

# 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 Nicole Rees, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Manager, Policy and Advocacy,

Ms Katie Koullas, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Yellow Ladybugs, and former TAFE teacher;

Ms Jan Davis, Architect and Leader, Work-based training initiatives for students, and

Ms Rebecca Hope, TAFE graduate, Amaze;

Ms Tamsin Jowett, President,

Mr Kyal Kay, Senior Program Facilitator, I CAN Network; and

Mr Thomas Quine, Volunteer, Aspergers Victoria.



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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. Could 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, I think 15 minutes, and seeing as we have got such a large gathering, I just wanted to remind you that it is 15 minutes allocated for all of you to make your contributions so that we have an opportunity as members of Parliament to ask some questions. With that in mind, I hand it over to you now. Thank you. Who wants to start it off?

### **Visual presentation.**

**Ms REES:** Nicole Rees is my name. I am Deputy CEO of autism peak Amaze.

I would like to acknowledge country; I am calling in from Wurundjeri country today. And I just want to say that this Inquiry is a really big deal for the autism community in Victoria. A TAFE system that works well for autistic people could make a huge difference to a sizeable part of Victoria's community, and it could really unlock and unleash potential and talent that is currently being unrealised and under-utilised. For this reason, key autism organisations have banded together. We have undertaken a joint survey to inform this Inquiry, and we stand united before you today as an autism delegation. There are lots of us here, including many with lived experience, and we have got a very short time frame. We have got two minutes each, which we will try and keep to.

There is a very high prevalence of autism in the community and at TAFE. We think it is around 3 per cent of the population, many of whom are undiagnosed. There is high aspiration and huge talent in Victoria's autistic community, but education and employment outcomes are very poor. In fact, they are among the worst of any disability group. Autistic students are attaining high-level VET qualifications at only about half the rate of others with disability. The poor outcomes are not caused primarily by autism but rather by a lack of a supportive and enabling environment. TAFE is the most common post-secondary destination for autistic people, but experiences are very mixed. There are pockets of promising practice and excellent outcomes, but this is not widespread or systemic. TAFE can work really well for autistic learners—the applied learning, the structured curriculum, the smaller classes and the work placements are real strengths of TAFE—but almost half of autistic students are not finishing their courses. There are low and inconsistent adjustments, there is reluctance to disclose their autism, there is low trainer knowledge of autism and low translation of training into employment.

Understanding and support for invisible conditions like autism is lagging and needs to be brought into sharp focus. Closed borders and the COVID recovery environment add to the imperative and also the opportunity for strong pathways from TAFE to employment. As the public provider of the vocational education system and prime pathway to jobs, it is absolutely critical that our TAFE system is working well for autistic students. This requires a targeted approach to address the discrete barriers and the discrete enablers of autistic students, which are so often missed in a generic disability response.

Autism-specific data, targets and measures are needed, with real targets around things like increasing course completion, increasing the rate of higher qualifications and increasing employment outcomes. We could look at leveraging Victoria's new Diverse Learners Hub and Autism Education Strategy, which exist in the school settings. We could look at extending those into the TAFE network. The TAFE disability support services network is absolutely key—they are the glue in all of this—but the offerings across and between TAFEs are so vastly different. So we are calling for a network-wide charter to have a base offering for students with disability. Workforce competency and training in autism is absolutely vital. Models that combine training with

work, we know they are very effective for autistic students. We will hear more about those in our presentation today. And lastly, we call on the Committee to consider piloting an autism inclusion program, and you will hear from Professor Sandra Jones in the next slot about the ACU's program that could provide inspiration.

While the current outcomes for autistic students are unacceptably poor, we are confident that with courageous and intentional reform this can be turned around. Thanks. I am handing over to Tamsin.

**Ms JOWETT:** Good morning. I am Tamsin Jowett with Aspergers Victoria, and I have autistic family, including a 20-year-old son at Swinburne University. We see a culture of systems in TAFE that misunderstand and disempower, leading our autistics down mental health pathways without the required specialist support and with an over 40 per cent unemployment rate. Today I also have Tom joining from DHHS, who through our Rise supported recruitment program co-delivered with specialists then found employment after university and TAFE. Thank you to Thomas and all our lived experience representatives here today—and Amaze—creating a united voice.

Aspergers Victoria delivers support across autistic lives, mainly providing employment and peer support groups, and it is designed through grassroots feedback and delivered through lived experience. We see autism as a cultural way of thinking and being, an invisible difference with different language, learning, sensory needs and behaviours.

The TAFE system offers our community such an effective alternative education approach, but the unemployment rate for the tertiary-qualified autistics shows they are not being supported adequately for that. The invisible barriers and inequality of the current TAFE system adds to the discrimination and does not build equity. We need to redesign the TAFE system with targeted and transparent funding to deliver specialist support and start with changing the mindset through from the transition support to creating peer support so that autistics feel safe to learn and understood, with TAFE becoming a place where autistics thrive again and become ready for work.

To change the engagement in education and career outcomes, Aspergers Victoria created our supported work experience program, which is on the next slide. This was to give students a more clear focus as well as self-understanding and motivation at school, and they are thriving with this targeted support. The right supports build confidence, help them realise strengths and transform them and their career pathways, and a key part of this is it is codesigned with our autistics. Such a supported program at TAFE will work, and I know Jan is going to discuss the program at Holmesglen and how this helps various disabilities. But support and change are required. Thank you.

**Ms KOULLAS:** Hi. Thank you so much for that, Tamsin. I support everything you said today. I am Katie, the Founder and CEO of Yellow Ladybugs. I self-identify as autistic myself and also have lived experience as a teacher at William Angliss Institute and have taught many autistic students as well as students who did not have that identification. So first and foremost, if there is one thing you take away from today, I would want it to be that there really needs to be reform with autistic voices. So anything that is created from today needs to have autistic input—for example, organisations such as I CAN and Yellow Ladybugs and the lived experience that everyone is presenting here today. So thank you for that.

We have a low understanding of autism and what that means in VET, and that leads to not enough adjustments at the ground level. I saw it firsthand. We were not explained at all how to give any modifications or support to autistic students, and it is only through my own lived experience I was able to naturally offer those adjustments. So we are failing autistic students at the moment. We are not given enough training. There should be compulsory training and professional development, and that should be given by autistic individuals who have gone through this and have that lived experience. So that is really the message I want to give today.

The other lens is Yellow Ladybugs does focus particularly on autistic women or gender-diverse individuals who have a more internalised presentation. We do not often see in the school setting our needs getting met, because we mask a lot, and therefore we do experience higher mental health challenges. Therefore I think that there needs to be a particular gendered analysis or support for this big cohort, this cross-intersectional group of autistic women and gender-diverse individuals, using what we have learned from our education setting in a TAFE setting, because as we know, we might have stereotypes of what autism looks like—and we have got autistic students studying hairdressing, beauty, economics; there is so much variety—and we need to break down those stereotypes. So I look forward to giving my input as an autistic person. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any more presentations?

**Ms DAVIS:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for the opportunity to present and talk to you about something that is really just so relevant and highly important. I am Jan Davis, and I work at Holmesglen specifically with young people with additional learning needs and disability who are studying a Certificate I in Work Education. The outcome of the program is for students to gain employment. Through my journey at Holmesglen I could see that the opportunities for employment were shrinking due to a variety of factors. I felt that I needed to do something more about this. In 2017 I was successful in receiving an international research fellowship through the International Specialised Skills Institute, and I had the opportunity to spend a month in London, where I spent time at two colleges and five industry sites where they were practising the supported internship program. That was a really powerful experience for me. I could just see the outcomes that the students were reaching in transitioning straight into mainstream employment. I saw students working at GlaxoSmithKline headquarters, Charing Cross Hospital, the Sofitel at Heathrow, Hounslow City Council and L'Oréal headquarters. I was really passionate about this and could see that this was going to give us the outcomes that would meet the needs of the students with whom I was working.

When I came home I had discussions with the powers that be at Holmesglen, and they were very supportive to see the program come to fruition. By August 2017 I was in discussion with Mike O'Brien, who sits on the Executive Board and is Chief of Surgery at Royal Children's Hospital. He had been looking for a program for what they call the graduate patients at RCH, so young people whose education had been compromised from birth to 18. From my discussions with him he could see that this was going to fit the bill. So very quickly we established an industry-collaborative arrangement with RCH, and we rolled out a pilot program in 2018 based at the children's hospital with 10 students. The majority of the students do sit on the autism spectrum. We did not know what the outcomes were going to be, but they were very powerful.

And we also have a partnership with a disability employment service that offered on-the-job support and then helped the students to transfer into employment the following year. We had 10 students graduate at the end of 2018 through the program; eight of the students went into mainstream employment, so that was an 80 per cent success rate. Six months later we measured the retention rate of the program of those students and that was sitting at 100 per cent. So this data and these statistics have come about via a research project that we were running through our clinical chair. Based on those statistics, we could see that this best practice model was changing the lives of the young people that we were working for. We were often asked about whether the model was sustainable and were we able to replicate it. Well, moving into 2019 we consolidated the program at the Royal Children's Hospital—

**The CHAIR:** Jan, we are really running out of time, but we have a long way to go. So if you can just quickly wrap it up.

**Ms DAVIS:** Okay. Sorry. Thank you so much. So we come to 2021, and we are now running the program across three industry-type sites: Royal Melbourne Hospital, Royal Children's Hospital and Active Monash, who have come on board for this year. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Now, I think we had a couple of spots for a graduate, Rebecca Hope, and a volunteer, Thomas Quine. Do they want to have a couple of minutes each?

**Ms JOWETT:** Yes, please.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Rebecca first maybe?

**Ms HOPE:** Yes. Okay. As you know, my name is Rebecca Hope. I was diagnosed 16 years ago with what is now known as ASD level 1, as well as an anxiety disorder. Over the last few years I have undertaken four TAFE courses at two different institutes. My first foray into TAFE came when I was a final-year student at Rossbourne School, which is a special needs secondary school for students who cannot qualify for the government special schools but at the same time require more support than the mainstream can provide. This course was a VETiS course. It was a Certificate II in Animal Studies. As the school enrolled me—because I was enrolled through the school—they disclosed my disability, but this particular provider did not give me the emotional support I needed. As a result I often found myself very anxious attending and I was too frightened to express my needs for fear of being ridiculed.

At the end of 2018, when I left Rossbourne, I found my way to Holmesglen, and I started off in their community and transitional education department, initially in the VCAL foundation course in 2019, which I thoroughly enjoyed. All of the teachers were very knowledgeable about my needs and knew exactly how to assist me, and as such my anxiety was greatly reduced. At the start of 2020 I was fortunate enough to be accepted onto the integrated practical placement program which Jan detailed in her speech, and I was part of the first contingent of students to be placed at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, which came aboard at the start of last year. Now, we were meant to have three work rotations, each of nine weeks in duration. However, COVID severely disrupted this and we were only able to undertake one five-week rotation. I did this rotation in the human resources/people and culture department of the hospital, and through that experience I gained vital skills not just for that particular industry but for general working life. It inspired me to go and look for a business traineeship, which I am thrilled to say I have now secured at a recruitment firm in Northcote. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** That is a fantastic story. Congratulations, Rebecca; that is great.

**Ms HOPE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Did Thomas want to have a say?

**Mr QUINE:** Yes. I will talk a bit. I am Tom. I am a former student of Victoria University. During my studies I was undiagnosed for autism, and despite knowing that I had these difficulties and kind of quite strongly advocating for myself, I found that they really did not know what to do with me and did not have any kinds of supports that they were able to offer me. This really became kind of much more of a problem for me when I moved into my main Masters degree, which had a very strong practical component. My academics were always quite strong; I had a kind of a high credit, low distinction average. But some of the subjects in the Masters had kind of prac exams where if you failed that exam, you would fail the whole subject irrespective of anything else, which just became kind of an insurmountable roadblock for me. To get around that, because there were no real supports, the only things I was ever really offered were extra reading time and extra exam time, which did not help.

I was told when I was discussing this with disability support that I—it was a bit strange. I was told that I had to tell them what I required and they could not really directly tell me. One of the things I suggested was a mentor to assist me especially with the more practical components of the course. They told me that they could not do that, which was a bit frustrating. It eventually ended up with me being pulled into a meeting because I had failed too many subjects and being told I was going to be expelled from the university, at which point I said, ‘Hold on. Why are we not taking into account the discrepancy between the practical and the academic stuff?’. I was shoved aside and told, ‘Well, it’s too late now. We don’t care about that’, which was pretty frustrating. It had a pretty severe impact on me mentally, and the only real silver lining is that that did actually become the catalyst for me getting my diagnosis. Thankfully, off the diagnosis I now got into the Rise program at DHHS.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for sharing with us, Thomas. We really appreciate it. Thank you so much. Look, I might kick off the questions.

**Ms REES:** Excuse me, Chair. We have one other lived experience expert in the room, and there is a slide for him—Kyal.

**Mr KAY:** Good afternoon, everybody. Springboarding directly off what Thomas just said, I am a Senior Program Facilitator with the I CAN Network. I work in and with TAFEs. Part of my job as a mentor is to help young autistics as young as five and sometimes as old as 20 to reach these tertiary pathways, whether that be employment, whether that be going on into universities or going through TAFEs. I am autistic myself, having been diagnosed with Asperger’s at the age of 14, and I am dyslexic as well. So I myself have been a student at TAFE and have experienced similar challenges, but the thing I want to emphasise first is that TAFE has created a great environment that challenges preconceptions around tertiary education. First and foremost within the autism community, a lot of older autistics my age and older still think they cannot go to uni simply because they are autistic. TAFE challenges these preconceptions every day and is so important to helping my mentees achieve their best.

But the thing that I hear the most from our amazing TAFE staff is that there are not enough resources out there to train them in how to help autistic individuals. This is where what Katie said earlier is so important about bringing and utilising autistic sources already within the TAFE network and within the wider education sector,

because the I CAN Network works with the education department, and so do most of the organisations here, to build a comprehensive action plan of how we can best help TAFE's support their autistic students. You will see in the submission here that we have added things such as plans for greater sensory needs because if you do not meet sensory needs, you have sensory meltdowns. They are two sides of the same coin. When you are helping autistic individuals, they are more comfortable and as a result they will have higher academic performance and lower cases of anxiety attacks and your related complications. So we really, really need more training—more comprehensive autistic-consulted training—in the area to really bring up to speed our autistic students because this TAFE is so important. If we can get this right, we can begin to combat the severe unemployment and disenfranchisement within the autistic community. Thank you, Mr Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Kyal. Can I just ask: Amaze's submission states that 50 to 70 per cent of autistic people also have mental health conditions. What mental health supports should be in place at TAFE's to provide for learners with autism? Is there something that TAFE's can do further to assist those people that need the care or help?

**Ms REES:** Yes. I think there are a few people who would probably like to contribute to that answer, but in the Amaze submission one of the reforms that we called for is: when someone makes an autism disclosure to also talk to them about whether there is another co-occurring condition, because so often autistic people have co-occurring conditions and mental ill health is a huge factor. The other thing we would like to point to is the mental health practitioner in schools initiative that is being rolled out in secondary schools across the state and whether or not that is something that ought to be looked at at a systems level in TAFE. I am going to hand over to others, especially our lived experience people, around adjustments about mental health. Katie, you look like you want to speak.

**Ms KOULLAS:** Yes. I just wanted to add that if we can be proactive and pre-empt it, we can really do a lot to support potential burnout. A lot of the time, anxiety-provoking situations, such as group work—even talking today, the autistic individuals in the room probably know the two minutes that we have got and the justice that they have got about, 'Oh, this person spoke more than two minutes'. It is all these hidden things that go on in our minds that lead to our anxiety, and the longer we are anxious, the more the chance of burnout and disengagement. So if we can try and be proactive and set up structures within TAFE, it will go a long way to support mental health and, like Nicole said, the co-occurring conditions—understanding how that interplays—the OCD or whatever else. Because we know there are a lot of us with co-occurring conditions.

**The CHAIR:** Rebecca, did you want to speak?

**Ms HOPE:** Yes. In my experience at Holmesglen the mental health support was already there, embedded in the course, because all of the teachers were trained, as I said, and I could go and seek support from any staff member at any time if I was feeling anxious. However, in the mainstream system that just was not available. I was not able to go and seek support when I was anxious about assessments or things that were happening in the class, and as a result I kept a lot of it inside. The only thing I could do was go out into the corridor and contact someone for help, like my mum or someone from school, because they just did not provide the support. This particular place's view was, 'Oh, she can do the work. She can behave. She's not an issue'. That is not the case. On the outside I might look fine—we might look fine—but on the inside we are struggling just to sit in that classroom. And having a go-to person, at least one safe person to go to in that setting, would set us up psychological safety and thus reduce our anxiety so we can learn more effectively.

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

**Ms RYAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for being here and for being so incredibly passionate about achieving this change. I think my question might be for you, Jan, as someone who is actively working in the TAFE sector. We have heard from a whole range of different groups that face barriers to TAFE today—everything from dyslexia; you guys, obviously representing autism; people who are vision impaired; people who are more broadly disengaged; and people with mental health problems. There is a common theme, I think, emerging around teacher training and the fact that people do not feel like teachers can necessarily identify and support students who might be facing those barriers. But I guess my question goes to—to me, that also provides a degree of complexity in that: can teachers physically train in all of this? Or is there a way that there can be some consolidation? Obviously you cannot pull teachers out of a classroom for two years to train. I mean, you could, but there is a question of the extent of that training if they actually train across all of those different areas that—

**Ms JOWETT:** Can I just say something on that. One thing with autism support is it has been proven that supports that support autistics help everyone learn. So they are actually straightforward, but they are just not thought through.

**Ms RYAN:** So I guess that is my question: is there training that can be devised that actually supports students facing all of those barriers or do you basically need discrete training for teachers in every area?

**Ms DAVIS:** Steph, that is a really good question. In an ideal world the answer would be to have everybody potentially with a special education background. So putting things in perspective, my background, my trade, is primary teaching. A lot of those skills that I have learned—and having worked in the special ed space there—just way add to my strength in working with the cohort of students. However, within the department that I work in, community and social inclusion, we—and the institute as a whole supports us—make a very conscious decision of having maximum class sizes of 10 students, so that limits us heaps because it is very expensive for the institute to run our department.

Across any institute, any educational setting, an average class size would sit between 20 and 25. So for us to get the optimum results in supporting our students with such a diverse range of additional learning needs we cap the classes at 12—so that is 12 to 10 students, one teacher. However, we will also have literacy and numeracy support as well, and students with support from perhaps from their NDIS plan we can also offer extra support. But over the years we have seen that this is the formula that works best with our students for not just the academic learning but the social side of it that Bec was talking about—that feeling safe, that feeling supported, that having a mentor teacher to go to, having a manager that they can go to, knowing that someone is there the whole time. So from an institute's point of view our courses do not make any money for the institute, because it is expensive to run one teacher to 10 students, and our class numbers are capped every year because of this.

**Ms REES:** Yes. Can I just chip in? In terms of a systems perspective and looking at the competency of trainers—and I know Katie spoke about the need for training for teachers and trainers—I just wanted to point to two other pieces that need to be considered. One is the disability liaison staff, and they are really the glue in this. They are there to support the trainers. Actually having a very skilled disability liaison service with a very clear offering as to what it is they do across the whole TAFE network so every institute does not look very different to each other but has a very clear indication of the base level of supports they do—like taking students through all the different kinds of adjustments they might have, doing individual plans with the students, working with the students and the trainers to make sure those individual plans are actually coming to life—are really important points.

The other thing is just pointing to the upcoming diverse learners hub that the Victorian Government is establishing for schools, and that will be a centre of excellence in education for neurodiverse students, including autistic students, and that is there not as a replacement to teacher training but as an adjunct, as a specialist setting where there is a multidisciplinary team and autism coaches and a place where schools can go to get extra advice and support. That is something that could be expanded to the TAFE network. Thanks.

**Mr KAY:** Can I just add something in here as well. To answer your question as well, you guys have seen a lot today about a lot of different kinds of co-occurring diagnoses, and the I CAN Network currently delivers PD that is done in a day format that covers autism but also autism and codiagnosis, so it is very practical and these resources already exist to do upskilling and reskilling within a timely and cost-effective time frame. So if it does decide that this is something that needs to be implemented, it does not mean you need to take all the teachers out of the faculty for two years and make them reskill. This can be done very quickly and very succinctly to teach everyone, to catch everyone up to speed. There is not massive amounts of recalling that needs to be done. Very similar to how currently high school teachers have to do a mandatory amount of PD to maintain their teaching licence, that same thing can apply for teachers within the tertiary sector. So I hope that answers your question.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Kyal. Katie, did you have—

**Ms KOULLAS:** Yes, I just want to say a couple of quick things. One, I agree with that last comment Kyal just said about it does not need to be two years. It can be as simple as just understanding the key challenges that do impact autistic students but will benefit many other types of differences in neurodivergence. But also, working in the TAFE setting or the university setting, I did see so much put in place to support students, international students, where they had officers who were able to help them understand the language, and I felt



as though the missing gap was helping our students who were neurodivergent with the same sorts of supports, like being able to go somewhere and ask what they think the motive was of their team member. You know, there is so much investment done there, and I really think that we need to look towards that and say, 'This is just as important, to support this group of students'.

Also, the last thing I will say is Yellow Ladybugs, we often do training differently through our social media platforms where we empower autistic young adults to understand what their rights are so they can self-advocate as well. I think that is really important—that not only are we on one hand supporting the TAFE teachers but we are empowering autistic individuals to actually know what their needs are and know how to advocate for them. I think supporting organisations like I CAN, Aspergers Vic. and Yellow Ladybugs by doing that is really important as part of this solution.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Katie.

**Ms HOPE:** Just in regard to a comment somebody made earlier about disability liaison units, they are very helpful when they actually get involved. With my mainstream course, I was not told. I knew that there was disability liaison. However, I was not taught how to use it, was not taught how to access it at all. Because I was a VETiS student, they just had the theory, 'Oh, it's your school's problem. If you've got issues, go talk to your school'. I could not necessarily just tell the school. I had to tell someone at the TAFE, and as I said earlier, I just could not and was often severely compromised because of that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** John, could I just quickly—

**The CHAIR:** Gary, yes.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** The answer to that previous question has covered a whole range of supports that are needed for people dealing with autism in the education setting. But I just want to home in on the sensory overload that students do suffer. Are there any other things specifically that TAFEs should do to try and manage or reduce that sensory overload for students with autism?

**Mr KAY:** Can I go first with this one, guys?

**The CHAIR:** Kyal.

**Mr KAY:** I have actually just finished the program at the Warrnambool SDS this morning specifically on this subject, so it is fresh and in my head. A lot of times I do not think sensory overload is properly explained. So as part of autism one of the things is that we perceive pre-existing stimuli to a higher level. For instance, I am photosensitive, so I always wear sunnies, even if it is a cloudy day, because for some reason between my eyes and my brain my frontal lobe is perceiving more light than my neurotypical peers. It is the same for people with sound sensitivity. It is the same for people with texture sensitivities. When TAFEs do the enrolment process it should be part of a student's package that they have pre-existing sensory conditions, and then there are very easy things teachers can do. In my case it was switching from the classroom lights to natural light, to opening the windows, because the lights inside the TAFE building—which are designed to be there during the night and the day—are extremely bright. For other students it is that there is not music going on during the class, during group break-off working periods. Once again, it is language. There need to be mechanisms in place for self-advocacy and for autistics to feel okay to speak. And that comes down to language, that comes back to training and that comes back to putting the right procedures in place to enable our autistics to feel comfortable to then speak. Rebecca should know that there are people there for her. Thomas should be able to speak on the fact that he has trouble in practical components, and the person listening to him should already have a list of things they can try in place. We need to have practical procedures and policies in place for our amazing TAFE staff.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, Kyal.

**Ms JOWETT:** And that could be as simple as having the transition supports they have had in secondary school follow them across into the TAFE system, including the knowledge of their sensory needs and their learning support needs. It does not need to be complicated, but you could have more transition support.

**Ms KOULLAS:** Can I just say one last thing? We do often talk about sensory needs—it is very important—but one of the hidden needs that autistic individuals face is executive functioning. If you do not know what that is, please look it up. It is all about the organisation, working memory and all of that. You get a lot of assumptions and ‘lazy’ labels and ‘just can’t complete it’. So for me, being a teacher, I have to look beneath the behaviour and what is going on to work out it actually has a lot to do with the executive functioning or hidden co-occurring ADHD and attention going on. I think topics like that need to be looked at alongside sensory sensitivities as a really big part of it.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, so we have got Thomas and then we will finish with Jan, if that is all right.

**Mr QUINE:** So yes, I was just saying I think it is really hard to overstate how important it is to really accommodate sensory sensitivities. I think the best, most recent example I have is when I first started working at DHHS I had only recently been diagnosed. I did not really have a good understanding of my sensory sensitivities or anything like that. Initially I was very unproductive, disruptive—probably in almost any other workplace I would have lost my job before I figured anything out. But fortunately I was able to get access to a funding scheme which allowed me to get these headphones, and just having noise-cancelling headphones made a massive difference to me. Just blocking out those distractions allowed me to focus better and become significantly more productive and more quiet in the workplace. And I think it is probably similar to other people on the spectrum with other sensitivities as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Thomas.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, Thomas.

**The CHAIR:** Jan.

**Ms DAVIS:** Thank you. Look, I would just like to say that we do it really well in our department. I believe that we have got really good structures in place as well as the program that I am heavily involved with. And I think a key to a lot of that success is that before a student enrolls we run what is called a pretraining review, which is mandated by the organisations, but we run an appendix to that. Through that appendix we spend a substantial amount of time with the family so that we get a really good understanding of the young person’s development, disability and what is required through support. So on the back of that, that is how we structure and support the learning. For our staff, although they may not have a formal qualification in special ed, they are very experienced, and we offer a great deal of professional development to cater for the disabilities that we are presented with.

I need to highlight that there are TAFEs out there who are doing it really well. We are doing it really well, but the thing that is stopping us is the funding. We are hugely limited by funding and therefore being able to provide all these young people with the opportunity to transition into mainstream employment, which is what the IPP program is all about—and here is Bec, a living breathing example of a total success story, of whom I am just so, so proud. She has done an incredible job, so I just wanted to—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We have gone way over time. We have got the next witness waiting, as you can appreciate, so we have got to wrap it up, unfortunately. Thank you all very much for being part of today. We really appreciate it.

**Witnesses withdrew.**