AMII DEMANUELE: And we are back for our last presentation of the day. We are about to hear from Dr Jennifer Smith‑Merry, she is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of Sydney. Dr Smith‑Merry has strong connections to academic policy and service audiences in Australia and internationally. She has published over 65 peer reviewed articles and book chapters, alongside a large number of reports for national and international governments, including leading the development of the Mind the Gap report into the NDIS and the 2018 New South Wales Disability, Disadvantage and VET Study that she is about to present about right now. Thank you very much, Dr Jennifer.

DR JENNIFER SMITH-MERRY: Hi everyone. I'm looking very summery because, actually, I'm on a holiday right now in very sunny and warm Cairns but I'm very happy to be presenting to you today despite my holiday. The reason I'm really happy to be presenting is that a lot of you ‑ some of you have actually participated in this research. And those who haven't, a lot of you have shown a lot of interest and support for this project and the ATEND network has ‑ I think they were the first group that we met with at the start of the project and have been involved since in various points along the way. So, the project that I'm talking about today is one that was…First of all, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land - my apologies for not doing that earlier - on which all of the University of Sydney campuses stand and pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country. The project was originally funded by the New South Wales Department of Industry. And they were really interested in understanding ‑ well, they wanted to improve the outcomes for people with disability who were accessing vocational education and training in New South Wales because what they found was that people were cycling through VET qualifications all the time. So, they were doing a qualification and another and another and another and they weren't moving forward from VET and into employment. You know, that caused them some consternation because the whole aim of VET for them is to improve employment. Whether that should be the whole idea of VET is something we actually looked at in the project as well. But they were concerned that they were funding this program of education for people with a disability but it wasn't actually helping people to get jobs. So, there was a cycling through qualifications. So, it was part of an overall strategy they had to try and improve disability employment. Another part of it was the Employable Me series that a lot of you would have seen on ABC and various other programs. But they were really driven by this interest in improving employment outcomes for people with disability. But they were also interested in disadvantage more generally. And so, while we took ‑ we looked at disadvantage very broadly, we focused in on disability as a case study. And so, they were interested in what the skills and employment outcomes were from people's engagement with vocational education and training and how can Smart and Skilled ‑ so Smart and Skilled is the funding framework that sits above vocational education and training and it funds fee free courses for people with disability for qualifications that are that Smart and Skilled lists. So, they wanted to improve engagement and outcomes. As well as this cycling through of courses, there was a higher dropout rate of people with disability and disadvantage from vocational education and training too. So, they wanted us to find out what was happening. We started off with a literature review to see what had been done already because there's no point in having a research project that reinvents the wheel, and there has been some really good and important vocational education and training research that's come out of Australia, particularly from the NCVET team. We also did analysis of datasets on disability and vocational education training. The government gave us their datasets. We did 71 interviews of people with disability, family members, carers and vocational education and training providers as well as employers. That's what I'm going to talk about today, the outcomes. So, what is the experience of people with disability currently involved in VET in Australia ‑ in New South Wales, sorry. Okay. So, there's a lot of text on these slides, you don't need to read them. I'm going to talk through the main points but the slides will be available to you if you want to look in more detail at the quotations or any of the points as well. There is a report, a very large report that sits behind this. It will be released by the New South Wales Government but it hasn't been released and it's not publicly available at the moment. We will publish also from this as well in journals but the report will have everything in it when it's finally released. So, we found that when we talked to people with disability and family members, they were actually very positive about their experiences with VET. They really found that they got a lot out of the experiences. They really appreciated the fee free courses that were provided through Smart and Skilled and they found that the courses were stimulating and interesting and did provide them with the skills that they wanted. I will get to the bits that need to be improved in a minute. Students chose that because it allowed them to test different career paths and interests without ‑ you know, without basically paying out a lot of money. People often came to VET without a really clear idea of what they wanted to do. Now, that’s sort of a problem, people need to be able to know what a course entails before they start on it but it did ‑ people felt that it gave them flexibility and they could start something and work out whether it was for them or not. It allowed students to build their skills gradually. So, going through different certificate levels, they were able to build up skills in areas they didn't have, that they hadn't gotten through schooling or other experience. There were flexible learning pathways and a low bar to enrolment. So, they were not ‑ you know, for example, they didn't have to get a HSC result. A more problematic reason is because Disability Employment Services or Centrelink might request it. So, people were sometimes going into vocational education and training not for themselves but because they were being requested to by Disability Employment Services or Centrelink as part of a mutual obligation. What we found was that, in the enrolment process, disclosure was really important for getting the right supports. That came from both the vocational education specialists and also people with disability. So, for the people working within VET - basically, if people weren't telling the staff that they had a disability then they weren't getting the right supports and they might be finding out down the track when people were already failing. That experience of failing might mean that people drop out or feel that they are not being successful. Sometimes, it was months down the track and they were not finding out and that meant that they ‑ the staff felt bad because they weren't able to actually assist people who genuinely needed assistance. However, people with disability were sometimes very reluctant to disclose at the point of enrolment and that was because of stigma in society. They didn't want to be stigmatised by their class mates. They didn't know what they were going to get if they disclosed disability. Some people had had poor experiences where they had disclosed disability in the past but they hadn't actually got any real assistance, and so they thought, "Well, what's the point in disclosing?" Or they felt that they hadn't got any real assistance. So, people are avoiding telling for those reasons. When people were talking about what they really liked about vocational education and training from their own perspective – so, it was about the effectiveness of personalised support. So, feeling that VET staff were really understanding who they were, understanding their learning needs and then building a relationship with them, but also building a relationship with students as well, where the whole class were sort of supporting each other, whether they have a disability or not. They enjoyed the vocational outcomes, so not being, I suppose, distracted by other things and having this real vocational goal in mind. Where accommodations were accessible, they found it really helpful. Also, people talked about understanding ‑ you know, being introduced to new types of assistive technology and being helped with using them, which was generally helpful in their lives beyond their education. Disability support provider staff working in VET who were doing the organisation of materials, they found them very helpful. Also, exposure to work. That was really something that came across really, really strongly, that the exposure to work that some people got through their vocational education was invaluable because a lot of people with disability were coming into the qualification with no exposure to work at all, they felt uneasy then to take the next step and go into employment. So, it was very helpful to have that as well. So, the key things here are relationships, personalisation and links to employment. They talked about people ‑ I think this is really key, is getting a traineeship or apprenticeship in high school. I think what we're getting at here this sort of ‑ people talked about the need for there to be a good pathway from school into VET and then into employment. Or people felt that they would sort of fall off and not ‑ I don't know, not be enabled to move forward and into employment. Support for course choice was really needed and I talked about that before. So, people ‑ because there's an online enrolment now, a lot of people are not getting any sort of support for course choice. And where they are getting support, it's often coming from places like Disability Employment Services who may not have - you know, may be sort of ticking off numbers of people that go into a qualification or a certain level of qualification. So, it might be driven more by them than by people and that came across in our interviews, unfortunately. So, it really needs to be a supportive process, there needs to be support for course choice and it needs to be personalised. So, online course selection is problematic. One of our recommendations was that they have more opportunities for in‑person course choice and familiarisation of what the course will actually entail. And pacing and accommodation was really important. So, where it wasn't offered, this was a real stumbling block and this ‑ there really needed to be pacing of courses. People talked about their - you know, when we think about disability, often, we only see disability but, actually, there's a layering of disadvantage that people have to deal with often. And so, some people ‑ so it became more problematic for people to finish courses when they not only had disability but were living in poverty. That made the fee free nature of the courses really important but it also meant that there were other stumbling blocks that people had such as accessing computers, for example. For remote learning, that really means that people with disability can be locked out of vocational education and training. People who are from non‑English speaking backgrounds or who themselves have caring responsibilities. So, for example, people with disability who are also caring for children, this could limit their involvement in VET. And then other stages of life were tricky as well. I think we need to think about this layering of disadvantage, not just see, "Okay, there's a person with disability so we deal with their disability." We need a personalised approach that can actually just deal with the multi-layered nature of disability, so, really individualised approaches. Also, I think that the next quotation is about stigma and discrimination. They don't believe that they can do it. Again, that's out in the community and I'm quoting here. It's all that stigma and discrimination, all that sort of thing. It erodes the belief that they can do it. A lot of people come into vocational education training with all of this stigma and discrimination that they've had to deal with through schooling and through the community. So, there's a lot of self‑doubt about being able to do the qualification. Staff were really predisposed to help people. So, people felt that staff were trying to do their best, but they needed more expert guidance in some ways. People were not getting qualifications in disability or they weren't getting any sort of training in disability but then they were having to sort of make do in the classroom. Also, being in a rural and regional area was ‑ the system doesn't work in the same way for people with disability. There were some benefits in that people could be more connected to the community, but living in a rural and regional area, people didn't get to pursue the courses that they wanted to do and they weren't able to travel to big cities often to be able to do that qualification. This quote here, “They said you need to do a three‑year course to become a florist. I did think about that but they said it's not done in Bathurst. You have to go to Sydney." This page here, which has a lot of quotations on it, I'm not going to read them all, I'm just going to read a couple, but what it's getting across is that there needs to be staff who are trained in disability in each course. Because, otherwise, you know, staff are going to sometimes perpetuate the stigma and discrimination that people have had to deal with. They're not going to understand mental illness, for example. They're going to draw on what they see in society rather than the individual and their needs. There was a feeling that people were hired for their skills but they didn't really have any qualifications in disability. So, here is a quotation here. “It's bad because there's no support there. So, basically, (1) TAFE,” ‑ not one TAFE but the first TAFE location. “Basically, the disability coordinator has got on board and gave her all the access she needs, provided the support person. But when we went to another location of TAFE, the first thing we did, we went to see the disability coordinator and he said, ‘We don't have funding. She's an adult. She can do everything herself.’ It was pretty much a roadblock straight away. ‘You're an adult. You should have NDIS funding for this.’ And I go, hold on this is TAFE, nothing to do with NDIS. So, yeah, basically put a roadblock straight away." So, it really depended on the organisation whether people got the accommodations and support that they needed and that's significantly problematic. So, we've got a system where some people are getting what they need and some people aren't. Often, the smaller organisation, the registered training organisations, which might run only a small number of qualifications, they really didn't even ‑ they didn't have the funding to be able to support people with disability. So, connections between schools, local communities and VET organisations are important for involvement and individualisation. This really came across in all parts of the study. Connections were essential for getting people into vocational education and training and the right course. So, there had to be good connections between, say, Disability Employment Services, Centrelink, disability services and vocational education or schools and vocational education and training. Plus, to get people into employment, there needed to be good connections between disability support services, vocational education providers and employers. So, we need to see these connections being built up more around the system. They exist in some areas and this is where, I think, in rural areas it was ‑ there was a benefit because there was a smaller community so people were more connected already. But in some areas, it just wasn't happening at all, there wasn't that connection and VET providers were saying, "Well, we don't connect with disability support providers because that's all done by the NDIS" or "that happens in the individual's personal life and we don't connect with them.” That was problematic as well, particularly as a lot of people don't actually have access to NDIS as well. For rural and regional issues, few courses were available and there was limited flexibility. There was a range of employers - was limited. So, people didn't really have a chance to have a career, which, I suppose, happens more generally in rural and regional areas already. I think I will just make that point clear across the whole of the project, is that often we set the bar too low for people with disability. We say, "You get this qualification and get into any job that you can," rather than, "What career do you want and how as vocational educators do we give you the skills for your career and then how do we enable you to get a job?" So, more generally in the employment space, how is the government enabling people to go with disability and follow a career? We're setting the bar too low. We're setting the bar at any job, any qualification, any job. We're not thinking, “Who is this individual and what career are they desiring?” And I think that sort of comes across in a lot of the rhetoric around disability employment. For people in rural and regional areas, there was a long wait for supports as well. So, people weren't getting supports, and that was basically because the support services were way too stretched. There's a quote here, "Teachers certainly are quite skilled at all of that but it still can be difficult. You're in Bathurst with 10 students and you've got two in Cobar, two in Bourke and two in somewhere else. It's very difficult to provide support." Okay, so what did we recommend based on this? We recommended collaborative networks be developed and that the Government work out how to fund that. That there was more universal or inclusive design for learning so that people didn't have to disclose. So, it's problematic, we would say, "You've got to disclose so we can offer you supports." What we should be doing is offering supports that are generally good for accessibility and that people can use those supports if they don't want to disclose. Peer support. So, working ‑ using peer support more as a model throughout the system so that people can visualise other people with disability succeeding in their qualifications and then, you know, sustaining other people through their learning as well. Training in disability for all staff in VET. This was so important and it will stop, you know, the patchiness as well. Increasing work experience, because that just came across as so essential. I'm not looking at it in this presentation but our employment data really showed that work experience was very essential for people ending up getting a job but it was also essential for the employers as well. So, when employers have had the chance of having someone with disability in their organisation, they're more likely to employ people with disability and on an ongoing basis. Having centres of excellence and local champions that are able to foster or develop new ways of disability education in VET and show that off to the rest of the system, show how it's done and enable that to be developed within other organisations. And the Government as a provider or contractor of regional supports for local areas to ensure equity and access and support. So, what I mean by this is that because some organisations are just so small that they cannot sustain disability support staff, what we might need to do is have regional supports that might be based in, for example, a TAFE that can then be accessible to students in a region who might be not students of that TAFE, or provided not through a TAFE but through some other organisation, who then is able to support students so that they're getting the support that they need to get through their qualification, whether they go through a small organisation or a large TAFE or whether they're in a regional or a rural area so that we don't have this really uneven access to support. So, what did we come to in the end? Well, the Government has a lot of tools available to it in the vocational education and training policy space, I suppose. I don't like using that word but ‑ yeah. The Government can do a lot of things in relation to vocational education and training but what it doesn't have the ability to do much for is employment. So, that's the really tricky bit. We can set up VET so that it's fantastically supportive of people with disability but unless we work really creatively to get the employment market right, it's only going to be one part of the puzzle. I'm going to end my presentation there. I hope you've enjoyed it. If you want to get in contact with me - if you want to get in contact with me and I will let you know when that report is available, if you want the slides, let me know.

AMII: Thank you very much, Jennifer. We actually had a question in the chat box from Brendon and he was wondering if your research covers RTOs as well or just TAFE?

DR JENNIFER SMITH-MERRY: It does indeed. So, we did an equal number of RTOs and TAFE interviews, and so - yeah, it covers both of them. Originally, it was ‑ we had mainly TAFE and we thought this is not very representative, so we went back and then tried to find some RTOs to talk to. I think, maybe one of the things that may skew the data a bit is that RTOs who are very small and actually weren't very interested in disability, we wouldn't have been chatting to them because we wouldn't have been able to access them. So, that's a limitation, I think, that you need to consider.

AMII: Thank you very much. Really insightful. I love qualitative research to hear the voices of the problems that are being experienced by the people that are experiencing them and then so important to use that in basing our solutions. Thank you very much for sharing with us, and as I can see in the chat box, there are definitely people who are interested in seeing your report once it's finished.