

Skills & jobs in Melbourne's West Podcast - Episode 1 Transcript

Melissa Tham

Hello and welcome to episode one of the skills and jobs in Melbourne's west Podcast Series. My name is Melissa Tham. I'm a research fellow at the Center for International Research on Education Systems. And with me today, I've got Michael Williams, who is our project manager. And we're going to be speaking with Alison Whan, who is the acting general manager of industry and growth at Vic Uni. Over to you, Michael.

Michael Williams

Thank you, Melissa. At Victoria University, in a first for the west of Melbourne, Skills and Jobs for Melbourne's West project has mapped urban skills and investigated the future job needs of employers in three target industry sectors, infrastructure, digital economy, and social services and care. The project has co-designed strategies for sustainable growth in Melbourne's west through employers insights and collaboration with education and government to develop a future skilled workforce and greater prosperity in the West. Before we go any further, I'd like to acknowledge the ancestors, elders and families of the Wurundjeri and Woiwurrung of the Kulin, who are the traditional owners and custodians of university land. As we share our own knowledge practices within the university, may we pay respect to the deep knowledge embedded within the Aboriginal community and their ownership of Country. Our small grant scheme has provided funding for seven separate projects. These small grants seek to celebrate excellence in industry engagement with Victoria University. The seed funding is aimed at applied research projects, which can be used to disseminate insights of current good practice engagement with industry across Victoria University, including VU Polytechnic, to facilitate further industry linkages into the future.

Melissa Tham

Thank you, Michael. So, Alison, welcome today. Would you like to introduce your project and your industry partner and just tell us a bit about the work that you do at VU as well?

Alison Whan

Sure, thanks for having me along. My role is acting general manager of industry and growth. The industry and growth team was initially sitting within the Polytechnic and now sits under the external relations and partnerships portfolio. Our role historically has been to engage with industry with a polytechnic focus. So for course delivery, industry collaborations, placement opportunities for students, those sorts of things, lots of fee for service training, as well. The particular relationship that I'm talking about today is with CPB John Holland joint venture. And they are currently the consortium working on the West Gate tunnel project. My project for VU Rise has been looking at that relationship, and how we can develop best practice with dealing with big industry partners such as CPB John Holland.

Michael Williams

Terrific, Alison. So tell us about some of the key challenges that have emerged through the project.

Alison Whan

I think one of the main challenges is being flexible and agile. With industry, they want to be able to get a product, get it off the shelf and get it fast. Whether it be in short course form or accredited training. They are not aware of how inflexible sometimes training packages can be whether those are higher ed packages or vocational education packages. Also, in a big project, like the West Gate tunnel, particularly with the delays over the last couple of years, they're on a timeline. They're working really long shifts, so a lot of their staff members are working 12 hour shifts. They've got deadlines. And what we're facing now is that supervisors are not releasing their staff for training. So on the one hand, there's a commitment by the consortium to train and upskill their staff. But on the other hand, there are deadlines that need to be met. And to release a staff member for eight hours a day, one day a week is really not aligned with the outcomes of the project.

Melissa Tham

What kind of skills are they looking for?

Alison Whan

Yeah, good question. And it's actually evolved through the project. So we first signed the MOU with CPB John Holland in 2017. And in the early years of the project they were doing a lot of the basic skills, so working at heights, white card, confined spaces, those sort of short, sharp skill sets required to work on big construction sites. That then evolved into a Cert 4 in Civil Construction. And that's probably the ones where we're having most pushback at the moment, those long form accredited training type packages where the participants will come out with a qualification. It's evolved, and now we are delivering business administration for their office staff members as well. So that's been a great outcome that we've gone beyond the traditional construction/engineering type delivery, to align with the fact that it's a big consortium, they do lots of different things. And so as a large institution, we have the ability to help them with all of those training needs.

Melissa Tham

Though if people are working 12 hour shifts, and they're working to quite deadlines, how do- how do companies and how do employees find time to do training and education?

Alison Whan

Yep. That has been the difficulty probably over the last 12 months as the project has ramped up. So some of the initial training we were doing with them was the Cert 3 in

Tunnelling. And that was a specific qualification, obviously, around tunnelling skills. And as part of that, VU purchased, I think, or was given a tunnel simulator, which actually sits at our Werribee Campus. And it now sits dormant. Because while Werribee was a fantastic location in that it was large, we had lots of parking, they could send, you know, massive cohorts of staff out there to do their training. It's now too far away from the project itself. And given the timelines, given having to catch up from both COVID but also the initial PFAS issues they had with digging the tunnel, there's just no time for them to travel. And so what they wanted was contextualized workplace training, which has just been too difficult for us to deliver that.

Melissa Tham

What does that look like? Contextualized workplace training.

Alison Whan

So training packages in TAFE, and excuse me, everyone, I'm not a teacher so I'm not an expert at this, but training packages are set nationally. So if we teach a Cert 3 in Tunneling, it will be the same Cert 3 in Tunneling essentially, as what has been delivered in any other TAFE across the country. What we can do, though, is contextualize it to the specific industry partner. So certain competencies have to be met. But we can say, sort of adjusted a little bit to the way CPB John Holland do things or it might be Metro Tunnel, or whoever the client happens to be. What we have the flexibility to do in the Polytechnic as well often is to do training in industry. So they don't have to come into our classroom, we can actually train out in industry. The flip side to that is that we need an – we need more teachers, we don't have enough teachers, not just at the Poly I think, across industry, I think well Free TAFE has been a fantastic initiative, and it's got so many people into training, what we don't have is enough trainers. And particularly if you are a qualified tunneler at the West Gate tunnel project, and you are earning \$325,000 a year, why would you get less than a third of that to come and train the next generation? So that's a real issue that is happening across all industries, all TAFEs, all qualifications, that there's a lack of trainers. With the Cert 4, they are – the Cert 4 in Civil Construction – it's a blended learning model, so they will come to Werribee to do their face-to-face learning. But there are online components of that as well. Again, the training is extremely aligned to what they're doing at work. And for some of them, it could be what they've been doing for the last 10 or 15 years and finally they're getting that piece of paper to prove that. And so that's really good for the learners because a lot of them are coming back to study for the first time in a really long time. So it's a bit intimidating, but they see what they're learning and they see what they have to demonstrate. And they're able to go, oh, actually, I know that off the top of my head because I've been doing it forever. So they're able to get through the course. And it's not simplifying it at all. It's just saying to them, actually, guys, you probably know a lot of this anyway. Now, you've just got to put it on paper, and you've got to demonstrate it, show us what you know, and work through the course that way. But again, the numbers have dropped in the last 12 to 18 months from what we originally started with, because they all need to be on site and just working.

Michael Williams

So Alison getting more women into the construction industry is something of a key priority for the state government. And the Building Equality Policy sets out a series of targets for trades, non trades and apprentices. What's your experience of working towards these targets in your role at VU?

Alison Whan

VU, particularly in the Polytechnic, and in collaboration with our built environment team in higher ed, are really trying to get that women in trades and construction policy sort of implemented at VU and with our partners. It's a bit hard though because it is a chicken and egg type situation. I would really like to see VU playing a role where we can encourage participation, bring together all of our industry partners, and your relationship with the industry capability network and use them as a– as a venue through which we can start these conversations. Because I think the larger organisations, such as the CPB John Holland Joint Venture, such as McConnell Dowell, those big players will be all over it. And they'll have social procurement managers, and they'll know what they need to do. But it's the small to medium enterprises who are the subcontractors, they're probably the ones who are least equipped, least educated. Yeah, not really knowing what it's like to have many women in their workforce. They're probably the lost players in that space. The other missing piece in that puzzle is, do the girls and women even know that these opportunities are available? And I think that's going to be a big factor. It's that– we can do all of the shouting from the rooftops that we want, but unless girls in year 8, 9 and 10, right now even consider a role in construction? And I'm talking about the wider roles. It's not just as an engineer, it's not just as a labourer, it could be in finance, it could be in HR, it could be in any of the management roles. But I can't see my 17-year-old daughter going 'I'll apply for a role at McConnell Dowell', she wouldn't even know who McConnell Dowell was. So what are industry themselves doing, to reach out to girls in high schools, to work with careers advisors, to go to the big careers fairs that happen at Caulfield, and all of those different places. You know, the armed forces have been there forever. Should the construction industry get together and start spruiking themselves as a legitimate career path?

Michael Williams

Yeah, yeah, I think that that's a really good point. And certainly, I know through the tech schools within Victoria, there's a high level of industry engagement with our tech schools through those years from 7 to 10. But perhaps that's not enough, perhaps we need more industry engagement at secondary level, to show all of the students all the breadth of opportunities and pathways that are there.

Alison Whan

Yeah, and I think the problem, if I could say with the tech schools, and they're not a problem because they're amazing – and what Gail does at Wyndham tech is just off the charts, it's incredible – is there aren't enough of them. And it's not reaching enough kids. You know,

the whole of the west of Melbourne, there's only Windham tech and it only gets kids from Hobsons Bay and Wyndham. So what about all of the other LGA's around? and it's still very STEM focused which we need more women in STEM. Absolutely. But not every job in construction is a stem job.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. So that's the idea to sort of, or that's one of the message, one of the messages is that you don't have to be a tradie necessarily to work in construction. It's a huge industry. But it's an industry – I mean, I certainly didn't consider it when I was going through high school as even a possibility.

Alison Whan

No, and, you know, organizations like CPB John Holland are definitely doing some fantastic things. They've got their West Gate Women in Construction Group. And VU were fortunate enough to be invited to the International Women's Day where we took a lot of our female teachers in built environment, electrical engineering, and they got to see how CPB John Holland are doing it. And they had women in safety. They had engineers. They had your labourer on the tools. They had someone in their finance team. And they had one of their corporate lawyers, just trying to demonstrate the depth and breadth of roles that are available for women, but also demonstrating their commitment to their own female staff. If you think about the way that the Big Build has been advertised and promoted, it's kind of about the outcomes and what Melbourne Airport train stations are going to look like, rather than the individuals we're going to require to actually help make that happen. And I think the other thing that I've encountered, and I think will be a difficulty for these organizations to meet any of their social procurement obligations, not just the female workforce, is that often these workers go from big project to big project to big project. So I don't even know how many new employees are bought on with each contract that comes along, because a lot of those that are currently working on West Gate tunnel, which will finish, they're saying around mid 2025, will probably transition to the Melbourne Airport Rail Link, because CPB and John Holland are two of the people in that consortium that's just been announced. And so how many new players are going to be in there anyway, and what are the organizations doing themselves to genuinely go out and get new employees, new apprentices, all of those sorts of things.

Michael Williams

I can imagine there'll be some attrition as there always is between projects. But the opportunity is to provide a greater diversity within the workforce. So it's, it's great to see your work is actually helping that and working towards much better outcomes. It's great to see.

Alison Whan

I hope that is the outcome. I hope we see lots of our lots of our graduates in some of those positions. I suppose that's probably my next big focus.

Melissa Tham

What happens if the quotas or targets aren't met?

Alison Whan

As far as I know, there's actually no penalty per se. And at the moment, there's no real way to measure it. So I know that ICN a trying to do something in this space and create a social and sustainable procurement steering committee to try and put some measurements in place. But yeah, there's no real penalty at the moment. It's kind of a nice-to-have and, and how it will be measured and how it will be done, I don't know. Because again, like with the hospital over the road, Footscray hospital, Multiplex, Multiplex themselves are not doing most of the hiring. It's their subcontractors are doing most of the hiring. So there's a lot of layers between signing on the dotted line with the government as to who gets the contract, to who the actual employees actually end up being, and how is that measured? How is that reported? I don't think has really been worked out.

Melissa Tham

Has the grant enabled you to work differently in any way or is there anything that you've gotten out of perhaps having had like opportunities to kind of reflect on the kind of work that you do through the grant itself?

Alison Whan

I think the reflection piece is really the key to this. You're absolutely right. The job would have happened anyway. Me relationship managing CPB John Holland, which was a relationship I inherited from my predecessor, but what the project has really made me focus on is sort of the governance around these types of relationships, the importance of having a relationship manager. And, you know, a classic example is I'm doing some service agreements with them at the moment, so working with the legal team, and I was going to put down, you know, the individual teachers as the relationship managers. And legal have advised no, you're the relationship manager, you need to oversee all of the promises that we have made to this organization. It can't sit with individual program areas because it's a multifaceted relationship. And so I think that's key. And that's what universities are not very good at doing. And I think that obviously came out of a lot of the RISE [projects]. Consultation with industry is who do they go to? There are too many people, the organization is too big, we don't know how to navigate that system. And so having that one person that enables- to do all of that internal stuff, I think is really, really important. And that's been highlighted through this.

Melissa Tham

Thank you for giving us your insights on that. Because you've got, you've got a viewpoint that's quite unique. It's, it's what we want to hear more about – just sort of unpacking that kind of messiness, between, you know, the, the relationships and the interrelationships and all of the communication, but I'm glad that you have got something out of it. And that, you know, that process that you talked about with the steering committee is just a bit more structured. And yeah, thank you for being involved.

Alison Whan

No, thank you. My pleasure.

Michael Williams

Great, thanks Alison.