world experience to chance creates a fundamental flaw in the pathway. Students are enrolled in vocational courses without the tangible industry exposure needed to solidify their skills, build professional networks, and confirm their career choices, a weakness given that non-completers are most likely to find employment in Building and Construction (18.6%).⁶ The structure exists, but its core purpose - connecting learning to work - is not being consistently fulfilled.

Transition from School to Work

In our region we have strong enrolments in traditional trade and in-demand industry pathways where students are keen to pursue an apprenticeship after completing school. Unfortunately, there are barriers to entry into industry, with students screened out and unsuccessful through the recruitment processes. Often young people who have committed to the training and followed their interest are not successful in finding an apprenticeship and look to other opportunities for employment which is often not a skilled pathway. There is no follow up with these students to support their success into the industry.

This disconnection from school to work is a significant issue which is impacting the number of apprentices entering the in-demand industries. There needs to be a solution

⁵ Department of Education (2025). *On Track 2024: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers*.

⁶ Parliament of Victoria, Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee (2018). *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*.

to this as we must bridge this gap for better outcomes for both young people and industry.

A missing part of the system is a service which works with these VDSS students in their final year of study to prepare them for work and place them into apprenticeships. A new service which works with the students to become job ready and successful in obtaining an apprenticeship would be a helpful solution. This would benefit the students from low SES backgrounds, and young women who do not have the social capital and connections to find an apprenticeship through their own networks. The LLENs would be well placed to take up this role with existing connection into secondary schools and industry.

4. The Root Cause: Chronic Under-Resourcing of Career Development

School career development in Victoria is critically ineffective, not due to a lack of effort from existing staff, but from chronic and systemic under-resourcing. A previous Parliamentary Inquiry recommended that the Department of Education and Training mandate a ratio of one career practitioner for every 450 students enrolled.⁷ In our region, this is rarely met; for example, one of our larger high schools Northcote High School has just one FTE careers practitioner for 1,600 students. This recommendation was reiterated in a 2021 report by the Australian Centre for Career Education (ACCE).⁸

A Quote from Karen Burgess, Careers Coordinator, Northcote High School, Vice President Merri-bek & Darebin Careers Network

“Not enough funding to ensure that every student has access to counselling by qualified careers practitioner. In our school I would see less than 10% of students – even doing 8-10 a day in peak times of subject counselling. Due to this, many students make uninformed decisions about courses and subjects.”

This resourcing failure directly undermines the single most effective form of career support, with evidence showing one-on-one talks with an advisor are the most attended career activity for all school leavers (83.8% of completers and 66.6% of non-completers).⁶ This failure leaves students to navigate a complex system alone, which is particularly detrimental for a generation where only half feel confident succeeding in their career and over half identify financial instability and the cost of living as a key concern.⁹ This lack of resources directly impacts access to practical experience. Support agencies like INLLEN are funded to facilitate only 15% of SWL placements, leaving schools and students to find the remaining 85%.

⁷ Australian Centre for Career Education (2021). *Conditions for Career Practitioners in Victorian Schools*.

⁸ Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation (2023). *future work and study aspirations for young people aged 15+ and cost of living pressures for young Australians aged 18-25*.

⁹ Pallas, T. (2023). *SUPPORTING YOUNG WOMEN TO WORK IN TRADES AND TECH* [Media Release]. Victorian Government.

A quote from Laura Hughes Careers Counsellor, Brunswick Secondary College, President Merri-bek & Darebin Careers Network:

"Career development in schools is entirely at the whim of the leadership of the school. Each school varies wildly, and students have no way of knowing what careers education they will receive year to year. Careers education should be mandatory component of all subject areas and teachers should complete PD in how to talk about pathways and teach career development skills. Career counsellors in schools work, usually alone, to try and expose students to as many opportunities as possible but career education should be a school wide, curriculum- integrated area of learning at every school, not a standalone/opt in/ad hoc activity."

5. The Consequence: Failing to Support Priority Cohorts

Supporting specific cohorts requires targeted, consistent, and sustainably funded interventions, yet these are often the first to be cut. In our region, programs funded through Jobs Victoria to help disadvantaged young people access 'Big Build' construction projects have faced short-term funding cycles and uncertainty, disrupting a crucial pathway. To genuinely support these students, the government must commit to long-term investment in the brokerage and mentorship roles that help them overcome systemic barriers. The need for this is acute, as young women globally face a "double disadvantage" in labour markets,² and youth from non-metropolitan areas are more likely to undertake an apprenticeship but less likely to enrol in a bachelor's degree.⁶

Similarly, increasing female participation in male-dominated industries requires investment in proven, on-the-ground programs. Our local trade training centre, NCAT, has successfully achieved 14% female enrolment in its trade programs - significantly higher than the industry average of 3.5% for trade and technician roles - through a dedicated young women's project funded by the State Government.¹⁰ However, this excellent initiative has consistently struggled for secure funding. This represents a key area for improvement: the government should identify successful, localised models like NCAT's and provide them with the long-term, operational funding needed to thrive and scale.

6. Recommendations

To address the challenges outlined in this submission, Merri-bek City Council and the INNLEN recommend the Victorian Government take the following actions:

- 1. Resource our Schools:** Mandate and fund schools to meet the established benchmark of one FTE career practitioner for every 450 students.

¹⁰ Carnemolla, P., & Galea, N. (2021). Why Australian female high school students do not choose construction as a career: A qualitative investigation into value beliefs about the construction industry.



2. **Introduce and Mandate a Careers Subject at Year 9-10:** Mandate and introduce a career and work-preparation subject in Years 9 and 10 to build early aspirations.
3. **Increase the Resourcing for SWL:** Mandate and fund a high-quality Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) placement for every VCE Vocational Major student, with significant investment directed to the LLEN network to broker and manage these vital industry partnerships.
4. **Invest in What Works:** Provide long-term, sustainable funding for proven, local brokerage and mentorship programs that support disadvantaged youth and women in trades, such as the NCAT young women's project, and create a framework to identify and scale similar successful place-based initiatives across the state.

7. Conclusion

The enthusiasm young people in Merri-bek have for vocational education presents a significant opportunity for Victoria. However, this potential is at risk due to a system that is failing to provide the necessary support, resources, and real-world connections. The core issues are clear: career education is under-funded, pathways are disconnected from industry, and targeted support for vulnerable cohorts is inconsistent.

By taking the decisive steps outlined above, the Victorian Government can build a robust and equitable system that transforms student aspirations into the skilled, resilient, and diverse workforce our economy needs for the future.

Merri-bek City Council and the INLLEN, with our established partnership and strong local links, stand ready to partner with the Victorian Government to pilot these initiatives. Our community offers the perfect environment to develop a model for place-based career education that can be replicated across the state.

We look forward to contributing to the public hearings if provided the opportunity.

Yours Sincerely,



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 Youth - Oxygen Youth Space



David Kennedy
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