

Submission to the Economic,
Education, Jobs and Skills Committee
*Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in
Victorian Schools*

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Introduction

Melbourne City Mission welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools*.

This submission is informed by:

- the lived experience of young people who access Melbourne City Mission's education, wellbeing and homelessness programs and services. Some of these young people are completing their education at Melbourne City Mission's Independent School, The Hester Hornbrook Academy. Others attend, or have completed, school with other education providers, and
- the perspectives and experiences of Melbourne City Mission education staff, including teachers and student wellbeing staff.

Additional context about these young people, programs and services is provided immediately below.

We are encouraged by the Parliamentary Committee's focus on career advice activities in Victorian schools, and Committee Members' commitment to ensure all of Victoria's young people and students are receiving career advice that is relevant, individualised and provides multiple and flexible pathways to accessing education, training and employment that will set them up for a successful future.

This submission focuses on strategies to improve the effectiveness of career advice activities for school leavers, particularly young people who experience disadvantage and barriers to engaging in mainstream education.

Context for this submission

Melbourne City Mission is one of Victoria's oldest and largest community service organisations, with a diverse service platform encompassing early years, education and employment, homelessness and justice services, early childhood intervention and disability services, and palliative care services. Our vision is to create a fair and just community where people have equal access to opportunities and resources.

Melbourne City Mission provides a broad range of education and vocational training services including:

- The flagship Independent School, The Hester Hornbrook Academy ('the Academy') – a supportive, flexible education model which reconnects young people with schooling. The Academy delivers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as well as working with Melbourne City Mission's Registered Training Organisation to provide accredited training. Each of the eight Academy classrooms across Melbourne has a Youth Worker and Educator who work together to support their students. The Academy is currently employing a dedicated Alumni Project Worker to, amongst other responsibilities, provide support, advocacy and guidance to students who are graduating or who are wishing to exit and explore other education and employment opportunities.
- Community based re-engagement programs for early school leavers and other young people who have experienced disrupted education.
- School-based early intervention and programs working with young people currently in or transitioning from of out-of-home care into education, training or employment.

Melbourne City Mission acknowledges that the experiences of these young people may, in part, reflect the experiences of other young Victorians who access career advice activities in schools. However, this submission also profiles issues that are very particular to young people who have experienced additional barriers to engaging in education and employment such as homelessness, intergenerational disadvantage and poverty, adverse childhood experiences and trauma, and mental health issues. For these cohorts of

young people, career development and advice is most effective when it takes into account these diverse experiences and the multiple and alternative transition pathways into further education, training and employment.

Recommendations

1. Ensure careers advice is individualised, comprehensive and tailored to the young person.
2. Ensure young people and the broader community understand and value the multiple pathways into further education, training and employment.
3. Ensure young people are well prepared for the requirements of different post-school options.
4. Support multiple, diverse and flexible applied learning experiences.
5. Provide high quality education, training and employment information and resources to schools.
6. Adequately resource career advice activities in schools.

Each of these recommendations is unpacked in detail over the page.

Recommendation 1: Ensure careers advice is individualised, comprehensive and tailored to the young person

Melbourne City Mission works with diverse groups of young people through education, employment and training programs and services.

The young people we work with often face significant barriers to engage in mainstream education and training programs. Their post-school pathways into TAFE, university, apprenticeships and jobs are shaped by their life experiences and barriers to accessing education. Young people experiencing disadvantage are at greater risk of poorer post-school outcomes. It is imperative, therefore, that career advice activities for these young people must be individualised, flexible and support them to confidently engage in post-school options.

Young people involved in developing Melbourne City Mission's submission were asked what 'great career advice' would look like for them. Many of the young people spoke about "personalised and situational advice" that treated them like individuals rather than a generic cohort. Other young people explained:

"It should be helping the students to understand all possible options and various pathways and understanding what classes they need now to benefit them in the future." [Young person]

"Teaching me what I am interested in, building on that. Then teaching me how I can apply it in the real world." [Young person]

"It should be realistic, yet inspiring. Shouldn't crush dreams, but perhaps reshape them." [Young person]

Young people who reported that they *had* received high quality and individualised careers development and advice described feeling "in charge of my life" and said "it gave me more confidence." Other young people explained:

"I felt like I had direction and motivation." [Young person]

"I felt relevant and hopeful." [Young person]

Melbourne City Mission educators described the need to adopt a strengths-based and individualised approach to careers development and advice. Young people, too, explained that careers advice should "focus more on existing strengths rather than deficits." Young people identified this was particularly important for students with disabilities and mental health issues. Educators described what a strengths-based approach looks like in practice for the young people they work with:

"Starting with what the young person wants. What can we do to get them there? What are the small steps we can take? We want to ensure we don't set our young people up to fail. We can't just enrol a young person in further education and leave it at that. We need to take small and deliberate steps that forms a pathway." [Educator]

Educators suggested that classroom resources exploring young people's skills, interests and strengths would be a valuable addition to their career development 'toolbox.' Embedding these career development activities throughout the school lifecycle would normalise these conversations and assist in the transition to post-school education, training or employment.

Recommendation 2: Ensure young people and the broader community understand and value the multiple pathways into further education, training and employment

Intergenerational disadvantage, homelessness, adverse childhood experiences and mental health issues are part of many of our students' life experiences. Linear pathways from secondary and tertiary education into full-time employment are not a universal experience for all young people.

Melbourne City Mission educators explained that many young people they engage with have not been exposed to mainstream education or employment pathways. For example, some young people's education may have been disrupted from an early age and so career and personal development skills have also been disrupted. For other young people, a lack of confidence in engaging in post-school options, particularly tertiary education, is a significant issue. For example, educators noted that some young people have had limited exposure to universities in their lives and feel a sense of inferiority when compared against other young people who go to university. While personal development forms a core component of educators' work, broader community attitudes and discourse must shift to equally value vocational pathways and academic pathways.

Commonly held attitudes that young people need to finish their Year 12, get an ATAR and then go onto further education doesn't acknowledge the diverse and multiple pathways that young people can take to get into their career of choice. Young people and educators spoke about the need for recognition of the multiple pathways into further education, training and employment, including non-linear pathways. One educator explained:

"There's this idea that if you do well at school, you'll do well at life. We know there are many different options and pathways available." [Educator]

While vocational options such as VCAL are becoming better known, there still remain misunderstandings about pathways from VCAL to university and other education options. One educator reflected on the stigma that remains attached to VCAL:

"Just because the young person has done the VCAL does not mean they have a set future or must enter a trade. These are options, just like going to university or into employment." [Educator]

There was recognition amongst educators that careers advice should encourage young people to explore the multiple available pathways, particularly those who have chosen to engage in a vocational pathway.

Recommendation 3: Ensure young people are well prepared for the requirements of different post-school options

High-quality careers information must be responsive to the changing nature of the labour market and growth industries. Educators explained that they examine trend employment with their students which is a key way for young people to understand the future demands of the workforce. This is a valuable component of careers advice which ensures young people understand the skills required for the future workforce. Accurate, evidence-based and consistent information and companion resources could be made available by the Victorian Government to support the provision of this information in schools and flexible learning settings.

In addition, educators spoke about supporting young people to understand the practical requirements of education, training or employment post-school options. This includes understanding time commitments, how information is delivered, and visiting and getting a feel for the location and environment. One educator explained:

"It's bigger than just getting a job. It's getting them across contracts, employment relationships, wages, conditions, the practicalities of working."

One of the VCAL units, Work Related Skills, examines industry and award conditions, wages, Occupational Health and Safety and communication with supervisors. Educators reflected this is a valuable unit for young people and assists in preparing them for post-school options.

Another issue raised by young people and educators related to understanding how social welfare assistance impacts on the ability to engage in employment. For some young people, accessing some forms of Centrelink assistance precludes them from working at all, or only working certain hours. For others, their Centrelink assistance means it is a considerable financial disincentive to enter into

employment. Young people reflected that they “want to get a job” but these requirements can act as a deterrent. While acknowledging these are federal issues, Victorian schools can support their students to understand and navigate these employment conditions as they prepare to enter into further education and employment.

Recommendation 4: Support multiple, diverse and flexible applied learning experiences

The value of applied learning experiences was consistently raised by young people and educators. Young people explained that these experiences assisted them to shape their career aspirations:

“I did two placements during my schooling. These both helped me to see where I wanted to be in the future and sort of guided me to take the path I wanted. I definitely learnt a lot and grew as a person because of these.” [Young person]

“I got a greater understanding of a field of work I was interested in.” [Young person]

“I was forced into retail and it made me realise I hate retail.” [Young person]

One young person who did not have the opportunity to undertake any work placements in their school reflected it would have helped them become connected with professionals in that industry. Young people identified that knowing someone in the industry or having networks can be crucial to securing a job. Young people explained that for many young people who experience disadvantage and may not have stable relationships and support networks, it can be more difficult to get a job. Ensuring access to multiple and diverse applied learning experiences exposes young people to various industries and career pathways and may assist them to gain post-school employment.

In addition, undertaking applied learning experiences in the communities where young people live and go to school means they stay connected to their communities and can continue accessing vital support services.

Recommendation 5: Provide high-quality education, training and employment information and resources to schools

To provide high-quality careers advice, schools need to have access to high-quality information, particularly from tertiary education providers and industry. Educators described the value of tertiary education institutions providing accessible and accurate information about career pathway options, particularly for young people who undertake vocational pathways. Educators discussed the impact of changing government and institutional regulation and funding on their ability to provide accurate and relevant careers advice. For example, changes to prerequisites and pathways into certificate courses, university degrees and employment need to be communicated to young people so they understand what is required of them to enter into their preferred post-school option. One educator reflected that they “don’t want to send a young person down a pathway that is a dead end.” Planning TAFE course pathways should be a strategic rather than a scattergun approach. Accurate and timely information will assist young people to consider relevant post-school options.

Educators also highlighted the importance of tertiary education institutions providing information about the various wellbeing and academic support services available to students. Information about available support, where this support is located, how courses/lessons are delivered, and how tertiary educators communicate with their students is vital for young people to understand before they commit to post-school education. Educators discussed the need for a seamless exchange of information between government, education providers and schools, particularly those offering vocational education options.

Recommendation 6: Adequately resource career advice activities in schools

Both young people and educators explained the importance of adequate funding for careers advice activities in school. Some young people suggested they would benefit – or would have benefitted from – a dedicated career counsellor to assist them navigate post-school options. Several young people with additional support needs identified assistance from an occupational therapist, as well as a career counsellor, as having significant potential benefit in planning for post-school pathways.

Another young person who had a positive experience with careers advice identified intensity of support as a factor in high-quality careers advice for students who have experienced adversity:

“Just constant support and being available as much as possible for any reason. Also having more than one career advisor. My high school had a team of 3 or 4, always available during school times who helped with resumes, placement applications, and even uni/TAFE applications. They also called a year after you graduated to check in on you.” [Young person]

Educators also identified the need in schools for a dedicated resource to provide careers development, information and advice, as well as actively build partnerships with TAFEs, universities, industry and employers.

Young people who identified their school as being disadvantaged either due to social, economic or geographic reasons, advocated for more funding to be made available so the school could provide high-quality careers advice.

Conclusion

Individualised career advice, delivered by professionals who understand diverse life experiences and systemic barriers to engaging in post-school education, training or employment, create the conditions for young people to thrive after leaving school. With the right information, guidance and support, young people can successfully navigate and transition from school into further education, training or employment pathways.