DARLENE: Now I have the pleasure of introducing you to Debbie Hindle. Debbie Hindle is a colleague of mine and has been for many years. She’s done a number of different roles over those years and I’ve remained steadfast in mine but what Deb has achieved in her time as an NDCO, as a project worker, as an autism mentoring consultant, time as a ministerial advisor and many other roles has been awe inspiring to watch and to stand alongside her in that. Without further ado I will hand over to you Debbie to hear about Silver Linings from COVID-19 disruptions.

DEBBIE: Thank you so much Darlene. Thank you, pleasure to be here. I’m here today to share some of what we found when I was Project Officer with ADCET in July/August this year. We reached out to the sector and asked them about the impact of COVID, what was COVID doing to their work, what was the impact of COVID on the students they were working with. We just didn’t want to find out about the challenges because we knew they were many but we also wanted to know if there were any silver linings, anything that emerged that people were really not expecting to emerge. When I was preparing for this session I thought I would just try and find out where the silver linings come from and it was way back by Milton in 1634 he first talked about it in a poem, hence we have the same silver linings. It’s those unexpected good things that come out of difficult or trying circumstances. I want to share, and you can share in chat, a silver lining that happened for you either personally or in your role at work, just one of the silver linings that came out of all that mess and chaos that came along with the COVID disruptions into our lives. I’m not sure if I can see the chat or if no-one is putting anything on there. I know for me personally a silver lining was that I got to water my new garden, I got to watering my fruit trees and my berry bushes. I could do that on a day that suited me. Yes, happy dog. Aren’t our dogs going to be so disappointed when we have to go off to work. We saved money on commuting. I saved money on not buying muffins, more flexibility. A student who was hospitalised could still study, had time with the kids. Children came home to live and work so even having the kids at home was great especially those kids who came from interstate, no tolls to pay. There were quite a lot of silver linings that emerged from the chat and also emerged from our survey. We group those silver linings into four groups depending on the number of responses and this is what this slide shows. It’s a pie chart and that shows a number of responses for each of the groups, our categories, our themes. The most common theme was openness to technological solutions. We were finding people were open to some of what technology can do, let down their defences. The second most common response, 31 people told us that there was more inclusive teaching and learning, some things that we’ve been trying to push through suddenly were possible. Just as the chat indicated, a lot of people appreciated working from home and there were a lot of benefits for that. 23 respondents told us that flexible working arrangements were a real silver lining, getting to be able to work from home. This was a really nice little bit of it, the last group in our pie chart is connections, compassion and creativity. We put 11 responses in that area, so things were happening between people. They were connecting in ways that they hadn’t connected before and that was really special and it helped people do their jobs and helped the students. Some of these cross over too. When I really looked at it I thought these themes even if we’ve got them separate there is a bit of a cross over. I’ll go through these one by one and the first, I’m on to the next slide, is their openness to technological solutions. There was an increased appreciation that functions and tasks could be done online. There was more video teaching, there was more blended learning. Sometimes we’ve been asking that for a long time. That technology was being used to support better inclusiveness and universal design so people were using those building learning tools. Some of them might have just been sitting there in the background, suddenly they were being used more, captioning and transcriptions were more common. That’s where the teaching work with the students but as far as the teams go, and I think Alicia mentions zoom where could actually connect and collaborate more with our work colleagues especially when we were dispersed across different areas, maybe intrastate or even interstate. Suddenly there was a bit better equality for people where one could participate in a zoom meeting in the same way. There were better connections and collaboration with other people crossing uni too. I think the virtual catch-ups despite ourselves we actually maybe started to enjoy them and I know that we’ve had a few in Pathways. Using online conferencing zoom became a bit of our saviour at that time and we’re all pretty proficient at it now as well, some of us are, even me with my little hiccups. This was a lovely quote that someone shared that put I pulled out of the survey, “Our intrastate teammates really appreciated the sudden equality and thought that they could for the first time participate on an equal basis in team discussions.” It really made it much easier and I know personally I employ a team of 23 people across the State. I have five in the north and 18 in the south. I have to get my figures right there. Often we would have meetings and 12 or 15 would gather in the south around a table and we would hook up with the people in the north. Suddenly everyone was on an equal footing. We could use break-out rooms and so the discussion and the deepening of those team meetings was a really good silver lining and benefit for our team. I’m going on to the next slide which talks about inclusive teaching and learning. This included flexibility for addressing more accommodation, more adjustments, alternative assessments and just more interest, a raised interest from teachers and academics about addressing accessibility. There was much more consideration about it and appreciation of access issues. Academics and teachers seemed to be much more open and more flexible in addressing these, much more consideration too of the situations that students were going through and alternative assessments. Suddenly those end of semester exam procedures where people would line up and be huddled together in corridors before they opened the door and everyone rushed in to grab their seat, all disappeared and there are a lot more of end of semester exam alternatives. Some of those were timed and invigorated and some were just alternative assessments. This range of alternatives benefited many students. There was a greater involvement across the whole tertiary institution for some of these things, learning advisors and teaching staff were much more open to more inclusive teaching and learning and alternative assessments, more flexible approaches to assessing students. Again I put in this next slide that connection like a lot of people were saying. We have so much evidence now to show how adjustments can be implemented without compromising academic integrity. We have so much evidence now to show how adjustments can be implemented without compromising academic integrity, there are no excuses any more. There’s no “why should we turn back”. We know that it can be done if it needed to be done. The next slide talks about flexible work arrangements, some of those things that really hit home for us in our roles. Lots of people told us that they just had a much better work life/home balance. As people commented here, they could spend more time with the kids, they could see the kids, you probably weren’t stuck in traffic doing long commutes, your animals loved you. My dog is sleeping down there. She sleeps by me 9 to 5. She gets a bit restless if I’m still in my office at half past 5, 6 o’clock. It’s time for her to sit on the couch and watch TV she thinks. There was a better balance. There was less travel and we were confident that we could do it successfully and we know over and above anything else from our COVID survey also that disability practitioners worked hard during this time and in fact they probably worked harder and longer than any other time, so they did do their work and they did it really well. The new arrangements meant that also the contact with students could be a bit more flexible so it didn’t have to be 9 to 5. Also out the window went you’re at work when you’re 9 to 5. It might mean that you can call those students in the evening when you’re more likely to get them because it doesn’t really matter when you’re working and it suits some students to ring them at that time. Students appreciated those online or phone appointments. We know that some institutions, some disability practitioners were very proactive at contacting students and it seems that students really appreciated that. Practitioners in the survey told us that they really hoped that that blend of home and office base can really continue in some way. Many were realistic and know working from home they don’t want to do that all the time and probably it’s not best for their work practices or their team or the place where they work but they don’t want to give it up completely, so maybe there’s some potential to blend stay a couple of days at home and a few days in the office. Again in this next slide I have a nice little quote that sums it up, professional staff should have the option to WFH, which is a new acronym which is work from home, so professional staff should have the option to work from home. It should be outcomes driven and not “people in the office” approach as we have already demonstrated that it can be done. Onto the next slide which is this last one. Academics were more willing to engage in support, more willing to engage with disability services and more willing to support that work being done to support students. Some indicated that compassion became a base line for decision making which is pretty incredible and creativity to continually work towards best solutions. There was a lot of thinking outside the box and doing things differently. There was more of a can do attitude and there was greater collaboration across the institutions and sectors to get things done, we can do this, and remember compassion became a base line for decision making, how can we support students who aren’t coping, how can we support them and enable them to cope better than what’s happening now. People also really appreciated the support and compassion through the connections that they had from others, not only others in their workplace but others across the ADCET and ATEND land so there was lots of appreciation for the work that ADCET did in that time and also that feeling of generating collegial support through keeping in contact, raising issues, finding out how to do things a new way. This next slide I’ve got a dog picture there looking at a computer. It’s my only dog picture in my slides in this conference. There’s greater collaboration across new areas to get things done. We need to hold onto and foster these relationships. Again, that was a theme that came out from a few people like how do we hold onto these collaborations, these things that started to happen, we want to keep doing those.

DARLENE: Debbie, it’s Darlene, just five minutes to go.

DEBBIE: Excellent because that’s the end of my formal presentation. I wanted to get people to put into chat what is one of the silver linings that’s happened in your institution that you’d like to see continue, so put that in there. Think of the silver linings. We started off with the personal silver linings but now I want you to think about the silver linings that happened in your tertiary institution that you want to see continue. I’m going to read it out. It’s going to be a bit more interactive I thought and as we’re doing that if anyone else has got any questions.

DARLENE: It’s Darlene. It’s hard to see the WFH without thinking the other but I do like that acronym. It’s good one.

DEBBIE: Lindell put in before more weighting to assignments over exams, yes. In fact I know that the disability practitioners and their work especially around exams was decreased because they didn’t have to do all these adjustments for exams because there were lots of assignments, 24 hour assignments. DARLENE: I think things like trust and compassion at this time have been wonderful to see across the sector. DEBBIE: Tracy has mentioned decision making based on compassion. That’s the main thing, that’s a really crucial thing that we want to keep hold of. Carol has mentioned alternative assessments. That made a big difference, that zoom connection, flexibility. Thank you for sharing those hopes. We’ve got a couple of minutes. I wonder if people can put down now some ideas of what could make that happen. If there was one little thing that you could do tomorrow in your institution to enable this to happen for us to keep these silver linings, what are your ideas, one thing that you could do tomorrow in your institution to try and keep the silver linings.

DARLENE: It’s Darlene here. While people are writing in I’m just about to post in there as well that ADCET from the great survey and the work that Debbie has done we’ve developed a whole range of resources to support people through COVID and beyond including return to campus guidelines and also zoom fatigue which has probably been one of the most popular articles that we’ve had written. That link there will take you to all that information.

DEBBIE: There’s some passion here for universal designed learning from the top down. I think we’ve got some real evidence now. We can push that more. Following on also from Darlene is that what we wanted to do was pick up on UDL themes and form possibly a community practice around UDL and that difference between UDL and adjustments. That was a theme also that came out of the survey, not a silver lining but a theme. What happens as we go to more universal design learning, what happens to all these reasonable adjustments, is there still a need, what does it look like. If you’re interested in being part of a community practice that would be great and if you’re interested in taking this discussion more about the silver linings and how we can progress those then keep them, keep them and progress them, then reach out to ADCET, reach out to Darlene and we’d be keen to get something going and supporting you in that. That’s my 20 minutes worth. Thank you so much. Check out the survey if you haven’t already and please let us know if you want to be involved in anything to keep hold of these silver linings where we can.

DARLENE: Brilliant. Thank you, Deb, that’s great.