

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Sarah Connolly

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network;

Ms Jenni Graham, I Am Ready Coordinator, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network and Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning and Employment Network; and

Ms Rachael Murphy, I Am Ready Coordinator, Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly's 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.

Can I also please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference. I now invite our submitters to make a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which we will be following up with questions accordingly. You can start your submission. Thank you.

**Ms MAJOR:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak at the Inquiry today. I am Wendy Major. I am the Executive Officer of the South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN, and I am representing the three Gippsland LLENs and the NDCO in the I Am Ready partnership.

We have based our response to the Inquiry on our observations and experience in developing and evaluating the I Am Ready program, bringing together employability skills training, industry immersion and work experience. The three Gippsland LLENs and the NDCO program saw a need to raise the aspiration of young people with disability but also aspiration for them, which is really important.

We were concerned that young people with disability had barriers to learning, and when I say barriers to learning, it could be young people who have not been assessed as having a disability for a number of reasons. Some of that might be the choice of the family not to have them assessed. But we were concerned that they were being left behind in career planning and transition support, almost as if such aspiration might not be expected of that group of students, when in fact we are all aware that having a job or a career brings so much more to our lives than just receiving a pay. When we think about a career, it is about our strengths—what we can do and what we would like to do, and not what we cannot do. People living with disability should have that equal footing.

I would like to introduce you to Jenni Graham and Rachael Murphy, who are the coordinators of the program and worked with more than 90 students from across Gippsland, including mainstream and specialist schools from Orbost to Cowes, so it is a big area. Jenni and Rachael will speak to two examples of student experiences that illustrate the point of our submission: that young people need to have adequate preparation in their secondary schooling to make a successful transition to TAFE. And so can I ask Jenni to begin please.

**Ms GRAHAM:** Thank you, Wendy, and thank you for the opportunity to present. I am talking about a case study of a young lady from a local secondary school. Katie was in Year 11 when nominated for the I Am Ready program. Her disability was extreme social anxiety. She was disengaged at school, with limited attendance and low literacy and numeracy. When interviewed for the I Am Ready program, Katie seemed interested in attending the one-day-a-week program for a term. She shared at her interview that she loved children and would like to work with children one day.

She attended 80% of the eight-week program, followed by a regular work experience placement at a local toy library. Her confidence continued to grow, and it was evident that she was more comfortable in a specialised setting rather than in the school classroom. During this time Katie was still disengaged with her regular schooling, and the school commenced discussions with TAFE for her to actually exit school and enrol in a TAFE foundation skills program. She successfully completed that course and transitioned to a Certificate I in general education for adults.

As a result of her participation originally in the I Am Ready program, she was able to transition to TAFE well, and her attendance is still going well. When the course went remote during COVID this year, Katie was still able to engage, although it did set her back a little bit. She is still on track to complete next year. She is now on

a pathway to enrolling in a Certificate III in early childhood education, and her confidence is continuing to grow.

So we see that as a really positive case study as result of that interaction, I guess, or that intervention of the I Am Ready program. And now Rachael will share a case study with you of something a little bit different. Thank you.

**Ms MURPHY:** Thank you, Jenni, and thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I would like to introduce you to Sarah's story. Her first experience with TAFE was with a VET in schools program and it was not successful. When Sarah joined the I Am Ready program she had recently dropped out of a VET in Schools course and the TAFE experience had not succeeded because she did not understand how to articulate her learning needs and what assistance would be required. She was not offered any additional support to meet her specific learning needs. Sarah's confidence was crushed and she was very withdrawn—quick to say, 'I don't know' when she may have needed some processing time and 'I can't do TAFE' when conversations about future pathways were brought up. When undergoing stage 2 of the I Am Ready program, which was the work experience component, Sarah discovered her work experience placement in the childcare industry, where she had thought she always wanted to work, was not the right fit for her. When reflecting on the work experience, she had the understanding 'It's okay if a placement is not suitable'. It was a real workplace experience that she had gained. But unpacking the experience—'What did she enjoy? Where did she do well? What parts didn't she enjoy? Where did she struggle?'—allowed Sarah to work through the next steps by trying more work experience placements in industries to try and suit her strengths and needs.

If young people are not set up with the tools and support to succeed and feel confident in the TAFE sector from the beginning, it can be damaging and it can take a long time to build up that confidence again. I think to support young people with disability in their transition from school to TAFE we need to start early in schools, so career staff and educators using the discovery model for planning to explore and increase knowledge in different industries and roles; identifying where your strengths lie, focusing on what you can do and creating goals and where you would like to improve or where you need some support; offering some VET tasters, hands-on experience and being able to understand more about the courses offered; and micro-credentials—enrolling in and completing units from VET subjects one at a time, celebrating the small achievements, building confidence along the way—because how is a young person supposed to commit to studying a subject they do not have an understanding in and if they are not able to articulate their learning needs and do not have the knowledge of how they are going to succeed. Any questions?

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Rachael. I will kick off the questions, but there are also other MPs that will ask questions. Gary Blackwood, the Deputy Chair, will ask questions as well, and Juliana Addison, Kat Theophanous and Sarah Connolly all will ask questions. But can I just ask about the I Am Ready program? What were the key lessons learned from the I Am Ready pilot program and how can these lessons be applied across TAFE?

**Ms MAJOR:** I think the key learning that we came away from was that real need for preparation for young people to make that transition. I think we mentioned in our submission that often VETDSS is the first experience young people have of TAFE, and if that is not a positive experience or if students are not able to access that as an experience, then their preparation for what learning in a TAFE facility might be just does not happen. We have a saying in Gippsland, 'You can't be what you can't see', so it is all about having that preparation beforehand.

We really were surprised to encounter—we had lots of community support in our program. We had volunteers coming in and helping us with our dress-for-success days and our industry immersion days. We had some volunteers who came into the classroom to support the teacher during the eight employability skills session days, and LLEN staff also supported the process. I think what we were surprised to encounter was even with the best intentions of people, there was an unconscious bias—almost a feeling of 'How do we make up for their deficit?'. It was not about, 'Let's focus on this person's strengths' or 'Let's bring the best out in this person'; it was 'What will we have to settle for?', and we encountered that frequently. But where we could challenge that and build the confidence of young people, the amount of confidence that we saw come out of those groups of kids was astonishing. It was almost like they became different people. The people who came into the program feeling very quiet and reserved and 'I can't do' were young people who felt confident, who physically stood taller and had just a better attitude towards their own ability to move forward. We very deliberately have not

focused on telling TAFE what to do. Our experience sits outside of TAFE, but we very much believe from our program that it has exhibited that necessity to prepare young people well for that transition.

**The CHAIR:** Any further comments? Rachael? Jenni?

**Ms GRAHAM:** I just might add one. One of the key learnings that came out of our program was that these young people found their tribe. Bringing students from lots of different schools into one setting, into one environment, to do their learning with like-minded young people, I guess, they really made connections with each other and with the training providers as well. Finding their tribe, finding that group that they belong to, seemed to really help in boosting their confidence and, yes, building their confidence, as Wendy said, I guess was one of the biggest successes out of the program.

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

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, John. G'day, Jenni—

**Ms GRAHAM:** Hi, Gary.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** and Rachael and Wendy. I think I have seen you before somewhere, Jenni, but anyway, that is all good. In terms of the school sector—before we get to TAFE—and the career development that they currently provide, it sounds like the pilot program you ran was very, very effective but involved both schools and TAFE. How can we formalise that program across schools in the first place and then perhaps TAFE later?

**Ms GRAHAM:** I think formalising across schools—our schools in the Gippsland region—we deliver this program, as we said in our submission, to schools right across the whole of the Gippsland region, and they have accepted and acknowledged the program very well in that we are about to do a second intake or we have completed interviews for an intake into term 1 and we have been very well received. So I guess it is the funding side of it more than anything that is the best way to get it incorporated into the school, whether it is the school curriculum or part of the VET in Schools curriculum, so that it can be a program that is there and available every year for all schools across the state. It is feasible—we have run the pilot, we have the model and we have seen successes—so it would be the funding more than anything else.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** I guess that applies to TAFE too; if we are going to make sure that it is a collaborative approach between both schools and TAFE, funding would still be the issue at TAFE as well, would it be?

**Ms GRAHAM:** Yes, I would say so.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Okay. Thanks, Jenni.

**The CHAIR:** Anyone else to supplement that answer?

**Ms MAJOR:** Could I just make the comment that what we feel is the important part here is that it is a transition program, whether it is our model or some other models—and I have been listening to some of the other submissions, the ones from Trent and David from the LLENs. There are other programs happening where people are trying to address the same issues. So I think it is about focusing on the issue—that notion of having a transition program that is deliberate and that the structures that we build within TAFE and within schools take advantage of that. TAFEs have these wonderful Skills and Jobs Centres at the moment that we have found to be really valuable across the work we do in LLENs, and they were certainly involved in the I Am Ready program to great effect. Also schools now have a new allocation I believe of 0.2 funding for pathways managers within the schools—or pathways officers—and I would be really keen to see how those roles have developed. But I would question whether 0.2 is adequate for the needs of most secondary colleges in order to do that liaising between all of the stakeholders that we need to work with in order to make sure that every child gets a good transition.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, Wendy.

**Ms GRAHAM:** A couple of the other responses we have jotted down for that question as well were on the importance of schools recognising that students with disability are just as capable of achieving as other students, so raising the aspirations, I guess, of the young people themselves but also careers staff and families,

which I think has been mentioned. I was listening to some of the other submissions as well and I heard very similar comments. I know Rachael mentioned earlier about breaking some of the TAFE certificates or some of the things that students are learning down into those smaller units—micro-credentials—so that successes can be recognised earlier rather than waiting until they get right to the end of a whole unit, so having something like that available while they are still in school.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Thanks, Jen.

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

**Ms ADDISON:** I would, yes. Thank you, Chair. I would like to congratulate the three of you and the Gippsland community on the I Am Ready program. Hearing that first story was just really encouraging. I am a former school teacher, and sometimes you have just really got to tailor things so individually to someone to try and find something that supports them. It seems that you are doing a really, really great job, particularly with that first example.

In your submission you state that the VET Delivered in Secondary Schools should be modified. Schools do not encourage students with disability to enrol due to fears of financial liability if they drop out. How could the VETDSS funding operate to increase participation among students with disability?

**Ms MAJOR:** That is an interesting point. I think through our work at the LLEN we work a lot in that VET space trying to increase VET participation. Because, as you would be aware, in Gippsland and particularly in my part of Gippsland we are operating in really thin markets. So we need to have critical numbers of students in order for VET courses to run and to give kids the most choice.

One of the things we come up against in terms of schools managing the number of young people who get to do VETDSS is that there is a real fear that if they commit their funds to a student undertaking a VET course and then they commence and then drop out, the school is still liable to pay for the whole course. Because VET has allocated resources to run the whole course, they may be at risk of not being able to afford it for the remaining students if they have to refund the fees, so I find that schools are very fearful of taking a risk on some students, and often they are the very students that need to have the risk taken for. I would love to see a way of overcoming that for all students. We talk about students who have a disability or barriers to learning, and that is a very deliberate description of this cohort of young people—the ones that schools are fearful of taking a risk on in terms of using a big part of their VET budget, because VETDSS is fee-for-service to schools, and it is not cheap.

We thought that if they could break down the funding process—if not for every student, then for this particular group of students—they could perhaps enrol term by term. The certificate could be broken up into four components, and the students then would only have to commit for one term and be able to see their way to being successful that term and riding on that wonderful success, confidently enrol in the second term and so on, so that they build on their successes. It is what Rachael said when she was talking about micro-credentialing, I guess, to borrow a term from the higher ed sector. But I think that that would make a difference in terms of schools being willing to take a risk for many of the kids that would like to do VET. And some of those kids who need VET the most do not even last in school long enough to have that opportunity. So I think if we could restructure the funding cycle for VET and break it up into those four components, it would make a big difference.

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

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, John. And thank you, Wendy, Jenni and Rachael. What an incredible program, and it just speaks to the ability of these tailored programs to be so successful in meeting the needs of cohorts like this. So congratulations to all three of you.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** It's Gippsland, Kat—it's Gippsland.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Yes! I know that you said that you do not want to speak for TAFEs and that your program sits outside of TAFE in particular, but I wonder if you have any thoughts around: what could TAFEs do to better engage with students with disability, to better support them when they are in there to give them

more insight about what TAFE involves for those that are considering studying TAFE? What is their role in your mind?

**Ms MAJOR:** It would be really important for the opportunity to go to TAFE for young people with disability not to be seen as TAFE having to run a disability stream. I heard a young woman earlier today talking about her experience as a TAFE student with disability, and she had completed to Certificate IV. I very much was cheering her on, because young people with disability are often defined by their disability. Being at TAFE is busy work for them—it keeps them busy and occupied—but TAFE for all students should be purposeful. There should be ongoing support within the TAFE structure to help young people manage their pathway, whether it be young people with disability or whether it be other young people who may not have developed the level of confidence they need to have full grasp of their planning. So I think that would be a really important factor—to have that ongoing careers adviser role working on a student's own career plan, so the notion of career planning could go beyond school into TAFE and into university even. There is many a young person who could use additional support in their learning settings.

**Ms MURPHY:** And if I could add to that, we have got the great resources of the Skills and Jobs Centre, and we worked with them pretty closely in our program. And just marrying those things together—of the student enrolling in TAFE and then maybe regular career planning with the Skills and Jobs Centre—could work well as well.

**Ms MAJOR:** Yes. One of the other things that we did within the program was that we felt that our teachers in our schools needed some more support in understanding disability and perhaps access to some additional tools to help them do their job more confidently. And with the NDCO, Andrea Evans-McCall, who is part of the partnership, we worked to develop some webinars for PD for teachers.

And the one thing that COVID has taught us all is that we can actually reach people fairly efficiently through webinars and online learning, and we have all had to develop a set of skills there that we never, ever thought we would need. But the reluctance of schools to engage with us via that tool is now gone. They can access the training resources more effectively, so we developed these webinars to help them understand disability and what they could do to support their young people. That could be extended into the TAFE sector, and there could be a focus across education sectors to actually make sure that teachers stay upskilled in that area of understanding for young people with disability. It is not about teachers who want to specialise in teaching kids with disability. I think young people with disability should be integrated across all certificate levels and just be able to access the support they need when they need it.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Thank you, Wendy.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Sarah Connolly, would you like to ask a question?

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Yes. I love the discussion about—and your insights, ladies, into—the importance of careers advisers in the schools. I have got some schools up my way—Tarnet is an incredibly fast growing area, and we have some very, very big schools. And like you talked about, people with special needs and disability are quite often in mainstream schools. I often wonder about the type of career advice that they would be getting. I think that for these students as they transition from school say into TAFE or into employment, their parents become an important person in their lives when they are looking at choosing a path through TAFE or what type of career they would like to follow. What do you think could be happening there at the school to better engage careers advisers and teachers and the parents? What do you think is missing?

**Ms GRAHAM:** Certainly as part of our program, we ran a program called Career Conversations, where we attempted to engage the parents of our participants into some sessions. We invited them along and just went through some career conversation-type sessions, pretty much teaching the parents how to engage. And a lot of our educators came to those as well. When I say 'a lot', they were not really well attended. It is a difficult task to actually get some of the parents involved in these sorts of conversations. So looking at different ways to do that, ways to encourage the schools to encourage the parents to be involved, from our learnings I think our online forums that we had were probably better attended than our face-to-face ones. So, as we said, some of the things we have learned out of COVID that we can now do in that webinar style might be something moving forward that you could do to run some programs to encourage parents.

We also delivered some transition forums as part of our program, where we invited along the local employment services, NDIS practitioners, other supports, local supports for people with disability, and they were quite well attended by parents. So providing those sorts of forums in local areas to invite parents along to proved quite successful.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask about work experience, and obviously it is a very important part of learning. I would imagine that not every workplace would be disability friendly in some aspects. Are there limitations that you have encountered when trying to set up work placements for students with disability? What are the best ways to encourage more employers to offer work placements for students with disability?

**Ms MURPHY:** I think one of the best ways is to start off working with the student so they can articulate what their needs are, so then that can be transferred over to the workplace so we can put things in place to support the young person in that work experience and work with the employer. That is one of the easiest starting points, I guess. But with our local connections through all of the LLENs we were pretty successful in gaining some placements that were supportive.

**Ms GRAHAM:** A lot of it came down to our local connections and our local networks, and being part of the LLENs system is really helpful. A lot of what we do in the LLENs is actually connecting in with industries and local employers. But similar to what Rachael said, it is very individualised—so each of these young people have their own distinct set of needs and supports that they might need in the workplace. Yes, it was a matter of, with the work that we were doing, matching what the students were looking for to what the employers could offer. Some employers were very, very receptive; others you could tell—Rachael and I were knocking on doors at different times trying to find employers to take students for work experience, and some were accepting and others were not. Often it is finding that right person in an organisation that is willing to have a go and try something a bit different that makes the difference. We also offered some disability awareness type training, so some training where employers could come along and get a bit more support, and offering that one-on-one support once a student was in the placement as well, I think, made them a bit more confident in taking young people on with those extra needs.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions? No. Are there any further comments you would like to make? No. Well, thank you very much for attending today, and we thank you for your comprehensive submission. It is fantastic and is very innovative in some of the aspects that you have put forward to us. It is very valuable to our Inquiry, and we thank you for being here today. Thanks very much.

**Committee adjourned.**