

# 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

#### **WITNESS**

Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, TAFE student.



**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. I remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

Gabriel is a student that will share his experiences with us. We appreciate very much you being here this morning, Gabriel—over to you. Take your time. Whenever you are ready to start, you can start, and then after you give us your experiences with TAFE we will ask some questions of you, if that is okay, Gabriel.

**Mr GERVASONI:** Okay, sounds good. I am a 20-year-old who is legally blind. I was completely blind at birth but at around 18 months old I began to develop some navigational vision, and my vision gradually improved over a couple of years to where I was considered to have low vision or a vision impairment. I then gradually began to lose vision, and I am now legally blind. I am told that my most likely prognosis is that I will be completely blind by the time that I am 40.

I am a passionate advocate for young people and those with disability and their right to have equal access to opportunities. I was recently named my region's Young Citizen of the Year for this advocacy work. I am a part of many community groups, including the Youth Council and the Youth Advisory Board. I am a keen learner and have found that with the right supports in place I can achieve academically. I was homeschooled from year 4 to year 10, when I commenced at Federation College, part of Federation TAFE, to study at the P-Tech program. This was a very inclusive campus and program, and I thrived there. I received a number of academic awards during this time. My experience of TAFE changed drastically when I left Federation College and moved to the general TAFE campus. I was originally going to begin my Certificate IV in IT at the beginning of semester 1 2019. However, in the October prior to this I met with the lead IT teacher and a representative of the Disability and Learning Access Unit, or the DLAU, at the campus, along with an orientation and mobility specialist and an orthoptist from Vision Australia, who made assessments of the campus, including lighting and accessibility and then forwarded quite detailed reports, including suggestions for modifications, to the TAFE.

When I met with the lead IT teacher in January 2019 to complete my enrolment, I discovered that none of the recommendations had been implemented. Of particular concern was that the concrete stairs, which I would need to use to navigate between the two floors where the classes would be held, remained unmarked. To me, the stairs just looked like a ramp, which was extremely dangerous. I was told that numerous requests to the facilities team regarding making the suggested modifications had been made and they had decided that it was too expensive to go ahead with the changes. Because of the safety issues involved I could not begin my studies until the appropriate modifications were made. I had people advocate quite strongly on my behalf for many months that these modifications needed to be made to enable me to access education in my chosen field of IT. After many meetings with DLAU and facilities team members, as well as other university staff, I was advised that the modifications would be made as soon as possible. In April 2019 it was finally deemed safe enough for me to begin my Certificate IV in semester 2. I completed orientation and mobility training regarding the safe use of the stairs and was confident in using them. Unfortunately other changes, including changes to lighting, blinds and signage, were not made, which made it very difficult for me to access certain areas of the classrooms and made it difficult to participate in group activities. I also had difficulties in orientating myself.

Once I began my studies the teaching staff were very supportive. I used the in-built magnification and speech functions on the classroom computers. I was provided with an electronic magnifier with an inbuilt distance camera, which was extremely helpful in seeing long distance. Even so, I still got very visually fatigued. Despite being told that due to my low vision and visual fatigue I would be given extra time to complete my assignments and assessments, this did not happen and still has not happened. The general campus environment is now safe for me, even if it is challenging to navigate at times. I am now happy about the modifications that have been made, although I am very disappointed that it took so much time before they were done. It is also a

disappointment that so much external pressure from my advocates had to be placed onto the university prior to them agreeing to implement the recommended modifications which allowed me to study in a safe and equal environment.

I commenced a Certificate IV in Cybersecurity at the same institution in 2019. Due to COVID-19, the entire course was delivered online until February this year, when I returned to onsite learning. A new computer lab has been built and the necessary modifications have been included, although the site has still not been modified, which makes orientation difficult. I received an access disability keyboard in March and access to a text-to-speech program in April this year. I feel as though I have been discriminated against and that my learning has been negatively impacted. I hope that this Inquiry will ensure that no other student with a disability will face the same challenges I have. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that, Gabriel. I am sorry that you have experienced some difficulties in trying to access TAFE. Can I just ask, in relation to learning remotely—and obviously through COVID there were some challenges in relation to physically attending courses at TAFE—did you have any difficulties in terms of the digital accessibility or other issues related to remote learning?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I think learning online was probably easier than learning onsite. At my house I know where everything is, there is adequate signage, everything is set up to my specifications. So it was a lot easier at home than it is on campus.

**The CHAIR:** Juliana, did you have questions or comments?

**Ms ADDISON:** I certainly do. Hi, Gabriel, it is Juliana Addison. I just wanted to say thank you so much for being here today. For the other members of the Committee, I was at the ceremony when Gabriel became Ballarat's Young Citizen of the Year, and we could not be prouder of you. You are doing amazing work and I am so glad you are getting the recognition that you deserve, because you are changing the world, starting in Ballarat. So thank you very much.

Gabriel, thank you so much for your advocacy. From your experiences and the lessons that you have learned, what should our Committee be saying to all TAFEs in the whole of Victoria? What would you really like to see? Whether someone is living in Mildura, whether they are living in Shepparton or whether they are in the heart of Melbourne, what should we be doing better?

**Mr GERVASONI:** Well, I think that TAFEs need to make appropriate changes to their classes, to the campus, make changes so that they can accommodate people with disabilities, reasonable modifications, appropriate assist technology. Extra time for exams would be very useful for people with disabilities. In-class supports is something that needs to be done.

**Ms ADDISON:** Gabriel, do you think because of all these barriers there are a lot of young people with disabilities who are just saying it is too hard?

**Mr GERVASONI:** There definitely are. I know people personally who are disabled and do not want to go to uni because it is just too hard.

**Ms ADDISON:** Well, I think that the feedback that you have given us today we have got some really good ideas of how we can try and make things fairer and easier for people with disabilities, so thank you so much. I am sure the other Committee members want to talk to you as well, so hang on.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions?

**Ms RYAN:** Gabriel, can I just say thank you so much for the testimony that you have provided today. I think hearing firsthand from someone facing those challenges is always the most powerful thing for us as Committee members. Juliana largely covered off on the question I had for you, which was, I suppose, how widespread you think it is, in your experience. I guess I would be interested to know a little bit more about those other students and their experiences as well, whether there have been physical barriers like the ones you faced in terms of accessibility issues around the campus or whether there have been barriers actually within the classroom like you were referencing, the need potentially for additional time with exams.

**Mr GERVASONI:** Well, I think for some of the people I know one of the main issues is having to advocate for themselves and having to push through the barriers is really difficult for their mental health. That makes them—I really do not know how to describe it—really anxious and not confident enough to do it, if that describes it enough.

**Ms RYAN:** And you dealt with the orientation and mobility specialist. That is an on-campus person?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I had to get someone from Vision Australia.

**Ms RYAN:** So you actually had to bring in an advocate to help you?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I did, yes.

**Ms RYAN:** Do you think many people do that? I mean, you are obviously very intelligent, and you are able to advocate for yourself to some extent. In your experience, do you think most people facing disabilities actually know where to go in order to get the support to help make those physical changes around campus?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I do not think so, because it is quite hard to find the exact location at the campus where you can ask for help, where you can complain, pretty much.

**Ms RYAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Gary.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, John. Thanks, Gabriel—a fantastic presentation, mate. I will take it that next step further, Gabriel, in terms of work placement. We have got past study now and we are ready for work. What supports do you think students like yourself need to have a successful work placement?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I think the TAFEs should liaise with companies that are willing to provide work placements for students, advise companies providing work placements of the contribution that students with disabilities can provide and encourage them to help them, pretty much.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay. And what can we do to help employers who are prepared to offer work placements? What do we need to do to make those placements successful for students with disability?

**Mr GERVASONI:** Provide the opportunities to the youth and make reasonable adjustments, reasonable modifications to the workplace if they are required.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay. Thanks very much, mate. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Gabriel, can I just ask where you are at currently if you are learning further or are you seeking employment or are you employed at the moment?

**Mr GERVASONI:** I am currently studying a Certificate IV in Cybersecurity, and I have also recently obtained an 18-month traineeship with IBM.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. That is great to hear. And obviously this is one of the reasons why we are having this Inquiry, and we thank you for your submission because it is vitally important to learn firsthand from difficulties that you are experiencing, along with other people with disability. So as a government, in the short term, medium term, long term, how can government make it more accessible and easier for people with disability to study at TAFE?

**Mr GERVASONI:** A big thing is adding in elevators, so that people with, for example, wheelchairs can go between classrooms. Like, in my building there are no elevators, or no lifts, so people with wheelchairs cannot learn IT, at all, onsite, so making modifications so everyone can access the buildings no matter their disabilities.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Any further questions anyone? Okay, Gabriel, would you like to add anything further to what you have already said?

**Mr GERVASONI:** No.

**Ms ADDISON:** John, can I just ask Gabriel one quick question?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Sure.

**Ms ADDISON:** Gabriel, when you were talking, I took a screenshot of you talking. Can I put it on social media? Is that okay with you?

**Mr GERVASONI:** That is fine with me.

**Ms ADDISON:** Excellent. Thanks, Gabriel.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for being with us this morning, Gabriel. It is very important and very valuable. Thank you.

**Mr GERVASONI:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**