

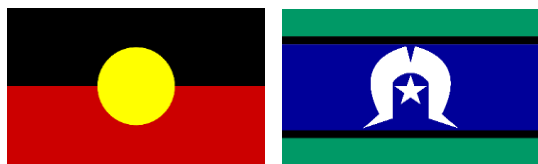
# **Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic)**

## **Submission: Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries**

August 2025



## Acknowledgement of Country



Our work takes place across Victoria. YACVic's head office is on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). We also have offices on the lands of the Gunditjmara Nation in Warrnambool, and on the lands of the Wemba Wemba and Wadi Wadi Nations in Swan Hill.

YACVic pays our respects to Elders past and present for their wisdom, strength, support and leadership. Bunjil's lore states that those who walk on this land must care for Country and the waterways as well as care for the children and young people.

We stand in solidarity to pay respect to the ongoing culture and continued history of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. Sovereignty was never ceded.

*This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.*

## About YACVic

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25, and the youth sector that supports them in Victoria. Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

We promote youth participation and make policy recommendations on issues that affect young people's lives, build the capacity of the youth sector and nurture connections for collaboration and support, and identify and advance thinking on emerging issues for young people. As changemakers we have a particular focus on young people who face marginalisation and disadvantage.

## About YACVic Rural

YACVic Rural provides additional targeted advocacy for young people and services in rural and regional Victoria.

We connect with young people, youth practitioners and the youth work sector to identify the unique needs and priorities of rural and regional young people. We respond through purpose driven place-based projects, programs and trainings, collective impact, sector support and policy input to accelerate positive change for young people.



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## Introduction

The transition from school to employment or further study is a critical time of independence in young people's lives, shaping their future economic security and wellbeing. These transitions are influenced by economic conditions, labour market shifts, access to quality training and education programs, personal sense of agency and identity, and strength of support from family and other networks.<sup>1</sup>

Young people experiencing disadvantage, including those in rural and regional areas, from low-income backgrounds, and/or marginalised communities, face additional and compounding barriers during these transitions.<sup>1</sup> These barriers can lead to interrupted education and employment pathways, resulting in entrenched disadvantage and long-term negative impacts for young people, communities, and the economy.<sup>1</sup>

Career management skills are essential for young people to navigate complex transitions and make informed decisions about employment pathways.<sup>1</sup> When young people are given agency in their education and employment pathways and receive targeted support to reach their goals, completion rates increase.

YACVic welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries. Our submission makes 18 recommendations to support improved student pathways into in-demand industries, in sectors where there is high employment growth and significant workforce needs. These include community services, healthcare, construction, engineering, IT and cybersecurity, education, agriculture, and clean energy.<sup>2</sup>

We highlight the critical role youth workers and youth programs play in supporting young people holistically to build successful education and employment pathways – a role that is distinct from career counsellors, teachers, and other professionals.

Further, we make recommendations to strengthen the youth work profession to encourage student uptake in further study and training, recognising youth work and the broader community sector as a critical industry in-demand.

We encourage the Committee to recognise the full range of professional and community actors who support young people—particularly youth workers and community sector workers who work with young people, who play a distinct and often under-recognised role in educational and vocational engagement, including outside of traditional school settings. We continue to advocate for young people to have their rights upheld and voices heard in decisions which impact their lives, including their right to education and employment.




## Summary of Recommendations

### Investing in youth work as an in-demand industry

- **Recommendation 1:** Increase funding to scale-up generalist youth workers embedded in public schools, recognising the unique role they play in supporting education and employment outcomes distinct from teachers and career counsellors.
- **Recommendation 2:** Address student placement poverty by working with the Commonwealth to introduce support payments for youth work students undertaking unpaid placements.
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide dedicated funding and support to youth sector organisations so they can deliver high quality youth work placements.
- **Recommendation 4:** Increase default contract terms to seven years for government funded community service organisations, including both service agreements and common funding agreements, as recommended by the Productivity Commission.

### Improving access to quality career education and information in schools

- **Recommendation 5:** Embed career education across the secondary school curriculum to expose young people to a range of career and pathway options early, including promoting both university and non-university options like TAFE and VET.
  - **Recommendation 6:** Support schools to provide personalised career advice and support to young people, equipping them with the resources, knowledge, and skills to articulate their post school plans, and the steps required to achieve this plan.
  - **Recommendation 7:** Strengthen student work experience programs and increase engagement with employers in schools to help students build career-related adult networks, and understand career options and required qualifications.
  - **Recommendation 8:** Connect students with diverse role models and mentors working in different professions, including women and gender diverse young people in trades and STEM.
  - **Recommendation 9:** Ensure meaningful consultation with young people is embedded into the career advice process, including feedback loops to evaluate the usefulness of career advice. This includes collaboration with student-led organisations and diverse student voices.
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## Supporting teachers, schools, and families

- **Recommendation 10:** Provide regular professional development to teachers and other school staff to understand student pathways, specifically place-based training to understand in-demand industries for that area.
- **Recommendation 11:** Support career practitioners with ongoing training, access to real-time labour market data, and ensure they meet national Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) standards.
- **Recommendation 12:** Support and fund schools to work in partnership with other experts, especially Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS) and community organisations which have developed effective career education resources and programs.
- **Recommendation 13:** The Victorian Government should reverse its decision to delay fully funding public schools until 2031 and instead recommit to providing full funding of the School Resource Standard (SRS) to Victorian public schools by the original date of 2028 to ensure Victorian public schools are properly resourced to provide best practice career education.
- **Recommendation 14:** Provide dedicated funding for schools to engage and build positive relationships with parents, families, and/or carers in career advice activities – including building their knowledge of employment pathways and career opportunities, and how to support their children to succeed.

## Addressing structural and regional barriers

- **Recommendation 15:** Improve access to accommodation, transport, and financial support for apprentices and students in regional and remote areas.
- **Recommendation 16:** Prioritise system investment to provide young people experiencing disadvantage with timely and affordable access to social services, such as health, mental health and housing.

## Supporting a strong and sustainable youth and community sector

- **Recommendation 17:** Ensure all youth workers in schools are covered by and remunerated under the Social Community, Home Care and Disability Services (SCHADS) award level, to increase job attractiveness, retention and workforce capacity.
- **Recommendation 18:** Increase funding and expand eligibility criteria for youth programs such as Navigator and Reconnect program, to support disengaged students much earlier.



## The current context: Senior Secondary Schooling Pathway Reforms in Victoria

Information in this timeline is partially sourced from the Victorian Government's outline of Senior secondary schooling pathway reforms<sup>3</sup>.

2023	<p><b>The Victorian senior secondary schooling pathway reforms were introduced, including:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>VCE Vocational Major (VCE VM):</b> a 2-year vocational and applied learning program within the VCE, preparing students to transition successfully into apprenticeships, traineeships, further education and training, university, or directly into employment. It has replaced the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at the intermediate and senior levels.</li> <li>• <b>Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC):</b> a flexible foundation secondary course that meets the needs of the minority of Year 11 and 12 students not able or ready to complete a certificate at the VCE level. The VPC provides students with a standards-based certificate that has been developed to be flexible, without a mandated period in which a student must complete the certificate. This allows students to complete it in a timeframe that suits their capability.</li> <li>• <b>Expanding student access to VET:</b> the government aims for all schools to provide students with access to at least 8 certificates, one certificate from each of the 6 priority pathways, and two certificates from the flexible pathways.</li> <li>• <b>School-based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs):</b> SBAT students complete their schooling while spending time in paid employment, developing vocational skills that prepare them for successful career pathways after secondary school.</li> <li>• <b>Work-based learning:</b> The government is working to increase the number of school students completing work experience, including 10,000 additional placements in clean energy and other priority industries by 2027.</li> </ul> <p>The reforms are expected to continue to roll out through 2025, until the introduction of a fully integrated senior secondary certificate is complete.</p>
2020	<p>The Victorian Government published the final report of the Review into Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling (the Firth Review).<sup>4</sup></p>





	The Firth Review found that Victoria needs to do more to make vocational and applied learning in schools' high quality, highly regarded, relevant to the needs of students and employers, and available to all.
2017	The Victorian Government held an Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools, <sup>5</sup> with the government's response to the report handed down in 2019. <sup>6</sup>

This submission identifies opportunities within the current reforms to strengthen outcomes for young Victorians undertaking study and training to enter in-demand industries.

## Understanding student pathways: student access to career information and support

### Factors influencing student pathways

Young people make career pathway choices based on many intersecting factors, resulting in a need for career education which is flexible and tailored to the individual's strengths and interests, and supports them to address barriers caused by systemic issues.<sup>7</sup>

A recent report by The Smith Family identified key factors influencing young people's experiences and engagement with work and study after school:<sup>1</sup>

- **External factors** – including availability, affordability, and security of opportunities and supports linked to housing, health care, transport, study and employment.<sup>1</sup>
- **Social capital** – including the benefits young people acquire through networks of adult relationships such as access to information, support and resources, particularly those built at school or work.<sup>1</sup>
- **Individual factors** – such as cognitive capacity, health, personal attributes and career management skills. This includes interpersonal skills, an ability to adapt to change, and capacity to make informed choices about career options.<sup>1</sup>

These factors contribute to diverse pathways and transitions. The study showed that highly engaged young people had strong support networks, clear goals, and well-developed career management skills. This gave them a strong ability to navigate setbacks and alternative pathways. Comparatively, those with limited engagement faced complex and compounding barriers such as poor mental health, housing instability, and limited support networks. Despite aspirations, these barriers to participation limit their ability to plan or act towards long-term goals.<sup>1</sup>





Youth workers are well placed to build up these skills and attributes in young people through strengths-based, person-centred frameworks to develop their individual capacity and resilience, support them through transitions to meaningful study and employment pathways, and improve retention and obtainment of their career goals.

### Access to and quality of career information and support at school

Student experience of career advice and pathway opportunities at school varies greatly, including access to career education, information, advice, counselling, and work experience. Many young people lack clear access to career support and information, and feel uncertain about how to pursue a career where they feel valued.<sup>1</sup> Those experiencing disadvantage report the lowest satisfaction and least access to career information and guidance.<sup>7</sup>

Career education is often delayed until the later years of secondary school, by which point some students have already disengaged or left school.<sup>7</sup> This undermines opportunities for students seeking vocational education, traineeships, or direct entry into the workforce.<sup>7</sup> To be effective, career education must begin earlier, be embedded across year levels, and be student-led so it is tailored to individual needs. It must also be made accessible to students in flexible learning settings, not just mainstream schools.<sup>7</sup>

For young people who do not pursue university, including those entering apprenticeships, TAFE, or employment, engagement with career support is often limited or absent.<sup>8</sup> This reflects an underlying bias in some school cultures, where the VCE-to-university pathway is prioritised and vocational or technical education is framed as a secondary or less desirable option. Students are frequently offered pathways based on academic performance rather than their interests, strengths, or career aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

It is essential for young people to have opportunities to develop practical skills, which can be done through work placements, industry internships, and volunteering programs. Research shows the earlier young people are afforded opportunities to develop skills and experience outside the classroom, such as volunteering and work placements, the better their understanding of the pathways available to them, and the greater their confidence in navigating pathway systems.<sup>1</sup>

Many schools have limited access to a specific career counsellor, or career counselling may be offered as a one-off; in 2024, only 66% of Year 12 non-completers had a one-one-one talk with the school's career advisor, and only 53% received written material about career and study options.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, access to relevant and up-to-date information and support about career pathways may depend on the competence, training, and capacity of teachers. This is made increasingly challenging in the current teaching shortage.



When young people are meaningfully engaged and informed about pathways available to them, they have higher outcomes of completion and satisfaction in the career field of their choice. Career development learning should prioritise personalised career advice and support, helping young people articulate their post school plans, and the steps required to achieve this plan. This support should be strengths-based and provide young people with the resources and skills to explore a range of post-school pathways.<sup>1</sup>

## Addressing inequity: Barriers to participation and the needs of priority groups

### Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status, including parents' education, occupation, and access to resources at home, has a huge influence on students learning outcomes and sense of post-school direction.<sup>10</sup> Disadvantaged students are less likely than advantaged students to have certainty about the kind of job they would like (69% compared to 77%), and less likely to feel well prepared for their future after school (57% compared to 70%).<sup>11</sup> Young people also might have limited options due to being responsible for bringing in income to the family or have caring responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

### Early school experience

Earlier school experiences, including school attendance, is linked to young people's continued engagement with study and work overtime.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is critical any career advice activities are paired with measures to support rising school disengagement. Read [YACVic's Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria](#) for our recommendations to support student wellbeing and engagement.

### Rural and regional young people

Rural and regional young people face additional barriers securing employment or further study post-school.<sup>12</sup> Alongside limited opportunities for work, young people in these areas often also lack training and further study opportunities in their communities.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, many young people move away to Melbourne or regional areas to gain qualifications, making it less likely for them to return to their original communities.<sup>12</sup>

The digital divide in regional areas is greater than metropolitan areas, and remote options and online resources should not be overly relied on for this cohort.<sup>13</sup> Career development support has a critical positive impact on local employment prospects. Research shows training, career education, and skill-development which respond to unique local community issues and needs (such as disasters) are required to meet the needs of young people within that community.<sup>8</sup>



## **Migrant and refugee background**

Students from migrant or refugee backgrounds face additional barriers. Particularly for newly arrived families, many of whom may not be familiar with the Australian tertiary education system and career pathways, and therefore may face additional barriers in supporting their children to understand post-school options and make career plans.<sup>7</sup>

## **Administrative and financial barriers**

Expensive up-front fees, complex eligibility criteria, administrative burdens and confusing course information all create barriers for young people unused to navigating systems independently.<sup>14</sup>

There are further financial barriers for apprentices and young people engaged in traineeships and study placements, with study and income support payments insufficient to meet the costs of travel expenses and accommodation, or additional resources needed to complete requirements such as work-appropriate clothes, tools and materials associated with their field.<sup>15</sup>

Youth workers are uniquely placed as a touchpoint between young people and their social networks, including family, school, services, and community. Youth workers work holistically with young people, ensuring they have agency in decision-making, and developing their skills and capacities to navigate challenging situations as they transition to independent living, working and study environments.

## **Reshaping the TAFE narrative and the need for continuity of support**

Despite strong employment outcomes, TAFE is still widely perceived by young people as a "back-up" option; an attitude often shaped by family and school environments that prioritise university pathways.<sup>16</sup> Research shows that teachers and career advisors significantly influence student decisions, while often being under-resourced to provide individual career education to students.<sup>17</sup> This limits students in making informed choices about their careers and can push them toward university by default, rather than pathways aligned with their skills, interests, or career goals.

Comparatively, many young people at-risk of disengaging or unable to meet VCE standards are encouraged into skills-based training and education, but not always with the career education to support pathways aligned their goals.

This outdated narrative around TAFE persists, even as 67% of Victoria's current job shortages can be met through TAFE qualifications, and TAFE graduates enjoy employment outcomes (78%) on par with university graduates (79%).<sup>18</sup>



TAFE and traineeships offer valuable, skills-based options for many young people, including those eager to enter the workforce or who are interested in practical, hands-on learning environments.

To improve TAFE enrolment and retention, schools must adopt a strengths-based approach that actively values vocational learning, is student-centred and includes wraparound support during transitions. Youth workers and dedicated pathways staff play a vital role in bridging the gap between school and workforce by providing wraparound support, ensuring young people are not just enrolled, but supported to succeed.

## Enabling pathways: Youth work and the broader community sector

### Unique role of youth workers

Youth workers play a critical role in early intervention and prevention to ensure young people, particularly early school leavers and students disengaged from school, do not slip through the gaps of career information and support.

As above, many young people do not have access to strong adult support networks or may face additional barriers to securing employment or further study post-school. Youth workers support young people in employment skills programs and keep them connected to industries and community in a unique way different to teachers and school staff.

Youth work is unique discipline distinct from other professionals such as counselling, psychology, social work, or teaching. Youth work is defined by the relational and empowering practice that puts young people and their needs at the centre, building trust and rapport without stigma.<sup>19</sup> By providing strengths-based and holistic care to young people, youth workers assist young people to engage with their community and develop skills and capabilities to achieve their goals.<sup>19</sup>

### Key benefits of Youth Work

#### Youth workers...

- Provide holistic support to young people, including identifying those who require additional support through trusted referrals, smoothed pathways, and system navigation.
- Are versatile, so they can work in different services systems (mental health, Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD), housing, disability etc) and environments (community, schools, sports clubs etc), as well as act as a connector between them.
- Can take a whole-of-family approach, proactively supporting parents and carers to access up-to-date labour market information, education and



training information, and how they can help young people to develop and achieve post-school goals.

- Provide tailored support for diverse and marginalised groups, including young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, disabled young people, First Nations young people, and LGBTQIA+ young people.
- Are crucially important for rural and regional young people where there are fewer services, longer wait times and people must travel greater distances in order to access services and supports.

Transitions into university and TAFE are often made without the continuity of care needed for young people to thrive in more self-directed, adult learning environments. For many young people, rigid attendance mandates and course structures in higher learning can further disadvantage them, especially students managing mental health, caring responsibilities, or financial insecurity. School support often does not extend to external learning environments, or for young people no longer enrolled in a school, and many young people struggle to navigate the complex systems of higher education administrative burdens.

### Case study 1

#### **Invigor8ing Education: Early intervention with students at-risk of disengagement**

Invigor8ing Education is a program delivered in the City of Whittlesea for Year 8 students at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. It aims to foster engagement through applied learning, exploring career pathways, building life skills, and reframing education as relevant and valuable.

Youth Development Officers support two learning streams; trade (e.g., painting, plastering) at Melbourne Polytechnic, and community/leisure (e.g., fitness, swim teaching) at Mill Park Leisure Centre.

Youth workers are consistently present throughout, creating safe, relational environments. They act as liaisons between families, schools, and service providers and used informal education and mentoring to build trust and self-belief.

As a result of the program, participants gained confidence, clearer career direction, and improved school engagement. Some students challenged gender norms by enrolling in non-traditional streams. Schools reported “small but significant” behavioural shifts.

#### **Quotes:**

*“2 Years post completion of Invigor8ing Education my daughter has started attending school again after previously having very poor attendance. She has a goal to work in hospitality and has enrolled in a TAFE course. She is happier in*

*herself, and she has made a lovely new group of friends. She is a totally different person after this program. Her improved confidence and happiness have blown me away and in turn she is happily engaging in school again!" - De-identified parent of participant*

## Embedded service model

Schools are uniquely placed to provide career information, and to identify students that require extra support. However, schools and teaching staff may feel under-supported and overwhelmed to give the required individualised support to support student pathways. Ultimately, schools cannot be expected to lead and manage career activities alone, particularly when they remain underfunded and short-staffed.

Attention must be given to the structure of schools, including embedding integrated services in schools with expertise in career development upwards of two days a week to provide wrap-around holistic support for young people and families. Embedding specialist services in schools offers an opportunity to provide whole-of-school supports early, while also empowering school staff to identify and support students and families in need. Further, youth workers at school have assertive outreach capacity to support young people who have disengaged or left school.

Embedded services can include generalist youth workers or other professionals working within schools, in the classrooms and alongside teachers and wellbeing staff. Youth workers at school adopt a whole-of-school approach and can help bridge the gap between school staff and the wellbeing team. Further, they can improve capacity building for teachers by facilitating the sharing of knowledge and skills.

### Case study 2

#### **Hester Hornbrook Academy: The role of youth workers in the classroom**

Hester Hornbrook Academy supports senior secondary students facing complex personal or educational circumstances, through an alternative education model. It aims to provide meaningful vocational learning, strengthen transitions from school to further education or employment, and offer ongoing post-graduation support.

Students engage in VET in Schools (VETiS) programs, gaining industry-specific skills that contribute to their VCE Vocational Major (VM). The Careers, Alumni, Pathways and Employment (CAPE) team supports students with career planning, job applications, TAFE enrolments, and post-school transitions.

Qualified youth workers in the CAPE team offer tailored, relationship-based support that bridges the gap between school and post-school life. This includes





individual mentoring, assistance with pathway navigation, and continued care after graduation to help young people feel confident and secure in their next steps.

As a result of this model, in 2023, 75% of young people exiting the school transitioned into positive pathways such as apprenticeships, full-time work, or TAFE. The Alumni Program ensures students remain connected and supported beyond the classroom.

**Quotes:**

*“Leaving school can be daunting... the Alumni Program bridges that gap, offering essential guidance and support from qualified youth workers.” – CAPE Team Member*

## Community-based support services

Schools must be supported to lead career advice activities through a network of other stakeholders, notably the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), employers and unions, as well as youth programs such as Navigator and Reconnect.

Strong collaborations are necessary to link students from an early age to career advice activities which are diverse, relevant and engaging, and which give students and families an informed understanding of career paths and desirable job skills – now and in the future. These activities should help young people to identify their strengths and passions, build skills, confidence, mentoring relationships and networks, and make practical plans for the short and long term.

Strong Industry connections support more comprehensive, practical work experience programs in schools.

### LLENs

The LLENs operate all around Victoria, creating strategic partnerships to improve education and transition outcomes for young people aged 10-19. They build on a strong base of local knowledge, and bring together education and training providers, employers, government, community agencies and families to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people. The LLENs play a particularly valuable role in rural and regional Victoria, where job prospects and career opportunities for young people are different to those in metro Melbourne.

### Youth programs

Career advice activities must also be well integrated with youth programs such as Navigator and Reconnect. However, significant issues exist.





Reconnect faces administrative difficulties working with young people who are disengaged from school but still technically enrolled. Further, the requirement for young people to have missed 30% of school days in a term to be eligible for the Navigator program is too high a threshold and means that some young people are accessing support too late.<sup>20</sup> Support for students at risk of disengaging must be established earlier, to prevent students from missing pathway opportunities. There are also barriers relating to parental consent, criteria for access, and an absence of programmatic support.

Further, the defunding of School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) in 2023 created a gap in services, particularly in connecting schools with local community and local experience to support place-based responses. There is a need for stronger investment in upstream education engagement support for children in school foundation and early years.

### Case study 3

#### **STREAT: Earn and Learn**

STREAT is a hospitality-based social enterprise that delivers programs for young people facing multiple barriers and disadvantages. Since its inception in 2009, STREAT has transitioned 76% of program graduates into employment or education.

Their flagship Fast Track to Work program provides young people with workplace experience, work readiness workshops, social engagement, and individual case support. Those who completed the program have the chance to proceed to a nine-month program to transition into paid employment with partnering employers while receiving intensive youth work support. Youth work forms a bridge for young people seeking employment.

#### **Quotes:**

*“On the first shift I travelled with the young person to get them there (and give them an) extra level of support. One time a young person changed (work) venue so I accompanied them to that venue and made them feel comfortable, walking through any anxieties they had.” – Youth worker*

### Case Study 4

#### **Young Women’s Leadership Program (YWLP): Building skills and capacities to empower young people**

Young Women’s Leadership Program (YWLP) is a 10-week program for young women aged 14–20 in the City of Whittlesea, fostering leadership and identity in a safe, peer-supported space. The program aims to build confidence, peer connection, leadership skills, and civic awareness beyond school.



Each week, the program covers themes such as values, public speaking, advocacy, and career exposure. Participants co-designed a final youth-led event. Youth workers offered non-judgemental and consistent support, building trust and encouraging risk-taking in a safe environment. Their presence enabled personal breakthroughs and sustained engagement beyond the program.

As a result of the program, participants reported improved self-esteem, connection, and leadership capabilities. Outcomes included employment, civic leadership roles (e.g., Youth Council Mayor), and social advocacy (e.g., school fundraiser for domestic violence services).

**Quotes:**

*"This group made me feel like I can actually talk about the things that matter."*  
- Year 8 participant

*"I have witnessed a young woman who came in and openly stated she had few, if any, friends at school and was regularly bullied for being different who blossomed over the 10 week program and gained new friends and stated- 'I love that the girls here will listen to what I have to say, I've never had girl-friends before'. And then to see her reconnect with an old friend at the event the girls hosted was so random but so positive for her - I can see her taking many new steps forward from here."* - Youth Worker

## Volunteering: Connecting schools and community

Volunteering is a valuable opportunity for young people to expand their networks, gain essential skills, and develop their capacity for workplace learning. Young people engaging in volunteering can pursue their interests informally, while gaining essential experience in environments different to compulsory schooling. Volunteering opportunities connect young people with organisations, services and programs in their local community, expanding their understanding of pathways available to them. It can be a way for young people to discover and understand employment options outside of career education in schools. Volunteering can also take the form of mentorship programs, connecting young people with people in the industry of their interest, building their network and understanding of pathways available to them.

### Case Study 5

#### **Future Proof Project: Supporting pathways through volunteering and community connection**

The Future Proof Project was delivered in regional and rural communities across Victoria, targeting young people seeking education and employment pathways.



**Aims:** To provide accessible, supported training and employment opportunities for young people in rural and regional areas.

**Activities:** The project funded enrolment in accredited short courses and qualifications, offered informal training such as advocacy workshops, and supported pathway planning. Convened by YACVic, training was delivered via partnerships with local partner organisations comprised of small nonprofits, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations, and local councils.

**Youth Work Interventions:** Youth workers played a vital role in helping young people navigate training options, identify career goals, and engage with local opportunities. The support extended to securing placements and ensuring continuity for learners undertaking online or in-person training.

**Outcomes:**

- 1,598 young people participated in 76 training sessions or workshops.
- 172 enrolled in certificate/diploma-level qualifications; 109 completed; 62 ongoing.
- 16 completed traineeships, often leading to employment.
- 127 qualifications in emergency management; 45 in community/youth work.
- 48 completed qualifications online.

Participants reported that Future Proof opened local job pathways, especially in emergency services, and broadened long-term employment aspirations—crucial in areas where young people often relocate for opportunity.

**Quotes:**

“Young people are now considering emergency management as a career—and they’re staying in their communities to do it.” – Project Partner

## Youth work return on investment

Despite its critical role, the understanding of the impact of youth work and its benefits remains undervalued. In 2022 YACVic commissioned Deloitte to conduct a social and economic return on investment (SROI) study to produce an evidence base of the social and economic value of youth work in Victoria.<sup>19</sup> The report found that for every dollar invested in youth work, this returns an estimate of \$2.62 in social and economic benefits, indicating youth work returns a significant return on investment for the community.



The benefits for education and employment amount to a total of \$285m in benefits over 30 years due to increased earnings, increased government taxes and reduced welfare payments, as a result of improved education and employment outcomes.<sup>19</sup> The SROI modelling indicates that youth work could realise a total benefit of \$594 million with an expanded workforce of 50 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

This aligns closely with the goals of the Victorian Government's Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF) to improve outcomes for users of government services by offering assistance sooner and reducing government expenditure by curbing demand for acute services. Investing in youth work is a smart investment for the Victorian government, not just in terms of improved outcomes for young people but in real economic terms that would benefit the whole Victorian economy.

### A strong and sustainable youth and community sector

Youth work is a growing and in-demand profession, with many youth workers operating in health care, social assistance, and education and training environments. Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework represents a shift in supporting young people earlier in life, before issues become complex or reach crisis. As initiatives are rolled out there will be more demand for youth workers, who continue to play an essential role in connecting with and building the capacities of the young people they work with and for.

Youth workers play a vital role as an effective form of early intervention, particularly in supporting young people with intersecting and complex needs such as mental health, employment, housing, and education challenges. Generalist youth workers are uniquely placed to offer flexible, wraparound support that responds to the diverse and intersecting needs of young people. Unlike specialist roles, generalist youth work supports the whole person, helping them stay connected to family, community, and culture, while building their confidence and capacity to navigate complex systems.

Deloitte's SROI report highlights that nearly 40% of youth work is focused on prevention and early intervention, and over half of youth workers operate in generalist roles, demonstrating the breadth and adaptability of youth work practice.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this, the youth work sector is experiencing significant workforce pressures. Rising operational costs, stagnant or declining funding, increasing complexity of cases, and high levels of staff burnout are placing the workforce under strain, and create potential barriers to new workers entering and remaining in the sector.<sup>21</sup>

Youth workers told us there is a critical shortage of qualified, supported generalist youth workers across the sector.<sup>21</sup> YACVic's 2022 survey of over 950 youth workers and managers found that only around one-third of youth workers hold formal youth work qualifications, while 64% want further training and development



opportunities.<sup>22</sup> Workers also raised concerns about the limited opportunities for further education and professional development, and a lack of recognition for the value and professional status of youth work.<sup>22</sup>

Strengthening the value, sustainability, and opportunities for development within youth work as a career is essential to ensure young people are supported to undertake study and training in this field. This includes:

- **sustainable contracts in the youth sector and community services**, to ensure young people receive continuity of care from experienced workers
- **appropriate remuneration in line with the SCHADS Award in school settings**, recognising the professional skills and value of youth workers alongside social workers and other Mental Health Practitioners
- **paid student placements**, to support the professional development of youth work students, and
- **investment in youth work programs through the Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF)**, ensuring youth workers are well-resourced and embedded in early intervention initiatives.

Youth sector stakeholders emphasised that investing in a well-supported, highly skilled youth work workforce is key to addressing service silos and providing effective, holistic early intervention support.<sup>21</sup> The sector has also called for improved pathways between TAFEs, universities, and employers to build a more knowledgeable and resilient workforce.<sup>21</sup>

By recognising and investing in the unique strengths of youth work and its relational, strengths-based, and youth-centred practice, government can ensure that young people are met where they are, with support that is meaningful, timely, and effective. This is especially critical for young people experiencing disadvantage or facing multiple systemic barriers, where generalist youth work can make a life-changing difference.

## Thank you to our Members

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