DARLENE MCLENNAN: Our first presentation, Beyond Compliance – Innovative Approaches to Accessibility and Inclusive Education in VET, this is going to be given to us by Jen Cousins. Jen has extensive experience and qualifications as a developmental educator, disability advocate and a VET practitioner and is currently the teaching and learning specialist in accessibility and inclusive education at TAFE South Australia. Wouldn’t we all love to have a position in each of our institutions like that. Jen is a very dear friend of mine and a colleague. We’ve worked on a number of projects together which, if you were in the previous session, the External Support Workers Resource we recently launched that has been our most recent publication. I’m going to hand over to you, Jen, thank you very much and look forward to hearing your talk.

JEN COUSINS: Thank you, Darlene, and thanks everyone for attending the session. Just to start I’d like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the past, present and emerging elders and custodians of our beautiful country and acknowledge their relationship with not just the land, sky and sea but also their educational practices which I think we have a lot to learn from and their community connections. I just wanted to kick off today about my presentation with a bit of a quote that’s been resonating with me for a little while. I think this really has brought into focus for me about inclusive education and we’ll know that it has, I guess, really become embedded in our culture. When the term becomes obsolete, and I think that’s really a key thing to reflect upon in terms of where we’re going with inclusive education, I guess we want to eliminate that word “inclusive” and move beyond that to just having great education systems that really work for everybody who participates in them. In July this year TAFE SA took a fairly brave move and created the role that I now currently have which is the Teaching and Learning Specialist in Accessibility and Inclusive Education. It’s one of the senior educational roles at TAFE SA and I am expected to lead across the organisation around accessibility and inclusive education practice with a particular focus on our educators. This is a fairly unique role, something as Darlene said we wish we probably had them in all of our organisations. I was absolutely thrilled to get that role. I kind of felt like this is something I’d been training for all my life but at the same time I was absolutely terrified too about what this might mean and how people may interpret that role. I thought today what I’d do is focus a little bit on where we’re going with that role at this point in time, some of the thinking that we’re doing around that role and how that might evolve over the next year or two and some of the strategies that we’re using to, I guess, advance some of the thinking around that role. If we think about what we have available to us there’s a very strong legislative and strategic context in which we work in terms of inclusive education and all of those things are really important drivers of change, I guess, and we wouldn’t be where we are without some of those particularly the Disability Discrimination Act and the Standards for Education. However, we’ve really acknowledged that they’re only part of the process for us. They can drive a particular type of change but in of themselves they are not the magic ingredient that we need to really get everybody on board in thinking about and practising inclusive education. With that in mind we’ve gone into this role, or I’ve gone into this role, with the support of my directors and we said that we really want to start as we intend to finish. We’ve decided not to leap too fast and too hard early in the process but to actually do some of that strategic thinking about what it is that we really want to achieve in terms of inclusive education and potentially to move beyond that in terms of our capacity as an organisation. In doing that role I have some very key partners already and I must say our student experienced team, in particular the Student Services and the Disability Access and Inclusion Advisors that I work with, are pivotal to my role and we journey probably together as my role actually develops and evolves. I just wanted to really acknowledge right from the outset that I think for us as an organisation the history has kind of played out that Student Services and equity practitioners, the disability access and inclusion advisors really are the fix it team for disability. That’s the one road that everybody goes to quickly as soon as they have a student with a disability in their class or potentially going to enrol in their courses. Really when we think about it most organisations like ours these teams are very small in size, in number of people and resources, but they are huge on passion and workload. It’s really not a sustainable model for us to continue to just say that they will fix everything for us when we have, well certainly at TAFE SA we have nearly 2000 educators and we have two access and inclusion advisors. We need to tip that balance and that’s really where my role comes in is how do we enable and empower the educators to be more responsive to those responsibilities around inclusive education and how do they have their interface, I guess, with those other supports and services that work around the particular needs of a student with a disability. We’ve been really thinking about how important that is and really need to emphasise that as educators we can’t do our role without the disability practitioners or the equity practitioners that we work with and they, I guess, can’t do their work effectively supporting the students unless educators are going to be responsive to those needs of those students who have been identified and have the capability to respond effectively. In terms of wondering about where we might begin with this journey, one of the key things we’ve identified is that the student voice and experience should really be critical in informing any of the practices or the strategies or the innovation that we choose to roll out going forward. For us our disability practitioners and our equity practitioners are a wonderful conduit for us around what’s already been experienced, what have been the challenges but they’re also going to work in partnership with us to bring that voice into the discussions that are loud and clear. We’re looking at developing opportunities for our students to provide direct feedback to us in terms of their experience. I think that’s going to be an amazing sort of driving force and really will help us bring into focus really where are the key areas in which we struggle to kind of create that change, that cultural change shift that we want across the organisation. I think most of the time when we hear the stories of the students is when we start to realise, you know, like wow, that’s my practice as an educator that’s doing that. When I talk to the disability practitioners and the equity practitioners at our organisation they said we’ve been saying this for a very, very long time but they’re not being heard by the educators. We’re really hoping that joining forces will be one of the key ways that we’re able to do that. We also recognise that we’re all using different language around inclusive education, that we’re using different terminologies, we have different meanings and understandings for each of those terms, we’re using different frameworks to explain those terms and concepts and perhaps potentially the changes we want to see. We know we have quite a bit of work to do around identifying what we actually mean when we use certain terminology around these things. When we’re talking about inclusive education, we’re really wanting our organisation to look at that more broadly not just someone who has an identified disability who wants an access plan, looking at how do we take a far more holistic or universal approach to inclusive education. The other key question we need to start with is whose job is it anyway. We’re really starting to form some very clear guidelines, I guess, that it’s everybody’s responsibility, a student’s experience from sort of end to end of their student journey and that means from every touchpoint that they have with our organisation they need to be thinking about what is the experience for the student with a disability or with particular needs. If we can actually plan for that much better and stay very connected with each other we’re going to, I guess, step away from our access and inclusion advisors and Student Services team being that one stop shop or the fix it team of disability and inclusion. It’s really all of our responsibilities. The other thing we need to, and we’re currently working on, is trying to decide what are our not negotiables, what is our bottom line, what are we going to accept as an organisation. I think this is a really critical question to ask ourselves because I often have conversations with various people in our organisation, “Oh, that’s just going to be too hard.” ‘We haven’t got the resources to make that happen.” If you’re going to push these people they may do it but it’s going to be a really difficult task and so if we’re starting with that as our bottom line, that we need to just keep paring back to make it comfortable for people, somehow we need to flip it to make sure that those people who are saying those things are starting to understand what it’s like to be the user or the student on the other side of that experience and how uncomfortable that can get because we’re putting up barriers to access for their education. We’re really looking at how we can raise that bar and really push our staff a little bit harder about what’s possible. For us we’ve needed to have a fairly strategic approach. Fortunately for us our board and our Chief Executive, David Coltman, have been highly supportive of my role and the role that Student Services plays in supporting students across the organisation. We’ve made an agreement quite clearly that we don’t just want to be compliant, we want to move to a quality model in the hope to get a highly innovative model where we get to lead in some new practices in the VET sector. That’s a really important commitment from the board and from the Chief Executive that they want to see us push beyond a model of compliance. We often have that experience that we ask for something about a system that we’re using in our organisation and people say, “Well, no, the system is compliant.”, and I said, “That’s well and good but it’s the way we’re using the system that may be actually not complaint. It might be what we’re doing with that system.”, so we need to get that understanding that it’s got to happen both ways. It can’t just be that we tick that basic compliance box. It’s about what is quality practice and can we push that innovative practice beyond and recognise that all things are connected, so something that happens in one part of the organisation needs to be equivalent in the other part. We can’t just have parts of it being a quality or innovative practice, we need the whole organisation to pick that up and that’s a really big, I guess, job to do and a vision to have but we’re feeling very confident that we’ve got some momentum going for the first time. We’ve got some conceptual frameworks and critical thinking that we’ve been kicking around. One key focus always has to be that student journey and experience making sure that’s really a viable thing, that that’s really our focus, that we understand what it’s like for a student to work through our system. We want to be using evidence based practice so people feel confident when they’re making that change or those transitions to different practices, that they understand why and feel confident that it’s the right way to go. We want to facilitate action based learning, so simply talking about some of these things won’t be enough and we’re going to need people to start doing and integrating into their everyday practice. We want to build collegial partnerships and really adopt that approach going forward with any of the practices we use and so we’re very keen to collaborate with other organisations who might be experiencing things similar to us. We want to really see that embedded practice, that it’s an everyday thing not an add on because we see that’s where one of the barriers is when people believe they’ve got to add this onto their workload then there’s less commitment to going forward with it. We have definitely agreed that universal design for learning is the framework that we want to be promoting to move forward and we’re talking about universal design in all aspects of what we’re doing not just universal design for learning but embedding those practices across each aspect of that student journey. For us we’ve been very lucky, the first job that I did when I came into the role was to work with our Student Services to develop our disability access and inclusion plan. In South Australia we have a Disability Inclusion Act that was introduced in 2018 which makes it compulsory for government agencies and authorities to have a disability access and inclusion plan and we must report to the government on our progress against that plan which we think is incredibly a positive step forward. This year have redeveloped our access and inclusion plan and that has been approved by our board and our CE and we have moved that into a sort of publication now and now the job for us is to translate that into practice. There are some key things about auditing our educational policies and procedures and practices to ensure that they are inclusive, data analytics that talk more about usage by the students of the systems we have so we get clearer feedback about their experiences.

DARLENE: Sorry, Jen, just five minutes to go.

JEN COUSINS: Sure, thank you. Data analytics, usage and feedback so building a lot more around informing people about their practice and the way it can occur.

We want to do some principles and benchmark practice particularly around accessibility and universal design and really embedding that as guidelines in our practice and picking up on things like does our marketing guide actually embed those things as well. We’ve had some challenges about establishing a baseline, determining our benchmarks, but we know that having that conversation together is one of the key things, is really starting to get that momentum for us, the more we’re talking to all of the people in our organisation the greater it is that that conversation is coming to the fore. When you’re at all different kinds of meetings people are saying, “Hang on, what about the accessibility, what about the inclusion of it.”. We’re really seeing that. What we’re finding is that working very closely with Student Services and the disability practitioners is that we’re getting that interface with the student matching the interface with the educators and for us that’s a huge step forward. We also recognise that it’s got to intersect across every aspect of the organisation. We can’t just have one above the other, so we need to actually work with everybody right down to procurement of resources and assets that we have and ensuring that they support our vision for inclusion. Really the key one is around the educator capability. That’s my role to really look at the professional learning. While we’ve already started quite a few things there’s a long way for us to go in terms of building that but to date, particularly in this last six months, we’ve had fantastic uptake of any sessions we’ve done around accessibility tools, learning tools or professional learning that we’re offering our educators. We have mandated a lot of access and inclusion training now as part of our educator capability framework. For us, what’s our action list for next year, well we’re really thinking about having some action based universal design for learning projects. We’ve invested in Ally as the new plug-in for our LMS which we haven’t had before which we hope will be a big step forward. We have developed a new procurement strategy that has access and inclusion aspects to it which is fantastic, but we’re also really hoping to have some partnerships across the country where we can share and develop a community of practice particularly around universal design for learning in the VET sector which is quite different. In talking with our equity services people one thing is that they really want to be a part of that process so that when the conversations are happening between educators, students and those services and support services that we’re all actually sharing the same information, we’re all on the same page in terms of progressing that. We are really new into this role and a busy, unique role. I’m really hoping that in a year’s time that I’ve got a lot more to share about what we’ve been doing and how we’ve been achieving that. I’m very hopeful that this is going to evolve and innovate into something quite big for us as an organisation that we’d love to share with others. Thank you very much for listening.

DARLENE: Wow. That’s Jen, that’s great. It’s fantastic to hear a little bit more about what you’re doing. I’ll just ask Cathy to share her slides now if that’s okay. The key points I found it’s everybody’s responsibility and I think for us in the sector that’s kind of what we dream of and it’s fantastic that that’s the first thing that you’re leading with and also that the executives have played such a pivotal role in making sure this is happening.