

TRANSCRIPTS

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 Thephanous

Ms Christine Couzens

WITNESSES

Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success, Bendigo Kangan Institute;

Mr Joe Ormeno, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Tracey Jeffery, Manager, Careers and Training Services, and

Mr Robbie Johnstone, Senior Strategic Business Analyst, the Gordon; and

Ms Frances Coppolillo, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Cathy Frazer, Executive Director, Student Engagement, International and Community Partnerships, Melbourne Polytechnic.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Our next witnesses to make a submission are from a number of TAFEs—Bendigo Kangan Institute, the Gordon and Melbourne Polytechnic.

Before we proceed, welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Could I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief—about 10 to 15 minutes—opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. I notice that there are a number of you online, so I hope that you have worked out between you who will make the submission. Okay, good—you are all nodding. You may proceed.

Mr KOKULARUPAN: Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we are all meeting today. Today I am on the land of the Boon Wurrung people, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

On behalf of Bendigo Kangan Institute, the Gordon and Melbourne Polytechnic, I would like to present a joint opening statement to the Committee today. This should take approximately 10 minutes and will hopefully assist the Committee to understand our shared experiences and insights on how learners with a disability are supported to access, participate in and complete their chosen TAFE programs. The three TAFEs represented today are committed to creating an inclusive and accessible environment that caters to diverse learners, ensuring equal opportunity is provided to every individual accessing our programs. Our submissions presented to the Inquiry Committee share common themes, which I will outline below.

Our three TAFEs have either introduced, are in the refresh phase of or have an active working group on the strategic implementation of an institute-wide disability action plan or accessibility and inclusion plan shaping our individual approaches to improving accessibility across each of our institutions.

As TAFE providers, we are acutely aware of our essential role in improving outcomes for learners with disabilities. Whilst overall participation rates of learners with disabilities has increased, it is also pleasing to note that learners with disabilities are enrolling in higher level qualifications. Based on data provided by the Department of Education and Training, 43% of learners with disabilities were enrolled at Certificate IV level or above in 2019—comparable with participation rates for learners without disabilities. Free TAFE courses have also enhanced participation rates of learners with disabilities. They reduce the financial burden of study while also enhancing labour market participation opportunities, as these courses are aligned to skill-shortage industries.

The comprehensive array of wraparound supports TAFEs provide learners also supports successful educational outcomes. Academic and other supports are tailored to individuals' specific needs, which is assessed prior to enrolment for all students through a documented pre-training review process. The pre-training review is intended to ensure a core suitability for the learner and identifies potential additional learning needs such as literacy, numeracy and digital literacy requirements. The pre-training review also provides learners with an opportunity to disclose their disability prior to course commencement. Learners with disability get better training outcomes when they identify their disability or adjustment needs prior to enrolment. Once the disability is identified, each TAFE represented here today then provides students with an individualised learning support plan detailing all supports provided at no cost to the student and reasonable adjustments that will be made during their course. TAFEs also provide opportunities for learners to identify as having a disability at all stages of their student journey. Universal design principles also support learner outcomes, including for those who have chosen not to identify as having a disability, through the provision of flexible learning and teaching approaches that are accessible to all.

Whilst it is pleasing to note the increased participation rates and outcomes for learners with disabilities, there are also challenges. Bendigo Kangan Institute, The Gordon and Melbourne Polytechnic have identified common challenges faced by Victorians living with a disability in accessing education pathways in our community. These include financial, community connections and employment pathways.

The first challenge identified relates to potential financial stresses faced by individuals living with a disability. We are cognisant that prospective students dealing with financial pressures are less likely to access education due to the perceived or real cost of the program they wish to enrol in. This is coupled with a potential lack of understanding of the support available to them at no cost during their learning journey. There are measures in place at all three TAFEs here today to help overcome some of these perceived financial barriers. For example, Bendigo Kangan Institute and the Gordon offer scholarships to supplement initial course fees, consumables and course materials.

The second identified challenge is community connections between TAFEs and other service providers. Highlighted by the TAFEs here today is the need to work closely with community organisations, supporting those living with a disability. Currently individual TAFEs pursue one-to-one engagement and collaboration with individual organisations. The TAFE network does not have an overarching strategy that guides this engagement. With this in mind, all TAFEs here today recognise the need to continue collaborating with the wider TAFE network, community organisations and NDIS providers. Melbourne Polytechnic is an exemplar in this space, identifying the link between NDIS Local Area Coordination, LAC services, and building community inclusion at TAFE. Melbourne Polytechnic invited the northern LAC to co-locate at several campuses to provide staff with information, linkages and capacity-building opportunities.

The third challenge for current learners with a disability is employment pathways after completing their education at TAFE and transitioning to employment agencies for support with gaining a job. We note that some TAFE learners are already clients of disability employment agencies when they undertake their training at TAFEs. All three TAFEs here today recognise the need to work closely with government-funded employment agencies to increase participation of Victorians living with a disability who wish to upskill or re-skill and subsequently gain employment, particularly those learners who are not already clients of an employment agency. In their submission, the Gordon TAFE noted that the benefits of establishing secure partnerships between education providers and employers, which provides students with access to employment and training opportunities and supports employment outcomes for students with a disability. All three TAFEs here also have Skills and Job Centres co-located at their campuses, recognising the considerable opportunity for TAFEs to increase future employment prospects for our students directly.

We unanimously agree that the overarching framework of reasonable adjustments needs to be solidified and have found that each TAFE interprets this broad model differently when applying it to learners living with a disability. All of us have dedicated Disability Liaison Officers who manage incoming referrals and decide what is deemed reasonable when organising support for students. Melbourne Polytechnic highlighted possible inconsistencies in their submission and identified that this model's interpretation is left to the Disability Liaison Officers and the teaching departments' discretion. Bendigo Kangan Institute recognises this broad model's complexities, stating that it is difficult to maintain consistency in student service provision due to localised interpretation. We strongly advocate for collective access to subject matter experts who can provide advice contextualised to the education setting on reasonable adjustment and suitable assistive technology.

In Australia rates of anxiety and depression, particularly among young people, are significantly high, and TAFEs provide students with care and development skills they require to study and live in their communities. From research conducted by Melbourne Polytechnic we know that a high proportion of TAFE students identify as having a psychosocial disability. Students often refrain from identifying as requiring specific support. However, we know that support is needed to increase retention and completion for students with a psychosocial disability, including access to mentoring programs, counselling and psychosocial coaching. As such, a TAFE network program to support mental health for students is recommended, which could include a co-designed mental health crisis management model to be developed across TAFEs, greater supports and training for TAFE staff in mental health awareness and mental health first aid training, positive mental health behaviours and skills being incorporated into vocational education curriculum that will provide students with industry-specific techniques into the workplace—for example, self-care strategies and stress management—and finally, building partnerships with external community and government mental health organisations and peak bodies.

We understand the importance of remaining technologically current to offer the best support to our students living with a disability. However, the costs of some of these assistive technologies can be financially challenging to manage on top of the already existing cost of supplying tutoring, educational assistance and support for our students living with disability. Whilst we understand our obligation and responsibilities to provide this support, the financial impost on TAFEs to provide adjustments requires a broader discussion.

Staff training and upskilling have also been identified as an area that needs further attention. In their submission the Gordon highlighted that some teachers feel they can better support students living with a disability and that we should continue to develop teacher capability to teach students with diverse needs, including implementing flexible approaches to teaching, understanding the needs of diverse cohorts and soft skills for communicating and interacting with all students.

The TAFEs here today have commenced implementing programs to address the concerns of our teaching staff. The network research led by the Gordon also highlighted the value of establishing teacher communities of practice to share best practice teaching strategies, including planning for universal design and reasonable adjustment. Bendigo Kangan Institute has developed a dedicated educator passport program to provide ongoing professional development and awareness training. Melbourne Polytechnic has introduced a working group of educators to identify perceived gaps and how best to address these whilst building capacity and understanding.

Our submissions aim to provide the Committee with a snapshot of the proactive approaches and challenges faced when supporting learners with disability on their educational journey. Both students and staff living with a disability were engaged in the development of these submissions. We believe our submissions adequately represent views and opinions from this cohort on their experiences at each of our institutes.

We understand the complexities of providing this support and are committed to increasing future education and employment opportunities for students living with a disability. While each of us has localised practices, we focus on putting the student at the centre of what we do. We will continue to collaborate across the TAFE network, striving to be industry leaders in championing access to TAFE for Victorians living with a disability.

Thank you, Chair. We are grateful for the opportunity to engage directly with the Committee's Inquiry today and now welcome any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that comprehensive statement. It was very good. Just on the mental health issue, obviously you all know that we have just received a report from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. The Government has committed to adopting all of those recommendations made by the Commission. It is the most common type of disability among TAFE students, as you said. What particular needs do these students have; how well equipped is TAFE to provide support for them, and if not, what inadequacies exist?

Ms FRAZER: Chair, I am happy to take that question. We have seen over the past several years increasing levels of participation by students with mental health issues. At Melbourne Polytechnic, in our 2020 data, we have seen high levels of not only students identifying and registering for disability support, but also students who may not identify as having a disability but will access counselling on campus. I think we saw in excess of 900 consultations for counsellors last year for mental health related issues.

I think it is important to recognise that TAFEs are not specialist mental health facilities. We provide general services and support learners to participate in their learning; however, we are seeing increasing complexity in terms of the students that require support, and that impacts on, I guess, the confidence and the capability of teachers to support those learners in a classroom or a training setting. I think it is really important to recognise the need for TAFEs—we only have students with us for a relatively short period of time—to enhance those connections with community organisation specialist mental health providers. But there is a gap. So some on-the-ground experience is we might have a student in crisis and, other than ringing a crisis assessment team or calling an ambulance, often there is nowhere to refer that student to. So there is, I guess, a burden on the TAFEs to deal with those issues on the ground.

In terms of staff capacity building, we try and work proactively with our teachers and run programs around providing the ability for staff to feel more confident in referring students to identify mental health issues where a student may not have disclosed having an issue and also rolling out mental health first aid training for students to become peer supports—we have got student ambassadors, and we put I think in excess of 20 students

through that program last year—and running mental health first aid training to teaching staff. We are also providing through our counselling service a secondary consultation, so a teacher can pick up the phone even if a student does not want to access support. TAFEs are really well equipped. The reason we are seeing more participation of learners with mental health issues across all our campuses and across all the TAFEs in the sector is that we provide those wraparound supports, but, again, for the very high-needs students in crisis sometimes there is a sense that we are left holding that and sometimes with limited options about where to refer that student to.

The CHAIR: Any further comments from anyone?

Mr KOKULARUPAN: Chair, if I can jump in and just add BKI's perspective. As Cathy mentioned earlier, all students regardless of their disability have access to free and confidential counselling through Student Support Services to help them manage any mental health issues that may be affecting their ability to study. For more acute issues or services we actually link students with external providers that they may not have been aware of initially and we can support them in navigating these external supports. We have seen an increase in these issues over the last 18 months, and at BKI what done is we have deployed a tiered service model to increase the reach of our services across the entire cohort. Recognising the increased needs of learners last year, BKI has also been focused on transitioning all support services across a number of delivery modes, including phone, face to face and virtual. This has resulted in an expansion of the reach of our services. One of the things I did want to point out is at BKI all students have access to a free mental health peer-to-peer support app called TalkCampus. Through this platform students are able to get 24/7 peer-to-peer support, with real-time escalations built into the app. As of today we have over 100 of our students actively engaged in using this support platform as a mechanism. Thank you, Chair.

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

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for being online and providing really detailed and important evidence to this Inquiry. My question relates to reasonable adjustments for students with a disability. What are some of the challenges that TAFEs face when asked to provide reasonable adjustments and how can they be better addressed?

Mr JOHNSTONE: I will take this one, Kat, if that is okay to start, and then maybe refer to my colleagues as well. I am here as a representative of the TAFE network project team that conducted research into this area in 2019, and the project was a collaborative effort with the Gordon, Box Hill Institute, Melbourne Polytechnic and of course the Department of Education and Training. We did research in three areas, and one of those was to improve access and achievement for TAFE students with disability. In the final report from that project back in 2019 there was some discussion of Disability Liaison Officers and perhaps the challenges around reasonable adjustments in that space. So upon a student identifying a disability—and that is an important point—the DLO will establish a person-centred support plan that is tailored to the learner's potential impacts on learning and how to best support them.

I said identification is so important because the evidence from our research shows that students attain better training outcomes when they identify their disability and accessibility needs. However, only half of our 783 survey respondents had told their TAFE about their disability. But when a learner does identify, a disability access plan can ensure that all reasonable adjustments—course modifications, tutoring, assistive technology and other supports—are explored to provide the learner with the greatest opportunity to succeed. That is what we want them to do: succeed. Incoming referrals—and this is where it is interesting—and decisions about what is deemed reasonable when organising supports for students may at times be inconsistent across the network, and interpretation of any guidelines is often at the discretion of the Disability Liaison Officer working with the student and the relevant teaching department as well. That is why we said in the opening address we are advocating for this potential for collective access across the network to subject matter experts who can provide advice contextualised to the education setting on reasonable adjustments and suitable assistive technology as well.

The report also noted the importance of establishing teacher communities of practice across the network to share best practice around reasonable adjustments, ensuring pre-training reviews are conducted face to face and course advisers are equipped to discuss the reasonable adjustments and other supports each student needs. When it comes to the crunch, all the recommendations we were looking at were reliant on collecting data on

what reasonable adjustments are occurring across the network to monitor patterns and trends over time, and this can be used to inform how we apply the funding model for those reasonable adjustments as well.

The CHAIR: Any further comments anyone? No. Thank you. Juliana, would you have a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank, you, Chair, and thank you to everyone for making the time to be with us today. It is most appreciated, and I would really like to thank Hemant for his very comprehensive overview at the start. It was very, very good.

We all know the importance of a qualification in terms of giving people particularly with a disability access to the employment market. A real challenge for me is about: we are able to get people with a disability into the sector but the challenge that they have is in completing the course. So why are TAFE completion rates low amongst students with a disability? And, most importantly, how could this be reversed?

Mr KOKULARUPAN: Ms Addison, if I may respond to that, and then I will throw to my colleagues if they have got anything to add. As was pointed out in the opening statement and by my colleagues today, all commencing students at TAFE undergo a pre-training review with a trained professional. This is really designed to accurately match a student to a course based on their current abilities and desired career outcomes. Often this could be a course with support or a series of courses that they undertake as pathways. Some students that require additional career support also undergo a one-on-one session with our Skills and Jobs Centre to ensure they select the appropriate course that matches their intended career outcomes. From BKI's perspective, we are committed to increasing accessibility and pathways, ensuring that each student is set up with the maximum prospect of success during and after their study. This is largely a user choice model. However, as TAFEs we are obligated to ensure that students are set up for success based on their current abilities. One of the stats I draw your attention to: in 2019 BKI directly provided support to 164 students living with disabilities across the institute of which 90% had either completed their course or continue to study with us. Now, this was achieved through a student-centred approach and close collaboration between educators, Disability Liaison Officers, student support and also our learning support team, which provides academic study and wraparound support for students.

It is important that we recognise that many students with a disability are also dealing with multiple life challenges besides those they confront in their study life. Each student living with a disability at BKI has direct access and supports not only from the Disability Liaison Officers but, as I mentioned earlier, a number of other supports such as counselling, welfare, careers and learning skills. Where a student presents as struggling in their chosen course of study, the individualised learning plan is developed, regularly reviewed and updated, if required. And on some occasions, if deemed a suitable alternative, the student can actually transition to another qualification that is better suited to their current abilities; for example, the work education program. This is reverse articulation model and is used as a pathway for students to build up their foundational skills before progressing further in their education journey. This is about, again, approaching it from the student lens to ensure that our students are set up with a maximum prospect of success to attain their educational goals.

I will pass to my colleagues if they have got anything to add.

Ms FRAZER: Thank you, Chair. I think it is important also to just add: in terms of the TAFE sector, course completion data is very complex and complicated, and it sometimes skews what is actually happening on the ground. An example I would use is: sometimes a student, whether they have a disability or not, might be participating, say, in a Cert II pre-apprenticeship program, and before they complete that, if they actually achieve an apprenticeship with an employer, they may be seen in terms of data as having not completed, but they have actually moved on to a higher level qualification and linked in with an employment outcome as well. Just to, I guess, reinforce what Hemant was saying, we are seeing higher levels of participation of students with disabilities across the whole AQTF levels from introductory courses, Cert I and Cert II, right through to degree programs at Melbourne Polytechnic. Again to reinforce: of those students who seek help early or identify as having a disability and having their particular individualised plans in place, the outcomes for those learners is very strong.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just on assistive technology, I think we skimmed over it just before and obviously through COVID technology has been so important in making sure that we could deliver some of those courses even though people could not attend in person, I just want to know what supports TAFEs need to increase the use of assistive technology in course delivery and whether they vary from metro to region.

Ms FRAZER: My mic is still on, so I will take this one. Look, it is interesting. COVID has actually brought some really good opportunities and enhanced the digital space in terms of adaptive technologies. In relation to learning technologies, and I will use Melbourne Polytechnic as an example, our learning management system and even our Zoom platform in terms of videoconferencing and our platform to house videos have all got accessibility features built in. I think one of the areas that we need to begin to grow or support is to actually ensure that our academic and teaching staff know how to turn on a lot of the bells and whistles that are actually in the systems, but we may not be totally au fait with how to use them to the nth degree. Even in terms of the COVID experience, we have put a lot of energy into supporting our learners—and this is again linking into universal design principles to support all learners who have to move to remote learning to actually be able to engage with the infrastructure—and we will not go back to the way we were pre-COVID even when we bring all our learners back on campus, if we even do that. So the blended delivery model has I think been quite useful in supporting people to use some of the adaptive technologies that are out there.

Just linking back to the opening statement as well, for the TAFE sector there are a lot of adaptations or technologies that can be purchased, and again it is just around how do we ensure that we are using the right technology for an individual student. Our experience sometimes is that the learner is so ahead of the game, the person with the lived experience of the disability is using the infrastructure and they are almost teaching us when they arrive, whether it is from school or from the workplace, around what to use and to bring in to the sector for the benefit of all learners with a similar disability requirement.

The CHAIR: Any further comment?

Mr KOKULARUPAN: Chair, if I may?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Mr KOKULARUPAN: Thank you. As Cathy was saying, it is about continuing to share our learning across the sector through collaborative TAFE-wide groups such as the disability inclusion working group. What we need to get to is a point where we have got access to a predefined list of all software for TAFE, making it a lot easier for the students who change institutes, as they are exposed to the same processes and can access the same software that they will use across their study journey. One of the things we did do to address your point, Chair, about the regional setting is during COVID we introduced the provision of loanable technology pretty quickly with enhanced functionality for students facing learning challenges. One of the things we did was deploy a laptop loan scheme, but we also deployed an internet dongle loan scheme for students who may have had challenges with accessing technology while they were studying remotely. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Very good point. Any further questions? Kat?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Yes, thank you, Chair. I am interested in a couple of things, actually. In terms of students with disability being more likely to undertake Cert I and Cert II courses and perhaps needing more strengthened pathways to higher level courses, but also acknowledging that each student has a different level of ability and may not need those higher level courses, I just wanted to get your insights on that; but also in particular how the Skills and Jobs Centres are doing, whether you think that the Skills and Jobs Centres are effective or properly resourced and whether they need more to assist in that. I am sorry if my connection is a bit unstable and I am chopping in and out. Please tell me if I need to repeat myself.

Ms JEFFERY: I might take this one, if that is okay. Thank you. Something that we have recently developed at the Gordon is some pathway programs, working in partnership with our Learn Local providers, and that is something that has happened through our Skills and Jobs Centre and through the connections with the Skills and Jobs Centre. We have found that that is a really successful way of supporting more vulnerable learners and including people that have identified as having a disability to have a supported pathway into TAFE. That can be not just into a Certificate I or II level course but it can actually be a pathway into some higher level courses as well. We have found that that is a really successful way of picking up some people in the community that might not have accessed TAFE before and just making sure that they are really set up with everything that they need before they get to TAFE and working with our Learn Local partners, who do a really excellent job of that, in providing that support, so that students are really set up and ready to go when they do get to TAFE.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: How about resourcing for the Skills and Jobs Centres?

Ms FRAZER: I am happy to add a little bit to that. In terms of the Skills and Jobs Centre that is hosted at Melbourne Polytechnic, I guess the main focus is the engagement with community, so community members who might have requirements in terms of employment or may be considering study, but also linking students back into the course of their choice. The careers advice that is provided by the Skills and Jobs Centre is pivotal in terms of finding the right fit of course, so we provide what we call agnostic careers advice. So if somebody is coming into a Skills and Jobs Centre, it may be at the Melbourne Polytechnic campus, but the Skills and Jobs Centre staff are careers credentialed practitioners and they may well refer a students to enrol at another institute. So I think that model is very focused on the needs of the client that comes in.

In terms of the resourcing we have, we are finding it is adequate in terms of the volume of inquiries and the levels of engagement needed. We also find with the Skills and Jobs Centre, our experience is, they work very closely with the host institute. So in our case the Skills and Jobs Centre adviser might be referring somebody into other supports within Melbourne Polytechnic or, as Tracey mentioned, back through the networks with Learn Locals.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr JOHNSTONE: Chair, if I may add just a short note?

The CHAIR: Welcome, yes.

Mr JOHNSTONE: It was encouraging with the release of the Macklin review too to see in that report the exploration of an expanded role of the Skills and Jobs Centre to engage with diverse community representatives, including multicultural groups, our Koori communities and disability and social services groups. There was a great discussion in there about identifying opportunities for local providers to co-design and deliver courses that meet their specific needs, in conjunction with the Skills and Jobs Centre.

Ms JEFFERY: I might just add to that as well, if that is okay? Thanks, Robbie. There certainly is opportunity with the Skills and Jobs Centres. We have a really strong network across the state of Skills and Jobs Centres in terms of a really strong community of practice. We have also developed a careers network for our career practitioners that work across the state. So there certainly is opportunity to develop the capacity of our practitioners in the centres across the state if we are looking at a statewide approach to something like this, just to develop capacity to help different sectors of the community.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Tracey. Juliana.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, John. What I would really like to hear about from the different services is: how can the Victorian Government amend its funding model to better support TAFE students with a disability?

Ms COPPOLILLO: I might take that if that is okay, Chair. Ms Addison, at the moment the TAFE sector is funded through a community services fund, which provides broad-based support to learners who have additional needs, and students with disabilities are within that cohort of students. And those services are those that have been mentioned by my colleagues here today in terms of counselling supports or learning aids or a whole host of things. I think, if we go to the previous point, supporting students with additional needs really has to be done by a community. We do not do this individually. We have a core function in education and training to support for either further studies and/or employment, but we work hand in hand with a range of services at the local level and across jurisdictions to create that network of resourcing for students.

In our experience one of the things that needs to be considered is the complexity of the disability that students come with. So it is not only about the number of students that turn up and resourcing to the number, but it is about looking into that number and understanding the degree of support that might be required by some students in that cohort versus others. So something that would be important in terms of the allocation of funding is to explore more deeply into the nature of the disability and its complexity and the requirement for resourcing and support.

Mr ORMENO: Chair, if I could also add to that.

The CHAIR: Of course, Joe. Yes.

Mr ORMENO: Thank you. I absolutely support what Frances said from Melbourne Polytechnic. There is a diverse need of funding in terms of the different levels of need of each individual, but I think there is a significant difference in the funding model that is provided for the TAFEs compared to other educational pathways. So if we talk about university or we talk about the secondary schools, it is quite significant, so we know that there are two different models within those, and especially in the secondary school models there is a range of funding that is provided dependent on the needs and there is significant funding available for those that require more significant support. So I guess a more consistent approach across the education sector to reflect the needs of individuals, I would certainly support a review of that and extending what is happening in the secondary schools, for example, across to the TAFE sector. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further questions, anyone? Can I just ask, in relation to teacher training, 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?

Mr JOHNSTONE: I might take this one, Chair, if that is okay, to start the ball rolling anyway. From that research perspective that I take, one of the themes that emerged when we were talking to teachers is that not all teachers feel adequately equipped to accommodate diverse student learning needs. So we have the DLO role, the Disability Liaison Officers. They provide valuable expertise on diversity and inclusion, but they can only provide limited pedagogical support to teachers. Also, one of the things that emerged from the research is where professional development is available to teachers, many said that it was too compliance oriented. So one DLO said that increasing the focus on compliance was limiting the time teachers spent learning about disability. And a lot of these delivery modes are online, and there was feedback about those online modules not engaging enough, so teachers wanted the opportunity to interact with and learn from their colleagues during training.

So after speaking with teachers and students we came up with a number of recommendations that the Department of Education and Training now is actively working through, and we are making some good progress. One of the key recommendations was to establish what we are calling teacher communities of practice, where we can share best practice teaching strategies, including planning for universal design and reasonable adjustments, and through those communities draw on existing online resources to support teachers in working with students with disability. And there are opportunities where we need to have some further development, as we said in the opening address. Teachers need to understand the implementation of flexible approaches to teaching. They need to understand the needs of diverse cohorts and also that key need from our teachers for soft skills—for communicating and interacting with all students. One of the key recommendations out of the report was that those communication channels between our DLOs and our teaching staff are maximised to ensure that disability access plans are fully utilised, that they are maximised. It is encouraging that when the inclusion working group met recently that communication channel, that recommendation, is one that is actively being looked at by all TAFEs in the network.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Our time has now expired. We could go on all day. It has been very valuable. Thank you so much for your presentation and your submission, and particularly to the Gordon out at Geelong. Thank you. We will now end the broadcast.

Witnesses withdrew.