

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Christine Couzens

WITNESSES

Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer, and

Mr Eddie Micallef, Chairperson, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: The next witnesses about to make a submission are Executive Officer Chris Christoforou and Mr Eddie Micallef, the Chairperson of the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria. Welcome, thank you very much for being here this afternoon.

Can I also inform you that the hearings are for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability. Thank you for joining us today. 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 the interference. I invite you to make a 10-minute or 15-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you.

Mr MICALLEF: Thanks, John, and thank you for the opportunity to make representations to the Committee. We see this as a very important issue. I will share the introductory remarks with my EO, Chris. I will make some opening statements just to give you a little bit of information about the Ethnic Communities' Council. We have been around since 1974, and we have played a key role in—how should I say?—supporting, developing and activating multicultural communities to make a significant contribution to Australian society to develop a cohesive community, and I think we have been very important. We also have a federal operation called FECCA, and we are able to influence governments at both the state and the federal level by those mechanisms, so I think that is pretty important.

As you are aware, the issues that we are confronted with, the structural racism—there is no need for me to go into that aspect, as you are probably fully aware of it. But people often who are marginalised, people with disabilities, often have a double whammy in that sense. They have a multicultural—how shall I say?—aspect of trying to develop a commitment to get into education, training and jobs within the community, so it becomes a double situation with them.

I think you are very fortunate from the point of view of the ECCV presenting in this Committee and the work that we have done in this area that Chris will talk to you about. Chris has a background as a teacher in TAFE and I have a background as a board member of the William Angliss Institute, a TAFE institute, so we are both familiar with TAFE operations. I have had a background on the engineering skills foundation, which looked at engineering training back in the 90s with John Halfpenny from the trade unions and Bob Herbert from the Metal Trades Industry Association. I also had a lot to do with VCAL in the early days with William Angliss. I understand the Government is phasing out VCAL, which was a way of bringing marginalised people into the training system. I hope, whatever happens with VCAL, that it is replaced with something that is effective and gets people with disabilities and marginalised people into the system.

From your Committee's point of view I would hope that you would come up with the answers, with recommendations to me that would encourage and help and support people from marginalised and disability areas into training, because one of the things—John, you would know from your background—is that people from multicultural communities are underused, under-recognised and are not taking part to the extent of their capacity, the skill set that they potentially have and the potential they have to make an input into the commercial and industrial sector within the Australian community.

Look, I would probably leave it at that, and I will get Chris to talk about the specifics of the technical aspects of what the ECCV is doing. Chris?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Thanks, Eddie, and thank you to the Committee. Thank you, Chair. ECCV has been quite active in the disability advocacy area for decades now, going back to the establishment of Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities in the 1980s, which today is a successful disability service provider in its own right. We were pleased to make a submission to the Committee and to provide a culturally and linguistically diverse voice for the Committee. I believe we were the only submission that did so. For us, we

feel like, as Eddie was rightly saying, the issues confronted by people with disability of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often marginal. So as the ECCV, as the state-based, member-based peak, we are really pleased to be able to provide a voice to this committee.

ECCV has been funded to deliver a range of disability advocacy and capacity-building projects across multicultural communities in the area of disability awareness and NDIS pathways, and we today have quite a strong footprint in that space. Aside from our submission to the Inquiry, we also put in a submission to the skills review and met with the chair of the skills review at the time, Jenny Macklin, and also are currently working on a submission to the disability royal commission. We have been kindly provided with some potential questions that you might have for us and we have got some sorts of suggestions about how you may shape some recommendations as part of this review process, so I am happy to hand back to you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Look, I will kick it off with a question. Obviously COVID is very challenging on a number of fronts and challenging in different ways for different communities, and people with disabilities have certainly borne the brunt of COVID and some of the challenges that presented through COVID. So can I just ask: what lessons from the challenges of COVID can TAFEs draw on to better meet the needs of CALD students with disability?

Mr MICALLEF: I will start off. I think the way that marginalised communities have been, how shall I say, explained or responded to by some of the mainstream media has not been helpful to multicultural communities in general. I think the fact that they have been unfairly singled out is a disgrace; I think we are getting on top of it now. We worked very closely with the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and with the Victorian Multicultural Commission. And at our AGM last year we had both the main parties contribute to that; we work in a bipartisan way, John, which is pretty important. And at the national level we are pushing towards a national racism strategy, which I think this country needs, to cut out that sort of nonsense right across Australia, right across the board. I think that is a fair thing to do.

But getting back to the actual communities themselves, I think the way they are communicated to and communicated with—they should be part of the solution and not be seen to be part of the problem. And I think governments have now woken up to that. We are working with DH, we have representatives on the COVID-19 advisory committees at both the federal level, through FECCA, and the state level—Chris sits on it at the state level—and we are working with Professor Ben Cowie and those sorts of people on a regular basis. So I think it is a pretty important issue, but the communication to these communities is extremely important. We are working with the vaccination rollout to make sure that they are given the correct information, supportive information, and getting community leaders to back that up with examples. Chris.

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Yes. I would probably just add that I know that a lot of TAFEs have moved to mixed delivery methods as a result of COVID-19. Some of them are kind of embedding those as ongoing practices. I think in our submission we said that that is a positive thing, that it provides learners with flexibility, but I guess it obviously needs to be reviewed on a continuous basis, because some students do need a safe place to study and not all homes are safe and not all learners have access to the right tools, resources and supports to do that effectively from home. So I think that in any sort of move towards a mixed method of delivery there constantly needs to be monitoring of how well people are coping with those changes, particularly learners with disability.

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

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, John, and thanks, Eddie and Chris, for your earlier opening remarks. And good to see you again, Eddie, mate.

Mr MICALLEF: Thank you.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Eddie, you mentioned racism a couple of times in your opening remarks, but also in your submission you outlined that students with disability often feel they cannot report incidents of discrimination. How can TAFEs improve their systems so that students do feel more comfortable to report these incidents?

Mr MICALLEF: Gary, I can share my experience. I had 10 years on the board at William Angliss, and we had a lot of international students, which is a little bit different, but there were often social problems and support that was required. William Angliss, to me, had a superb structure where those students were given the

proper support. I know in similar situations out in the country they were left abandoned, and we had that spate of attacks on Indian students back some 10 years ago. Those sorts of issues made it very difficult. I think TAFEs should have some sort of welfare coordination where they are looking at their multicultural communities to give them that support. I think it can be done, and I think not only did William Angliss do it in that regard but it did it also with overseas qualifications. I think the TAFEs need to get their act together and develop a supportive network that covers everybody, not just mainstream students in trouble but right across the spectrum.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, Eddie. Any comments, Chris?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: I would agree with Eddie. I think the community support organisation funding for TAFE is spent in disparate ways. I think there is a lack of investment in diversity officers or multicultural liaison officers. You know, I think that that is a tangible way of getting some investment in place to ensure that students feel like they have got some appropriate supports that they can reach out to if they need it.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, terrific. Thank you, both.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Juliana.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, John, and thank you, Eddie and Chris. I am very interested in learning about the experience of older students with a disability who are seeking to access TAFE. Your submission states that there is a disparity of supports between younger and older students. In what way are older students with a disability disadvantaged, and how could we address this?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: I mean, there is a current program in place that can support older students who may not have completed post-compulsory education, so the Reconnect program exists. I believe there has been a commitment to refund that for a further four years, which is great. I think the challenge that older students with disability face is the whole transition to TAFE, so making sure that students are getting the right careers advice and that their aspirations are being built into any pathways plan, because part of the funding issue is that students over the age of 24 in the past did not get the same benefit of being able to do multiple courses before losing their eligibility for subsidy. So I think that is something that is quite an easy thing to fix in terms of making sure that older students with a disability are not disadvantaged if it takes them a bit longer to find their appropriate pathway.

Mr MICALLEF: Can I just add, Juliana, I think with the Federal Government program, the introduction of that apprenticeship support process, that is an area where we need to make sure that adult apprenticeships are taken into account. Those sorts of programs are able to take in older students—without disability, with disability and with a whole range of other problems—as part of a general supporting mechanism.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Brad.

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you, Chair. We have had a bit of a theme raised by the other witnesses in this inquiry in relation to work placements. As you would both know, Eddie and Chris, and thank you for your presentation, part of the TAFE program is often a work placement in order to achieve a qualification. In your experience, what are the challenges there, and how could they be overcome?

Mr MICALLEF: Well, I have an industrial background, Brad—I am a former occupational health and safety officer for a union—and I go back to the days, I was talking to Chris before this, of the old sheltered workshop days that some of you may remember. The issue then is whether there is exploitation, the same way regional workers are currently under the microscope now with some employers doing the right thing and some not. We need to have mechanisms to make sure that people are aware of their rights, and in some cases those with a disability have difficulty in understanding their rights. I think you will see there is a mention of the literacy aspect of people with disabilities knowing their rights, knowing where to go to get support. Look, I think it is a challenge, and I think the media has a role to make people aware of it. Employer organisations have a right. Unions have a role. They all have a role.

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: I think also—

Mr ROWSWELL: And employers?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Yes. I think part of the challenge for learners is the onus is always on them to find their own work placement. I think there needs to be appropriate investment as part of any sort of vocational program—a resource to work with employers, build up a bank of supportive employers across different geographical locations and industries that may be able to host different students. When you have got multiple barriers, whether it be language or whether it be disability, and then you are expected to go find yourself a work placement, it is a challenge, and I have seen it firsthand.

So again, it is an important part of our VET system, and I think there needs to definitely be appropriate consideration taken about the way that people and industries support all learners to get appropriate opportunities to practise their skills.

Mr ROWSWELL: Thanks, Eddie. Thanks, Chris.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kat?

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Eddie and Chris, for your contribution and also for the work that you do continuously as part of ECCV. We have had several contributions to the Inquiry around peer support for students with disability to assist them in navigating the course and completing the course and provide a touchpoint for them to encourage them to continue to completion. What are your thoughts around a peer support model to assist, in particular, students with a disability who may have language barriers, who may require a peer support worker that is culturally sensitive to them, even trauma informed? What are your thoughts on that? Have you seen any models that work well? What would make up an effective model for that?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Thanks for the question. I guess, yes, there are a number of industries or sectors that have done it really well historically. Sectors like the mental health sector and the alcohol and other drugs sectors have been pioneers in terms of peer support models. I think that they could provide a really good reference on what works well. I am sure there is a strong evidence base that would support that, some good practice that has been tried and tested. I do not think that we would need to look very far to possibly find that. I think that the government's current investment in job advocates is probably a little bit of a reflection of that. But I guess the key thing with peer support workers is that they do have lived experience—and in this context that they have a disability or that they have an experience as a migrant or refugee and of trying to navigate a complex system like the education and training system. I guess, like for all of us, being able to see yourself in the person that is supporting you is really critical as part of that engagement and trust. So yes, I guess there is a range of models that could be referenced.

Mr MICALLEF: I do not have the teacher experience that Chris has had, but industrially, with rehabilitation from both drugs and alcohol, being placed in industry, given proper support, and also with workers in various industries where, say, migrant women were exploited—within my early days in occupational health—and had what was called RSI in those days. We were able to redesign the machines, bringing in the Lincoln Institute and those sorts of professional organisations, doctors with that sort of experience, to add another level of support for those workers to reintegrate them back into the workplace. So I think, even though it is not the same, it is a way that it can be encouraged and supported.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Any further questions, MPs?

Ms ADDISON: John, I am happy to ask another one if time permits. Your submission mentions students with a disability often lack the skills to advocate for themselves. How can this be addressed?

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: I am happy to have a go. There is a big investment at the moment in the idea of disability advocacy and self-advocacy. The Victorian Government has it as a policy priority, which is great. I think as part of sort of addressing that for students leaving school you have got to start a bit earlier in terms of developing those self-advocacy skills—building on what Eddie was saying before—in terms of teaching those rights and responsibilities and making people feel empowered, that they can speak up for themselves. I guess also though, in saying that, there needs to be an appropriate investment in mentoring and appropriate supports, peer supports, to assist not just students but also their families and carers to navigate the system. I think if you can get buy-in early in terms of discussing career pathways and developing aspirations in learners of all abilities, then I guess it becomes something that the student and their families can buy into to help them navigate, as I said before, what can be an overwhelming and complex system at times.

Mr MICALLEF: Juliana, I think that is an extremely important question each of you have raised. It really means that when people with disabilities are taken into the system they should be given proper induction, and part of that induction should be to make them aware of their rights and where to go. You will see in our submission we talked—I mentioned it before—about literacy, health literacy. If you become literate in health you become literate in a whole range of other issues, and the communication of that to the actual person involved in going into industry or training or whatever is pretty important. So that is the way. Developing the person themselves as well as training them for the role that they are to do I think has to be jointly done.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr BLACKWOOD: John, I will ask one more if you like, mate, if we have got time. Eddie and Chris, just in relation to the skills that our TAFE teachers have and the training that they undertake, do you think that there are any types of training that you could suggest that might better assist our TAFE teachers to better support those students of migrant backgrounds with disability?

Mr MICALLEF: Well, I will start this. To me it is obvious they need to have an understanding of structural racism, of the need to support diversity in all its elements, and they need to have that full understanding, because all of us from a multicultural background can go back to the days when both in school and in training and in industry and in commerce there have been issues of what is called ‘structural racism’ where they may not feel as though they are singled out—one only has to look at the way the former Collingwood Football Club president put his foot in without realising what he was doing. There are a number of those issues that happen on a daily basis, and they do not understand—in talking to people who have been subject to that—the hurt that that imposes on people. Even if it is not deliberately done, even if it is done subliminally, it does have an impact, a detrimental effect, on the person themselves. We have to get on top of that.

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Yes. Just building on what Eddie said, there is a very good example within the TAFE system, and that is the development of the Wurreker strategy more than two decades ago for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, and that has been quite effective in terms of making sure that post-compulsory education is safe and accessible for our First Nations peoples. Nothing comparative exists for migrant and refugee communities, so it could be a recommendation of this committee that a culturally and linguistically diverse strategy is developed the can kind of address a lot of these issues that have been raised here today.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, terrific. Look, thank you both. But, Eddie, how did you know I barrack for Collingwood?

Mr MICALLEF: You have got that look!

Mr BLACKWOOD: Good on you! Thank you both.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Eddie and Chris. It is a very valuable contribution you have made, and your submission is excellent. Keep up the good work. We have just finished an Inquiry, which is the disadvantaged jobseekers Inquiry. We work cohesively knowing and understanding the importance of these important investigations that we do as a Committee, and we have made some 70 recommendations accordingly with the submissions that we have received for that Inquiry. We are hoping for a very good response from the Government as we are preparing another document—obviously this report, which is also very important—that we will present to Government over the next few months and hopefully get lots of recommendations as a result of the submissions that have been made and accordingly the Government will respond in a positive way. Thank you for your contribution, and we will keep you informed.

Mr MICALLEF: Thanks, John.

Mr CHRISTOFOROU: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.