

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

WITNESS

Ms Karen Biggelaar, Principal, Ballarat Specialist School.

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, and then we will proceed to ask some questions after that. Thank you for being with us this afternoon.

Ms BIGGELAAR: Thank you, everyone. My name is Karen Biggelaar, and I am Principal of Ballarat Specialist School, a large specialist school with around 450 students from kindergarten through to year 12, and all students have an intellectual disability from mild through to profound.

Thank you for inviting me to the Inquiry to share my insights into access to TAFE for learners with a disability. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share the experiences of my school, and my opening statement is a bit of a story. So in 2019, when our seniors students attempted to access TAFE learning through our local VET cluster program, which includes TAFE and non-TAFE providers, we experienced some significant barriers. The selected students independently completed an online assessment measuring their skills against the Australian Core Skills Framework in reading, writing, numeracy and digital capability. Sadly, we were then notified that some of our students would not be able to participate in the Certificate II courses as they scored too low in their assessments. I naturally contacted the service provider for some more information and was told by the key contact for schools that they were not funded to be able to support these students that need one-to-one literacy and numeracy support, that they were more set up to support students with physical impairments, that they needed to develop a learning disability pathway and that they were mandated to assess against the four areas. I queried what adjustments were made to the assessments to support the students to demonstrate their capacity. What about the literacy levels required to access numeracy and digital components of the assessments? Was there any consideration to the prior experiences of the students? And how can we as a school support the students and their participation? I was advised that our school was not able to provide any supports for the students, including our planned supported study allotment. The representative informed me that no adaptations or modifications to the reading, writing, numeracy and digital capability assessments could be made, and on this basis they were within their rights to decline the student applications to enrol. So my first experience supporting young people with a disability to access TAFE was not that positive. I actively referred to my expectations in regard to the Disability Standards for Education and also for registered training organisations and the wonderful examples that are shown on relevant websites, including a mature age student with a disability accessing reading material using a C-Pen turning text to audio. After providing this feedback and discussion, the service provider agreed to a change in their approach, and our students were enrolled and able to successfully participate in the programs with our school's assistance. This included our staff going with students to TAFE, a supported study group back at school and meetings between some teachers and trainers. The experience that our students had was very dependent on the capabilities of the trainer and their ability to adapt to the expectations and modify the program delivery.

We have had a very successful partnership at Ballarat Specialist School with South West TAFE, who have run our school's horticulture program for a couple of years now. They are amazing, demonstrating a great understanding of our students with a disability, having expertise in making reasonable adjustments to support the students' learning and working in partnership with our staff. For students with a disability, TAFE is their main post-secondary learning pathway, so I would like to strongly advocate for TAFE providers to build robust and positive partnerships with our special education schools that have senior students.

As a member of the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, I initiated a survey to see if my experience was an isolated one. Out of 45 schools who completed the survey, 27 had students accessing external VET programs. Of these, 55 per cent felt the programs were of high quality, which was really great to hear. However, reading the comments from the other 45 per cent of schools, many have had similar experiences to

Ballarat Specialist School. One thing was really clear though—that all schools wanted to develop a stronger partnership with their local TAFE organisation. So I am hopeful that a schools perspective today can be of assistance to you during this really important work, and thank you for including Ballarat Specialist School's perspective during your Inquiry.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Karen. I might throw the first question to Juliana, being a Ballarat local member, so she will ask the first question.

Ms ADDISON: Hello, Karen, and thank you for being such a champion for our kids. We have just the most amazing specialist school, and Karen's leadership and her whole team are just amazing. So thank you for everything that you do, Karen. That story just says so much about your commitment to the Ballarat Specialist School students and what we are doing, and our \$10 million is going to enhance Ballarat Specialist School even more. So it is a very exciting place to be at the moment.

Karen, how might families be more supported to encourage their children to go on to further studies, particularly at TAFE? What support do parents and carers need to really encourage their kids or even to put their own fears at rest?

Ms BIGGELAAR: Yes, I think you have used the right term there—'fears'. There are a lot of fears, particularly fears around setting up students to fail and not wanting that experience for the young person. I know when we first started engaging with TAFE at the school there were a lot of fears around the expectations—the expectations of the community, families and the students themselves. So I think it is for the TAFE providers to be really clear on what are the necessary expectations for the learners, how participation can be supported and what the non-negotiables of the course are so everyone is very clear at the outset about what the requirements that need to be met are and also of course what adjustments can be made to the expectations to support the young person to be successful and to be included in that learning program. I think from my perspective it would be really wonderful if every TAFE had a spokesperson with a disability who has experienced training in the TAFE sector and who could reassure students and families and go out to specialist education settings and other places and explain the supports that are available with TAFE and how students with a disability can be successful and can be supported to learn like their mainstream counterparts.

The CHAIR: Excellent. I might throw to the Deputy Chair, Gary Blackwood.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, John. Karen, you just mentioned having an advocate from TAFE that has a disability that can actually lead prospective students through the process. What other ways can TAFEs provide better information and support to people with a disability? There must be other ways as well. That certainly sounds like a good way to me, but there must be other ways that TAFEs could improve that interaction.

Ms BIGGELAAR: Absolutely. I am from a specialist school, so I feel that it would be wonderful if we could have TAFEs engaging directly with specialist schools with senior students. We have students in my school on a senior campus in years 10, 11 and 12 who are of course all doing work about their future training or employment pathways that they are going to have for life. So if we could have a really close partnership with those service providers and if students, whilst in a safe and secure setting that they know well with positive relationships, could experience success, whether that be at a TAFE taster or just some kind of orientation or the start of a transition program that is actually based at the school, I think that would be really positive.

Reflecting on your question, I was thinking about the partnership that we have that has been very successful and what they have done. That partnership was not successful right at the start. We actually had a bit of a rocky start. Now, though, we have had 10 to 12 students every year participate in that program and achieve their Certificate. I think we have only had one drop out, which is pretty good for any certificate course. It was a rocky start, but we really tightened up all the communication, and all the players agreed that that communication and how we supported the students needed to be really tight. That was a partnership with South West TAFE as the training provider and Westvic Staffing Solutions as the employer. It is a little bit different because it is a specific program just for students with a disability on our school site, but that working in partnership and having terrific processes and communication has made all the difference, and that is even though the trainers have changed multiple times. I think why that has been successful is there have been adjustments in supports. They have actually employed an education support person to work in the program to support the trainer. There is clear communication about the expectations to all the students. They know what is required. There is clear alignment to employment opportunities with the work placements, which keeps the

students very engaged and being meaningful and purposeful. There is great engagement with our local community, so the students have been out to Ballarat Botanical Gardens and Ballarat cemetery and had work placements in their local community as well, and then also there is further discussion with the students about pathways. That program has had a student pick up an apprenticeship at a local golf course, and he is going to be an amazing employee for many, many years to come. He loves it and the community will love that as well. We have also had a mainstream student who was having challenges at their school come across and participate in that program at our school in that supportive environment and be very successful, and that student is hoping to have another similar experience if they can this year.

Those experiences then will support these young people to be confident that they can learn in a TAFE program and know what to expect when they go to a TAFE setting what the learning might look like and the types of supports that they can have. So I think having those types of programs in schools is a really important first step, because otherwise people leave the safety of the school environment that they have known all of that time and they are expected to fit into an environment that is set up for people without a disability and they have to make all those adjustments to then survive and thrive in that new environment that they are learning about. Whereas if we could actually have those people come into the setting where the students are already comfortable, have the positive learning experience, realise they can achieve and get some confidence and a bit of self-advocacy so that then they can go and engage with the TAFE learning environment, to me that would be extremely positive for the students and the families, as well as having all the benefits of the two different staffs working together. That would give our teachers the opportunity to share the knowledge they have about the way that the student learns. It would also give the trainers the opportunity to see the types of practices happening in schools that are supporting people with a disability to learn well, so I think there would be lots of benefits there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine, do you want to ask a question?

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Karen. We really appreciate your time today, so thanks for being with us. You talked a lot about what you see as being important. I just want nail that down a little bit more around the resourcing of TAFEs to provide that advocacy and support for people with disabilities and whether you see that having a unit within the TAFE is the only way to go or whether there are other ideas. I know you have mentioned quite a few things today already, but I am just trying to nail that down a little bit about what would be best placed within the TAFE sector itself.

Ms BIGGELAAR: Yes. Tricky for me because I am definitely based firmly in schools. It is a really interesting question. I was reflecting on what happened with that experience, and I am from mainstream schools as a principal previously so I have not ever felt the need to advocate very strongly on behalf of the student for them to have access to TAFE before. But in this circumstance I did feel that need very strongly and it made me reflect that there might be other situations where students are in a mainstream setting, for example, and they have a disability and there is no-one that has then been able to advocate strongly for them to participate. I think in the ideal world we would have the students being confident to have self-advocacy—that they could say, ‘Well, hang on. I need my assessment adjusted’ or, ‘I need access to this tool to read the text so I can do the assessment’. That would be absolutely the ideal, but I do not think that is achievable without a lot of positive experiences already happening in schools—

Ms COUZENS: It is about how we make that happen, isn't it?

Ms BIGGELAAR: Probably the only thing I did come up with was having someone who has been through that experience and maybe some kind of communities of support in TAFE where people who have a disability can actually connect with other people and hear about what supports have been successful et cetera. I think having inclusion as a role in TAFE, someone with that role who goes into special education settings who can talk to students about what supports will be available if they are interested in pursuing TAFE post secondary school would be a great start, whether they can talk to students or at least go in and talk to the careers educators in our schools so that they have got that information that they can give to parents and families and students and staff would be a great start.

Ms COUZENS: Right. How do you think you would get TAFEs to provide more support in terms of wellbeing of students with disabilities?

Ms BIGGELAAR: Again, I am from a schools' perspective. I think when we could have that partnership working really well, we could give a lot of information about students, about students' sensory needs or

behavioural needs, all those different needs. In our specialist schools we actually have all that knowledge there. My question probably is: how do we give that knowledge? We were very keen to share that information and have contact with trainers and teachers working together, but there did not seem to be any formalised processes for how that happens, so that knowledge just gets lost and then it is up to the student and the family to communicate that knowledge. We have 50 or so year 12 students so we have a lot of information that we can give to our local TAFE in regard to the learning needs of young people with a disability in Ballarat. So I think some formal processes just like you have from kinder to school—there is a transition plan and that information goes across. Why can't we have some kind of sharing platform there that would help the person with a disability not have to initiate the conversation but rather the information can already be shared. I am sure there are significant privacy things there, but maybe that is something that could be looked at in the future: how we can share that knowledge and expertise. It was great having some of the trainers come and talk with our staff. That was excellent sharing of expertise too so I do not know if time can be facilitated for collaboration in that way or if cannot be. I am not sure.

Ms COUZENS: That is a really great point. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Karen. I am very proud of my specialist school in Nelson Park, and they also received some \$10 million, which is fantastic. Just in relation to support for families, what kind of support do families of students with disability need when students are considering their post-school options? Can I also ask you in relation to COVID—obviously you have had your challenges through COVID, and remote learning would be part of your expertise now—are there assistance packages that we could provide to those students in terms of remote learning? And what can we do to help those families that want to further their children's education?

Ms BIGGELAAR: Having a real breadth of range of courses, to me, is very important from the TAFE sector—Certificate I courses as well as Certificate II courses—and making sure that that information is really accessible for families in a school environment. How we can do that remotely is probably an even more challenging question. I know in our situation for some of the work placements et cetera it was really challenging to do that during COVID. To keep that vocational learning happening during COVID was really, really challenging. I think some families supported that very well—they drove students to workplaces et cetera and did things that we as a school could not do during that COVID time. I do not know if I have a good answer for you in regard to how we can do that remotely. It is very challenging.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Thanks for coming on and enlightening us on some on these very important issues. We appreciate you made the time to see us and that you have made a submission as well. So thank you very much, Karen.

Ms BIGGELAAR: Thanks so much for having me, everyone, all the best.

Witness withdrew.