

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 Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Christine Couzens

WITNESSES

Mr Lionel Bamblett, General Manager, and

Mr Woody Eke, Senior Policy Officer, TAFE and Higher Education Unit, Victorian
Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.

The CHAIR: I want to start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the various lands on which we are all gathered today. I acknowledge that in this virtual environment we are gathering on many different lands. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

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. This will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you, Lionel. Thanks for being with us today. And thank you to Woody—I think Woody is online too, is he?

Mr BAMBLETT: Thank you, Chair. Is Woody online? Woody has not come online. He is going to come online now.

The CHAIR: Okay, no worries. Thank you. Well, you can kick it off if you like, Lionel.

Mr BAMBLETT: Okay, look, I would like to thank you for the invite to this hearing. I will introduce myself. My name is Lionel Bamblett. I am the General Manager of VAEAI, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated. I think we sent a bit of a slideshow through to you guys about our organisation and its structures. We are a statewide organisation, and over the years—we were incorporated in 1985—we have worked very hard to make sure that we—it has come up there now—have come up with as broad a representation across the state as possible to the point where we started out I think with four local committees, local groups, and we now have 30 LAECGs, Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. What we have done over the years since our incorporation is we have worked with successive governments, because Aboriginal people's issues will remain our issues, and whether it is a Labor or Liberal-National government is not the point; our needs and wants remain the same going forward, so what we have got to look at is how we address that.

In line with that, in 1990 we entered into a partnership arrangement with the Department of Education, and as far as our knowledge is concerned, that is the first partnership between an Aboriginal organisation and any state government anywhere in the country. We then redeveloped that partnership, and that was signed off by the Premier of the state of Victoria and our President in 2001, and it is called Yalca. And as far as we are concerned, Yalca is still relevant today. In line with that, what we have done is we have worked with successive governments and have developed the partnership and enhanced that partnership as we have progressed, to the point where we now have, as I said, 30 LAECGs. But we also have the whole breadth, so we are able to reach out into local communities.

If we go back a slide, we will see—we actually are located there. That is where our LAECGs are located across the state. What we are trying to do is capture the local community's voice as much as possible, and we are able to do that. We have a structured arrangement—we are an incorporated body, and we have a VRC, a Victorian Representative Council, and an Executive Committee that meet quite regularly. I know it was a bit harder during the virus arrangements, but we still did attempt to do that. We actually have a process where we are capturing that local community voice in all issues in relation to education.

Our partnership in education is across the breadth of education, right from early childhood through to adult education. So we advise in relation to early childhood, schools—primary, secondary—TAFE, adult education and universities. In line with that, we actually negotiated an accord or a similar partnership arrangement with the Vice-Chancellors Committee of Victoria, so we are able to give advice into that space as well. We are growing the numbers of our students across education to the point where I think last year—I was just at a meeting earlier today—100% of our four-year-olds are enrolled in kindergarten in Victoria. So this mythical gap they keep talking about in Canberra, we just smashed it in early years, which we are very proud of. We

believe that as those students develop across the education system we grow the education outcomes that we are all looking for. We had nearly 700 students that completed Year 12 during the pandemic, which is phenomenal when you think about that.

Our philosophy, the VAEAI philosophy, you can see it there, is that the Koorie student and community is always at the centre, and that then leads to policies, support services, planning, resource allocation, inclusive curriculum, open pedagogy and teaching styles, improved literacy and numeracy qualifications, and Koorie student empowerment. And that is what it is about. See, we believe that education actually is about empowerment, and if we can achieve the growth of education, we then achieve that empowerment outcome in our community. That has implications right across the spectrum for what our communities are attempting to do and is more so relevant with what we have just witnessed, and that is the advent of the treaty process, which leads to the possibility of—for me, being an older Aboriginal person, it is pretty hard to imagine the outcomes of that. But we think it is phenomenal, and then there is also the truth-telling voice that was just released today or two days ago, and our president, Geraldine Atkinson, is actually the co-chair of that treaty group and actually was part of the launch of that, which was phenomenal.

I do not know if I did it. I have been remiss here; I did not actually acknowledge country. We are actually on the lands of the Wurundjeri people, and I would like to acknowledge their elders past, present and—I love the new phrase—emerging. And we actually work very closely with the KYC, Koorie Youth Council, to make sure we carry that message.

But coming back to where we are in the Marrung governance structure, then we have the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups; Koorie education roundtables, which we established; and the regional partnership forums, the Marrung governance structure and then the state education board action. So we actually have a process where we are empowering community's voice to be at the table to actually pass on their knowledge and pass on their desires of what they would like to see occurring in education, and that is what the Marrung governance structure is in relation to. It is a 10-year plan which I think is the first of its kind in the country, especially in education and training—and I have always got to say that 'and training', which is great—and when you consider what we are talking about today, that is the disability guide in relation to that area.

That is our organisational structure. That is where we come from. As I said, my name is Lionel Bamblett. I am the General Manager of this organisation, have been for a number of years. Woody Eke, who is actually accompanying me in this meeting, is in our policy area in our office. I am a Wiradjuri, Bangerang, Yorta Yorta man, and I am very privileged in that sense, but I am also happy to be here today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Woody, would you like to add anything to that? No. Okay. If it is okay, we will ask some questions. I might kick it off.

Ms ADDISON: John, just before you do, can I just apologise? I got cut off, so I missed the first bit of the presentation. I am sincerely sorry to our presenters that I missed it, but I am happy to be back now.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Mr BAMBLETT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Could I just ask the first question. How well are TAFE disability support services meeting the needs of Koorie students and how can they be improved going forward?

Mr BAMBLETT: We do not believe they are adequate at the moment, but look, in saying that, there is really good support with the TAFE and adult education system at the moment and higher education. What we have been able to do is we launched a strategy in 2008, I think it was, and it is called the Wurreker strategy, and that is around TAFE and TAFE access and TAFE development. Each TAFE college, for example, is required to develop a Wurreker plan in conjunction with our local community, those LAEC groups that I put up before. It is in partnership with those groups, so that we are actually localising the training needs for people.

In the past training was always to the point where people could be educated, but we are educating people to actually leave their homes and then come to the metropolitan city to actually further their careers. What we wanted to look at is, actually, if you are going to be in a local community, what is the local economy, what is the local job network system that you can link into? That is what the Wurreker strategy is about, and we have found it to be highly successful to date.

In the disability sector, though, we think it is actually lacking in the sense that there have been, I think, attempts to improve that. I know the Minister, Gayle Tierney, just released some funding for the employment of extra support staff in the TAFE sector, which has been most welcome, but also in line with that we think there needs to be a bit more. The question of disability, for example—in our community the understanding about disability is somewhat different than in the non-Aboriginal community. We do not look at people in the context of being disabled. We look at them as a valued member of our families and our community, but in saying that, if we are going to go into a structured environment such as a TAFE setting or an employment setting, there need to be some support systems developed around that.

I will use an example here: in the schooling system we have developed a thing called CUST—Community Understanding and Safety Training. Under the support from the Minister for Education it was actually to be introduced across every school in Victoria. We think something like that would be most valuable also in this setting so that there is that cross-cultural understanding. We need that to happen in this area as well. I think the TAFE sector is well placed to do that with the advent of the new TAFE support positions that have just been made available in the TAFE system and also the growth in universal participation. There is that correlation right through. That is what we actually would like to see happening: that cross-cultural understanding that takes place. Going back to what I said previously, we do not sometimes view disability in the same context as the wider community, and if that is the case, sometimes some of our community members can slip through the cracks. So we want to halt that and address that. Hopefully with the findings that you come forth with, that might happen.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John. Thanks, Lionel, for your presentation today, and thanks for the work that you and Woody and your association do in terms of Koorie education. That is a great milestone—to have 100% of four-year-olds attending kinder. That is fantastic, mate. I know it has been an issue in my area here in West Gippsland. In terms of the expectations for learners with disability as well as Aboriginal learners, there has always been a culture of low expectation—just accepting and expecting that they will not achieve as well as perhaps they could. What do you think is needed to shift that mindset among learners, teachers and also the wider community?

Mr BAMBLETT: It is the breaking down of those stereotypes. That is why we actually negotiated with the Department around that CUST program. Aboriginal people are always seen as the other, to the side, never part of the whole planning matrix, so basically to move away from that we have actually introduced several other programs as well. But the CUST program actually opens up the dialogue between the training or education provider and the community, so there is that greater understanding and linkage between the people who are providing that training and the community. We are actually entering into joint planning arrangements. We have tried to do that also with the Wurreker strategy. So we are looking at the TAFE colleges. If they are going to develop a Wurreker strategy, they need to have local community endorse it through our LAECGs.

See, for example, previously a lot of the training that was taking place, and I will use Morwell in Central Gippsland as an example here, we were training people to actually leave their hometown, before we invented Wurreker. Basically, the best example of that is they did childcare training courses; it was not a degree course but a training assistant. But at the end of the year there were two jobs—two jobs in the whole town. So you were training a whole group of people up for an area that did not exist. Down at that time I think the mines were still operating and the power companies were still operating, but we were going off doing this other training. So we were encouraging people to leave their own community, to move away. That has a major impact. So it is that understanding and knowledge of each other, okay?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thank you, Lionel. Thank you, mate.

The CHAIR: Kat, do you have a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Lionel and Woody, for being here. Lionel, it is lovely to see you again. I know that this is a passion area of yours, and we have had several conversations about it already. I am interested in the transition from high school into TAFE. It is kind of a wobbly area for students from any background really, but in particular for students who face additional barriers, including students with a disability. I am interested in whether you have any thoughts on how TAFEs and indeed schools can better engage and support Koorie people with a disability who are considering TAFE but have not made the decision

yet to enrol in TAFE or perhaps do not know what their options are in relation to TAFE. Can you comment on that at all, Lionel or Woody?

Mr BAMBLETT: Yes. Woody, do you want to have a go at it?

Mr EKE: You go ahead.

Mr BAMBLETT: Basically, with that area, there is a career advice mechanism in schools. Not all students want to go off and do a university course. Not all students want to go off and do a doctorate. Someone might want to go off and become a plumber, and why wouldn't you with the money they can earn? Sorry, that is an aside. But basically, with that in mind, it is about that career advice coming from the schooling system, which we are working on and working with the Department to actually try to achieve that as best we can. The other one then is about working with the TAFE colleges. Most TAFE colleges have a Koorie advisory committee now—they have for years, a lot of them—basically working with those folk and our community and bringing them together around the understanding and the planning process.

This is going back to what I was saying about focusing and targeting training and understanding of education around local development and local leading. Otherwise you just have that population drift. I do not know if you are all aware, but the population drift prior to the pandemic was that Aboriginal people were moving more to a Melbourne base than regional Victoria, with 48% of the Aboriginal population in Victoria residing in Melbourne and surrounds. That is our population drift. That then has a possibility of leading to that community breakdown, and we have got to overcome that. You know, it is that local focus and also understanding of the resources and systems that are available, and that starts in school. A lot of people actually think career advice should start in and around Years 10, 11 and 12. We disagree. Young folk coming into secondary school start having ideas of what they want to do in life, and we need to encourage that, so that career advice process needs to extend back into those years as well.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you.

Mr BAMBLETT: No worries.

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

Ms ADDISON: Yes. Thank you, John. I was just wondering, in terms of teacher and staff capacity, how could the Victorian Government better equip TAFE teachers and frontline staff to meet the needs of Koorie learners with a disability?

Mr BAMBLETT: It comes back to that swapping of understanding. I will go back to what I said at the start. We in our community sometimes do not view people with a disability as having a disability, and so it is about making sure that they are accommodated in whatever planning goes forward. So some of that comes into play. A TAFE college teacher might see someone and think of them as having a disability or severe disability or whatever the case, which might not be so visible, but they view them in that light, whereas in our community that is not the case. But it is also about that community understanding, and it is about breaking down those barriers and those people and folk in that TAFE college and our community coming together and understanding the processes around that. Basically that is the way to solve a lot of this. We have got to demystify just what it is to be an Aboriginal person in this country and we have got to demystify what it means to be a non-Aboriginal person in this country, and that is about going forward together. I should say that with the point that I am not advocating assimilation, so do not do me in for that, Woody.

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

Mr ROWSWELL: Thanks, John. Lionel and Woody, if there was one thing you could fix in the current system, scripts aside, what would it be? What would give Indigenous people, Aboriginal people with a disability the greatest chance of completing TAFE and contributing more broadly to the community beyond that?

Mr BAMBLETT: Woody, have you got that, mate? Go on.

Mr EKE: I think it is quite an exciting and encouraging time for Koorie students in the VET sector at the moment, with the conversations that Lionel and Geraldine have been having with Minister Tierney and the

work of the Koorie VET Advisory Group. The ongoing work that that group is doing is fantastic, and resourcing every Victorian TAFE with a Koorie liaison officer and two Koorie student support officers is going to go a long way to supporting Koorie students with a disability. So if there is one thing that I think needs to change, I think it is a smooth implementation of filling those positions in the TAFEs and having every TAFE on board with a well-resourced student support unit and also the Koorie units within the TAFEs—so re-establishing or establishing those within each TAFE around the state and ensuring that there is somewhere where Koorie students and Koorie students with a disability can go within their TAFE that is culturally safe, that is staffed by Koorie staff that have relationships with Koorie services and mainstream disability services. I think that change is coming through the great work of the Koorie-led advisory group.

Mr BAMBLETT: Thanks, Woody. But, look, it is also the idea that I do not think we should be looking at people, because they are labelled as disabled, as completely the other. There is a great capacity as we are all seeing locally, as we are seeing some of the growth that is happening across the general community. That also impacts on our community and we need to encourage people to have aspirations to achieve whatever they want to achieve. That is what we are on about. That is what our Wurreker strategy and that is what our Marrung strategy that I showed before are all about as well.

Thanks for reminding me, Woody—I was a bit remiss in not talking about the VET advisory committee. We co-chair the VET advisory committee with the Deputy Secretary for training and sitting at that table are representatives from TAFE colleges, representatives from the Department and also, most importantly, representatives from Corrections. Because we have a high number of people, as we know, and the data shows that—not only our young people but our older people—in corrections, and we have got to also address that area and make sure that they are given those opportunities. There is a high number of people in that space that would be regarded as having a disability. We work with the Parkville school council in relation to that, and we have been working with Corrections in relation to that as well.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you very much. Thank you, Lionel. Thank you, Woody. We really appreciate your submission and your being online today with us. So we really appreciate it as a Committee, and we will let you know the outcome of the recommendations that we make and how that will benefit your communities as well.

Mr BAMBLETT: Thank you. But also, just before you go, next week one of my projects is actually—aside from education and everything else—the Aboriginal Advancement League, and a proposal put forward for a centre of excellence. I know that next week, I think it is, Kat will be turning the sod on the development of the women's football complex.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: We certainly are. I am looking forward to it, Lionel.

Mr BAMBLETT: Yes, and I think that is great. We want to do more in that space. People should always remember something: in Victoria and down the eastern seaboard of Australia, but more so in Victoria, we live in the most dispersed Aboriginal population in the country. The majority of our students in Victoria go to school where there is one to five. They do not go to school in large groups in the main, all right? That is a clear indication of the dispersal. That is not only in metro Melbourne, that is also across country and regional Victoria as well. So for us to actually address that and reach out to our community and grow our community as a strength-based focus, we need to develop that coordination, and that is what that is about, Kat, and I thank you for your support with that.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Lionel.

Committee adjourned.