

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 2021

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Shae Wissell, Chief Executive Officer, Founder and Executive Director,

Dr Judith Hudson, Non-Executive Director, and

Ms Christine MacJouvelet, Chair, Dear Dyslexic Foundation.



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

I also advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Thank you for being here and for making a submission to this very important inquiry. I welcome you today to 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. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief 5 minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. We have Gary Blackwood, MP, and Steph Ryan, MP, at this very important hearing. Thank you. You may proceed.

**Ms WISSELL:** Thank you. First, we will go around and introduce ourselves. I am Shae Wissell, and I am the CEO and Founder of the Dear Dyslexic Foundation.

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Hi. I am Christine MacJouvet. I am the Chair of the Dear Dyslexic Foundation and also have dyslexia myself.

**Dr HUDSON:** Hello. I am Dr Judith Hudson. I am one of the Non-Executive Directors on the board of the Dear Dyslexic Foundation.

**Ms WISSELL:** We would first like to acknowledge and thank you for having us here at this hearing today and for reviewing our submission. The Dear Dyslexic Foundation is a not-for-profit social enterprise. We operate under the social model of disability, where dyslexic individuals are properly supported according to their needs. Our mission is to empower young people and adults with learning disabilities to reach their full potential, and we give young people and adults a platform to share their lived experience of dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Our service model is built upon peer-led support principles, and we really use storytelling to raise awareness and to give voice to people with dyslexia, their parents and carers and enable them to self-advocate. We actively seek to address the challenges that dyslexic individuals face, including barriers to diagnosis, lack of visibility, acceptance and inclusion in school and employment, and access to support services. Through a collective dyslexic voice we produce regular podcasts, have a peer support helpline and provide an online community as well.

Dyslexia affects one in 10 Australians, including myself. It is a neurologically based specific learning disability that significantly impacts people's ability to decode and read words. This then affects people's ability to read fluently, to comprehend what they read, and their spelling can be compromised. There are also secondary difficulties that are less obvious for those that have dyslexia, and co-occurring difficulties can include high levels of anxiety, depression and a negative impact on feelings of self-worth. People with dyslexia can have difficulty with time management, organisational skills, mathematics, grammar and putting thoughts on paper, and they are just some of the challenges that we face and that students going into TAFE may have as well. The stress caused by dyslexia can be demoralising and in some situations it can disable us. As a person, it can leave us feeling unable to survive in a learning environment and it can leave us extra vulnerable to those who do not have dyslexia.

They are just some of the barriers to learning for those who have dyslexia who are accessing TAFE programs, and we will be discussing those challenges through the questions that we have from you today. Dear Dyslexic is well placed to support TAFEs in implementing and improving policies and procedures and providing educational packages to improve the skills and knowledge of educators and disability support workers within

TAFE. We are also able to implement the following activities that we talk about today as well as an app that is available to support some of the screening that we will discuss.

We kept our briefing quite short. We were given 5 minutes. We are happy to hand over to yourselves and start taking questions around our submission.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I will kick it off. So, how can TAFEs better engage and support people with dyslexia who are considering studying at TAFE?

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Thank you very much, Chair. First of all, by being dyslexic friendly TAFE is perfectly positioned to attract people with dyslexia and have a positive return on investment by giving these intelligent young people the new start they need to receive an education and become great assets to our society—attracting students with clear, hopeful messages. TAFE courses are a route to skill-based education and training that in many cases would be an ideal pathway for someone with dyslexia, by introducing IT training for those with dyslexia and digital literacy problems, providing information on resources and TAFEs amending their policies and procedures to meet the needs of students with dyslexia. There needs to be coordination between educators across subjects and courses, integration with disability support teams, a universal design approach for all students and multiple ways for students to gain and demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

Self-advocacy needs to be offered and encouraged by TAFE. Dear Dyslexic has helped PhD students with dyslexia form a self-help group. Due to the encouragement of our board member Dr Judith Hudson, a peer support self-advocacy group of dyslexic students was formed at the University of Tasmania also. So this model could be established in the TAFE system.

The process that would be useful for dyslexic people in the TAFE system would be using the LLN assessment results to help identify students who may have dyslexia; using an app—we have access to an app that screens for dyslexia, which is not a diagnosis and does not need to be; and then also, for those requiring it, providing assessment services by referrals for students to enable counselling, mentoring, tutoring and peer support programs. That is what we would like to see.

I teach VET in the finance area and am the LLN specialist at my RTO, and I have worked in the TAFE system.

**The CHAIR:** Steph, did you have a question?

**Ms RYAN:** Sure. Christine, I guess just to follow on, you say that self-advocacy needs to be encouraged, but obviously younger students in particular may face some challenges in terms of having the confidence or the ability to be advocates for themselves. So how do you think TAFEs can better support young people to actually put their hand up and be an advocate for themselves and seek that assistance where required? And what would you say is working well? What in the current system is failing?

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Right. I do not think young kids coming into TAFE see it as being dyslexic-friendly or friendly to people who have not succeeded at school, because many have never even been diagnosed. So we need to—and that was my very first point—be dyslexic friendly. These are intelligent people who have got tremendous capacity to learn. So dyslexic-friendly is the starting point—and giving encouragement, letting them know that there is a support group.

**Dr HUDSON:** Self-advocacy is about learning how to speak up for yourself and how to make decisions about your life, learning how to get information and aid information and understanding about your life directions. So a young person with dyslexia is no less capable than someone who is not dyslexic, but after years of failure—academic failure or failure in the school system—he or she may have experienced a negative impact on their self-esteem. They have low self-confidence levels and low feelings of self-worth. So they are often hampered by their communication difficulties as well and can be disadvantaged in that direction. Those with dyslexia generally have lower life satisfaction, lower life expectation in terms of achievement and poor health and wellbeing across a life span, and assisting a young person to build positive self-advocacy skills can only serve to counter this life trajectory.

For example, you could provide resources about self-advocacy for young people with disabilities, their family and service providers; screening and assessment services for students who have been struggling through school but, as Chrissy said, have not been identified—this could be offered through TAFE; and a range of

workshops—for example, attending a workshop on what your dyslexia diagnosis means. An awful lot of young people will be diagnosed for the first time with dyslexia when they enter a TAFE or further education learning situation, and they really do have absolutely no knowledge or understanding of what their disability is. They see the negative, but there are a lot of positives that have never been put to their understanding. Encouraging self-advocacy through support groups, using training videos and workshops to support living with a disability, doing advocacy support groups and understanding strengths as well as difficulties, sharing strategies that work for other people, finding out alternative ways of learning, giving instructions and learning about how to develop a positive self-image—all of those things can be achieved by the teachers and lecturers and can actually foster quite a turnaround in how the young people see themselves.

**Ms WISSELL:** And can I just add: making it a safe environment for young people to disclose and to be able to self-advocate, because if they have come through school and it has been a traumatic experience then they may not want to disclose their dyslexia—so making it a safe environment where they feel comfortable in disclosing is one of the first steps as well.

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

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes. Thanks, John. Your submission states that you feel the current training for TAFE teachers on dyslexia is inadequate. What do you think would be the ideal training package for TAFE educators to better meet the needs of learners with dyslexia?

**Dr HUDSON:** To ensure that they are identified and better engaged—

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Can I just say, there is not actually a training package that is currently available. Currently DVC offer a one-day or a half-day course which only some people get to go to and it is not completely in the Australian context; most of it is from overseas. We have developed quite a number of courses and presented at University of Tasmania, where the Dean there is dyslexic himself. Is it the Dean—did I get that right, Judith?

**Dr HUDSON:** The Vice-Chancellor.

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Sorry, the Vice-Chancellor. He would be most horrified, I am sure. So we have developed various courses for educators on dyslexia, but it needs to be more than just one quick afternoon or morning and they need to be kept up to date because there are constant changes in research. There needs to be ongoing PD not just in dyslexia but in all of these specific learning disabilities. Sorry, I cut that one a bit short, but there is not an actual nationally recognised course.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I notice that there are lots of highly achieving and very famous people that have dyslexia—Winston Churchill—and I did not know much about dyslexia until I read up on it. Obviously there are lots of people that live with dyslexia and are quite successful, like Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, Michelangelo, Picasso, Richard Branson, Steven Spielberg, Bill Gates—the list goes on and on. Obviously there is huge talent out there, and it is about tapping into that talent. So I just wanted your views on how mentors could be used to improve the TAFE experience for learners with dyslexia.

**Ms WISSELL:** That is a big list of successful people, and I think TAFE has a really amazing opportunity to work from that strengths-based approach, where people are able to succeed rather than coming from a failure of education till they get into TAFE. We currently run mentoring through the foundation, and we have found it quite successful. I think that the autism space has a fantastic mentoring program in higher education at the moment that we have been looking at really closely that seems to have worked really well, particularly in the university space, where someone that has autism is in a higher level within a university degree and then they take on that student and give them that support and encouragement over a period of time. I think that it is a really good opportunity for young people—anyone—that is at TAFE to have access to a mentor that can encourage them, provide them that support and give them that support in navigating the system, because it is quite complex. Just applying into TAFE, and all the forms you need to fill in, is challenging in itself, but once you get into the system, then having someone that can support and guide you and help to encourage you to stay in the education sector and to complete your diploma or whatever you are doing at TAFE I think is really important. I think there is a strong place for that type of support.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions, members?

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, John. Just in regard to the prison system, in terms of the needs of those in the prison system with dyslexia being met, how can they be better supported? Or, in the first place, are they being met? I assume not. So how can they be better supported?

**Ms WISELL:** Well, we know that there are high rates of people with dyslexia in the prison system from international research—they say over and beyond 40 per cent of people. Research out of Parkville, the juvenile justice centre there, said that 40 per cent of young people had dyslexia. So there are high rates. We know that they are not in Corrections—TAFE is not trained at the moment to support dyslexic students. People coming into the system may not have been identified at all. They are using the LLN now, so there is some level of literacy understanding when TAFE providers are working with these students, but again there is not that next step to see, ‘Well, if someone’s literacy skills are low, what is the reason for that?’. We have been working with Corrections Victoria for a couple of years now—it is really just the start of it—looking at how we could support the four TAFEs that go into the prison system. But at the moment they are not trained in dyslexia; they would not be able to identify it, and then there is no additional support for those students that may be identified with dyslexia to then help them to complete their course. We know that if they complete a course and they are able to be employed, then the chances of them reoffending are lower. So I think there is a lot of work that could be done in the prison system to support those students.

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Can I add to that very quickly? We did go to Kangan TAFE, Shae and I, and we did a presentation on dyslexia. The teachers were absolutely amazing TAFE teachers and they responded very well, but, you know, a 1- or 2-hour session does not arm you up to be able to go in there on a daily basis and do what is required with these very challenging students.

**Dr HUDSON:** Could I add just one little bit on that as well? What we teach or how we teach dyslexic learners, what we do with them, will work with all students, whereas if you have somebody who is dyslexic but is intelligent that is just lumped together with a group that have just low-level literacy, you are creating far more problems than you are solving. But if you can actually teach the teachers how to teach dyslexics, that will work for all of the students that they have got—and probably improve learning for all of them as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for being here with us this morning and for your submission. We really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

**Dr HUDSON:** Thank you.

**Ms WISELL:** Thank you for having us.

**Ms MacJOUVELET:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**