

Skills & jobs in Melbourne's West Podcast - Episode 3 Transcript

Melissa Tham

Hello and welcome to the Skills and Jobs in Melbourne's West Podcast Series, episode three. My name is Melissa Tham, I'm a research fellow from the Center of International Research on Education Systems. We've also got Michael Williams, who is our project manager. And with us we have Owen Smith, who is a teacher of community service of VU poly, and also Cathy Cassar, who is a careers coordinator from Hester hornbrook Academy. Over to you, Michael.

Michael Williams

Thank you, Melissa. And 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. We're gonna start with Owen today. So can you just tell me tell us a little bit about your background? And how did you come to be a teacher at VU Poly?

Owen Smith

Yeah, sure. So my background is in around youth work from 2000. And I think 2015 to about 2021, I was working at the Hester Hornbrook Academy where Cathy works as a youth worker, VETiS trainer, and careers counsellor. And as a well, being team leader out at the Sunshine campus. Yeah.

Melissa Tham

And can you tell us a bit about the project and what your role in it has been?

Owen Smith

Yeah, sure. So I didn't tell you how I ended up at VU. But I've been working on and off of VU for a number of different years. Finally, I bit the bullet to become a full time staff member last year. Originally, the idea of the project was just... I saw it essentially in an email that came around internally around some small grants to do some research or do some reflection work with industry. A big part of where my passion lies is around working with marginalized communities, leveraging their strengths and trying to rewrite narratives around them not being successful, or essentially, facing barriers, and especially within education. And I saw this as an opportunity to delve a little bit into that, and to use my connections with my previous workplace, which is HHA to support, you know, a bit of consultation or research, whatever that kind of looks like to better understand the needs of that community, especially in tertiary education.

Melissa Tham

Yep. And Cathy, can you tell us a bit about yourself and the work that you do at HHA?

Cathy Cassar

Well, I'm new to Hester Hornbrook Academy. I started in January this year. Previous to that came from VET, I've been doing that for 20 years. Locked down was my friend, in that it gave me time to I guess, like many, think about what we wanted from our careers moving forward. The position that Hester Hornbrook Academy as careers coordinator was advertised, I had time to think about whether I wanted to move into supporting young people – first time I've ever moved into a space like this. And yeah, when I was successful in my application and went into the role. So fundamentally, my position at HHA is to support all our young people enrolled in designing and developing their career plans and their career pathways. More recently, though, in term three and turn four, as we get to the sticky end of the year, as we like to call it. It's about looking at supporting those young people preparing to graduate and assisting them in making their applications to further education if that's what their path is. Alternatively employment, alternatively a Gap Year, alternatively whatever their future ambitions may be. I also support classroom teams in designing content for our work related skills modules. And yeah, engaging with networks in industry and partnerships to try to, again, increase the profile of opportunity to our young people where they may not be aware of what's available out there.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, that's great. So how did you two meet?

Owen Smith

Good question! Great question. So a part of the project, in terms of my application, and, you know, getting the green light to, to go ahead and do a little bit of a research project was obviously had to go through school leadership. And what we kind of ended up with in terms of the project itself and what it looks like, and what it will look like, is this kind of, what does the relationship between Victoria University and HHA look like? And what are the opportunities there? How can we better support the community in the western suburbs to you know, whether it be employability outcomes, upskilling, whatever it might be. And so I contacted one of my ex colleagues there. And we talked about, you know, what could this look like, and we settled on a workshop style kind of collaboration, effort. And we thought about who would be some good people to invite, and we thought about a cross section across the across HHA. Because there's a number of different professionals that work in there. So we thought about inviting people in from the different areas and Cathy, being of that background, but also the careers coordinator was someone who we thought was an essential part, because of, you know, your work in the VET sector, understanding that but also around, you know, supporting young people into careers. And often that means further education. And so we thought, Cathy would be a must in that, even though I only met you at the workshop. But Michael, very much you who was my contact there, was very much keen to have Cathy on board.

Cathy Cassar

And I'm supported by a team of people in this research project from Hester Hornbrook. So we do have two of our assistant principals. We have a head of campus. And one of my colleagues, Sarah Keo is also the alumni and pathways coordinator and our lead VCE, who is also a career practitioner is part of the team. So we are well supported by an by our extended leadership team, in making sure that we have various lenses looking into what vi offers and various levels of expertise. So I'm one of the newest recruits at Hester Hornbrook. But within the team, we have people who have been with her Hester Hornbrook from its from its development and inception.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, pretty much. So it's a nice little, it's a nice village, if you will, of the two, the two institutions working together quite closely.

Cathy Cassar

Well, from the perspective of Hester Hornbrook, VU is literally across the road from our Sunshine campus. So many of our young people are quite aware of the name, they're quite aware of its reputation, well aware of the courses that are available through there and because of its location to our campus, and its accessibility is seen as first preference. And I am more than happy to support any young person's I guess interest in Further Education and if it means partnering with a provider or Polytechnic that they're keen on exploring, that makes my job so much easier.

Owen Smith

Yeah, most definitely.

Melissa Tham

So what are some typical kind of career and education and training pathways that you see for the young people who go through Hester Hornbrook?

Cathy Cassar

This is a really interesting one, again, third term in so I'm only a few months into the role, but in working with the young people planning to graduate, we are a trauma informed secondary education provider. A youth worker is embedded into our education classroom. Our young people are supported through their well being equally as they are supported through their education. Many of them rely on that wellbeing support to function to survive to succeed and thrive. And because of their I guess, lived experience being a client in the services, many of them want to go and give back to this community they are so familiar with in that community services space. We currently have about three or four young people applying to enroll into certificate for youth work through various institutions, VU being one of them that they are encouraged to. Alternatively, we also have a number of young people interested in the certificate for Allied Health that's available. Our pathways aren't into higher education, we are a vehicle provider. So our young people don't graduate with a score of VCE. So my role is to kind of work backwards and have a look at what TAFE can give them as a stepping stone to getting to the employment interests of the future. In saying that, though, we have an alumni student who has just been enrolled into a master's in education. So higher education is absolutely possible. But as an initial pathway for young people from Hester Hornbrook, it absolutely comes into that TAFE sector. That's where we start.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. So the young people come through HHA, and then you said that they often enrolled in like Community Services and allied health. So when they come to your classes, are there any particular challenges or any particular needs that you've kind of identified in your work?

Owen Smith

Yeah, you know, I'm very fortunate to have to have worked in the academy or in HHA, for a number of years, my role there predominantly was working with students who were in the senior classroom. So students who were finishing up their senior certificate or their year 12 equivalent, and looking to move on. If only we had Cathy, a few years ago, because a lot of the work fell on the classroom team, which is a youth worker and educator to support that transition in which, you know, I think we do well, but we definitely lacked that expertise with a career coordinator. But I often saw with young people, and one of the really great things I

think about HHA is that it's not just once you are in year 12, you're out and you're forever forgotten. There's a lot of post support that's put into place. And I know Sarah, as you talked about Sarah Keo, her role is alumni support. So doing that follow up work as well. But even in the beginning, there was a lot of post support that was that was provided, whether it was you know, formalized or informal, it does depend. And so as a youth worker in that space, you know, we would often support young people go into further education. And I often saw some significant barriers to them succeeding. They, the environment that's created in that school is one where young people feel connected, feel welcome, feel accepted for who they are, the education or kind of component is targeted to where they are at, not where they're supposed to be. So they're allowed to grow, allowed to thrive and allow to succeed, not in what I saw was, especially towards the back end, they're in year 12, or the same year level is that a lot of them actually are kicking a lot of goals, that they're doing really well, they're feeling really positive about themselves, they can see the finish line, and we start to have those conversations about what it is that you want to do, do you want to go into a cert for youth work? Do you want to go into a certificate or into construction or cert three into allied health, whatever it might be, you know, what should go. I remember working with a number of young people that had really lots and lots of talents, but needed the education to support them to get along. And what I saw is that, you know, once they left his really high support environment and that support dropped off, they really struggled. You know, TAFE, especially because of the way that it's set up that attendance is obligatory that, you know, they would struggle in the environment where they don't have those connections, they don't have those relationships, you know, there may be one of 30 students in the classroom. You know, they might be quite young, 20 or 21, when they enter into those spaces, and be in a space with a whole bunch of adults. And they might be expected to be studying three to four units a week. And so that's three to four different relationships they need to build with, with teachers in the space. And the model at HHA is very similar to primary school where you have that one educator, or that one youth worker, that's your primary kind of relationship for the year. But in in TAFE, it's not that, yes, you might be lucky that you have the same teacher maybe a couple of times a week, but the expectation is, is that you're handling different relationships and sometimes different expectations from that relationship. And so, I see, yeah, there's a whole bunch of different barriers, relational barriers, you know, young people in their mental health. A lot of the young people that go to the school are often carers as well. So whether that be them having children or for them caring for the people around them, their siblings, their parents, you know, their peer networks as well in their communities. And so, you know, the flexibility that is offered within HHA is not offered in VET. And in fact, you know, if students have to take time off because of their mental health needs, because their housing has fallen through, because of their caring responsibilities or because mom's lost her job, so I got to I got to pick up my my hours that KFC from 10 to 32, to pay for the rent. That's not offered in TAFE. And so there was... I often saw a number of issues, and I often saw that young people really struggle with to fit into that adult learning environment once leaving such a supportive place.

Melissa Tham

Yeah, it's a big jump.

Owen Smith

It is it's very, very big jump. Yeah.

Melissa Tham

Cathy, you talked a bit about like, the well being supports that are offered to students at HHA. Can you just tell us a little bit more about what kind of services they involve?

Cathy Cassar

Well, we are a little bit unique in the way that our school runs in that we call hubs. So when a student demonstrates an expression of interest to attend our school, they are welcomed into the campus of their choosing. And at that point, we go through a little bit of a wellbeing assessment and that wellbeing assessment might include their education history, their disengagement in the past a little bit of a story about who you are, where have you come from, and why are you looking for HHA? What is it about our environment that you need so desperately that you weren't able to get from a previous close school. And as part of that well being assessment, we look at things like their literacy, their numeracy, their mental health, any reports and diagnosis information that allows us to enable how ready that young person is for education. And once we've established their readiness, and once we've established where they're at, we can then identify the type of program that we enroll them in. And we're very fortunate like that we have an engage youth program, for example, that is literally enabled to engage youth back into education. It is timetabled at two days a week, that student isn't punished for not attending because they don't have to attend. We also offer VCAL programs that are targeted towards levels of interest, whether it be visual art, whether it be hospitality, whether it be Sport and Rec trying to hook them in with a night with a topic that they're keen to learn about, and customize the learning around that topic. So they're learning math through measurement. They're learning, communication and skills through basketball practice and running tournaments. We also have a young parents class for young moms, or carers where they can come in with their child so they can participate in education and not be disadvantaged by the cost of childcare, or the inability of family support to which might be a hindrance had they have chosen another education provider. Oh, that's a huge Yeah. And then separate to that we have in every classroom and education support officer who works and supports literacy numeracy, we have the youth worker who supports the well being needs of the young person and the qualified teacher who works through their education requirements through their VCAL, or soon to be their VCE reform. So our young people are very well supported. We have literacy and numeracy intervention, we have specialists, we have an education psychologist who can support diagnosis if we need them. And in the event of significant trauma or a significant event in the in the campus, which can happen from time to time, we have that additional wellbeing support, our students are allowed to not be okay. It's allowed. And that's where, I guess the

apprehension of leaving a space like ours becomes quite tricky for some of our young people, because their question to themselves is, what happens if I'm not okay, when I go to VU, or when I go to work? What happens? And who do I have to tell? And if I tell them, what is their reaction gonna be? And how many people do I have to tell? And if I have to continue to repeat my story, that's a consistent reminder to me of all the things I am not or I cannot do. And that in itself becomes traumatic. So when we run as a trauma informed program, our young person tells one person at the beginning of their journey, and it is the role of the professionals through Hester Hornbrook that we relay the important that the information that's important, the information that's necessary, and then the professionals in their team can start making the professional judgment and professional modification to their program to enable for their success. I guess our intention in this partnership was really looking at, not only do we want to set that student up for success at enrollment, but we want to make sure that they're encouraged and empowered to complete, I want to be able to tell these young people well done, you've deserved your completion of your secondary education certificate, but you're in, you know, you're in really good hands for where you're going next. And you're gonna make it.

Owen Smith

Yeah, and I think, just piggyback off what Cathy said, you talking about in terms of specialty success. And I think this is where the road really meets the rubber for when we're talking about like jobs and skills in the West. You know, the young people at Hester Hornbrook Academy are everywhere. They're everywhere, across Australia, they're everywhere across the world, our education system doesn't do a good enough job at providing them opportunities and success, especially in tertiary education, whether that be TAFE or higher ed, but these young people, especially those who have lived experience of whatever it might be, are essential for the workforce are essential for the workforce moving forward. One of the outcomes of the Royal Commission into the mental health sector here in Victoria, is the need for peer support workers, the mental health sector, it needs reform. And one of those reforms is having a peer support worker, but also it needs to be reformed from people who have experience in that sector, it can no longer be people who have gone through life with significant privilege in terms of being able to go through university get their masters, you know, attain positions within the sector and then lead up from not having that experience of being a service user. The young people in Hornbrook Academy are essential in order for these reforms to happen not only in the mental health space here in Victoria, but for other spaces across the industry as well. And so it's really on institutions like Victoria University, to be able to understand this cohort to understand their needs. And to be able to put in place supports, albeit appropriate supports, because we cannot replicate the kind of supports that are at Hester Hornbrook Academy, but appropriate supports to be able to support them to get their qualifications and to move out into the world and to make a real difference.

Melissa Tham

But at the same time, I mean, it sounds like it's a, it's a challenging contexts in which you're both in working, but there's also the some key principles that you just outlined. Talking about establishing relationships – I like how you talk about relationships with teachers and having one versus four, rather than having, you know, like four lectures, for example. You know, it's just a nice way to kind of frame it. But there's obviously like a lot of knowledge that people need to have when they're working with young people with lived experience. So you can't replicate exactly what happens in HHA, but what would you like to see happen?

Owen Smith

I think, and you're right, Melissa, that the types of supports that are put in place in in the academy or in HHA, they can't really be replicated in tertiary education, and to a degree, nor should they be. I think universities can do a much better job at understanding the needs of these learners. Let's talk about relationships. Relationships are key in this area, when especially when we're talking about lived experience of trauma and trauma informed care and relational pedagogy, relationships are at the center of it. You can't heal through trauma without a relationship without positive, safe relationships around you. That's just a massive thing, it's what the research says.

Melissa Tham

Yeah. Is there anything else that you'd like to see? I mean, the Yeah, I mean, there's other educators that you work with, I'm sure, that haven't or might not have had the same work experience as you, for example. So would you suggest like any types of like trauma informed training or do you go through any trauma informed training before you work in the community service?

Owen Smith

Yeah. Cathy's giggling next to me!

Cathy Cassar

Because we actually addressed this during our little workshop! Oh, okay. Yeah, we when we began looking at the relationship that VU could offer Hester Hornbrook Academy, we initially started with the conversation of graduating students, but then we started flipping it. And one of the beauty about having senior leadership in a forum like ours was we were able to say hold on a minute. We are currently a three, soon to be four campus, planning to be six by the end of 2026. We are about to double, not only our student enrollments, but our workforce. So the two prong approach to our analysis of partnering with VU was: how are we going to find the teachers? And how are we going to find the youth workers? And how are we going to find the psychologists and how are we going to find the careers practitioners? And how are we going to find the education support officers ready to walk into these classrooms to support new students in a new environment, trying to find their feet in

education? So we were toying around with the idea of potentially looking at the rules of the programs of graduates of VU and kind of playing with this idea of should trauma informed study, be part of a degree in education?

Owen Smith

Yes, it should.

Cathy Cassar

Yes, it should. And that was the main consensus. Yes, it's should. So then we had a look at what kind of skill and what kind of work experience would be desirable. For a person who is applying to be an employee of Hester Hornbrook Academy, we want to be and we're working towards being an employer of choice. But to be an employer of choice, we have to be able to poach the right people. And who are those people? Where are they coming from? And what sort of skill and knowledge and background and expertise do they have in trauma. Because it's really tricky, it's really tricky to be able to understand our cohort. Similarly, as tricky as it is for our young cohort to venture into a space like a VU TAFE Classroom. It's a two prong approach. And I'd like to think that by HHA partnering up with Owen, in this type of research, we're kind of giving a voice to a huge percentage of the population and go, hey, let's not forget about the schools that need the well being experts, the schools that need the trauma informed educator, the class, the VET classroom that needs the trauma informed certificate 4 teacher, that's in, that's in that space. How are we going to encourage the right people to be at the right place at the right time? It's a mammoth task. And I'd like to think that our little project, you know, we're sitting in a little board room of a sunshine campus secondary school, but we're fleshing out some really important challenges of the future. And if we really looked at the packaging of the diplomas and the degrees in youth work and community services, and what if we made trauma informed practice, maybe not a core unit, but absolutely, you know, top three in your elective list, so that it becomes something that people who are studying these programs want to learn about, and they want to learn about it, not only because it's interesting to learn, but because it is so vital in order to succeed in these professions moving forward.

Owen Smith

Yeah, so I'm on the side of the conversation, that it should be a core – that anybody who wants to be a teacher or educator must, must learn about trauma informed care and relational pedagogy. Statistics shows that according to the adverse childhood experience test, which is an over overarching kind of look at whether or not a young person has experienced trauma by the age of 18, that 60% of the population, and that's across the world, has experienced at least one experience that that adverse childhood experience or one negative experience. And so that's 60% of your classroom. And so, in order for any teacher in any setting, whether it be early childhood education, primary, secondary, post

secondary, you're going to have people in your classrooms that have had experiences that that have shaped their lives and sometimes in a very negative way.

Melissa Tham

For people who don't know, what do you count as an adverse?

Owen Smith

So you can go into the test itself, the Adverse Childhood Experiences test, and you can have a look at those 10 questions. So there are 10 questions. So that could be things such as natural disasters, it could be interpersonal relationships, as well interpersonal trauma. It could be the breakup of families, it could be coming from specific communities that have either you know, felt the oppression of poverty, felt the oppression of colonization or whatever that might be in terms of experiencing trauma. That, you know, these people are in classrooms across the world,

Cathy Cassar

From HHA, just a little sniff that we have a new campus opening up and we have the floodgates open to interest, we have currently 80 students waiting to come into our school. Well that is the 80 that know of us, what is happening to the 80 young people and their families while they're sitting in limbo waiting for a position that we cannot guarantee. What happens to the other schools that can't reach a Hester Hornbrook Academy branch?

Melissa Tham

You've talked about the cohort you work with and the challenges that you go through and you've identified a huge gap and a huge area of need. You've referred to a workshop that you've conducted with staff at VU and HHA. Can you talk us through what the journey of the workshop was like? What is involved, and who was there?

Owen Smith

The workshop wasn't necessary the way the project was originally framed. As you know, Melissa, helping us out throughout this year. Originally it was framed around how can we introduce this concept of relational pedagogy into tertiary education and through whatever events, we eventually landed on this co-design workshop, where we took myself and my colleague, Michelle Fry who has been helping me out on this project to go into the Sunshine campus here in the western suburbs and do a co-design workshop around what are the opportunities between these VU and HHA? There was a lot of back and forth between the two around what everyone is comfortable with, what do you think it should look like and eventually we settle on this workshop idea. Getting staff from across the professional scope within the school and give their own lenses. On the day I was a bit nervous, because I

thought, do I really need to structure this? Or should I not? I had participated in youth co-design before, but this was my first experience of doing it professionally and across institutions. I don't think I quite nailed it, but I think we did a pretty good job of it. It was quite natural in terms of what happened. We had these different themes that we were looking at, in terms of skills gaps, weak institutional relationships in the Western suburbs that we talked to and it evolved from there. It started off with the students and their needs, in terms of how to support students get through tertiary education. In order to succeed in life and then it flowed into what are the skills gaps at the moment and what are the different professions in HHA, what are the needs that HHA need from tertiary education to shape these graduates into effective workers. We also talked about potentially short skills upgrades as well. I know in our department in community services, we often do upgrades around alcohol and other drugs, community development, violence and so potential for us to come in and support the professional staff at HHA as well. Doing those short courses. There were a lot of areas that we touched on in terms of, I would say, unlocking potential in the relationship.

Cathy Cassar

I think that is kind of where it all started. When we looked at the invitation to partner up with VU our minds firstly, as it should went straight to the students – that is why we exist that is why we are there. The work we do is for their success, but because of Owen's past relationship with HHA, we were able to go, wait a minute, what about the staff? What about the recruitment that we're going to do with our growth?

Melissa Tham

What are the next steps forward for the partnership?

Owen Smith

Good question Melissa. One thing that came of it and hoping it will come to fruition, is a student mentor program. Sarah I believe, touched on the notion that the young people would really benefit from some kind of role modelling from students who are currently doing certificate IV youth work. I know her and Michelle are talking or are planning on talking about how we could develop a mentor program to ensure that our students at HHA get that insight into getting a tertiary ed student. Also, the students who are studying youth work get their placement hours which is required, but also the experience of working with young people. So hopefully that could be something that comes from it. We also talked about other instances of placement opportunities. I talked about previous professional development that VU could do for HHA. I know VU and HHA have undertaken research before within the school from different people in institutions so hopefully we can continue with that. Werribee campus is opening up. I'm not sure when

Cathy Cassar

I think 2026 for that one or 2025. It's part of our three year plan.

Owen Smith

That is just across the road from the VU campus in Werribee. I know that community services team is out there delivering their courses at the moment. I think there are a lot of potentials that could come from this relationship, but I think the real nugget of gold is having a better understanding of these young people and what their needs are. This cohort of young people that do end up in our institutions, they are here right now studying. What can the institutions do to better meet their needs to ensure that they get their qualifications and they go out into the workforce and they do wonderful things for our community.

Melissa Tham

That's fantastic. Well thank you for coming in and those are the questions from me.

Michael Williams

Cathy and Owen it has been fantastic to hear about your work and it is a series of massive wins. At the individual level for the students, but also for Melbourne's west, going into fields that are really needing people to be qualified in and potentially these students might have fallen through the cracks. So it is fantastic to hear. I am so pleased to hear that our project was able to help with funding for your work and I wish you all the very best for the future. Thank you.

Cathy Cassar

Thank you, thank you so much.