

Skills & jobs in Melbourne's West Podcast - Episode 2 Transcript

Melissa Tham

Hello and welcome to episode two of the skills in jobs in Melbourne's West Podcast Series. My name is Melissa Tham, I'm a research fellow from the Center of International Research on Education Systems at VU. We've also got Michael Williams, who is the project manager. And with us we have Monica Wellington, the Project Coordinator of the MENU project, and also Simon Salerno, who's a third year, Bachelor of nutrition student. 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 the 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 the Polytechnic to facilitate further industry linkages into the future.

Melissa Tham

Thank you, Michael. So Monica, you wear many hats in this project, you're an RA (research assistant). You practice in nutrition and, and you're the community partner coordinator, as well. So can you tell me a bit about your background and how you came into those roles?

Monica Wellington

Yes. So my PhD at Victoria University is looking into food and nutrition for people with intellectual disability in Australia, and particularly in the– looking at nutrition services and the way they occur, and also the way supporters or people have support with food nutrition, as well as people's own perspectives of food nutrition in their lives. And I do have a separate hat at VU a paid position as a community partner coordinator, which helps to coordinate the

partnerships that we have between VU's nutrition program, and our community organizations for a few different projects. And the Menu Project is one of those.

Melissa Tham

Yep. Great. And how did you how did you become interested in your in your topic?

Monica Wellington

Well, after I did my masters of dietetics, I started practicing in the community. Actually, while I was studying my masters of dietetics, I did some research assisting at Deakin University around disability and disability rights, which gave me the interest in the lives of people with disability and how they might be, we might be able to help them improve. And then after I finished my master's, I started working in the NDIS and working with people with disability and their support workers to build up their nutrition in various ways. So this research and my PhD is a connection of the two.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, so you had a lot of preparation and a lot of experience. So can you tell us about the MENU project?

Monica Wellington

Yes. Its a- MENU is an acronym that stands for meals, eating and nutrition for you. And the MENU program project is a four week nutrition education program for people who are carers or support workers of people with disability. And it aims to provide them with the opportunity to be involved in some nutrition education, and also co-designs some supporting materials to help them continue what they're learning in their education workshops. At home, to they can help improve the way food is provided to the people that they care for. So we've had a few different types of people involved in that we've had parents and carers who might be supporting people in their homes or in private residences. And we've also had paid support workers or people who work in kitchens or people who have chefs who might support people who work- who live in shared accommodations. But the overall aim is to help carers and support workers feel more confident in the way that they're providing food for people with disabilities.

Melissa Tham

How did you identify that as a need?

Monica Wellington

People with disabilities that have high risk of some lifestyle-related health conditions, and poor nutrition is one of those. So it's, I suppose, addresses that in a way. And we also know that carers and support workers play a pretty significant role in monitoring those health concerns or health risks. And they also play a pretty significant role. Sometimes it depends on the setting where people live, in the way food decisions happen, and the way menu planning and food preparation happen. So it makes sense to be able to help support them build their own knowledge so that they can feel confident and competent, providing support to the people that they care for.

Melissa Tham

And the MENU project is a continuation of a previous project. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Monica Wellington

Yeah, that project is the VU CHEW program, which is another acronym that stands for cooking, healthy eating and wellness. And the VU CHEW program is another four week program delivered at the Werribee campus on-site. And it's a cooking and nutrition education project program, where people are invited people from community groups are invited to come along and participate in it. And usually those people are invited from backgrounds or community groups who might not have the opportunity to participate or be involved in such a health promotion program. So in the past, we've had people with disabilities come along and be involved. And the Menu Project came as a stepping stone from that, were some of the staff who were supporting people to be involved in the two programs that how do we continue what they're learning and continue this good work at home and make these changes that they might want to incorporate more sustainable? And they're also asking about how they prefer foods and what they can do to help make that more healthy – which is where the MENU project came about.

Melissa Tham

Do the nutritional needs of people with disability differ from people without disabilities? Or are there particular things that you really need to cater for?

Monica Wellington

Sometimes, yep. Sometimes people with disability have high risk of poor nutrition. And we know that there are nutrition interventions or programs out there, but we know that they've got fairly mixed success. And one of the reasons why that might happen is because these programs don't include the role of the support environment or carers in addressing and designing their changes. So the MENU project does that – it's a pilot in a way to see how this might change. We also know that carers and particularly paid carers aren't always involved in training in their roles. And that training also includes nutrition training, the pay Disability

Support staff aren't required to have any qualifications or training. And that's seen as a bit of an issue. And there was a couple of pieces of legislation released last year in 2021, to help address some of those concerns, and one of those is was released by the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the NDIS as a practice alert, and it kind of acknowledged that people experience people with disability experience health inequalities, and that they also acknowledge that support staff or support workers have pretty significant roles in monitoring those health concerns. And that training would be a good idea so that people's health is more monitored, or could be improved. Yeah. One of the other pieces of legislation was the National Disability roadmap for improving the health of people with intellectual disability, which acknowledged that– helps to address health inequalities experienced by people with intellectual disability by creating ways to support people and their carers and their families to have more information about nutrition and also use that information about health and nutrition. So we think that the MENU project might fit with both of those legislations quite well.

Melissa Tham

So currently, who is responsible for maintaining the nutritional standards of people with disability?

Monica Wellington

There isn't any standardized policy, or any standardized requirements. Yeah, so it happens in different ways for a lot of people.

Melissa Tham

So can you tell us a bit about your industry partner?

Monica Wellington

Yeah. So with the MENU project and the way that we've piloted it, we've partnered with Co-Health which is a community health organization in Melbourne's north and west. And they, some of the people who have participated in the MENU project have come through them. And they're people who work in shared accommodations for people with disability.

Melissa Tham

Yep. And just to sort of get a, an idea of what that looks like. So what kind of shared accommodations?

Monica Wellington

There are accommodations, which house up to 30 people with disability and at any point in time, there's a few support workers on shift. And that depends on the residence. Yeah, and what happens there and how their staffing is structured. But some of them have carers who are in roles, which adjust cooks who are responsible for the cooking. And sometimes that just depends who's on shift and available to do the cooking. So they produce meals at mass for the 30 people.

Melissa Tham

Yep. Right. So and how many of these accommodations is Co-health responsible for? How many do they have?

Monica Wellington

I think– I don't know exactly how many but we worked with four in particular for the MENU project. Yeah.

Melissa Tham

So Simon, can you tell us a bit about your experience in the MENU project as a student?

Simon Salerno

Yes, certainly. It's been a really positive experience. The main thing that going into the MENU project that I really wanted to get out of it was working with a multidisciplinary team. So working with dietitians, like Monica, but also support workers, students. Yeah. And also the chefs as well. And just really working towards one common goal and just seeing what that was going to be like.

Melissa Tham

Did you have any previous experience of working with people with disabilities in nutrition prior to the project?

Simon Salerno

No, I didn't.

Melissa Tham

So Monica and Simon, can you give us just like a brief overview of what it might involve what the four week program involves?

Simon Salerno

Yeah, yes, certainly, I can. So essentially, the first week is a focus group. So you'll get together with support workers. And essentially, do like in a needs assessment, see what the needs are and where the gaps are. And then the second week is essentially going away and just addressing those needs and seeing where we can provide the help. Then the third week is having a kind of a prior run over what will be covered, what the types of resources and the types of information that will be provided, and then making sure that's fine. And then getting that final type of feedback from the support workers, whether there was something that we may have missed, and then in the final week, is just the overall delivery of that education.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, that sounds great. It's very, very thorough. Do you think you'll stick with that four week structure?

Monica Wellington

It seems to be working and what we've received from the follow up evaluations will help shape that into a way that might suit people better. But at the moment, the four weeks tends to work really well for staff and their availability, sometimes time poor so just a few hours over the course of a few weeks suits them well. It also suits the students where they've got other commitments, students voluntarily participate in facilitating the MENU project. So alongside their studies, is really important to manage your workloads.

Melissa Tham

So this is additional to your studies? So not everyone participates in the MENU project?

Monica Wellington

That's right. It's voluntary.

Melissa Tham

Has the project made you think differently about your work or your career moving forward? Coming into your final year of studies?

Simon Salerno

Yes, certainly. It definitely has. I think when you go into opportunities like this, it really broadens your perspective on things and you're definitely working. Because initially, what I

wanted to do is work with the geriatric population. So I think it's not too dissimilar in a way where there is going to be support workers and things of that nature. And there is quite a gap when it comes to nutrition both for geriatric populations and people with disability as well. So I found that was really there was a lot of converging lines there.

Melissa Tham

And what has been your involvement in the project like? Can you talk us through it what it is like to work with Co-health or to work with disability workers?

Simon Salerno

Yeah, it's a very positive experience. It's essentially designing and delivering nutrition education, in particular with the MENU project, it was delivering it to the support workers. So support staff, and also the chefs were in on the calls as well. So it was great to just work in a collaborative environment where everyone was firing ideas, and really working towards bettering the nutrition outcome for the people.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. And do you like how many students go out and, you know, deliver this, deliver these types of workshops?

Simon Salerno

At the time, there was probably about four or five of us, and we would work on a slideshow, so we'd probably get a few slides each, we would look at some evidence based literature, okay, put that into the slideshow, and then Monica was guiding us along the way. So making sure everything was substantial and yeah, substantiated by some evidence.

Melissa Tham

How did you find that? How did you find that process?

Monica Wellington

Great, great collaboration with the students. So each of the sessions is facilitated by the students and supported by the staff who, myself or Helen McCarthy, who are both dietitians. And just seeing how the students have the opportunity to practice what they've learned over the previous years of study, and putting that into real life tangible training, was fantastic to watch.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, it sounds like it is very student-driven. I mean, you prepare the slides. And then you know, you look over them to see, just to check, but it is very kind of student-driven. And then you kind of take on that role in training, and imparting all of that knowledge to the Disability Support Workers, which is great.

Monica Wellington

And it's been a chance for the students to work with community groups to identify what their needs are, and then address those needs in a really tailored way. So they worked in collaboration in all parts of that the asking the questions, gathering the information, identifying needs, and also developing content to meet those needs.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. Is there anything that was brought up in those interactions that was like unexpected?

Simon Salerno

I guess, just the willingness to learn and take on that knowledge and to use it practically. Yeah, it was really good. Because at times you will, you can go into things kind of uncertain of how it's going to be received. Yes. But I think overwhelmingly, it's it was received positively also, from the point of view of the MENU project as well, just seeing the support workers really interested and really willing to take on this knowledge and start to impart that, that knowledge onto everyone else. Yeah, it was really positive.

Melissa Tham

That's great. So unfortunately, we don't have someone from Co-health today, but like, what's the sense from you as to how... as to whether this partnership has been valuable for them?

Monica Wellington

So we're partway through returning to the groups that we've piloted in the mini project with their feedback. Yep. And we have some information about that. But we'll have more when we finish all the focus groups. But some of the things that they've said, have been that they have really enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in an education program, which hasn't been offered to them in the past. They've been able to include a lot of the information and change their menus to be more healthy, and to feel confident that they're meeting needs nutrition needs of the people in the residences. But that was dependent on the residence and how things happened there. So there were a few barriers that people were identified. And they also identified ways that we could maybe help them more to overcome those barriers. So that continued work together, is seen which is excellent.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. Any particular challenges that came up?

Monica Wellington

It was around well, yes, supporting people to know more about nutrition themselves. So at the moment, the MENU project has been delivered to staff and to help change the way food is provided to people with disability. But there's a gap there – where people with disabilities themselves aren't receiving the information directly, right. We hope to be able to also do an extension of the MENU project in the future to help support a decision-making help people with disability, make good decisions, or make healthy decisions. Yeah, yep, to make their own decisions about healthy eating, and to help support workers in that process.

Melissa Tham

Thinking about that the project moving forward. You mentioned that this is a pilot. So where do you see the project going?

Monica Wellington

Well, hopefully we have the feedback that we're receiving the pilot and in the evaluations will assure us that we can deliver a good program in the future. There was a couple of areas which participants identified that they wanted specific knowledge on. So the way the MENU project is, at the moment, its general healthy eating advice. But we know people with disabilities sometimes have specific nutrition needs, like the general population, and one of those demands was around texture modified foods. So we hope to be able to deliver a texture modified MENU project to help staff feel more confident in the ways that they're preparing, balanced, nutritionally balanced texture, modified foods. Yeah. And within that, the person who might identify or diagnose someone with swallowing issues, and therefore needing texture, modified foods and fluids is a speech pathologist. So we hope to collaborate with the speech pathology department and the staff and students within that a venue to deliver to do some inter-professional collaboration and deliver that as a multidisciplinary MENU project.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, that's great. So it seems I mean, the previous episode, one of the barriers, or one of the challenges was about the ability for the university to be agile, but use your project seems like, it is very agile, and very kind of adaptive to, you know, designing the program to meet the needs of your industry partner in ways that are quite flexible, is there anything that you think kind of allows you to be flexible?

Monica Wellington

That flexibility is a really important part of inclusion for people with disability. And more broadly, inclusion has been really challenging for people with disability or groups of people with disability, because our mainstream processes are so rigid and structured. So we need to change things and to collaborate in the design of programs or design of materials or device design of processes, so that people with disability can be meaningfully included in in their in various ways, in fact, but especially in health.

Melissa Tham

So do you think that's like an inherent aspect of just working in the field of nutrition and disability? And it's just a part of what you do?

Monica Wellington

Yep. And really important part of it. Yeah.

Michael Williams

Monica, tell us about how the grant has helped with your work.

Monica Wellington

Well, the MENU project started as a need and a very small scale need. And we wouldn't have been able to deliver the project or do the pilot at such a level if we didn't have the funding. And I don't think we would have been able to create resources to help support people at the same level either, and be able to plan for the future without the funding.

Michael Williams

Fantastic, good to know. Thanks.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. And Simon, what's your sense from the other students involved in the projects? Like, do you think they've enjoyed it? Do you think it is different to other areas of study?

Simon Salerno

Yes, certainly. I'll address the first part of the question. The students, it's been really positive. I think that there's a lot of tangibles that can be taken away from this experience. And there's a lot of transferable skills, that that have been taken, like working as part of a

team, designing, delivering education. And I think that's really important. And that's really valuable skills to take outside of, say, a degree and into the workforce. Yeah. And in terms of how different it is from, I guess, other education and other experiences within education, certainly, it's definitely a hands on experience. It gives you skills that you can use to give you the opportunity – I like to say it gives you the opportunity to have an impact while you're studying. We often, when you go into a degree, you doing a lot of practical stuff and you're not being able to apply it or sorry, a lot of theory and not being able to apply it practically. But this gives you the opportunity to take that theory and apply it into practice and to have that opportunity to really make a difference while you're studying, instead of waiting till you finish a degree to get into the industry. I think that's a really, really important takeaway.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, definitely. And is that something that you want to see happen more?

Simon Salerno

Certainly, yeah, definitely, I think this is, there's, there's still a bit of a bit of a gap, sometimes I feel with, it would be really great to have that opportunity to have these opportunities and, and deliver more education. Because I think the more you do it, the more adept you get to it, and the more confidence you get, as well.

Melissa Tham

So these grants are for the purpose of sustaining and promoting university and industry partnerships, but for this particular project, we see students as playing a key role in that partnership. So how do you think the university might be able to promote student voice more actively?

Simon Salerno

I think mainly just I guess, disseminating that information and just making it be more known. And whether that's via, via online ways, or even just ways of just putting posters up around the university, just letting people know that this is an opportunity that is available, and that it's really, really worth your while and worth your time.

Melissa Tham

Great. And how do you find that it fits in with, you know, what you do in your studies? And just like in with other commitments that you have?

Simon Salerno

Yeah, it fits in well. I think there's a lot of flexibility. When it comes to the mini project, Monica will always make sure that everyone's available, and there is a time that we can all meet. And then I guess the advent of having online kind of meetings, so through Zoom. So that's been really handy as well, just so everyone can meet at a convenient time. Or even if you're on a lunch break, or something at work, you can kind of pop in and have your say, but it's been it's been very flexible, there's really been no issues at all with managing time around the MENU projects. And I just think that the benefit you get from doing it is really worth worth that little bit of extra time.

Monica Wellington

Yeah good point, you build your practice being a nutrition educator, which is one component of being involved in the MENU project, but also learn some professional skills. And those skills are really important for whatever industry or whatever job you can you go towards, after university.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. How important is that for you? Like, how important is the experience in the project moving forward towards the end of your degree?

Simon Salerno

Very, very handy. Yeah, I essentially have tried to put my hand up for every volunteer opportunity, because I know that it's just going to be a real, I guess, a real benefit. And I guess an edge as well going into the industry. Upon graduating, it's just gives you a real good level of confidence. And it feels like you've been there before. So it's not so foreign.

Melissa Tham

You know, are there any students that are looking towards a career in this space?

Monica Wellington

None have really shared exactly that. Yeah. It's been a good opportunity for some students to identify, yes, I really want to go into community health and nutrition education with groups of people or with people themselves. Some other students have identified that no, this isn't for me, I'd rather go into it down a different fork in the road. So it's been nice for them to figure that out. And use that in their career planning next.

Michael Williams

Monica and Simon, thank you very much for coming in today. It's been great to learn about the MENU project, and we wish you all the very best for the future.

Monica Wellington

Thank you, Michael and Melissa.

Simon Salerno

Thank you for having us.