

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 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

Ms Meredith Peace, President,

Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, and

Mr Justin Bowd, Research Officer, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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. Could I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference. I invite you to make a 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you.

Ms PEACE: Thank you, Chair. If I can start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay our respects to elders both past and present and to any Aboriginals present with us today.

I will just start with an introduction. I am Meredith Peace, the AEU Victorian Branch President. With me is Justin Mullaly, who is the Deputy President, and Justin Bowd, who is one of our AEU research officers. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today, and I want to make some brief statements. TAFEs, as you would know, play an integral role in educating and training students, particularly students with disability. They provide high-quality vocational education but are under ongoing significant pressure due to a range of factors. Since this review commenced of course we have had the Macklin review report handed down on skills for Victoria's growing economy, and that indicates very clearly that further support and reform is needed in the TAFE and vocational education sector.

I want to go to three particular issues that we have raised in our submission that outline some of the ongoing pressure that our TAFEs are under which impacts on their ability to support students with disability within their programs. The first one is in relation to funding, and I reference the Macklin report, which highlights the fact that the funding model, in my words, is not fit for purpose and is in need of significant review. We have seen recently, in February, the release of the latest report of government services data for 2019, which again shows that Victoria is the lowest funded of any state or territory in the country, at \$14.24 per hour, and we are over \$3 behind the national average. Those hourly funding rates have not been increased since 2017. The subsidy rates are not indexed, and to put it in simple terms: the funding provided for TAFE does not actually cover the cost of training, which leaves our TAFEs in a very vulnerable position. We have seen from annual reporting over a number of years that despite significant investment by the Andrews Government, and very important investment, they continue to struggle, and that goes very much to that issue of the hourly funding rates.

I want to also address the issue of competition. We saw the introduction of contestable funding in the vocational education sector in 2008, exacerbated by massive funding cuts in 2012–13 by the then Baillieu Government, which saw significant damage done to our TAFE sector. As I said, we have seen significant investment from the Andrews Government over the last five or six years, which has certainly put our TAFEs on a much more secure footing, but they continue to struggle in that competition or contestable funding environment. Again, the Macklin review report highlights the fact that competition has not served the vocational education and training sector well, and it is not only competition between private provision and our TAFEs but also competition between our existing TAFEs. Coming to the issue of students with disability, of course those that are most vulnerable in our community and who need the most support have been the most affected by those changes. When a system is under pressure, the ability of our TAFEs to provide the support our students with disability need is further stretched. When we are dealing with profit motives or simply TAFEs having to cut corners because they do not have the funding that covers the actual cost of training, then it is our students with disability who are more often than not most affected.

If I also come to one aspect of the funding, what we knew in past years as community service obligation funding was cut by the Baillieu Government in 2012, and whilst we have seen funding levels increase under the Andrews Government, that funding was never and has never been fully restored. That funding particularly provided onsite campus support for students with a range of learning needs and particularly for students with disability. For example, prior to that, in 2012, we had counsellors on site who could work directly with students in classrooms and provide support outside classrooms—that one-on-one support which is often needed to make sure that our students with disability are able to engage effectively in their learning program and get the support

they need throughout whatever qualification they are doing. The contestable and inadequate funding has also meant that we have seen impacts on teacher workload, things like larger class sizes and compressed delivery of courses, and one of the things students with disability often need is the capacity to complete their studies over perhaps a longer period of time. When our TAFEs are under funding pressure, that compressed delivery means that there is little latitude available for those students to be able to get the support they need and also to be able to complete their studies in a particular qualification over a longer period of time.

I want to finish just by coming back to where I started, which is in relation to the release of the report and recommendations from the skills for Victoria's growing economy review. That review made a whole raft of recommendations, many of which we support. Central to that is unifying our VET sector, but in particular also unifying our TAFE sector. We have TAFEs which operate individually across the state as standalone TAFEs and also the dual sector. Not only are they competing with private providers, they are competing with each other, and for our TAFE sector to meet the needs of students, to be student centred and particularly student centred for students with disability, we need to see a much more unified system. That unified system needs to be driven by quality. That must be at the centre of our provision of vocational education in this state. We want to see the best education and training provided to students from all walks of life, and that is also central to that report.

Finally, that report recommends, as I said at the start, that there be a comprehensive funding review. All aspects of funding in our vocational education sector need to be reviewed; they need to be better fit for purpose and they need to cover the actual cost of training. Never before—because of the pandemic we are still experiencing—has there been a more important role for our public TAFEs. We need to make sure that they are provided with the support they need so that they can support the most vulnerable in our community to get access not only to high-quality education and training but, importantly, to employment—good, decent and secure work for their futures, which we know will of course benefit our whole community. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Meredith. Justin Mullaly or Justin Bowd, did you want to make any comments?

Mr MULLALY: Not at this stage, Chair. Thank you.

Mr BOWD: Me neither, thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much for that very important submission, very comprehensive submission. Can I just ask in relation to the free TAFE, other than improving the affordability, obviously, how well are free TAFE courses expanding opportunities for learners with a disability?

Ms PEACE: I think one of the barriers to students with disability is of course cost. So as you rightly point out, free TAFE has I think been extremely important in removing one of those barriers for participation for students with disability. It has enabled them to get access to courses which previously were for financial reasons prohibitive. That has been an important change, I think, but as I outlined in my opening remarks, we also need to see better support for students with disability in a range of other areas so that when they are enrolled in their TAFE qualification they can actually complete that successfully, whether that means they do it over a longer period of time, whether that means they are able to spend more time with their classroom teacher to get that extra support they need or whether it is the provision of a counsellor on site that they can work with to address any other particular barriers that they may have. So free TAFE has been fantastic for a whole range of reasons, but for students with disability there are other barriers which also need to be addressed.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John. Meredith, thanks for your submission and your presentation this morning. In terms of course flexibility, what types of flexibility could TAFEs introduce to their courses to make them more inclusive of learners with disability?

Mr MULLALY: Thank you for the question. I think one of the challenges, as Meredith pointed out, is the move that has occurred in the vocational education sector, including in TAFEs, to what we call 'compressed delivery'. What that means is that you have courses being delivered in less than the nominal hours as set out by regulation. The issue there is that you do not necessarily, where you have students with higher needs, including students with disability, afford them the time to learn the things that they need to learn. But just as important as being instructed in the particular skills or knowledge that the course contains is the capacity to demonstrate that knowledge through the competency-based assessment system. So from that point of view, I think one of the

flexibilities that TAFEs need is that where they identify students who need more time not just to learn but to demonstrate skill attainment and knowledge attainment there is flexibility in the provision and there are the resources available to that TAFE in order to make sure that the teacher is available or any auxiliary supports are available for that student. That is one example I think that is a really important one, because I guess the key to competency-based learning is that students leave with the skills that enable them to get the job and that employers can rely on that people can actually undertake particular tasks. From that point of view, being able to have the time and flexibility to demonstrate competency is incredibly important.

Mr BLACKWOOD: So just to follow up on that, Justin, and thank you for the answer, are we looking at the option of perhaps tailoring the timing of the course and the content over a specific time—tailoring that to suit each particular person with a disability? Is that the stage you would like to get to?

Mr MULLALY: Well, I think—to take a step back if I may—the regulatory regime actually requires already that courses are tailored to the needs of each student whether they have disability or not. That is the whole basis of a competency-based system—that you are actually meeting the needs of the student in terms of what they need to learn, when they need to learn it and when is the most appropriate time to assess them. Of course there needs to be some construct around that, because of course our TAFEs have to deliver to students not just as individuals but certainly as students in groups and in classes, but the very basis of our system should enable us to tailor things to the needs of individual students with disability. The biggest hurdle to that at the moment is the resources available to make that happen meaningfully for each of those students.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Justin.

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

Ms ADDISON: Thank you very much, John, and thank you, Meredith, Justin and Justin. I was wondering if we could turn our minds to quality teaching and learning in our TAFE sector. I note that you have raised the issue of teacher registration in your submission, for TAFE teachers to be registered through the VIT. So if you could just explain to us again: what are the current requirements to qualify as a TAFE teacher and what extra resourcing and extra considerations are needed to make the transition to registering all TAFE teachers through the VIT?

Ms PEACE: I will start, and you can add. The current qualifications require a Cert IV in assessment and training—and obviously industry experience in the relevant area that you are teaching. As you just mentioned, we believe that our teachers should be fully qualified teachers in both aspects of teaching, both your industry experience as well as your ability to actually teach and engage adult learners—and those adult learners could be, as we hear today, students with disability, school leavers, people returning to the workforce or people who are unemployed, an incredibly diverse student population. So your ability to actually be able to teach and develop relationships, which are so integral to the learning process, we believe is fundamental to being able to deliver high-quality education and training to the Victorian community.

As part of that, as you have alluded to, when people are fully qualified—and I might get Justin to touch on that in terms of equivalent AQF levels—we would like to see them registered through the VIT. Teacher registration is an incredibly important mechanism to ensure that you not only have people who are appropriately qualified but are fit and proper to teach. We have seen a vast improvement over many decades where the teaching workforce and teacher education unions have fought very hard to see their members appropriately registered, because it does play an important part in the quality of what is then being able to be provided within a particular education institute. I might get Justin to comment on our industrial agreement, which is very much framed around both increasing qualifications and increasing quality.

Mr MULLALY: I think it is important to recognise that the access qualification to be able to be employed in any registered training organisation, including TAFE, is that Certificate IV. That actually is not a teaching qualification; it is an assessment qualification. As Meredith pointed out, critical when people are entering into a career in vocational education as teachers in our TAFEs is developing their teaching skills. Our argument is really clear: we want people to enter with a set of requisite teaching skills and in that way have that recognised through registration. The industrial agreement that we struck with TAFEs in 2018 builds on a long history of industrial arrangements in TAFEs that actually peg classification levels and salary to the qualification level, and it is the teacher qualification level. For example, the highest paid TAFE teacher at the moment would be one who has an AQF 6-plus qualification in teaching, which is the equivalent to a bachelor or a diploma

qualification, in that fashion. It is important to us because what we have to do in order to ensure high-quality VET provision is to marry up high-quality teaching skills with knowledge and industry experience and continued currency of that industry experience. In that fashion, we think that there is a really unique place for the VIT to ensure that we have got quality as measured by registration—and not just in our TAFEs. We do not need to go over the history of very poor quality outcomes over recent years because of the arrangements that have enabled unscrupulous, for-profit providers not to actually focus on quality, let alone the capacity of the teachers that they might have in front of students.

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

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Meredith and team, for your presentation this morning. I did not take account of how many times you mentioned the term ‘funding’ in your presentation, Meredith, other than to say I took a mental note that it was quite a number of times. Have you given consideration to what that quantum looks like? To get the system back on track, to make it as accessible as we possibly can and for our system here in Victoria to be—I hate using this phrase—perhaps even gold standard, what does that look like? What financial contribution are you looking for from the state government to elevate our TAFE system in Victoria to that gold standard?

Ms PEACE: There are a couple of comments I would make. One of our recommendations, which is a recommendation that we have been making for many years, is that the bulk of government funding for vocational education should be allocated to TAFE. They should be seen, and I think they are already, but they should absolutely be seen as the leading provider, both in terms of volume and quality, for vocational education in this state. As such, our recommendation is that at least 70% of government funding provided for vocational education be provided to our public TAFEs to ensure that they are on a stable footing. In addition to that I think you can also look ...

Mr ROWSWELL: Help me out here. So my specific question was the quantum. So what is 70%—what does that look like in terms of dollar figures? What are you asking the state government for here?

Mr MULLALY: I think we would need to take that question on notice in terms of wanting to ensure we give some accurate, if only approximate, figure to that. I think what we would say, though, as a basis for that calculation, that moving Victoria towards funding at least at the national average per student contact hour is an important step forward. But I think what we would say, given the state of vocational education funding nationally, it needs to move further than that. But if it pleases, we would like to come back, and take that question on notice.

Mr ROWSWELL: Outstanding. Thanks so much.

Mr BOWD: Sorry, I am not sure if this is helpful or not, but we are about 20 to 25% below the national average as far as hourly funding goes. So increasing the hourly funding component of TAFE funding to that level would take about a 20 to 25% increase.

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

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Meredith and Justin and Justin. My question goes to some of the comments that you made, and in your submission, recommending a unified TAFE system to create efficiencies of scale and to strengthen or streamline governance. Can you articulate for the benefit of the Committee and of this particular Inquiry what benefits that would mean for students with disability, perhaps drawing on examples from interstate?

Ms PEACE: As I said earlier, what we have seen through a competition-based model is obviously increased competition both between public and private providers but also within our TAFEs. I think at a general level rather than specifically about students with disability we have a circumstance where you could attend a TAFE in one part of the state and enrol in a Cert III in a particular qualification. You could attend a different TAFE somewhere else in the state and enrol in the same qualification, and you could be charged a different amount of money. You could also get access to a different amount of direct contact hours, which goes to the issue of compressed delivery that Justin referred to before. We have also got TAFEs that are effectively operating as individual businesses all around the state. Let me be very clear: this is not about amalgamating TAFEs, closing TAFE campuses down; it is about getting our TAFEs to work cohesively together, to look for ways to do some of that background work. I think this is something that Jenny Macklin highlighted in her recent report: that they

should look at some of those perhaps, if I describe them as, administrative systems that sit behind the direct work in the classroom that could be done in a more unified way across what is effectively a system. We want to see our TAFEs work as a system, not as separate entities, and that is for the benefit of our students.

Look, I am no expert on what is going on in other states, but we have seen a number of other states move to kind of a single TAFE model. I think New South Wales is one of those. But that has also been done at a time when they have drastically cut funding and are in fact closing or selling off campuses at the moment. So I do not think there are good comparisons around looking at a more unified system, for example, when we can compare to New South Wales. There is not much point talking about making a more unified, higher quality system if you do that in concert with looking at shutting down services and cutting budgets. As I have said before, the whole funding system needs to be reviewed and increased alongside some of those issues around a unified system. I might ask Justin to add to that.

Mr MULLALY: Yes, if I may add: to specifically come back to that issue of disability and how a unified system can support students with disability, I think that there is a deep connection between having a standard that is being delivered in terms of provision from one TAFE to the other, and that is particularly important for students with disability. There is a lot that is some great practice in individual TAFEs. A more unified TAFE system would enable us to actually share that practice in a much better way. I think that there are particular and important needs that can be addressed in an even better way than they are now when it comes to mapping, knowing, understanding and supporting local businesses and industry. That of course relates to both the operation of TAFE for all students but particularly finding opportunities for students with disability in terms of giving them the experience in the workplace whilst there are undertaking their studies, but, as importantly, finding opportunities for them in terms of employment, if that is what that student needs, in their local area. A more unified system will better position our TAFEs in conjunction with government, of course, and in conjunction with business and industry to identify where there are strengths and where TAFEs can fill the gaps and where we can marry that up with the needs of students with disability.

The CHAIR: Any further questions, Members?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, John, just a question around teacher training. I think both Meredith and Justin have mentioned the importance of having our teachers suitably qualified. How do you think the Government can ensure, or what changes should they make to ensure, that teachers do go into the suitable training that they need to meet the needs of students with disability?

Mr MULLALY: I think in terms of ensuring that when people get qualifications that enable them to become teachers in vocational education and training—and I say that on the back of our earlier comments that we think the current entry standard does not meet the need, so I am assuming that the comment is based on the fact that we would be advocating for improved entry standards—I would have thought, in terms of enabling entry to teaching, you would have parts of those courses that actually focus on training our teachers so that they can identify and address, to a good degree, the needs of students with disability. I think that needs to happen of course in concert with expertise that is available more broadly in TAFE, because of course it is not reasonable to expect all teachers to have all the knowledge for all needs. It is about making sure that we are marrying up a sufficient amount of knowledge for individual teachers with those other support services. I think it is critical that teachers have access to ongoing professional development, and I think that that is a central plank. But I actually think that there is something that we often do not talk about that is really important here, and that is if we are talking about supporting students with disability to get training and to get qualifications to get a job, we actually have to have our teachers really well placed to talk with business and industry about how we can ensure that businesses are well placed to accommodate the needs of those students and make them productive members of their workforces. That is something that a teacher can do—again, to an extent—but I think it is an important and often missed part of the conversation here.

Ms PEACE: If we have time, can I just quickly add that the other part of that equation, I think, certainly for the future, is also looking at how we are going to attract the next generation of TAFE teachers into our TAFES. Just following Justin's line there, I think there needs to be a lot of work done between our TAFES, our government and also industry to have conversations about what models we can use into the future to make sure that we are able to attract the next generation of teachers. Whether that is the kind of model we have now or whether it is perhaps a hybrid version of that, where perhaps people are employed in industry still but spend part of their time as qualified teachers working in a TAFE, I think there are real opportunities there to have

some deep conversations about the next generation of TAFE teachers, because I think we fear that we will be in serious trouble if we do not actually turn our minds to that issue in the near future.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can I just ask one more question? This is not a leading question, regardless of who is in government federally, but do you think there should be a national approach, more of a hands-on approach, from the national government in relation to TAFE in dealing with some of the challenges?

Ms PEACE: Absolutely the federal government has a role to play, and they provide significant funding, of course, to the sector. At the moment they have a very different view about the provision of vocational education than the Victorian Government. Their view—if I can speak broadly about the recent review that was conducted by the Productivity Commission—focuses on increased competition and also going back into another student loan model, and of course VET FEE-HELP was a significantly discredited model, which was seriously rorted and left many students with mountains of debt and often no qualifications or very low-quality qualifications. Certainly I agree, regardless of who is in government nationally, we should have a more unified approach across the nation, but that is difficult given the current circumstances where the agenda of the federal government is a very different one to the kind of more unified system—not based heavily on competition—and our free TAFE model, which of course has provided access for many students and particularly students with disability.

Mr MULLALY: If I may add, I think the other thing that we are very conscious of and very concerned about is a very strong move by the Commonwealth—and we have seen this through the JobTrainer arrangements between the Commonwealth and each jurisdiction—and that is a move away from subsidising full qualifications and a move towards subsidising skill sets, which are bit-part elements of qualifications. We have a very strong view that governments, when subsidising training, should be subsidising proper qualifications, not its and bits of qualifications. And if there are to be sub-components of qualifications, that should be available on the basis that somebody already has a qualification that is suitable in that way. It is about a building set on top of a qualification, rather than a simple skill set that would enable people to be able to do one particular task or one set of tasks within a particular job or industry. Running things down to that very compartmentalised level will not serve us in the long term in terms of having qualified people who have skills that are transferable in a genuine way, as the labour market changes over time, as it will, and as people's needs as individuals change. We need to have people have broad qualifications so that they can get jobs that meet their needs, both in terms of making sure that they can have the income they want but contributing to the economy more broadly. We will not get that if we end up with a model that is just based on short-term skill sets, and that is quite a concern of ours in terms of the federal government's agenda.

The CHAIR: Okay. We are well over time. Thank you very much for your submission, Meredith, Justin and Justin. We really appreciate the fact that you took so much time and so much thought has gone into your submission. Thanks very much for being here today.

Ms PEACE: Thank you. Thanks for your time.

Mr MULLALY: Thank you.

Mr BOWD: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.