

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Christine Couzens

WITNESSES

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement, and

Ms Emily Barter, Manager, Workforce and Industry Development, Victorian Council of Social Service.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

Could I please remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you.

Ms KING: Thank you, and thank you very much for the opportunity to be here and to be with you today as well. As you mentioned in your introduction, my name is Emma King. I am the CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Service, which is the peak body for the community and social sector. I would like to acknowledge that we are today on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and to acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. As you mentioned in your introduction as well, I am appearing with my colleagues Deb Fewster and Emily Barter. I would sincerely like to thank the Committee for giving VCOSS this opportunity to speak with you today.

We all know that education transforms lives. A good education can put someone on the path to success and on the path to happiness. A poor education of course can do the opposite. Good education comes in many forms. There is no one right way for any person to learn, but there are some key qualities and some key characteristics that are required. So educational settings, to begin with, must be inclusive. They must be easy to access, and they must be accessible for everyone. They must be flexible, supportive and person centred. And in many ways Victoria's TAFEs are leading. They have a strong focus on equity and diversity, and they provide a very, very important pathway for people with a disability. This is a really important context for the comments we make here today from VCOSS's perspective, because I really want to acknowledge that we are starting with a solid foundation. Could our TAFE system be more inclusive, easier to access, more flexible, more supportive and more person centred? Well, yes, it could. But I need to emphasise it is about building from strength and looking at the opportunities that we have, and I will explain our position in more detail shortly.

But, firstly, I did want to reflect very briefly on why it matters. Our educational institutions should look, and should be, as diverse as the communities that they serve. They should have people from all backgrounds and all income brackets and with all abilities. When they are not diverse in this manner, two things happen. Firstly, people miss out. People miss out on the transformation that I mentioned earlier. They miss out on the ability to learn, to improve and to thrive; to get a job and to get a wage. They miss out on the opportunity to be the very best that they can be. And let us be specific here. When I say 'they', I do mean those people who are already starting from behind: people with difficulties at home or who maybe have no home whatsoever at all; people with very little money; people with health challenges, including mental health challenges; and, yes, people with disabilities.

The second thing that happens when our educational institutions let us down is that our society as a whole misses out. We do not get the full participation in society of those who are denied a good education. We do not get their wisdom, their insights or their perspectives, their experiences or their contributions. Our workplaces, our TV screens and our parliaments are then denied a certain richness, so we all lose.

People with disability already face significant barriers to education and employment, and we have long known why this is. Some educators are simply uncomfortable with disability. It scares them; they are not trained for it. Some assume people with disabilities are not up to the task. This can take the form of either outright discrimination or the so-called soft bigotry of low expectations—unfortunately I think we have all seen that before. The proverbial too-hard basket is overflowing with applications for jobs and training opportunities penned by people with disabilities. Barriers are also created when educational institutions fail to provide the right supports for a person to learn. Reasonable adjustments are supposed to be made for students who need them, but we know this does not always happen. Often learners are not even actively engaged or consulted

about their learning needs. We also fail people when we do not provide the correct oversight and monitoring, which would allow us to know when something is wrong. The numbers tell a story. People with disability are twice as likely to be unemployed in Victoria and about half of all young people with a disability are living off Commonwealth income support, and that number continues to rise.

We are not here today to be negative. If we look at TAFE specifically, we are doing a lot right. I said earlier that Victoria's TAFE system is world class. Our free TAFE policy is the envy of other jurisdictions, and I would like to note, it has been copied by others as well. The system may not be perfect, but that just means we have lots of opportunities to make it better. When we get the chance during questions, we would like to tell you a bit about the Community Traineeship Pilot Project, which is something VCOSS is really proud to have been involved in. This program is the result of a partnership between VCOSS and Jobs Victoria, and at its core is a comprehensive, learner-focused structure of support. It is not designed to stop people falling through the cracks, but it is designed to actually get rid of the cracks altogether and to put a stable floor, if you like, beneath every learner. The results have been nothing short of amazing. Including during the time of COVID, we have had an average retention rate of just over 70%, and in some of our groups more than 90% of the trainees have completed their course. This compares to a national average of 56% for similar courses. Trainees have also reported decreasing anxiety and increasing levels of wellbeing and resilience—and again, I would just echo the fact of remembering that much of this traineeship has actually taken place during the past year and during COVID.

So what is needed to make our system better? We need to listen to what individual learners are telling us about what is working and what is not and how well their needs are being met. We need to make sure the right help is provided to all learners and at the right time. We need flexible wraparound supports for all students, and these must be easy to access. It could be a youth or a support worker or access to financial assistance. And we need better disability supports at TAFE. The support needs to be proactive, it needs to be tailored and it needs to be flexible.

What we are talking about here is transformational change, and we are already on this journey. What we propose will cost money now and it will save money later, so this is a true investment. It will take time, and it will require a shift in attitudes, a lifting of aspirations and a comprehensive government response. It will also require a whole lot of community effort to boost opportunities for learners and workers with a disability, but it will be worth it, because we all lose when we get this wrong and we all win when we get it right. So let us make sure we get it right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Can I just kick off the questions. School career development is obviously something that is very important, leading up to further training. How can schools improve the career development they provide to students with disability?

Ms KING: I might just you kick off there with a few initial comments, then I will hand over to my colleagues as well. In terms of looking at schools improving with students with disabilities, we have done quite a bit of work in this space as well. I think that when we look at the transition supports—well, I guess what I am thinking of here is support for students themselves and then support as students transition into another environment—I would probably start by going back to really dealing with often the soft bigotry of low expectations when it comes to students with disability. I do not think they are always assisted to meet their genuine and full potential. There are a number of things that I mentioned in my introductory statement around the sort of flexible support and, to be candid, the kind of, 'How can I help you?' approach—so if a student needs assistance at school, how that is provided.

I would also note the recent funding by the department, by virtue of the budget I think in November, which I think is \$1.6 billion that is being invested to assist students with disability and a much more inclusive approach. I would note that that approach, I think, has been an aspiration for maybe 20 years—that we actually have that in schools. It is actually a really phenomenal shift, so that we are not only supporting students with a very direct diagnosis of disability but we are also supporting others in school as well. It is around actually, 'How do we lift everyone up and how do we give them the best opportunity?'. I am pretty excited about seeing where that transforms from here. I think it is looking at different career pathways for students as we progress from that point, but it is also looking at how we have inclusive classrooms, we have flexible supports, we have support there for people who need them. But I might hand over, firstly, to Deb, given it is a question about schools, and then Emily, if there is anything that you want to add in.

Ms FEWSTER: Thanks, Emma. It is Deb Fewster speaking. Thanks for the opportunity. In addition to the disability inclusion package that Emma just mentioned, which was announced in November in the state budget, I think the other thing to acknowledge in terms of that building from strength is that there has been a lot of work at that parliamentary committee level with government around reforms to career education in schools as well. Some of the things that we have been aware of that have been unfolding in that time have been improvements to existing resources for students with disabilities, new resources for employers to provide high-quality workplace learning, professional learning for careers educators in schools and also seminars for parents and students with disabilities. Some of the kinds of opportunities to kind of stretch and grow are—so we are excited, as Emma said—the disability inclusion package, but it is also around providing opportunities for students to have that industry exposure, so things like those kinds of shorter term, brief taster experiences in different industries, the role of schools in also providing hands-on work experience opportunities and also those structured workplace learning opportunities where a student combines accredited course study with on-job training as well. Something to think about with the students and families that do not have a lot of personal networks or social capital—so students who are experiencing disadvantage, including students with disabilities—is that really important connecting or networking role of those careers educators and other school staff to fill that gap and perhaps leverage the kinds of networks that families might not already have that they can draw on to facilitate that work experience opportunity or that taster experience for students.

The other thing as well—just linking back to Emma’s point earlier and that soft bigotry of low expectations—is that engagement with parents, because we know that there are parents who genuinely are really, really scared. They have had negative experiences, they have seen the discrimination that their children and young people have faced, that they have faced as a family, so they are really worried about sending their child into the world, into that workplace environment, for good reason, so really wrapping support around the family to break through that. But also sometimes families can be sceptical about what is possible for their child, so again, wrapping that support around the student and the family. I might hand over to Emily. Have you got any other comments, Emily? I am not sure.

Ms BARTER: Thanks, Deb and Emma. It is Emily Barter speaking. I think you have pretty much covered everything that I have got in my notes. I think one other aspect which I think is really important in the Community Traineeship Pilot Program that Emma mentioned before is the importance of supporting employers and having employers feel that they understand how to take a student on placement, particularly somebody who is experiencing disadvantage or disability; an ongoing communication and acknowledgement of the types of adjustments that might need to happen in the workplace; and to have a point of contact to speak to if things are not going as well as they might have. Our traineeship program has really highlighted the benefit of having a key contact person to be that liaison between the education, the student and the employer. I think that is the one thing I would like to add, thanks.

The CHAIR: Excellent, thank you. Gary, would you like to ask a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John, and thanks, Emma, Deborah and Emily, for your submission and your presentation this morning. Just while we are on your CTPP, I note that it has youth workers working closely with learners. What benefits do the youth workers provide, and how can TAFEs better integrate youth workers into classes?

Ms KING: Thank you. That is a fantastic question. Emily oversees that program, so I am going to throw straight to you, Emily, who I think could talk about this underwater, and then feel free to come back to me.

Ms BARTER: Thanks, Emma. Yes, we do have youth workers heavily involved in our CTPP, if I can refer to it as that. Our youth workers provide holistic support to the trainees in the program, and they are available during class as well as out of class. They provide a whole range of social and emotional wellbeing, they help connection with other peers within the program, they advocate for those young people with both their TAFE teacher as well as the employers that they are working with and they also provide assistance with various complex processes, and I think there are a lot within just enrolling in TAFE or indeed understanding and completing assessments.

They also do help advocate on a whole range of needs for the trainees or students. It could be understanding the content or helping that student communicate about their own particular learning needs, but it might also be about communicating when they cannot come to class or if they need extensions of assessments and things like that. They also help the young person access the flexible wraparound support fund to help with other barriers

that might seemingly not be directly related to education but pose other barriers to them remaining engaged in the program.

Ms KING: Maybe if I can jump in there. I mean, just to be very practical I guess around that as well, we can give you a couple of examples. Some of the students who, for example, were not perhaps attending class at the beginning, once the youth worker touches base with them to say, 'Look, how can I help you?'—I think that 'How can I help you' is really clear. It comes down to sometimes they do not have money for a myki, they might feel like they do not have the right clothes, and with having some support around that, which is only a fairly small amount of money per student, they can get the myki, they can have the clothes, they can be assisted with buying the technology that they need to be able to participate in the course.

Also to provide just one example, and there are more, one of the students, I think on the first day of their work placement of their traineeship, was hit by a car on the way to the traineeship. Now, we are pretty sure that without the support of the youth worker, that trainee would not—they were assisted in terms of I think the TAC claim, but they completed their traineeship and saw their way through. Remember, this was someone who had had a pretty hard time in life leading into the traineeship, and the support of the youth worker actually meant that they were assisted at a time that they needed it, and not only that, they then participated in the traineeship, in the work placement, in the education placement and they have come through and they have got a job. So it is a pretty good story, and we have got other examples of that as well.

It is the difference between having someone there to help you navigate the system where otherwise it can feel too hard, particularly for a number of the people in this particular traineeship program. They have often overcome adversity multiple times in their lives. A number have said that for the first time someone has literally come and said, 'How can I help you?'. They have provided real support, and in providing that support it is the difference between dropping out and finishing. It is the difference between dropping out and for many of them not only succeeding in finishing their traineeship and their qualifications but they have got a job on the other side. So having a youth worker or a support worker has literally meant the difference between success and failure.

Ms FEWSTER: And Emma, I might just add briefly as well, I think the other benefit from an educator's perspective and then...

Ms KING: Oh yes.

Ms FEWSTER: in terms of student outcomes is that having a youth worker in the classrooms actually allows the educator to do their job, to actually be the educator and not be an educator and a wellbeing person and a counsellor and a mentor and everything else. So there is real clarity of roles, and a really complementary kind of alignment of skills, and that leads to really great student outcomes.

Ms KING: We are mindful that often—I know at least one person on the panel has a very strong educational background—the educator is expected to be all things to all people. So having that youth worker present as support not only helps but is great assistance to the student, the educators and also the workplaces. So it is fantastic.

The CHAIR: On that note, Juliana, would you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: I would love a question, thank you, John, and Emma and Deb and Emily. Congratulations on the CTPP. We often hear about the importance of wraparound services that would make a real difference, and it is great to have this example as one that we can showcase in other areas where disadvantaged jobseekers really need that additional support. So that is great news.

I would really like to talk a little bit more, and it has already been mentioned, about engagement with worried parents and the anxiety they feel with their children perhaps entering the TAFE sector. What types of communication and information do schools need from TAFEs to assist students with a disability to apply and succeed at TAFE?

Ms KING: Thanks, Juliana. I might start and then throw to my peers. I think one of the key things—you know when you look at the different sort of career information sessions that schools run, I know there is a lot of evidence around actually why we want those sessions to be run earlier because I think the earlier they are known about the more they help families and carers be aware of what pathways might be possible for their

children or those that they care for in a way that they simply do not understand otherwise. I think one of the challenges often parents have, or carers have, even from the point of time that they enrol their children in actually early childhood, let alone school, is that everything is a battle—every single support that you need actually is really, really hard. I could talk about that for a long while, but anyway I think that is one of the significant challenges we have.

Then when we look at pathways for students I think the earliest opportunity we can have around how we can link every single student up with a pathway that suits them and their needs is a fantastic way forward. So I think it does come forward to actually making sure that students are aware of the TAFE pathways that are there, knowing that there are a number of different pathways that are present, and keeping in mind that we know that for many students they are aware of that. TAFEs have I think the second-highest proportion of students with disability in any setting—I believe the only other one is community education providers, so they are only just sort of behind community education providers. But I think it also goes to the support that TAFEs can talk to at the time, and I might defer to Deb and then to Emily for that as well. Thank you.

Ms FEWSTER: Yes. Thank you. So just reflecting a little on the points that Emma has made, I think that in other areas of our policy work we have really identified there is a real deficit in education and knowledge around people's rights. And I think that is something that is really important. Schools have a role to play, as do community education providers and TAFEs, in addressing the fear and scepticism et cetera that parents might have, carers might have and students themselves might have about the right to reasonable adjustments, that people can actually sit and have a conversation around modifications to course materials or the equipment that is used in class or things like differentiated teaching strategies—there is actually a right to request those reasonable adjustments—and a conversation around the support services that will be available to them as they move into a new learning environment.

But taking a step back as well, I think that there is that piece—which Emily might want to talk a little bit about—which is that transition support. Emma mentioned that a key element of that is actually providing information as early as possible. We have brought the window for careers education forward to year 7 now, rather than later in secondary schooling, so it is early conversations about exploring what is out there for people, countering that culture of low expectation, but then the other aspect of transition support as well is actually that support to navigate that transition. It is not just about the information about what is out there but then how you get on that pathway, what does an enrolment process look like, what is involved in an application, what kind of paperwork might be completed. And again, the earlier that you can be having these conversations and doing this work, you are setting up that student for success and the people who are in their support network, so you are not arriving at TAFE on day one of your class and suddenly thinking about, 'What paperwork do I need to fill out to access learning support?' and things like that. Emily, I am not sure if there is anything else you want to add to that as well.

Ms BARTER: Thanks, Deb. There are a few things that I think might be worth adding, yes. When we are talking about access, it really is understanding—and you touched on that, thanks, Deb—around getting in the door but it is also being able to participate fully and engage and be successful. And so yes, enrolment processes are really quite complex, and we have some great examples from the CTPP of how pretty much we had three groups beginning at the beginning of this year who would not have been able to navigate that enrolment process without the support workers. And experience shows that a number of them would have just stopped the process. So I think it is about knowing that there is going to be support from the start right through to the end and a knowledge that needs will go up and down. They will not start up high and taper off; we have absolutely found that needs ebb and flow depending on course content, when assessments are due and also the experiences and what is going on for those young people or students at the time.

I think another thing that is really important is that the adjustments that Deb has referred to really need to be available before classes start, and a confidence that that will actually be the case. Too often we hear and have experience of when things do not actually happen until courses have already started and people are on the back foot, so a confidence and a knowledge of your right to say, 'These need to be in place prior to the course starting'. For example, somebody whose first language is Auslan needs to know that their learning content is accessible to them from the get-go, not four weeks into the class.

The other thing is around what services are available and can they can be accessed timely. Different TAFEs will call them different things, like access support or learning support, but essentially a learning plan that is developed, that is then passed onto the teachers in a timely way, that is communicated and understood and

reviewed and that it is then not on that learner to explain the learning plan to their teacher. And we have examples of where students are saying they had to teach the teacher or there was already a communication breakdown before they even got to talk about their own communication needs. So that on-time, up-front and regular cycle of communication and confidence that those things will be available are highly important.

Ms KING: I think also even the naming of where to go, because one of the things that I have heard from a number of students is there is often support available at a TAFE but it was called something that did not sound like help, so people did not actually know where to go to get assistance. None of us will like asking for help at the best of times. They were often pretty reluctant. But they did not actually even know where to go in a TAFE. It is so different from a school where you have often got a smaller community et cetera around you. It can feel pretty overwhelming, and if something has got a fancy name which actually means help but it does not sound like it, that does not help either.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Brad, do you have a question?

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, VCOSS team, for your constructive submission. You have presented a couple of submissions to the Committee in my time on the Committee, and I have always been grateful for the constructive way you seek to go about preparing the submissions. So thank you, firstly, for doing that again this time and for the time taken to put the submission together. I just want to explore briefly the last part of the submission around employment. Your recommendation here is:

Build the disability knowledge and confidence of employers through targeted training, support and resources

I just wanted to get an understanding of, in a practical, pragmatic sense, what you thought that looked like.

Ms KING: Absolutely. Deb, did you want to start with that?

Ms FEWSTER: Yes, sure. One of the first things that comes to mind—and it is based on kinds of insights not just from our policy and program work with students and workers with disability but different people in our community with different kinds of vulnerabilities or needs—is that there is a need for some support around sometimes building the supervisory capacity of employers. There is not always like an off-the-shelf, standardised approach to providing supervision. So if you have got a worker, for example, with disabilities who needs reasonable adjustments et cetera and as a supervisor, a manager, particularly if you are early in your career of supervising staff, you may not have had experience working with a person with a disability as a colleague or providing that management or supervisory support. So some of the kind of work that we do, for example, in the development of the family violence workforce, is actually about looking at what are the gaps in knowledge for new and emerging supervisors as well as people a bit more established in their management practice, and what are the bespoke training needs? Is there a particular kind of training resource that we need to develop? Are there orientation guidelines et cetera, orientation to work guidelines?

So I think that is one of the things that we would consider as an important contribution, building the supervisory capability so that both the employer and the employee or the student, the learner, are having really good experiences and that it is going to lead to sustainable outcomes where people feel confident to employ people with disabilities but also importantly people with disabilities feel confident about going into the open employment market and having a really positive experience.

Ms KING: Emily, did you want to jump in and then I will add in?

Ms BARTER: Yes, thank you. Absolutely, workforce supervisor confidence and capability and capacity to take on students and understand students and their needs are really important. I think that the CTPP has shown a really good example of some of the support structures around supporting employers and workplace supervisors to understand what it is to have a student on placement and what are some frameworks around how to support students, but also having a point of contact to help understand the support needs.

We have got some really good practical examples where that has happened where it has been that the trainee or the student on placement has not felt confident to share what their learning needs are or their particular needs around what is going on in their life at the moment, such as simple things like changing start and finish times or looking at the number of days of work that that young person may need. It is that sharing and understanding—obviously with consent and adhering to privacy—around what are those support needs and making sure that

people understand them so it is not on that young person entirely to communicate these things that they might feel are tricky to communicate.

The other thing that we have introduced and that has been really well received is a community of practice for workplace supervisors to share skills and knowledge and experience. It has been really well received with lots of positive feedback. People have really been able to learn from each other about: well, how do we actually support different people in the workplace? I would just like to say that of the trainees that have actually finished their program, 61% of those have actually managed to secure ongoing employment with their employers, which I think is pretty incredible considering that a lot of this has happened during COVID, for one. But also these are young people who have come from being unemployed with lots of disadvantage, and 57% of them have identified as having a disability or living with a mental illness.

Mr ROWSWELL: Congratulations.

Ms BARTER: Thank you.

Ms KING: I just want to say: I think one of the other parts there is also showcasing successful examples. Sometimes we know that there are employers who absolutely want to do the right thing, but they are worried that they are going to get it wrong or they are not quite sure what questions to ask. So I guess, in going back to your initial question around the sorts of resources and the sorts of supports to provide, it is almost around showing that it does not have to be hard. I think sometimes it just feels a bit too overwhelming. If you are running, for example, a small business and thinking about, 'Well, how and what adaptations do I need to make?', I think there is a component there around saying, 'Well, actually, what support might be available for an employer to provide some adaptations, whether it be in technology or other things?'. That actually is not terribly hard but it can feel like it. It might be some sort of financial assistance there, but also when we look more broadly at where the growth is going to be in our workforce—which is, for example, in health care and social assistance, which we know are booming industries—I would say that, for example, a number of people who have disability are going to be very, very well placed to take on these jobs. They bring in expertise; they are experts by experience. And I am not only suggesting that people go into those jobs—obviously there should be an ability to go into any job that you want to.

But without question there is that soft bigotry of low expectations, and I think that is coupled often by an employer not being quite sure how to do this or worrying that it is going to be too hard and then, 'How do I do that and run my business and have a successful business at the same time?'. I guess we are really keen to show examples of where that has happened and how we can make it happen. So I think putting some of those examples up in lights might help sort of blow up some of the myths that exist as well.

Ms FEWSTER: And, Emma, I was just going to quickly mention—and there are probably not any specific examples I can think of off the top of my head, but if the Committee is interested, we could follow up with some case studies—and acknowledge the role of Local Learning and Employment Networks as well. Historically they have played a really important role in terms of brokering partnerships between schools, community education providers, local industry groups and employers as well, so it is a deep kind of expertise and they have got a strong track record of success in this area. We really want to see them continue to be supported to do what they are really exceptional at doing as well.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you. Kat, do you have a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Emma, Deborah and Emily, for what has been a really sensitive and nuanced contribution so far. I am interested in, I guess, the transition period into TAFE from school and how students can be better supported. I note that we have just recently had our historic Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System release its final report, and part of the focus of that report has been on seeing not just the individual but their family and carer network that sits around them and the importance of involving them in any caring and support that happens within the system. I am just wondering whether you can comment on TAFE's current ability to involve families, parents and carers in the support of a student with disabilities and whether that in your view is adequate at the moment—perhaps not just TAFE but also employers as part of placements—and whether that can be improved. Thank you.

Ms KING: I might defer. Emily, having taught in TAFE before, perhaps can speak about this from personal experience, so I would like to defer straight to you, Emily, for that one.

Ms BARTER: In terms of involving families and carers, TAFE is adult education, so it does obviously require consent and consideration about what that person is wanting to involve. But certainly when there have been families involved in understanding what supports are available, that has shown in those instances to be incredibly valuable. They can ask questions that that student may not know to ask and can actually help support that young person or student to access support services, which gets me to the thought that there are a lot of centralised support services at TAFEs. It is often that centralised approach which does mean that some students, one, do not have the confidence on the whole to access, with which families and carers can help. Two, it does also mean that some learners who may not have a diagnosed disability or a diagnosed psychosocial disability can, with family and carer support, actually access supports and know that there are some available, as centralised supports often appear to only be available to people who have a diagnosed disability. In this way, families and carers have actually been able to advocate more strongly for other supports within the classroom.

Ms KING: Thank you. I think it is a really good point that you raise, because as we know, now as children transition from early childhood into school they have got transition plans. They go from grade 6 into high school, and they have got transition plans. And it is that really interesting thing as students move from schools into forms of higher education, whether it be TAFE, whether it be other forms of higher education, where suddenly they are just expected to take off and know what to do, really. We know for some students that is a massive liberation, and it is a fantastic thing. For others in a whole variety of different circumstances it is actually incredibly overwhelming, the systems are pretty foreign and it is pretty hard. I think if you couple that with students that might have kind of had difficulties along the way, I think that that is compounded. I am really interested in the fact that I think there is a gap there, but also balancing that alongside the comments that Emily made around it being adult education. So actually how do we kind of land in the right place? And I think it is a really critical point that you make, because we know in any standard higher education institution the number of, I will say, young people—but not everyone in that system is young—that drop out in first year is actually really, really high. So how do we work to address that? And we know that that is compounded for students with disability.

What I would also say is when I look at the number of students with disability in our TAFE system, it would suggest to me that TAFEs are doing something right at the same time, when we know that actually, if you like, TAFEs have a disproportionate number of people with disability in the TAFE system. So I think they are probably particularly well placed to help inform—I am not sure how able they are to do that in a way of sharing openly—what they do well and where the gaps are. I just feel like TAFEs are very well placed to do that, because for a number of other higher educational institutions or further learning they may have very low numbers of people with disability, so there is something there about TAFE that is actually pretty special in terms of welcoming students in and opening that to them, which is exactly as it should be. I think it is a really important point that you make though about that transition process and how families and carers and others are involved in that and actually how do we work to make that smooth in the way that we do in every other part of someone's educational journey through life. So I think it is a great point that you raise. I am not sure if anyone wants to raise anything further.

Ms FEWSTER: I think you covered that really well.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Perhaps just off the back of that and thinking again about transitions, what about peer support and the importance of learners with a disability creating connections with their peers. Is there anything that can be improved on that front?

Ms KING: Without question. If I was to look at, for example, the local neighbourhood house that I am deeply involved in and look at the peer support that plays there, it is very, very strong. Actually going to mental health there is a group there that runs what they call the Boomerang Network. It is a mental health support group that is run for people in the local community. Anyone can come and join in. They have trips out et cetera as well, and then it links to educational opportunities. It is actually a group that I think when people hear about what happens everyone actually wants to join because (a) it is welcoming, and they do great things.

We know there are some fantastic peer support network models that a number of our members provide. Mental Health Victoria speaks with great expertise around the peer support networks that occur, so not only actually in terms of looking at peer support around helping someone transition but also in looking at teachers as well within our system who have got lived experience and having peer support along the way.

Actually, it is a really good point that you have picked up that I should have mentioned earlier in my response. Peer support is so important. We know that that connection and that sense of belonging are critically important to helping people have a great start in the system and staying in, whether it be our TAFE system or any other form of higher education. That is actually really critical, because it can feel pretty lonely. You know, when you leave school or some other form of support and you find your way into TAFE, for example—because this Inquiry is specifically about TAFE—peer support is really critical. I think anything that we can do around peer support is vital. I am thinking here even of some of the work that I know residential colleges for unis do, which is they connect people up with others who might be from their local country community, for example, to help them stay connected rather than feel lonely and drop out et cetera along the way. I think there is a lot that can happen there around peer support and the links up to other networks, because of the number of times I think we have all heard through friends as well as through work, ‘Well, I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know that support was there. Someone told me this. I had not known it for 15 years. My child could have accessed this for a good 15 years prior. I had no idea it was available’. And often one of the greatest sources of finding out is through peers as well. I am not sure whether Deb or Emily want to add to that.

Ms FEWSTER: I might just add, and then I will throw to Emily. I just think one of the things that we have done with the Community Traineeship Pilot Program is we have intentionally designed peer support as a key feature or characteristic of the model. We have defined intake points and people come in as a group or a cohort, and before they even set foot in the classroom to engage with the curriculum there are, I think, two weeks—and I will throw to Emily—of just intensively getting to know one another and establishing their own individual identity within the group, as well as a group identity, and the teacher, the educator and the youth worker are part of that group as well. It helps with the stickiness or the retention in the program. But I will throw to Emily, who is the expert.

Ms BARTER: Thanks, Deb. It is a very intentional peer support program, and what has been shown to be really interesting about this—during COVID and now obviously there have been far more intentional and innovative ways of ensuring peer connection in the online environment. It is not just at the beginning, it is not just during orientation, but there is intentional reconnection of that group and those peers throughout. And what has happened is that of those students some have kind of self-selected as leaders within those groups. They are looking towards each other. They are setting up their own WhatsApp groups and asking questions of each other rather than always going back to the teachers. Some of them have put their hands up as well to be involved specifically in groups that are helping design aspects of the program or relook at aspects of the program that are not working so well, so we are getting the input directly from these young people around what works for them, and so that has all come out of those intentional peer connections and peer support programs.

The other thing that we have done is we have also linked newcomers into a group with a buddy within that group, and that has also been incredibly valuable, particularly for people who have maybe social anxieties about coming into that group that is already established. That has made that process a whole lot smoother for those trainees and young people than it might have been otherwise.

Ms KING: Yes, and I would also just reflect on our personal experience of having met with groups of trainees. Something that one of them said in the early days when we were launching the report was, ‘Three weeks ago I didn’t have a job, I didn’t have a link to any kind of tertiary institution and actually I felt pretty lost. Now I’m standing here today, I’ve got a job, I’m about to start and actually I’ve got these friends around me, and I feel like we’ve connected really quickly’. And that was just a personal anecdote from when Minister Pakula joined with us to launch the program in the first place, and the sense was palpable actually amongst the trainees in the very early days of that sense of connection. We know throughout that program that they keep that connection up and they support each other and back each other in, and going to the graduations is actually pretty emotional because they really stick with it. For some who might have experienced difficulties in one group because of things that have happened in their life, sometimes they will come back in through another group as well, so we do not lose them. It might be about how they are provided with support at a point in their life, but they are provided with that educational work opportunity, which is really critical—and for success and friendships, which we know are just so important around that belonging and connectedness and sticking with it when sometimes things can get challenging too.

Ms BARTER: Emma, if I could also just add into that that the evaluation, and thank you for the social connectedness prompt, and the data coming out is showing that people are feeling more socially connected, and that is shown to be a risk factor for people and their mental health—if they are not feeling socially connected—and I think that is one of the really positive things that has come out of the program.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you so much, Emma, Deb and Emily—a great submission yet again. We thank you for your submission and for being here today. Thanks very much.

Ms KING: Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.