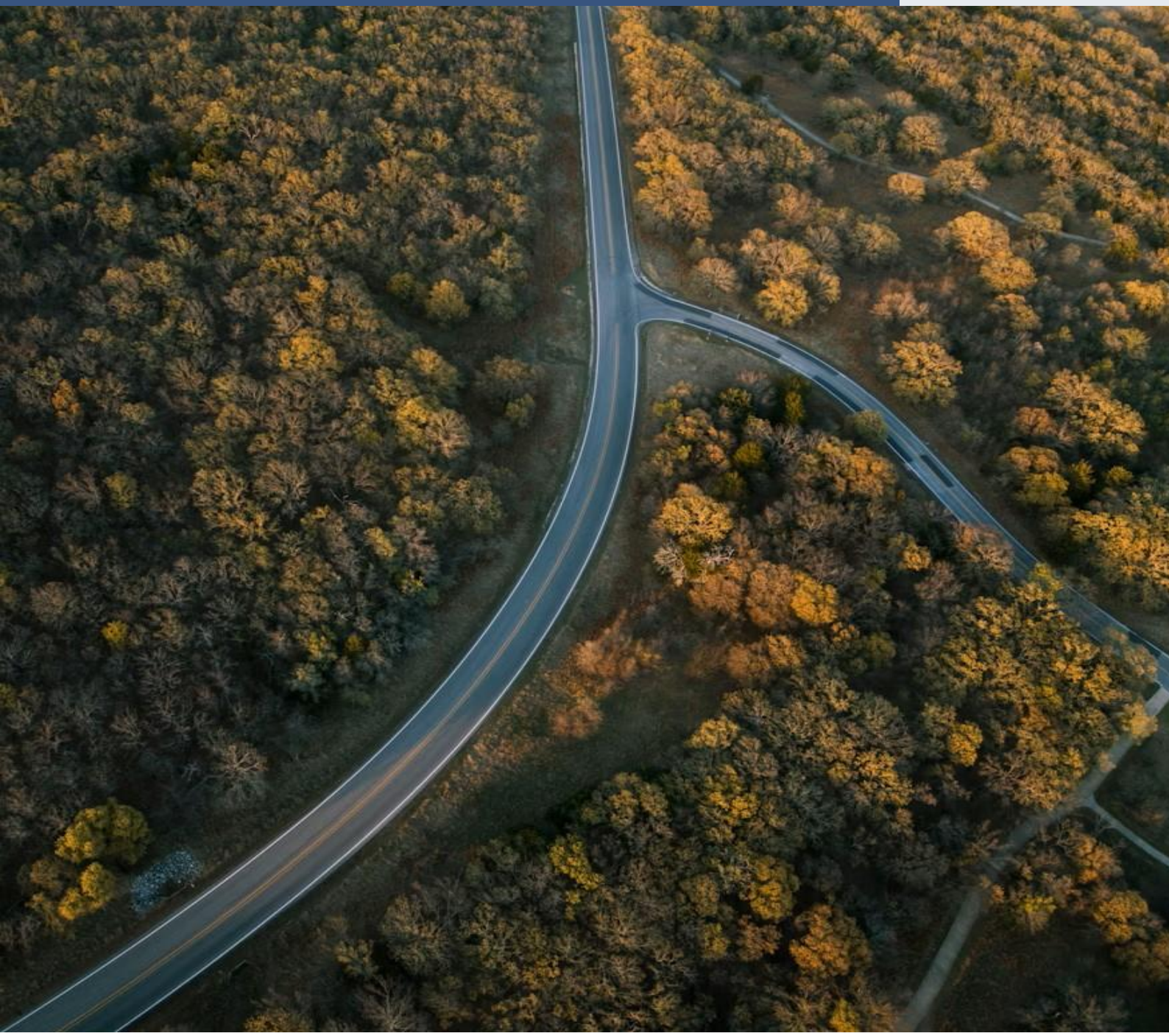
VCOSS Submission to the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

VCOSS
Victorian Council of Social Service



August 2025

About VCOSS

VCOSS is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where every person and community is supported to thrive. We work relentlessly to prioritise wellbeing and inclusive growth to create prosperity for all.

We achieve these goals through policy development, public and private advocacy, supporting and increasing the capabilities of the state's social service bodies, forging strong coalitions for change, and explaining the true causes and effects of disadvantage.

VCOSS's strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline service groups, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive Victoria.

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VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide this input.

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders and ancestors. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

Lived experience statement

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights in the development of this work. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. When somebody shares their experiences and insights with VCOSS, they enrich both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

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Executive Summary

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.

As the peak body for the social and community sector in Victoria, and additionally as the provider of Executive Officer services for the Early Educators, Health and Human Services, Sport and Recreation Industry Advisory Group (IAG) to the Victorian Skills Authority, we have focused this submission on student pathways into the social and community services, which is a critical part of the healthcare and social assistance industry.

Victoria needs a multi-faceted, funded strategy to grow and develop the workforce it needs for this in-demand industry. This must include fixing the 'student to new worker' pipeline.

VCOSS' submission sets out the challenges and solutions, starting with the number one pathway challenge: tackling pay inequity stemming from the gendered undervaluation of the social and community services. We then look at opportunities to effect positive change in schools, in the vocational education and training system and in the sector.

With growing demand for care services in challenging times, Victoria must invest in strengthening the sector that has caring at its core. Victoria's community sector workforce keeps our community safe, healthy and thriving. The future wellbeing of Victoria depends on taking effective action now.

This submission draws on insights from consultations undertaken in July 2025 involving VCOSS members working with learners across the education system.

Summary of Recommendations:

To address gender-based undervaluation as a primary barrier for student pathways into the community sector, the Victorian Government should address the following economic conditions for community services organisations:

1. Adjust base funding to the community sector to reflect the full cost of delivering services.

2. Increase default contract terms to seven years for government-funded community service organisations and optimise government contracting practices.

To increase awareness and elevate perceptions about student pathways into in demand roles in the community sector, the Victorian Government should:

3. Support engagement in career education and exploration with students from late primary school onwards.

4. Educate young people and those who hold influence – including (but not limited to) parents, carers and school career advisors – about pathways into the community sector and VET study options, building on:
    - Reforms to careers education, senior secondary certificates and VET in schools. The Department of Education should expand current investment in training and resources to enable more school staff to be able to speak to students about community sector careers
    - The *Job that Matter* and *Your World, Your VCE* marketing and communications campaigns. The Victorian Government should provide sustained, scaled investment in integrated marketing communications campaigns that generate measurable improvements in awareness, knowledge and interest of community sector career pathways.

5. Maintain appropriate funding, multi-year contracts and pay what it takes to all 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to ensure continuation of place-based support and coverage across all areas of Victoria.

To strengthen pathways into the community sector for early school leavers and learners requiring additional support, the Victorian Government should:

6. Improve the delivery of trauma-informed, wrap-around supports for students across the education and training systems.

7. Provide funding for mainstream and specialist schools to address identified gaps in transition support for students with disability who are pursuing VET and higher education.

8. Introduce a new, sustainable funding model for Learn Local providers to cover the full cost of course development, promotion, delivery, administration and student support.

To ensure that students undertaking community sector qualifications can complete mandatory workplace placements and progress to employment, the Victorian Government should:

9. Introduce support for students undertaking key community sector TAFE qualifications (such as the Diploma of Community Services), that are currently ineligible for the Commonwealth Government's Prac Payment, building off the success of the Inclusion Scholarships program.

10. Advocate to the Commonwealth Government to:
    a) extend the Prac Payment to all community services qualifications (including key TAFE qualifications)
    b) raise the rate of Youth Allowance and other Commonwealth income support payments for students and apprentices, to at least $80 a day.

11. Introduce a funding model for community sector organisations hosting mandatory workplace placements, based on a 'per placement day' fee.

Gender-based undervaluation is a principal obstacle to student pathways into the social and community sector

The community sector is an in-demand industry. Victorian Government modelling predicts the healthcare and social assistance workforce will need a further 86,482 workers by 2027, increasing to 335,464 new workers by 2034.[1] Currently, community sector workforce growth is not on the right trajectory to meet that target.

Gender-based undervaluation is the biggest obstacle to student pathways into the community sector. The historical perception that care-related professions are "women's work" and are less skilled has led to many roles in the industry being undervalued relative to other sectors, creating the conditions for low-paid and insecure work.[2] The Fair Work Commission's Gender-based Undervaluation Review has recognised this issue by giving priority consideration to awards that cover roles within community and social services.[3]

Current government reforms to senior secondary education - for example, VET in schools - are helping to position the community sector as a priority industry to schools, students, families and carers. However, without addressing the root causes of gender undervaluation of the sector, we will struggle to attract enough students to commence or continue a community services pathway.

To do this, we need to first address the underlying economic conditions. For workers, this means we need to lift the rates of pay. While we are aware that the Fair Work Commission has work underway to address gender undervaluation of various community sector awards, this is only one part of the issue. We also need to provide workers with security of employment by offering longer term employment contracts. Workers need access to the certainty of reliable hours of work, to avoid underemployment, and many also require workplace flexibility to balance their paid work with other (including unpaid) care roles.

Community sector organisations need to be funded adequately, not only to deliver safe, high quality services, but also to be able to offer fair, flexible and secure employment. This means ensuring that community sector roles are appropriately paid and encompass all regulatory requirements and entitlements (such as award requirements, the Superannuation Guarantee, portable long service leave contributions and WorkCover premiums), as well as providing opportunities for upskilling and career development. We need to create the conditions for the community sector to become an industry of choice.

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[1] Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, *Employment Projections Dashboard*, 2025

[2] Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023 – 2033: Women's Economic Equality Final Report,* https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/10-year-plan

[3] Fair Work Commission. *Gender-Based Undervaluation – Priority Awards Review | Fair Work Commission*. 2023, www.fwc.gov.au/hearings-decisions/major-cases/gender-undervaluation-priority-awards-review

The care economy, of which the community sector is a huge part, is a significant contributor to employment, economic growth and societal wellbeing in Australia[4]. It is capturing the attention of policymakers in productivity conversations across the country for these reasons.[5] We need to continue to improve awareness and understanding of the substantial impact that community sector careers have on society and shift perceptions about the sector's contribution and its value.

Along with addressing the economic factors, creating the conditions to enable the community sector to become an industry of choice, and changing perceptions of the sectors contribution and value, we also need to ensure that there is increased awareness and understanding of what the community sector offers and promote the pathways to a community sector career. One of the many consequences of historic gender undervaluation of the sector has been less curiosity and therefore less awareness of what the community sector offers in terms of roles, opportunities for career progression and qualifications required to enter the sector. The result is that pathways into the sector are not necessarily well understood by students and those who influence them.

Recommendation 1: Adjust base funding to the community sector to reflect the full cost of delivering services.

Addressing gender-based undervaluation and achieving the necessary growth of the community sector workforce is directly tied to the need for increased funding – and better funding terms – for community service organisations. Insufficient funding keeps wages low. This makes community sector jobs less attractive and drives workforce shortages. As women comprise the majority of the community sector workforce, this also perpetuates the gender pay gap and limits economic security for women.

The funding provided to community service organisations must reflect the true cost of delivering services, including specific allocations recognising worker-related increases to costs such the superannuation guarantee levy, portable long service leave contributions and WorkCover premiums – as well as overhead allocations that support organisations to uplift HR, governance and ICT systems to embed effective practices for staff recruitment, supervision, training, mentorship, collaborative service delivery and leadership development.

Adequate funding for the community sector is essential not only for safe, efficient and high quality service delivery, but also to remedy gender-based undervaluation at its core.

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[4] Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Economic impact of care and support,* https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/draft-national-strategy-care-and-support-economy/economic-impact-care-support

[5] Productivity Commission 2025, *Delivering quality care more efficiently*, Interim report, Canberra, August. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/quality-care/interim

Recommendation 2: Increase default contract terms to seven years for government-funded community service organisations and optimise government contracting practices.

Short-term funding contracts constrain the community sector's capacity to attract and retain skilled workers. Sustainable, long-term funding would increase the sector's capacity to grow and develop the workforce, plan for the future, and innovate.

The Victorian Government's Service Agreement with the funded sector should be amended to establish default funding terms of seven years, in line with the Productivity Commission's recommendation for government-funded community service organisations.[6]

In addition, sub-optimal funding arrangements – including poorly-targeted performance indicators, and onerous reporting requirements, along with compliance and regulatory burden– can constrain job satisfaction for workers and lead to burnout and dissatisfaction. The Victorian Government should conduct a review of its contracting and procurement practices for community service organisations to ensure that its funding requirements (and associated compliance obligations) are fit-for-purpose, streamlined, supportive of service quality and innovation, and deliver effective outcomes.

[6] Productivity Commission 2017, Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services, Report No. 85, Canberra

Improving the visibility and status of the care economy

Positive steps have been taken to improve the visibility and status of the care economy, attract students to choose the community sector as an industry of choice, and grow the workforce. These include marketing campaigns positively promoting VET pathways (including qualifications and careers in the community sector) such as Your World, Your VCE and the workforce attraction campaign Jobs that Matter, that promotes the work and value of the community sector and provides information about career pathways. There have also been reforms to careers education rolling out across the school system.

These existing investments and activities should be sustained. But we need to bolt on additional strategies to attract, skill and retain the community sector workforce required to meet future need. This includes improving the visibility and reputation of the care economy for students from as early as primary school, and continuing to elevate the profile of vocational education and training (VET).

VCOSS also advocates for specific investment in building the capability (knowledge and understanding of community sector careers) of school staff. This could include opportunities to experience "industry tasters" facilitated by LLENs, alongside students and families.

Recommendation 3: Support engagement in career education and exploration with students from late primary school onwards.

The Imagineering Plus Project in 2022 – 2023 was a project targeting students in grades 5 and 6. It was supported by Hume City Council and facilitated by Hume Whittlesea Local LLEN and based on the first iteration of the Imagineering Project in 2018-19.

Imagineering Plus took a family centred approach and involved over 800 grade 5 and 6 students and their parents or carers in the City of Hume, particularly focusing on those at risk of disengaging from school or whose family members had not engaged in higher education. Its purpose was to expose students and parents to education pathways and future emerging work trends, aiming to influence career pathway planning whilst maintaining school engagement and supporting a successful transition to secondary school.[7]

The evaluation of the project identified a range of positive outcomes, including increased student awareness of educational and career pathways and engagement of parents/carers in career pathway discussions. Excursions to local TAFEs and guest speakers from industry also helped to shift perceptions – from young peoples' initial understanding of TAFE as "*a boring*

[7] Viv Sercombe, *HWLLEN Imagineering Plus Program Evaluation – 2022–2023*, 2023, https://www.hwllen.com.au/_files/ugd/46a98a_087b64a5fbcc431f828af4f6901ccb6a.pdf

place where people only do study" to "a *place where I can do an apprenticeship or traineeship when I finish school"*.[8]

While exposure to career pathways at such a young age should emphasise exploration rather than decision making, this project clearly demonstrates the benefit of planting seeds early and encouraging an ambitious mindset for young people and their parents or carers. One parent who participated reflected that "*the Imagineering program gives students a vision of what they want to be in the future*."[9] This effective project could be scaled to other areas across Victoria via the statewide network of LLENs to connect with more young people earlier in their journey, with a focus on community sector careers as an identified area of future workforce need.

Recommendation 4: Educate young people and those who hold influence – including (but not limited to) parents, carers and school career advisors – about pathways into the community sector and VET study options, building on:

a) Reforms to careers education, senior secondary certificates and VET in schools. The Department of Education should expand current investment in training and resources to enable more school staff to be able to speak to students about community sector careers
b) The *Job that Matter* and *Your World, Your VCE* marketing and communications campaigns. The Victorian Government should provide sustained, scaled investment in integrated marketing communications campaigns that generate measurable improvements in awareness, knowledge and interest of community sector career pathways.

Although the community sector is an in-demand industry, awareness of careers in this sector for school aged students tends to be relatively low, due to gender undervaluation, societal misconceptions and low profile.

As well as championing and promoting community sector careers, there is a need to elevate societal perceptions of VET. Pathways into employment in the community sector are predominantly through VET qualifications. This includes providing more information to young people and their families to address outdated misconceptions about lower employment outcomes and earning capacity. In 2024, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into the perceptions and status of

[8] Sercombe, *HWLLEN Imagineering Plus Program Evaluation – 2022–2023*, 31
[9] Sercombe, *HWLLEN Imagineering Plus Program Evaluation – 2022–2023*, 32

vocational education and training found that learners, employers, and other stakeholders lack reliable information on VET.[10]

Since the commencement of Victoria's senior secondary schooling pathway reforms in 2018, much work has been done to give vocational and applied learning more of an equal footing in relation to the historically dominant VCE route. Despite this, rates of engagement in VET pathways for year 12 completers have remained fairly stable while bachelor's degree enrolment has continued to grow year on year.[11]

This signals the need for greater promotion in schools about TAFE – including the excellent facilities and the breadth of legitimate career pathways it opens the door to. The Victorian Government's Free TAFE initiative has made high quality vocational education accessible to more than 175,000 students since 2019 and should be emphasised as a key incentive in campaigns to attract young people to careers in the community sector.

As a VCOSS member providing services to disadvantaged young people noted: *"The carrot is, for 300 bucks, in 12 months you can earn a qualification that will get you job ready…You will then have young people who will see TAFE as a viable entry option."*

We note that there have been positive steps taken to promote VET pathways in senior secondary school, such as the *Your World. Your VCE* marketing campaign, which also takes proactive steps to promote careers and pathways in the community sector. This is a great start and useful resource. To realise the full impact of this investment, there needs to be ongoing and sustained investment in training and resources to enable more school staff to be able to support students to understand the options available to them in community sector.

In 2022, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) launched a workforce recruitment campaign called *Jobs that Matter*. This campaign, which is still current, promotes the work of the community sector and provides more information about career pathways. The campaign emphasises the value of the sector and the potential to 'make a difference'. While we don't have access to campaign metrics, our members who work in schools advise that this kind of messaging resonates with the current generation of young people.

Expanding educational campaigns such as *Jobs that Matter* would continue to raise the profile of careers in the community sector for school students and those with the greatest influence on young people's future decisions – parents and carers, teachers and career

[10] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education, and Training. *Final Report: Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training - Shared vision, equal pathways*, 2024, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/VETInquiry/Final_Report

[11] [11] Department of Education, *On Track 2024: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers*, May 2025, https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/2024-snapshot.pdf

advisors. Retesting key messages and methods of delivery with focus groups of target audiences and updating the campaign based on their feedback would help to ensure that educational resources are aligned with current student and parent media consumption preferences. For example, the social media platform TikTok was prominent in our conversations with members, but was not utilised as part of the *Jobs that Matter* campaign.

To realise the full potential of the investment in the marketing and communication campaigns such as *Jobs that Matter* and *Your World, Your VCE*, there should be sustained, scaled investment into integrated marketing communications campaigns that generate measurable improvements to strengthen awareness, knowledge and interest into pathways into the community sector.

Recommendation 5: Maintain appropriate funding, multi-year contracts and pay what it takes to all 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to ensure continuation of place-based support and coverage across all areas of Victoria.

High-quality, personalised career guidance is strongly associated with increased student confidence and better employment outcomes[12]. However, we have heard that most career advisors within public secondary schools are already working at maximum capacity, with recent research indicating that the national average is at least 560 students per FTE advisor.[13]

To support and supplement the work of career advisors and encourage more students to pursue careers in the community sector, it is important to bolster connections between schools and external organisations such as LLENs and leverage off their existing networks and established relationships with education providers and community sector employers.

There are 31 LLENs in Victoria, covering every school in the state. Central to their work is a place-based approach, meaning services are designed to meet the needs in the local context – which takes in socioeconomic, cultural, geographical and other features of a region – as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.

There is a strong view amongst VCOSS members and industry representatives that the LLEN model is best practice and facilitates meaningful collaboration between schools, employers, industry bodies, government agencies and community groups. LLENs have a strong focus on at-risk cohorts and facilitate work-based learning, vocational training and other initiatives that help with the transition from school into training or work.

[12] Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools: Committee Final Report*, 2018, https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/495fd7/contentassets/45f3562fdaa34c15a5fd0159380becf3/eejsc_58-04_text_web.pdf

[13] Markham, N, & Betts, M, (2025). 'Upgrading the school to work transition for social and economic impact', Year13 and HEDx, Australia.

Work-based learning (WBL) encompasses work experience, industry or community organisation exposure programs, structured workplace learning (SWL) and school based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs). WBL has great potential to influence students' career aspirations, build connections and develop key employability skills.

However, the nature of the work of the community sector can present challenges for work-based learning in practice. These include difficulties finding age-appropriate roles, regulation requirements restricting opportunities for work experience, limited capacity to support diverse needs and a lack of resources to support students in many workplaces. We have also heard that placements are often difficult to secure for young people undertaking VET subjects while at school because they are competing with TAFE and university students for placement opportunities.

LLENs have been instrumental in developing innovative approaches to overcome these obstacles to WBL, including through the use of data and technology. For example, in 2022 Goulburn Murray LLEN produced the pilot program Goulburn Murray Virtual Industry Careers Experience (GM VICE). GM VICE is an immersive virtual reality (VR) platform that aims to address the problem of young people needing exposure to more industries, using VR headsets to allow students to explore simulated workplaces.

Building on the success of GM VICE, the Victorian Government has now provided funding to VicLLENS, the collective voice of Victoria's 31 LLENs, to scale the use of VR careers education across all schools in the LLENs network.[14] VIC VICE currently offers interactive 360 degree VR workplaces in five priority industries, including community services. While VR is not a substitute for real life workplace experience, this initiative makes WBL and workplace exposure much widely more accessible, particularly for students with additional support needs and those living in rural and regional areas.

Other innovative approaches by LLENs across the state include interactive industry-specific career expos and incursions into school environments. These initiatives and the connections they forge are instrumental in informing students, teachers and families about real career opportunities that exist and opening up conversations about training, including the value of vocational pathways. Funding for LLENs should be long-term and reflect the full cost of delivering their services. Current short-term contracts limit the capacity of LLENs to maintain place-based collaboration and partnerships, undertake long-term planning and provide continuity to students through their transition from school to employment.

[14] VIC VICE, "VIC VICE." 2023, www.vicvice.com.au/about

Case study: Hume Whittlesea LLEN - Invigor8ing Education program

Invigor8ing Education is a supported, practical semester program for Year 8 students with interactive participation in a training and/or workplace environment. The program aims to provide a practical applied learning option for small groups of students in Year 8 who need assistance with their school engagement.

The goal is to increase student awareness of the value of vocational pathways as they gain important transferable skills for use in education and workplace settings. Invigor8ing Education is a partnership between The Y Whittlesea, Baseline for Young people (City of Whittlesea Youth Services), Whittlesea Youth Commitment and Hume Whittlesea LLEN.

A young person, 14 years of age, had been referred to the work immersion Community Services stream for Invigor8ing Education due to their lack of engagement when at school and increasing occurrences of school refusal. At the initial stages of the program, they presented as being very quiet and somewhat withdrawn.

As time progressed, and with the added support provided through a small group program which enables greater assistance to encourage active participation, this student demonstrated their commitment by being punctual and highly engaged with the activities even if it was an area they didn't initially enjoy. This interaction evolved through the program as they took on leadership roles by helping and teaching other students on the program - skills previously not apparent within their regular schooling.

Feedback from the student's parent indicated that their child enjoyed the program and would come home happily telling their family all about what they had been doing that day. According to the mother, this was incredibly positive as, prior to the program, their child would come home and go to their room with very little communication. They also mentioned their child was starting to show more interest in school and attendance was getting a lot better.

For this student, Invigor8ing Education has helped them improve attendance, build confidence, work as a team, use initiative, gain better communication skills - all transferable skills for employment.

Pathways into the community sector must be inclusive

Whilst many VCOSS members noted that people with lived and living experience of socio-economic disadvantage, marginalisation or with additional needs are often driven to work in this sector, they quickly find that barriers to education and training can be compounded.

We note that there have been positive investments in student inclusion, mental health and wellbeing programs in secondary schools that make a real difference in students' lives, this does not continue in a consistent manner beyond this. This results in inequitable access to programs and supports, which in turn has an impact on employment outcomes. Support systems that recognise the impacts of trauma, and focus on empowering individuals based on their inherent strengths, would contribute to greater equity and inclusion.

The Victorian Government is to be commended for the investments it has made to support students across the education system. It is pleasing to see these investments to transform career education in schools. VCOSS is also pleased to see the recent establishment of the Victorian Early Leaver Connection Initiative (VELCI) which will support young people who leave school without completing Year 12 to stay engaged in education and training.

It is also critical that community organisations delivering training and providing support to learners and their families are funded sustainably into the future. These organisations, including Learn Local and LLENs, play a pivotal role in creating pathways to training and employment for Victorians who need additional or tailored support.

Recommendation 6: Improve the delivery of trauma-informed, wraparound supports for students across the education and training systems.

The community sector is a values aligned industry with a strong potential for growth of a lived and living experience workforce. This workforce has the potential to provide workers with purposeful work. We know that people with lived and living experience of trauma and disadvantage are often driven to work in the sector, with this figure as high as 30% at one school for disadvantaged young people. People with lived and living experience can make exceptional contributions to the community sector, but may need different and additional supports to complete qualifications, enter the sector and remain as workers.

In this light, it is vital that educators, support staff and employers receive ongoing training about the impacts of trauma, and how to support wellbeing alongside learning and professional development. This includes creating safe spaces, responding to individual needs with compassion, and actively promoting and embedding inclusive practices.

Victorian schools are increasingly adopting trauma-informed approaches but we have heard that there are significant gaps in support for people with lived experience of trauma and disadvantage in the VET system, contributing to high rates of non-completion. Holistic, strengths-based and trauma-informed support – including for the transition to employment – is needed to ensure to greater equity and inclusion for these learners. Best practice involves wraparound support, including student mentorship.

Recommendation 7: Provide funding for mainstream and specialist schools to address identified gaps in transition support for students with disability who are pursuing VET and higher education.

Victorians with disabilities face additional barriers to participation in education, training and work, and this is why TAFE enrolments and employment rates for Victorians with a disability are significantly lower than for people without a disability[15][16] . These barriers include challenges with administrative requirements relating to enrolment in qualifications, and accessibility needs not being accommodated in educational settings including work experience and placement contexts.

VCOSS welcomes significant investments in improving disability inclusion practices in Victorian government schools. The Victorian Government has also made strong commitments to improve disability inclusion and support in VET settings following the Final Report of the Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability in 2021. This includes support for The Gordon TAFE in Geelong to develop a disability awareness program and establish the Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion, set to open in 2027.

However, we remain concerned about reports from our members indicating that students with disabilities often do not feel safe or do not have their accessibility and inclusion needs met adequately in the transition from school to training and employment. We also know that there is a culture of low expectations for people with disability in schools, which is a form of discrimination that can restrict access to opportunities[17]. For example, if educators and career advisor have low expectations of the capabilities of a person with disability, they may not invest time and effort in encouraging them to reach their full potential.

We know that there is further work required to respond to the findings of the Disability Royal Commission and put into practice recommendations that prevent discrimination and ensure safe, high-quality, inclusive education and training for Victorian students with disabilities. Any

[15] The Hon Gayle Tierney MP. *Backing Inclusive TAFE Training for People with Disability*. 23 May 2025.
[16] Victorian Skills Authority. "Victorian Skills Plan for 2023 into 2024." 2023, www.vic.gov.au/victorian-skills-plan-2023-publication/improving-opportunities-victorians-disability/breaking-down-barriers
[17] Mary Sayers, Sue Tape, Poppy Mullins and Xander Wroblewski, *Being realistic about inclusion: What's realistic for young people with disability,* Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin, Volume 54, No 2, September 2022.

actions taken in this space will need to align with the recommendations from the Royal Commission.

Recommendation 8: Introduce a new, sustainable funding model for Learn Local providers to cover the full cost of course development, promotion, delivery, administration and student support.

Learn Local is a network of adult community education providers who provide low or no-cost pre-accredited and accredited training in community-based environments such as Neighbourhood Houses. These environments can be more accessible for learners as they are flexible, situated closer to home and focused on the needs of individual people.

Learn Locals have historically been an important pathway into VET and higher education as they provide an alternative 'foot in the door' to Victoria's education and training system, particularly for people with negative experiences of mainstream educational institutions. However, VCOSS members engaged in delivering community education report that the current policy setting will actually reduce pathways as vocational preparation training has been removed as a funded category.

As with LLENs, the funding model for Learn Local providers must be adequate and sustainable to enable long term planning, effective service delivery, long term planning and relationship building with industry.

Support for quality student placements in the community sector is needed

Student placements are a mandatory component of accredited community services qualifications. Placements provide an essential opportunity for students to develop practical skills, apply their learning to real-life workplace situations, and transition to employment. These placements are vital for to building Victoria's future community sector workforce and produce job ready workers. However, the current student placement and new-worker pipeline is under significant strain.

There is a clear need for increased support – both for the students undertaking these placements and for the community services organisations hosting them – to ensure a sufficient supply of skilled, job ready workers and address persistent workforce shortages in the sector.

Recommendation 9: Introduce support for students undertaking key community sector TAFE qualifications (such as the Diploma of Community Services), that are currently ineligible for the Commonwealth Government's Prac Payment, building off the success of the Inclusion Scholarships program.

Recommendation 10: Advocate to the Commonwealth Government to:

a) extend the Prac Payment to all community services qualifications (including key TAFE qualifications)

b) raise the rate of Youth Allowance and other Commonwealth income support payments for students and apprentices, to at least $80 a day.

There are persistently low completion rates for courses qualifying people for careers in community and social services, including Certificate III in Community Services. We know that this is a key obstacle preventing students from entering the community sector workforce.

Significant numbers of students are enrolling in relevant qualifications, but completion rates for these courses are as low as 30%, according to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.[18] While there are a range of reasons for non-completion, our research suggests that a shortage of placement opportunities and financial hardship caused by unpaid placements are substantial contributors to this issue.[19]

[18]NCVER 2024, *Total VET students and courses 2023: program completions DataBuilder*
[19] VCOSS, *Supporting high-quality placements in the community services sector: Insights Paper,* August 2025

On 1 July 2025, the Commonwealth Government introduced a Prac Payment of $319.50 per week to support eligible teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work students while they undertake mandatory workplace placements.[20] While this is a positive commitment to supporting students, this new payment does not cover community service qualifications, including key TAFE qualifications such as the Diploma of Community Services.

The Victorian Government has also made investments to reduce financial hardship among social work students most at risk of discontinuing their studies, such as introducing Inclusion scholarships for social work placements and piloting 'earn and learn' initiatives like the Switch to Social Work program. However, these are only available to university students, and mandatory placements are also required for students undertaking key community sector TAFE qualifications such as the Diploma of Community Services.

A Community Work Australia accredited Diploma of Community Services currently requires the completion of 400 hours of practical placement hours[21], or the equivalent of approximately 10.5 full-time work weeks. While there is no doubt that placements are an essential component of the training for careers in community services, VCOSS' research has found that unpaid placements are a key driver of poverty for students.[22]

Placement poverty not only contributes to low completion rates, but also has detrimental effects on health, wellbeing and capacity to learn. In order to sustainably grow the workforce to meet future demand, community services students need to be financially supported to complete their mandatory workplace placements and transition to employment.

Though it is outside the scope of this Inquiry, VCOSS notes other structural drivers of student poverty, which include the inadequacy of Commonwealth income support payments for students, apprentices and trainees, including Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy. These payments should be raised to at least $82 a day to ensure that people undertaking study and training who do not have financial support from their families can afford the basics.

[20] Ministers' Media Centre, Ministers of the Education Portfolio, Cost-of-living support for teaching, nursing and social work students, Joint Media Release, 6 May 2024, https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/cost-living-support-teaching-nursing-and-social-work-students

[21] Community Work Australia, *Community Work Australia Course Accreditation Guidelines*. June 2024.

[22] VCOSS, Supporting high-quality placements in the community services sector: Insights Paper, August 2025

Recommendation 11: Introduce a funding model for community sector organisations hosting mandatory workplace placements, based on a 'per placement day' fee.

VCOSS has previously advocated for the introduction of a 'per placement day' fee for community sector organisations mandatory workplace placements. This payment would help host organisations by contributing to the costs associated with placement administration and coordination, teaching, training and office resources (for example Wi-Fi access, information technology support, computers and desk space).

Funding could also allow host organisations to pay placement supervisors for their time and contribution to developing the future workforce. Additionally, organisations could use these funds to backfill positions or reduce caseloads to better support student placements.

This approach would not only increase the availability and quality of placement opportunities in the sector but also ensure that all students have a positive and valuable placement experience. Ultimately, it would contribute to higher completion rates for relevant qualifications and help grow the community sector workforce by encouraging more new workers to enter the sector.

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