PENNY: We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land where we are today. Both the Turrbal and the Jagera and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. Just a hello from Sheena and I. We’re both accessibility officers with TAFE QLD and we’re here to share a bit of an insight into the varied approaches that we used in the online VET training space at TAFE QLD. We’ve included a few examples of how we responded to the needs of our supported TAFE students. We were definitely exploring unchartered territory in an alien environment in 2020. Some of the learning outcomes from this presentation will be around you learning about delivery of practical courses remotely, hopefully gain an insight into innovation on the run and strategies that we use to support staff and students and how supported students were assisted to continue to learn, engage, participate and access training within this virtual training environment. With the shift to our online delivery of courses there were a few obvious challenges for us at TAFE QLD. Vocational training, of course, focuses on students building their practical skills and this usually requires a hands-on classroom with a purpose built environment, reflective of industry standards. So the big question was how could this be translated into the online environment without compromising these training packages and outcomes. How would we make sure that all students, but especially our supported students, would continue to engage, participate and learn. I’m just going to give you a quick snapshot before we launch into our discussion. A little bit about TAFE QLD. So we’re a leading provider of vocational education and training in QLD. We have over 50 campus locations and we deliver in excess of 500 courses from entry level through to Bachelor degrees. Currently we have around 109,000 students enrolled, including school-age students. We definitely take a flexible approach to learning and just remembering that the goal of VET is to prepare students for work through the delivery of practical work orientated skills and is driven by industry. Over to you, Sheena.

SHEENA: Yeah. And as Penny stated, TAFE takes on an inclusive approach to education and training, and this is essential due to our diverse population. We have diversity across age, cultures, language, connection to disability, medical conditions, employment status and educational experience. A lot of our students have varied numeracy – numeracy levels and the range of goals that our students come to TAFE for is large. Some will be long-term unemployment, some are gaining new skills and some are gaining acknowledgment for skills that they’ve gained over the years. Next slide, please. But when COVID hit, there was a crucial need to respond immediately so that our students could continue with our studies. We were given about a two to three-week leeway, turn around, for our students to be able to come back and engage on their student – in their studies from the online space. This had us on the run. Next slide, please. So it was very difficult to predict what challenges we might have. Wouldn’t it have been great if we could have all had a crystal ball to try to predict what challenges lay ahead for our students and our staff and in reflection we’ve identified some challenges that we saw. We had an increased need for intervention with our students due to change. Their accessibility plans may have needed some updating. Access to equipment and technology was something that restricted some of our students. We definitely had disruption to our course delivery and we also had to start adding COVID-safe training units to our courses. So a lot of students in hospitality and events were still providing – doing some practical study on campus as essential services but they had to come in and do their COVID-safe training units before they could go on in those studies. The other thing that happened for our vocational students was that their placements were cancelled. So a lot of places like aged care and hospitals and so forth stopped taking vocational students and also work experience placements. So a lot of our students had to put their placements on hold. So there definitely was a lot of changes that created an increase in anxiety in both our staff and our students. Next slide, please. With a goal to provide a safe and supported online space, we found it was key for our students to stay connected with our support team. Next slide, please. While we needed a few extra tools for the job, such as technology and mobile phones, our circle of support continued with accessibility services, counselling, Indigenous support and international support providing online services. Next slide and over to you, Penny.

PENNY: Thanks, Sheena. So we definitely had to immerse ourselves in learning new techniques for educational delivery and support for our students. An absolute key to providing this ongoing learning and delivery involved staff and student training, both at the same time and very quickly. So students needed to be confident enough and have access to the necessary equipment and skills to engage in online learning, which was going to be the new normal for all of them. So we were very involved in upskilling students and staff and we knew that we had to embrace and share the need for inclusive strategies for our diverse student population with our teachers. Next slide. So innovation on the run. One of the benefits of being a large training organisation such as TAFE QLD was it’s really set up to embrace changes in the style of training delivery. We have a great educator capability team that’s responsible for professional development for staff and they set what was called a one stop shop, designed to help staff and students transition to online learning more seamlessly, if that was possible. So they provided lots of Webinars for professional learning and continue to do so, of course. They shared information and training and access points and IT support around using new software and the online tools and they gave plenty of information on how to engage students with presentation styles and so forth, just to make sure that participation and access was the absolute key. So they made that available through our TAFE Connect environment, which is the online framework used by teachers to deliver course content for students. So the great thing here was that our accessibility team members were involved in online webinars as well in the development of resources for educators and more specifically around several relating to reasonable adjustments. So we were involved in presenting those with the educator capability team and some of the resources that we developed were embedded in the Connect framework resource for students. So I just wanted to share one of the little tools that we embraced, some of us. So our counsellors and accessibility officers found that Adobe Spark was a really quick and easy way to create some inclusive and engaging slide shows. It was a really quick little tool to use and to create some slide shows where we could communicate really effectively with a cross-section of students. So some of our slide shows were designed to support staff, others were specifically for students and these were shared globally with faculties to embed in their online learning management system, the Connect that I mentioned before. And the added benefit also was that we could share them by email to students. So some of our supported students struggle a little bit without help to access some of their Connect resources. So this kind of linking was very good to just directly email to the students. So as part of this PD Initiative and our involvement in the reasonable adjustments Webinars, we developed a quick reference guide and when I look at it now I think I probably need to add a few things but, you know, it was around sharing information about reasonable adjustments in the online space that teachers needed to know about, to make sure that our students were better engaged. Okay. Over to you, Sheena.

SHEENA: So I guess one of the things we really focused on was Zooming inclusively. Most now would be familiar with the Zoom platform but I had not heard of it myself before COVID and the lockdowns and is everything. So there was a lot of work investigating the inclusive features of the software and our support staff actually did a lot of work assisting in the trialling of how we could utilise some of these features with the use of recordings and so forth, the captioning, the break-out rooms and the sharing of the screens. I guess, you know, we also had a do a lot of remote interpreting as well, so that was a brand new thing we had to try to experiment with and we did that quite well for our students. Next slide, please. You know, with Zoom came the invitation into staff and students’ homes. So I myself spoke to a number of students from their cupboards, in their pyjamas, in their swim wear, so it became quite evident early on that we needed to create some Zoom netiquette for our students. So this is a little – this is some – a little bit of information that was provided to all of our students about what to do when you’re in a Zoom class or in a Zoom session with a study coach or in one of the break-out rooms. So, you know, we don’t want to be first in there seeing the family fight with the brother and the sister in the background. So this was something that we provided to all of our students who were provided with online coaching. Next slide, please. Unfortunately, you know, for Zoom it was not easy for everyone. We had a lot of students who it created a great lot of social anxiety for. Ones who may not have even had that in the classroom. When they came to the online classroom and they had to have their video with their face showing, some of them were just not turning up to classes or were just sitting in the room without actually checking in with their teacher. So teachers weren’t aware of the students being in class or not. So I actually created a little Adobe Spark video just to explain why students were feeling anxious and some of the strategies that teachers could use. So you might want to have a check of that one also. Next slide, please, Penny. So I guess I just wanted to provide a little bit of an insight into a, sort of, a case study and how we personalise our learning at TAFE QLD in the accessible space. I guess I have actually – I work with a number of deaf and hearing impaired students at my campus. So the initiating of remote interpreting was a major part of my work during COVID lockdown and as you may know making the environments accessible is one of the underpinning goals in our work as an accessibility officer and all of a sudden the students’ environment that they were in became a dual area. It was a virtual classroom and a Zoom into their home. So one of the major challenges was to ensure that my students had access to the required technology, equipment and skills to use these platforms. And now when I look back at the model I can see why I was feeling like, how am I going to work out this puzzle. I was needing to use my multiple locations to deliver remote interpreting for one student. So if I look at the locations, location 1 I was relying on the teacher coming from their home with their technology, their camera and their audio. Location 2 I had the interpreter location, relying on their technology, their view of the teacher and their audio, what they were receiving from the teacher. I had the location – location 3 was the Zoom classroom. So I had to rely on the online classroom platform. That relied on Internet speed, accessibility features and identification of if the student needed to pin the interpreter to their screen or not and location 4 was the most important, that was the student location, and there I was relying on their access to their technology. We found that, you know, my students needed multiple screens to actually access it effectively. So, you know, ensuring, like, they had their screen. They could look at their PowerPoint and one for their interpreter. Also, you know, they’d like to still have connection with their teacher as well. We noticed a few things such as fatigue. Fatigue was something that was a main thing that came in for our students who were utilising remote interpreting because it took a lot of concentration to stay connected to the two – to the dual screens, so we had to bring in some breaks and things like that. They were missing some visual cues from our teachers as well. So a lot of our deaf teachers rely on seeing the teacher’s physical interactions and they were missing part of that as well. So there were a lot of challenges in this space but we did – you know, the Auslan interpreting was delivered and we, sort of, worked with the students and came up with that. I’ll now pass it over to Penny who is going to give us another quick over case study.

PENNY: Thanks, Sheena. So here’s a bit of an example of how we supported some of our students on the autism spectrum in the online learning space. Look, the type and intensity of the support initially depended on the student needs, of course, and so for some students this ongoing support and encouragement had to continue throughout the online delivery phase and, you know, throughout their study time really. So the kinds of things that we found particularly important was review of the online etiquette overview. So teachers, you know, embrace this netiquette with their initial PowerPoints but we needed to remind, you know, students mostly throughout the online delivery that they needed to embrace that as well and reminded them. Practice in the online environment with support staff where possible was really important for our students to overcome their anxiety in accessing the learning. Assistance with entering the classroom was obviously something that we needed to do with some students. Clear consistent visuals and instructions in class by the educator. We talked a lot to our faculty teachers to see if they could include PowerPoints that, you know, had a bit of a purpose on the first slide, a little bit like our learning outcomes on this slide, I guess, and the consistency factor was really important for this population. Also for a lot of our supported students, I guess, and in class support by support staff. So our support staff, you know, stepped into the online classroom as if they were in a mainstream face-to-face classroom and took notes and communicated with students via chat in some instances. We needed to train students up on this – using the private chat sometimes and the break-out rooms. So that was an additional kind of thing that we needed to train them up on. So the follow-up was really equally an important part for all of our students but for these students, to keep them on track, reduce their anxiety levels, that could lead them to, you know, becoming disengaged and not participate in their class. Going on to the next slide then. So there was a bit of a fall out and we kind of knew this would happen. We had some predictions in our crystal ball that Sheena was discussing earlier on. We did have some instances where students became disengaged to the point where they withdrew from courses, so they dropped off the radar. They didn’t feel comfortable studying in the online space, despite our attempts to support them. Some students needed additional technology training in general. So for those students that really struggled with using computers and technology and word processors and so forth, and they are still out there, there was definitely an additional need for students to develop these skills. During the virtual delivery phase we did find that there were many students who needed to upskill on specific software programs that were – ones that they would usually use or ones that their faculty was using. So we did share the load a little bit with our learning skills teachers who were able to assist those students with that generic training and that’s a really good – great part of TAFE, an additional generic support for students, the learning skills staff. Lack of access to digital tools was a bit problematic for some students. So we did find that some of our supported students who just could not get access to digital tools withdrew from the courses, as they couldn’t come into TAFE closure time. Difficulty embracing change was an issue, especially for our anxious students and communicating and accepting different ways of engaging in the online class took out some of our students quite a significant period of time. Culminating in an increased level of mental health issues. Our counsellors were constantly dealing with students who were experiencing anxiety, as well as the social isolation of not being able to come into TAFE. For some of our students there was a different perception of what learning should look like. So, you know, learning in their eyes was coming to TAFE from a physical perspective and engaging in face-to-face classes, not studying at home. So that was a little bit of a problem for some of our students and, of course, the impact of finances, reduced finances and loss of jobs for many of our students meant that there were associated well-being issues for them. There were some positives. So I must say some of our faculties saw students, especially in the screen and media area, use their smart phones quite significantly to create their little movies, so that was a bit of a positive outcome there.

SHEENA: Yeah. That’s that flexibility that we see, Penny, with some of our TAFE delivery. Yeah. A lot of flexible learning, sort of, choices and things like that. So, yeah, like you sort of mentioned. Definitely with COVID we did see a digital divide, whether that was due to students not being familiar with technology or just not having access to technology and our ability to access technology, as an accessibility team, we just became – because everyone was after technical – technology to loan, we just were unable to gain loan technology. So for some of our students there really was a digital divide and I’m sure that there will be a lot of research in coming years over how that impacted, not only just students but the main population because without that connection to the Internet or, you know, mobile phones and things like that, it really does create a disadvantage for students. Next page, please. Like Penny mentioned, look, it did actually – out of something that created so many challenges for us, there really were – it also did create some opportunities. We have seen, I guess, an increase of enrolments in some of our courses at TAFE QLD. There’s been industry priority changes. So, you know, extra training in our nursing areas and things like that. I believe there were some other short packages to give students a taste on, you know, what they might be able to look to if they were going to be changing their job areas as well. We discovered diverse ways of communicating. So Zoom and so forth did actually open up a new world for some of our students. They – you know, they actually read their emails at times. We were able to zoom in and chat with them and stay connected, whether it was via phone. We now still provide Zoom appointments or phone appointments to do consultations with our students. So it has actually opened a lot more accessibility for our accessibility students to have connection to their support officers. You know, we did – there was a lot of collaboration as well between the VET and tertiary sectors. So there were a lot of online Webinars and Zoom meet-ups around strategies that people were doing to support their students. So, you know, in a way we continued to find these new ways to connect and support our students and I think this is actually going to – just going to keep moving. It’s opened our mind and we’re thinking outside the box and coming up with creative ideas for our students when they come to us with complex support needs, which is a bonus, of course. Next slide, please, Penny. So to infinity and beyond. So we have developed now all these resources, accessible resources and have this new knowledge of what it’s like to learn online and, you know, it’s so great to be here today to be able to share what we looked at and, you know, we’re looking to others in our sector to see how others dealt with the situation as well, to give us some ideas to work with our students. We are still continuing remote interpreting with a number of our students, which has actually opened up a lot more availability for us with the shortage of Auslan interpreters in Australia at the moment. So we can now get interpreters remotely into our classrooms, which is great for some of our students, so they can come and participate in a full-time course, rather than just when we have Auslan availability. You know, the online class delivery is probably going to continue for a while. We have most of our courses have some degree of online delivery in their course delivery, so there may be one or two units that are delivered online. So students will still stay connected to those skills and become more comfortable in that platform and, yeah, so just, like, gaining familiarity. Everyone is more familiar with Zoom. Everyone is more familiar with going online. Next time it’s not going to be – if we do end up having to go fully back online again, it’s not going to be such a rush. We have some things in place now. I mean, we didn’t know that we would be in this place in 2019 and here we are now with all these new resources and learnt knowledge and new skills and knowing how we can actually react to change and support our students. Okay. Next slide, please. This is just something that I, sort of, wrote on reflection of 2020 as an accessibility officer, I guess. So analysing how we respond to change and seeing how we can continue to learn and thrive in uncertain times becomes a different personal learning opportunity for each student. So how those of us work in the accessibility support environment, engage with students, about coping with change is also something to explore when reflecting on 2020. We both thank you for your time and please do not hesitate to get in contact with myself or Penny should you have any questions or an insight or just to say, you know, I’ve been there and this is my insight as well.

PENNY: Thanks very much for listening, everyone.

SHEENA: Thank you.