

Australian Catholic University

**Submission to the
Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy
and Infrastructure Committee**

***Inquiry into Student Pathways to
In-demand Industries***

July 2025

Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee regarding its inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.

ACU is supportive of this inquiry's objectives in its consideration of how to guide and support students to pursue employment in industries that are in demand, including through higher education.

At the outset, ACU makes two overarching observations. First, this inquiry should complement relevant work that is underway at the federal level to implement recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord, following the first major review of Australia's higher education system since the 2008 Bradley Review.¹ In response to projections that 90 percent of jobs created in Australia (nationally) over the next five years will require a post-secondary qualification, the Accord emphasises that reforms must promote "growth for skills through greater equity".² Widening higher education participation and outcomes remains an area of ongoing concern across all Australian jurisdictions, and work to better support students to pursue, and successfully take-up, employment in in-demand industries in Victoria necessarily entails ensuring equitable access to higher education.

Second, the Inquiry identifies that "in-demand" industries include health care and social assistance, construction, technology, clean energy and education, among others. ACU submits that it is important to maintain this open and flexible understanding of industries that are in demand, to ensure that government policy and tertiary education providers can nimbly respond to the changing needs of the Victorian economy and community.

ACU provides the following feedback on the matters identified by the Committee as areas of particular interest and concern.

How to encourage and support students into vocational education and training and higher education that leads to employment in in-demand industries

Students can be encouraged and supported to undertake tertiary education leading to employment in in-demand industries by focusing on three key areas:

1. Enhancing career advice and awareness of pathways into tertiary education

Career advice services, including at schools and through Victorian Government Skills and Jobs Centres, can be improved to ensure all students are well-informed about their tertiary education options and pathways, including the pre-requisites for, and routes into, different courses and careers. Career advisory services and broader outreach activities also need to build greater awareness amongst students of current provider pathway programs, which offer students a route into tertiary education. For example, at ACU, programs like Uni Step-Up³, Foundation Studies⁴, and ACU's diploma programs⁵ provide pathways into university for students who may otherwise have forfeited a higher education. Furthermore, there is opportunity for the Victorian Government to assist providers to expand these kinds of programs and increase offerings that are aligned with employer needs in in-demand industries.

¹ Bradley, D., Noonan, P. Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*.

² O'Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2023). *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, p. 6.

³ Australian Catholic University. *Uni Step-Up*. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/widening-participation/uni-step-up>

⁴ Australian Catholic University. *Foundation Studies*. <https://www.acu.edu.au/course/foundation-studies>

⁵ Australian Catholic University. *Diploma Programs*. <https://www.acu.edu.au/study-at-acu/education-pathways/diploma-programs>

The Victorian Government can also look to support or complement the tertiary harmonisation work that is being undertaken at the federal level, through Jobs and Skills Australia and to implement recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord. At a base level, it is important to communicate to students that higher education and vocational education and training (VET) are both quality options. They may even complement each other, and in some areas they can lead to similar career outcomes. It is concerning that some (potential) students view VET and university education as mutually exclusive or competing options.

2. Education-industry linkages

The Victorian Government could provide incentives for in-demand industries to engage with school students, through targeted work experience programs. This would provide students with exposure to those industries and better inform students about their post-school options and the further education they may need to undertake if they have an interest in entering those industries. Government should also explore and consider whether any overseas models might be suitable for adoption or adaptation in Victoria. For instance, a degree apprenticeship model, partnering with industry, is used in the United Kingdom, which is primarily targeted at school-leavers or college leavers with A-levels, including those who may be unsure about pursuing a university education.⁶ This combines university-level study with paid work, enabling students to gain work experience in industry and remuneration while they complete their degree.

3. Optimising tertiary education supports and offerings

Dedicated support could be provided, especially to higher education providers, to facilitate the co-design of programs in collaboration with industry. This would deliver more course offerings in areas of need, ensure curriculum reflects current and emerging skills needs, and provide students with strong employment prospects upon course completion. Another area that could be examined is to ensure secondary and tertiary education curriculum is reviewed in priority areas and designed in an efficient and complementary manner, such that students can seamlessly transition from secondary to tertiary education (and through to the workforce). For example, in health disciplines, this might involve supporting a smooth transition from a VET-major allied health stream to a diploma in allied health, and then on to a bachelor degree in allied health at university.

Work could also be undertaken to encourage and support education providers, including through sector forums, to regularly review course design and curriculum in areas aligned to industry demand, to ensure the latest technological advancements are utilised to optimise student learning and engagement. For example, this could involve exploring opportunities to make better use of virtual reality to support students' practical skills attainment, especially to assist students who might struggle with theoretical learning but thrive with practical hands-on skills development. Micro-credential offerings could also be reviewed, including opportunities to utilise bridging units or scaffold block learning, with a view to supporting students to transition into tertiary education, and through to employment in priority areas. For dual sector universities, there may also be opportunity to further develop or expand Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) programs for STEM-related skills sets (e.g., by working beyond the standard weekly classes, and providing real world case studies for students to engage with and co-design).

As a university with a strong reputation in the critical areas of health and education, ACU makes a distinct contribution to addressing skills gaps in these major industries (amongst others). ACU educates the largest number of teachers and nurses in Australia and serves to meet significant workforce needs in these areas. The provision of student pathways into university-level study plays a role in this work. For example, ACU's course offerings include pathways into teaching or education, which supports students to pursue employment in the education and training sectors. To illustrate, a Diploma of Educational Studies can be undertaken as a standalone course or used as a means of transferring into an initial teacher education course. ACU's Bachelor of Educational Studies is another pathway for students to follow, geared to supporting those who are passionate about becoming a teacher to gain the necessary knowledge to be eligible to transfer into an

⁶ For example, see <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/apprenticeships/degree-apprenticeships#who-are-degree-apprenticeships-aimed-at> ; and <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/study/degreeapprenticeships/>

education degree; or alternatively, to pursue a career in corporate training, educational consultancy, youth services or adult learning, amongst others career avenues. ACU also provides financial support to raise awareness among secondary students about pathways and to offer university-level units they can complete while at school, enabling them to earn credit towards degrees in disciplines aligned with areas of skills shortages.

A noteworthy initiative at ACU providing an employment-based pathway to teaching programs is the All Points to Teaching (APTT) program. It provides successful applicants with a fully-funded scholarship to complete a teaching degree while simultaneously working in schools. The program offers a supportive, flexible and accessible learning and employment experience for students; helping them to forge their careers as teachers and connects their learning to the school workplace (currently operating in NSW and Queensland).

ACU is also a national leader in developing a future-ready health workforce capable of delivering high-quality, evidence-based care to older Australians across diverse community and residential aged care settings. Through collaboration with industry partners via the National Care Workforce Alliance (NaCWA), ACU integrates best-practice, gerontological, and interdisciplinary care into its nursing and allied health programs. This approach, which fosters clinical excellence and compassionate practice, ensures ACU graduates are well-equipped to support older people to flourish, aligned with aged care quality standards, while also addressing critical workforce shortages.

These kinds of initiatives can be expanded and/or enhanced to educate more students and fill skills needs in critical industries, and there is a role for the Victorian Government to assist in this respect.

How well Victoria's senior secondary schooling pathways support students to pursue occupations in industries that are in demand

There is a disconnect between the subjects some students select to study for their Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and what they need to study to enter many university courses aligned with careers in in-demand industries. English is compulsory in Victoria, however, subjects like mathematics and science, which are often required for courses like physiotherapy, teaching, nursing, and allied health, are not. A common issue is that by the time some of these students realise the required pre-requisites for a university course they are interested in pursuing, it is often too late for them to change their subjects. There needs to be better collaboration between schools, higher education providers, and government to ensure students are receiving the right advice earlier in their schooling and decision-making processes.

Furthermore, entry requirements to tertiary courses can vary between institutions, even in the same field of study. This can make it challenging for careers advisers to give students accurate advice on specific courses and fields of study at individual institutions. For example, completion of Year 12 science is a pre-requisite for admission to a Bachelor of Occupational Therapy at ACU but it is not at some other institutions. There is an opportunity for the government to work with the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) and higher education providers to develop a solution to support career advisers in schools, to help address this issue and ensure easy access to current offerings and different entry requirements across institutions.

Another issue warranting recognition is that the shortage of teachers in STEM subjects is impacting the delivery of mathematics, science and other important foundational skills in high schools. Furthermore, while schools offer a range of senior secondary subjects, subject offerings are not uniformly available across all schools. Consequently, some students with an interest in technology or STEM subjects may not have the opportunity to study those subjects if they are unavailable at their school. TAFEs and universities could consider ways they could help stem some of the impacts of these systemic challenges, while they remain issues.

To help address these issues, one option might be to respond at tertiary level by providing tailored support for students through embedded learning. For example, where feasible students could be split into two streams; using Engineering as an illustration, providers could have one stream with a commencing cohort of students that have Year 12 level mathematics, and another for commencing

students that do not. For the latter group, mathematics would be a foundation unit embedded in the first year. Another option is to facilitate greater coordination and/or co-development between universities and TAFEs, to help support students who do not complete a VCE to develop the foundational skills they need to enter higher education in areas of skills need. In essence, there is a need to help equalise educational opportunity and access, and promote more inclusive tertiary education, to encourage more students to pursue courses aligned with skills needs in industries that are in demand.

How effective school career development is at meeting the needs of students and industry

There is significant variation in access to, and the quality of, career advice across schools. Often this is dependent on the individual Career Adviser. Furthermore, resourcing for career advisory services also varies across schools. While independent schools usually have a dedicated careers staff member, many government and Catholic schools only have part-time support. As a result, some students receive excellent guidance, while others receive very limited assistance. There is a role for government to help address this issue to ensure equitable access to quality career guidance for all students, across the school education system. Measures that could be taken to support more consistent and quality career advice for school students includes the following:

- A central information resource for career advisers: Provide centralised resources to help keep career advisers abreast of in-demand industries and skills needs, current and emerging.
- Improve work experience: Work experience helps students decide and make more informed career choices. While government schools have access to an online portal to support and facilitate this, access is not consistent across Catholic and independent schools. Access needs to be improved to ensure all school students can easily take part in work experience.
- Centralised, streamlined career platform and tools: Currently there are many different career tools and platforms in the market, and significant variability across individual schools in terms of the tools and platforms that are used and available to students. This makes it hard to ensure consistent advice to students. A state-supported, centralised resource with current course information, career advice, and real-world case studies would make it easier for schools to have meaningful career conversations that align with both student interests and industry needs.

Areas for improvement, including how to better support regional students, female students wanting to work in male-dominated industries and students facing disadvantage to pursue pathways into in-demand industries

ACU identifies the following areas that could be improved to better support students to pursue employment in industries that are in demand.

Coordinated approach to university-level study in schools: A holistic, strategic approach should be developed across the government and non-government school sectors with respect to the offering of university level study units in high schools. Currently, there is no systematic or collective approach to the offering of university level programs, both award and non-award, in schools. Rather, it is undertaken on a case-by-case basis by universities and at the request of individual schools. This is inefficient and also results in uneven offerings and educational opportunities for students across the school system.

Additional funding and support for university enabling courses: The Victorian Government can target additional funding to strengthen preparatory programs and pathways into higher education, to encourage and support more students to pursue careers in in-demand industries. These programs can play a pivotal role in equipping students with the knowledge, skills and mindset they need to approach and succeed in higher education, especially for underprepared and educationally disadvantaged students.

For example, ACU's Foundation Studies Program provides a pathway to ACU undergraduate degrees for students who wish to study at university but do not have a recognised Year 12 qualification. It is a non-award program designed to equip students with the skills they need to

succeed in their chosen bachelor level degree. Historically, most students who complete ACU's Foundation Studies program progress into a health sciences degree. Thus the program is serving to support students to transition into tertiary education and enabling them to pursue courses aligned to areas of workforce need.

The Australian Universities Accord Panel has observed that increasing the provision of enabling courses supports higher levels of equity participation.⁷ However, an ongoing issue with Commonwealth funding arrangements is that universities' abilities to fund enabling courses is uneven across the sector; varying by institution and from year to year. For example, a university that does not have dedicated funding to deliver enabling courses and fully utilises its maximum basic grant amount (MBGA) under their Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding agreement in a given year will have very limited ability to offer enabling courses. As universities would not take a student contribution for these courses, they would need to be internally funded by the provider in order to deliver them as fee-free offerings to students. The Victorian Government can assist to increase the availability of these offerings by providing additional dedicated funding to universities to deliver more enabling programs. More broadly, it would also assist providers to have greater clarity on the use of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for students enrolled in the VCE; including clarification on the use of CSP funding for students who enrol in university level study and non-award study while undertaking Year 12.

Support for particular equity groups: A range of measures should be adopted to better support regional students, females in male-dominated industries, and students facing disadvantage, enabling them to pursue pathways to qualifications in areas of high workforce demand. For instance, to encourage more female students into male-dominated industries, it is important to ensure that female students are given exposure to role models and real career stories that would help them see a place for themselves in areas such as STEM, construction, and information technology. Targeted scholarships and mentoring programs for female students studying in these disciplines would also assist this endeavour.

With respect to regional students, evidence indicates that the majority of those who undertake university study within regional areas remain in those communities to work⁸, helping to meet skills needs in those areas. Therefore, it is essential that there is adequate support for regional students to pursue higher education in the regions in areas of need. For example, this might entail ensuring students can learn in-community online but also with on-campus intensives to provide them with access and exposure to the benefits of an on-campus learning experience. Another avenue would be to provide support that would facilitate city visits to education partners to inspire regional students to pursue education and employment in in-demand industries. Many regional schools face staffing shortages, making it challenging to release teachers to accompany students for such activities. These constraints are often also financially prohibitive. Additional support is needed to enable regional students to participate more fully in these initiatives.

Part-time employment opportunities during study in areas of industry need: Many students are keen to work and gain practical experience while they are studying. Work could be undertaken to facilitate more part-time employment opportunities for students within industries experiencing workforce shortages, enabling them to gain relevant experience while pursuing their studies. The suitability of any relevant existing initiatives, such as the Assistants in Nursing (AINs) model, could be explored for potential adoption or adaptation as part of this process.

⁷ O'Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2023). *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*, p. 75.

⁸ For example, see Nous Group. (2018). *The Economic Impact of the Regional Universities Network*, p. 4. <https://run.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/RUN-Economic-impact-report-final.pdf>; Regional Universities Network. (2017). *Submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*.