

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Ballarat—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Mr Tony Fitzgerald, Chief Executive Officer, and

Associate Professor Jeremy Smith, Chair, Clemente Ballarat Steering Committee, Centacare;

Dr Steve Else, Clemente Ballarat Academic Coordinator, Australian Catholic University; and

Ms Josha-Lyn Gibson, ex-Clemente student.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers.

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I understand you are going to give us the 5-minute presentation, and we will proceed to ask questions after that. Thank you.

Mr FITZGERALD: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. The principal program that we would like to present to the Committee is called Clemente. We believe it is one of the key successes and most successful program that our organisation has been involved in in terms of preparing people to have a better chance of getting a job. What it is, basically, is a program that enables people who could be from 18 to 80 to reconnect with the education system. As an organisation we view the fact that one of the critical success factors in getting a job is the level of education that you have achieved in preparing you for a particular course of work or employment that you might be interested in.

Clemente is very much a soft touch approach in the sense that it is high-support, one-on-one mentoring—not overly stretching in terms of the volume of work that you undertake during the course, but it certainly prepares you to reengage with the education system. We have got a couple of people from the university who assist us in running the program who can speak about the academic and structure as well. But what we have found is that the people who have been successful in Clemente have gone on in a lot of cases to bigger and better things, either employment or further education, undergraduate degrees, and we have got a graduate of the program here, Josh, to talk to us, and she is undertaking a Bachelor of Arts, having gone through the Clemente program.

Our belief is that the two biggest high-risk groups for us are youth and over 50s, and we think that Clemente allows us to assist the youth in getting back and re-engaging with the education system. It helps them prepare via skill development to decide to go on to tertiary education or job applications. With the over-50s we are tending to find now that the majority of people in this area are female, as they come out of the child-rearing and family relationship situations and perhaps are not as technology savvy as is required these days. Certainly we see the use of technology through the Clemente program as, again, a critical success factor in preparing people to achieve better outcomes in the job.

Certainly from our experience the employers that are looking to place people are looking for people who have education, skills, that kind of thing, that prepare them better for the job that they might be applying for. Certainly we believe Clemente, the program itself, prepares people better than their just going in cold, so if they have got some certificate as a result of them being successful in the program or they have gone on to undergraduate degrees. We have got people doing masters and PhDs out of that as well. If they have been affected by social or family issues, alcohol and drugs and that kind of thing, which has caused them to disengage with the education system, Clemente is a very successful way of getting them to re-engage with the education system. That, we believe, is one of the critical success factors in getting them into a position where they can apply for jobs or have the confidence, having got three or four subjects and the Cert IV qualification. The amount of confidence that puts in a person to then start applying for positions is very, very, I think, strong from an outcomes point of view. So that is a quick snapshot of the program, but certainly I can hand over to Jeremy to talk a little bit about the program, if that works.

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: I will make two points before handing on particularly to our graduate, Josha-Lyn, whose story I think you will find really quite interesting. It is an example of the kind of success that Clemente can have in transforming lives—a very strong transformative effect.

Here in Ballarat of course we have got a multipartner program. The steering committee that I chair oversees the program, so we have good governance structures in place. We have a similar arrangement down in Gippsland in the Latrobe Valley, particularly centred on Morwell and Traralgon East. In terms of the results that we have

got here over a longer period of time—and we have been running now for some 12 years, and it is a program that has sustained itself basically on the strength of the partnership to this point and could grow with further investment—some of the results that we have got are actually really interesting, particularly in terms of employment. More than half of our graduates have gone on to post-secondary education. Josha-Lyn is one. We have 13 out of 47 graduates who, in addition to those who have gone into post-secondary education, have gone on to employment themselves. One of them was going to present today, Shaz. Shaz is employed in health care and she has got a shift today, so she is an apology.

The CHAIR: Good!

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: Yes, exactly. Proof positive. I do want to say something about the post-secondary paths, though. We had a direct pathway worked out into the Bachelor of Arts at Federation University. That is in place, but there are other program destinations as well for Clemente. I just want to list them in terms of Fed Uni, and I will mention them in terms of ACU as well, ACU in Ballarat at least anyway: community and human services; Master of Social Work; education—teacher education, that is, both primary and secondary; also the Bachelor of Arts; and the Bachelor of Social Science. So we do have, if you will, post-secondary paths that lead to jobs, of course, and lead to good outcomes, and Fed Uni, I can tell you, has the best graduate salaries outcome of any university in Victoria. But it is not just receiving jobs, it is not just getting jobs, it is getting good jobs, it is getting well-paid jobs with good conditions and it is getting jobs that have relatively stable careers. So if you think about this as a pathway of transformation from disengagement—and often people are caught in multigenerational poverty—there is a pathway through all of this to stable employment in good positions with good pay and good conditions. That is a very good outcome, and that is the kind of thing that we think Clemente is about. I can sit here, and you have got the statistics and the data from the research we have done here in Ballarat, but often it is the human stories that really count, so I might hand over to Josha-Lyn for her account.

Ms GIBSON: Thank you very much. For context, I was 17 in Year 12. I was the eldest of three children living in a single-parent home. My mother has struggled with a disability for the majority of her life, and unfortunately when I was 17 her illness took a turn for the worse, and in the absence of any other family members I made the decision to leave high school in order to take care of her. At the time I was under the impression that when her condition had hopefully stabilised I would be able to go on to higher education as a mature age student fairly easily. When I was 20 and that opportunity had finally arisen I had found that I had quite forgotten all of the skills that I needed to know when it came to learning. Additionally I was struggling with my own depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

I did not have a lot of faith in the Clemente program when I began it. I was pressured into it by a therapist, if I am being quite honest, and within six months my life had completely changed. The Clemente program is incredibly low pressure and at the same time utterly supportive. You only have to ask for help and you are receiving it. I learned incredibly valuable skills during the program, including critical thinking, critical analysis of texts, essay writing, academic sourcing, referencing, all of this—things that I did not know I needed to know for university. I did not actually finish the program. After only 18 months I decided that I knew enough, and I went into an entry program at Federation University. I am now a first-year Bachelor of Arts student. I am very aware of the fact that if I had not been given both the opportunity to join the Clemente program and then the sheer support that the Clemente program gives to make the most of that opportunity, I would be on a very different path in my life right now.

Ms ADDISON: Josha, what is the support? Can you explain, be a bit more explicit about, what the support looked like? What did it mean to you? How did you get support?

Ms GIBSON: Of course. Well, firstly, everyone is assigned a learning partner, which is a volunteer from the community who helps you with everything from taking notes in the lectures to assisting you with what you need to do for your assignment. There is usually, or there was when I was there, a week where somebody comes in from ACU or Federation University and explains essay writing very simply and in ways that somebody who might struggle with these kinds of things will understand. Essay questions, if you did not understand them, were broken down, and you were helped with finding academic sources and just understanding what everything meant. It was a great resource for understanding what was expected of me as an adult independent learner.

Ms CONNOLLY: That is amazing. I am blown away.

Ms ADDISON: Can I just say that I have had the privilege of talking to Tony and Jeremy—and I would like to acknowledge Deb Mannix, who is also here—and have met with other people who have been on the course, and I just want to say this program has got the potential to do amazing things across the whole state. It is a great-news story for Ballarat. It is a great-news story in Gippsland. And this is something that I think we really should have a really good delve into to see how we can actually move this on and move this out across the state, because it is very, very transformative, as you can see from just the one story. The results are coming in, and there is evidence there to say that what has been put in place is so important, so I just really wanted to stress that at the start of that.

Mr FITZGERALD: Can I just also add to what Julianna said. Whilst it might not prepare you for the particular employment path you want to pursue, the confidence you get from completing the program is a key stepping stone to going out and having the confidence to apply for a position or seek out the skills that are necessary in the particular employment path. So if you want to be a welder, for example, you start off with this program and then you get the confidence to go out and apply for jobs. The confidence that comes from the program, whilst not skill specific, is such a key and critical success factor.

Ms CONNOLLY: I think this is amazing, just hearing your story, Josha. In my electorate, Tarneit, there are a lot of kids or young people that could really benefit from this. How is it that you only heard about it—you said, you were out with your counsellor, and was it your counsellor that mentioned it?

Ms GIBSON: Yes, she mentioned it to me. I was in a place in my life when I was very disengaged from anything. I was going to therapy because I was being forced into that as well from my family at home. I went from a place of complete hopelessness to—well, I left the program to study at university because I felt like I was ready. Yes, it was just a matter of luck that she had heard about it through her connections and got me into contact with the program.

Ms CONNOLLY: Okay. Can I ask: is this advertised through schools? How are you accessing disengaged youth? How do you find them and know they are going to be appropriate for the program?

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: Largely it is through referrals from the agencies. So what Josha-Lyn mentioned in terms of hearing from a caseworker, that is sort of the common story. We are a little bit broader in Gippsland in terms of the way we do try and get the word out, but we are quite resource constrained in what we can do. We have had many discussions at both ends of the state in the steering committees about, ‘How do we advertise this a bit more?’. And there are lots of ideas, but this is where I think we run up into a bit of a resource limitation in terms of getting the word out.

Ms CONNOLLY: You are not accessing that—

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: The agencies are liaising—

Ms CONNOLLY: What about at school, though, as opposed to the agencies? So the schools should know that, say, early school leavers or kids that have the potential to get to university but come from such disadvantaged homes are going to need some real, tangible, hands-on support. Are you going through the schools?

Dr ELSE: Well, this is where our potential project which we call Clemente Youth would really come in. We developed it with a number of partners—so, Centacare, Federation University, ACU, the City of Bendigo. The plan is to run a youth-focused version of the program at four sites—so Hobart, Bendigo, Gippsland and Ballarat—and one which focuses on teaching disengaged young people, 16 to 23, emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills and ones which would particularly give them confidence in themselves but also bring them back and give them the opportunity to get back into education and into training for employment. So we put an application in, a very strong one. We were all confident about the Try, Test and Learn Fund. Unfortunately we were unsuccessful, but we are on the lookout for funds to continue developing this. We can prove this; we can provide you with the information in our application. We think we have put together a really strong program and really well supported.

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: I think, just to add a little bit to what Steve said, in that context we would be better placed to be able to advertise the program and its benefits and to be able, I suppose, to network schools, for instance, particularly if we were doing it in a state environment. The tender that Steve mentioned, that is a \$2.8 million tender from the Commonwealth, hence it was Victoria and Tasmania. Our thinking now is that it would be good to do this in Victoria, and I think that would actually give us a more natural affiliation with schools and school networks—to operate within the state jurisdiction if possible. That is just where our thinking is at. We are still very keen on that project, and I think it would actually help us do the very thing that you are asking about.

Ms CONNOLLY: I do know that Victoria University is trying to target, say, kids in the west towards my area and having smaller classes and that kind of thing in the first year, but you guys seem to have gone a step before that. In helping with notetaking and the assignments, it is almost having that sort of parent that is not able to do it there at home—they are with you to help nurture you through that.

Ms GIBSON: Particularly coming from—I am the first member of my family to ever attend university. I come from a long line of dairy farmers. There were a lot of things that I noticed amongst my peers that they already knew, having had parents who had been to university, that I did not know was expected of me at all.

Ms CONNOLLY: I have just got another question: how do you think this would go with, say, kids from refugee backgrounds? It is not just, I guess, disadvantaged. You were talking about having your mum who was unwell, but kids that have come from war-torn countries and things like that, say in Africa.

Dr ELSE: Well, that is a group that is particularly in our mind. The city of Bendigo, the secondary schools there, showed a great interest in it, and they were part of our application. We had a contact in the Karen community of Bendigo which was linked in as well with universities in Bendigo. I have had conversations with the Centre for Multicultural Youth in Ballarat. The level at which we start takes as little as possible for granted in terms of learning skills, thinking skills and English as well, so we could definitely do a good job with young people, and adults as well, from the sort of countries and backgrounds that you just described.

Mr ROWSWELL: I was speaking to a local principal recently who was saying to me that as the school year comes to an end he is concerned for the ongoing welfare and wellbeing of a number of his Year 12 students who he knows he can support within the current school environment, but once they leave that school environment he also loses responsibility for them and their welfare and wellbeing as they enter the next stage of their development. So I am very keen to explore how the success of this program could be, I guess, better linked to that critical transition period between secondary and tertiary education. In your view there is a place for that expansion?

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: I would say yes, most certainly. I think a well-resourced expansion that could actually be based on the partnership model that we developed here which brings together a number of community service agencies along with universities—I think that is the kind of model whereby you could multiply, if you like, a number of Clemente sites around the state. I should say Clemente is also very much national in their work. There are some 12 sites across the country. Not all of them operate on the partner model. In fact we actually forged the partner model here in Ballarat.

Mr ROWSWELL: And you are not aware of any other program in existence at the moment? Because in this space obviously often there is a duplication of service offering, which is inefficient and not a particularly good use of resources, so you are not aware of any other similar offering within the state or around the country at this point in time?

Mr FITZGERALD: No, not to our knowledge.

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: No.

Mr ROWSWELL: Well done.

Dr ELSE: And that point was made by the Doxa School Bendigo. There are types of schools which have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds who you would expect Clemente to fit better with, but a few years ago we had a student from Ballarat Grammar, a top-performing private school, who had in her VCE years

become disengaged for very personal reasons. She joined the program and very quickly got her confidence back, and she is now at university as well. So it is not just the expected schools and students that we show we can help.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Do you have any collaborations or work with employers? You mentioned the welder before. So you got him to the point where he started an apprenticeship, did he?

Mr FITZGERALD: Yes. Under the employment program we had assisted this person to achieve a welding certificate. There were plenty of job opportunities in Ballarat for welders, which was just a particular place-based approach because there is a big provider, MaxiTRANS, here who build trailers and they were consistently saying, 'We can't recruit enough welders'. So you get the confidence from coming out of the Clemente program and you have got a particular pathway or a particular employment opportunity, and we can assist with further skills-based help and assistance.

Mr BLACKWOOD: You have an overview of the skills shortage in this area as well.

Mr FITZGERALD: Yes.

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: It is worth saying, and I mentioned earlier, post-secondary education is a possible outcome, but I talked a lot about higher education. Josha-Lyn is in higher education, but we have had a number of successful graduates who have gone on to do diplomas and certificate-level courses at TAFE, at SMB.

Dr ELSE: And Sharren.

Assoc. Prof. SMITH: Of course Sharren was a really good example. Shaz, who cannot be here today, is a classic example. I think we are kind of well placed in this sense, and I could talk about Ballarat in this way but of course we have got four dual-sector universities in Victoria. We have got a TAFE system in place. This is another side to Clemente that really could be well developed and therefore can give multiple career destinations. I think the key point is still relatively secure employment, it is relatively well-paid, good conditions and so on. Again, they are good outcomes. I mean, that can expand the vision, I think, and we have got a basis of doing it from here.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I ask you, Josha: you said you got I would call it a mentor, but you said—what was it—a friend from the community was helping you go through.

Ms GIBSON: A learning partner.

Ms CONNOLLY: A learning partner. Was that person just from the university or just a person from outside? And their age?

Ms GIBSON: As far as I understood they were volunteers from the community.

Dr ELSE: Yes, she is right. They are volunteers. Usually we find that Centacare, the Smith Family and the Ballarat Foundation source them. We have retired university lecturers and the ex-head of Centacare, David Beaver. We had a nurse up until recently before she started PhD studies. We have got a fantastic team, and these are people who give their time freely. Josha-Lyn has just spoken about what an amazing job they do.

Ms CONNOLLY: Are you still in contact with that person as you go on?

Ms GIBSON: I am not currently now, no. With changes per semester some people would only do it for a semester; some would stay for longer. Sometimes people would switch partners because they had a skill that would better suit somebody else. No, I am not currently in contact with any of my learning partners, but they were invaluable.

The CHAIR: Josha-Lyn, I want to thank you for sharing such a personal part of your life. This is what these hearings are all about—to see how the various policies and programs are affecting everyday people out there that are struggling. Congratulations for being the first in your family to be at uni. I am sure that you will do really well. What other services at this point in your life can the State Government or organisations like Centacare provide for you to continue on with the good work that you are doing at the moment for yourself?

Ms GIBSON: Largely I am doing very well, actually. I am always happy to share this story because I really cannot overstate how much the Clemente program has set me up for the success I am currently having. I am very well supported by Federation University in anything that I might need, but largely I am doing very well.

The CHAIR: One day at a time, it is great. But do you have an idea of where you want to be? What is your ideal job that you would like to be placed in?

Ms GIBSON: After completing my Bachelor of Arts I would like to continue on and do a Master of Library Science. It is sort of my way of giving back. The Ballarat Library has hosted the Clemente program for a while, and a lot of the programs held through libraries are also greatly of advantage to people in my position.

Ms ADDISON: That is amazing. That is really amazing.

The CHAIR: Is there anything you wanted to say before we conclude?

Mr FITZGERALD: No. Hopefully the Committee has got an understanding of the program, and I think the outputs and the successes are clearly demonstrated with Josha about how successful it can be. It is a key stepping stone to further education or to greater chances of employment.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.