

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Friday, 12 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**

Mr Jeremy Irvine, Executive Director,

Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy, and

Mr Dan Mabilia, Director, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association.

**The CHAIR:** Our next witnesses to give a submission are the Victorian TAFE Association. We have Mr Jeremy Irvine, Ms Pam Jonas and Mr Dan Mabilia.

Before we go on, welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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 interference.

I invite you to make a brief 10- to 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions. Thank you.

**Mr IRVINE:** Thank you, Chair, and apologies for the technology. My name is Jeremy Irvine, and I am the Executive Director of the Victorian TAFE Association. With me here at VTA I have Pam Jonas, who is our Senior Adviser, and Dan Mabilia, who is our Director of Advocacy and Policy. And again we apologise for the camera issues; we are all here.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right. If whoever is speaking can clearly say their name, that would be great.

**Mr IRVINE:** I will make an opening statement if I may, Mr Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Mr IRVINE:** Okay. It is Jeremy Irvine. Thank you to the Committee and to your colleagues, Mr Chair, for the opportunity to present to this Committee and the Inquiry this morning. The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes the opportunity to speak with the Committee today. Our members have a keen interest in this Inquiry and the questions that it raises around access to TAFE for learners with disability, and our submission is made by the Association on behalf of its members and we are proud to represent their views here for you today. We believe that the Victorian TAFE Association is well placed to respond to this Inquiry in its role as the peak employer body for Victoria's TAFE sector. VTA members comprise all of the public vocational education and training providers, being the 12 standalone TAFE providers and the four dual-sector universities and an associate member in the Adult Migrant Education Service. Our members are actively engaged in VET and training at the state level as well as nationally and internationally, and we understand that the Committee is interested in views, insights and experiences on how learners with disability can be supported to access and fully participate in TAFE programs in Victoria.

In our submission we endeavoured to cover many of the areas of interest to this Committee, with a particular focus in the key areas of the support for learners with disability and the need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE, the training and practical policy and curriculum support that TAFE teachers need to maximise the learning experiences of learners with disability and the effectiveness of current government and TAFE policy and programs in supporting learners with disability and suggestions for improvement. Our submission draws on information and consultations directly with VTA members for this Inquiry and on the views of practitioners from the TAFE Disability Network—those most closely involved and attuned to the needs and learning experiences of learners with disability. We are aware that some of our members have contributed to the development of a whole-of-government response to the Inquiry, prepared by the Department of Education and Training, and also that a number of representatives from standalone TAFEs and dual-sector universities will be discussing issues with the Committee following our participation and time with you today. It is likely that they may well be best placed to provide specific reference to case studies and examples of on-the-ground activities, which may be pertinent to your Inquiry, but of course we are happy to respond to the Committee's questions on the range of issues indicated to us and also those raised in our submission.

By way of general background, the Victorian TAFE network is highly cognisant of disadvantaged cohorts, including but not limited to people with disability. TAFE plays a major role in providing opportunities for those who may encounter difficulty with engaging, staying and succeeding in education and training. Research by

KPMG undertaken by the association showed that in Victoria alone people with disability are generally better represented in VET than at university and the TAFE network delivered training to three times as many students from low socio-economic backgrounds as higher education providers and about four times as many Indigenous students. Research also shows that without the opportunities provided by TAFEs many learners from disadvantaged cohorts would likely be excluded from tertiary education and training and from full engagement with society.

The breadth, the diversity of the Victorian TAFE network operates on a number of levels, as you would all know from your own electorates—from a diverse education and training profile to its location provision over large geographic areas, the highly diverse student cohort and the large range of industry sectors that are serviced. The size and scale of the Victorian TAFE network underpins its capacity to be accessible to a wide range of learner cohorts and to improve and increase the educational opportunities for people with disability. This manifestly contributes to the social and economic benefits gained by people with disability who can take their place in the credentialled workforce and achieve their potential. The TAFE sector is heavily invested in providing accessible education opportunities for learners with disability. Many of our members, including those who will be appearing before you later on today, can provide examples of best practice and strong leadership in this area.

TAFEs have a broad range of disability inclusive policies and practices in place. These include access and equity policies, equal opportunity policies, student welfare and accessibility policies, partnerships with disability service providers and community support policies to foster engagement with the community as well as scholarships for students experiencing disadvantage, including disability, disability access plans and reasonable adjustment policies. Notwithstanding this position of strength, more can always be done, and indeed we raised areas in our submission around the potential and real need for some areas to be addressed. Our members have a strong, student-centred focus and are continually striving to include their offerings and services to all students.

Across the TAFE network there has been much collective effort and leadership focused on improving access and achievement for learners with disability. People with disability make decisions about their education on the same basis as other learners—for example, on interest, employment prospects, financial means, access to employment providers and the expectation of support for their choice. As such, they should be in a position to choose a course or be able to participate in learning on the same basis as others. They should not be put at a disadvantage because the system cannot deal with their needs or provide support that they may require. This Inquiry we believe signals a willingness to talk about the great work that is being done in TAFE and to provide access for TAFE for learners with disability and ideas for improvement. We trust that it signals a willingness for action to be taken where issues have been raised and where innovative suggestions have been made.

Finally, in our submission to the Macklin review we suggested that reform and change should be strength based, working from what is good about what we have and then considering the question: what does better look like? And, Chair, if we may be so bold, we would like to challenge, positively, this Committee with that same question: what does better look like as a lens through which you consider your findings? That concludes, Chair, my opening statement on behalf of the association.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Jeremy. I will kick off the questioning if I can. I just want your views on how the Victorian Government could assist TAFEs to incorporate universal design into their training delivery. I am just trying to pinpoint some of the issues that may be different to metro TAFEs as opposed to the regional TAFEs, so in terms of just universal training methods.

**Mr IRVINE:** Ms Jonas will answer that question on behalf of us, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms JONAS:** Thank you. In terms of universal course requirements or universal design, the areas that we have been looking at are trying to build inclusiveness into the system rather than bolt it on. So at the moment I think we have a system where we bolt on things rather than have an inbuilt capacity. Universal application at the moment, as I say, is in its infancy in the TAFE system. Universal curriculum design is in its infancy. We are certainly trying to make inroads in that area, and it is an area that a number of our TAFEs and our teachers are looking at. It is not an easy thing to do in terms of what is there. We are trying to, as I say, change a system that is currently not designed to have everybody included in it into a system that is designed in that particular way.

We are sharing practice around universal curriculum design. Our DLOs are progressing universal curriculum design, and that is one of the areas—sorry, our DLOs are our disability liaison officers—that they are working on with teachers in their own institutions. I am not quite sure how much more you would like.

**The CHAIR:** That is fine. Any comments from anyone else? Jeremy or Dan?

**Mr IRVINE:** No. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Gary, would you like to ask a question?

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Yes. Thanks, John. And thank you all for your submission and also, Jeremy, for your presentation this morning. Your submission mentions a tension for TAFE teachers to balance reasonable adjustments with course compliance and requirements. What assistance could the Victorian Government provide to enable teachers to address this conflict?

**Ms JONAS:** I am not sure of the assistance that the Government could give on this issue, largely because the issue is around training packages and the compliance that is attached to them, which is a national rather than a state issue. Dan?

**Mr MABILIA:** Dan Mabilia here. I would also just like to add that there are sophisticated systems in place within each TAFE to acknowledge what adjustments need to be done, and there is a process that teachers will go through with their managers to provide that adjustment and add it to the curriculum. So there is a mechanism in place for that to happen, and of course it always depends on the individual needs or the needs of the particular person with a disability that is studying that particular program and how that relates to the training package assessment requirements. So there are those implications to consider.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay, thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Juliana, would you like to ask a question?

**Ms ADDISON:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Jeremy, Pam and Dan. I am interested in this idea of transition officers; I think that they could be very, very beneficial, and you suggested that this could be the case. So what I am really trying to get my head around is: what would be the main role of these transition officers, and would they be based at TAFEs or within our school networks?

**Ms JONAS:** Thank you for the question. One of the issues that has been raised with us and identified by the TAFE Disability Network and through our Disability Liaison Officers is that a key area for improved success for learners with disability is the transition from senior secondary education to TAFE. It is at that point, that very important transition point, that the role of a transition officer would probably be most useful and most valuable. This could be somebody who is based in the school or it could be somebody who is based at the TAFE, but we do need somebody at that point. There is currently a void around the information that is transferred from the school to the TAFE when the student transitions. There is currently no uniform way that the information about a student is taken forward. TAFEs often get inadequate and incomplete information about students that are coming through from the senior secondary college or senior secondary setting. So we envisage a dedicated person who can assist with that transition process. The idea of transition officers who assist learners with the move to secondary schools is currently in place in New South Wales. They do have a transition officer program that operates in this space, but it is very important for us to be able to develop a learning capability plan or an assessment plan to reflect a student's capability and their support needs. That needs to come with the student. This is probably a supplementary idea, but the idea is perhaps to make sure that that information exists, to implement something like a student passport that lists their support needs and goes with them from secondary education into TAFE or into higher education and then perhaps even into employment, so that it has information about the support needs that they have, what they have done and what they have had done for them to assist with that and what sorts of support needs they might have going forward as they transition through different stages.

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

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Chair. Going on with what Juliana was asking about with transition officers, in your minds a transition officer has a completely separate role to a Disability Liaison Officer? Is that right?

**Ms JONAS:** Yes, a Disability—

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Or is it a function that a Disability Liaison Officer could pick up in an expanded role?

**Ms JONAS:** Yes, you are right. It could be either-or. It could be a dedicated person that works closely with the secondary school or secondary schools that they are involved with to make that transition process easier, or it could be somebody, an existing role, that has an expanded purview of what they have to do.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Following on from that, your submission does call for funding to increase the number of DLOs in TAFEs. I am just trying to get a sense of how under-resourced TAFEs are in regard to Disability Liaison Officers and what might be an acceptable ratio of DLOs to students?

**Mr MABILIA:** Dan Mabilia here. I think that is the \$64,000 question. It is very difficult to try and determine a specific ratio, simply because of the complexity of the student cohort—the complexity of the disabilities, the complexity of the programs and the time that is invested in supporting those individual students with a disability. There is an expectation that every student with a disability will have some sort of case management or some sort of support program, and that is the case in many instances, but in talking to the Disability Network, they would say that the Disability Liaison Officers may spend 80% of their time with 20% of the student cohort, the students with a disability. So it is very difficult to try and determine what that ratio would be, but definitely the comments that are coming from the Network are suggesting that they are certainly stretched in trying to maintain a high-quality support service for those students.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I know that free TAFE has been a huge success and I would imagine that there are a number of people with disabilities that have made good use of that free TAFE. But can I just ask: how can TAFEs adjust their enrolment processes to make them more inclusive so that more people with disabilities would apply?

**Mr IRVINE:** I will have Mr Mabilia answer that, Mr Chair.

**Mr MABILIA:** Thank you, Mr Chair. The process at the moment, I think you are all aware, is predominantly an online process, and that certainly suits many applicants for vocational education and training and it helps speed up the process as well, but obviously it does not suit many people with disabilities. Current practices are that TAFEs recognise that. They already recognise that the standard enrolment process is not suitable for everybody and they make allowances. The allowances usually involve opportunities for people to enrol through face-to-face meetings and opportunities, so they would work with particular individuals, individuals with disability, to go through the process to fulfil the requirements for the enrolment. That includes assisting them with the electronic enrolment process, scanning documents that need to be uploaded for part of that process as well as assisting them to engage with the learning, literacy and numeracy testing process as part of the pre-training review. So they already are involved in understanding that there are special considerations that need to be applied, depending on the needs of the people that are applying. It is somewhat difficult if the individual that is commencing the process to enrol does not provide information that they require assistance, and it is important for all of the enrolment staff to be trained adequately to try and determine that, to ask the right questions so that they can find out that information and provide the appropriate support.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Any further questions? Kat, Juliana?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Yes, I have got one, Chair. Thank you. Your submission talks about students with disability and the need to assist them to transition into a Certificate III and IV or higher level courses. In your experience, what is limiting learners with disabilities from studying those higher level courses at TAFE, and how can we better address that?

**Mr IRVINE:** Mr Mabilia will answer that again.

**Mr MABILIA:** I think that definitely one of the strengths of the people that work in TAFE is to provide support and information to their students about potential pathways and employment opportunities. Many of the staff have been engaged and continue to be engaged with industry, so they are there to support their students and provide them with the advice about succeeding to a particular goal or career. That may involve further

study; that may involve employment. I think TAFEs are really in a good position to remove the complexity for people to understand pathways because of the nature of the training package, where they are progressing from one qualification to the next in a particular stream, whether that is in an industry stream or a literacy, language and numeracy stream and there are Certificates I, II, III, IV et cetera. So I think that the support that can come from the teachers and the individuals within TAFE that provide the program, including the Skills and Jobs Centres, is really about supporting the individual needs of those students, because there are definitely opportunities to provide expert advice on the best pathway to achieve something, whether it is moving onto further education or moving onto a particular job role. And often the job role and the career expectation of the individuals will determine where they need to go and what pathway they need to follow. I think that the Skills and Job Centres and the particular teachers in particular programs are well equipped to provide that support, and they do that through individual one-to-one meetings but they also have careers nights, careers expos and study expos not to mention the number of relationships that they have with higher education providers, where there are many documented articulation pathways for students. So that applies to all students, not just students with disabilities. However, there is that understanding that there are certain limitations with some people with disabilities on their ability to go from a Certificate II, Certificate III, and continue up that qualifications framework, if you like. So there is a level of understanding that there are limitations.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you.

**Ms JONAS:** Could I just add quickly to that? From talking to practitioners, their main concern is that we set students up for success; we do not set them up for failure. The success that they achieve is really at the start of their engagement with tertiary education. Whether it is in higher education or in TAFE, their success is based on a strong foundation from which to build, and for many students Certificate I, Certificate II and foundation courses are the right level from which to proceed to higher qualifications. So it is really that we need to give people—all people, all learners—a basis from which to achieve success, and we need to have a very broad lens, I think, as to what success means for individuals. I do not think we can measure success in the same way for everybody, and particularly with people with disability the success that they achieve will be a very individual thing.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Well said, Pam.

**The CHAIR:** Very good points, Pam. Can I just ask: in relation to teacher training, how feasible is it to mandate the inclusion of disability awareness and universal design in TAFE teaching qualifications, and what is the best way to deliver training on meeting the needs of learners with disability that would reach all TAFE teachers regardless of their career stage?

**Ms JONAS:** Thank you for your question. I guess we think that mandating disability awareness is highly doable with staff. We actually mentioned mandating the two electives that were in the TAE, which is the qualification for teachers and trainers in TAFE, as a start, but after further discussion those two particular electives may not be the best. But the idea of mandating disability awareness is supported and I think is highly doable. It could be mandated in initial teacher training in a general sense of disability awareness, and it could be as part of continuing professional development for teachers during their careers. For example, the VET Development Centre runs a series of programs aimed at specific issues to do with disability and disability awareness in particular areas. So there are opportunities within the system for people to come in and out of growing their disability awareness. We know that there are specific units that TAFEs themselves have developed with their own staff to continue their disability awareness. I think the idea is that all teachers should have a level of disability awareness going into teaching and if they do not have that they need to get it as quickly as possible within the system, and then their overall disability awareness will develop through a range of systems as they progress through their own careers. It may be that they only need a certain level of disability awareness to deal with what they have to, but then other teachers may be challenged in more specific ways, and they can get the training that they need at the time that they need it.

**Ms ADDISON:** Hi, John. I was wondering if I could just ask another question following on from Pam's discussion about setting students up for success, which I think is so important? I think targeted funding plays a key role in that in terms of funding for learners with a disability at TAFE in that there is no targeted funding for them at TAFE, unlike within our school sector and at our universities. So my question to Jeremy, Pam and Dan is: what would be the ideal funding model for supporting TAFE learners with a disability?

**Mr IRVINE:** Thank you for the question. I will start, and then I think I will have Pam come into the answer. We do not propose a specific funding model; rather, the Association suggests a series of funding principles, and they include that the same funding rationale should be applied equally across all of the public education providers and that the current situation is inequitable. The provision of targeted, appropriate and predictable funding arrangements for learners with disability in TAFE would remove the apparent funding inconsistencies that can limit the choice and control of students with a disability to undertake a course in TAFE—funding that is in addition to the Community Service Obligation funds. We also propose that funding is transferable—that is, that it attaches to the student, not the education provider—and funding that recognises that the circumstances of young people within the disability categorisation can be quite different, as we have been discussing this morning, and some, as my colleagues have mentioned, have higher needs than others. An alternative approach to viewing the heterogeneity of the group could be achieved by examining the different types of learners with a disability and formulating targeted policy responses. Finally—and I will ask Pam, Ms Jonas, to join us in a minute—there are also opportunities to improve the outcomes of existing policies and initiatives by expanding their scope and amending eligibility criteria. So, Pam, do you want to add to that?

**Ms JONAS:** Yes. I guess from a personal perspective, in an ideal world disability funding would be driven by the value that the people with disability add to our community, our society and our economy, not by the cost of providing equal access to learning. So I think that is the principle from which I would start. In terms of which model, the current higher education model is an in-arrears program, so higher education providers can claim up to 60% of the cost of supporting a learner with disability after they have commenced their course. That has some appeal. Or perhaps an extension of the school system or modelling around the school system model, which is where there are seven levels of assistance provided for students with disability. That ranges from \$7,000 at level 1 to up to \$60,000 at level 7, and that funding reflects the support that the student needs. It may be that neither of those models are appropriate in TAFE. It may be that we need to develop a new model, a different model that reflects the VET sector in a better way. But I guess the principle is at the moment there is no targeted funding, as you have said, Juliana, and I think it is a real issue for students in going into TAFE. Why is it that the other two public education systems have targeted funding for students with disabilities and the third system of public education does not?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would like to ask a question just in relation to sharing resources. Your submission suggests that the TAFE network share resources relating to assistive technology to improve access to course content. What other resources could be shared across TAFEs to improve accessibility?

**Ms JONAS:** At the moment there are a range of resources that are being developed across our TAFEs themselves. They are already sharing resources around universal curriculum design, around good practice and professional experience through the TAFE Disability Network, through the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, but we have suggested that other areas for sharing could be something like a centralised resource bank or a catalogue of equipment that exists in various TAFEs. Many times TAFEs buy equipment specifically for a student. Once that student has used that equipment it goes into storage and may never be used again, but there may be another TAFE or another provider that needs to access that equipment. If there was a centralised catalogue of equipment that was available to share, that would probably save quite a lot in terms of cost for people. Transcripts of podcasts, for example, for students where they have had audio transcripts made of learning, those sorts of things could be shared, again perhaps through a central system. And developing communities of practice around specific issues to do with disability would be a good way to share the expertise and knowledge that exists in the system. I think it is fair to say that there is a lot, a heck of a lot, of expertise in the system, and they are sharing that at a level at which they can. But we need perhaps to try and improve the ways that they can share their experience but also that we can share the resources that are available in each of the TAFE institutes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Questions? Can I just ask in relation to Jenny Macklin, who 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 JONAS:** Sorry to keep on talking. I think there are a range of things in the Macklin review. While there was not much in the way of specific information regarding students with disability, they were incorporated in her comments around, I think, placing students at the centre of learning and ensuring that we engage with diverse community representatives, including disability groups, to identify the opportunities that are there for, for example, co-designing and delivering courses for students with disability. I think there was information in there about increasing the disability awareness of teachers, which we have spoken about, including teacher

preparation and continuing professional development. There is information there around sharing resources, which, as I said, the TAFE system is well underway with doing not just in the area of disability but with a number of projects running recently around sharing assessment approaches, around sharing curriculum online and around developing online curriculum for students. And I think Jenny talks about systematic approaches so that we are putting the idea of collaborating around these things into a system-wide approach, not just an individual approach, and also to ensure that Skills and Job Centres are engaging with community representatives, including disability groups, in terms of improving the situation for learners with disability. I think probably the main recommendation or the main recommendation that points to this area is her Recommendation 5.3 around scaling up and connecting leading models of support for students. Again, that is a more general approach, but obviously it includes students with disability and other disadvantaged students. But that whole idea of scaling up and connecting is probably the driver, and I would say the Macklin report itself gives us a new narrative for collaboration in the system, away from previous policy positions around competition, so there is an active sense that we need to be collaborating on all of these issues.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your submission. It has been great. Thank you for being a part of this process.

**Mr IRVINE:** Thank you, Mr Chair and Committee Members. We appreciate the time to meet with you today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**