

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Brad Rowswell

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Kat Theophanous

Ms Sarah Connolly

WITNESSES

Ms Felicity Bellingham, President, and

Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter.

The CHAIR: 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 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 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 brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which we will follow with questions from the Committee. Whoever wants to start, thank you for being here and you can start. Thank you.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Hello. My name is Felicity Bellingham, and I am the President of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education.

Ms HATHERLY: Hello. My name is Helen Hatherly, and I am the Vice-President of that same organisation.

Ms BELLINGHAM: AASE—I will give you a little bit of an introduction to us. The AASE is represented by chapters in each state and territory across Australia and is managed by a national council comprising representatives of each state and territory. AASE aims to advocate on behalf of people with special education needs to ensure provision of and access to quality education services. We also aim to provide a range of quality services to members and the wider community. Any person interested in these aims can be a member of AASE, so our members include teachers, educational leaders, allied health workers, academics and community members. Our members come from across the government, independent and catholic education sectors.

AASE's goals are to provide a strong and informed national and state voice for the special education community, to enhance access by students with special education needs to quality educational programs, to promote professional standards of a high order, to foster equitable and effective resourcing support for students with special education needs and to support research that informs the delivery of special education in the Australian context.

AASE publishes the *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education* four times a year. Our national AASE Research Award is awarded annually; this was established to provide an opportunity for research which can support evidence-based practice in the education of students with special needs. It is funded from contributions by our members.

Each year AASE organises a very successful and informative national conference. The 2020 conference was due to occur in September, but due to the pandemic it will now go ahead in 2021 in Adelaide, South Australia. Our national conference provides an opportunity for educators, academics, professional support staff, families, community members and key stakeholders to come together to collaborate, share knowledge, network and learn together.

In line with our aims and goals, the Victorian chapter facilitates a number of local opportunities for professional collaboration, development and professional learning of high quality. The Victorian chapter offers access to educational grants, including assisting graduate teachers to attend the national conference each year. During this year—2020—we have hosted a variety of AASE Victoria TeachMeets, bringing together educators online to share and discuss successful professional practice with each other. This year the themes have included remote learning for special education, returning to onsite learning, specialist education in a regional setting and preparing Year 11 and 12 students with disability for post-school pathways. In January of 2021 we will be hosting our first AASE Victoria symposium, which aims to provide a smorgasbord of practical professional learning that will positively inform classroom practice. Our keynote speakers will cover topics like assessment and curriculum, trauma-informed practices, and speech and language. There will also be a panel of lived

experience and a variety of workshops exploring subjects across the curriculum and collaborating with allied health professionals. Thank you for inviting us to take part in this public hearing.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. I will start off with the questions, but there are a number of MPs that will also ask questions. Gary Blackwood will ask a question—the Deputy Chair; Juliana Addison, MP; Kat Theophanous, MP; and Sarah Connolly, MP. Can I just start it off by asking you: how can the enrolment process at TAFEs be made more accessible for people with disability? How can we make it easier as a government for those people that cannot access TAFE?

Ms BELLINGHAM: That is a good question. We were talking to our members about this—we have been discussing it—and one of the things is we think that TAFEs would benefit from having a person who is assigned to the job of liaising with students with disability who are coming into a TAFE to concentrate on that enrolment process. Part of that would be getting to know the student and their individual support needs, because each student with disability will have different support needs and different literacy levels, and it would be good for a person to have the role of finding that out—talking to the teachers, talking to the student and talking to their family to find out what kind of support needs they might need. Also part of the enrolment process is when we were talking to members they were saying that a tour—I mean, obviously, this year it has been more of a virtual tour—of the environment would be very important and a tour of the classroom to know exactly what it is like to be in a classroom in TAFE. Some of our members have commented that the TAFE places that are currently run are more about the electives and tend not to include core subjects, so the sort of everyday kind of subjects they might be doing. Some of our members commented that they would like more thorough subject descriptions—so for parents and families and teachers who are talking to families about which TAFEs and what courses and whether they are a suitable pathway for a student, to have really good descriptions of the subjects to give them an idea of whether that is going to suit that student and what it means and a physical experience in a classroom of what that is going to feel like.

Ms HATHERLY: We also felt that any student with disability throughout the schooling system has had a go-to person or has had a strong relationship with a professional in a school, where they have been able to ask questions and where they have been able to plan together, remembering that they will have met four times a year as a student support group to plan. So they rely very heavily on the advice and support of someone local at that school. So in planning, somehow we need to be able to plan at the TAFE level that a similar level of support may or may not be required and therefore a relationship needs to be developed, at the same time taking into account that the students are moving from a school environment to an adult learning environment. There has to be a very carefully planned transition between one location and the next so that students feel comfortable and families feel comfortable, because with a lot of the students the families need to have a level of comfort in knowing that everything is going to run smoothly. That is what happens in schools from year to year. So in going out of a school into another environment they would need a similar level of support.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that very succinct answer. Gary, did you want to ask?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Thanks, John, and thanks, Felicity and Helen. In your submission you state that some students with disability may lack the literacy and numeracy skills to attend TAFE. How can this be addressed while students are still at school and also after they have left school?

Ms HATHERLY: I suppose it is perhaps not about how it is going to be addressed; it is how it is going to be supported, and I think that is the big difference between students with disability and students who do not present with disability. So it is an understanding that these students will always have difficulties and challenges in their area of literacy but it is what level of support they are going to be provided with to therefore be successful in a tertiary style of education. I know that did not answer the question, Gary. It probably just prompted another question.

Mr BLACKWOOD: No, I think you are right. If you really think about who we are dealing with here, it is going to be about how they are supported and encouraged to take the next steps even though they may have those little things that are holding them back a little bit. They have got to be given the confidence to keep moving on and the support to keep taking those next steps.

Ms BELLINGHAM: In terms of preparation while they are still at school, there is probably a wide variety in what kind of preparation students are experiencing in the school before they finish Year 12—students with

disability. Some of the really good practices that are going on—and it is really happening before Year 12, so we are talking Year 9, 10, 11, 12, because it cannot start at Year 12; it is really a build-up of those—are training in independence, training in independence in a classroom, training in independence on transport, so you will hear schools talk about how they do transport training; and workplace skills that include listening and following instructions, problem-solving and taking initiative. So those are the kinds of skills that, if we think about their employability skills, they need to be starting before Year 12 to build up to.

Ms HATHERLY: And that is hard when there might only be one or two children in a year level in a mainstream school that have a disability. The understanding of working in a group and being part of a group, that needs to be specifically taught, so there may be an extensive transition program depending on the skill level that you want to start off with, depending on where those students have been educated prior to TAFE.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Sure. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Juliana Addison, a question?

Ms ADDISON: Thank you, Chair. I guess this is a good follow-up question to that one when it comes to the suitability of courses that are on offer at TAFEs, and I know that will be very different. I am based in Ballarat and I know Gary is in Gippsland and John is in Geelong and we have got Melbourne people as well, but what I am really wondering is: how significant is the issue of lack of suitable courses that would act as a barrier to people wanting to continue their education at TAFE? And what kind of courses could TAFEs offer to fill the gap to make sure that we do have suitable courses?

Ms BELLINGHAM: When we talk to our members about this, one of the things they have said is that in terms of desirability, there are lots of students and there are lots of families who would like to consider TAFE. It is a desirable option; it is something they would love to aspire to. I would say they are very willing and keen to go to another learning environment after school and they are ready to keep learning, and they probably need a little bit more learning and preparation for workplaces. So they often go into a Cert I, but some of our members said that there has been a reduction in Cert IIs that are appropriate, whereas Cert III, a lot of our members said that step is a bit too difficult. But Cert IIs would be ideal for preparing students who are very capable of having a position in a workplace, and a Cert II would provide that kind of preparation. The kinds of areas that Cert IIs could potentially look at are retail, hospitality, child care, aged care, allied health. The hospitality side of it is more about services and that kind of side of hospitality—sports settings and gardening and maintenance, that kind of thing.

Ms HATHERLY: And the courses that would need to match those would be in keeping up their literacy and numeracy skills, their social skills as well and, once again, their employability skills, but targeted to those specific industries that they may be wanting to work in.

Ms ADDISON: Terrific. And Felicity, I will just let you know that this desire for Cert II has been raised already today, so there is a real theme emerging, which is great.

Ms BELLINGHAM: There you go. I am glad to hear it.

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

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you both for being here and providing your insights. My question relates to, I guess, the enrolment process and how difficult that might be or how much of a barrier it seems to present to people with disability—how daunting it might feel or how accessible it is. Do you have any comments around that—the actual process itself of applying for TAFE?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Some of our members talked about how there was a little bit of confusion with the forms that came from TAFE—that the families were asked to fill out one form and then there was a second form that came, and the TAFE said they did not have that form, so they needed a second form. I suppose it is again along the lines of what we were talking about with having a person whose role at the TAFE is to liaise with the families and the teachers, for that individual to get to know them and what kind of support they are going to need, perhaps not to just be handed forms, particularly if they are handing forms expecting the student to just fill them out, assuming they have very average literacy levels. If there was a liaison, then they would find out what kind of support level they need and whether they need help with that form, whether the parents

sometimes need help with that form, because sometimes I know that members have talked about how schools are helping with those things, because they have built that relationship with the families. So if there was a TAFE person who was building that relationship, they would be able to help.

Ms HATHERLY: And I do not know whether the NDIS has a part in this process as well. Members are reporting that families are getting very used to talking about goals, lifelong goals, and so I am not quite sure whether the TAFE forms match the NDIS type of goal statements that they are looking at. There could be some intermeshing of that language that is used in the enrolment forms. That might be of great benefit and might also give the parent or the carer confidence that ‘This educational institution understands the needs of my child who has a disability. It is not my child who is going to TAFE to pathway into a university course, it is my child with disability who is taking this brave step to go into another educational institution’.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Well said. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sarah Connolly. Question?

Ms CONNOLLY: Thanks, Chair. Felicity and Helen, thanks for being here today. Your insights are fantastic.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Thank you.

Ms CONNOLLY: It is really apparent to me, and you talked about each student will have different needs and different, I guess, levels based on the type of disability that they have got. It strikes me that teachers and support staff at school in those initial years are extremely important in really trying to help the student achieve the best outcome for them as they transition out of school into TAFE and employment and things like that. What do you see that schoolteachers and support staff can do to gain more confidence in supporting students with disability to overcome those barriers? What else do you think they need assistance with?

Ms BELLINGHAM: When we have spoken to members I think there is sometimes a difference in the level of confidence across schools—the level of confidence of teachers with their ability and their knowledge to support students with disability with these post-school pathway preparations. So in terms of the best practice that is going on, I think to share that around and to spread that to other settings and to help other teachers in all settings to feel more confident they would probably need some PD explaining all of the post-school options that are available, because although sometimes parents desire TAFE, it is not always the best option. There are a lot of post-school options for students, including going straight into the workplace or TAFE or other post-school options; there are lots of programs available. So PD to teach educators and the people who are supporting those students about all of the options would be good. Some of our members have said that the PDs they have attended have concentrated just on TAFE, when there are other options available.

I think it also comes back to the employability skills that we were talking about earlier, so if teachers and the coordinators in schools who are helping students with disability can understand the kinds of skills they need to be building from about Year 9 to Year 12 in terms of independence—independence in the classroom, independence to be able to travel to and from a place, and that takes more than 5 minutes in Year 12—learning how to take initiative and learning how to work with a team, that means making sure that students are not just one on one with an aid but actually working as part of a group and part of a classroom so they are learning to work with other students.

Ms HATHERLY: I do not know whether anybody in previous hearings has mentioned the career action plans that students do in Victorian schools. So the career action plans go from Year 7 right through to Year 12, and every student with disability is required to have a career action plan. So the information that is gained in those plans all throughout should therefore inform the vocational pathways specialist teacher at the school—or the work experience coordinator or whoever that person is who the role is designated to in a mainstream school—who would then be looking at those career action plans and thinking, ‘All right, well, I’ve got five children in Year 7 and eight children in Year 9 who look as if their pathway might be directing towards TAFE’. So then TAFE needs to be able to respond to that query about the programs that they are offering, and I do not know at this stage whether TAFE is doing that outreach service. So whether it is an outreach program that TAFEs do to search out students to support them, I do not know whether that is part of their responsibility or actually whose responsibility it is. I have just answered the question with another question.

Ms CONNOLLY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? Would you like to make any comments yourselves, Felicity and Helen?

Mr BLACKWOOD: I have got a question, John.

The CHAIR: Yes, Gary.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Just in relation to the families of the students that we are talking about, what sort of supports do you think would help them as their son or daughter considers going to TAFE?

Ms BELLINGHAM: A liaison. I think a liaison who gets in contact—

Mr BLACKWOOD: So that is the liaison person.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes. I think a liaison who gets to know them like the coordinators they are leaving have gotten to know them. So the people at the school they are at will have gotten to know them and their family, and I think someone taking on that role—yes, definitely, and that would help families.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Okay. Thank you. Over to you, John.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Anything further you wanted to add, Felicity or Helen?

Ms HATHERLY: I just think it is a really important piece of work that is happening, and TAFE for some of our students—or some of the students that we were talking about today—is seen as a really desirable location for them post school and something that they look forward to doing because they want to keep learning but they want to keep learning in a comparable institution to some of the students and friends that they have made in mainstream schools and the friends that they have made along the way in sporting teams. They want to be able to continue their learning, and TAFE is a very good option for them because it is going to prepare them well for work, which is starting to prepare them to give back to the community and to be valued members of the community.

Ms BELLINGHAM: As a teacher, I am thinking of students in my classroom who I just know—I just know—could become and can become, as they become adults, people who contribute to a workplace in a really good way, and it would be good for them and good for the workplace.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you both for your submission and also for being here at the public hearings. We really appreciate it. It is very valuable to us, so thank you very much. Thank you for being here.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.