ANTHONY: We now move to our afternoon presentation. It's entitled Creating Places of Belonging for those Living with Disability: Going Beyond Diversity and Inclusion in Post-Secondary Education. The presentation by Dr Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes from the University of Sydney. Sheelagh is a Kamilaroi woman - sorry, I knew I would get that wrong...

SHEELAGH DANIELS-MAYES: That's all right.

ANTHONY: ...who lost her eyesight to congenital glaucoma as a child following measles. In January 2016, she moved back to Sydney from Adelaide after a decade's absence to take up a lecturing and research position in the University of Sydney, school of education and social work at the University of Sydney where she teaches and does research in the space of Aboriginal and inclusive education, indigenous studies and indigenous methodologies. Living with vision impairment means that Sheelagh has been a lifetime advocate and activist for accessibility and inclusion within the built environment, in online digital platforms, and in the minds of people who tend to underestimate the abilities of those living with disability. Sheelagh has studied in the fields of education, sociology, criminology and psychology, and has borrowed the theoretical frameworks of cultural responsiveness, critical race theory and critical access disability studies. Sheelagh is passionate about higher education, having unique responsibility to work towards equity and social justice. Sheelagh's experience includes working with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Adelaide City Council Access and Inclusion Panel, and the South Australian Minister's Disability Advisory Committee. She facilitated the writing of vision Australia's reconciliation action plan, the RAP seeking to make the organisation more culturally savvy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are blind or have low vision. Prior to returning to university to study education, Sheelagh worked as a senior project officer with the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services developing programs to lower the reoffending rates of Aboriginal peoples across the State. Sheelagh's work history is diverse having been a counsellor with organisations like the AIDS council of New South Wales, ACON, the Salvation Army and Oasis Youth Support Network. Sheelagh, over to you and welcome to Pathways15 Online.

SHEELAGH: Thank you. I think I'm going to have to start getting a shorter bio. It's a complicated life story, though. Thank you for that. So I'm going to have someone driving my slides for me to just make things a little bit smoother and I'm going to be working off a Braille laptop. So this is one of the skills of people with disability. I think we learn to multi-task. So today I'm going to be talking with you briefly about creating places of belonging for those living with disability. And I'm particularly looking at this idea of going beyond these concepts that we're all familiar with about diversity and inclusion with a focus on post secondary education, be it the TAFE system or university system. If we go into the next slide. We've got here the Syd university acknowledgement of country but I would like to just say this in my own words. I acknowledge that I am on the Gadigal - lands of the Gadigal people today of the Eora nation here in Sydney. I pay my respects and honour elders, past, present and emerging. I acknowledge the lands from which you are all coming to this meeting today, and I pay my respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and indigenous peoples from other parts of the world who may be with us today. So welcome. When I'm - before we go into the next slide, I will just say this - and I heard this being talked about before I started - when I'm asked the question of who are you, things could get rather complicated, as you heard from my bio, but it's really become quite simple an answer, and this is what my answer is: I'm an Aboriginal woman living with a disability of vision impairment working with a guide dog. It's really not that complicated and it is very much person-first language, and the first thing in there that you will find is that my Aboriginality comes first. If we go to the next slide, we will explain this a little bit more. So this is called get my feathers on. Which is a phrase that I've been using for quite some time now. So as I say, my Aboriginality always comes first when I'm saying who I am. I'm - my Kamilaroi mum passed away when I was about four years of age and for a lot of different reasons my Aboriginality was kept a secret. I didn't learn of my Aboriginality until my mid-20s. Since this discovery, I have gone through a process of growing up Aboriginal. I have learned Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing from my own elders in Kamilaroi country but also elders right across the country often found at universities that I've studied at. To me, it sort of all started to make sense of the world once I started tapping into my Aboriginality. So on this slide you will see in the top left-hand side we've got a couple of maps there that show you where Kamilaroi country is, if you think of this visually and think of Sydney, head north and go inland is where you will land with Kamilaroi country. It's a big nation. You will think of towns like Tamworth, Moree, Tinga and Inverell. Fresh water, the photo here is of the Guida River, I spent a lot of time running around in bare feet on as a child. On the right side you will see there are three of my feathered friends. They are my totem birds and I am just going to talk about the top one. I’ve got crow up there or wagun, and I have also got kookaburra or willy wag tail. The crow is what I am doing today. Crow is putting my feathers on. Crow is a trickster. He allows me to be naughty or really demands that I am naughty and that I am a trouble-maker. So I have got full permission. He tells me I need to disrupt, disturb and destabilise, as I say. I need to ask the difficult, uncomfortable and courageous questions. And this process is called getting my feathers on, okay. So I can also put my feathers on when I'm having a rough day. It's like taking on an armour that protects me, that gives me strength but also reminds me what my responsibilities are. We will move into the next slide. Here we have another part of my story, come second most times. We've got two photos that speak to my disability story, so to speak. On the left is me in 1974, aged eight, wearing my fabulously unfashionable glasses provided by the government system at the time. I lost most of my eyesight, as I said before, aged 7 following a severe bout of the measles. It took the adults about – around about a year or so to figure out that I had glaucoma and that I had lost a lot of eyesight and it wasn’t properly diagnosed until 1975 when I was 9. So a lot of damage had already been done to the eyes but children don’t rock up and say, hey, I can’t see anymore. They tend to hide it. They tend to adapt. Following surgery on both eyes I was sent to Sydney to get my education. This consisted mostly of learning to type, learning Braille, and mobility. All skills I use on a daily basis as an adult and am grateful for having. But I did not get to learn a curriculum of English, maths, science and other subjects at a standard of my sighted peers. You see when I entered the institution I was put through an IQ test which I failed. It hadn't been adapted for low vision, nor did it take into consideration the fact that I had not been at school for about two years. So I got basically treated as an intellectually disabled child during my time there. I stayed in the institution between the ages of 9 and 16. At 16 I managed to get myself expelled. It took over a year but I got there so that I could finish high school and go on to university. I didn't know what a university was. I didn't know what a university would get me but for some reason or another that I can't recall now, I knew it was important. So jumping forward to the photograph on the right. This is a photograph taken only a couple of months ago when I was training with my new guide dog Topaz with my other girl Nina having retired. For those who might know her she is also still living with me, but she has retired. So Topaz has taken on the heavy lifting. This is us walking in front of the quadrangle building at the University of Sydney. She is currently snoring at my feet, by the way. But getting from this institution for the handicapped, as it was called back then, to the institution of the academy has been a twisting, sometimes torturous winding journey. I first entered higher education as a student seven years prior to the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992. There was no student support. My technology was black texta and a whole lot of paper that I paid for myself. Many of my essays were submitted orally to my lecturers. In my second year I took two buses and a train to my vocational counsellor's office so I could sit in his office and type up my assignments. He was blind too and would tell me he had it tougher as a uni student in the 1970’s and I had no right to complain. No sympathy but plenty of care. I had lecturers threaten to do harm to me if I quit. Again, no sympathy but plenty of care. When I graduated in 1989, it took a bit longer to do the degree than it possibly should but anyway, over 100 job interviews happened before I was finally successful in getting a job. As a vision impaired person in the 1990’s, I was meant to be the client and not the welfare worker. Since this first paid job, as you've heard before, I've worked in a lot of jobs and what I find most intriguing of them all is many of them have required a driver's licence of which I don't have. So then, again, this resiliency of people with disability to be creative and innovative about how we solve such problems. I've been back to uni a number of times but in 2016 I finished a PhD in Aboriginal education looking at what does successful teaching of Aboriginal students look like. Five years later I am Australia's only known Aboriginal female academic with a vision impairment. If there's any more out there that you know, please send them my way. I would love to have a cuppa with them because it's a very isolated world, I have to say. Let's be honest, though, the world is built in a way that doesn't cater for most of my needs and sometimes things get tough. I need to be persistent, I need to be resilient and again I say I need to be innovative. What I have found works is collaborating with allies, with partners such as yourselves, those savvy people who get it but I will come back to that a little later on. What I would like to do right now is look first at the architectures of exclusion and ultimately inclusion. So if we go to the next slide. This is me muddling this year. A lot of things have changed this year because of COVID-19 and I've had to move more into the disability space and accessibility, in particular. For me, there are three architectures or ways that exclusion and, in turn, inclusion happen. First we have the architecture of the built environment that we're all pretty familiar with. So we're talking about buildings, public spaces, kerbside, signage and wayfinding, for example. Second we have the architecture of the digital environment. And here we're talking about websites, emails, PDFs which I always say suck for a blind person, please don't do them, and PowerPoint’s. And finally we have the architecture of people's minds, eg, we've got low or high expectations, intersectionality, are we seeing a strength in being Aboriginal disabled or are you saying, "That poor bugger" or are you saying, “Double whammy, double trouble", don't know. We need curiosity. We need willingness to learn. Think about it this way: when we design a building, we need to adhere to building codes to the Disability Discrimination Act, to universal design principles and hopefully these days we won't come across a building that doesn't have a ramp or doesn't have Braille on the lift buttons. When it comes to the architecture of the built - of the digital environment, are we embedding ramps, for example, to make a document or a website accessible and navigable, are we looking at the guidelines and actually using those? Is your mindset built in a way that enables or disables? Increasingly we are seeing terms like equity, cultural competency, human rights, inclusion and diversity in legislation, policies, strategic plans, and, more recently, in graduate qualities. We've come a long way since the days of poor education in institutions for the disabled, and a long way from only providing textas and paper to a low vision university student. But in my experience we still have a long, long way to go. So if we go into the next slide. I read a blog by a commentator called Sanita Ands who describes herself as a general disruptor which made me like her even more. And Anita tells us that diversity and inclusion aren't what matter. Belonging is what counts. When I read this earlier this year, bells went off in a good way. Things started to gel a bit for me about what I was trying to muddle my way through. Anita goes on and explains that diversity is a fact. The numbers are what they are. If you look around the Zoom, roll call for here, we're all different. So diversity is a fact. If we look at inclusion, then we're also saying that this is okay but, again, Anita's words are very enlightening. She says that inclusion is a choice. You decide whether to include someone or not. Many choices have been made throughout this conference, for example, to make it accessible and inclusive. Thank you for that. But let's talk one last statement by Anita that stands out for us today. She’s got , “Belonging is a feeling that can be enforced by a culture that you can purposefully create”. To get here today I needed to do a few emails and make a few requests, no drama. Felt easy. Felt supported. It's a mindset of belonging. Let me give you another example to bring this to - to illustrate. My guide dog and I automatically tick the box of diversity, okay. We are different. Legislation and policy means we are to be included. We have to be given access to public buildings. But do we belong? Now, there's a café on campus here that I go to quite often because I do feel like I belong. And when I think about the reasons why I feel like I belong it's because when I enter the space I'm already greeted by the staff, taken to a table, they help me with the QR code, they tell me what the specials are, all done without me asking. They offer my guide dog water, they tell me where my coffee is when they put it on the table. It's easy. I don't have to think. It's just a space where I can be. By contrast, if I think about a meeting I went to a couple of years ago - it was quite a big deal staff meeting. I rocked up to this meeting with my guide dog in hand, so to speak. As I entered the door and there were over 100 staff members there, I was given a piece of paper with print on it that looks like moving ants to my eyes and told that we would be discussing this today. Okay. Sat down. No acknowledgement of country in this prestigious meeting. In the first 10 minutes of the meeting were dedicated to a whole lot of photographs being put up on the screens which everybody was having a wonderful laugh about. I still don't know what those photographs were. So, yes, I was included but excluded by being given printed material, excluded culturally, excluded by not having anyone explain to me what those photographs were. There was no sense of belonging in that space and I ultimately left the meeting early. So what do we do? And I'm going to move on to the next slide. And I'm going to draw inspiration from the New South Wales Government guidelines for inclusive playground design, which sounds a bit bizarre but trust me it works quite well. They've got three key principles. And they're very simple, as I'm saying: can I get there? Can I play there? And can we stay? Now, they're three that we can hold on to pretty quickly. But how does this translate to higher education? Let's go to the next slide. So I had a bit of a muddle through these three and came up with some ideas: can we get there? So this talks about can I get to the university, the campus, the TAFE? Okay. Is the public transport there? Is the infrastructure there? Are there accessible parking spaces? Can I get there is also about can I actually get into a building? Are there hand railings? Is there wayfinding? Can I get there is about signage, number one. If I can't get there, there's no inclusion whatsoever, no belonging is possible. If we look at the second idea of can I - hang on, I have muddled myself with my dots on my computer - can we stay? Now, this is interesting. If I can get somewhere, you would think I would be able to stay, but not always. I need to be able to get access to grass for my guide dog. Something that's not considered often in design of universities or TAFEs. I know universities where I've had to go three, four blocks before I even get to a square metre of grass to be able to toilet my dog through the day. Can I get into my classrooms or office? Can I use the technology and online platforms? Can I study what I am passionate about? Can I enjoy my work? So this is the play. Can I study? Can I work? Is there a pathway from education to employment? And then - let me go down to the third one here - we start to talk about can I stay? Is my employment secure? Are my colleagues inclusive? Are my peers, my allies and my partners, do they get my needs? Are they curious? Am I having to use too much of physical, emotional or mental energy to deal with this place? It's too exhausting having a disability and then having to educate everyone at the same time. The other thing I will just give an example here we had a student at the University of Sydney, and it's not University of Sydney's fault, but she got 90 per cent through her degree and then discovered that the final exam that was set by an external agency that she needed to sit, she couldn't do. So she had to give up on her dream of being a teacher. So as we're wrapping up I want you to think about your own campuses, okay, your own offices, your libraries, your meeting rooms, classrooms. Also the places where we have our coffee, we gather socially. Can we get to them? Can we play in them? Can we stay in them? And I would like you to sort of take that away from this and sort of leave you with that and go back and have a look at your places and see if you can actually answer those questions positively. Hopefully we can. But to finish up before I run out of time because I know we're a little bit behind and I want to leave a bit of time for a couple of questions - is that what I will say here is that up until this year my Aboriginality and my disability have very much been separated for some reason or another in my head. And it's only recently that I've moved into the space of bringing them together. And as I brought these two together this is where the belonging has also come. So when I have the discrimination, for example, around the disability, which happens almost on a daily basis, my soft place alone is my Aboriginality, that's my strength. But the trickster in my Aboriginality says I have to disrupt, I have to change. I have to transform places so that they become places of belonging for people with disabilities. So this is becoming a trickier and trickier space to understand and probably an area of research that I’m now moving into. If you have ideas please let me know because I am still muddling this one through. But I will finish there and see if there's any questions people want to ask in the chat room.

ANTHONY: Thanks very much, Sheelagh? Do we have any questions for Sheelagh? If we do can you please put them in the Q&A. That’s a very powerful presentation and that idea, can we get there, can we play there and can we stay there is going to resonate with me for a long time. So thank you, Sheelagh.

SHEELAGH: You're most welcome.