TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Friday, 12 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 Theophanous

WITNESSES

Mr Bruce Maguire, Lead Policy Adviser, and

Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, Vision Australia.

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

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

Just before you start, and thank you for being with us this morning for your presentation, I just need to say a set of words so that we legally cover things off. I welcome you to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Can I please remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief, 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you for being with us, Bruce and Chris.

Mr EDWARDS: Thank you, Chair. The two people today that will be presenting are me, Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, for Vision Australia, and Bruce Maguire, who is our Lead Policy Adviser at Vision Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome.

Mr EDWARDS: Thank you. Firstly, we would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to present at this important inquiry. Despite being blind myself, 30 years ago, without the sort of assistive technology that I am using here today on this Zoom call, which is a screen reader that allows the computer to talk to me, I myself went to TAFE. Despite a challenging environment without that technology I was successful in completing a qualification that has led me to have a successful career, to contribute to society as a non-executive director on a number of not for profits and to fully participate in the community as a family person. On the other hand, we still remain concerned at Vision Australia about the barriers that are still facing people who are blind or low vision in achieving a qualification at TAFE.

A little bit about Vision Australia: Vision Australia provides services to over 26,000 people each year. We work in partnership with people who are blind and low vision to enable them to live the possibilities they choose in life. Our service offering is based on four pillars, and one of those to start with is education, then employment, independence and social inclusion. We clearly recognise that education is a fundamental human right, and clearly that is articulated in the convention for people with disability. We also know the importance of education as it relates to employment and providing opportunities for people to reach employment, to remain independent and to be socially included, so they are all linked, and certainly education is a key foundation of all of that. In our 2018 survey into employment what we identified was that in Australia only 24% of people who are blind and low vision are actually working in full-time work, which is vastly different from our sighted peers. The same survey also found the importance of further education like TAFE and university to change that statistic. Of people that did not have a post-secondary qualification, only 10% of people who are blind and low vision were in employment, which is even more alarming, whereas 28% who did have a qualification were in full-time employment. So it is very important.

Finally, for the last 20 years I have been the chair of the Vision Australia Further Education Bursary Committee. This further education bursary provides up to $8,000 for people that are entering post-secondary studies. The concept of it is through generous donors we ensure that the cost of assistive technology, which is vital for success, is not a barrier to people that are unable to afford it and that they have the right equipment. What I have learned in the time that I have spent as the Chair of that Committee is the importance of TAFE for some of our cohort. Not everybody does extremely well at school and goes on to do, you know, amazing things in university and study a range of different courses. Some do need a leg-up, and that sometimes comes through

the TAFE. What I have seen through that is where we get it right that qualification absolutely leads to sometimes further education into university and sometimes a career where people have been successful, like myself. And so what I am just highlighting there is the importance of TAFE and getting it right for people who are blind and low vision to really make a difference.

Now Bruce will talk a little bit more specifically about some of the challenges within the TAFE sector. Thank you.

Mr MAGUIRE: Thank you, Chris, and thank you, Chair. From the research that we have done as well as from the many conversations that we have had with current and recent students both at TAFE and at university over the last sort of particularly five to 10 years we have been able to identify three main groups of barriers that students who are blind or low vision often experience while they are at a TAFE.

The first group is inaccessibility in the learning management systems or online learning systems that are now a very important feature of most post-secondary courses. There has certainly been a proliferation of online learning in the tertiary sector over the last 10 years or so even before COVID, and of course COVID has just accelerated that. When you have technological developments and innovation that occur at a very rapid rate, as we certainly have in the online learning space, what we frequently see is accessibility considerations—making sure that those systems are accessible to and usable by people with disabilities—often fall by the wayside, and that has certainly been the case with online learning management systems that are used in the tertiary sector, both in universities and in TAFE. Most of the students that we have spoken to and the research that we conducted which we sort of talk about in our submission demonstrate that there are very real and significant barriers in the online learning systems. So that is the first group of barriers.

The second group of barriers relates to knowledge and support, and basically these barriers arise because staff in the institutions, often staff who are assigned to provide support for students with a disability, do not have the detailed knowledge about how the learning management systems interact with the assistive technology that people who are blind or low vision use and often do not know the kinds of reasonable adjustments that are appropriate for students who are blind or low vision.

The third group of barriers relates to the unwillingness of some lecturers and teachers to provide their content in ways that can be accessed by students who are blind or low vision. In the past it used to be that the only way of accessing material was through hard copy, so large print or hard copy braille, or audio on cassettes and things. That has changed a lot now, with the majority of material now being available in electronic format, but that has introduced a new set of barriers because not all material available in electronic formats is going to be accessible for students who are blind or low vision. While some lecturers and teachers are very supportive and very happy to make whatever adjustments they need to make, others are not. And factors such as the increasing casualisation of the tertiary sector workforce mean that there are often substantial pressures on teachers and lecturers and, again, accessibility often is a casualty in that environment. So I think they are the three groups of barriers that can make studying at TAFE much more difficult for students who are blind or have low vision, and I will finish there. I am very happy to expand on those or answer any questions that the Committee may have. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Bruce, and thank you, Chris. There are four other MPs online: Gary Blackwood, who is the Deputy Chair, and Committee members Juliana Addison, Kat Theophanous and Brad Rowswell. So we will all ask questions individually.

If I can just kick it off, in terms of assistive technology, and you have mentioned briefly about that, how can TAFEs actually improve the provision of assistive technology and related support to students who are blind or have low vision? Is there a way that they can do it better?

Mr MAGUIRE: I think one of the key things is students going to TAFE often do not have themselves a detailed knowledge of the technology that will work best with the systems that are used at TAFE. The staff at TAFE should be in a good position to tell prospective students, 'If you are going to study here, then this is the specific technology that we know works with our system'. And if the student does not have that technology, then there are a number of ways that they can access it, including through the Vision Australia bursaries that Chris talked about in his opening remarks. So I think the key is having knowledgeable staff who can advise students appropriately, because we have certainly talked to students who have said that they are used to using one particular piece of technology that they might have learned how to use at school and then they go to TAFE

and find that that technology does not provide them with the kind of access that they need and the student support staff at TAFE really do not know what technology is best. So there is a scramble when the student starts to find and explore a range of technologies, and it is not a good time to do that when you are trying to study—to kind of explore the kind of technologies that you might need.

The CHAIR: Chris, did you want to add anything?

Mr EDWARDS: I would like to add something. I think that clearly having knowledge about what technologies work matters, but I think it does come down to TAFEs having funding to be able to provide the students with some technology that works. One of the challenges is that it often ends up having a computer with that assistive technology in the library setting or something like that, which creates barriers or challenges for students who are blind and low vision in that the only study that they can do is at the library if they do not have that equipment at home. I think that there are some lower cost options that do work for people who are blind and low vision. I think it is important that the TAFE do understand what they are, that there is support in teaching the person about the assistive technology and how it works with the LMS system that is being used, and clearly having the funding available.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John. And thanks, Chris and Bruce, for your submission and your presentation this morning. Just to follow on from that, what type of training do you think that TAFE teachers and frontline staff need to successfully teach, support and interact with learners who are blind or have low vision, especially in post-COVID times with the technology that now is required?

Mr MAGUIRE: I think that it is important that staff who are providing the support actually have some familiarity with the technology. So staff actually need to experience how the technology interacts with the systems. They need to have enough knowledge of the various assistive technology options that are available to be able to provide support to the students. They do not necessarily have to be experts, but they do have to have enough knowledge to be able to provide advice about the best way of using the technology and the different technology options that are available. One way I think of doing that, and we have seen that certainly in the case of one university that I am thinking of, is they actually went through all of their systems and checked the accessibility of those systems with various assistive technology and then prepared a number of documents that they gave to prospective students, so the students knew before they started what technology would work with what system and the staff knew enough about the technology to advise students.

I think, more generally, staff do need to have a fairly detailed understanding of the needs of students who are blind or low vision. So, for example, they need to know that if you are going to give a student an image-only PDF, then the student may have difficulty reading that. Often the barriers that students encounter are because staff do not have that detailed knowledge. So I think the training they need to have is specifically around the needs of students who are blind or low vision, and there are a number of components that would include, including assistive technology and including associated things like the kinds of formats that are accessible, the kinds of vision impairments that students may present with and how each of those impacts on their learning.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Bruce. Anything to add, Chris?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. I think that because blindness and low vision is a low-incidence group, not every TAFE teacher is going to experience it every year. So I think it is really critical that there is that general—and it could just be an online course—something about understanding disability, understanding that you will have students that will have that and will have particular needs, and the importance of asking them about what their needs are and how you might go about accommodating them, and then having those specific courses that Bruce is talking about when you do have a student that actually helps give you that detail and greater understanding at the time when you need it.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Chris. Thanks to you both.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Juliana, would you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Bruce and Chris, for joining us today. I have just been thinking, on the panel today, Bruce and Chris, we have a representative from Geelong and a representative from Gippsland, and I am from Ballarat. I am just wondering: have you experienced a difference between access for

students that are blind or who have low vision to TAFE in a metro setting as opposed to a regional setting? Are there additional barriers in the regions for people who are blind or with low vision?

Mr MAGUIRE: We have not done research into that area specifically, but in talking to a number of students one of the things that has emerged—and particularly during COVID, when a lot of learning has been done online—is that a lot of students in regional areas face issues around internet connectivity, and students who are blind or have low vision particularly experience those things too. I think it is also more challenging in regional areas to access resources that might be available in metro areas, and there are also probably fewer students who are blind or have low vision in regional areas. So a particular TAFE may not have the experience in providing supports that you might find in a larger TAFE in a metro area, which is why I think it is so important to have resources that all TAFEs can access so that you can provide a more consistent experience right across the board.

The CHAIR: Chris, did you want to…

Mr EDWARDS: I do not think I have got much to add. Clearly one of the challenges for people that do not live within a regional setting is—you know, if you do not drive, there is a greater reliance on public transport for people who are blind or have low vision. That is not so much a TAFE issue, but certainly an access issue generally is that it needs to be accessible to public transport.

Ms ADDISON: John, could I then follow up with a question about universal design?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: I was wondering, Bruce and Chris, then: how could the Victorian Government encourage TAFEs to incorporate a universal design in their training delivery?

Mr MAGUIRE: I think one important thing, and possibly the key, is to require that TAFEs have what are known as accessible ICT procurement policies: that is, when purchasing course content—and I will come back to that in a moment—and certainly when purchasing learning management systems, that they require vendors to demonstrate that those systems are accessible to students with disability, including students who are blind or have low vision. Our understanding is that increasingly TAFEs and universities are purchasing kind of pre-prepared unit modules and then they put those unit modules into their learning management systems. Sometimes those learning modules are accessible when they are bought, but by the time they are put through the learning management system they become inaccessible. So accessibility testing has to be a key component. Australia has a standard for accessible ICT procurement, AS EN 301 549, and we believe that it is really important that the Victorian Government firstly implements it itself in its own procurement but also introduces regulations or whatever to require that TAFEs have similar ICT procurement policies. I think that the development of guidelines for ensuring that course content is accessible at all stages and having processes that provide a way for those guidelines to be applied across the institution and between institutions—one of the things that often happens is that individual teachers will prepare their own content and some will use whatever guidelines might exist and others will not. So we think it is important that the Government work with the TAFE system to develop processes that ensure that all content incorporates those guidelines, which are based on the principles of inclusive design.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kat, did you want to ask a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Bruce and Chris, for your contributions to the inquiry. When we talk about access to TAFE, we do not just want kids enrolling, we want them completing, and that is as much about the course content as it is about student wellbeing. My question relates to student wellbeing and whether you think that there is anything that the TAFEs could be doing better to support the wellbeing of learners who are blind or who have low vision in all the social aspects that are part of the TAFE experience, which are so critical to them completing the course as well.

Mr MAGUIRE: Yes, and one of the things we are finding in talking to people about their experience of studying during COVID is that when you are studying online, you miss out on a lot of that social contact that you get in a classroom environment. And a number of students that I have spoken to have emphasised the value of having support from other students in that face-to-face environment. Students have also talked about even during COVID developing their own informal networks with students so that they might socialise on weekends or after lectures, and that seems at the moment to be very much dependent on individual students. So I think

that there is scope for TAFE to actually look at having a less informal or sort of more formal approach to assisting students to develop those social networks.

But look, I think one thing that is important to understand is that students' wellbeing is often very much affected by their experience during the course. So if a student is constantly battling to overcome barriers and constantly battling to get responses from staff, then they are going to have less energy available and possibly even less time for socialisation. I think you cannot isolate wellbeing from the other aspects of the student experience, although it is an important area in itself. But I think we need a multipronged approach from TAFE, making sure that there are good contact networks for students. We have heard from students who say that they contact the support—that they have been trying to contact the course coordinator for over a year and they have never had a response from the course coordinator. And that should not be happening because it just adds to the stress that people experience. So I think we need a multipronged approach that emphasises the ways in which students can socialise, be it online or offline, without it relying totally on the individual student to initiate.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. I think that it does remind me that disability units within the TAFEs need to think about programs that are beyond the classroom and the study. There is certainly scope for buddying or some sort of thing that introduces people to the other aspects of TAFE, rather than just focus on that, and so I think there is definitely some scope to do that in a cost-effective way with volunteers and other students.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thanks, Chris.

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

Mr ROWSWELL: Chair, I am very conscious of time, but I did have a brief question for Chris, if I may? Chris, thank you for sharing your personal story at the start of your presentation and the story of your success. Do you attribute that success to something that worked well in the system or was it just simply your own determination that got you through when you were at TAFE?

Mr EDWARDS: I think it was a bit of both, but my first course at TAFE was in computer programming, a business diploma, and I did have some teachers that actually listened to the need. So I think the two things that helped were that I was able to advocate effectively to say, 'These are the things that I need for success' and that I had, you know, teachers and the course coordinator at the time that heard that and worked with the disability unit to achieve that. So it is having that unique solution that, you know, might be common across a number of people but having the supports that were unique that worked for me.

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thank you to Vision Australia and thank you to you, Bruce and Chris, for your very valuable submission.

Mr MAGUIRE: Thank you very much.

Mr EDWARDS: Pleasure. thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.