

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disability

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

Mr Nick Wakeling

WITNESS

Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Australian Network on Disability.

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. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, to minimise interference.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you for being with us this morning. Amy, did you want to kick it off?

Ms WHALLEY: Thanks so much for inviting Australian Network on Disability to be part of the public hearing today on access to TAFE for learners with disability. Before I start I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are connecting across today and pay my respects to elders both past, present and emerging. My name is Amy Whalley. I am the Acting CEO at Australian Network on Disability. For the purpose of this presentation and our discussion I will refer to Australian Network on Disability as AND.

The purpose of AND is to encourage and support employers to become actively inclusive of people with disability. Founded in 2000, we are Australia's only business network which is dedicated to supporting access and inclusion. AND's members currently comprise approximately 320 organisations across Australia, with a combined workforce of more than 1.7 million Australians. We show members how they can welcome people with disability, both as employers but also as customers. Our shared objective is to increase participation of people with disability in all aspects of business. We believe that people with disability should have the same life choices and economic opportunities as other Australians. We provide expert guidance, services and linkages to employers and government representatives, and we connect our members with skilled and talented university students with disability and unemployed people with disability through paid internships and mentoring. Membership is available to employer organisations including public and private companies, government departments and agencies, and other businesses, including education providers and for-purpose organisations. We have 22 education providers as members, predominantly universities but also including TAFE organisations.

I do not represent the voice of the people with disability today. However, I can share the voice of employers and our 20 years experience of what it takes to provide welcoming and inclusive environments for everyone to thrive. Our goal is to achieve mutual benefit for employers and people with disability. I welcome questions that you may have.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will kick it off. Just in relation to promoting inclusion, how can TAFEs create a more inclusive environment for learners with a disability?

Ms WHALLEY: Thank you. One of the key areas that we work with employers on as well as education providers is relating to providing reasonable adjustments. Again, this would be both from an employee perspective working within TAFE environments but equally for learners with disability, ensuring that there is a very clear process for students to be able to access reasonable adjustments to participate in learning, looking at various funding models to ensure that the adjustments can be provided and recognising that the adjustments will be different for each individual, particularly varying in terms of the disability type.

We undertook a study with Macquarie University in 2013 relating to the types of adjustments learners may require, particularly in work placement settings, and we found that 73 per cent of those adjustments were likely to require no associated costs to the university or to the employer undertaking the work process. Being able to provide a safe environment for individuals to be able to share their disability information and equally request reasonable adjustment is a key requirement to providing an inclusive foundation for a learner with disability.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further questions? Gary.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, John. Thanks, mate, and thanks, Amy. In terms of the TAFE teacher training, what training do you think that TAFE teachers, and their frontline staff also, really need to interact better and to be able to teach and support learners with disability?

Ms WHALLEY: Thanks, Gary. In terms of our experience, we have worked with a number of universities on providing what we would call disability confidence training, and there are various aspects within that training that support student-facing roles—anyone in a student-facing role—to provide an inclusive experience for learners. This would include an understanding of disability and the breadth of disability, inclusive language so that teachers and student-facing staff are aware of inclusive language that will help people feel welcomed and supported in their journey, and how to support either the learning or access plans that students have in place to ensure that those requirements that have been requested from a reasonable adjustment process can be implemented.

We have seen education providers provide this training as mandatory or across different faculties and used an interactive training session to share and discuss what that means in practice so they can really understand what it would take to provide that welcoming and inclusive experience for their learners. Being able to provide that disability confidence training is very effective in supporting access plans and welcoming students with disability.

Mr BLACKWOOD: And Amy, what is the best way to deliver the type of training you are talking about so that we engage a broad range of staff?

Ms WHALLEY: I would suggest a blended approach. Certainly e-learning is a valuable way to learn information and it is often very effective in terms of being able to fit into the schedules of teachers and being able to ensure that that information comes across, but there is certainly huge value in being able to provide face-to-face training that allows individuals to ask questions in a very safe environment so that they can really explore and understand the impact of disability but equally their role in providing an inclusive environment. Often to get to that level of confidence, being able to discuss and share previous examples and ask questions that they may have been fearful to ask before is very effective, so in an ideal world being able to have a short e-learn that gives that foundation knowledge and then a face-to-face or webinar-style environment that allows some interaction and discussion around disability confidence and providing inclusive environments is very effective.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Amy.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, Steph.

Ms RYAN: Thank you, Chair. Amy, thank you so much. I am really curious to know generally I suppose what the attitude of employers is when you are discussing with them the need to make those reasonable adjustments, and also I guess what TAFEs can actually do to support employers through that process in order to get more learners with disabilities to actually have the opportunity to undertake work placements.

Ms WHALLEY: Yes, fantastic, thank you. Great question. In our experience the attitude of employers is that they have the good intention to welcome employees with disability. They want to ensure that they are providing the right environment and they certainly want to increase the representation of people with disability within their business, but often it is their lack of know-how that gets in the way of them being able to move forward or take action. So what we have certainly seen through our internship program and other experiences that we have had over the 20 years is the absolute need to provide that support throughout, particularly the onboarding or the initial engagement with a student with disability, for example, so being able to support an employer around the questions to ask and also an effective process to implement workplace adjustments to remove the fear around getting it wrong or feeling that they might get it wrong, and also being able to provide that education and information around the types of adjustments. We certainly recommend that the person with disability is the expert in terms of what adjustments they may require, but for an employer, or certainly within the TAFE environment, to feel confident to be able to ask questions that explore the most effective workplace adjustments and then knowing the right process steps to take to implement those adjustments really helps, have a successful placement. So in our experience, as I said, it is not that the intention is not good, but really understanding the needs of the student with disability and exploring the skills that they bring to meet the objectives of the traineeship or the internship or the work placement is critical so that each side feels really supported through the process.

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

Ms ADDISON: Thanks, Amy. Thanks for everything that you are sharing with us today. I am very interested in the physical infrastructure of our TAFEs. Particularly my TAFE in Ballarat is the old School of Mines which was first opened in the 19th century, so it certainly was not designed for a lot of modern students and the needs of modern students with a disability. How can our TAFEs ensure that physical infrastructure provides an accessible and inclusive environment for students with a disability?

Ms WHALLEY: Well, certainly the physical environment is very important, as is the digital environment. I will focus on the physical but just wanted to reference that these days the access obviously comes in both a physical and digital form. Many organisations are grappling with how to ensure that their physical environment is accessible for people with a disability. There are the Building Code of Australia standards, which are in place for employers to follow. But if a building was built, as you referenced just then, over 100 years ago, then those codes are not going to be meeting the standards and the dignified-access requirements that you want to position today.

The main things really as a starting point are to understand what the barriers you currently have are and to be very clear and open about what they are so that learners are aware of that in advance and equally where alternatives are available. In terms of a system and a process, we work with businesses around developing what we would call a dignified-access checklist which not only looks at the building code standards but equally looks at a dignified approach: so what is the experience like for individuals when they are trying to interact with the building? And by doing that not only are we looking at your compliance but we are equally lifting above it so that it is a positive experience. From doing that you can then start to prioritise those areas that need to be focused on first and be able to plan ahead for how you are going to remove those barriers, whether that relates to stairs and ramps, lifts or fit-outs, equipment and tables and chairs that are used—the physical environment obviously spans a huge array of the built environment—and equally going to the level of your bathroom facilities, your kitchen facilities or where information or equipment is stored. Sometimes there are some workarounds that do not necessarily mean a change to the building but are a change to the way that you use the building or the infrastructure to allow more accessible access for your learners.

Ms ADDISON: Amy, can I just drill down a little bit further about this idea of dignity, because I think it is really important. Just because something is accessible does not mean that it is not going to provide potential embarrassment, humiliation and everything like that. So is that something that your group or your organisation talks a lot about—dignity? Because I think it is a really important point.

Ms WHALLEY: Yes, absolutely. A really easy one to understand, to give an example, is a lift. To meet building code standards having a lift in place would get a tick. But if the lift is a goods lift and you only have one and it is not part of the main entry process, then that is not a very dignified approach for anyone in terms of accessing the levels above or below. So you would pass code, if you like—it gets that tick—but for a dignified experience it is not there at all. And as you say, making sure that people have the independence to use the facility as well, so there is not a reliance on another individual to help them access an area, would come into that dignified approach as well.

Ms ADDISON: And I am just thinking: if you are in a class and a couple of people say, ‘Do you want to go and get a cup of coffee after class? Do you want to catch up?’, but your route is going to take you 7 minutes longer than everyone else, there is a real social disconnect there. And you just sit there going, ‘What’s the point; it’s too hard’ or ‘They are on the move’. It is something I had not considered before, so thank you very much for sharing that.

Ms WHALLEY: No problem.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just further on that, Amy, and I understand obviously through COVID we have learned to adapt to work differently and learn differently. Clearly being there physically in the social interaction space is very important, but it is also important to have a second style of learning which is remote learning. I know most of us are from regional areas, and digital connectivity is a huge issue. So is there anything that we can do as a government to assist those people that want to remotely learn? How can we assist in packages to help them learn remotely?

Ms WHALLEY: One of the key things when looking at any digital solution is really understanding the accessibility of that solution. This is where the role of government and employers has a huge power, if you like, to be able to really shift the way suppliers are offering and providing digital solutions—and ensuring that when you are requesting, say, for example, a new digital learning solution or reviewing any learning packages the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are considered throughout. So WCAG, for short—web content accessibility guidelines—is a global standard relating to the accessibility of digital environments, particularly websites and e-learning, as an example. So it is really the role of employers and the role of government to ensure that when you are requesting new services WCAG is very much a requirement to ensure that whatever you purchase will be accessible to learners with disability, such as individuals who may use screen-reading software or perhaps do not use the control of a mouse and they use the keyboard to tab through a learning. If it is not accessible for individuals, then they will not even be able to start the course. So making sure that everything that we build and develop is accessible is certainly a key.

I am not an experienced e-learn developer so I am only making comment from my own experiences, but obviously considering the amount of screen time that we are all using now, the way that we pull together learnings in a digital forum will also need to be considered, but the key thing that I would talk about is how accessible the actual product and learning solution is—to ensure that it is accessible to everybody.

The CHAIR: Are there any further questions?

Ms ADDISON: I am happy to ask another question. I did not know whether Gary was going to jump in there.

Mr BLACKWOOD: I was too slow. You are too quick, Juliana.

Ms ADDISON: No, you go, Gary, I will go after you.

Mr BLACKWOOD: No, no, ladies before gentlemen.

Ms ADDISON: You old-fashioned gentleman from the country—I love it.

Mr BLACKWOOD: I thought you were going to say ‘old man’—you are right.

Ms ADDISON: I am just wondering what practical and policy support would assist TAFE teachers to better meet the needs of learners with a disability, please, Amy.

Ms WHALLEY: I probably covered this in my conversations before, so the confidence for teachers to understand how to implement access plans and provide adjustments would be a key requirement for teachers—to really understand what that inclusive experience is like. Actually your example before about the social aspect of TAFE life I think is really important that teachers are across as well; it is not just that learning experience, it is actually the interaction of your environment as a whole, and how we make sure that is an inclusive feeling for all of your learners so that everybody can benefit from a diverse student environment. But, yes, it is certainly around making sure that teachers are all educated on what it means to provide adjustments, the breadth of disability and an understanding of inclusive education.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Any further questions?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes, just a quick one, John. Just in terms of encouraging people with disability to disclose their disability, how can TAFEs encourage more students to come forward to actually seek the relevant support?

Ms WHALLEY: Thank you. This is a question that many employers are equally asking in terms of employees sharing their disability information. There is no silver bullet with this one, but it is very much around the environment in which you present. Actually, I might just make note, too, that we avoid the term ‘disclosure’ and talk about people sharing their disability information, a sort of starting point of providing a safe environment for people to share that information—and they only need to share, really, if they do require an adjustment. So how an organisation such as a TAFE provides information and opportunities so that students are aware of how they could and how they might share disability information to request an adjustment is really key. The old saying of ‘If you can’t see it, you can’t be it’ really comes into play a bit here too—so being able to

show examples of storytelling of students with disability who have successfully gone through the training or moved on to other courses or employment. Equally there is the representation of your staff with disability within TAFE, so that actually the inclusion of people with disability is seen in all areas of TAFE. So lots of it comes down to your messaging.

When an individual enrolls with TAFE, how you ask questions around disability information will play a part in why someone may or may not decide to share that information. So there are many different ways that this can be done in terms of considering how you ask about disability information and at what points of their learning journey and through the point of 'The reason we want to know this information is so that we can provide an inclusive and accessible environment'. Many people may be concerned about how information is going to be used, so again, it is about being able to provide a really clear statement around who would see this information and how the information is used and what that means for the student. So again, it is about trying to really establish a safe environment for people to understand why they may share their information and equally then what that means in terms of how they can request adjustments. And this can be very effective in terms of the TAFE messaging around your commitment to accessible and inclusive experiences, your processes and policies that support that and your ongoing commitment to ask questions to ensure people have what they need to thrive.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Amy.

The CHAIR: Well, thank you, Amy. Thank you for being with us this morning. It is very valuable to us, so we all appreciate it.

Ms WHALLEY: No problem. Good luck with the rest of the Inquiry.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.