

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

(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 Sarah Connolly

WITNESSES

Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team, Brotherhood of St Laurence;

Ms Joanne Stevenson, TAFE student, and

Ms Helen Watkins, Head of Professional Studies, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

The CHAIR: I want to start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the various lands on which we all gather today, and I acknowledge that in this virtual environment we are gathering on many different lands, and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's standing order 234.

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 telephones 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.

We have a number of different MPs on this very important Committee. Gary Blackwood, MP; Juliana Addison, MP; Kat Theophanous, MP; and Sarah Connolly, MP, are all with us today. I invite you to make a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Ms CLARKE: Thank you. Hello. My name is Kira Clarke. I am a Senior Research Fellow in the Youth Opportunities Team in the Research and Policy Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. The observations I will share are drawn from the Brotherhood's work at the nexus of research practice and policy in vocational education and in inclusive communities. There are three things that I would like to briefly discuss today before we turn to questions: firstly, what we have heard from learners and from trainers about the barriers encountered by learners with disability along the VET learner journey; what we have identified as some of the needed improvements to address these barriers; and finally, how reform at the system level is needed to address broader challenges and enable the needed improvements to support learners with disability to access TAFE.

To begin, let us look at the learner journey. Learners with disability may face multiple barriers at various points along the way on a journey. This includes access to or transition into training, progress or transition through training and outcomes or transition from training into work or further education. The VET learner journey begins with access. Speaking with VET learners with disability during 2020, we heard consistently about the importance of advice from trusted individuals, with limited reliance on existing websites or career information as their primary source of TAFE or VET information. We heard from learners with disability that it was most often a trusted friend or family member or in some cases a case worker who was relied on to raise awareness and understanding of training options and how to navigate the process of choosing a course, applying for a course and enrolling in their chosen institution.

We have observed that for prospective learners who were already connected to services with some TAFE connections, they were more commonly having access to timely, relevant and accurate information that enabled their access to TAFE. For learners who were not service connected or who were connected with services that themselves were not connected or aligned with TAFE, there was more limited availability of the type of information that is needed to enable access to TAFE.

So the key challenge here is that the training system is not well aligned with important sectors that support and advocate for people with disability. There is limited systemic coordination between the training sector and relevant services and agencies, including between schools, jobactive providers, community-based support services and Centrelink.

Moving from access to progression through training: for learners with disability who have successfully accessed TAFE and are involved, support needed to enable their progress through their training may be directly related to their learning, for example, interpreting materials and clarifying assessments or supporting literacy and numeracy, or it may be related to personal, health or social and emotional needs.

There are two key challenges we have observed. Firstly, many learners struggle to understand and engage with their providers' systems and procedures, particularly those that are web based, including assessment and communication systems. When it comes to accessing institutional supports for learning or for non-learning purposes, we have heard frequently of the invisibility of supports, leading to the need for learners with disability, often at the point of crisis, to advocate for themselves and navigate institutional systems to find the right person or the right information. Secondly, many learners with disability describe relying on their teacher or their trainer as their main source of support. So our research has observed the really high esteem in which many learners hold individual teachers. VET teachers on the whole are not trained with high-needs matters in mind.

As one hearing-impaired learner studying Auslan described to us, there are uneven skills among TAFE trainers, a shortage of trainers skilled in working with high-needs learners and, as he put it, a deficient skill set amongst those who were industry trained rather than trained as educators. This is not a criticism of the commitment or effort of VET teachers themselves, rather a critique of the ways in which VET teacher capacity and capability is developed in light of the growing demand for inclusive approaches to supporting high needs and learners with disability in TAFE.

Finally, moving from progress through training to the challenges learners with disability face in translating the training to outcomes in the labour market and further education, as one learner, a woman in her late 50s with an acquired brain injury, described to us earlier this year, providers make very little available to learners in the form of high-quality take-home literature and provide limited support and information for transitioning out of programs upon completion. Our research has identified that while general employability skills supports, such as interview skills and resume writing, are increasingly common in TAFE, there remains limited targeted support for learners that builds understanding of labour market opportunities, limited building of learner awareness of the utility of their qualifications for both the vertical and horizontal mobility within an industry and limited access to meaningful workplace exposure and workplace experience that is crucial for building networks that enable employment outcomes.

So in considering this evidence from our work with learners, trainers and stakeholders in TAFE, there are some improvements that can make a difference. Firstly, better data. In the last five years the number of people with disability enrolled in VET in Victoria has hovered just under or just over 50 000. While there has been a 10 per cent increase in the last five years in the number of VET students identifying as not having disability, there has been only a 2 per cent increase in the number of VET students with disability. This suggests that some prospective learners with disability are missing out. If we are to successfully address barriers to TAFE for people with disability, we need to understand the multiple and cumulative impact of the barriers for people with disability. There is a need for the regular and systematic collection and publication of disaggregated data that indicates the nature of access to, transition through and outcomes from TAFE for people with disability. Particularly important is the collection of data that supports understanding of cumulative disadvantage or cumulative barriers—for example, for those living in rural and remote parts of the state, where there may be limited breadth of course choice or a need to travel to access training, those experiencing low-level training churn and labour market marginalisation and those from Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Stronger data will also enable the implementation of differentiated measures of equity performance in TAFE to understand the ways in which institutional practices are responding to the personal, learning and career support needs of VET learners with disability.

Another improvement that can make a difference is addressing the skilling of TAFE staff and strengthening cross-sectoral connections. There is an urgent need for interventions that address careers exploration, course and provider suitability and support access for both prospective and enrolled VET learners with disability. This requires building the capacity of TAFE staff and strengthening the alignment and connections between services working with and advocating for people with disability and TAFE. Raising the capacity of VET teachers to adapt to teaching those with disability requires significant investment. VET teachers are now being called on to develop effective strategies to assist high-needs learners, many with complex and challenging needs. Strategies aimed at raising TAFE teacher capacity should include working alongside specialists, assisting learners and building the familiarity of support agencies with vocational programs. These strengthened connections between specialist services and TAFEs are needed to enable TAFE support staff and trainers to work side by side in supporting more flexible pedagogy and enabling access for people with disability.

Finally, there is a need to align visible, proactive support for learners at key transition points in the learner journey. The efficacy of support for high-needs learners is not just about the type of support available; it is also about when that support is made available and the visibility of that support to the learner. Our research has shown that high-needs learners encounter a fragmented support system in TAFE that places the onus on individual learners to advocate to support access at the point of need. To strengthen the support system in TAFE there is a need to realign existing institutional learner support practices around the key transition points in the VET learner journey. This includes at the point of access and enrolment, during those all-important early weeks when learners are familiarising themselves with institutional practices and systems, at the point of transition between courses and between units and leading up to the completion of training. This realignment needs to be combined with a proactive approach to building student awareness of the available supports, not just once at enrolment but repeatedly throughout the training.

So in conclusion, considering the extent and significance of the challenges and the barriers learners with disability face throughout their VET learner journey, it is apparent that tweaks that address individual barriers are not going to be sufficient. There is a need for more holistic, system-level improvement. We advocate for a shift from a systems-centred approach to supporting learners with disability and other disadvantaged learners to a learner- or person-centred approach to support. Our person-centred vision is one in which people with disability can realise the same fundamental rights as everyone else to participate in the social and economic life of the community and to make their own choices and their own decisions. As such, our recommendation seeks to reorient Victoria's provision of vocational training through its TAFEs so that every step of the VET learner journey is adapted to the needs and to the views of those with disability. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Kira. Joanne now I think has joined us, so maybe we could just hear from Joanne, if that is all right, before we go to questions.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, that is good. I am fine with that.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here, Joanne.

Ms STEVENSON: Thank you for having me.

The CHAIR: We really appreciate it. So if you just want to give us a 5-minute—or up to you—outline of your experiences with TAFE.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes. Well, I started back in 2011 via completing year 12, not knowing what to expect, not knowing what courses there were. We ended up going with Tracey Wareham, and I have not looked back since. I have been here 11 years already. I just absolutely love it—the help that she gives, the courses, everything in general. It is never a dull moment in there.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic. Thank you. So can I just firstly ask, either Kira or Joanne, just in relation to the enrolment process at TAFE: how can we make it more accessible for people with disability? Can we make it easier for enrolment? Is it hard to do at the moment?

Ms STEVENSON: It can be. And now with COVID I think it is going to be a lot harder. Maybe you could just do, like, a one-on-one in a room, just have that one person helping you go through it all. And that ACER test is also extremely hard, so I reckon that could sort of be made a little bit easier for us kids, or students, that have a disability.

The CHAIR: Kira, did you want to add anything to that?

Ms CLARKE: Yes. We hear very similar descriptions to Joanne's from many of the learners in VET that we speak to and from trainers and TAFE administrators—that the enrolment process is often quite convoluted and complex and can be discouraging for high-needs learners and high-needs prospective learners. So a person-centred approach to supporting TAFE would extend to that enrolment access process and would look to provide targeted enrolment support for those prospective learners coming from backgrounds where we know they are likely to face some barriers and discouragement from the complexity of it—so to have a differentiated approach to enrolment support, so for those learners we know are going to need additional support to have a continuum where there might be that case-managed approach, like Joanne described, right through to intensive supports when needed. But to be differentiated is really important.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The Deputy Chair, Gary—I think you have got a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, thanks, John. A question to Joanne: when you were at school, Joanne, how much support did you get to help you decide what to do after you finished school?

Ms STEVENSON: Quite a bit.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Quite a bit?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, we had someone from eWorks at the time come down and go through what we wanted to do with job skills, and then we had a teacher sit down with us one on one and say, 'Right, so you're in year 12. You're going to be leaving school at the end of the year. These are the options. What would you like, and where would you like to go?'.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Excellent. So TAFE was encouraged to you as an option?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes? Fantastic.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, that was highly recommended to us kids, and to be in Tracey's class.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Excellent. Thanks, Joanne.

The CHAIR: Now, I am not sure if Juliana is online.

Ms ADDISON: Yes, John, I am here.

The CHAIR: You are? Excellent.

Ms ADDISON: Sorry for my late entrance—a few technical details. Kira and Joanne, thank you so much for presenting today. It has been really, really informative. Joanne, if I could ask you a question.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, definitely.

Ms ADDISON: In Ballarat we have got a range of different schools. Did you go to a specialist school?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: And I was up visiting my specialist school just the other day, and I was very pleased to have just given them \$10 million—

Ms STEVENSON: Oh, wow.

Ms ADDISON: to make our specialist school in Ballarat even better. But I was talking to them about the work that they do in year 12, and they are amazing. How many other students from your school decided to go to TAFE? Was it—

Ms STEVENSON: A lot. There are a lot of us.

Ms ADDISON: So that is obviously something very good that your school did.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: Do you have any advice for my school in Ballarat about them encouraging more people to do TAFE?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes. Get them to sit down one on one and describe it and talk about what the TAFE can offer, what there is and the additional support that they can get. And, yes, they will not look back if they do go, and it will be the best experience they can do.

Ms ADDISON: And did you find that having other school friends with you on your TAFE journey helped you make connections?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, definitely, because I had people there I knew, so it was less scary and less daunting.

Ms ADDISON: I think that is right for everyone; whether you go to TAFE or you are starting a new school, to know some people is so important.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, especially if you have anxiety; that can also play a huge part in it.

Ms ADDISON: Very good, so that support, one-on-one support—

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: and having other people that you knew coming through the system was really beneficial.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, definitely.

Ms ADDISON: Thanks, Joanne.

The CHAIR: Kat, did you have a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Yes, thank you, John. Thank you, Kira and Joanne, for your submission today. It has been really informative so far. You are the first witnesses that we have had and I feel like we have already learned a whole bunch just from what you have told us. I have a question probably for Kira—but, Joanne, if you want to jump in as well. It is around NDIS. How well have NDIS services supported people with disability to access TAFE, and which areas could be improved if any?

Ms CLARKE: So I am able to answer part of that question. I am happy to take the second part on notice and provide a written response. We know that there have been teething problems in the alignment between NDIS supports and TAFEs. And we know that in some ways, as Joanne described, that one-on-one support and building a sort of trusted advice is something that is potentially missing within the way the NDIS is enabling access to TAFE. So building awareness and familiarity with the VET system more broadly but also the types of courses and programs that are available within local communities is a really important part of the role played by support workers funded through the NDIS for prospective learners to VET. So we know that there have been teething problems, and that closer alignment is really important to overcoming some of those teething issues.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: That is helpful. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Sarah, did you want to have a question?

Ms CONNOLLY: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Joanne and Kira. Kira, that sort of statement that you read out at the beginning—I think that has really set the scene for this inquiry, and I was really interested in how you talked about a holistic approach and looking at, I guess, the needs of the person in a holistic way in which to help them achieve and do a TAFE course and complete TAFE. I thought that was a really great insight and a great way to start, so thank you.

I wanted to ask you and Joanne: what do you think that the Victorian Government can do to ensure that all TAFE teachers—and remember, not just the teachers but the frontline staff—are going to be equipped to successfully teach and support and interact with learners with disability?

Ms CLARKE: I might have a go first and then you can add—

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Ms CLARKE: So I think from a system-wide perspective the reorientation of the system through a person-centred approach is the first step of a very complex realignment. In terms of ensuring that TAFE teachers have the requisite skills, it is about working in partnership with specialists and with the specialist support agencies, because not all TAFE teachers are going to be able to respond to all different types of needs. So it is making

sure that you also have the support staff working alongside TAFE teachers to provide that team-based response to high-needs learners.

There is also an opportunity for greater knowledge sharing across the institutions, across the TAFE sector, in Victoria. So through the Jobs and Skills Centres, there is a lot of intellectual and cultural capital there related to providing support for learners with disability and high-needs learners, but what we have observed is you often have really great practices being developed—for example in Swan Hill, and really great practices being developed in Bairnsdale—that could be shared. So more cross-institutional sharing of some of this best practice, I think, is a really important step of rolling out some of that skill development more widely at a system-wide level.

Ms STEVENSON: And also, with the aide helpers that you were talking about, sometimes if they have a really big class we need—like say my class; we have got about 13. We can average up to 15 on a daily basis, and sometimes when you have got one teacher and one aide helper you sort of need that extra person in there—so like two helpers plus the teacher. Because it can get quite chaotic when you have got one different—say we have two courses going at the moment, we have got three actually, and we have only got one teacher and the one aide helper, and they have got to try and go between the three courses on one day, and that gets a bit complicated and just a little hectic and they get stretched. So if you had that extra—say the two helpers plus the teacher—that would sort of take the stress out of it.

Ms CONNOLLY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further questions from anyone? No? Anything further you wanted to add, Kira or Joanne?

Ms STEVENSON: More choices for different classes.

The CHAIR: Right.

Ms STEVENSON: Because some of us love working with animals and we do not have an animal course up here. The only way can do it is online, and that is not always linked through TAFE. And because it is something that some of us want to do—then there are some who want to do hair and make-up or just different courses that we do not have up here. If we do decide to do them, we have got to travel, and some of us do not exactly have the kind of transport that is needed. So—just more course choices for classes up here, maybe.

Ms CLARKE: Yes. Just to finish I would like to reinforce Joanne's comment there. This is a common story we hear particularly from learners outside metropolitan Melbourne—that there is sometimes limited access to the courses they want in their local community and limited familiarity with their caseworkers or their support workers of what the opportunities are in the local community and to access training beyond their local community. So again, coming back to the need for better data to understand the point at which learners may be being discouraged from VET and then building that cross-sectoral alignment between the support agency and the training system.

Ms WATKINS: Sorry, can I just jump in and make a comment? I am just lurking in the background here.

The CHAIR: Sure.

Ms WATKINS: My name is Helen Watkins, and I am the Head of Professional Studies here at SuniTAFE, where Jo is a student. I am just listening, and actually just—because Tracey could not be here today. The comment that I wanted to make was in relation to Jo's comment just then about the pathways. One of our big problems is we are able to host courses at level I, Certificate I level, but there is no pathway, no linking, between—we do not get funding for Certificate II or even entry-level Certificate III. So what we find is we are finding it very difficult to bridge the gap for students with disability from the entry-level course, where they are gaining those work-ready skills, to the next level. Because if we put them straight to a Certificate III or Certificate IV, we feel like we are setting them up to fail, but we are not funded to do anything at a Certificate II level. I think you will find that is quite common across TAFEs that we have this. We know there is a gap, but the Government has been very, very focused on the upskilling and they have almost missed this particular cohort of people.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I appreciate that. Can I just ask: how can TAFEs improve the information and support they provide to people with disability who are considering studying at TAFE? Is there anything that we should do further than what we are doing now?

Ms STEVENSON: Maybe get each TAFE in a different area to contact other TAFEs in different communities and just explain what they do and how they do it so there is a lot of communication between TAFEs, because there are some TAFE courses that other TAFEs do that we would like to know about but we do not have the communication lines set up between one TAFE to another.

The CHAIR: Gary, did you want to ask a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, John, to Joanne and also Kira. When you get through TAFE and you are trying to transition to employment I can imagine that is a really daunting place to be as well. How can TAFEs be better able to help in that transition process from TAFE to employment?

Ms STEVENSON: Kira, did you want to go first?

Ms CLARKE: Sure. One of the things we hear from a lot of the learners that we speak to, and some trainers, is that one of the major barriers in that transition is the lack of opportunity to start building the networks before they have completed their training. Unfortunately there are some stigmas to overcome for learners with disability transitioning into the workplace. When workplace placements, workplace experiences or workplace exposure are enabled and built into a training course, those networks start to be built, employers start to see the opportunities and start to see the potential and skills of learners coming out of their courses. We see that as really enabling some of that labour market outcome for those completing their courses. What can be done more with TAFE is about making sure those work placements, exposures and connections are built into the course well ahead of the transition point at completion and that there are more local community partnership and connections built between the courses where learners with disability are enrolled and their potential labour market opportunities.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Kira.

The CHAIR: Juliana, did you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: I did, thank you, John. And once again thank you, Kira and Joanne. We understand that students of all abilities often face many challenges within the TAFE sector to actually successfully complete their qualification. What supports do students with disability in particular need not only to participate but to actually complete their TAFE courses, to really make sure that they get to the finishing line?

Ms STEVENSON: Well, I have just done a Cert IV in ed support, which allows me to go into any school and become an aide helper. I found that some of the books in that were really challenging and daunting, so I would often go and seek, say, a different teacher out and just get their input on what the question means and what they would do—just go and speak to different teachers and get different information so I could complete each book and each question.

Ms ADDISON: Joanne, before I became a Member of Parliament I was a schoolteacher, and I know students like you who are very eager to succeed. What could we do for the ones who might be a bit more shy or a bit more anxious? You are obviously a very engaged learner. Could we do more with breaking down work and better understanding?

Ms STEVENSON: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: Should we be doing more with the materials to make them easier to understand? It could help.

Ms STEVENSON: Yes, definitely. Yes, that would really help out a lot of them, because there are some in my class that want to do different courses but they are just not sure where to go, how to do it and who to talk to—especially BJ; he is really shy on that sort of thing. He wants to do an animal course as well, because he and I love our animals, but we just do not exactly know where to go, who to talk to or how to get the information about each course.

Ms ADDISON: Terrific. You might have to come up and have a visit to our specialist school, because we have some sheep and we have a llama and an alpaca, and we are going to start doing some vet courses at our specialist school. We have got a farm, so maybe you should come up to Ballarat and visit us.

Ms STEVENSON: Definitely; I would love that so much.

The CHAIR: Sarah, do you have a question?

Ms CONNOLLY: Yes. This one is probably directed towards Kira. Kira, your submission recommends TAFEs go ahead and develop education and career plans for all learners with disability. What do you envisage these kinds of plans would include, and how can they be designed to maximise learners' TAFE experience?

Ms CLARKE: Thank you for the question. At the core these plans need to include a reflection of learners' individual agency, goals and aspirations. Just picking up on the observation that Joanne just made, there are often disengaging barriers to some learners, but they are encouraged to go into programs or courses that do not align with their own goals and aspirations or what they want to see. So at the core these plans need to be centred around documenting and enabling learners to make their own choices and to understand what the choices are but also something that documents and makes visible their needs as they move through a course and also as they move between courses or between institutions. So they could be broken down by the type of learning and non-learning supports, related to their levels of literacy and numeracy that are identified through normal diagnostic processes, their previous educational history and the type of learning history and learning experience. That would give the information to their trainers and their support staff to know where to target and where to provide the wraparound support they will need as they go through. I think Juliana just asked the question previously around what can be done to try and build and engage learning function. It is doing the type of documenting of what learners say they want, what they imagine for their future, and really using that as a guide for the type of pathway and the type of support that is really crucial.

Ms CONNOLLY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Are there any further questions? Okay. Kira and Joanne, thank you so much for being a part of this. It is a very important inquiry, and we value your submission. So thank you from all of us for making your submission.

Ms STEVENSON: Thank you for having us.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.