

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 2021

*(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 Christine Couzens

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, and

Mr Phil D'Adamo, Executive Director, TAFE and Tertiary Institutions, Department of Education and Training.

**The CHAIR:** Our next witnesses to make a submission are Ms Lee Watts and Mr Phil D'Adamo from the Department of Education and Training, and we welcome you 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 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 the interference. I invite you to make a brief, 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, and then we will follow up with some questions. Thank you.

**Ms WATTS:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. I would also like before commencing to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and also to pay my respects to others on whatever lands they are residing on, across and for this hearing.

The Department thanks you very much for your time today and for the opportunity to speak to you about this extremely important subject. The Department is committed to continue to play an important role and to support the best education training outcomes that can improve people's lives, the lives of all Victorians, but essentially to provide equitable access to education and training for people with disability. And why? This is to enable meaningful participation in society. Our TAFE network, as you all know, plays a vital role in creating opportunities for all Victorians by leading the training system in providing an educational setting where people with disability can have the best chances and opportunities of success.

The Victorian Government's vision is for an inclusive Victoria which supports people with disability to live satisfying, everyday lives. At the state level the current plan is called *Absolutely Everyone*. The plan aims to create inclusive communities. It recognises that the experience of inclusion is central to social interaction, sharing information and having everyday experiences. The plan also recognises the importance of contributing lives. It aims to ensure people with disability can participate easily in education and easily in training, community participation and decision-making. I note here that the Committee may wish to reflect later on the interconnecting issues of career guidance and the ease of finding information about providers and courses, with particular reference of course to assisting people with disability.

Linked to *Absolutely Everyone* is another plan which had come to its conclusion in 2020, *Every Opportunity: Victorian Economic Participation Plan for People with Disability*, which set out the Government's vision to increase the economic participation of people with disability across the state. The economic participation plan took—please note I am using past tense—a broad view of economic participation. It encompassed all of the ways that people contribute to and participate in economic life, including through employment, self-employment, career progression, enterprise development, education and training and as consumers. The Victorian Government intends to build on the achievements of the economic participation plan, including its focus on the critical role of education and training through the development of the next state disability plan, which will cover the years 2021 to 2024.

I would like now to turn the Committee's attention to a snapshot of the key features of the TAFE system. In 2018 there were approximately 532,000 Victorians aged between 15 to 64 years who had self-declared a disability, or approximately 12% of Victoria's population. As at 30 August 2020, within Victoria's TAFE system—which for noting by the Committee I am defining as the 12 standalone TAFEs and the four TAFE divisions of the dual-sector universities—about one in 11, or 9%, of TAFE enrolments in courses that the Government funds were learners who have reported a disability. As at 30 August 2020 more than half—59%—of learners with disability who were enrolled in government-funded education and training were studying at a TAFE. Again, as at 30 August 2020, this meant that there were more than 12,200 learners with disability who were enrolled in TAFE courses.

About three-quarters—73%—of TAFE learners with disability were studying at a Certificate III level or above. For the Committee's noting as well, a Certificate III level is equivalent to the first year of a university

qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework. One in four learners with disability were studying below the Certificate III level—at the equivalent of a Year 12 qualification or a VCE or VCAL level—and they were studying at Certificate I and II levels. This tells us that the course offerings at these lower qualification levels are an important stepping stone for some learners with disability who are trying to gain skills to engage in employment and to improve their own economic and social situations. Equally, however, and importantly, TAFE learners with disability were as likely to be enrolled in a Certificate IV or above course as TAFE learners without disability. So there is equivalency there. As at 30 August last year approximately 47% of TAFE learners with disability and 47% of TAFE learners without disability were studying at a Certificate IV level or above. We think this is a very important fact for the Committee's attention.

Going further as well to give you insight into the top five courses that TAFE learners with disability were studying in 2020, they were the Diploma of Nursing, the Diploma of Community Services, the Certificate I in Transition Education, the Certificate I in Work Education and the Certificate IV in Accounting and Bookkeeping. What you see here is what I have begun to describe, which are the two pathways: the pathway of entry and the pathway of progression.

In addition to that, I would like to bring to the Committee's attention that there is strong metropolitan access and participation. Again, at 30 August 2020, about two-thirds of TAFE learners with disability undertook their education in metropolitan Melbourne—that is 68%. In regional Victoria there were more learners with disability in the Barwon South West region than in any other region of Victoria. And as at 30 August 2020 there were more female learners with disability than male learners with disability at TAFEs, which raises a range of interesting questions for the Committee and for our further conversation.

I would like to turn now to the experience of learners with disability at TAFE and to talk to you a little bit about how the Department understands that experience. The Department surveys all students who completed or left early from government funded training in the previous year. The survey results that I am about to take you through are based on the previous years of education and training. In the 2019 student satisfaction survey, we know that about one in three TAFE learners with disability had an improved employment status after completing their training, and about one in four students, 24%, went on to further study at a higher level. These results again confirm the two pathways that are the theme of our presentation today.

Transition and employment outcomes are strong, but our efforts to improve our work cannot be diminished. In 2019 the student satisfaction survey also found disappointingly that TAFE learners with disability reported lower levels of satisfaction with their training than other TAFE students. There was a seven-percentage-point difference between the two cohorts of students. About 70% of TAFE learners with disability were satisfied with their training compared with 77% of learners without disability. While the survey does not pinpoint the reasons for this, it does indicate that TAFE learners with disability are concerned with some aspects of their training, including teaching quality, assessment, equality of course materials and access to those course materials, facilities and equipment and how there can be an even more supportive learning environment. These issues, however, are not exclusive to students with disability. They are areas that the Department of Education and Training continues to seek to improve and to lift across the board.

The Department, as you have seen through my brief overview and snapshot, uses qualitative and quantitative information to improve students' experiences, outcomes, to lead the TAFE network as a system and to lead individual TAFEs to improve in very targeted and measured ways. One of the key examples of this was the commissioning of the 2019 review into improving access and achievement for learners with disability. I will speak more later about the review and the actions that have been taken since the review was commissioned.

Before outlining that, I would like to inform the Committee about how learners with disability are supported by a range of programs and resources at TAFEs. These programs are outlined in the Department's submissions, along with case study examples of how these supports have translated into practical assistance for learners with disability. TAFEs receive funding for learners who need additional support to engage with and succeed in education and training, including community service funding and through the Reconnect program. Skills and Job Centres also provide an important government-funded service. Based in TAFEs across Victoria, there are 32 Skills and Job Centres which provide expert advice on training and employment opportunities, including careers advice, job searching, assistance with resumes, apprenticeship and traineeship advice and other important services that relate to career transition.

The Government's community service funding, which is only applied to public providers, is equally important in this regard. The community service funding ensures that TAFEs deliver services and programs that help local communities and students with additional barriers or needs to access training to be able to complete their studies and progress to employment or further study. Students with disability are one of the primary recipients of this fund. In 2020 just a shade less than \$50 million of funding was provided to the 12 TAFEs and the four dual-sector universities to assist. All TAFEs determine what supports are required for their specific local communities and students, so the deliberations around how that funding is spent are fixed within the purview of the TAFEs. The Department, however...

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Lee. Sorry to cut you off, but we are limited in time and I just want to have some opportunity to ask some questions if that is all right. If you could wind up, that would be great.

**Ms WATTS:** No problem. Can I have two more minutes?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, sure.

**Ms WATTS:** I would just really like to call out the government's flagship program, Free TAFE, which has led to very improved access and participation of learners with disability. The introduction of free TAFE has led to commencements for learners with disability—a 94% increase. More than 3,300 learners with disability started a free TAFE course in 2019 compared with about 1,700 in 2018. It is a great outcome for the students and their communities. Again, I would note that within these free TAFE courses there are two diploma courses which are within the top five, and they are the Diploma of Nursing and the Diploma of Community Services. These are important because each of the three courses leads to meaningful employment and better quality teaching and learning, and there is a flexible delivery based on both face-to-face delivery for these courses as well as online delivery, which I think is important for the inquiry in terms of access and participation. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. A very comprehensive submission. Look, I just wanted to ask a question about the Macklin review. There have been previous comments made by previous witnesses just earlier about the Macklin review. Jenny Macklin recently led a review into Victoria's training system. What insights did the review provide in terms of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability?

**Ms WATTS:** The report recommends that learners in total should be placed at the centre of education and training. Ms Macklin has recommended that there be expanded support networks to engage with diverse communities, diverse employment opportunities, and this will include both disability and social services groups, which will work towards the identification of opportunities for better quality local provision to co-design and deliver courses that meet their specific needs. Ms Macklin has recommended the establishment of a potentially new body, as I have indicated, which will work closely with communities and employer groups to co-design offerings.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you. Phil, did you want to add anything? Any comments you want to make?

**Mr D'ADAMO:** Thank you, Chair. No, look, I think Lee has covered it. I think there are some recommendations about focusing on emerging industries, such as the clean economy, care economy and digital economy, as areas of strategic focus, which I think has some relevance, and equally strengthening on-the-ground support for local learners and businesses as well, so I will just add those two points.

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

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes. Thanks, John. Thanks, Lee, and thanks, Phil. Lee, just in relation to teacher training and the skills that our TAFE teachers have, how is the Government ensuring that TAFE teachers are trained to be able to adapt courses to suit learners with disability?

**Ms WATTS:** Thank you, Mr Blackwood. Going to the foundation of TAFE teaching, this is a point of intersection between both the state and the Commonwealth jurisdictions in terms of both regulation and standard setting where the Commonwealth Government has primary responsibility for regulation of TAFE teaching but also most importantly of TAFEs themselves and their registration. I just wanted to highlight that there is the ability to influence but not the ability to lead by the state in relation to some of these issues in relation to teaching qualifications.

What the Department of Education and Training has done is to focus, in a number of ways, with additional investment around enhanced access to gain more people to come in to deliver their Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, which is the baseline qualification to become a TAFE or skills-based training teacher. But more than that, what we have done within the Department is to support the inclusion of as a part of that qualification two units of competency which were recently added to the national training and education suite of products whereby enrolling TAFE teachers can access a unit which is entitled 'Plan and implement individual support plans for learners with disabilities'. These units are available nationally, and their inclusion in the qualification is supported by the Department of Education and Training. We also have included bespoke units that are very specific in the Diploma of Vocational Education and Training and also a further qualification, the Diploma of Training Design and Development, whereby we seek to skill our teaching staff in their understanding of implementing accessible training and assessment plans for learners with disability. So I think that we are leading both in terms of uplift but also in terms of educating more broadly.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** That is terrific, Lee. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Kat, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Yes, please. Lee, we have had several submissions to the inquiry that have recommended specific government funding for learners with a disability rather than the broader community service funding given to TAFEs. Are you able to comment on that and perhaps comment on how the Department ensures that community service funding is adequately meeting the needs of learners with disabilities within TAFEs?

**Ms WATTS:** Thank you, Ms Theophanous. I will start, but I might hand over to my colleague Mr D'Adamo as well to assist with this answer. There are a range of different funding streams that are used by our TAFE network to support our students with disability. They include the community service fund. They also include other more specific activities, such as counselling services. In particular the Government has provided additional funds for mental health support, for financial counselling support and with and for different career guidance support. The Department works really closely with TAFEs to ensure that, on an individual student basis, students are given access to the additional services that they require, and that may be, for example, additional equipment, it may be ensuring that screens are available for our visually impaired students or it may be Auslan support for those with hearing disabilities. So it is genuinely on a case-by-case basis, and each TAFE makes determinations and decisions based on what the student requires. Phil, would you like to add anything?

**Mr D'ADAMO:** Thank you, Lee. Ours is a broader bucket in relation to support, and it is tied to minimum service standards, so our community services fund is really targeted towards a broader suite of support services or factors that go to that support, such as building networks with local organisations and services; the partnership approach; inclusion and engagement support services, which is highly relevant; educational support services; social support services; career advice and support to our jobs and skills centres; and also job readiness and connectedness. So it is a bucket of funding that goes towards multiple purposes. How we arrive at what is appropriate funding or not appropriate funding is we have essentially a level of base funding which goes through the supports provided through Skills and Jobs Centres, which are incredibly valuable, particularly for people experiencing disability, and to helping that transition into TAFE. That is one part of it. The second part of it relates to the costs associated. One of them is establishing Skills and Jobs Centres. The other is related to operating those centres. And the third element of that funding is needs based, and what that looks at is it takes into consideration issues such as regional loading in relation to some of our regional areas which have got greater need and demand than others. We provide a loading for that. We also look at the disadvantaged cohort. We look at data in relation to that to make sure that our funding is meeting that particular purpose as well, and that is to recognise that students may require different levels of support. It is not specific to it, but there is a calculation that goes towards the level of funding and ensuring that that is aligned with the level of support that is needed.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Phil. Brad.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Watts. A question about free TAFE: since free TAFE has been in operation, how many students with a disability have taken up those free TAFE courses? If I could just establish that, I have got just a couple of other short final questions following that.

**Ms WATTS:** My apologies. Sorry, I am just looking at my notes in terms of the numbers of students.

**The CHAIR:** Lee, if you like, take it on notice.

**Ms WATTS:** Can I take it on notice? I would prefer to give the actual number. It is at my fingertips. My apologies, Chair, that I was not able to pull that out.

**Mr D'ADAMO:** Ms Watts, if I may, in our opening address we referred to the initial data with free TAFE commencing on 1 January 2019, and in that case, in its first year, there were more than 3,300 learners with a disability who started a free TAFE course in 2019 compared to 1,700 in 2018. Our data for 2020 is in the process of being compiled so we do not have that with us at the moment. But that was the uptake in 2019—3,300.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** That provides a benchmark, which I am grateful for. Of those 3,300 in 2019, how many went on to complete their course?

**Ms WATTS:** Thank you for that question. As I have indicated, a number of the courses that were the most popular free TAFE courses for students with disability were at the Diploma level, and these courses run across two years. So students are not expected to have completed them by now. What I will say, however, is that with the disruption of COVID across 2020, there are a number of points that need to be made. Student study was disrupted as a result of COVID. Our TAFE system moved very swiftly to online and flexible delivery, and we had very, very high rates of retention. What we have not had the ability to finalise yet are the rates of completion. I wanted to give you a sense of why.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Yes. No, thank you. I am interested in that, and specifically I am interested in how many students with a disability do not in fact complete their course because of the lack of opportunity for work placement. That is the crux of my question. That is where I am up to. If you are able to take a portion of that question or all of that question on notice and provide that information, I would be grateful, Ms Watts.

**Ms WATTS:** We will make our best endeavours to do so. Thank you.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I suppose, following on from that question: how does the Department support or assist learners with disability to make a successful transition from training to employment? Is there a program in place for that?

**Ms WATTS:** Yes. There are a number of programs in place for that, and that relates to assistance through our Skills and Jobs Centres. As I mentioned earlier, there are currently 32 Skills and Jobs Centres, which are placed or housed within each TAFE and within local regions. What they provide is expert advice in relation to local employment opportunities. They assist students with disability to help with their job searches. They assist with the preparation of the actual résumés and applications. For those students who seek to move into apprenticeships or traineeships, they connect them with group training organisations and other networks, and they also assist in terms of counselling. So yes, we think we cover the field.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Excellent. Any further questions by Members?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Yes, I might ask one, Chair, if that is okay. You spoke a little earlier around teacher training and equipping teachers, I guess, with the skills they need to support learners with disabilities. I am interested in that workforce capacity question around addressing TAFE teachers' concerns that they are overloaded, that they lack the time and the resources to develop or deliver courses or plans that meet the needs of learners with disabilities—they just do not have that time in their schedule to be able to do that one-on-one work. Is there anything that the Department is doing or are there any levers that the department has to address those concerns from the workforce?

**Ms WATTS:** Thank you. The Department has introduced a program whereby we support TAFE teaching professional development. This has been in place since it was introduced in mid-2019 and also runs through to the middle of this calendar year. We have funded a specific TAFE teaching capability development fund, which looks at how each TAFE and potential TAFE staff—new staff as well as existing staff—can improve their teaching and assessment capacity by bringing together different communities of practice and by teaching people around different digital literacy skills, which was really important in terms of the COVID year. But also, equally, that fund complements those additional units that I mentioned earlier, in the two diplomas of teaching

and the Certificate IV of Teaching Practice, that relate specifically to planning and implementing individual support plans for learners with disabilities. So we are seeking to provide greater access—and that there will not be any financial barriers for people.

**Mr D'ADAMO:** If I can just add to that and just make reference to the multi-enterprise agreement which came into effect in 2019—this is the enterprise agreement for teachers—the purpose of that was to be very clear and specific about what hours should be allocated to what work. So in addition to the professional development that we provide, the agreement is quite clear that a full-time teacher must allocate 800 hours for teaching, 400 hours for preparation and development of learning materials, 388 hours in teaching-related duties such as curriculum development and maintaining industry currency and then a further 160 hours to other activities such as travel and meetings. So the agreement itself does provide for, I guess, a categorisation of activity with allowance for the development of materials and keeping that, I guess, relevant and refreshed.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Can I just ask, in terms of standardising TAFE support, each TAFE at this point in time offers a different range of supports and services for learners with disability. How can the Government ensure greater uniformity of service provision for learners with disability across all Victorian TAFEs?

**Ms WATTS:** I think that there are a number of, in addition to Ms Macklin's review, further opportunities at the state and federal level to make more consistent and more cohesive some of the current arrangements that frame learners with disability. Mr Eren, the Government is currently considering a range of these future opportunities to ensure further consistency. TAFEs currently report directly through to the Minister for Training and Skills and Minister for Higher Education, and they are governed by independent boards. However, there are further opportunities, the Department of Education and Training believes, to assist our TAFEs with and through some further guidance and further collaborative leadership, which is one of the areas that Ms Macklin also reflects, to make these opportunities more consistent.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Any further questions, Members? No. Okay. Any further comments you would like to make, Lee or Phil?

**Ms WATTS:** I would really just like to thank the Committee for allowing Phil and me the opportunity to spend the time with you today and wish you well in your work. We look forward to further implementing and reflecting on your recommendations, so thank you for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. On behalf of the Committee, thank you for your submission. We appreciate it very much. Thank you.

**Mr D'ADAMO:** Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**