

# 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 Thephanous

Ms Sarah Connolly

#### **WITNESSES**

Mr Peter Kellock, Coordinator, Research and Projects, and

Mr David Kennedy, Executive Officer, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network; and

Mr Trent McCarthy, Chair, Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks.

**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 that privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I ask you to make a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you all for being here today. So Peter, David or Trent, all of you, whoever wants to start, you are welcome to start.

**Mr McCARTHY:** Thanks, John. I might invite David and Peter to kick us off, if that is okay.

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Mr KENNEDY:** Thanks, Trent. Peter Kellock and I might just do this opening part as a bit of a tag team, but I suppose I just wanted to set some contexts to the submission made to the Parliamentary Inquiry about the LLEN. Over the last six or seven years the Inner Northern LLEN had led a consortium of LLENs working on a community transition support initiative. The aim was to actually improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people with disability. That particular project worked across 22 special schools across north-west Melbourne and covered 14 Local Government Areas, so it was quite a big area that we were covering, and it also had the seven LLENs of north-west Melbourne that were involved.

Our submission is really based on the work that we have done over the last six years, and I suppose one of the things that we found really challenging initially when we came into the space was there is actually very little data about the destination of students from special schools and where they ended up. One of the things we, I suppose, did was we tried to create a dataset and do some research over that period, which has actually helped us to understand the space a bit more clearly. I think that research in some ways feeds quite well into this Parliamentary Inquiry into TAFE because the issues that we found working across those schools were issues around lack of aspirations for young people, and I think that is really important. If we are trying to increase the accessibility of TAFE for young people with disability, we need to go back to a starting point where we are actually creating aspirations that young people with disability want to actually go to work. The findings of the work that we did were that lots and lots of young people do want to go to work, and the school settings that we work with also definitely had moved to a far stronger position where they were encouraging young people to develop aspirations and then go into further study, employment et cetera. But what I might do is hand over to Peter Kellock, who is the manager of our research area, who has actually written our response. I might just get him to run through some of the key points as we go through.

**Mr KELLOCK:** Thanks, David, and thanks for the invitation to speak. Look, I think one of the key things that our experience across the north and west with students has shown is that TAFE is a major destination. After Day Services something approaching 22, 23, 24% of students end up in TAFE, so it is a major pathway, second only to Day Services. We do not think there is a major problem with access to TAFE; it is more about what they are actually getting when they get there and the quality of the programs and the offerings. What we found in this area where we did work was that below 22% of students are ending up at TAFE. Only a very small minority are really taking vocationally focused pathways. Most of them are held doing Certificate I-, Certificate II-type programs in transition-to-work education units, which really, to be blunt, are a holding operation that does not provide them with long-term vocational outcomes. It makes sense from a TAFE institute point of view that they cluster their students together in these arrangements because support is easier to provide, but in the end it is a short-changing. What I would say is one of the critical issues is how passive or active TAFE is in actually reaching out and partnering with schools, with teachers and with parents—to actually go back to David's point about aspirations—to actually work on the aspirations of what constitutes a

fair deal for these young people. With 22% of students already ending up in TAFE there is no huge incentive for them to do a whole lot more work.

The other interesting thing I think that we can explore is the potential for growth in enterprise-based education, because all the data is there—self-employment rates for people with disability are more significant than they are for the mainstream population, and it is an under-utilised pathway that could have a far stronger focus. Thank you, Chair.

**Mr McCARTHY:** I might step in there at that point, David, unless you were going to add anything further? Terrific. All right. So thank you, everyone, for the opportunity. I am speaking particularly in my role as the Chair of the 31 Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks but also from the perspective of one of those LLENs, which runs programs with students with a range of disability and also in an inclusive education space, which does not always identify as disability.

One of the critical things that we wanted to raise was obviously that one of the barriers to TAFE, which is not necessarily always on the radar of TAFE, is the fact that the experience of students with disability in schools is often, as Peter mentioned, on that vocational pathway and particularly on the pathway through programs like VCAL. One of the challenges that we have identified is that the opportunities for students with disability are sometimes limited in relation to getting workplace experience while at school, and so we have this strange converse effect where on the one hand we are saying to students that they should pursue a vocational pathway, or schools might move students in that direction because they are more likely to achieve a VCAL certificate rather than a VCE certificate, but in fact at the same time we see that there are a range of barriers that can exist for students to actually get work placement opportunities.

This has been a key point of concern for the Victorian LLENs. We are looking at a piece of work at the moment to actually understand, particularly in the context of the new reforms following the Firth review, to what extent are we actually ensuring that students with disability have fair and equal access to work placement and to vocational pathways while they are at school. One of the reasons why this is absolutely critical is that if students do not get access to those critical learning experiences while they are in a supported school environment it makes it a lot harder once they enter the tertiary sector, whether it is TAFE or university, to actually be able to undertake independent learning. The key difference between the experiences of students in secondary schools and in TAFE environments is that in secondary schools we have a range of supports that exist for each individual learner whereas in a TAFE environment there is a much bigger focus on assistive technologies, which actually are all about the learner managing themselves through that process. Not all TAFEs necessarily have these technologies in place, and we have seen the opportunity for students this year, obviously under COVID, a unique context, who would have otherwise struggled in a TAFE environment but have in fact managed to thrive because they have been able to access learning technologies that they already use at home. So not only do we need to overcome this barrier, which is the barrier of low expectations and low aspirations that influence the experience of a lot of students with disability, but we also need to make sure that if we are making a promise to students that they have a vocational pathway all aspects of the system support that.

I would just put on the radar for the Committee that the Government has done some fantastic work in funding supported vocational programs. I have mentioned Head Start as one of those, but at this stage Head Start, despite being a significantly well-funded project of the state government, does not have a specific focus on supporting students with disability or students in inclusive education programs, and that is partly because those students may in fact have an IQ of 70 or below in the inclusive education space and so are often not encouraged to go into Certificate III-level programs. What this means is that we have got on the one hand investment in vocational education in the secondary sector, but it is not necessarily translating into the employment outcomes that we would like to see and obviously the uptake of TAFE when students finish school.

The other thing I just mention is that there is some really strong data that supports the value of TAFE for students as a pathway to employment. Amaze, which is obviously an organisation focused on the autism spectrum, conducted a report that found that the unemployment rate for people with autism is six times higher than the rest of the population. So TAFE can act as a significant bridge for those students, but we must see a complete integration from the school experience through to the TAFE experience into employment, and that is really about understanding that the experience at school dictates the experience of entering TAFE and therefore also into the workforce as well. I will end it there and make sure we have got time for questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Trent. I will ask the first question, but there is also Gary Blackwood, MP, the Deputy Chair, who will ask a question. Juliana Addison, MP, Kat Theophanous, MP, and Sarah Connolly, MP, will all ask questions. So just on that, in your submission you state that people with disability are under-represented in vocational courses. I just want to get the bottom of: how can TAFEs increase the participation of learners with disability in vocational courses? Or at what point do you think the TAFE system sets up barriers for learners with disability? Do you think there are barriers? Is there a reason behind that?

**Mr KENNEDY:** My thought is that often with TAFE—and I think Peter Kellock sort of mentioned it—we end up creating a holding pattern for young people with disability. So we do not actually create a line of sight to a job. So what happens is that for young persons going from secondary school into TAFE, if they are going into a work ed unit they are actually not with the broader TAFE population, they are actually in a disability setting, which we think is old thinking—is actually the old way of doing things. Our proposition really would be that more young people with disability are able to enrol in a broader program—so Cert II-, Cert III-level qualifications in an industry-based program—so that they have actually got 100% focus towards getting a job at the end of it.

At the moment I think there is a lot of really good work that gets done. Young people are kept in the system. They get through, but once they finish TAFE there is a bit of a hiatus in terms of them sitting on the couch for a year and a half before much happens. So what happens in a lot of cases is those young people end up in day services after they have been through TAFE. At the end of the day we are sort of going, ‘Yes, we don’t want young people in day services’, but the end result is that is where they end up, because we have not set up the structure to transition kids from TAFE to then the job. And I go back to what I said earlier: we need to start in the school setting as early as possible to create aspirations but also to work with the parents and the family to create with them an aspiration that their children or child could actually be in a job—it might be a part-time job or a full-time job—and actually raise the bar about the way we think.

I suppose the other part of TAFE is in its current form the support structures are not really there to assist the employment component. So we have got a fairly complex system outside of TAFE. We have got DES providers, obviously we have got National Disability Insurance Scheme that has come through. We have got a whole heap of other programs and projects, but it is still very difficult I think for young people and parents to navigate the system. I think TAFEs are probably in an ideal position in some ways that they could actually help sort the tangle out a little bit with the focus on employment.

**The CHAIR:** Any further comments from anyone else?

**Mr McCARTHY:** John, in addition to David’s points I will just raise an example of the difference in experience for students in rural and regional areas versus metropolitan areas, where you might have a range of services on offer. In a lot of our regional centres we may have one organisation which supports people with disability on their employment pathway. It may or may not have any local branch. It may in fact be a satellite service operated from a larger regional centre. And those organisations, as David mentioned, often become the places through which young people actually transition from TAFE into some sort of a holding space or a supported service.

We think there is actually a different way of thinking about this, which is the fact that when students are in the school environment we have the ability to access them and to support them in terms of not just the vocational pathways and the employability skills but also the skills that they will need when they enter TAFE and that will actually support whatever happens beyond TAFE. So to give you an example, we have just in my own region had 10 students—100% of students in fact—despite COVID, successfully complete a Certificate II in active volunteering. And these students in the past would have been likely to undertake a VCAL program and potentially complete that program without a VET certificate. Every one of them in Year 10 now currently has a VET certificate, and some are potentially going to pursue VCE pathways.

Now, what is interesting about that is that the TAFE experience for them is now a real experience and a real thing they are prepared for, because they have been able to do a concentrated VET program early on, a focused program on their needs that actually supports them for whatever they want to do next. So that engagement and that investment in the school environment is essential to support them on that TAFE pathway. Our own experience as a LLEN is that a significant number of the work placements that we create for students are actually for students with disability or in inclusive education programs. In fact about 50 per cent of the

placements my LLEN has created in the last 12 months have been for those specific cohorts of students, because of the equity issue that we want to address directly.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent; thank you. Gary, did you have a question?

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes, John. I just wanted to add to the questions you asked. I think it was Trent, you mentioned that there were issues with the content of courses in terms of what they then lead to with outcomes. How could TAFE change the content of courses or give them a focus that actually improves their outcomes?

**Mr McCARTHY:** Great question. I think something that David said before is absolutely critical, which is that people go into TAFE for two distinct reasons: one is as a stepping stone to employment, and another reason is as a holding space or something that they are interested in. We believe that if their primary reason is that stepping stone into further work or some sort of career, there needs to be a job attached to that. So obviously we have a philosophical belief that we need a jobs-first approach in terms of our education and employment policy. We need to be thinking about the job that is there for the person as part of that training pathway. Otherwise we are wasting their time, wasting their money and potentially setting people up not for success but for a dependence on a system which actually results not in productivity for that person but in fact poorer outcomes.

So one of the ways to address this is actually to look at requiring, as part of those TAFE enrolment programs, partnership with employers to actually support a pathway into a job. There are employers that are looking to employ people with disability that have a strong desire to work in that space. What they often find challenging though is the complex system between state and federal governments to do with the NDIS support—the fact that from an employer’s perspective this is not necessarily their primary expertise—so they need someone to actually hold their hand on that pathway to actually become an inclusive employer.

One example, I would say, though, where we have seen a really strong uptake recently is that there is a Certificate II in Heavy and Light Rail Fundamentals, which is being run as part of the state government’s infrastructure programs, and we have got a significant number—I think it is around 50% or more—of the students that are in that program that actually have an autism diagnosis or are on the spectrum. I have two students in fact that travelled from places like Gisborne and Seymour to attend a program in Newport, so they see that there is a job attached to that pathway and that is because there is real jobs growth in that industry. So I think there are some good stories we can learn from, but we absolutely have to have that investment in job creation and links to those TAFE courses.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, Trent.

**Mr KENNEDY:** Could I just add to that? I think the other part of the equation that is missing is the opportunity for self-employment. So one of the things that we have worked on over the last couple of years is a piece around a youth enterprise hub, and one of those pieces of work has been specifically working with a number of disability settings, a couple of specialist schools and TAFE. But I think in terms of the way we sort of look at this, we tend to sort of compartmentalise things but people often will have a business idea on the side, and this is what is happening in the disability space. They cannot get a job, so they go, ‘What can I do? Can I set up a small business? Can I make things? Can I sell them? Can I sell them online?’. I think when you start to look at it, the whole concept of work, it is not just the job; it is actually all the bits, whether it is the little small business you have got on the side as well as a part-time job, coming together to actually provide support for that person. I think that is the sort of mindset that we need.

But if we go back to teaching young people, it is really teaching kids to survive in the twenty-first century, and that might not be a full-time job. It might be a part-time job and a small side act of a business on the side that they are very passionate about and something they can actually do. We have got a couple of case studies with a couple of different settings that have utilised a curriculum-based program to work with kids to develop these skill sets in order to set up microenterprises. Over the next couple of years we hope to be able to expand on this work, but at the moment we are able to do that work through a grant that we got through the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which was just a one-off grant. What sort of played out is the settings that have actually been involved in that project, they are fundamentally embedded into the way they are doing business.

I think we have probably got a case study that we should probably share to the Parliamentary Inquiry sort of offline, because I think it is quite a shift in the way one particular school is actually running its Year 11 and 12 program. They have actually taken the youth entrepreneurship and enterprise piece of work and it has actually

become the Year 11 curriculum. So it is not a bolt-on; it has actually become the critical part of young people's learning—about enterprise and at the end of the day getting into work and being self-sufficient as well. So I think the two parts of the puzzle are really critical and I think that is really the way of the future—that all young people, not just kids with disability but all young people, need to have those skills in order to be able to operate effectively in an environment where we have gone through COVID and the job market is probably not going to be the same on the other side of COVID. We are bouncing back, but there are a lot of part-time jobs that are coming through as opposed to full-time jobs et cetera. I just thought I would add that in as well.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes. Thanks, David.

**The CHAIR:** Juliana, do you have a question?

**Ms ADDISON:** Look, I would really love to explore this entrepreneurship pilot program that the Inner Northern ran because it sounds interesting about really looking at this issue of entrepreneurship. I think you are spot on about COVID: we have seen a real shift in how people buy stuff, how people interact online and their capacity—that people can do micro projects and earn an income off them. What did your pilot program involve, and are there any results from this pilot program that we could be applying across our TAFE sector?

**Mr KENNEDY:** It is a good question. Obviously we were funded from about August last year to August this year to run this project, so we did get caught up in COVID, but one of the interesting things that happened was we had three settings initially in the project. Two of them struggled with COVID in that the online environment was very difficult for young people with intellectual disability. But one of the settings, which is Concord special school up in Bundoora, was the school that actually developed the curriculum and ran that piece of curriculum this year. So in terms of what the actual outcomes were in terms of young people, we have not got sort of hard data around the numbers, but this piece of work is around change—like, we are actually trying to create change within the setting.

We have not actually run the program for long enough to say 'This makes a significant difference to the young people' because of just how it played out with COVID, but what we have found is, whether it is in a mainstream school or in a disability setting, you actually have to work with the school staff to get their mindset right in the first place. One of the positives out of this is that the school has written its own curriculum and shaped the piece of work for its own setting. They have looked at hospitality and a cafe and setting up along those lines, but we are only at the start of the journey on this stuff. So in terms of the agency for change, the settings are really keen to utilise this stuff because it is actually empowering for the students as well as for the staff. It is not the same old, same old, it has actually got a lot of co-creation with young people. That is really what the learning so far has been—get the schools involved, get the staff involved, develop the curriculum, run the curriculum. Then what it looks like beyond that is actually a bit of an organic process. It is not just, you know, add water and stir. I think there is a fair bit of work still required to push this along a bit. But I think definitely the foundations are laid in terms of how this work can impact young people with disability.

**Mr KELLOCK:** If I can just add to that, I think really what is going on at the moment in that project is we are lining up the building blocks of having placements in social enterprise, having vocational mentors who have got a background in enterprise and entrepreneurship to work with the young people. We are really trying to close the gaps between the learning program and the practical application and, you know, as a result build a pool of people who have an enterprise background but are then sort of conversant with working with young people with disability. I think it has a lot of promise. We have already seen a curriculum that has been amended to meet the skills of the entrepreneurs but at the same be appropriate to a disability setting. So, I mean, if you are asking the question about what TAFE can do, well, they have got a huge reservoir of industry contacts, some of whom could be activated into that kind of a process. You know, there is no shortage of enterprises and social enterprises in the regions that could be also activated, and it is a matter of having a focus on a whole range of employability options rather than just holding people, as we said earlier, in that holding pattern.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are quickly running out of time. There are two more questions, so if we can keep it as brief as possible. Kat Theophanous, did you want to—

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thanks, John. And thanks, Trent, Peter and David, for your insights today. I am really interested in the transition between school and higher education for young people and ensuring that they have a sense of their own agency and the opportunities that are available to them that align with their interests

as well. My question goes to the role of mentoring. We have had some other witnesses at the Inquiry mention that for people with disability often face-to-face, one-on-one engagement is the most useful form of engagement, and that to me speaks of mentoring. I am wondering whether you have any insights about what kinds of mentoring programs work best for learners with disability, where you have seen it work really well, what sorts of models you have come across.

**Mr McCARTHY:** Thanks, Kat. It is a fantastic question. We know that particularly when the mentoring enables the learner, or the young person in this case, to have an ongoing engagement with that person over a period of time we build up the trust, we build up the rapport, we build up that space that you described, which is the ability for them to identify what they are interested in, to actually try things out, for them to not go so well and to actually make other choices as well. It is the sort of support that we would hope all young people have, but particularly when there are structural barriers that may exist or system barriers that may exist it becomes absolutely crucial to keep people on that pathway.

The program that we run and that is being run in 20 schools around the state next year, which is Project Ready, which is the one that I mentioned before, is where students complete a Certificate II in Active Volunteering, undertake some entrepreneurship skills and also engage in work placements. It has a mentoring component included in that, so we have community services students from TAFE who are the mentors in the program. They then find other mentors in industry and community for individual students as well. So the whole idea is that we have mentors upon mentors upon mentors. What is really important is building the network of people around that young person who are prepared to stay the journey with them and open up those doors. We know that 70 or 75% of jobs are not advertised. In a post-COVID environment that number is expected to not only stay the same but potentially increase. So it is the door opening that is really important. It is being on the journey together which is really important, and it is also helping young people, whether they are on the autism spectrum or have a mobility disability, whatever it might be, to understand that they are valued, that they have a right to work and that they have a pathway that should be available to them from school to work, and part of the role of the mentor is to really help break down those barriers, to support them and obviously to stay the course with them rather than the one-off piece as well.

So it is absolutely crucial, and in fact TAFEs should really have an investment in supporting mentoring in the TAFE environment, because we do that in school environments but we are not seeing as much of that ongoing support and through line in the TAFE environment.

**Mr KENNEDY:** Kat, my sort of thought around this is that we have set up a project, which is the Vocational Mentoring Exchange for the inner north of Melbourne. We have got a two-pronged approach. One is the VCAL program, and next year we will work with six VCAL classes and 80 young people will be mentored. If I bring it back to the youth entrepreneurship work, we believe that mentoring is really critical in those projects as well. Trent hit on it. I think the realities for a lot of people are that they do not have the social capital or the connections to jobs or other options. I think that is what we see with our project—that getting a pool of mentors and training them and supporting them to be able to support young people opens up a whole range of opportunities that did not exist for that one person. I think the way I look at it, though—and this is where the resourcing becomes quite difficult—is that my LLEN region has 38 secondary schools, just to give you an idea. We are working with five VCAL programs out of 38, so we do not have the resource to be able to scale up. So if you want to do mentoring at scale it has to be resourced, because you cannot just drag someone off the street who is in business and say, ‘Can you mentor someone?’. You need to put them through training and screening and all that risk management stuff. But it actually takes resources. We think mentoring is a really, really critical step in creating the links into jobs and also to broader networks as well, just bringing people into the community as well, which is really important.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Thank you for your submission, and thank you for all that you do out there in the communities. We really appreciate the submission you have put in. It is very valuable. Thanks again.

**Witnesses withdrew.**