AMII DEMANUELE: Welcome back, everybody. What a fantastic presentation we had from Brandon. I’m feeling really energised by it and also looking forward to our next presentation which is going to be provided by Jen Cousins. She has extensive experience and qualifications as a Developmental Educator, Disability Advocate and VET practitioner. Jen is currently the Teaching and Learning Specialist in Accessibility and Inclusive Education at TAFE Queensland. Jen has been involved in a range of national projects that endeavour to increase awareness of the rights of students with disability in VET and to build educator capability. Meredith Jackson is highly regarded as an Inclusive Practitioner having spent more than two decades teaching and managing in the VET sector. Meredith manages Disability Services for TAFE Queensland and is also their ATEND representative. Jen and Meredith are here today to present Access Plans for VET Educators – a Call to Arms. Thanks very much, Jen and Meredith, take it away.

JEN COUSINS: Welcome, everybody. In the spirit of recognition Meredith and I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of our country and recognise their deep and enduring connection to their land, sea and their community. We would also like to pay our respects to the elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Over the past few days we’ve been hearing a range of presentations and we’ve heard many variations on a recurring theme and about collaboration being an essential driving force for change and to build universally through education and training experiences. When we set about our presentation as a call to arms it wasn’t so much about summoning people to engage in hostilities but much more about an invitation to come together to explore what might be possible through collaboration.

MEREDITH JACKSON: Thanks, Jen, thanks, everyone. I just wanted to mention I don’t actually manage Disability Services for TAFE Queensland. I’m very humbled by that. I look after the Service Provision at our wonderful Skills Tech region. The challenges of equity practitioners anecdotally the feedback indicates that there’s a significant gap between the formal process of acknowledging and developing an access plan for potential support and then what happens in practice when our VET educator actually receives that plan. So, student/teacher surveys, completion results they’re all the indicators that we received that there continues to be a disconnect between a student identifying that they have a disability and working with us as the VET provider to establish an access plan and then seeing this actual plan implemented, monitored and reviewed. Now we’ll all be aware that our VET educator workforce is complex and ever changing. We’ve got long term established practitioners, professional educators with a lot of industry experience, we’ve got industry experts with training and assessment qualifications, casual contractors, teaching on the job, off the job, online, face to face and mixed modal. Many of our VET educators they’ve also had limited exposure to dealing with educational and workplace adjustments. Receiving an access plan can be a very daunting and unfamiliar experience to our teachers. Just connecting back to Brandon’s earlier presentation, this makes it challenging also because our VET educators are flooded with emails, with the priorities of their faculties for training, business targets and they are also pressured by the shrinking delivery hours. Dr Thomas Tobin drew to our attention on Monday about the piece of paper and he really emphasised the importance of making sure that we equip our VET educators to be ready to engage with students and to be able to follow through confidently on the access plans. What we’re going to do now is we’re just going to just do a poll activity with you. Through this project that we’ve been involved with the conversations we’ve had with our colleagues across the sector have really revealed the challenges are widespread and this is what drew us to this call to arms and started us on this quest. We’d like to share some of the key gap areas that were identified and we want to hear from you to know what your experience is around these gaps and to see what you’ve observed as well in your respective areas. Let’s just take a quick poll and I’m asking you to have a look at the gaps here that we’ve listed and I want you to select what you see as the most common gap in educator understanding, so if you could just do that now that will be great. We’re getting some good uptake, interesting. Have we still got our votes coming?

JEN COUSINS: Yes.

MEREDITH JACKSON: I guess you’re probably all thinking these are all gaps in my workplace but choosing the one that you see as the most common is really interesting.

JEN COUSINS: Voting has slowed down now if you would like to share the results.

MEREDITH JACKSON: Okay, I think so. Let’s first close off and share now. Our results draw to us the inherent requirements of the VET educators’ training packages, an area there that our educators are really struggling with. Then closely behind we’ve got stakeholder responsibilities with access plans – sorry, universal design for learning down the bottom came in in second place there, great, so really good feedback there. That gives us an indication that our conversations were really on track there around the many areas and the biggest areas that are emerging there which sort of led us to what we decided we were going to pursue with this actual project. Thanks, Jen.

JEN COUSINS: Thanks, Meredith. I think it’s a telling sign there that the inherent requirements of the training packages were picked up as one of the key issues and if we put some context to the project that we’ve been working on that’s one of those key things or key areas that we were having a lot of conversations about. Meredith and I who have both got very extensive experience in working in the VET sector have come to that conversation with each other quite a few times talking about the role of VET educators and the tension or the challenge that there is with the VET training packages because in essence they are like inherent requirements because of the assessment requirements or the performance requirements of those units of competency. It’s really important to think about that. We had those conversations. We’ve been chatting for quite a while about this and then this year we had the opportunity to come together and really consider the experience of VET educators and look at ways that we might be able to support them in a much more significant way and, you know, come to that as a partnership or a collaboration. We’re really keen to improve the correlation between the equity practitioners and the educators in responding to those access plans. If we think about it, we don’t actually get much training as a VET educator around that type of activity and we don’t get much training around inherent requirements within the VET sector. We really wanted to look at building educator capability and really thinking about how they can really develop that conversation with the student about the way they can talk about inherent requirements and develop reasonable adjustments based on the qualifications or training that they’re doing. We wanted to streamline some of the organisational processes by having that conversation sort of at a national level and talking through with each other about those types of things and have a bit of a national model around how we might respond to those things and develop a professional learning resource. In that we wanted to strengthen the student voice and self-advocacy and really promote that empowerment and enablement in this process of developing an access plan. Some of the current drivers that we’ve got have really come into play in the last few years and that’s really helped inform our conversations I guess at that national level. We’re aware of the review of the disability standards this year, the national disability strategy is coming to an end and we’re thinking about those conversations beyond 2020 how we’re going to take that strategy or the concept of the strategy forward, also considering around the fact that we launched the disability awareness VET e-learning modules last year. There’s been a lot of uptake, discussion and feedback about those. We had the inclusion of people with disability in VET cross sector project in 2017 which identified for us a really key range of issues and, I guess, considerations going forward about how we might do that educator capability building. We have the NDIS well ensconced now in our support for students with disabilities and how the actual uptake now of VET is appearing to be much greater and those supports are there for the students to participate more effectively. We’ve been having emerging discussions through other networks and forums, through the NDCO, through ATEND and ADCET about needing to have some more contextualised VET resources that actually support better practice around supporting students with disability.

MEREDITH JACKSON: As we can all see, and I think this has been a theme through the week so far, our students are really at the core and centre of what’s driving us towards these changes that are emerging and I particularly took note yesterday of our keynote speaker, Helen Cooke, suggesting that our students need to become experts in what they need in regards to support and adjustments and be able to articulate this to themselves as they’re going throughout their education and into the workforce. These drivers, we’re challenged by the changes that are around us, the DDA and the disability standards for education are really not well known and understood by our VET workforce. Access plans, encourage students to disclose and students can be apprehensive because they’re concerned that disclosure may lead to discrimination. Our training packages are not always written in an inclusive way. Our units of competency can be quite prescriptive. We saw earlier in our poll there’s some concern around our VET educators understanding an application of inherent requirements and these can really impede our educators to be confident in their practices, to think laterally and to think inclusively as well. The mapping of foundation skills can narrow the scope of a unit as well as the understanding of the foundation skills by our VET educators, so there can really be limited guidance and professional learning about inherent requirements and about reasonable adjustment. We also felt that there could be more VET focused resources available and we’re also really mindful of the difference in the funding models that each of our States are working with on our national VET qualifications. We’ve got systemic changes. We’ve also got stakeholder changes, so low levels of awareness and understanding of what disability is and its impacts. Our project is targeting VET educators. However, we are also aware this is across all layers of our VET workforce, low levels of awareness and understanding of what resources are available and of the different strategies for how to support our students with disability, poor implementation of accessibility and inclusion in our practices as vocational providers, contributing to an unintended exclusion of people with disability. Yesterday’s wonderful presentation really emphasised the need for institute-wide engagement as part of a cultural shift and it was wonderful also to hear about TAFE’s South Australia’s newly released DAIP with a key action to raise disability awareness across their organisation and ensure that the induction of new all staff includes disability awareness training and their disability access and inclusion plan. I’m just giving a plug there, awesome work TAFE South Australia.

JAN COUSINS: In progressing our conversations Meredith and I did a call-out to the sector to a range of people who we knew throughout our networks about whether people were prepared to come on board and work with us about developing a professional resource, a professional learning resource that people could be using across their organisations to really work together with the disability or equity services and the educators to help build that capability, to build that confidence in having those conversations and responding more effectively. We had a great response from people and we got representatives from across the country and were able to really come together to form what we started off as a conversation to really becoming a community of practice. We met every two to four weeks and we’ve been doing that since April and we used Google docs to communicate and co-build, I guess, and co-create the resource. That in itself has been an amazing experience as we shared our own perhaps challenges, some of our own observations, some of the experiences that we’d had. That’s really helped inform the learning resource as it’s developed over time.

MEREDITH JACKSON: What are our project aims, firstly, to really recognise the impact on our VET educators and our equity practitioners and to build the network for greater support and collegiality. That was really important to us when we set down our aims for the project by promoting greater partnerships in supporting our students by ensuring that we have some strategies in place for all staff to be more aware of what the role of the student services and the equity services is and what supports are available. That’s a very important part of building those partnerships with our students. Brandon earlier gave us some really great ideas on how we can build that and he really emphasised the importance of communication and also to really get out there to promote just what we do and what a great job we do as well so that our work colleagues have a better understanding and more confidence so that we can then form a strong partnership to better support our students. By developing a broader and deeper understanding of reasonable adjustments and our responsibilities with our VET educators in the provision of VET programs to our students and importantly to get some consistent conversations in place so everyone supporting the student knows and understands what the support plan is, what’s in place and where we’re going with it as well. They’re our project aims. Over to Jen.

JEN COUSINS: Thanks, Meredith. What we’d like to do is just a quick activity with everybody. We’d like you to pop into the chat box what you believe is the key message in working together to respond effectively to an access plan in the VET sector, so if you could just pop that in the chat box that would be great, thank you. Beautiful, ongoing communication, collaboration and communication. We heard on Monday in Lee Papworth’s presentation about how important that collaboration and communication is, so really an important aspect, team work, flexibility and collaboration. I think those things are really critical in this particular part of our work. Even if we’ve had a lot of experience in this area it’s sometimes limited what we know, perhaps a particular qualification, a particular unit of competency, the way things need to operate because of the way a delivery and assessment strategy is being used. By coming together and having that communication, that conversation, it definitely makes a huge difference in the support that can be provided, the understanding of expectations and a whole range of things. Agreed, Leslie, everyone needs to be on the same page. We really need to make that we’re all kind of steering the boat, I guess, in the same direction. That’s a really important one and we all need to be understanding, I guess, of the support and the empowerment that we want to provide for the student. That’s great, creativity, Jane. I think that’s a critical aspect of this. We need to be creative, we need to think outside the box. We do need to explore all of the possibilities before we make decisions. Communication and collaboration, again that’s obviously a critical aspect of what we were looking at and definitely we need to describe and define what an access plan does and the purpose it has in that particular, I guess, instance and how does the scope of that plan operate in that individual circumstance alongside of the requirements that we need to meet as their educators. Thanks everyone for those fantastic contributions. I think they make a big difference. You won’t be surprised that when we gathered up our own collective wisdom it came up with these key themes about what is an access plan, what’s the legal framework that sits behind that, what’s the purpose of the plan, what’s the role of each of the players in responding to an access plan, a lot more focus around the confidentiality and the disclosure and the choices that people may make around those sorts of things and obviously matching up with our poll results there, the inherent requirements and reasonable adjustments and how we might respond to those and really start to explore them differently or in a much more creative and open way and then really taking on board the implementation and documenting it and reviewing of those plans.

MEREDITH JACKSON: What have we delivered from this project? This is really the exciting part, what’s out there and what’s now available. This has now been shared on the ADCET website. We’re really proud. There’s a PowerPoint presentation that we all collectively developed and some great facilitator notes to use, really clear session guidelines and a plan keeping in mind that we’ve done it with the view that everyone will be wanting to contextualise it for their own staff and their own environment. It’s a really nicely developed one that you can contextualise. We’ve got some great activity sheets and case studies. Brandon mentioned earlier the value of having some really good case studies of our students. I just want to proudly share that we’ve got 16 in our little suite of resources covering from Certificate 1 to Diploma across a wide range of training packages. Please make sure you go and have a look, they’re really well written. There’s a resource guide and there’s a really good glossary as well there, yes, very excited and very proud.

JEN COUSINS: I’ve popped the link for the resources in the chat box. In thinking about this we also considered the new cross sector units that came out of the cross sector project and we’d like to consider continuing to develop these resources so that they align clearly to those particular new units.

MEREDITH JACKSON: What were our learnings, we are not alone and these challenges are across our sector. We’re awesome and we’re passionate and what a great group of people who got together and performed a really strong community of practice. There’s always more to learn. I think we all can agree we’ve learnt from each other and from this experience. We know we can develop a strong voice for our sector. We are strong advocates for our students and having a national conversation in our sector, we deliver national qualifications. That is invaluable. That was a really strong source that got us where we are here, so lots of learnings there.

JEN COUSINS: Just to finish off, we think there are lots of future opportunities to collaborate in the same way and develop other professional learning resources that we can share and use together.

I’m really encouraging everybody to utilise these resources and we will be looking to review them again next year so some feedback if you’ve been using those or if you’d like to contribute more to the development that we’d love to hear from you as well. We’d be quite keen to look at some resources that match up with those TAE units and also considering some of the VET awareness activities for equity practitioners around how do you unpack those competencies so that you can feel more confident in working with the educators as well. Just to finish off we’d really to see a community of practice on universal design for learning. That was something that kept coming up in our conversations but we kept sitting aside so if anyone is interested in participating in a community of practice about universal design for learning that’s contextualised to the VET sector then I would certainly love to hear from you because I’d like to kick that off next year. I’ve popped my email in the chat box so you can certainly contact me at any time if you’re interested but we’ll do a call out later. We’re very proud of the resource and we really hope that you will be willing to participate by utilising the resources and sharing that national conversation going forward. If anybody has got any questions we might have a minute or so, I think.

AMII: Two minutes. Thank you very much Jen and Meredith for a fantastic presentation. It’s been amazing to hear about the work that you’ve been doing. I’m really looking forward to having a look at those resources that are up on ADCET and very interested in the community of practice idea around UDL.

MEREDITH JACKSON: Thank you.

JEN COUSINS: Thanks everyone.