

# 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 Catherine Dunn, Individual Advocacy Officer, and

Ms Olivia Beasley, Board Member and Educational Sub-Committee Member, Deaf Victoria  
*(both via Auslan interpreter).*

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability. All mobile 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. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. But before I do that, can I just advise the committee and the audience this session will be interpreted in Auslan. When asking a question, Members are requested to pause until spotlighted on the screen before talking. For those audience members who would like to view closed captions, please click the CC icon on your screen and select 'Show subtitles'. Thank you. Did either Catherine or Olivia want to start? Would one of you like to start?

**Ms DUNN:** Good afternoon. Before we begin, we would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands that we are meeting on remotely today. Deaf Victoria would like to especially acknowledge the traditional owners of the land—the Boon Wurrung and the Woiwurrung Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation—that we work on. We pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Deaf Victoria is the peak advocacy organisation for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing Victorians. My name is Catherine Dunn, and I work as an Individual Advocacy Officer and as an Outreach Officer. We were established in 1982 by Deaf community members. We would love to thank Parliament and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, DFFH, for the funding provided under the Office for Disability.

I would like to thank the Parliament for the opportunity to present today. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and show my appreciation for the many Deaf advocates who have come before me and led to organisations like Deaf Victoria who seek to advance human rights and civic participation for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. For the parliamentary members and those watching the live stream, you may notice that the view is slightly different as closed captions are being provided and the size on screen of those using Auslan, such as myself, Olivia and the Auslan interpreters, is larger. This is to ensure that the session is accessible not only for Deaf Victoria, who are presenting today, but also for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people who may be watching this public hearing. We thank the parliamentary staff for making that happen behind the scenes.

This accessibility is crucial, with the 2016 census recording 11,685 persons in Australia who use sign language at home. Of these, Victoria has the second-highest population with 3,130 signers, representing 26.8 per cent of the total. There was a 2 per cent per annum increase in the number of identified sign users in Victoria from 2011. It is worth noting that the measurement tool, being the census, is flawed in many ways given the fact that Auslan has not appeared as a language choice selection and the survey is written in English, which could pose participation barriers to Deaf people with lower levels of English literacy.

We will assume that members have read our submission to the Parliament's hearing for the Inquiry into TAFE accessibility for learners with a disability prior to today's session. This submission highlights some of the barriers to successful participation for Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners. I will highlight some of these now: the lack of awareness by TAFE administrators and educators on how to provide appropriate access and where to go for support or advice; number two, no apparent mandate for TAFE staff to receive specialised and mandated training from specialised disability organisations on how to make education inclusive; number three, a shortage of Auslan-fluent staff, such as interpreters, to support Deaf and hard-of-hearing TAFE learners; and number four, the lack of specific and earmarked funds for disability access, which can lead to substandard provision or even refusals by TAFE staff.

Our submission demonstrates our core values of authenticity in ensuring Deaf and hard-of-hearing people are represented at all levels and in advocating for their human rights and equal opportunities. We would like to highlight the experiences of Deaf and hard-of-hearing TAFE students today. However, we note that the Department of Education and Training's submission and hearing for this inquiry lacked clear pathways for Deaf and hard-of-hearing TAFE students. The Department of Education and Training briefly outlined their collaboration with Expression Australia and Melbourne Polytechnic in growing the workforce of Auslan interpreters for Deaf and hard-of-hearing TAFE students; however, there was no mention of deafConnectEd, which is their funded service provider to provide support and advice to ensure TAFE accessibility for Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, nor BDEI, which is part of the Department of Education and Training's inclusive education professional practice branch. I will now hand over to Olivia.

**Ms BEASLEY:** Thanks, Catherine. I would like to extend my thanks to the members and staff who have made our presentation possible today. Today I will be expanding upon our submission with some of our own anecdotes. I will provide some ideas for solutions and will happily take any questions from the Members.

My name is Olivia Beasley, and I am a Board Member of Deaf Victoria. I was born and raised profoundly Deaf. I was born in a Deaf family, so my first language is Auslan. I am part of a very large Deaf family, so with Auslan as my foundation language it enabled me to learn English.

Sorry, I am just going to have a momentary pause before I go into further detail. I can see that the captions are not actually working on the live stream. I just want to touch base with the back end of the session today just to ensure that the captions will be able to function. This way we can have captions as well as Auslan access for all of our viewers. I just want to check that everything is okay. I really appreciate you maintaining that caption access for everyone, as we acknowledge that it is not only Deaf people who are strong Auslan users who will be tuning in to today's session, but it will be those who also rely on captions and English access.

In Australia one in every six people faces hearing loss. This is predicted to increase to one in four by 2050. This means that the community has various individuals who live very different lifestyles, have different cultural influences and different interests in various areas. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people do vary throughout, and they are a diverse group. They exist at all levels of society—as CEOs, managers, plumbers and electricians, teachers and nurses, apprentices, parents, grandparents, carers and friends. But I would say most of them are students at some stage in their life.

My father and brother are Deaf themselves, and they have been involved in the TAFE sector and TAFE system for quite some time. They have always been very motivated to gain qualifications and further their education. Unfortunately they have faced several barriers in the TAFE sector. They try to improve the system and have conversations which can improve their access; however, that is not always possible to achieve due to the nature of the system. They often do not complete their study or have not done so, and they continue to face barriers no matter how they try to overcome them.

My brother was very fresh to the TAFE sector last year and he was very much looking forward to his new start to education in the tertiary sector; however, he faced barriers from the very beginning at the enrolment stage. Unfortunately his experience was quite negative, and he was faced with very patronising approaches from teachers and was believed to not be at the same level as other students. This really reflects that the TAFE sector needs to become more equitable for access in order for all students to have a positive and similar experience. There are ways in which reasonable adjustments can be made to enable access and to give people the opportunity. Unfortunately this does not often occur within the TAFE sector due to not enough resources, not enough knowledge of individuals who work in the sector and not enough specified knowledge in regard to Deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students often face challenges when it comes to advocacy and advocating for their rights, and it is important that the educational institutes do consider what they can provide so that there is not additional stress and anxiety placed on a student who is considering the pathway of TAFE.

In an ideal world for a Deaf student who is navigating the TAFE system, I will walk you through a bit of a global overview, starting with the enrolment process. That is obviously a very critical process, and to have access from the beginning of the enrolment process can ensure the rest of the process is done smoothly. So say, for example, somebody were to arrive for enrolment day and start discussions, to have tools such as iPads and notepads and to have people aware of different communication methods prior to a Deaf person approaching

them will immediately enable this Deaf person or hard-of-hearing student to feel confident that their access can be met.

Starting with that first approach and that first discussion, they then need to be referred to the Disability Liaison Officer, or the DLO. That DLO should be equipped with a range of understanding. They should be very knowledgeable in regard to Deaf and hard-of-hearing requirements and be able to pose options that this person can access for their education. If they are unsure which options or what suggestions to make, they should have the knowledge of somebody else that they can connect with to gain an understanding. They should not be imposing pressure on the Deaf students by explaining the extensive costs of making certain arrangements. They should be having conversations about interpreters and captioners, asking the student themselves what their preference is and trying to mitigate that 'back and forth'.

After that conversation with the DLO, the DLO should then be equipped with the knowledge to go to the teachers who will be educating the student, brief them prior to the commencement of their studies and ensure that they have the skill set to be working with Deaf students and hard-of-hearing students. They should understand the accessibility requirements—how to work with an interpreter, how to provide captioning—and they should be enabling the student from the moment they enter class. They should not be complaining about the difficulties of providing this access to the students.

The classroom should be created in a way that enables full participation and integration of the Deaf student with the rest of the students. They should not feel singled out or segregated. The teachers themselves should be equipped with the knowledge to approach the student after their class and see whether or not there are any other adjustments that should be made or any improvements that can be made to that setting. The teachers, once again, should have the skill to know how to make those reasonable adjustments. If, for example, an interpreter was not able to be provided for a session or if captioners were not available, they should have the skill in knowing other ways they can make adjustments and having a conversation with the student in regard to this. Unfortunately, the landscapes are often inequitable for Deaf students. It is really important for a student to feel equity and feel that they are going through the same experience as their other classmates. They should not be feeling the pressure or the anxiety prior to starting their class or their educational experience. They should really feel peace of mind and should feel confident in the system to access their education.

So, in conclusion, we do acknowledge that the system is not always smooth. There are always areas and room for improvement, but it is a matter of how people approach those gaps and how people begin to make those improvements. If an interpreter is not available, for example, there needs to be some strategic thinking or innovative thinking and other ways that access can be achieved for the student. Likewise, if captioning is not available, teachers need to show flexibility and understanding of how they can make improvements. The burden should not be falling on the Deaf student or hard-of-hearing student to receive access to their education. If there are barriers to their learning or delays to their completion of certain assignments, it should be given and understood that they require an extension. It should not be the student's responsibility to prove why an extension is required. It is due to the level of education and lack of understanding of access, perhaps, that has led to that extension being required.

Now, talking about the idea of a picture in picture, where an interpreter might be visible on screen in a small square on the screen, that is not conducive to full access. So, as mentioned before, the idea of having more visual space where you can see an interpreter more visibly and larger on screen, that is conducive to good access. Once again, it is a matter of having those conversations with the interpreters to understand what else can be done to provide better access and gaining the knowledge. That could also include providing captioners for classes and understanding the process of how to book captioners. Interpreters also have various levels of skill, so it is important that the interpreter's skill sets are being considered.

Once again, I would like to reiterate that it is really the TAFEs' responsibility to ensure that they are providing the access that is required for the students. They should be able to learn the subject of their choosing without feeling the burden of trying to make adjustments themselves to receive the access they require.

Thank you all for watching. I would now like to pass it back to Catherine Dunn.

**Ms DUNN:** Thank you, Olivia. As Olivia has mentioned, there does need to be a holistic approach in ensuring the accessibility of TAFE. We need to think outside of the box—or rather, outside of the classroom—

to ensure Deaf and hard-of-hearing students can access all of TAFE's aspects from enrolment, student wellbeing and studies all the way through to graduation.

Earlier I touched on the four main issues for TAFE Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Deaf Victoria recommends the following: continued investment and commitment by the Department of Education and Training in addressing the shortage of Auslan interpreters and staff fluent in Auslan through a dedicated workforce development strategy in collaboration with community consumer groups like Deaf Victoria and service providers and training experts such as Expression Australia, Melbourne Polytechnic and RMIT. Secondly, there needs to be clear commitment and funding from the Department of Education and Training for accessible pathways at TAFE by emphasising the position of deafConnectEd and the Victorian Deaf Education Institute, thus upskilling TAFE administrators, educators and disability liaison officers in their capacity to increase positive outcomes for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. We also need to be engaged along with other disability advocacy consumer groups to have a seat at the table on state education committees. We note that despite repeated requests we have not been engaged in the process. TAFE is not limited to the classroom, so access should not be either.

We would like to thank the Parliament again for the opportunity, and we look forward to the ongoing commitment to accessibility and engagement with the Deaf community. Thank you very much. Thank you very much for watching our presentation. We would now like to open for any questions that might come from Committee members.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We really appreciate your presentation today and your being with us today and also obviously your submission. I would like to ask something about COVID, and that has obviously had an impact on communities right across the state and indeed right across the nation and the world. My question is: we have now adapted to remote learning to a certain extent in times of restrictions on movement, so to speak. What can TAFEs learn from the shift to remote learning during COVID-19 to do it better to meet the needs of learners with disability?

**Ms DUNN:** Thank you very much for the question. I know that TAFEs in general do have Deaf and hard-of-hearing students that are disadvantaged, and I know that obviously that has even worsened through COVID-19—and of course that is not only for TAFE students but for many people. That disadvantage for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community has certainly impacted on students trying to learn. We obviously want to make sure that we can ensure that people's learning is equitable. Shifting to an online platform and learning online obviously is very different—for example, today we can obviously have people in gallery view, but for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people it is important to have the view full screen so you are able to see the interpreter in a bigger picture. Also having access to captions is very important as well. So being able to embed these processes into the system, such as education systems, which is currently not mandatory, is vital for the equity of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. It is also important to provide those when not only in the classroom but learning online. Olivia, would you like to add anything at all?

**Ms BEASLEY:** No, I believe you covered most of the points. Again, it is that matter of improving the system for everyone—that is, for the enablement of Deaf people to have full integration with the rest of their peers in the classroom. Obviously COVID has been a time of learning for everyone, and it is about creating access once again. So with Zoom here we have a very good example of what good access looks like. We have visual access to interpreters, and we have captioners as well. There are a lot of benefits for all of the community with having this access met.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Are there any other members of Parliament who would like to ask a question? Gary?

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes. Thanks, John, and thank you to Catherine and Olivia for those tremendous presentations—really, really interesting and really informing. Olivia outlined a number of reasonable adjustments that would really help accessibility to TAFE. I guess what I would like to know is: how can we make TAFE more accountable for providing adequate and timely reasonable adjustments?

**Ms BEASLEY:** Yes. I think again it begins with the enrolment process. The access needs to be considered before even considering Deaf people attending on site, so disability liaison officers need to have the knowledge in what adjustments are possible and providing those options for adjustments. So again it comes back down to finance and resourcing, and this is what the TAFEs will be looking at. They need to have the contact people

who have the knowledge to provide those adjustments and to gain further knowledge about other adjustments that could be made to improve someone's access. That means having an interpreter available for discussions. Also, quite often YouTube videos or video materials that are being displayed within a subject or within a class often do not have burnt-in captioning. So there are lots of issues, and once again captioning is a really good solution to barriers of access and to create easier access. So through the enrolment process it is about having the knowledge already within the TAFE system to provide that access.

**Ms DUNN:** Thanks, Olivia. If I could add, it is wonderful today that TAFEs have been able to provide access, and obviously we appreciate that greatly, but obviously sometimes it is not effective if there is no evaluation of that access that is being provided. It is really important to bring into the picture or into the conversation somebody who is Deaf themselves—into that review process—so that the TAFE can engage someone, whether it be someone from an organisation such as Deaf Victoria, to be part of that evaluation process. People need to come back to access and come back to evaluation to ensure that there is continuous improvement.

We also have deafConnectEd, which is an organisation funded by the Department of Education and Training to provide this advice to TAFEs on how best to provide access and inclusion for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students at TAFE, so engaging with people like deafConnectEd is a great way of ensuring that the right access is provided. The provision of access must be reviewed, and that must include Deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the process. That way we can ensure we can provide feedback and that the access can always be improving.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thank you, Catherine. Thank you, Olivia.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Christine Couzens, would you like to ask a question?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, thank you. Thanks, Catherine and Olivia. That was fantastic. We really appreciate your contribution today and your submission. I have to say that the detailed evidence you have just given has covered off a number of things that I was going to ask you about. But I did want to focus a bit on the access to TAFE and the fact that it is a TAFE responsibility, not the student's responsibility, which is a fantastic point that you have made. I am interested in your view around co-design in terms of the support that TAFEs should be providing and how that actually might work, including that cultural training too that you talked about—mandating cultural training for teaching staff, for example—and just how all that might work and whether you have got some ideas around how that might work.

**Ms DUNN:** It has not happened to date, unfortunately. I think what is important is to have a pathway where we can continue to work together into the future. So if there was to be a panel or a group that was set up to establish and then review the access and do that on a regular basis, that would be very important. For example, Deaf Victoria and deafConnectEd do collaborate to work with TAFEs. They could do so to co-design and receive ideas and feedback from the Deaf community about their experiences in the past and how best to improve those. I think this is something that needs to be continual and ongoing, so that if there were any issues in a particular course or ideas from the Deaf or hard-of-hearing student on how they could improve, we can pool that feedback from the community and have those people in the room. We can have the teachers, DLOs and Deaf community members all there together as part of a team that can continuously review and improve the process.

**Ms BEASLEY:** Yes. And if I can just add something there, there is a very famous saying at the moment, and it is 'Nothing about us without us'. So really that is such an imperative phrase because it is about inclusion. So people who are on the receiving end of access, they are going through the journey and they are going through that journey from the beginning. So co-design would certainly be a critical part of that process in ensuring that the TAFE is accessible, and that co-design has to come once again from that Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Obviously in the TAFE sector there are particular subjects which are popular within the Deaf community such as plumbing and so on and popular subjects that are often studied by the community. So with co-design it is interesting to consider how, with the addition of resources, those subjects could be improved upon. It is really important to engage with the Deaf community and the students who have gone through that journey. They understand the sector, they study through the sector, so it is important to bring them on board to gain their feedback.

**Ms DUNN:** I think that Olivia brought up a wonderful point. The community obviously know what they have a hunger for learning, and it might be, for example, a Certificate in TAE. I know that a lot of Deaf people

previously wanted to be part of the TAE course. The community had such an interest that they decided to have a Deaf-only, Auslan-only, version of this TAE so that the course was provided completely in Auslan, and it meant that there were no additional barriers; it was a completely accessible and inclusive course. That is an example of a co-design approach that we would love to see in future for future topics and subjects.

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

**Ms ADDISON:** I would, thank you, John. I would also like to thank Olivia and Catherine for the contributions they have made and the insights they have provided. We have talked a lot about the many challenges facing students who are Deaf or with hearing loss. What more could we do in real, practical terms to ensure that students complete their qualifications?

**Ms BEASLEY:** Sorry, would you mind repeating the question, Juliana? So it is ‘most practical ways that a Deaf person can complete the entirety of their course’?

**Ms ADDISON:** Yes—any other additional supports to ensure that they complete the course and they get the qualification.

**Ms BEASLEY:** Right.

**Ms DUNN:** That is a great question. Thank you, Juliana. I know that many Deaf students are very keen to be part of TAFE courses, but then the number of students that successfully complete the course may not be as many. Unfortunately they may pull out before the end of the course. We certainly want to improve the system and grow the number of Deaf students, and the question is: how do we do that? Perhaps peer learning is a good way to do that. I know that a lot of TAFEs do already have models such as this, like student support services or mentoring services, so that a Deaf person can go in and have advice from another Deaf person. But unfortunately at the moment they are only people that are not Deaf. So it means that the Deaf student does not feel like they have a person that is ‘like me’ and is not able to have a quick conversation in the same language, in Auslan, just to clarify something quickly or bounce ideas off. Sometimes they feel that they cannot relate to their peer mentor because they are not Deaf as well. So I think that that would be a quick, short win—to have peer support or mentors available that are other Deaf people that have been through a similar qualification. I think that that is a perfect example of a co-design approach, and that is one avenue that you could take.

**Ms ADDISON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Any further questions from members? No? Okay. Well, thank you very much for your presentation today. We really appreciate it. It is very valuable to us in our Inquiry. We appreciate that you have made the time to be here today and also your submission in written form as well. So thank you very much. We appreciate it very much.

**Ms BEASLEY:** Thank you. And we really appreciate being here today. It is certainly very valuable to be able to impart this knowledge, and hopefully it will improve the sector and will improve the experience of many Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the TAFE sector.

**Ms DUNN:** Yes, I would like to echo Olivia’s comments and would love to see the recording afterwards to ensure that there are captions being provided. It has been wonderful. Thank you very much for working with us today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you again.

**Committee adjourned.**