TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Friday, 12 March 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways, Victoria University Polytechnic;

Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement, and

Ms Jill Slater, Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives, Swinburne University of Technology; and

Ms Heather Marsh, Manager, Equity and Diversity, and

Mr Drew Burns, Coordinator, Disability Services, Federation University.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's 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. I am not sure if you have worked out who will be making the statements, but if you can be very brief so that we can have plenty of time for questions. Thank you.

Ms MARSH: Thank you, Chair. I cannot see my other colleagues on the screen. I will defer to any of them if they would like to speak first, but I have a short opening statement on behalf of Federation University TAFE.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms MARSH: I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are presenting today from the lands of the Wathaurong people and paying my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In October of 2020, Federation University data showed that 13.5% of students enrolled at our TAFE identified as having a disability. While this shows that a significant proportion of our students identified as having a disability and are linked into our disability and learning access units for support, we know anecdotally that a larger number with disability, including those with mental health conditions, do not communicate this to Federation TAFE, either due to the lack of diagnosis, concerns about the stigma of identifying or because they are unclear how identifying may benefit them in their learning.

Our TAFE teachers regularly demonstrate that they are committed to access for learners with disability, providing adjustments in a timely and practical manner. But building both the competence and confidence of our teachers to discuss access needs prior to the commencement of study and plan for adjustments, particularly those that may require resourcing to deliver, will enhance student success. Increasing the confidence of our learners to identify and to understand the benefit of communicating their access needs allows earlier referrals for support. Learners may have differing levels of knowledge about the kinds of adjustments available, and earlier connection with disability and learning access staff can empower and educate learners about their rights. Early identification may be encouraged through language in the pre-training review, in conversations with TAFE staff and through cues on promotional materials and course information.

Providing a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible, including accessible facilities, course content and a disability welcoming culture, is critical in creating a pathway to success. In terms of accessible facilities, for instance, some of our learners at TAFE have lower digital literacy skills, and learners with disability may experience greater barriers to affording and using technology. When thinking about course content and information, materials need to be provided in accessible formats, and assessment tasks which may seem necessarily rigid could in fact be adjusted to allow for different modes of response.

The culture of inclusion requires understanding about the societal assumptions as well as environments that form a barrier to people with disability. Neurodiversity, for instance, is not well understood in broader society, and that lack of awareness is reflected in the culture of learning environments. Federation TAFE identifies three components as core to any plan to improve the experience in outcomes for learners in TAFE with disability. The first is accessible pathways and enrolment processes, including pre-training reviews; the second is clear access to well-resourced support programs, disability-competent teachers and accessible course content; and the third is an inclusive culture, with peer support within an accessible environment. To achieve success across these three areas Federation TAFE requires collaboration with its sector colleagues to share approaches, to share resourcing and to develop training and materials and a more robust funding model for the individual support of our students' access needs. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further comments or statements? No?

Assoc. Prof. ZACHARIAS: Chair, I am happy to go next. My name is Nadine Zacharias. I am the Director of Student Engagement at Swinburne and an Associate Professor in higher education research. My colleague Jill Slater is the Manager of Community Services Funded Initiatives here at Swinburne and works in the PAVE division. In my role I have responsibility for AccessAbility services that support students with disability across the TAFE and higher education divisions of the university. I would like to acknowledge that Jill and I are on Wurundjeri country today. Swinburne welcomes the Inquiry and the Parliament's interest in improving the access and success of people with disability in tertiary education. The Victorian dual-sector universities are well placed to provide support to students with disability across their tertiary journey and have a solid service infrastructure. We can also give students greater choice in terms of programs than a TAFE or a university can and enable pathways from Certificate and Diploma levels to degree-level programs if this is the best path for the student.

We find that the needs and characteristics of students are quite different across TAFE and higher education cohorts. Supporting students with disability can be built effectively into general service provision, and Jill will speak to that in a moment. But it also needs a specialist support offer for students with complex needs, and our colleagues at Federation University have spoken to that. If students need direct support in the form of Auslan interpreting or support workers, this is often very expensive to provide. We would like to call out that TAFE is the only level of education without targeted funding for students with disability, and we would posit that this should be addressed as part of the Inquiry, especially for costly direct service provision. There are already good practice models for broad and inclusive service provision at Swinburne and elsewhere. We shared with you additional information about our Student Success Coach model. My colleague Jill Slater will briefly talk to those and is happy to take any further questions. Jill, over to you.

Ms SLATER: Thank you, Nadine. Thank you, Chair. The student success coach program is a Swinburne-designed model to meet TAFE's community service standards and resourced from the Department of Education and Training via the community services fund. The fund resources TAFE to provide support services to vocational learners, including addressing the needs of nominated high-priority groups such as learners with a disability, Indigenous learners, learners from a CALD background, retrenched workers, long-term unemployed and apprentices and trainees. The program focuses on high-priority cohorts who are at risk of not completing their qualification and identifies and provides support early in their course, with the learner and the student success coach together developing and agreeing on strategies and interventions that will support them to succeed. Learners' needs are at the core of the Student Success Coach model.

The program supported 2,500 learners in 2020, and this high usage we believe reflects how well this program was integrated and harmonised across all course areas. The coaches worked with 98 learners to have an education access plan developed with our AccessAbility unit but referred a further 183 to AccessAbility who were not registered or aware of the supports they could be receiving.

I just wish to quickly highlight some key features of the program that we believe work very well. The first is recognising that learners with a disability will experience many of the exact same academic and life issues as our other students, and student success coaches can offer broad support in managing learning and assessment, navigating through Swinburne systems and processes and facilitating access to specialist support where needed, such as our AccessAbility unit. I suppose we see our Student Success Coach program as a tier 1 service, and the AccessAbility special service as a tier 2. Embedding student success coach support into education access plans has been an extremely successful outcome. We have collaborated closely with AccessAbility and have included the sorts of support that they might receive from a student success coach in everybody's education access plan. But locating our coaches within the learners' environment also has been a great success factor because it ensures learners have direct access—and teachers have access too, who are key partners in our program. We believe this breaks down stigma, widens participation and frees up teachers to focus on teaching and learning while secure in the knowledge that their support needs are being addressed. Attaching coaches to specific course areas and adopting approaches that relate to that cohort and the study areas is another. For example, VCE, VCAL, apprenticeships and migrant programs can have very different practices in line with the learner needs and the course context.

Our learners' evaluative feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The majority of the 190 respondents, 91.58%, were either very satisfied or satisfied with the support they received, and 91.05% felt the student success coach support kept them engaged in their studies. Pre-enrolment career and training pathways advice is the area that

we have flagged here for improvement to ensure learners are aware of their options and choose the right one to meet their goals. The Skills and Jobs Centre currently offers course and career advice to the public, and we note that the recent Macklin review into postsecondary education proposes an expanded Skills and Jobs Centre role with increased resources to provide service to more people, including a wraparound support model for their study journey. Depending on the outcomes of the review we may in future collapse the Student Success Coach program into an expanded Skills and Jobs Centre. This concludes our opening statement, and I now hand back to the Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dianne?

Ms SEMMENS: Thank you, Chair. Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Victoria University Polytechnic. I want to say thank you for the opportunity, but I am not going to cover the things that my colleagues just have, because I appreciate you have had a long day at the public hearing. But I do want to pay my respects. The land I am on is that or the Woiwurrung and Boon Wurrung language group of the Kulin nation, so I pay my respects to First Nations people.

Look, my opening statement is really just probably to add to what my colleagues have said. Dual-sector university is in quite a unique position in terms of supporting learners with a disability—probably, I would say, having worked at other standalone ones, a better position in terms of supporting learners with a disability. However, the point that my colleague Nadine made was well made, which is that it is quite a shock for students coming from secondary school, where they have had quite targeted supports, individualised and so on, and they come to TAFE and that does not exist in that same individualised manner. We see that quite a lot.

Of our 11,000 to 12,000 students we have annually, we have over 1,000 that indicate that they have a disability on their enrolment form, and I am sure everybody sitting on this panel is well aware that there are hundreds of others who have not disclosed. So 9% of our student population with a disclosed disability is quite high, and what we have learned, particularly in the manufacturing and traditional trades area, is that we see amongst our pre-apprenticeship groups very high levels of disability in terms of neurodiverse needs and learning support needs and so on that relate to cognitive and processing disabilities, and many of them do drop out and do not continue with their studies. Yes, it is about the support being offered, and that is why Swinburne's program is so interesting, the success coaching. That is a model that has worked in the language, literacy and numeracy needs, and I can see why it is so successful in the area of disability as well.

We find though that the cultural component cannot be ignored. I do not mean the cultural component of the students necessarily, I mean the cultural component in terms of students accessing whatever form of student services is by nature a deficit model and has a stigma attached to it. So we, too, have been exploring that notion of the Skills and Jobs Centre and expanding services in that way, which carries probably less of a stigma for young people particularly—the idea of making an appointment, as opposed to just drop-in or outreach or whatever. It is much more appealing, the latter.

So in my opening statement I just wanted to highlight the extent of the issue. We did a big survey in October 2020 that involved our access support workers, it involved our TAFE teachers, it involved our students and it involved parents—well, not just parents, but families, significant others of our learners—and what we found from that survey about how did they cope with them moving to online learning, even though it was interactive and supportive, how did students with disabilities cope? Well, they are not a homogenous group, so I say this within the context of noting that different people cope differently, but in general a few things came out that may be of interest to this particular panel, probably not surprising though. So students who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or who identified as culturally and linguistically diverse—and at Victoria University 43% of our student cohort do not speak English at home—and refugee background, indicated very clearly that the digitally supported remote learning was not successful for them in the way that perhaps it had been for mainstream students, if I can say that.

We also know that the group with disabilities that did take to and did not drop out of the remote learning were those who identified as having anxiety and depressive illness et cetera, which, as you can see, while they may have welcomed the ability to remain isolated, that is not necessarily particularly helpful in terms of workforce training into the future. So the fact that they felt satisfied, I do not necessarily think the correlation is that that is a desirable state necessarily for those students either.

The other thing that we found from it was for those who were using assistive technologies that was really hard from an at-home perspective and in terms of access, supportability, all of those sorts of things, particularly for the west of Melbourne. The rest of Melbourne had—what is it—115 days in lockdown, last year it was 134 for those in the west because of the hotspot lockdown. So we had students who were really quite isolated and in environments that were not conducive to learning, and obviously with any form of marginalisation, including disability, that just exacerbates the disadvantage that they are already facing. So we really welcome the panel's interest in this.

I am going to stop, because I think your questions are probably more significant than me telling you Victoria University's experience. But I hope it gives you just a bit of an insight into similar programs to what our colleagues at Fed University and Swinburne and RMIT are offering.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your opening statement. I will kick off the questions. We will also ask a question to you. You have probably recently heard that the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System handed down its report to the Victorian Government. The Victorian Government have indicated that they will obviously adopt all of those recommendations that have been made to it. Just in relation to mental ill health, and it is the most common type of disability among TAFE students, what particular needs do these students have and how well equipped are TAFE providers to support them in that way? Anyone?

Ms SEMMENS: I will have a crack first, if that is to break the ice. Okay, so how well equipped are TAFE providers? Well, I suppose it goes to my earlier point that the accessing of help for mental health issues does carry with it enormous stigma, so the traditional forms that educational institutions like ourselves offer—which is, you know, the 'by appointment'—can be a very confronting experience. So I have no doubt that my colleagues have also adapted in terms of providing support through text messaging and online as well as through in-person appointment. As to how well equipped they are, I would have to say that while the specialised officers, those with a mental health background, work with students with that form of disability, what we find is that people are usually presenting with a multiplicity of issues and problems and that it often does require [inaudible] being involved with other players et cetera, and that creates a whole other layer of complexity.

So, you know, I do not know how you answer 'how well?'. I would say that there is definitely room for improvement, and I think that different modes and different ways of addressing this in a more universal way would probably be very welcome—whether that be through education or where they are not seeking it out from the sense that 'I have anxiety or depression or whatever so I will go and hear this', it is actually something that their colleagues who may not have anxiety or depression also need to be understanding about managing it. So I know that is not the remit of this Committee, but it does go to the issue of people with disabilities and focusing only on the individual or focusing only on the disability, which tends to be what we do. I do not think that serves the client group very well.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr BURNS: Can I add a little bit of something to what Dianne has just said? I think we go back a little bit as well. Students or learners sometimes have trouble identifying that they actually have a disability that is called 'mental health illness' et cetera. It is not defined well enough, we have found, and so students then go, 'Well, I don't have a disability, I have a mental health condition' or 'I have anxiety' and 'You probably can't help'.

Another thing that I would like to add is that we think TAFE education managers and teachers need to be equipped to identify and properly refer students that become unwell during their studies so that learners remain engaged. We do focus on trying to catch this stuff at pre-training reviews, at initial appointments, but as my colleagues have said, it comes from this deficit model rather than an empowerment model. And so if students become unwell, we need to find a way to capture that as well. Thank you, Mr Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further comments?

Assoc. Prof. ZACHARIAS: Just to reinforce what our colleagues said, we have also found that there is a low visibility of the available services for students with mental health conditions and that they often do not identify with the disability label. I also note that the *Review of the Disability Standards for Education* has literally just arrived. We talked a lot about mental health support in that, and it might be interesting to see what came out of that review as well in terms of how we can more inclusively as a sector and as a community really

provide support. We find that students often come with existing support models in the community into the university and sometimes do not need additional support, especially if they are mature age, whereas others develop a mental health condition for the first time after they start their program with us. So the cohort, again as Dianne has said, is quite diverse and I think we need good mechanisms to pick students up where they are—in how they come in, where their needs are—and with a language that they understand and are not put off by.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms SLATER: And can I just say, Chair, that all our student success coaches who have undertaken a training in mental health first aid and found that extremely useful—we recommend that their teachers do it as well—and they have had additional PD from our AccessAbility unit around understanding anxiety, recognising anxiety and depression, which seem to be the key issues of our students with mental health conditions, and that young people in the apprenticeship area particularly but also the VCAL students responded much better to Orygen and Headspace online consultation during lockdown as they do want to have that immediate kind of connection and not wait for an appointment, which was happening with counselling because of the overwhelming need that was going on. So those two services in particular, which we have got partnerships with as well, seem to be preferred methods for discussing their issues for a lot of young people.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John. Just a question about additional supports for mature age learners with a disability: in the first instance, generally speaking, do mature age students with a disability need additional supports? And what would they be in terms of assisting TAFE providers?

Assoc. Prof. ZACHARIAS: I am happy to kick this off, Gary. The biggest impediment to assisting mature age students with disability is that they have to pay for their own assessments. They are not covered for the cost of assessment as younger students are, and that provides real financial barriers and practical barriers to students to get the support, because we cannot register them through the AccessAbility service if they do not have a diagnosis and if they have not done the assessment. That could be a really straightforward, practical solution to support mature age students.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thank you, Nadine.

Ms SEMMENS: I absolutely fully endorse that. This is a very complex bill, and we recognise there are no silver bullets or easy fixes for the particular issue when there is an inequity thing around age there, that younger [Zoom dropout] would make a massive difference.

Ms MARSH: I agree with Dianne and Nadine. I would like to also add that some of our mature learners have not engaged with study for many years. While they are bringing this real wealth of life experience and frequently quite a high level of commitment to their studies, they are sometimes lacking the literacy, numeracy and technological capabilities that their school-leaver counterparts have, so I feel that there is a greater need for targeted enabling programs for mature learners.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Heather.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Juliana, would you like to ask a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, John, and it is great to see everyone here but particularly great to have my TAFE, Federation Uni TAFE, here, so thank you so much for being here today and contributing to this important inquiry. I am very interested in TAFE teacher training. What is the best way to deliver training on meeting the needs of learners with a disability that would reach all TAFE teachers regardless of where they are at, their career stage?

Ms SEMMENS: This is an interesting one because it is one that we had a little debate around amongst ourselves the other day, so I certainly am not speaking necessarily for the group. There would be a tendency in the first instance to say, 'Well, we have a mandatory qual—Certificate IV in Training and Assessment—that all TAFE teachers require. Why don't we add mental health, disability et cetera onto that mandatory qualification?'. That seems like a neat solution, and that may be part of it. But what we do know from our experiences of employing staff with that mandatory qualification is that the specialists and so on required to deliver those particular units may not necessarily be readily available. They are hard to make available in the

vocational streams, let alone [Zoom dropout] a wide variety of public and private providers, so there would be huge variance, I would suggest, in the quality of what is delivered in that space. But also it is something that is done at the start of somebody's teaching while embarking on teaching in TAFE, and sometimes you are not really at the pointy end to absorb that. I am not saying we shouldn't, but you have not had the experience and the contact with students to make it come alive for you to understand the application of that. So I fear that if we do that, it would simply be, you know, like some generic theory around this stuff, assessments based on multiple choice whatever, and then when they come to the real-world situation of sensitively having to broach the subject with somebody who perhaps has not disclosed or somebody who clearly needs support, the way that that referral happens and the way that we care and support our students to connect with services may not be part of that unit. But I suppose the other side of that is what was mentioned before about mental health first aid—completely in support that that is an excellent and quite succinct way to introduce people to that more universally, no matter what stage of their career.

The other part, I suppose: we talk, and in the submission everyone addressed the issue, about the universality of teaching and learning and that really you should be catering for all abilities. And, yes, in an ideal world that would be true, but we know already that TAFE teachers, through no fault of their own, struggle to cope with the mixed-ability range in a very mainstream sense, let alone with the overlays of gender disadvantage, culture et cetera, and I think that while it is aspirational, it is probably not very pragmatic.

In Victoria the VET Development Centre offers training. I would see that as a terrific way to reach wide numbers of people—very affordable training for TAFE teachers to do. And not just TAFE teachers but the support workers too—the administration staff, professional staff. Often they see it and recognise there are issues, but they are the admin officer so what are they going to do about it? But they do have a massive role because they are front of house. From my view, I think it needs a multipronged approach and not simply just tacking it onto the…

Mr BURNS: Can I jump in there from our perspective? Firstly, I want to acknowledge and affirm what Dianne has just said. We agree with what she said. And we would also like to acknowledge that the teachers, in our experience, demonstrate a great willingness to provide adjustments and that any training that they receive regarding confidence and competence with disability they take on board very quickly and they apply it very quickly. What we also have experienced is that where lived experience trainers deliver that training it provides a powerful context for the TAFE teachers. And we know real-life examples, which is what Dianne was referring to, of barriers and adjustments to support TAFE teachers to translate their learning to a practical classroom model…

Interruption.

The CHAIR: Go ahead. Sorry, Drew.

Mr BURNS: No, that is all. Thank you. I just wanted to affirm those things and add a little.

Ms SLATER: I'll also add a comment: I undertook a consultation with a whole number of teachers across different areas of our PAVE division, and it was interesting because none of them talked about embedding anything further in the TAA. There is a sort of general feeling that the TAA is already overpacked with so much. It is delivered in such a short duration that people cannot really get full sort of skills or knowledge around any one area when you are racing through a qualification that is so jam packed. It also does not have the context quite yet of the practice either, which is what Dianne was saying. But the areas that they actually did talk about were wanting guidance and capability around understanding learners' needs, identifying students for early intervention and understanding things like anxiety and depression and how that presents itself. They wanted better clarification on how to work across disciplines and how we work to educate each other, whether they be an education access worker or an admin worker that is going to be a frontline person—how do we do that? And the big issue for them was around reasonable adjustments. They wanted so much more clarity about that, not just really broad statements, because they were thinking about the context of competency-based training being very prescriptive in terms of assessments and not being confident about how much they can move around that and how much flexibility they can provide around that. Their suggestions were things like the VDC do rolling sort of generalist information, based on lived experience as well, that that kind of gets rolled out and it is rolled out regularly because the teacher workforce keeps changing. But they also wanted to do specific moderation type in their networks or in their course areas, to really moderate on reasonable adjustments that pass audit and to be very clear about what they can and cannot do in that process.

The other thing which is a bit of an aside was that they just felt that they had very little to no knowledge about all the new technologies that enable learners to engage, so the adaptive technologies basically. They were talking about a couple of layers—not the TAA, interestingly enough, but certainly the VDC rolling out and having more course moderation, an opportunity to share practice and get to what is good practice.

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

Ms THEOPHANOUS: I do. Thank you, Chair, and thank you everyone for being involved in this Inquiry. My question goes to the different types of, I guess, support workers that seem to be present within the system. It seems to me that there are a whole raft of different models at play here—whether it is coaches, navigators, transition officers, disability support workers, AccessAbility liaison officers—and I am sure that there is much variation in their roles and in their involvement. I would love for you to comment on whether you think a standardised model would be better for a role that encompasses all of those things, or whether you think that there is a particular type that is working really well. Then as an addendum to that question, we know that the Andrews Government is reforming the way that vocational education happens in government schools, and as part of that we are funding jobs, skills and pathways coordinators in schools. I note that several of you have mentioned the Skills and Jobs Centres in TAFEs. Is there a linkage there that has not happened yet? And could the role of this coach or transition officer fill that connection between the two—government schools, TAFE sector? I hope that made sense.

Assoc. Prof. ZACHARIAS: Look, I am happy to jump in because we have thought a bit about this particular conundrum at Swinburne, and we have started to think about it as a tiered model. If you say tier 0 is outreach work into the community, very accessible—the Skills and Jobs Centre, for example, could be regarded as a tier 0 service. It is very accessible—drop in—open to anyone, very inclusive and broad based and community based in many ways. You then go to a tier 1 service that is still open to all students. The student success coaches, for example, could fit into a tier 1 service. The other one is our student HQ—that is, all administrative services for the students. They are tier 1, open for everyone, and they take about 80% of all inquiries.

Then you go to tier 2 services, which are our specialist services. AccessAbility services—my team—is a tier 2 service. Counselling, mental health support, the wellbeing centre, language and learning advice, careers advice—all the specialist services—are tier 2, and they are about 15% of inquiries. Then you go into a tier 3 service, which is case management, so those students that have the most complex needs and need the most ongoing support really throughout the duration of their program or their course get supported through a case management system which pulls in all of the relevant specialist services that can support the student. That is how we have started to think about it, because the cohort is so heterogeneous that you cannot really pigeonhole them. And it is horses for courses. The majority of students with disability we can support with a very light touch, quite general and inclusive support provisions, but then there is a significant minority of students that need ongoing support at least for one semester or often for the duration of their course. Does that make sense?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Nadine. That is helpful. Anyone else?

Mr BURNS: Yes. I just would like to add that at Federation we have something called TAFE retention officers, and they sort of apply the same sort of structure that Nadine was just talking about. I think we have three and are currently recruiting a fourth. They will go to TAFE classes and orientation sessions and talk about what supports you will have. They will meet with all students and then they will also refer students. When the student identifies that they might have an issue with a disability or some kind of equity issue, they will refer them to the correct services, so we are in touch with them and they are in touch with us, and it is a very cross-collaborative type of approach to keeping the students who may not be easily retained at TAFE.

Ms MARSH: I think just add to what Drew was saying, we had a big discussion yesterday, Drew and I, about exactly what you have raised, which is that transition space between high school and tertiary education where there is a real need for an appropriate-type place for students where students are not just, for instance, referred into a course that they will not necessarily succeed in. I know it was said in earlier sessions of this panel that we want to set students up for success. We do not want to set them up to fail, so it is those transitional pathways that are critical really in making sure that the student's aspiration is met in the most appropriate course for them. So I think that there is a real opportunity there if there is going to be a review of those education opportunities that students have prior to tertiary, to set those things in place as well and link them in partnerships with the TAFE provider.

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

Mr ROWSWELL: Thanks very much, Chair, and apologies for my lateness to this particular part of today's hearings. I did have a question about the retention of people with a disability within the TAFE system through to graduation. It is one thing to get an enrolment; it is another thing for that process to follow through and for those people's minds and lives to be enriched and for them to be able to contribute in a meaningful way in another way outside of the institutionalisation of a TAFE placement. Perhaps anecdotally—or if you have figures, that would be great—how many people start in your institutions who have a disability and then complete, or who do not complete, and are there any particular threads of reasons for why they perhaps do not complete that course? Or perhaps it is easier for me to ask: would their reason for not completing be any different to a student who does not have a disability?

Ms SEMMENS: That is a really big question, and a good one. Thank you for that. Victoria University's experience is that students who declare disability have a slightly lower completion rate than students who have not declared a disability. Having said that, it goes back to that thing about it not being homogenous, and whether there has been sufficient care given for placing people in the right courses. That is probably another issue, I will leave that, but some occupations—while we would all love to think that everything is possible for anyone, it is not the case. I will just give you a little case study to sort of understand that. Obviously everyone is very cognisant about not discriminating against people having access to TAFE, clearly, because they have got a disability. But, for instance, we had a young woman who was completely deaf—she was still verbal, except she was completely deaf, and she was in aged care. You think, 'Okay, well, there is technology now. There are lights, there are all sorts of assistive things that can help', but the reality is that most aged-care facilities are not set up and do not have those sorts of technologies that would enable her to be able to work in a safe way. So it is not even about her technical competence in the job. She left that course and went into a different course. So was it directly about her disabilities? Yes and no. Not really. It was really about the systemic lack of support in the industry for people with disabilities to work competently in those fields. So there is that.

The other thing that I would say is that the hard part about your question, which you would be aware of, is all the ones that are not disclosing disability—with the dropout rate—where the reason given is 'for personal reasons', 'overwhelmed', 'too much' and all of those things. Now, that is a really common reason. Many TAFE students' lives are very chaotic, particularly with mature age students juggling multiple things as well. So it is a little bit harder to quantify whether they have dropped out because, say, their mental illness has meant that they are no longer able to actively participate or whether really that is only one factor in what is a pretty chaotic life that comes along with that as well. Do you know what I am saying?

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you for articulating the complexity.

Ms SEMMENS: Your assumption is correct, I think. I do not know—I am happy for my colleagues to jump in. Your assumption is correct: I do not think that we can all proudly stand and say that students with a disability have the same completion rates as students without, because they do not. But it is a really complex thing as to why that is.

Assoc. Prof. ZACHARIAS: Look, I would add to what Dianne has just said and note that we have much better data for higher education than we have for TAFE. We know that for higher education students the number one reason by some margin for considering withdrawal is health or stress. For almost 50% of those who consider withdrawal it is for the reason of health or stress. And then study and life balance, the need to do paid work, work-life difficulties, personal reasons—all of those are sort of next in line. So it would be terrific if one of the recommendations of this Inquiry potentially was a better evidence base of why students leave, because in our preliminary conversations neither of us had terribly good data. And I think that speaks to a systemic issue and potentially one of the recommendations could speak to that.

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you for those answers.

Mr BURNS: I would just like to add we completely concur with our colleagues' statements on that. But we would also like to add that the link with the disability and learning access units is strong. We survey student completion data once every two years, and where they have engaged with disability services, over 90% of students say that they would not have been able to continue in their course without the disability and learning access unit support. For us, that is key.

Ms MARSH: And then the other issue that that points to is the students who have not identified and therefore who have not been linked in. I think identification is part of the key to this. But I really concur with Nadine there about the data—the lack of data. The tracking of even disengagement from study is more difficult at TAFE because of resourcing than it is for our higher education students. We can very easily track for our higher education students if they have started to become disengaged from studies, but it is harder to do at TAFE due to resourcing.

The CHAIR: Well, thank you very much. I think that is a wrap. We have gone over time. It has been wonderful to hear firsthand from the people on the ground about some of the issues related to our topic. We thank you for your valuable contributions. Thank you.

Ms SEMMENS: Thanks for your insightful questions.

Witnesses withdrew.