

# 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 Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Thephanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager, Ticket to Work, and

Dr William Crisp, Policy and Project Officer, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services.

**The CHAIR:** We will now start the broadcast. Our next witnesses to make a submission are Michelle Wakeford and William Crisp from National Disability Services. Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Could I please remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. I understand you also have a video to present as well. Thank you for being here.

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Thank you, and apologies for not being able to see me, but you are not missing out on anything, so that is fine. My name is Michelle Wakeford. I am the National Manager of Ticket to Work. With me is Dr Will Crisp. He is our policy officer at Ticket to Work, and he will be joining me to assist with any questions that you may have. We also have our pre-recorded video of Samson talking about his TAFE experiences that we will present after my opening statement. What I will do is outline a little bit about the work that we have been doing, our findings and our recommendations, and answer any questions that you may have.

Ticket to Work was set up to address the causes of low labour force participation for people with disabilities, and the way that we have looked at that is by focusing on young people with a disability who are still at school. So what we do is make sure that young people with disabilities or students with disabilities get a combination of school-based vocational career development as well as early contact with the work environment. How we try to do that is in a coordinated place-based approach. What we have found is that many young people with disabilities do not get the same opportunities, the career and work opportunities, while at school, and this causes further difficulties in transition and access to employment.

The work that we have been doing with our partners—we've been able to support over 1500 students with disability into paid work while still at school, and we do that mainly through School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships and after-school work, but we also do some work around micro-enterprises as well. We think it is a bit of a rite of passage for all teenagers to have those opportunities to engage with the world of work while still at school. Things like after-school jobs and School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships should be open to all young people, particularly young people with disabilities, mainly because a lot of the research is showing that one of the key indicators of post-school success for students with disabilities is actually having those opportunities for vocational careers and work experience.

So today we will pull from our experience and research. Note that disability is diverse and unique to each individual, but we will pull on what we know. Most of the students we work with have an intellectual disability and/or autism, and many attend special schools. What we have found is that those students that do get vocational support and work experience in that coordinated approach are much more likely to be studying post school, often combining work and study. They are twice as likely to complete year 12. There are three to four times more likely to be in employment, have higher levels of qualification and have greater independence.

The way we looked at improving outcomes for young people with disabilities was looking at the international findings. It is very clear what works from some of the international findings, and what we have tried to do is implement that within the Australian market. Yes, it is that key engagement in the world of work, and particularly paid work, that is the number one indicator of post-school success.

It is key for learners with disability to have access to inclusive learning environments and access to industry and work experience within that training and education setting. In Australia what we have found is that often people with disabilities in vocational education do not get the opportunity to do the practical side of things, so what we have found is that apprenticeships and traineeships work particularly well for people with disabilities, and it has been found that they have a high completion rate, they are more likely to be employed post school and they have higher wages. Often this is thought to be because employers can see that the person is able to do the job. Whereas some employers are sometimes nervous about taking on people with disabilities, if they can see that

there has been success in the past, they are more likely to give employment opportunities, and there is career progression.

It is also really important to note, I think, that young people with disabilities have the same aspirations and hopes as other young people. In some of the research that has been completed there is very little difference. Young people with and without disabilities want to access training and education. They want to make money—a lot of them want to make a lot of money—accessing sport and hobbies and having long-term relationships and things like marriage. Also note that 17% of Victorian students receive an education adjustment due to disability. It is a large and growing cohort of students, so it is very important that in vocational educational training and TAFE the needs of those young people are taken into consideration.

We believe the aim in Australia should be for young people with disabilities to get the opportunities and have a normal pathway from school, so not a disability-specific pathway but to learn and work with young people—well, with all people. We think that to do this we need to really consider how we take a more systemic approach to looking at education and training. We need to be really focused on reducing barriers and also encouraging self-determination. One of the findings was that many students with disabilities have no or very little say on what their post-school world, their adult world, is going to be. So it is really key that young people are getting those experiences.

One of the things that I thought I might touch on is just some of the things that schools are currently doing and what we can do more to improve that career development. There has been a real focus in Victorian schools around careers education starting earlier—things such as Head Start school-based apprenticeships and traineeships and ensuring students connect to the world of work—so it is really exciting that the Victorian Government has focused on career development.

We do believe that it really has to focus on those initiatives that have been implemented to make sure that they actually support students with a disability. The things that are being implemented are great, but one of the things is that we are finding a lot of our students are not able to access them. For example, there is a use of online careers assessments which all Year 9 students have the opportunity to do, but you can imagine we have had students in tears because of the jobs that have been suggested through those online career development assessments if they are a wheelchair user and the jobs that are coming up they cannot possibly do—so some real sensitivity around what works in careers education for students with a disability. We have found that customised employment or a discovery model, which is often used overseas, is really key in that work experience.

It is great that connection to work is being a focus. It has been found that connection to work for secondary students but also for TAFE students is often the number one indicator of post-school employment, but if there is not extra support or if people are just being placed in jobs in work experience without thought around what the needs of the employer and that young person are, we often see what we call the ‘place and pray’ approach—we put a young person with a disability into a work placement and just pray that it works out without any thinking about what kinds of supports would be required or very little understanding of what supports would work in that work experience.

You know, the Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships that have been implemented or are being trialled at the moment are brilliant—it is looking at a three-year School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship and incorporating vocational education—but many of the students that we work with cannot access them because they are only at level 3 and up. So we think that there are some great things happening, but we really do need to consider how to best make sure that young people with disabilities are able to access those supports.

We are quite concerned about the Firth report into vocational applied learning in Victoria that came out I think in November last year. We think some of the recommendations there will actually reduce students’ ability to access vocational education and school-based apprenticeships and will potentially reduce completion of Year 12 because there is not the mechanism for students with disabilities and particularly intellectual disabilities to engage in secondary school if some of those recommendations are implemented.

We think TAFEs can better engage and support students in a number of ways. We know that the data shows that students with disabilities are often going into foundation-level courses, and there are very few employment outcomes from those foundation-level courses, so the Certificate Is and Certificate IIs. Often students with disabilities and particularly intellectual disabilities do multiple courses of these foundation levels, so they are not moving up into the higher level of qualification. The research shows that foundation-level courses do not

equate to employment outcomes. They should be there to actually support students to actually move into a higher level of qualifications with the appropriate supports so that they can actually gain the benefit of TAFE and vocational education in actually achieving outcomes. Some of those foundation courses, even though they advertise them and focus on them being a pathway to employment, the data that is coming out—and it is limited data—is that that is not the case. It is just not leading to the outcomes that people are expecting and not leading to those higher levels.

We find that literacy and numeracy assessments often stop the participation of many people, not just people with learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities but many people within our community that often see TAFE as an opportunity to better their employment outcomes. Literacy and numeracy assessments kind of give the message that TAFE is not for a lot of disadvantaged people, particularly people with intellectual disabilities.

We find that with TAFE many students do drop out because they do not get the appropriate support. Often there is not the willingness or ability to modify the curriculum to ensure that the learners are able to get the support—things like accessing material in Easy Read. Often there is a thought that giving access to students with disabilities and particularly intellectual disabilities is dumbing down the curriculum or reducing the quality, whereas that is not the case. Often it is around making sure that all learners are able to engage. We have found that with the right supports we can create really good outcomes. To date, we have worked with over 2000 employers, and we find that employers are keen to take on students for work placement and work experience if they are getting the right supports. Many of the employers that we have worked with have sometimes in previous experiences been burnt by that place-and-pray approach, where they are not giving the appropriate supports and are not considering the needs of the employers.

We think there is a lot we can do. I think internationally there are really clear indicators of what works. We are finding in the US and Canada now the norm is inclusive higher education. In university students with intellectual disabilities are sitting next to other students learning in that environment, whereas we still have not quite got inclusive secondary school or inclusive TAFE, really, and vocational education—we have not got them right. So I think we can really learn from some of those international experiences to look at how we can improve. That is all my presentation. I want to pass on to show a little bit of Samson's video, and then I am happy to take questions, if we can run that video.

#### **Video shown.**

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. That was a great video. Thank you. Can I just kick off with a question. Obviously completion of certificates is important, but if it does not transition into employment, then that is obviously a problem. So how can TAFEs improve the transition to employment for students with disability?

**Dr CRISP:** I think the evidence shows us that if people, particularly students with intellectual disabilities, can do those work placements in parallel with their education, it works better. It is easier for them to put the theory into practice simultaneously, if you like, and I think that is what lacking in the system at the moment, the ability to get the support and access to do those on-the-job placements.

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Yes, we always also advocate that kind of blending of support so that employment supports or employment organisations are able to work with students before they leave school. So, you know, there might be a variety of things that we can look at so that it is not this clean cut—that we start to blend in starting to look for employment or looking at internships or looking at industry mentoring or a range of different things while the student is still at the TAFE so that the transition is quite a smooth one and hopefully they are leaving TAFE with a job, whereas currently often the course stops and there is some time to kind of get the right employment supports. So that blending of supports is really key and that collaboration between different sectors so we do not work in that kind of silo approach.

**Dr CRISP:** So maybe TAFE would benefit from working with industry more closely to support people with disabilities to get work placements while they are studying. It is that kind of thinking rather than working in silos, I think.

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

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, John, and thanks, Michelle and William. I guess following on from that too but taking it back a step, in the schools themselves, how can schools improve the career development they provide to students with disabilities? In other words, how can they do better in terms of preparation for work opportunities post school?

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Yes, I think similarly that it is often sometimes a blending of supports. So what we do at Ticket to Work is that when young people are getting that experience, we do not find necessarily that the school is the best placed to support the employer and that young person. So if we can utilise other things, such as employment services or NDIS employment supports, to do that vital kind of work on the job and make sure that it is a good match, it really does benefit—so trying to look at it from not, again, that silo approach, and also making sure that things that schools do have are available for all students. As I said before, many Victorian students have a learning or some sort of disability that means that they need to have some sort of adjustment. So I think with whatever that school, as a whole, and the education department are looking at, it is making sure that they are inclusive and that, if needed, those extra supports are available.

Our experience is that often students, particularly with intellectual disabilities, do not get to do work experience of their choosing. It is often that they just go into the local supported employment work experience, doing their work experience in a supported employment—so where they are just employing people with disability—and not having those opportunities in that mainstream, not having the opportunity to actually choose what they want to do post school. Often in special schools we have transition coordinators rather than career advisers, so the idea is that it is just about moving a student from one kind of institution—of school—to another, and there is not that opportunity to actually explore or have that career development. As I said before, if we do not get that transition right, the likelihood is those young people will never work. What we have found in some of the data is that by age 21, if those young people have not had that engagement with the world of work, then it is going to be really difficult, and often they do not have that experience.

**Dr CRISP:** It is about expectations. I think due to ableism many people do not think that people with disabilities, particularly people with intellectual or other cognitive disabilities, can work, and those expectations are what stop these students from flourishing. If the expectation changes—if we expect kids to be able to work, and everybody around them has those same high expectations—then that is what the kids are going to assume. They are going to assume that going into open employment is the norm, so, ‘I’m going to do what everybody else is doing’. But at the moment I do not think that is a universally held opinion by many people in the community. Disability is not about being able, it is about needing the right support to be able to do what you want to do, in my opinion.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, William, and thanks, Michelle.

**The CHAIR:** Juliana, do you have a question?

**Ms ADDISON:** I do, thank you, Chair. And thank you very much to Michelle and William, and please pass on my thanks to Samson. It was so informative to hear about his lived experience starting courses and then being able to get his qualification and going so well with his Certificate IV in Disability. That was really great to hear, and, William, I really like that idea that you just talked about—that it is all about support. People with disabilities can do much if they are given the right support, and I think that is what is really the heart of this Inquiry. It is about saying ‘Well, what as a government can we be doing to provide those supports to learners with a disability to allow them to thrive and be able to fulfil goals in their life and have great achievements?’. So I am very interested in School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, and I know many of the Ticket to Work participants undertake these School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships. What support can our government be giving to ensure more students with a disability undertake these opportunities?

**Ms WAKEFORD:** I think there are elements there that we just need to tweak. With the implementation at the moment—I think it is just a trial—of Head Start School-Based Apprenticeships And Traineeships, what often happens with young people with disabilities is, because there are limited supports to actually support them into those School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, they actually shorten the qualification. That just means that even though you have got more need to take it slower and to have those opportunities, because the funding is not available what TAFEs and other RTOs are doing is reducing the length of the qualification. What Head Start does is it increases it to three years. A lot of the training providers that we were working with were trying to do a two-year school-based traineeship in one year. When you are talking about young people with intellectual disabilities, they should be getting longer not shorter than other people without disabilities. So we think there are some real opportunities with Head Start.

The main issue is that they are only doing higher level qualifications. What Head Start does is put it within three years rather than two years, so starting in Year 10, which will be brilliant. But unfortunately most of the young people that we work with cannot access them because they are at level III or level IV. We would like to see them at level II. One of the good things about Head Start is that it does provide some of those wraparound

supports that are really needed. We would like to expand that in the sense of looking at an intermediary role—someone there to actually support the employer and the student to get the supports right within that work placement. We think there are mechanisms there, and we would like to be able to explore that further and maybe look, as part of the Head Start trial, at addressing some of the needs at the Certificate II level, because that is the mechanism that many of our students go into and then they can move up those qualifications. But at the moment they do not have that opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Brad, do you have a question?

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Chair, I do not have a question. I would like otherwise just to thank Michelle and William for their presentation today and to say that I hope that the ‘place and pray’ model that Michelle described in regard to work placements is absolutely a thing of the past, because that is just ridiculous and not good for anyone. Thank you again for your presentations today.

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Thank you, and we would really like to expand our model. We know it works, and we would like to have those opportunities to have those conversations to make sure that we do have those things that we have learned have worked in place so that not just the students that we have been working with but all students with disabilities have those opportunities in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kat.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Michelle, for a comprehensive contribution to the inquiry. In the final minute that we have got left I just want to ask a bit more in depth about mentoring. I know it was mentioned previously, but perhaps could you expand on how mentors, tutors and navigators could be used, particularly in the vein of former students, to help students with a disability to proceed through their TAFE courses?

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Yes. I think it is really key, particularly having that peer navigating. One of the things that we find, particularly at TAFE, is that students do need that additional support. It is not saying that they cannot do the qualification, it is more that, for one, they need help to be able to navigate the system. It is really confusing. It is confusing for young people with disabilities, it is confusing for parents and it is confusing for schools. It is having someone that knows that young person and is able to navigate those different systems and to know if the young person needs additional support—you know, how do we get them from the NDIS or what supports can the TAFE use? Each TAFE is different, so there are multiple conversations that need to take place to actually make it work. Parents and young people with disabilities really have difficulties—I think most people have difficulties—navigating those systems, so having someone that has been through that process I think is key—and also that support to actually access the curriculum. So what we find with a lot our students is that it just takes a little bit longer and needs to be explained through different mechanisms. Having someone that can actually support that student to access the curriculum means that they are more likely to complete and they are more likely to get the benefits of that education and TAFE experience. So yes, I think that coordinator or mentor support can take various forms that will support that student to be successful.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your submission. It was very valuable, and we all appreciate it very much. Thank you.

**Ms WAKEFORD:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**