

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 Michele Leonard, Victorian State Leader, and

Mr Troy Crellin, Manager, Social Enterprise Programs, Mission Australia.

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 webpage as soon as possible. I 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. Thank you for being with us this morning.

Ms LEONARD: Thank you, everyone, and good morning. My name is Michele Leonard. I am the State Leader at Mission Australia in Victoria. I want to thank you for the opportunity to be before the Committee today. I am pleased to be here representing Mission Australia with my colleague Troy Crellin, who is the Manager of our social enterprises in Victoria.

To begin, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respects to elders, past, present and future, for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land, and we recognise the importance of young people, who are our future leaders.

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services with a focus on ending homelessness and ensuring that people and communities in need can thrive. For example, of over 11,000 people we supported last financial year, over 3300 were supported through disability employment services, transition to work and ParentsNext programs and also our social enterprises here in Victoria.

As part of these programs we facilitate people with disability to enrol in and complete TAFE qualifications. When designed and delivered well, these TAFE courses can provide a great stepping stone for people with disability to get their education qualifications and vocational training. Yet, as highlighted in our submission, we have seen people with disability experience a multitude of challenges when enrolling in and completing TAFE courses due to a lack of support and understanding, and accessibility issues. We really appreciate the fact that this Inquiry is happening and also the opportunity today to speak to you and discuss some of the issues further.

I note, as I am sure you are aware, that these challenges were exacerbated with the introduction of the coronavirus-related restrictions without access to support people with a disability. We found during that period of time there was a very large focus on every social support meeting that we had around these issues. We strongly encourage working with people with a disability to design, develop and implement better processes to support people with disability to access education. It is also critical that measures to improve access to TAFE include educating TAFE staff.

In our paper we identified a number of recommendations that we encourage the Victorian Government to consider. We would like to just identify 'addressing stigma in relation to physical, intellectual and psychosocial disability and make supports readily available for people with disability at different stages of their tertiary education journey'. We also are encouraging increased investment in resources and funding to raise awareness in schools and education settings of Disability Standards for Education and ensure they are implemented uniformly and across the state; providing ongoing training to academic and non-academic staff at TAFE to create a supportive environment for students; funds and established support through disability liaison officers, who would provide targeted supports to students with disability from pre-enrolment through to completion of TAFE courses; increased accessibility of courses by providing flexible learning options for people with disability to learn at their own pace and with additional support from academic staff; and also finally to advocate to the Commonwealth Government to ensure students in receipt of income support payments who are following Certificate I and Certificate II courses are exempt from jobseeking-related mutual obligation requirements.

Our recommendations were based on our experience and also data. We note there are currently 1.1 million people in Victoria with a reported disability, representing 17 per cent of our population, or over one in six people. Research by Mission Australia has found that a lower proportion of young people with a disability intend to go to university than young people without a disability. Conversely, higher proportions of young people with a disability plan to go to TAFE or college. We know that more than six in 10 respondents with a disability indicate they felt there were barriers that would impact upon their achievements of their study or work goals after finishing school. Three in 10 young people with a disability saw mental health as a barrier to achieving their post-school study or work goals. Close to one in four respondents with disability saw academic ability as a barrier to achieving their work goals after school, and three times the proportion of respondents with a disability saw physical health as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals after school. This information has come from our youth survey—Mission Australia conducts a youth survey annually, and it gives us a very rich detail of where young people are at. Currently the youth survey is open.

It is our experience that we have seen a lack of appropriate support for people with disability to enrol in TAFE qualifications within VET institutions. We see at the enrolment stage there is a lack of information about potential financial support for students. Scholarship fee-free courses and subsidised qualifications require a really detailed, strong application process that is complex and time consuming, with little support for people with disability to access. And the level of disability-specific support provided is limited and inconsistent. Some tertiary institutions employ their own disability liaison officers who can be extremely helpful, but others are employed regionally and across campuses, especially for the TAFE sector.

Mission Australia services have found that young people whose disability has gone undiagnosed during their school years often struggle with the transition to further education and training. Delays in diagnosis can hinder the opportunities for people with disability from receiving the supports they need. Misdiagnosis can result in people not receiving appropriate supports with their education or being treated unfairly due to lack of understanding about their condition. This is supported by Australian research that has found that people with disability aged 15 and over attending an educational institute for non-school qualifications experienced discrimination at a rate of 19 per cent in the previous 12 months, with 24 per cent of this group reporting a source of discrimination as the teacher or the lecturer.

In our employment services, for people in receipt of income support payments study and training can be used to count towards JobSeeker activity requirements where it meets short course approved conditions. However, only study at Cert. III counts towards this requirement unless they are a participant in disability employment services. This means that while studying at Cert. I or II level they are expected to complete employment search activities as well as their study activities even if they are studying full-time, which is a difficult task for them to achieve. We do note that over the COVID period families and carers of students with disability agreed they had received a challenge over that period to really access education services.

So we consider solutions. Some of the solutions that we would promote are that services are holistic and that there must be a clear process to working in collaboration with different layers of government, private and public education institutions and community service providers but most importantly with people with a disability and their families. We advocate early intervention at school level to prevent people with disability from disengaging from education and to provide additional support at early stages to address any barriers.

We advocate inclusion so students with a disability find more social connections in inclusive education, higher rates of post-secondary education opportunities and increased outcomes for employment and independence. Evidence indicates that inclusion can reduce the rates of bullying, as people who attend social facilities have a higher chance of experiencing bullying than those in mainstream schooling. We support destigmatising disability-related issues and raising awareness through education campaigns. Publicising information about available support services in community is vital in encouraging people to access targeted services. We believe that schools are an ideal setting to provide programs and interventions to reduce stigma through all forms of disability through education, encouraging help-seeking behaviours and providing pathways to support.

It is recognised from education surveys undertaken by Children and Young People with Disability Australia in 2015 and 2016 that a majority of students with disability and their families felt that in-school support was not adequately meeting their needs. We emphasise it is also important to fund supports through disability liaison officers, who would provide targeted supports to students with disability from pre-enrolment through to completion of the TAFE courses. And where students need additional support with course materials the institution should have access to financial and human resources to meet the needs of students with a disability.

I would like to thank you again for this opportunity to input into the Inquiry. My colleague Troy and I are very happy to answer any further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michelle and Troy. I might just kick off with a question in relation to how schools can better support students with disability who are considering studying at TAFE.

Mr CRELLIN: So I think part of it is about that knowledge and schools engaging. Some really good examples of schools that are doing well—I would suggest a school like Briar Hill is a really good example for the Committee to look at.

And I thank the Committee, obviously, for the opportunity to speak today. I should introduce myself. My name is Troy Crellin. I am the Manager of Social Enterprise Programs for Mission Australia. I am currently at Charcoal Lane today, so I just want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on. And I have got beautiful food in the background, so I am quite hungry here with that smell.

But look, I guess, essentially there are some really good models out there that look at a trauma-informed and also, I guess, a model that actually recognises our invisible disabilities as much as those that are visible disabilities—so depression, bipolar, epilepsy, PTSD. There are lots of disabilities in our community that we are not really recognising to the level that we need to, and I think that there is a stigma with young people attached to that. I think one thing that would really help our education sector is really, I guess, destigmatising, and Michele has mentioned some really good options about those disability liaisons. In social enterprise we actually play a really strong role in that pre-entry of young people into the education system, predominantly TAFE, where we are playing a role of helping young people to understand why it is important that they mention that they have a disability at the start point—because you are able then to access extra supports. And what we see is that the young person accessing that support means they get extra help in the classroom but then other young people can actually utilise that support as well. So the destigmatising actually happens at a peer support level as much as it is occurring the classroom. It is just about that first step of actually recognising the disability

I just wanted to note that I think we say that our TAFE sector in 2019 had 9 per cent disability clients accessing TAFE, but I think the number is a lot higher. I have been working with the TAFE sector since 2008, and that stigma of actually recognising or saying that you have a disability generally comes with that concept of, like, ‘What happens if I actually tell people that I do have a disability?’. So having those supports alongside to explain the process and why you want to tell people about a disability I think is really important. I can tell you from the TAFE providers we have worked with as Mission Australia, each have been really grateful for the trauma-informed knowledge that an organisation like Mission Australia brings or like a Berry Street brings to the school system with some of the models they have brought forward. I think there is certainly something to be said about engaging with the social sector when engaging with TAFE and education.

The CHAIR: Any further questions, Steph or Gary? Steph?

Ms RYAN: Gary, you go first, Deputy Chair.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Good on you, Steph. Troy, just in terms of encouraging people or learners with a disability to share their condition and thereby seek relevant support, how do you think we can improve the process?

Mr CRELLIN: I think it is really about that pathway to support. Look at who the young people are engaging with and trust at a starting level, and really engage that collaboration of support in terms of taking those first steps into the TAFE, into education, with those supports that are already engaged. It is such an important step, I believe, because sometimes it gets lost on an enrolment officer, you know, skimming over some of the questions. And when you are a young person of 15, 16, 17 or 18, sometimes it is quite scary to answer questions without knowing what the results are going to be. We see it in not just the TAFE sector when we are talking about disability, but we also see it in terms of the jobactive space—you know, ‘I don’t want to divulge too much about myself because it may hinder my opportunity to get a payment or it may hinder my opportunity to get access to this course, so I’m going to hide what people know about me’, is the mindset of a lot of young people that I have been working with across my last 10 years of working in this sector. I think it is really important to put the trust in those supports but also reach out to those supports. So I think that TAFE providers really need to be asking the question of a young person when they turn up, ‘Who are your supports?’

Who do you engage with?', and maybe if you are identifying that someone might not be telling the truth on their enrolment form, giving them that opportunity to do so.

One other point that I will make is that once you tick that box on your 15-, 16-, 17-, 18-page enrolment form that you do not have a disability, there is no way back from there. So are we that rigid, that we should just say that at that point we stop actually giving that person that support, or can we have a teacher that actually identifies that maybe we need to investigate this a little bit further and actually reach out to some supports? So I think they are the two points that really I raise from your question.

Ms LEONARD: And if I can just add, Gary, two other things—once you do tick that box on the enrolment form, does anything ever happen? That is a really important response from a young person if they do tick it, and then that follow-up is critical. And I think, as Troy was saying, being fearful of the consequences, so historically, whether they are real or perceived unwanted consequences, in a lot of the campaigns and the education it is tackling some of those misconceived—or real—experiences as we go forward so that people are not fearful.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Michele. Thanks, Troy.

The CHAIR: Steph?

Ms RYAN: Thank you, Chair. Mission Australia obviously is a national organisation so I would really love to know whether you see any differences in terms of the support that TAFE provides young people with disabilities in different jurisdictions—whether as a Committee we should be looking to any examples interstate or whether you broadly see these problems replicated in TAFEs across the country.

Mr CRELLIN: I am happy to go there. I have worked with other states as well and I can say that it is uniform—the challenges are uniform. Some of the traditional methods of disability support, especially for traineeships and apprenticeships, have been through a federal process of the DNAWS payment, or whatever they call it today—disability support incentives. You have to tick a few boxes to be able to get that support. But I think one of the main problems is that we bundle our learning supports in our TAFE sector. We bundle everything into learning support; we do not have a separate disability support, so it is about understanding the needs of individuals. Learning support is obviously there to support learning needs but learning needs are so broad. It might be literacy-related issues, but if you are talking about trauma-related issues, does a learning support worker have the qualifications to be able to manage that or do they fully understand?

There are also issues of some disabilities where they might not be recognised disabilities or they might not be on scope. There is obviously a national inquiry that has just happened because this is a broader issue in this country. I think it is reflected not just here. I have worked across TAFE New South Wales as well and the same issues really occur at that start point. Everything needs to happen at the very beginning and all the understanding of supports needs to happen when you have got a young person that just really wants to start TAFE. If I am a young person, generally what I am going to do is I am going to jump over the hurdle of actually going through the process appropriately and just try to engage in mainstream supports without getting all my documentation together to engage in supports. We see that time and time again in terms of how young people manage and how young people cope. It is a young person's mindset to jump the steps that need to be taken. I think really it involves a pathway with a teacher or a pathway with a support worker to actually go through that step. The mechanisms are kind of in place at TAFE, but unless they are engaging with a disability support or they have already got some supports that understand their support needs that can provide documentation, there is going to be an urgency from the young person just to get in. For instance, I have got a young person at the moment that is about to start a course, needs to start a course on the 25th of this month or at the end of this month. They have now got 15 days to do an application. They manage significant barriers that I want to address, but they just want to get started. It is kind of like I am slowing them down. They are trusting me because I have got a 10-year relationship with them and we will do it properly, but if they were doing it by themselves they would be in mainstream education and eventually it would be up to a teacher at year 2 of their qualification, saying, 'This isn't for you. We can't support your needs'.

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

Ms ADDISON: I did. I would like to say thank you very much to Michele for that very informative presentation, and it is great to have you here to answer questions as well, Troy. The previous witness was a

fantastic young man from Ballarat who talked a lot about advocating not only for himself but having a lot of people advocate for him. Young learners with a disability often lack the skills to advocate for themselves. How can young people with a disability be assisted to build self-advocacy skills?

Mr CRELLIN: I think destigmatising is a big part of it. If I think about Charcoal Lane as a space, for instance, for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, many young people in our environment have never really had strong experiences of culture. But in this space we put culture at the front of everything we do. As an example of that is that young people start to feel very comfortable in their skin and understand who they are and where they come from and the real power and strength in their abilities. I think we can apply the same to any group in our society. Once we actually see others achieving from our own communities and from own experiences, we are actually more likely to feel that confidence in ourselves. I think there are some really strong leaders in disability that have some really strong stories that are really empowering for young people. They are the types of connections I have tried to make and have definitely made in the past through our programs that we have worked with, because there is nothing more empowering than seeing others achieving when you are used to being stigmatised and having that experience of feeling like you are experiencing disadvantage. To Michele's point as well, that is a lifelong experience for many young people that we are working with.

I am working with a family in the education sector at the moment where the youngest daughter of nine years of age is managing a condition that is perceived by teachers to just be troublemaking and teachers are kind of placating her and have learned that if they placate her and treat her differently to everyone else in the classroom then she will behave and attend—and I do not blame the teachers for doing that. It is an added pressure when you have got 28 kids in the classroom; you have got one kid there that you just need to kind of manage. It concerns me then that that young person has already started to be seen as different and have that experience. By the time they are engaging with a service like us at 16, 17, 18, they have disengaged from education or have had negative experiences. You carry that stuff with you, so you have got a lifetime of preparation towards a certain way of thinking. It is our role, as mentors and leaders in our community, to actually lift up the positive stories and actually share those and bring those stories to the front of the conversations we are having and ultimately help people feel empowered. It is such an important part of it, I think.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Further questions? Yes, Steph.

Ms RYAN: This might be one for you, Michele, and perhaps a little bit of a curve ball, but if no-one else has any other questions: you referenced the support that you provide around pre-entry of young people into TAFE. It is obviously a significant part of what Mission Australia does. I guess I just wanted to ask you about some of the reports today around the landfill levy, whether you guys still operate op shops and whether that will impact on your fundraising ability and your ability, I suppose, to provide that support.

Ms LEONARD: No, we do not provide op shops.

Ms RYAN: You do not operate op shops.

Ms LEONARD: No, we do not.

Ms RYAN: When did you get out of that? You used to, didn't you?

Ms LEONARD: Yes, we used to. We had op shops around a number of states in Australia. We got out in 2019.

Ms RYAN: Cool. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. Did you have anything further you wanted to add, Michele or Troy?

Ms LEONARD: No. Just again, thank you for the time. We really appreciate the opportunity to give you a bit of further detail of our experience.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for being with us, and we thank you for your submission. It is very valuable to our Inquiry. So thank you very much again.

Ms LEONARD: Thank you so much.

Mr CRELLIN: Thanks for the opportunity. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.