

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Sarah Connolly

WITNESSES

Ms Tamsin Rossiter, Executive Officer, Adult and Community Education Victoria;

Ms Nicole Battle, Chief Executive Officer, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria; and

Ms Jenny Macaffer, Chief Executive Officer, Adult Learning 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 phones should now be turned off or 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 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which we will be following with questions from the Committee to you. Thanks very much for being here.

Ms ROSSITER: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the public hearings for the Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability. We are really appreciative of this opportunity to talk with you today. I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we all meet today from throughout Victoria. I am joining you from Wadawurrung country of the Kulin nation. I would like to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and I extend that respect and welcome to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us today.

My name is Tamsin Rossiter, and I am the Executive Officer for Adult and Community Education Victoria, ACEVic. We are the peak body for Learn Local providers in Victoria. As you probably are already aware, Learn Locals provide pre-accredited or adult and community further education pathway programs to assist learners to transition into further study and employment. Pre-accredited programs focus on vocational pathways and adult literacy and numeracy and digital and employability skills training. There are over 270 Learn Locals throughout the state, funded by the Victorian Government via the Adult, Community and Further Education Board. Some Learn Locals are community education centres, some are neighbourhood houses and 30% of them are registered training organisations as well.

One of the significant features of these pre-accredited training programs is their flexibility. They are designed to meet the needs of learners and also of industry and communities. As you would have seen in our submission, Learn Locals deliver a large number of programs specifically for learners with disability. In addition to the tailored training programs, another important factor is that people with disability are visible in Learn Locals; there is a strong sense of belonging. Learn Locals provide welcoming and inclusive learning environments within their local communities, and they are well linked to a range of community service providers and support networks for learners with disability.

We welcome this Inquiry, and in terms of considering increased access to TAFE for learners with disability we think it is critical that the role of adult and community education—the role that it plays within the post-secondary system—is considered. This Inquiry is quite timely in this regard because there is currently a significant drive to increase partnerships and collaboration between the ACE sector and TAFE, and this initiative is driven by the current ministerial statement, *The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020–25*, a copy of which is included in our submission. Here you will note one of the priorities is to build a cohesive and interconnected education system. So we look forward to sharing with you examples and ways in which the ACE sector can and does work with TAFE to enhance the accessibility for learners with disability.

I will now introduce Nicole Battle, who is CEO of Neighbourhood Houses Victoria.

Ms BATTLE: Thanks, Tamsin. Hello, everybody. In terms of neighbourhood houses as Tamsin mentioned, a lot of Learn Locals operate through neighbourhood houses. There are about 400 neighbourhood houses across Victoria, with pretty much a 50-50 split between rural and metropolitan regions, and of those 400 neighbourhood houses, about 200 of them deliver Learn Local. There is also a handful—probably about 40—that are registered training organisations as well. So our involvement in adult education is quite significant. I do not know how much you know about neighbourhood houses. They are funded through the Department of Health and Human Services and they offer a range of services—so, things like child care, they run social

groups, they run support groups, they do a lot of emergency relief, they do a lot of work with women coming out of family violence. One of the things that we have found in terms of adult community education is the importance of a holistic approach. A lot of the learners in the ACE space do come to it with various barriers, whether it be disability or something else, and what neighbourhood houses do so well is the wraparound. We provide local service, so for some people who are getting back into education and going back into that journey that is a big enabler because they do not have to travel far so they are able to connect to a service in their local area, so that is really important.

We also do the holistic stuff very well, so we get a good sense of these people. We get a good sense of who they are. We know their name. We are able to build up their confidence in other ways. So they might come for learning, but equally they will engage in support groups. They might also do some social groups and they might volunteer back at the house as well, so it is a really good opportunity for us to build their confidence and their esteem, and we find that that makes a big difference in their learning journey, because often learning is about confidence—having that confidence to know that you can do it and having the confidence to know that you can sit in a classroom of people. For us, it is that really important integration between the learning and the other parts of that person's life. So that is just a little bit about neighbourhood houses and the role that we play in adult and community education, and like Tamsin, we really welcome you listening to some of these learnings today. Thank you.

Ms ROSSITER: Thanks, Nicole. Jenny Macaffer, the CEO of Adult Learning Australia.

Ms MACAFFER: Thanks, Tamsin and Nicole. I would also like to thank the Inquiry for inviting us here today. I am coming to you from Boon Wurrung land, part of the Kulin nation. We welcome this opportunity to join with our colleagues from both ACEVic and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria because this is such an important inquiry. Just a little bit about Adult Learning Australia, often referred to as ALA: we are the largest national not-for-profit peak organisation representing adult and community education in Australia. We have been operating for more than 60 years, and we have both organisational and individual members in all states and territories. They reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education.

A substantial part of our members in Victoria are Learn Local organisations as well as neighbourhood houses. We also have some TAFE organisations who are members across Australia, so you can see that we cover a wide range. We collaborate with our various state partners, such as ACEVic and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria as you have seen today, on a range of issues to advocate for and support the sector. Victoria, and I think this is a really important thing to note for the Inquiry, is a leader in terms of adult and community education in Australia. It has a very long history of engaging with marginalised and disadvantaged groups and at this point has some very strong support from the Victorian Government. We have seen that from Minister Tierney, which we welcome.

We see this as an opportunity to highlight the flexible and supportive environments that Learn Locals offer to students who have a wide range of disabilities. And as I said, Victoria is unique in having such an extensive level of community and social infrastructure in place through Learn Locals, and we want to see the provision of adult and community education in Victoria strengthened within an integrated post-secondary education system to provide better outcomes for people and learners with disability. In one sense we see this as an opportunity for Victoria to shine across the nation about how best to have that integrated approach. So thank you again for having us here today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will get into questions. We have with us today Gary Blackwood, MP, who is the Deputy Chair; Juliana Addison, MP; Kat Theophanous, MP; and Sarah Connolly, MP. Can I just ask—and we will all ask our questions accordingly—your submission mentions that the successful transition from Learn Locals to TAFE is not common. What factors limit learners with disability from transitioning into TAFE?

Ms ROSSITER: Yes, it is a really good question, and I think it is a bit multifaceted. I think with that question we need to look at the different learning environments maybe as a good starting point. One of the strengths, as we have already mentioned, around adult and community education teaching is that it is done localised within people's local communities. The class sizes are often small, and it is a very welcoming and an inclusive learning environment. As Nicole mentioned, trainers get to know the learners very well. There is a lot of individualised one-on-one support for learners, and so for some learners to then transition into the TAFE

system—it has been fantastic of the Victorian Government to rebuild the TAFE system, and we now see a system with state-of-the-art facilities, and they are big, impressive learning institutions—sometimes that in itself can actually be a barrier for people who are used to this smaller learning environment within a community-based setting, so sometimes that can actually act as a barrier. Some of the solutions we are working towards are how we can orientate learners from the community-based setting into the TAFE setting, so having us working in an integrated way where TAFE staff can come out into the Learn Locals, where Learn Locals can include orientation sessions into the TAFE learning environment to familiarise the learners within that TAFE setting. So although the facilities of TAFE are fantastic and very welcomed, that in itself sometimes can be a barrier for people who are used to some of the smaller learning environments.

Ms BATTLE: Just further to that, I think, and as Tamsin mentioned, it is very much about that warm handover. We know that with any learning environment it is the transition where you often lose people, so again with better integration and even having the TAFE come to the Learn Local, but equally sometimes just being able to take students on a tour and making them feel really comfortable, that will be enough for them to navigate that transition successfully.

Ms MACAFFER: Can I just add—sorry; it is pouring with rain and I have got a tin roof, so it might be really hard to hear me at this moment—some of the Learn Locals I have spoken with also said that they might have had some relationships with people in TAFE before but because there has been so much change the contacts and relationships that they have had in the past have gone and it has been a challenge to reconnect, so that is also something that we could look at around developing those relationships between Learn Locals and TAFEs.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, John. Thanks, John. Probably to Tamsin, I think. It is in relation to your submission, which mentions that an integrated post-secondary system would enable learners with disability to access programs and support through ACE while transitioning to and participating in TAFE. What are some of the examples of how this could work, Tamsin?

Ms ROSSITER: That is a good question. We do have a couple of good examples. Already we have some Learn Locals working really well with their local TAFE, and I can give you an example. In Geelong, where I am based, is The Gordon TAFE. There was a collaboration project that was funded by the Adult, Community and Further Education Board, and I think that in itself is significant because it is the funding of particular projects that allows these collaborations to be established to build on this integrated approach. What our concern as a sector is is when these projects finish what we really need is the funds and the resources to continue these collaborations, because what we have seen down here is the starting point for an integrated system is an increase in awareness of what Learn Locals are, what pre-accredited—they are also referred to as ACFE or adult, community and further education—programs actually are and how they work. So there needs to be a systematic approach for the whole of the TAFE system. There is no point just getting our CEOs or our TAFE directors on board; we need the whole staff of TAFE to be aware of, ‘What is a pre-accredited program? How does it work? Can my learners be enrolled in a TAFE program and a pre-accredited program at the same time?’. Of course they can, which is invaluable for a TAFE teacher—to have their learners supported through, for example, additional literacy and numeracy training simultaneously to while they undertake a TAFE qualification. So we need that awareness of the Learn Local brand, how Learn Locals work. A TAFE program manager who might be a program manager of horticulture and has a cohort of learners who need some additional literacy and numeracy training, how do they access the Learn Local? Who do they talk to? So it is building those relationships.

So the awareness of Learn Locals but also the awareness of pre-accredited training I think really needs to be across all TAFE systems—you know, not just one TAFE that has got a really good project that has worked well. We need to see this right across the state, I think, where Learn Locals are working well with TAFE and vice versa. Of course it works well both ways, because as the TAFE and Learn Locals are more integrated, the Learn Locals can have access to additional students to train through the TAFE system as well, and that can be beneficial in terms of sustainability of the actual Learn Local, as well as assisting the TAFE to help with course completions of their accredited courses. But ultimately it is the learner that we are most concerned about, and that learner will have access to additional support to be able to be successful in their accredited training and on to employment.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Tamsin.

Ms MACAFFER: Sorry, could I just add, another vehicle for that is some sort of integrated professional development that might work across both, with TAFE teachers and with Learn Locals.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Jenny.

Ms ROSSITER: Absolutely, and I think the secret to that is the funds. I mean, you are probably familiar that in 2018 the Andrews Government supported the Learn Locals with \$5 million to go towards literacy and numeracy and language training, and that was fantastic. What we are actually seeing now are the benefits of some brilliant professional development to increase the capacity and the capability of Learn Local practitioners to deliver literacy and numeracy and language programs. So in a similar way, when we look at supporting learners with disability and if we are looking at professional development for TAFE trainers, as Jenny said, additional funds would be most welcome.

The CHAIR: Juliana, did you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, Chair, I certainly do. Thank you so much for joining us today. We have got a fantastic Highlands LLEN where I am in Ballarat, with Jannine Bennett, and they are doing great things and transforming lives in Ballarat, so I am a big fan of our LLENs. I think this is a really good follow-up from the previous question, and it is talking about the delivery of TAFE programs at our Learn Locals. Your submission states that enabling Learn Locals to provide TAFE programs would improve access for learners with disability, particularly in regional areas like mine, and I know that you are in Geelong. What steps would be needed to occur for this to occur?

Ms ROSSITER: Yes, it does link in with that previous question, I think, because again it is the awareness, and we need this really at the hands-on level, so it is the people who are designing and managing the training programs, so the program managers and the trainers need to have that connection to the Learn Locals. Either they could deliver programs at the TAFE or vice versa—the Learn Locals could also deliver them. It would be great to see the sharing of those resources and facilities, the TAFE facilities, with the Learn Local sector. It would be fantastic. You know, Learn Locals do a lot of taster programs, so an introduction to aged care or—try a trade—introduction to trade. As we know, the TAFEs have superb trade training facilities increasingly, and it would be fantastic to have those resources shared with our sector.

With the project that we had in Geelong, going back to that idea of systemic connections between a range of people, we actually had TAFE staff coming to a number of Learn Locals to provide advice on the enrolment process, on the admissions process. The careers counsellor came and spoke to the learners. We had the Aboriginal liaison officer; we had student support. So you can see, once you get this cross-pollination of TAFE staff in the Learn Local setting it is a great way to build those relationships and to make some of those TAFE services available to Learn Local learners and for ones wanting to pathway on. Did that answer your question? I do not know if anyone else has anything to add.

The CHAIR: Okay. Kat Theophanous, would you like to ask a question?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thanks, John, and thank you, Jenny, Tamsin and Nicole, for your input today. I am a huge fan of our neighbourhood houses and our Learn Locals. We have got some brilliant ones in the inner north, including the Bridge Darebin, who have been doing a phenomenal amount of work, particularly through the pandemic. One of the things they have recently achieved is getting some workers through Working for Victoria to help them out. They have got 15 new workers for the next six months. One of them is going to be dedicated to looking exactly at how they can support their students who are coming through and doing the Learn Local courses, how they can then build those connections with what happens after they complete those courses—how do they get them into work or further employment. So they have got someone dedicated to that role now. I wonder if that is something that is common amongst neighbourhood houses—to have someone in that role doing that work, making those connections, or whether it is something that would be of value across the board? Maybe it is a question for Nicole there.

Ms BATTLE: Look, it absolutely would be. Certainly the Bridge is a phenomenal centre. Chris and her team do such a good job. There are a couple of other neighbourhood houses that were also able to get money out of Working for Victoria to create similar roles, and I think it is a really great model. I think some of the

smaller Learn Locals—it is harder for them probably, just based on bums on seats. It is harder for them probably financially to make a role like that work. But, yes, I think it is a fantastic model, and yes, Chris has done a great job there.

Ms ROSSITER: Probably just to add to that, it is probably important to note that the way the funding works is that the funding is for delivery of training. So in terms of any additional roles that are required in terms of building these relationships, this is where the ACE sector is lacking. Some of the larger Learn Locals that are RTOs, for example, may have some marketing staff or business development staff, but most Learn Locals in the smaller houses have the trainers that come in to deliver the programs and maybe a training coordinator above them, but there is nobody in those roles to fulfil those really critical business development relationship-building roles, and that would be fantastic to have—in each region some funded positions where that is exactly the role, to kind of broker those relationships between the Learn Locals and the TAFE.

Ms BATTLE: Just further to that, that is where the neighbourhood house model works quite well with the Learn Local sitting in the neighbourhood house, because the neighbourhood house coordinators are funded through the NHCP, the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program. So they have a little bit of extra capacity, I suppose, in the sense they do have that face of the house that is able to take on that role. It is not really part of their PD so to speak, but they do the work. Neighbourhood houses just sort of jump in and that is what they do. Equally often they will have volunteers they can also call on that they have got trained up to also be doing some work in that space. But pure Learn Locals, they kind of lack, because as Tamsin has said, they are just funded for that delivery; they are not necessarily funded for the wraparound or they have got less capacity to make that wraparound happen.

Ms MACAFFER: I think, though, Kat, you have just highlighted the adaptability of the community sector. Because they are less bureaucratic than TAFEs they can respond to these things more quickly and be more inclusive, working with the community. So that is one of the benefits of being locally based and run by community and delivering to local community—you can respond to the needs much faster than a large institutional organisation like a TAFE.

Ms BATTLE: Sorry, just further to that, because I think it is an important point, that is where there is that adaptability. If you think about the hierarchy of needs in education, if you have got people who are hungry because they do not have enough to eat, that is where often the neighbourhood house model, this really localised model, picks up on that, and so they link people in with food often. We have got houses where they will see women coming through and they will be missing classes and they delve a little bit and find out that that woman is in a family violence situation, so they are able to link that person in with extra support. So they are very adaptable, and they do look at the person very holistically—not just the education but all of the other factors that are enablers for that education to occur.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sarah Connolly, do you have a question?

Ms CONNOLLY: Yes, I do, Chair. Thank you, ladies, for joining us today. Once we have someone with disability do their TAFE course and get through that, how do you go then if you are looking to place those TAFE students, say, to do work experience or with a local employer based on your contacts? Have you got enough buy-in within the community to do that or is that a little bit of a struggle?

Ms ROSSITER: I think it depends on the qualification that they are doing. Many qualifications at TAFE, for example, in community services, have placement hours, so when their qualification includes structured workplace placement hours, that really assists in that process to transition into employment. Often employers hand-pick which graduates they would like to offer work to and that can work quite well. In regard to our sector, what is important is, even though it is called pre-accredited training, our training can also be offered post-accredited, so we can deliver training to prepare students to transition to TAFE, we can assist learners simultaneously while they complete their TAFE qualification but we can also run a prepare-for-employment pre-accredited course once they finish their TAFE qualification. So working closely with the TAFE, it would be a fantastic initiative to see more of this happening to help learners once they have finished their TAFE qual to transition into work, whether that is through work experience or whether it is preparing people for job

interviews and preparing them for employment, résumés et cetera. Our sector does a lot of that type of work, and it would be great to be able to work in with a TAFE more to be able to offer that post-qualification training.

Ms BATTLE: The other thing that can often occur in large regional centres is where there is a big employer the Learn Local neighbourhood house will often make connections with that employer with a view to being able to almost tailor what is needed in getting ready for employment so that they can transition really easily into the job. Because moving into employment is another transition where you can lose people—so the more you can do to do that warm handover and to make them feel supported during that transition. And again, I am sort of thinking of a couple of programs where then the Learn Local will go in even after the person has started employment to be able to keep doing some of the soft skills training with them just to keep them engaged.

Ms MACAFFER: I think that is right, Nicole. I have seen some good examples in the Latrobe Valley and some of the other regions in Victoria where that has happened. One of the other points is, I guess, just around placements. Some TAFE students in particular are finding it difficult to have placements during their training. In fact this year and last year a Learn Local and Adult Learning Australia shared some students. So in a way those students—and one had a disability—also got an opportunity through their placement through TAFE building a relationship with a Learn Local by taking on a student as well. That built the relationships between the workers in the TAFE and the workers in the Learn Local organisation. So some of these relationships are happening in different ways across Victoria as well.

Ms CONNOLLY: I just have a follow-up question, Chair, if I may. If we step back a little bit and look at transition from school into TAFE, do you think that the sort of impact that kids being able to do a little bit of work experience, particularly students with disability, would help encourage them and help the uptake of them then going and enrolling in TAFE?

Ms ROSSITER: Yes, I think it is. The work experience but also the Learn Local taster programs I think play a key role, in particular in the era of the free TAFE courses, which again is a great initiative. But one of the risks of free TAFE is that people may enrol in a course because it is free and it might not be the course that is the right course. What we want to ensure is that people are undertaking a course that is right for them and that leads to employment—so engaging learners at that pre level in a taster program, for example, in community services. They might do a pre-accredited course, which will give them a taste in early childhood, in disability and in aged care, for example. By the end of that program they can make an informed choice about which TAFE course to actually enrol in. Currently there is not work experience offered through Learn Local programs. That is something that the ACFE board continuously looks into, but certainly that is the purpose of the taster programs, to help guide people from school—not just from school; we have learners of all ages, adult learners. But it is a great way to help them make an informed choice of their program.

Ms BATTLE: And I think anecdotally too we know that often young people, particularly with disability, go through high school or secondary school being told what they cannot do, and it is very easy for them to lose sight, to lose that aspiration, to lose that sense of future. So I think being able to engage them in work experience would be really useful, because all of a sudden they understand why they are studying. They understand where their road is heading. So I personally do think it is incredibly useful to create that sense of purpose.

Ms MACAFFER: I think so too, and that building confidence for the learners. And the Reconnect program, which we mentioned in the submission, is a really good example of that for those that have left school and want to reconnect through alternative means like Learn Locals.

The CHAIR: Good on you. Thank you so much. Thank you not only for your valuable submissions that you have made today—and thank you for making time to submit personally; I speak on behalf of all members, I would assume—but for the work that you do in the community. I represent an area of Corio-Norlane in the north of Geelong, and we value the work that you do and the work that comes out of Learn Local and also the neighbourhood houses. Tamsin would know, as a Geelong person, there are certainly some challenges in that area, and I would estimate that every Member would have those challenges in their own electorates. So we thank you for your submission and we thank you for the work that you are doing in the community. Thank you.

Ms ROSSITER: Thank you very much for having us here today and for listening to our answers. And we must give a shout-out to our minister, Gayle Tierney, who does an enormous amount of work for our sector. I

think the ministerial statement is giving us that real framework to move forward, so we are very fortunate to be working alongside Minister Tierney. It is great.

The CHAIR: The budget submissions are in another committee, but that is fine.

Witnesses withdrew.