T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 2021

(via videoconference)

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WITNESS

Professor Sandra Jones, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement, Australian Catholic University.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside the 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 please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief 5-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you, Sandra.

Prof. JONES: Thank you for inviting me to speak. I am a little bit nervous, particularly as an academic, without my slideshow to protect me. I will make sure I stick to my 5 minutes. I just wanted to briefly say that the reason that I think this is really important that you are hearing autistic voices is that we do know that autistic people have lower rates of post-secondary qualifications and lower rates of employment than people with other disabilities. That is largely due to barriers that are social, environmental and communication barriers rather than lack of capacity to actually do well in their education.

I come to this both from an academic perspective as a researcher whose area is autism inclusion and the experiences of adolescents and adults with autism but also with personal experience as an autistic person who struggled with the secondary school system, went to TAFE back in the dark ages as a pathway into university and went on and did my PhD and became a research professor. More recently, my youngest son went to TAFE as a pathway into university as well, so just putting both of those perspectives there.

You have asked me to come and talk about our Autism at ACU program, which I am really excited about. We are trying to make our university as inclusive as possible for autistic people, both students and staff, and we also do a lot of community outreach and work in partnership with autism organisations. When I first wanted to set up this program I went and looked at what was happening at other universities. There was lots of great work happening, and I think that is really important to note, but two things stood out to me. One was that these programs almost universally were not developed by autistic people or with autistic people; they were developed for autistic people. I think the same with any disability—that really is an important issue. But also a lot of programs are singular in focus—so I saw some wonderful mentoring programs, but they were mentoring programs that sat alone without environmental adjustments or other things that were actually necessary to make this work. So when we started the program at ACU the commitment was to develop a really comprehensive program that addressed all of these different barriers but that was led and informed very much by autistic voices. So I lead the program as an autistic person and we have an expert advisory group that consists of autistic students and alumni and staff, so we are very much making sure that all of the work that we are doing is actually beneficial and what the students are looking for.

Just briefly going through the components of the program, we have a lot of information for incoming students. We have a public website where students and their families can go and find out information about the university and the supports we provide to autistic people and very importantly—I think this was commented on earlier—a single contact point so there is someone that you can send a question to and know that the person who responds to that will actually have a working knowledge of autism. We have a range of physical resources—books and resources and activities that students can use who are enrolled in our program. We also have on our Melbourne campus a low-sensory room, which is a really important facility for students. They can go in there when they are feeling overwhelmed. They have got an access card, they can turn the lights off and they also have lockers in there so they can keep any materials that they require in a safe space, and we are putting those rooms on other campuses but also doing other things around raising awareness of some of those sensory and environmental challenges.

We have our mentoring program, which links autistic students to a peer mentor who they meet with regularly and can really focus on whatever is important to them. It might be around academic issues, it might be around

social issues, it might be around understanding and navigating the university system, but it gives them someone that they know they can talk to who they know is there to provide them with support.

There are social activities for the students based around providing social activities that are actually relevant and appropriate to them, so not going to the pub or having large parties but things like board game nights where students can come along and you do not have to worry about the small talk—you can find a shared interest.

A very important component of our program is around professional development for staff. If we are going to make the university more inclusive, staff need to have the resources to understand autism, understand what adjustments students might need and how they can support them with their learning and their assessment. We also do a lot of advocacy and awareness raising because one of the key things in inclusion is that you actually feel comfortable and welcome in the university or in the TAFE, so that is very much around raising awareness of the strengths that these students bring. We hear so much about the challenges, but actually our autistic students do bring a lot of strengths and do have a lot of skills that make them really successful both as students and as employees. We are also raising awareness of some of those issues so that if a student sits in the classroom and they have got their sunglasses on or their headphones on there is not that automatic assumption that they have got a hangover or they are listening to music but there is actually reason for that.

We are also working on transitions programs, so working better with schools to allow autistic students in secondary schools to actually have an experience at the university and understand more about what that is like.

There are lots of other components. We are developing sensory maps to help students navigate campus. We are working on resources around reasonable accommodations and resources around inherent requirements to make it easier for students to be able to communicate their needs and access the things that they require. I will stop there so there is plenty of time for questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sandra. Can I just ask in relation to if TAFEs wanted to adopt your program, how easily could the ACU's autism inclusion program be taken up by individual TAFEs and what resources and training would TAFEs need to successfully run a similar program?

Prof. JONES: I think it would be fairly easy from the perspective of, you know, we have a really good sense of what is needed. Obviously TAFE is different to university, so there would be some things that would need to be changed to make it work. The initial set-up for TAFEs I think would probably take a bit of resourcing, as I said, around understanding the teaching models and adapting the materials and resources to them. On an ongoing basis really it is about having a contact person or a support person at the TAFE and acknowledging that whatever we do to raise awareness we are never going to be able to thoroughly educate everyone with everything they need. So if students have a person at their TAFE they know they could contact: 'That person understands autism. I can ask the questions in the way that they come in my head, and they can help me sort of translate that and navigate that with the lecturers'. The main ongoing resources would really be that support of a person and also I think the physical space—there may need to be some environmental adjustments around how that would work. It would depend on how extensively you wanted to implement it and in how many TAFEs, but certainly the model would work in any post-secondary education environment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Gary, or anyone, do you have a question?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. I am happy to, John. In terms of professional development, what sort of professional development does your program offer teaching staff so that they can continue to improve the way they deliver programs to autistic students?

Prof. JONES: The first component obviously is just around increasing their knowledge and understanding of autism, so that is, you know, 'What are the challenges?', 'What are the strengths of the students?' and 'How can we support them?'. It is just really drilling down into some of those things that they have heard about, like executive function, sensory challenges—what does that actually look like? I think that is why having the program led by autistic people is really important, because I can give that presentation but then people can ask me those sorts of personal questions—'Well, what do you do?' or 'How does that work for you?'—and I think that definitely makes our staff feel more comfortable asking the questions. Then we do tailored training depending on the particular needs. We are working with different areas of the university around specific aspects. One of our schools has come to me and said, 'Look, I know that group work is a real challenge for

these students. What could we do around group work to make that more accessible for the students? What changes could we make?'.

So it is really driven by needs in two directions. One is staff coming to us and saying, 'Look, this is an area that I would really like some support with. How do I actually scaffold assignments better?' or 'How do I support students with exams?' or 'I have a student and I'm not really sure why this is an issue for them', so we do that. But it is also driven by our students. As I said, our program has an expert advisory group of our autistic students and alumni, so they will often bring things to me and say, 'This is a consistent issue for us' in this discipline or at university in general, and then we will work through that. So it is very much about: 'What do the teaching staff need? What do the students need?', and then developing the modules that are required.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Sandra.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Further questions—Christine?

Ms COUZENS: Thanks so much, Sandra, for your time today; we really appreciate it. I just wanted to build a bit more on the comments you made about a dedicated person or having someone within your university but in talking about TAFEs. Do you see that as being a critical role not just in terms of autism but across the board with disabilities, having someone assisting those people on a day-to-day basis?

Prof. JONES: I believe so. Obviously I do not know enough about the TAFE system to know exactly how that would work and what the resourcing would be, but I think that there are a lot of overlaps between different disabilities but there are a lot of really unique aspects as well, and if you do not have someone who has that really deep knowledge, it can be really difficult to translate that in a way so that the teaching staff are actually going to really understand what is required and in a way that the students feel supported. And it is also about the comfort to ask those questions. You know, I get a lot of questions from students because they know that I am not going to think 'That's a dumb question' or I am not going to need them to explain to me what they actually mean or why that is a problem. Obviously it would depend on the resourcing that you have and the structure, whether that is a physical person on each campus or whether, you know, in our wonderful world of remote everything, that could be a person that you could reach out to by email or Zoom chat. It is just having that person—whether that is for one TAFE or five TAFEs or 10 TAFEs—so that I know that there is an autistic person or a person with expertise in autism that I can contact and say, 'How would I do this?'. That also really resources the teaching staff too, because if that person has developed an expertise in what works at TAFEs, what has worked in another TAFE or what has worked in another course, it is much easier than every single teaching staff member having to start out from the ground and work it out.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And I know in some areas, say for the Aboriginal community, for example, we are building Aboriginal education units within TAFE, which is fantastic. Would you see a similar thing being a big advantage for the TAFE sector—to have a disability unit, for want of a better word, built into the TAFE system?

Prof. JONES: Yes, I think for two reasons: firstly, because of that consistent, ongoing support and knowing that it is there; but also just from the external view of feeling welcome and feeling invited as a person with a disability. There is that perception that 'If those things aren't visible, do they actually want me there, and am I going to feel safe there?'. I have certainly noticed that has been a big thing at ACU. I do have a lot of contact from students and from parents saying, 'Okay, the fact that you are so visible makes us feel comfortable that this isn't a token thing; you actually really do want our students to come and you really do want to support them'. I think having that centre of expertise but also that visible commitment is really important.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And having spoken to a number of people with disabilities in my own TAFE here in Geelong, during COVID obviously there was a big impact on all students, but in particular students with autism that I have spoken to. Do you have any feedback on how you managed the issues during COVID and the impact that it may have had on students?

Prof. JONES: I mean, it had a huge impact, and probably the opposite to what anecdotally people would expect. There is that stereotype that autistic people, because they do not like to communicate, will love online learning because it is all distant and they do not have to worry about the social aspects. Most of the students found it really difficult. We are also doing some research into the experiences of secondary school students during COVID. I think with that switch to online learning, again, that is where the mobile professional

development—'What's the need?'—is really important, because again, there are certain assumptions that we make about people that do not take into account their disability.

Being really honest, I do not like this kind of set-up, this Zoom meeting. You are all lovely people, but for someone who struggles with eye contact, having you right there, that big, in the middle of my screen, is actually harder than being in a room with you, where I can kind of look away or look at something else. So knowing that students might need to turn their videos off, for example, and that does not mean that they are not paying attention, and providing an option for students to send a private chat message if they have not understood something, I think there are those sorts of adjustments we can make, but also being aware that communication is tricky. Not being able to just catch up with the teacher after the lecture and say, 'Oh, I didn't quite understand that ' or 'You said something about the assignment date changing, but I missed it'—you lose a lot of that when you move to online, because with a lot of the questions that as an autistic person I might not feel comfortable asking in front of the whole class I would feel comfortable walking up to my lecturer afterwards and saying, 'Can I just ask you this?'. I think those sorts of things can make a huge difference.

We saw some wonderful success stories where teaching staff who knew they had an autistic student in the class would actually reach out to them afterwards—you know, just send them an email once a week or once a fortnight to just say, 'Hey, how are you going? Do you have any questions?'. I think those sorts of things can be really, really supportive of students, and also just acknowledging that this is exhausting. And then we put other expectations on students. We say, 'You'd like to participate in this because you must be feeling lonely'. Yes, they are feeling lonely and isolated, but the solution is not necessarily more Zoom meetings.

Ms COUZENS: Right. Thank you for that. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? No. Okay. Thank you very much, Sandra, for your contribution today. It is very valuable to our Inquiry, and we appreciate it very much. Thank you.

Prof. JONES: Thank you very much for inviting me to speak.

Witness withdrew.