

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 November 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

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Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Melinda Eason, RTO Manager,

Mr Josh Wanganeen, Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Lead Trainer,

Ms Elva Richards, Student, and

Ms Emma Wendt, Student, Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thanks for being here. Can I firstly acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. 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 say it outside, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and 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. If you want to give a presentation, then we will ask questions accordingly.

Mr WANGANEEN: I am Josh Wanganeen. My tribes are Kokitha, Narungga, Kauna, and I have ties to Warringal, and from my mother's country, Yorta Yorta. I also want to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land, the Wurundjeri people, and those people from the Kulin nations. In particular I want to acknowledge all of our elders, past and present, including some of my lineage—great-grandfather William Cooper, who was one of the leaders in the 1930s in terms of the Cumeragunja walk-off. He was also a mentor to Sir Doug Nicholls. He was also a mentor to our late CEO, Dr Alf Bamblett, who had a dream of bringing the VACSAL Aboriginal community service organisation to life in the early 1980s. It is because of their legacies that we have an opportunity to be able to practice our culture today. I also acknowledge the emerging leaders as well.

Ms EASON: Thanks, Josh. On behalf of VACSAL, we would like to thank the Economy and Infrastructure Committee for inviting us here today. My name is Melinda Eason. I am the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited, VACSAL—we will call it VACSAL from now on—RTO and Learn Local manager. My role includes training and assessing in the courses that we have on our scope. I would like to introduce Josh Wanganeen, who is VACSAL's accredited course co-facilitator and Lead Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Trainer. Emma Wendt and Elva Richards generously accepted the invitation to be here today representing VACSAL students. They will tell you more about themselves shortly.

VACSAL is an Aboriginal-controlled organisation and community services peak body that provides advocacy support services to Aboriginal communities across Victoria. We have 53 staff located in number of sites in the metropolitan area, covering the north and west. We have regional sites in Shepparton, Torquay and Ballarat. Our service delivery programs, including Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services—BWAYS—and the Aboriginal centre for men, cover areas in youth and adult homelessness, including a hostel for Aboriginal young men; youth and adult justice, including Koori caucus; family violence case management; early school leavers program; early years program, including Aboriginal Best Start; and community development officers in all locations.

VACSAL is also a private RTO and Learn Local. These two programs provide access to culturally appropriate accredited and preaccredited training. In the words of Dr Alf Bamblett, VACSAL's founding member, cultural integrity is at the heart of every learning journey. Our RTO is small but our heart is big. We work together in solidarity and value partnerships to develop better outcomes for our students. We have high expectations for our students, and as a result our retention and growth is high. The RTO has been operating since 2014, and we deliver the Certificate IV and Diploma in Community Services. We have had over 200 students successfully complete their qualifications and enter into or maintain related industry employment. Although our greatest achievement is supporting the students to complete their qualifications and enter the workforce, thus reducing the cycle of poverty, we are also proud of our students and trainers who have been winners and finalists in the Victorian Training Awards and Wurreker Awards.

From the moment our students come to VACSAL, they know they are culturally safe. Their identity will never be questioned, processes and protocols will be familiar and they are not a minority. This automatically reduces anxiety and stress and changes their perspective of what education and employment experience can be. Through the implementation of integrated teaching and industry partnerships, we support students to see connections and relevance between qualification and industry. We develop and use material through an Aboriginal lens that relates to Aboriginal lives and acknowledges Aboriginal history, making the content inherently more meaningful.

VACSAL and our fellow Aboriginal-controlled organisations are able to offer work placements to our students, therefore creating a direct pathway to permanent employment. Our graduation is celebrated two weeks after successful course completion. This is an all-of-community celebration, publicly highlighting and role-modelling the importance of education and employment.

VACSAL is a not-for-profit, private RTO. Therefore we do not have access to free TAFE, yet we waive all student fees. We do not want poverty to be a barrier to education. We provide one-on-one or group tutoring support without access to the Indigenous Tutoring Assistance Scheme, ITAS. As an ACFE provider we have 20% course enrolment exemptions. However, this been reduced to 10% in the 2020 Skills First contract.

VACSAL has only recently become a Learn Local. We are currently researching the preaccredited training needs of Aboriginal people, using the Capacity and Innovation Fund. We are providing a framework for all Learn Locals in our region to encourage more Aboriginal people to access ACFE training. We look forward to providing preaccredited training in the following areas: study and work-ready skills; My Best Life, aimed at young people from Bert Williams; Aboriginal cultural awareness training; learning my language; intro to community services and community development; presentation and public speaking skills; and computer and art therapy skills.

VACSAL has improved the outcomes for Aboriginal jobseekers for the following reasons: lack of administrative barriers—there is no online enrolment or assessment; and offering holistic family centred and strength-based support, using the wraparound services that we have at VACSAL. We are accountable to the Aboriginal community; the Koori grapevine is strong. The successful story of our students is our strongest marketing and recruitment tool.

Building on current cultural knowledge and skills, culturally appropriate trainers, Aboriginal cofacilitators in every workshop, training materials and support, we support the search for appropriate employment and we assist the students in addressing the key selection criteria, developing a résumé and cover letters. This can often be a barrier as many Aboriginals find it very difficult to talk themselves up. We purchase working with children checks and police checks, we offer students support placements and last, but most importantly, we build up students' self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth. We recognise and acknowledge their resilience. This strengthens culture and develops a can-do attitude and therefore an internal belief that they do have the ability and the right to access and maintain meaningful employment.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Melinda. Thanks for coming. I wanted you to come because you and I have had a lengthy conversation about the work that you do out of your offices in Northcote, and I thought that it would be of benefit to the broader Committee to hear about that. We spoke about the importance of the preaccreditation training in the sense that for a lot of Aboriginal kids they may not be ready to take up, for instance, our free TAFE courses and it is really important to have them ready for that before they launch into it and then perhaps drop out of it. Can you talk to that at all, and the work that you do and the research that you are doing in the area and the broader area around that?

Ms EASON: Yes, thank you. As part of our CAIF funds part of our role was to interview all Aboriginal services about their preaccredited training needs, and the strongest advice and guidance that we received from all leaders—we spoke to all the CEOs—was that the workforce needs to be more job ready, more work ready, and understand all those employability skills and acknowledge what they have got. The young people that we are hoping to work with at Bert Williams are obviously experiencing homelessness, so they have got a lot of work to do in terms of making sure that they can meet the needs of any traineeship or apprenticeship.

It is about that can-do attitude, that building self-esteem and authentic relationships that we build with our students and also having those connections in Aboriginal organisations that can pathway into there, rather than starting another relationship with a jobactive and maybe the appointments are only 15 minutes long. I think that we have already built up the relationships and the trust, more importantly, hence we are in a very good position to pathway from preaccredited training. All those hours that we have applied for have been researched, exploratory research in job-ready skills and all those study-ready skills, preaccredited skills—all those employability skills and meeting the needs of where the students are at that particular time.

We only became preaccredited this year, so we have applied for the hours, so hopefully we secure those. We have not had that opportunity to roll that out.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Was that process onerous or difficult, or easy?

Ms EASON: No, it really was not. In fact they were so excited when we applied that I think they met us on Christmas Eve at like 6 o'clock to come out and do the site visit. They were so excited, and they also pushed forward on the 20% exemptions. You had to be a Learn Local for one year before you could get that and they pushed that forward, so they have been incredibly accommodating. It is quite a different space to the Skills First area with accredited training—very different space.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Melinda. Before we ask any further questions, can we just hear for a couple of minutes from both Elva and Emma, whoever wants to go first?

Ms RICHARDS: My name is Elva Richards. I am a Barngarla and Gubrun woman from Port Lincoln, South Australia, but I have been living in Victoria for about 10 years. My experience is I did not finish Year 12. I really struggled with high school so going forward, as soon as I turned 18, I just started working, so everything that I knew was learned on the job. That kind of served me for years, but I got to the point when I moved back to Melbourne—in 2017 I moved back here—I found myself unemployed. I did not have a home. My husband and I did not have anywhere to stay, so we ended up staying with his sister. He picked up work fairly quickly but I struggled, so I decided that I wanted to go and get a qualification. I wanted to get something that said I was qualified to do something. Through the grapevine I found Melinda and VACSAL, so I inquired about doing their course. I had actually inquired, I think, a year before, but I was too scared to kind of make that step. When I started training, like going into the classes, I was really, really nervous because I was a mature age student. I did not know anything about study. I was really new to it.

The biggest thing that I noticed walking in was I felt very safe. It was in a really culturally safe space. I had done mainstream courses in the past and I could not finish because the space was not comfortable for myself. It was also very stringent and not flexible. For myself as an Aboriginal woman, there would be times that I would have to take leave because I would have to go home for a funeral or there would be things that would come up with my family and I would have to go home. With mainstream courses I just could not catch up, whereas with this specific course they were very flexible. Any time that there was anything happening they would sit with me and make up the time. So that was really important for me.

Public speaking was something I really, really struggled with. I think, again, with what Melinda has been saying, building up our confidence to be able to speak in public was massive for me. I ended up being able to—even being here today, that is pretty massive for me.

The CHAIR: You are doing great.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. I started very nervous. This was in 2017. I finished that course. I was so proud of myself because it was the first time I had completed something. At the end of that, at graduation, I won one of the leadership awards. That meant the world to me as well.

I then did a work placement at VACSAL in the Best Start program, and then I was successful in getting a job there, where I worked at VACSAL for about two or three years. That was the first time I had sustained employment for such a long time, because I learned so many work-ready skills at VACSAL that enabled me to sustain employment for that period. I then did the Diploma in Community Services, which again furthered my skills and my knowledge.

I then decided that I wanted to move on to working in mental health, so I gained employment at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service as an Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing officer. I work primarily with acute inpatient wards in St Vincent's. For me, going through the whole process of starting education at a later age was really scary, but I managed to complete the Certificate IV in Community Services, the Diploma, and then I have sustained employment throughout this process, all with the support of Melinda and Josh and VACSAL. I have been successful to start studying a Bachelor of Social Work. I will be starting that next year in order to fulfil my goal.

The CHAIR: Congratulations.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you.

Ms WENDT: My name is Emma Wendt, and I am a proud Gunditjmara woman from the Western District of Victoria, although I grew up and was born in Melbourne. I have lived here my whole life. I would also like to add that I am a proud mother of two. I would like to share my journey from education into the workforce. I enjoyed school, but when I got to Years 9 and 10 the hormones kicked in and I started to rebel and misbehave at school. I remember clearly the coordinator rang my mum and said, ‘Emma is wasting her time at our school, and our own. It is best that she leaves’.

I spent the next few years looking for work. I really wanted to grow up fast. I found an Aboriginal-identified traineeship working at Reconciliation Victoria. I was only 16. I took the opportunity and completed a Certificate III in Business Administration. I went on and completed another traineeship through the Replay Group and completed a Certificate III in Children’s Services.

While working in child care I fell pregnant with my first child. I went on and had baby number two and left the workforce for four years. After staying home and raising my children on my own as a single parent, I decided that I needed to work to create a future, a career, and be a positive role model to my children. VACSAL gave me the opportunity to work casually on reception. From there I enrolled in the course, and I was working part-time in the RTO. Gaining my Certificate IV in Community Services work did not just open the opportunity for work; it opened up the opportunity for a career. I am now the AHLO of Western Health, seeing patients in all three hospitals—Sunshine Hospital, Frankston Hospital and Williamstown. I have been able to buy my own house. Working in Aboriginal community organisations was a perfect stepping stone into the workforce.

The CHAIR: Well done.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Congratulations; that is incredible.

The CHAIR: So just on that, VACSAL has helped a tremendous amount of Aboriginal communities in finding sustainable jobs going forward—and there is a perfect example. Is it possible to get some data off you in terms of how successful your programs have been, how many people have come through your programs and how many of them have succeeded? Are you tracking them, and are they doing fine? If we can get some of that data, that would be great.

Ms EASON: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Also, what are some of the challenges for VACSAL, and how can we as a State Government help?

Ms EASON: I spoke to our Deputy CEO this morning, and she said, ‘If you could please put forward the difficulties in finding teachers, trainers and assessors’. It is incredibly difficult to find them, which means it puts a lot of pressure on Josh and I to do a lot of the delivery as well as our other roles. So that is one of the biggest barriers. The other barrier, I think, is really to have a specific employment officer with us at VACSAL, whether that be a partnership or not, that gets to know the students throughout the entire year—hence the reason we can write very good key selection criteria, résumé and cover letters, because we know the students. Josh might talk a little bit more about how it is difficult for Aboriginal people to talk themselves up.

Mr WANGANEEN: I suppose it comes with the effects of colonisation. Obviously, within our community we have got a lot of lateral violence, high levels of shame and low levels of self-esteem. So I think what Melinda was talking about earlier—to be able to offer a safe space where our students and participants, even if they are not going to go on to the Cert III or IV in Community Services, can come into a culturally safe space. It is almost set up like this—it is a round table—so it is more to facilitate and discuss, where the participants’ and the students’ stories matter within it, and to be able to tackle some of the social justice issues of access to education and access to employment.

Due to the history of colonialism, we want to be able to provide a space where students and participants can be able to tell their story. We have a ‘my mob’ presentation; ‘my mob’ is who you are and where you are from,

even for the non-Aboriginal students. If you look at our previous award winners, most of the award winners—even though probably 80% of our students are Aboriginal—have been non-Aboriginal. Last year the lady who won our award was actually from Egypt, and English was her third language. The Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students recognised that resilience, because we can understand some of the history, including transgenerational trauma and some of those challenges. So we can be able to address them, and that reduces the levels of lateral violence and bullying and things within the classroom.

I think it is pretty unique at VACSAL, because a lot of our students have been in at 18 or 19 and they have had their grandparents do the course with them. So we have had fathers and sons, mothers and daughters and grandparents and granddaughters do the same course together. And I think it is fantastic for our elders to be able to come in and do a Cert IV. Even though they have probably had 15 or 20 years' experience within the workforce they can still be able to study with their family members. And it is really a shared sort of knowledge, which I think sort of finds a safe space to be able to tackle some of those social justice issues as well.

I looked at some data last year, and the highest employers of Aboriginal people from last year were AFL Victoria and community services, which is great if you want to be able to go and play in sports or work within community for your people, but also what our RTO and the other Aboriginal RTOs want to be able to provide is support. Yes, we want to be able to work in community services and be good at sports as well, but we want a piece of the big pie. So we want to open up opportunities to, yes, run community services courses, but also entrepreneurial courses and home ownership courses so we can break through some of the effects of poverty as well as work within community, which is our prime, core business.

Ms RYAN: Thank you all so much for being here today. Elva and Emma, particularly, your stories are very inspirational. It is great for us to be able to hear those firsthand. I guess, Josh, you were just touching on it, and I was really interested to know why community services is the accredited offering—and I think you just answered that—but whether you actually want to expand your accredited training at all, and if you do, what area would you be likely to head in and I guess what challenges, if there are any, there might be in expanding your accredited training, because what I really heard out of Elva and Emma's stories is that you guys are providing a service that is very, very difficult to get in any other setting. So obviously you being able to expand your accredited training would have a significant benefit, I imagine, for Aboriginal young people.

Ms EASON: We have got a lot of young people in our course this year all doing traineeships at VACCA, which is fantastic. So that is working really well. One of the biggest barriers is that we cannot buy resources and assessments off the shelf. So it costs a lot of money to put qualifications on scope because we develop all our assessments in consultation with the Aboriginal community. What I think the ideal is we have got a relationship—a partnership—with RMIT at the moment that is working really well, where they will come out and use our training and assessment strategies or our methodologies in teaching, and they actually pay for Josh as well to be in the classroom. So it is that Aboriginal co-facilitation that needs to happen right across the board. I would love to offer 100 different courses that meet the needs of the individual person's career paths, their dreams, their goals and their passions, and the only way we can do that is in partnership. If we put everything on scope, we would just become too big and we would lose the uniqueness of what we have got. We want to know every student's name; they are not a number. We want to know their stories and we want to be able support them, so I think partnerships are the way to go. We have twice put out disability, which is another high employment area, and aged care, and everyone chose—we had 45 students enrol in community services and no-one was interested in disabilities and aged care, unfortunately, because they are enormous growth areas and a great career pathway as well. So partnerships—in short.

Ms RYAN: So you do have those courses on scope at the moment?

Ms EASON: No. We partnered up with E-focus, another private not-for-profit RTO, and we had that authentic win-win situation—partnership. We put it out there, we recruited and everyone enrolled in Certificate IV in Community Services and not the others—so be partnerships if we are going to expand.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks for a fantastic presentation. It is probably one of the best we have had so far, I think, in terms of what you are doing and how you are helping people that really need that help. But can I come back to Elva and Emma. You both mentioned you struggled at different times at school—9, 10 and Year 12. What could have been done back then do you think to help you get through and complete Year 12 and for you,

Emma, to stay a bit longer at school? I know it is a bit outside our scope, but because you have been through that and you know what happened then and how you felt then, what could have been done, do you think? What are a couple of ideas that you think could have been put in place to help you get through that period?

Ms RICHARDS: Speaking from my experience, we had Aboriginal education workers at my high school, and it was actually the Aboriginal education workers that told me that university was not something that I should look into and did not encourage it at all. So I think I had a lot of difficulty following that because I thought I was not smart enough to do university. But I think if there was a space that was—I think the workforce, I guess, at that time should have been more supportive in that way.

Yes, that was my difficulty with that. I think if the teachers in high school specifically were a bit more understanding—with Aboriginal students, especially young people, a lot of us are dealing with a lot at home. A lot of my friends would come to school, and they had not even had breakfast, so expecting them to sit there for X amount of time and actually retain information was near impossible. Then the kids would arc up and be really, really naughty, and the teachers would obviously put them into detention and then expel them. There was not a lot of understanding of Aboriginal students. That was my experience back when I was in high school. I do not know if that has now changed, but I think a lot more cultural understanding of the fact that a lot of our young people are dealing with a lot at home—my cousins would be looking after their sisters and brothers, feeding them and getting them ready for school and then have to find their way to get to school as well. So a bit more understanding, a bit more flexibility around—I think some schools had breakfast programs and stuff like that. Those things would have been helpful.

Mr BLACKWOOD: That is great. Did you want to add anything?

Ms WENDT: Sort of similar. While I was at school there were no Aboriginal caseworkers back then—not that attended my school—so probably to keep me at school and build up my confidence and encourage me to stay would have been something that would have been useful, because when I left and I went and did my traineeship in an Aboriginal organisation, I felt really supported and I was able to complete it, whereas I did not feel supported in school.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? Is there anything you wanted to add?

Ms EASON: I think a really good program would be an L2P program under an Aboriginal-controlled organisation. You could kind of blend a support worker/driving instructor, particularly for young people who have to get 120 hours and a lot of their family members maybe do not have their own licence to be able to support that process—it is a real barrier—and also for adults that have either lost their licence and need to get a new licence or have never driven. I think that is a very doable thing, and it would really make a massive difference in people's lives.

Ms RICHARDS: That is a great idea. Thank you.

Mr WANGANEEN: Probably the one other one is—and I know we spoke about the lack of teachers within the sector and in particular specialist Aboriginal teachers—support around staffing that so we can help close that gap between partnerships. At the moment the student has to come to VACSAL and do their course, and then we are referring them off to jobseekers—so if we can have that sort of one-stop shop. Obviously large TAFEs, RTOs and other educational mainstream bodies have the resources and have the power of 15–20 people. We have a staff of 2.5. So if we had more energy and resources, we would be able to have that ripple effect not just in our Aboriginal community but in the wider community as well.

The CHAIR: Good. Thank you so much for being here today.

Witnesses withdrew.