

Submission:

Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills* for consideration by the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of alternative care.¹

Victorians rely on our skilled and dedicated workforce to get through periods of hardship and vulnerability, as has been apparent during the pandemic. Our member agencies regularly demonstrate the critically important role community services play in supporting children, young people and families to survive and thrive.

The Centre is pleased that the Committee is drawing attention to the need to support a workforce pipeline for our regional community services. Workforce supply, particularly in regional and rural Victoria, is the most pressing challenge facing our sector, with too many children and families missing out on support because of where they live.² Without the workforce we need to meet demand and deliver support in the right places, the social and economic impacts on individuals, communities and government are likely to be profound.

According to the Brotherhood of St Laurence:

Unmet demand for early years services in Melbourne's growth corridors, where many families of CALD background with young children reside, is considerable. With some 60-100 babies born weekly in outer growth corridors, essential infrastructure – including early years services – has not been able to keep pace with the burgeoning population.³

About our workforce supply needs

We know that the child and family services sector in Victoria is currently under significant pressure and is faced with significantly increased demand from children and families in need. Our sector was already experiencing escalating demand prior to the current global pandemic, a trend also seen at

¹ Alternative care, previously referred to as out-of-home care, means care of a child by a person other than a parent of the child. It can refer to foster, kinship, residential care and permanent care. This change has been made based on advice from young people with care experience and is consistent with upcoming changes to legislation.

² Human Services Skills Organisation (HSSO) 2022, *Findings from the sector: human services workforce forum report*, HSSO, Brisbane, p. 1.

³ Brotherhood of St Laurence 2019, *Submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Parliament inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, p. 10.

the national level. In 2019-20, more than 12,000 children spent time in alternative care in Victoria, with numbers steadily increasing.⁴

Our members frequently report difficulty in the staffing of programs right across Victoria and often find themselves in intense competition with other programs and services that are equally as important. Reform in Victoria has resulted in the welcome expansion of support available to children and families and has seen the creation of additional positions for child and family services professionals, but without an adequate strategy to boost workforce supply.

The child and family services sector, as part of the broader community services industry, relies on a highly educated workforce to deliver quality services to children and families experiencing hardship and disadvantage. Our workforce consists of professionals from a diverse range of academic backgrounds. A 2017 survey of the Victorian family services workforce found that the majority of our university educated professionals hold social work qualifications.⁵ Examples of other degrees that supply professionals for the child and family services workforce include:

- Human Services
- Youth Work
- Sociology
- Child and Family Studies
- Behavioural Science
- Counselling
- Social and Community Welfare
- Community Development.

Examples of university investment to support a skilled child and family services workforce

The Centre is pleased to be working in partnership with Victorian universities on two projects that support a pipeline of skilled workers, supported by university investment. Broader awareness of innovative partnerships such as these across the Victorian university sector could encourage the uptake of similar partnerships and support universities to invest in areas where it is needed most.

Paid Internship Pilot

The Centre is working with a small number of universities on a range of paid and unpaid placement models to build the skills of future social workers. Universities have played a key role in our paid internship project, particularly for regional students who have a limited range of placement options locally. The universities in our pilot have helped recruit students, working with the Centre to match students to community service organisations. We are currently working with a Victorian university to link students wishing to gain research skills with CSOs needing assistance with research projects. The university is playing a key role in the piloting of this scheme because staff can see the benefit for students of these research and evaluation opportunities in a practice setting.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2021, *Child protection Australia 2019-20*, AIHW, Canberra.

⁵ Department of Health and Human Services 2017, *Family services workforce survey report*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

Raising Expectations

Raising Expectations is a unique evidence-informed model that provides a platform for government, universities, TAFEs and the community sector to work together to improve access to and enable successful completion of post-secondary study for people who are in or have lived in alternative care. Raising Expectations currently partners with Federation University Australia, La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology and is in negotiations with the remaining universities regarding participation in the program. The universities provide practical wrap-around support for care leaver students to increase access and reduce barriers to vocational and higher education, including financial (bursaries, scholarships and grants), mentoring, academic and other personal support.

Supported by these partnerships, the Raising Expectations model has contributed to tangible improvements in the education and life opportunities for individuals who have been in care, seeing the number of care experienced people enrolled in the partner universities rise to more than 700 students.

This support has positively contributed to a pipeline of workers for community services, as around 70 per cent of surveyed care leaver students are completing courses in industries experiencing workforce shortages – health, community services & education.

How universities can play a greater role in supporting the pipeline of skilled workers

We encourage universities across the state to engage in closer partnerships with peak bodies and to work together with peaks to deliver their industry plans.⁶ Universities must not only enrol an adequate number of students in relevant courses but must also seek to attract a diverse mix of students to reflect the diversity of clients supported by services while ensuring that the education provided meets the needs of priority sectors. Through targeted equity measures they can make sure no student is disadvantaged by being in regional Victoria, from a low socio economic community or other circumstances that can render young people vulnerable.

Additionally, in the 2022-23 state budget, the Victorian Government funded the development of an attraction and recruitment campaign to raise the profile of the community services workforce.⁷ Victorian universities can play a role in promoting this strategy and raising awareness among current and prospective students of the wide and varied range of career pathways and options available.

In Victoria, there have been extensive reforms that have impacted child and family services practice, yet these changes are not necessarily reflected in course content, with implications for the work-readiness of graduates. The expertise of peak bodies could be leveraged by universities to shape and maintain contemporary curriculum content.

⁶ See, for example: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2018, [Child and family services sector industry plan 2018-2021](#), Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.

⁷ Department of Treasury and Finance 2022, *Victorian budget 2022/23 – Putting patients first: Service delivery – Budget paper no. 3*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

Government should also consider their role in supporting university-sector partnerships, including through the provision of incentives for universities to work closely with industry to produce job-ready graduates in areas of need.