SPEAKER: Pathways15 Closing Keynote: Lifting the bar of low expectations. Graeme Innes AM.

GRAEME INNES: I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which you are watching this speech, I also apologise that the internet stopped me from delivering this speech at the close of your conference but hope you enjoy it and find it valuable now. I was house captain at my school and the annual sports day was coming up. Many of the school's best athletes were in the other house and I knew that we had to come up with a different strategy if we were to win the competition, so I started to think about how the house points were awarded and realised that winning the tug of war might just give us enough points to get over the line. Cookhouse, our opposition, had the advantage in weight and strength but we had one boy whose weight could be used as our anchor if we could only get him to be committed and try hard. Like me he was blind and he came from a disadvantaged Aboriginal background and didn't have the benefit of the positive encouragement which I had enjoyed. Expectations for him in school had been low and he met those expectations. I sat with him at lunchtime every day for the week before the sports carnival, talking to him about the tug of war. I showed him the rope and explained how he would need to tie it around his waist as the anchor and how he could lean back on the rope and make a huge difference to the team. I talked through the scenario of the actual tug-of-war helping him to visualize the process and encouraging him to think about it at other times of the day. This was a technique that I had learned and I found that positive visualization could make a real difference. When we lined up our teams for the tug of war I placed myself in front of him on the rope and kept up my positive talk. When we started it was a tense struggle for some time but I could feel our team being slowly but surely dragged towards the line where we would lose. In a final desperate effort I turned to him and yelled come on anchor remember what we talked about. Suddenly, I felt the tension increase from behind me and our losing slip stopped. Slowly ever so slowly, as he leaned into the rope we started to pull the other team backwards until we were finally successful. I turned and gave him a huge hug knowing that he had made the difference. He didn't believe me that he had done so at first but I assured him and after he finally accepted that he had and came to glow in the success of our moment. Why do I tell you this story today? Well it could be because it's a story from my autobiography Finding a Way but that's not the real reason. I tell you this story because it taught me a major life lesson about lifting the bar of low expectations. I've spent much of my life working to lift that same bar for other people some of whom have disabilities, some of whom are same-sex attracted, some of whom are first nations people and some of whom come from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds and some of whom are asylum seekers, and all of you have done the same thing, lifting the bar at your universities and colleges for people with disabilities, supporting and encouraging those people and continually reassuring them that they can succeed when, as a result of societal pressures, they are not sure themselves that that what they think and what you say is true, and at the same time you are campaigning within your universities and colleges for the rights of these students. Working with the administrators and lecturers to ensure that what is written on the pages of the Disability Rights Convention and the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Action Plans of most higher education and training institutions is actually put into practice, because without your work that is all the values that those documents have in higher education and training institutions, the value of words on a page, documents on a bookshelf or these days on a hard drive. Thanks for the chance to speak with you today. I do that as one of the people grateful for what you do because without people such as yourselves in the roles that you have I would not have been able to achieve what I have in my life. I think of all those people who wrangled reluctant universities on my behalf and behalf of others and manually Brailled and taped books before computers and the internet were a thing, before Twitter and Trump, FaceBook and fake news, Snapchat and social distancing. But let's review the year that it's been because for your sector it has really, as gamers would say, levelled up in toughness. Your work was always a challenge, on the one hand supporting a student base dealing with the soft bigotry of low expectations which our community imposes on people with disabilities, and on the other hand persuading a higher education and training sector with more and more limits on its finances and disability rights implementation not high on its business plan that the smart or efficient business model does not include limiting the rights of people with disabilities who are about 20% of the population. That in itself is enough to make you roll over in bed each morning and pull the covers over your head. Then we had a global pandemic. Higher education and training had been moving online with all of the disability challenges which that brings, but that move increased to warp speed. International students were sent home, taking a huge chunk out of higher education and training sectors budgets. We went into lockdowns with all the personal family and other challenges that working from home can cause. Zoom became the norm, and yelling ‘you're on mute’ at your colleague five suburbs away became the activity of the year. Federal government stimulus programs were very quickly rolled out, we got job keeper, job seeker, job maker and pictures of politicians next to a tradie in a white van became more prevalent than mask wearing in Bunnings. But for reasons harder to fathom than delphic pronouncements none of those programs were available to the higher education and training sector. Politicians, most of whom gained their qualifications when education was free in Australia, seemed to forget that the sector is the fourth largest contributor to the Australian economy. So those covers on your bed should have been more locked down than last winter in Melbourne.

Many of your colleagues who would probably have attended this conference are looking for new jobs. Your student population has dwindled and is under more pressure, but every day you kept making the long commute from your bedroom to the laptop on your dining room table and delivering for students with disabilities.

I listened recently to a speech by Aubrey Webson, a man with a disability who is the Jamaican ambassador to the United Nations, and he was speaking on the topic of millennium goals. Yes, those goals are far removed from the day-to-day student issues you have faced virtually from your dining room table or the desk in your in the corner of your bedroom, but the mantra for those goals summarises what you do day after day. Leave no one behind, leave no one behind. Whilst the higher education sector struggles and students with disabilities inevitably get pushed to the back of the queue, that is what you do, ensure that you leave no one behind and you keep doing it as do I because you have a passion for that mantra, an innate belief in the importance of an equal opportunity for students with disabilities, because you know as do I and as do an increasing number of others in Australia in my view, that a society which includes everyone with a disability or not, will be a stronger, more diverse, more effective society and it is a Pathways Conference such as this which continues the tradition that you and your predecessors have created even though this year it is virtual, which demonstrates to me despite the year that you have had, that you will continue to do what you do, and in its virtualness, is that a word virtualness I'm not sure, it has probably been more diverse and more inclusive allowing people in your field to attend who have not been able to attend before.

I haven't been here the whole time so I'm not aware of the detail of the conference as you are but I know that your tradition of collegiality, sharing information with your colleagues which will mean that you can all do your jobs better in the future will have been a key focus and you've set an example of diversity and inclusion through the participation of students in the conference, through the panel that occurred on Friday afternoon and in many other ways. 2020 has been a huge year and the plans which most of us had for that year probably went out the window faster than the toilet paper went off our supermarket shelves. I'm sure you all need a break, I know that I do, but we can go into that break with hope. Next year we will have a leader back in the white house and what a difference that will make, vaccines seem to be coming more and more of a reality, the chances of a slow recovery in the higher education sector seem greater with planning for the return of international students moving forward, and in no small part due to your efforts students with disabilities have not been left behind and will be better able to take their rightful included place in Australian society in the future. So enjoy your well-earned break and come back next year determined to follow the motto of Sarah Henderson, don't wait for the light at the end of the tunnel stride down there and turn the bloody thing on yourself. Thanks for the chance to speak with you today.