

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Tuesday, 3 September 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESSES

Dr Arnaldo Barone, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association;

Ms Linda Kearley, Manager, Swinburne Hub, Swinburne University of Technology;

Ms Jennifer Gordon, Executive Director, Community and Industry Engagement, Wodonga TAFE; and

Mr Peter Murray, Business Development Manager, Enterprise, Box Hill Institute.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. 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 go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by that privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearings is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's standing order 234. 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. If you can give us a five-minute presentation that, would be great. And then we will proceed on to questions.

Dr BARONE: My name is Arnaldo Barone. I am Director of Policy and Advocacy for the Victorian TAFE Association, and I am joined by my colleagues. I always like to bring members along with me because I am a bit of a generalist but they have got the on-the-ground experience. I think they can provide richer insights than possibly even I can—definitely more than I can, actually, not possibly.

I just want to start by saying a few broad statements and then hand over to my colleagues. The first one is what we point out in the submission, which is about the public mission of TAFE. TAFE is much more—we are driven by more—than the profit incentive. Not that that is a negative thing, but we are driven by the desire to serve our communities, especially the communities in which we are located. I think that is a really important point, especially for regional communities and for regional TAFEs.

I think we need to move away from thinking of students in the very traditional sense and start thinking more and more about students along the entire life cycle and think of this problem within that kind of context. More and more people are going back into study later in life, changing careers, and I think we have to ensure that our systems are designed to accommodate that. We have to think boldly about how TAFEs can help, and by boldly I mean it is very common to think of TAFE as the apprentice sector or as there for the apprentice sector, but we do so much more. So I think we need to be aware that there is probably an untapped pool of activity and resources that we could use.

Finally, I would like to point out the Victorian TAFE model is a localised, devolved structure, and I think there is strength in that. It allows our TAFEs to have much stronger connections to the communities in which they are situated, and I think in terms of the issues at hand here it serves Victoria well. Some of my colleagues here may want to make statements.

The CHAIR: That is okay, we will get straight into questions.

Ms ADDISON: I am from Ballarat, and we love Fed Uni TAFE in Ballarat and we are so thrilled with the high levels of interest in terms of the courses and free TAFE. But when I have been at the TAFE, which has been a number of times, I am seeing that there are a lot of people from disadvantaged backgrounds coming for the first time, which I am very excited about. What support do they receive, particularly if they may have been a long time out of a classroom or a long time out of formalised learning? What does TAFE do to support these people to ensure they succeed?

Mr MURRAY: Most TAFEs have a student support area that will have disability support officers who will work with people with a disability and Indigenous liaison officers who will work with people from an Indigenous background. They will also have people who develop language, literacy and numeracy skills of students. There is a service there available to them for that type of extra assistance.

Ms KEARLEY: Once a person, a young person or otherwise, is enrolled within the TAFE situation all those services are available. The challenge for somebody from a disadvantaged background is that getting in there in the first place is daunting. They go there and they go inquiring about courses, they are not really sure what to do. We have this model and it starts probably in the VCE level where we look at what course you are going to do. We do not look at the job outcomes or the career outcomes,

the occupation outcomes, and we do not always look at, ‘Well, what does that job look like day by day? Is it a job that you will want to do?’

So once the students are in the TAFE organisation they are well supported. Skills and Job Centres create great support and referral into other areas, into Learn Locals, for example, where it might be a more supported way of reintroducing themselves to education, but they have got to find their way there, and that is not always easy for them given that they are apprehensive about walking into a TAFE building in the first place.

Ms GORDON: Absolutely, TAFE could do amazing things for disadvantaged and unemployed people, but the connecting to them is an issue. There are multiple ways we can do that, and we do work to do that through employment service sectors or through our community service agencies et cetera. I agree with both of my colleagues. We also have pretraining reviews now, which are individual one on ones with every student. That is a compliance issue, but frankly it is an educational practice that should happen and does happen in those one-on-one interviews—give those students an opportunity to talk about some of their areas of disadvantage. And even that, whether they divulge that at that point, is not always occurring. I believe there are some good structures in place, but we need to continue to work on them, definitely.

Dr BARONE: Absolutely. One of my roles is on the governance committee for DeafConnectEd. It is the central group. It is auspiced out of Melbourne Polytechnic but it serves all the TAFEs. Its idea is to provide support to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. And one of the things that I have come to learn in my role there is that sometimes the TAFEs want to provide that support but there is a difficulty in obtaining the services or the supports that they need. In that case, interpreters—it is very hard to find interpreters. TAFEs have to compete with private demand for interpreters. So TAFEs do what they can, but it is always sad when a student has to be told, ‘We can’t teach you the course this year because we can’t find adequate interpreters’. So we do what we can. The issue partly is certain funding streams that are available to universities—I am talking about commonwealth funding streams—and to schools are not readily available to TAFEs. So I just wanted to add that point.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you.

Mr BLACKWOOD: In your submission you mentioned that TAFEs have strong links to industry that enable disadvantaged jobseekers to gain work experience and knowledge of emerging industries and skill needs. Can you just explain how you develop those links to industry and how you maintain them, and then how you can link the students up to those industries?

Dr BARONE: You can start.

Mr MURRAY: Okay, I will start. It varies from industry to industry a bit. It varies from business to business, to be honest. There is no one set approach that fits all. It is often just networking, regular meetings with them and talking to them about student placements. If we are talking about the disability sector, we actually have arrangements where we train people with disabilities in the workplace in conjunction with disability organisations. We have probably got about three organisations that are doing that on a very constant basis.

Ms GORDON: And I think we need to note that at the highest level our national training packages are developed with industry. That is not with us; that is through the AISC.

Dr BARONE: Australian Industry and Skills Committee.

Ms GORDON: At that highest level there is straightaway interaction with industry. We have heard criticism of this in terms of slowness to move with industry, and I think we would all put that on the table. With the rate of change that occurs in industry, keeping up with it at any level is very difficult. I would agree absolutely with Peter. It is on the ground the networks that you have, and it does vary across industries. When you work with small and medium enterprises it is more difficult because it is not as representative, for example, as community services and health, where straightaway DHHS policies—DHHS information—guide a lot of what we do with those, particularly the public sector or the public service and health services. It does vary, but it is in our compliance. We must work with industry. It is embedded, to me, all the way through.

Dr BARONE: And often, one of the things that I have learnt since I have been in TAFE—because before that I was in universities—is the level of activity in the form of what we call applied research. But essentially industry often comes to TAFE and says, ‘We’ve got a problem. Help us solve it’. That actually leads to links, and it leads to projects and it leads to opportunities for students. These sorts of things are often organic. Sometimes they are through the sort of more traditional channels through industry associations, but I happened to be on a panel recently where we looked at a program being conducted by Holmesglen to support disabled children to obtain improved employment outcomes, and it is actually up for an award for that program. But that actually arose out of a chance meeting between the head of surgery for Royal Children’s Hospital and the person who had done an ISSI fellowship, who had researched this program, and through that that became adopted through a partnership between Holmesglen and the Royal Children’s Hospital. So it can be from really formal channels to just chance meetings, so having said that we do try to have regular interactions with industry, and as the guys have said it is embedded within our way of operation.

Ms KEARLEY: And it varies not only with industry but it also varies by region—the type of industry that is in particular regions with each TAFE. So what might happen in one area, particularly depending on what that TAFE offers, is that if they offer a strong component of trades courses with apprentices, then the links will be with small and medium enterprises, sometimes sole traders, who are generally time poor, and connecting with them and having them come on campus can be quite a challenge. How we tend to connect with them is by running direct jobs boards with them to help them meet their workforce development through training the pre-apps to be job ready once they complete their pre-apprenticeship to then put them towards the employer for employment as an apprentice. So it does vary across the industry, size of the industry and location.

Ms GORDON: Listening is the first pillar on my industry engagement plan. Listening is so important, and I know some of the funding that has come from the Victorian Government at the moment has been incredibly helpful for us. Even we have got some of our seed funding to do research in the renewables sector in the Hume region, building on an RDV-funded DELWP project looking at principally: are there VET workforce skills needs there and, if so, what should we be doing to plan for them? I guess that is an example of attempting to keep up with an incredibly rapidly growing area.

Mr MURRAY: I would just add that I think our relationships these days with industry tend to be more relationship-based rather than transactional-based.

Ms GORDON: I agree, absolutely.

Dr BARONE: Absolutely.

Ms GORDON: That is the sustainability of it, really.

Mr MURRAY: Correct.

Ms CONNOLLY: For, say, youth who are disengaged or might be early school leavers and by the time they get to TAFE and it becomes very difficult to walk in, do you think there is a gap in services or in offering to help get particularly young people to be able to walk through the door, sit down in a room and do a TAFE course? A lot of principals have reflected to me that there is this gap. So kids might be out of school for two or three years, not in an educational learning space or attending any of those sort of facilities. Do you see a need?

Ms GORDON: To fill that?

Ms CONNOLLY: To be filled, yes.

Ms KEARLEY: The biggest step probably is the barriers that the young people have set for themselves or the understanding of the barriers they face—‘I’m not good enough’. Often there are some other emerging mental health issues as well. There are a lot of services. Often school principals do not actually know where they are. We do not always know exactly where they are, and the eligibility for each of the services may be quite different and not everybody is aware of it. Possibly what might be helpful is a one-stop shop for principals to know and teachers to know where to refer people.

I know in our area there are certain schools that just pick up the phone and call the skills and job centre—‘I’ve got a young person disengaging from school; what can we do?’. So we will work with that young person and the school and the parents. We will even get the whole family in and then we will engage with the regional DET office, and if we feel that that young person is likely to settle into TAFE and complete a course, then we will ask for an exemption and accept from school, but we will also wrap a lot of services around and ensure that young person knows that their enrolment with the school still exists if they stop coming.

Ms GORDON: Yes. Similarly, we have a dedicated person to work with early school leavers because it is quite a complex area. We are not there to compete, to take them from schools. Government policy is to keep them in the school. So again it is about relationships with the secondary counterparts in your area. When they do need to leave, it needs to be conducted in a very respectful manner because those young people often have very difficult home lives. They may not even be living with their biological parents at that point. So I think, from my perspective, it is handled well, but I suspect your question was the ones that are missing—

Ms CONNOLLY: Yes.

Ms GORDON: that leave, and I, hand on heart, think that is a real issue for both. Schools have to give some sort of pathway plan for anyone leaving, but then that is the end of their responsibility. We, I think, could play a great role in picking up on some of those pathway plans more actively, and they are the ones who are over 17—the ones who are not early school leavers—I do agree with that. It is about resourcing it and putting some dedicated, I guess, KPIs around it in terms of what that might look like, but I think there is a real loss there. One of the areas I have a concern about is the ones that are then in their early 20s, because they are still classed as youth, but they may have come to Melbourne to attempt uni and it has not worked out, and where are they now? They have not got a full-time job. That is a loss of social capital that I think we need to work on.

Dr BARONE: I think related to all that—there is a lot of stuff around career advice in there too, I think, because the reason there might be the disconnect is they may not even have considered TAFE as an option, or it is considered a second-best option—the educator of last resort: ‘Why would you go to TAFE? You’re a dud’. From the school level it may not have been presented as an option. They might have gone through a traditional academic kind of education system that does not suit them so they think they are losers. Yet they might find that going down something which is a bit more hands-on might suit them and suddenly they flourish, but that starts from that career advice too.

Ms GORDON: Yes. And the engagement there.

Dr BARONE: Exactly.

Ms GORDON: We have been doing a lot back at TAFE now to engage with schools. Each year we bring about 500 secondary school students on campus over four different engagement days and we go out with VET pathways—pathways in general, but they do not know what they do not know. They do not know anything about trades if they do not have any connection to trades in their family. And we are not all about trades, but that is just a constant reminder to us of what they do not know in the school level. We work with 9 to 12. We are just doing a year 8 program now, and in two weeks we are having visits from years 5 and 6 at Bandiana Primary School. We are not selling to them to get them to come to TAFE. We are very open; it is very transparent. But just walk around the campus and have a look at what goes on here. Maybe it is part of your aspirations or at least you have met people you could contact and ask.

Ms KEARLEY: I think there is a lack of awareness too of pathways—that there is a way to get a PhD and it does not really matter where you start if that is what you want to do. But we have one focus and that is university and, as Arnaldo says, there is a consideration that you have failed if you do not go straight to university. So that awareness that you can get there—it might take you only six months longer.

Ms ADDISON: Do you think our tech schools might shut down some of those barriers? I know, back to Ballarat, that our tech school is right in the precinct of the Federation uni TAFE, and so a lot of kids will be going into that tech school, which will then open that up. A lot of the techs are still just coming online, but do you think that could be advantageous for your sector?

Dr BARONE: Yes. I think it is a multipronged issue, though. That will certainly help to challenge ideas about technical sorts of employment and those sorts of things, but you also have to get to the parents—that is the big one—and also the teachers.

Mr MURRAY: I was just going to add that I think the Reconnect Program is one that works with the youth, particularly the ones that have dropped out of the education cycle, work cycle, to get them back into that. I think that works quite well. But I also think there is a place for Learn Locals with their pre-accredited training to develop work readiness skills and to develop digital literacy skills. We all think teenagers are fully digitally literate. They are not. They are often very digitally literate in relation to social media and talking on the phone but not necessarily in relation to work-related digital skills.

The CHAIR: Just on that, in terms of digital barriers: affordability, connectivity to the internet, having the access at home—are these barriers to some of those disadvantaged students?

Mr MURRAY: More so in the regional areas than in the metropolitan areas.

The CHAIR: What role can state government play in alleviating some of those barriers?

Ms GORDON: I think acknowledging that they exist is terrific in the first place because they do exist, regionally. They exist because of a lack of access to the NBN in some places, particularly in the hilly areas. They exist simply because of, as you said, affordability. We have to not assume everyone has a PC at home. They do not have direct access to a computer, the hardware, let alone access to the internet, and more and more information for the people that you are looking into is on the internet—the information they need to apply for jobs online. They need an email to do that. If they do not have an email, you have to set up an email for them to help them apply, but they do not actually work through email. I am being general here, obviously.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Ms GORDON: What can you do? I think the support I see regionally that goes to community centres—Learn Locals—is terrific. We have delivered courses in rural areas, and a lot of our delivery is through a Moodle learning platform, but we have actually gone back to printed material for them, because that helps. They cannot go home and study, because unlike the rest of us around this table, for whom it would be quite feasible to do, it is not the same. So any support in the rural areas to give those outlying places public access to computers is a terrific thing. I have to say, public libraries do an enormous amount to support the disadvantaged and to help give them access. You can go to—is it MyGov?

Ms ADDISON: MyGov, yes.

Ms GORDON: Many of the technicians who are there to support the library will come out and do front-of-house work to support them. I am just looking—I have written some of this down.

Ms KEARLEY: I think the other disadvantaged group when it comes to digital literacy is refugees and migrants. They come and they do their 400, 500 hours, and they return to their communities, and often those communities have different refugees and migrants in different areas of Melbourne. Then they go home and they speak their first language. We have experienced a great deal of difficulty—if you only come to school and learn English and come home and do not speak it again, it is going to be challenging. What would be helpful would be more incentives for some of the larger employers to take groups of refugees or migrants from the same cohort so that they have some companionship in the workplace.

Learn Locals are currently funded to deliver English programs in the workplace. It is a three or four-way partnership that needs to happen with maybe a champion for the refugee and migrant population in their own community for them to connect with. That would certainly make a great deal of difference for employment at that entry level, particularly in civil construction, for migrants and refugees in that 30 to 50 age group, where they have often come through Malaysia and Indonesia and worked on construction sites and they have the skills but not the occupational health and safety requirements or the qualifications to be able to be recognised here.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: You have mentioned Learn Locals a couple of times in the context of, perhaps, picking up on some of those ones that are falling through the cracks but also filling in some of the skills and

training gaps. What is the nature of the relationship between Learn Locals and TAFEs? Can you tease that out for us? Can it be strengthened to the advantage of the whole system, picking up on disadvantaged jobseekers?

Mr MURRAY: I will start off because we are a little bit different in that we do have our Learn Local, being the CAE, which Box Hill operates as well. We are the exception, if you like, in that we are both a Learn Local and a TAFE, so we have obviously a very good relationship. As an example of where it did work out well, when DENSO were shutting down because of the closing down of the motor industry our Learn Locals went out and did some digital literacy training before they then went on and did some redeployment training with the TAFE, so it was working quite well there.

Dr BARONE: There was a report that was produced by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at VU, which was commissioned to look at this issue. Two of the things that came out were in a previous submission that I had written, which were essentially to look at a statement of ministerial expectations for TAFE and Learn Locals to express a desire for greater collaboration between the two bodies—little things like that make big differences—but also perhaps to have initiatives, funding schemes or things of that nature to allow them to explore and to pursue collaborative activities, to work better and to remove any potential transaction costs to potential collaboration between the two.

They are just two of the points. That was a report that was produced, I think, two years ago now and has gone into the future of adult learners initiatives that are going on there around adult illiteracy and the like. I think it is actually informing a lot of that action as well.

Ms KEARLEY: Would you like a couple of examples of what we have done at Swinburne? Would that be helpful for you?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Please.

Ms KEARLEY: So there are two programs that the skills and jobs centre is working with at Swinburne with Learn Local. One of them is a three-way partnership. The first one is the try-a-trade model, where participants are attracted through various means of advertising. They are enrolled by Cire Learn Local. It is a four-day program. One day of each of the trades is delivered at Swinburne's Croydon campus. At the end of the four days skills and jobs centre staff go in there and check with the participants—are you interested in the trade, and what would you be interested in? The pipeline model is resulting in about a 50% conversion into pre-apps and from there into apprenticeships. So it is actually quite a good conversion model.

The other one we trialled this year is also with Cire, and it is with EACH, which is Eastern Access Community Health. It is around a couple of the communities where they have residential houses for young people with complex mental health needs. We offered an introduction to hospitality course, delivered partly at Swinburne, and partly the skills and jobs centre went in and did some career and job readiness awareness training with these young people. They were able to obtain an RSA licence and do first aid and barista training as well. The Learn Local trained them in that introduction to hospitality. The skills and jobs centre came in and did some jobs readiness and résumé preparedness, and EACH was the organisation that provided the participants.

Ms GORDON: That is an excellent question because I think the capacity of TAFE to collaboratively work with Learn Locals would be of enormous benefit, particularly in regional areas. Again, it is part of the work we are doing at the moment. We work from Toolangi to Corryong, Mount Beauty, Beechworth and Myrtleford. We are just going to start with children in Rutherglen. We do that by, one, having a skills and jobs centre once a month visit out there and, two, going in and listening to their needs. If they mention people who are eligible for Skills First Reconnect, then we will bring people in to help there. Or if they want pre-training advice, we have put in free digital literacy stuff as well through the skills and job centre. But each of those centres is very different. They reflect their own communities. There is not a one-Learn Local-fits-all model. Well, probably there is for funding, but how they operate, what they do and what their needs are is very much being respectful and listening to those communities. But I think it is a great opportunity to work more closely.

The CHAIR: Excellent. I am just conscious of the time. One last question? No. Thank you very much.

Dr BARONE: Thanks for having us.

Ms GORDON: Good luck.

Witnesses withdrew.