

# Response to the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

## Introduction

The Victorian Government thanks the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee (the committee) for its *Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability* (the Report), and all stakeholders who made submissions to the inquiry. This work will support the government's continued efforts to improve disability inclusion at TAFE.

The committee's report details how students with disability can be supported to access and fully participate in TAFE in Victoria. The report made 31 findings and 44 recommendations which can be broadly structured around three themes:

- supporting transition and commencement,
- improving participation, retention and completion, and
- enhancing system-wide performance.

This direction is welcome and the Victorian TAFE network is committed to creating an environment where all people thrive. The TAFE network is continuing significant work to improve access to training for students with disability.

Underpinned by a collective vision for inclusion agreed to in 2018, the TAFE network commissioned a review in 2019, *Improving access and achievement for students with disability* (2019 student review).

In partnership with the Department of Education and Training (the department), the TAFE network is continuing to take action to address feedback from the 2019 student review. There is much in common between the themes identified by the committee and the TAFE network's approach, in particular with:

- **supporting transition and commencement** – using Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) more effectively and expanding outreach programs to support the transition of students with disability into TAFE courses.
- **improving participation, retention and completion** – establishing mentoring and peer support networks and programs, supporting pathways into work, wellbeing-focused initiatives, and andragogy-focused recommendations.
- **enhancing system-wide performance** – improving teacher capability through professional development and training.

While it is acknowledged that there is still much work to be done, there is positive work happening at many TAFEs which highlights how students with disability across the sector more broadly can be better supported.

The TAFE network is continuing to strengthen collaboration across the sector to embed a culture of inclusion throughout the network. This includes expanding current best practice within the TAFE network that speaks directly to the committee's recommendations in response to the 2019 student review.

## Our vision for the Victorian TAFE network

Victorian TAFEs are open and inclusive educational institutes that provide services and support to ensure students with disability can participate in the social and economic life of their communities.

TAFEs provide jobs for members of the local community, as well as gathering spaces, library services, support for people looking to develop the skills they need to find work and skilled workers to boost local industry.

The TAFE network is at the centre of the Victorian training system. It has a strong focus on preparing students for employment and delivering training that helps people get the jobs they want.

This focus aligns with the committee's observations about the positive impact of employment on an individual's wellbeing, which said "Meaningful employment creates financial independence and improves physical and mental wellbeing".

The committee also notes the importance of TAFE as a pathway to meaningful employment and the government is encouraged by the work TAFEs are doing to improve support for students with disability to access and commence training.

The government and the TAFE network understand the need for individualised support for students. People can experience many different types of disability, including co-existing disabilities.

Some common forms of disability for TAFE students with disability include:

- mental illness
- neurological conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- learning, intellectual, physical, medical, hearing, vision and developmental disorders.

As a collective, the TAFE network welcomes and supports students with diverse and co-existing disability by providing individualised supports and services targeted to their specific needs. In light of this, the government welcomes the committee's engagement with different types of disability and is pleased to be able to respond to this important report.

In 2021, the Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) was established to ensure all Victorians can access the training they need to find a good, secure job. Building on the work of the Skills Commissioner, this will further drive innovation across the sector, delivering better planning for Victoria's future training needs and providing an integrated approach to the quality of teaching and training. The VSA will also lead the development of an annual Victorian Skills Plan to better guide our state's training delivery, in consultation with stakeholders (including participants in the VET system).

The Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery (OTCD) is another key part of these continuing reforms. The OTCD was established in 2021 and has oversight of programs and activities designed to support all students, including those with disability, as they progress in their studies.

The OTCD will drive network improvements by promoting collaboration and best practice across the TAFE network. This approach involves acknowledging, celebrating and elevating the leadership of each TAFE in particular areas of expertise.

For example, The Gordon has been a leader in improving access and inclusion for students with disability. The Gordon chairs the Disability Inclusion Working Group (a sub-group of the TAFE Network Leaders Forum), which provides advice to government on collaborative and innovative approaches to inclusive training delivery and leads the network in a number of inclusion initiatives (as outlined further below). The government is confident that The Gordon's leadership will continue to support improvements in the TAFE experience for students with disability.

## Strengthening disability inclusion

In 2022, delivery of the TAFE Disability Inclusion Strategy will build on our progress to date, with support from the committee's inquiry findings. This strategy will support greater consistency and coherence in supporting students with disability to engage with training.

The OTCD and the TAFE network will also have the opportunity to learn from the government's ongoing *Disability Inclusion in Victorian Schools* reform, which introduces a strengths-based approach for how schools identify and respond to student needs. These learnings will contribute to improving the TAFE experience for students with disability.

This response presents an overview of how the committee's recommendations are being addressed through an ongoing agenda across the Victorian TAFE Network.

As also noted by the committee, it is important to recognise the significant impact of COVID-19 on TAFEs. Amid the ongoing pandemic, all TAFEs have worked hard to ensure that students with disability are not further disadvantaged and are able to access, participate and achieve their training goals.

### Holmesglen supporting students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

Holmesglen pivoted quickly to remote learning using Webex, the online learning platform Brightspace and web-based resources. Teaching faculties and all areas of the institute embraced the opportunity to innovate and develop online resources, from enrolment processes through to final exams, making use of technology to enable access for all students, including those with a disability, such as embedded Auslan interpreting and captioning.

The remote learning experience has been transformational in many respects. Many students with disability, including learning difficulties, social anxieties and/or auditory processing, found a reduced sensory load benefited their study. Access to recordings of classes enabled the review of teaching delivery, and the ability to reinforce learning and flexibility of access if a scheduled class was missed.

The Disability Support Service, working with the institute's Learning Skills Centre, provided individual, introductory and practice sessions for students new to, or challenged by, the technology. The Disability Support team increased additional contact with and support for teaching faculties, students, their families, carers, case management and support staff who support students learning at home.

Educational Support Staff joined students via Webex in remote classes to provide one-on-one participation support, in addition to an increase of individualised study support sessions. Some study sessions were able to have the unit teacher present for part of the session to provide instruction/content specific teaching for the student. Flexibility was increased as, without physical campus boundaries, Educational Support Staff could be allocated across classes.

## Supporting transition and commencement

The government welcomes the committee's 11 recommendations under this theme.

The TAFE network continues to focus on mechanisms to further improve equity of access and inclusion across Victoria. This work is focused on developing greater collaboration across the TAFE network and leveraging current best practice and leadership to ensure that when students with a disability engage with TAFEs, they have a consistent and supportive experience.

This work will directly address the committee's recommendations for improving the way that TAFE Disability Liaison Officers work. This will enable earlier identification of students with disability and more targeted support for individual students.

## Transition into TAFE

Across the TAFE network, a number of programs and activities exist to support students with disability to transition into TAFE and commence training. These programs and activities respond to the differing needs of students with disability, as TAFEs work flexibly to meet the specific needs of the communities and individual students they support.

TAFEs deliver outreach programs to connect with students with disability at a variety of educational settings. The government acknowledges that more could be done to ensure a consistent approach across the TAFE network.

The OTCD is working closely with the TAFE network to improve transition and commencement support. It will continue to work with TAFEs and the school sector to ensure that students with disability are set up for success.

### GOTAFE Skills and Jobs Centres career counselling and course advice

Thomas\* visited GOTAFE Skills and Jobs Centre seeking advice on what courses to study to improve his employment prospects. Thomas wanted to follow in the footsteps of family and join the air force, but a degenerative eye disease rendered him legally blind. Thomas' vision impairment affected his ability to work and caused emotional and financial frustration.

The Skills and Jobs Centre facilitated a career voyage assessment with Thomas. This assessment identified Thomas' knowledge on aircrafts. Thomas also had advanced computer skills. The Skills and Jobs Centre discussed designing websites and online games as relevant areas of study. The Reconnect program assisted with financial costs for Thomas' study and provided case management during transition to study. Thomas successfully completed a Certificate IV in Graphic Design and went on to complete studying the Diploma in Graphic Design.

Thomas reported being well supported by GOTAFE, especially during class time where adjustments were made to ensure a clear view of any visually presented work.

– \*Name has been changed

The TAFE Network is working collaboratively through the Disability Inclusion Working Group to improve the campus experience for students with disability who experience sensory challenges.

This includes examining ways to improve the inclusivity and accessibility of low sensory environments and spaces and creating inclusive common areas where all students can mingle together comfortably. These initiatives will particularly support transition and participation for students with co-existing disability, especially those with autism spectrum disorders or mental health impacts. This exploratory work is in response to recommendations within the 2019 student review and is aligned to the committee's recommendations and findings around improving inclusivity for students experiencing sensory challenges in a TAFE environment.

### Relationships between the TAFE network and Learn Local Organisations

The committee found that Learn Local Organisations (LLOs) are supportive and inclusive spaces that provide accessible learning environments for students with disability. The TAFE network is committed to ensuring that students with disability can access the supports they need to succeed in course selection, enrolment, placement and study through improved and extended partnerships between TAFEs and LLOs.

There are good examples of relationships between TAFEs and LLOs that leverage LLOs as an inclusive and accessible learning environment for students with disability. These relationships are very important to the improvement of access to TAFE by students with disability and form part of the continuing work program. The OTCD will continue to work with the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board to ensure that these relationships become even more

commonplace across the state. This activity is consistent with goals contained in *The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020–25 Minister Statement* which identifies and values the importance of these partnerships.

### **Tiered Training and Transition Program – Bridge Darebin and Melbourne Polytechnic**

The Tiered Training and Transition to Work program is a 6-module program designed to step students through the various stages from leaving school or education into employment. This program has been designed to assist students who are neurodiverse or have mental illness or high anxiety issues.

This program provides practical skills, knowledge and experience to undertake work-related skills and gain the experience they need to secure employment. As part of the program, students visit Melbourne Polytechnic's St Georges Training Restaurant to learn about TAFE culinary training programs. This not only exposes them to further pathways through TAFE, but also builds familiarity and comfort with the space.

When students visit Melbourne Polytechnic, they learn about the accredited pathways to further qualifications. They also have an opportunity to work in the student café at Melbourne Polytechnic. TAFE personnel will conduct job-readiness interviews with students. If students continue with study options, they are supported by the Skills and Job Centre at the TAFE for the duration of their study journey.

Students are identified for participation both by Bridge Darebin and Melbourne Polytechnic through the strong working relationship established between Bridge Darebin and Melbourne Polytechnic's Skills and Jobs Centre. Students are referred by the Skills and Jobs Centre into the Tiered Training and Transition Program. In particular, participating students are those with neurological diversity, such as autism or schizophrenia, who may need a stepping-stone program with additional support before transitioning into TAFE.

## **Improving participation, retention and completion**

The government welcomes the committee's 18 recommendations under this theme, which is closely aligned to work underway across the TAFE network to address similar findings in the 2019 student review. Across the TAFE network, there are examples of good work to ensure that TAFE staff are well-equipped to provide reasonable adjustments for students with disability. The Government acknowledges the committee's recommendation that this be addressed in a consistent manner across the network, under guidance and leadership from the OTCD.

The government is pleased to report that the OTCD's renewed approach to network management will facilitate a joined-up approach to work to address consistency in practice across the TAFE network.

### **Free TAFE**

The introduction of Free TAFE has been successful in attracting more students with disability to study at Victorian TAFEs. In its first two years, Free TAFE enabled 41% more students with disability to commence a course. While the impact of COVID-19 has impacted student numbers, Free TAFE will continue to provide training access to more students, particularly those facing barriers, to improve their wellbeing and increasing their independence.

While these numbers are encouraging, the overall percentage of students with disability as a proportion of overall Free TAFE student numbers has remained steady at approximately 9%. This demonstrates that the work underway to address the committee's findings is key to improving

participation, retention and completion for students with disability, so they can gain the right skills to pursue a career pathway that is right for them.

## **Staff Training and Professional Development**

A number of the committee's recommendations under this theme are related to staff training and professional development. These recommendations align closely with those identified through the 2019 student review, including a focus on developing teacher capability to teach students with disability.

The TAFE network, led by The Gordon as chair of the Disability Inclusion Working Group, and in collaboration with the OTCD as network manager, are using the results of a TAFE professional development survey undertaken in mid-2021 to identify ways improve professional development of TAFE teachers and staff.

It is important to ensure teachers are equipped to use flexible teaching approaches, understand the needs of students and developing soft skills for communications and interacting with them.

This work involves consideration of how TAFE teachers and staff can be better resourced and trained to support and teach students with varied or co-existing disability (from mental health, neurological, learning and intellectual disorders to physical, medical, hearing and vision disabilities). The TAFE network is considering ways to tailor training to the different needs arising from the various types of disability people experience.

The TAFE network is also working to improve staff induction processes about the nature of disability inclusive workplaces and their right to access workplace adjustments. This includes providing staff with training opportunities in how to advise and support students with disability to participate.

## **Support Services and Programs**

Providing appropriate supports for students with disability enables them to succeed in achieving their educational and employment goals. The TAFE network, in conjunction with the OTCD, is exploring ways to target existing programs more effectively and considering how students with disability can be better supported – particularly those at risk of non-completion.

In addition to wrap-around support programs, the TAFE network is also leveraging targeted mentoring and peer support programs. This includes the professionalisation of mentors, an initiative which directly addresses the committee's comments around the importance of peer support and mentoring in improving the self-confidence of students with disability.

The wellbeing of students is key to ensuring success in their training. The government is encouraged by the work the TAFE network has undertaken to improve student health and wellbeing services and supports, particularly for students with disability. This work includes looking at innovative models to improve student mental health through actively involving students in developing new initiatives.

By involving students in the decisions around service, students gain a sense of ownership and empowerment, which further serves to build confidence. For example, GOTAFE is planning to include a student with disability as a student representative on its Student Council. It has also renamed its disability support service to Equitable Learning Support, after consultation with students with disability who advised that the original name was stigmatising and marginalising.

The TAFE network is accessing resources other organisations have used to promote mentally healthy workplaces and promote an inclusive culture. Together with the mentoring initiative outlined earlier, the Disability Inclusion Working Group is promoting peer support initiatives and the involvement of students in decision-making to develop an inclusive education community across the TAFE network.

## Technology and Environment

Technology is so much a part of modern life that to fully participate, students with disability also need to be able to access and use emerging technology. TAFEs continue to be innovative in their use of the latest technology, where possible, and has potential to expand further in the use of assistive and experience-enhancing technology.

As noted above, it is the government's intention that the TAFE network is seen holistically as a safe and inclusive space for all Victorians, including students with disability, regardless of their background or needs. This includes ensuring that TAFE campuses are set up to accommodate students' needs.

### **Bendigo Kangan Institute (BKI) reasonable adjustments and engagement with industry to support students**

BKI's Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) is supporting a student who has an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI); she is currently undertaking a Certificate II in Animal Studies. She has been working with the DLO, who has coordinated wrap-around support with internal and external services such as her Disability Job Network Provider, private psychologist, and occupational therapist (OT). This student requires various reasonable adjustments due to her cognitive ability, memory, retention and fatigue.

The DLO has organised an in-class tutor that supports and motivates her throughout class and study time. The DLO liaised with educators to record lectures, sending work directly to the student's email and implementing larger fonts to avoid eye strain and potential fatigue. The Animal Studies delivery portfolio allows the student to have extra time to finish assessments to ensure she does not become anxious or stressed.

The DLO liaises directly with this student's ABI private psychologist and OT to ensure the student manages the course load and content and arranges speciality equipment recommendations, such as using a stand-up desk. This private psychologist and OT also attend campus for appointments with the student. They use confidential counselling rooms to conduct these assessments, ensuring the student can comfortably juggle study and psychological support.

As the student approaches completion of her course, the DLO will link her with other appropriate services such as the Skills and Jobs Centre to support her with a tailored career and pathway plan, support with further studies and links to local industry and employment.

## Work placements and employment

The Report highlights the important role that work placements fulfil in supporting students with disability on their employment pathway. This provides students with disability with exposure to employers and vice versa, which can help to break down barriers – such as an employer's lack of understanding of how a student with disability can work in their industry.

Current activity within the TAFE network is looking to grow programs to employ students with disability within TAFE via traineeships, work experience, apprenticeships or placements that can lead to a learner successfully attaining their qualification and securing employment. This includes promoting links with industry through methods such as inviting industry representatives to speak to classes.

### **Holmesglen Institute's Integrated Practical Placement Program**

Holmesglen's Integrated Practical Placement (IPP) program embraces diversity in the workplace and provides a unique opportunity for young people living with a learning or intellectual disability to bridge the gap between studying and finding employment. Current partners include Royal Children's Hospital, Royal Melbourne Hospital and Monash Active. The Institute has been awarded

National Disability Insurance Scheme funding to mentor 2 other TAFE institutes to implement a similar IPP model.

Unlike other placement programs, the real benefit of this model is in the 3-pronged approach between Holmesglen, the partner organisation and WISE Employment, a disability employment service – each offering support and guidance to students from placement right through to employment.

The benefits of the program for students are practical hands-on learning in a professional workplace, personal on-the-job placement support and employment coaches to assist with employment transition through WISE Employment and graduating with a 22302VIC Certificate I in Work Education from Holmesglen. Crucially, 80% of graduates of the program have gained mainstream employment.

Individual TAFEs within the TAFE network are demonstrating leadership in their practice to drive system improvements. The OTCD is working closely with these TAFEs to leverage their success, and improve access, participation, completion and retention of students with disability across the network.

## Enhancing system-wide performance

The committee's 15 recommendations under this theme are focused on approaching improvements at a network or system level. The strategic nature of these recommendations, and the overarching theme, are aligned to the OTCD's network management approach to engagement with TAFEs.

Students should be able to approach any TAFE in the network with confidence that they will receive consistent support and quality of training regardless of their location, needs or accessibility requirements.

The OTCD was established in 2021 to strengthen consistency and collaboration as the mainstays of the TAFE network, by looking at ways to deliver improvements and enhancements across the whole network, rather than TAFE-by-TAFE.

A key part of the renewed approach to TAFEs through the OTCD includes setting clear, specific network priorities. One of these priorities is that TAFEs have a focus on supporting all students to achieve successful outcomes, including those facing barriers to education and employment. While this priority is broader than students with disability, they are a key cohort for achieving this priority.

To successfully support all Victorians to get the skills they need to get a meaningful job or move into further training, the TAFE network has to focus on sharing good practice and what works best to improve outcomes, including enrolment and completion rates, for all students, but particularly those who face barriers.

### The TAFE Network Leaders Forum: Disability Inclusion Working Group

The Disability Inclusion Working Group has been established to develop advice and leads on implementation and strategic objectives in response to the 2019 student review and disability inclusion more broadly within TAFE.

To support the delivery against the recommendations emerging from the 2019 student review, the Disability Inclusion Working Group established a number of sub-groups to take this work forward. There are 5 sub-groups covering relationship management and communications, other awareness and inclusion initiatives, human resources/enrolment policy and process, professional development, and Disability Liaison Officer survey insights.



These sub-groups are each led by one TAFE and include representatives from other TAFEs, which ensures that these sub-groups are developing and implementing work that can be disseminated across the TAFE network.

Some of the key pieces of current work being driven by these subgroups to improve inclusion for students with disability across the TAFE network are:

- improving the delivery of outreach programs to mainstream and secondary schools
- developing resources to guide students on when and how to share information about their disability
- making disability awareness training available to all staff
- improving communication between Disability Liaison Officers and TAFE teachers to ensure that the disability action plans of students are shared in line with privacy requirements.

## Informed Design

### Service Design

An important first step is that TAFEs and the government work together to establish an evidence base to help design services to address the true needs of students with disability and effectively support them to succeed at TAFE. This may include services aimed at providing specific and individualised in-class support and access to assistive technology.

The OTCD has identified that improved processes for collecting data on students with disability to allow for benchmarking and monitoring of progress across all stages of the student pathway is essential.

As reported by the committee, TAFE staff and students with disability need to be more involved in design, delivery and evaluation of support programs and services to ensure that they are meaningful and practicable. Some TAFEs are looking for ways to increase representation for staff and students with disability on committees to ensure that their voice is heard.

Through the Disability Inclusion Working Group, TAFEs are planning an event for the TAFE network to share best practice examples of establishing inclusive spaces at TAFE campuses as well as implementation strategies that can be rolled out across the TAFE network.

The Disability Inclusion Working Group is also progressing work to support the performance and capability of employees to access workplace adjustments, flexible working arrangements, peer support, mentoring, and other supports to develop, progress and remain within the organisation. These initiatives will run alongside and complement other work to develop TAFE staff and teacher capability more broadly.

### Course Design

The TAFE network is still at the early stages of addressing the need to change andragogy practice through course redesign to improve accessibility and reduce the need for reasonable adjustment beyond the physical environment. However, through the Disability Inclusion Working Group the TAFE network has committed to best practice resource and knowledge sharing and is considering establishing communities of practice to support this. The proposed best practice sharing event mentioned above will explore best practice teaching strategies and approaches that enhances accessibility for students with disability.

Some TAFEs are further ahead in their thinking about this than other TAFEs, and this is an area in which The Gordon is also leading the TAFE network. The Gordon's Disability Action Plan includes excellence in teaching and learning as a key priority, with actions focused on universal course design including:

- delivery model and curriculum to meet requirements of all learners,
- technology, new training solutions and new ways of learning, and
- ensure accessibility across all learning platforms: Gordon Online, LLN and program materials by providing closed captioning, text to voice and audio description.

## Building Design

The government's \$220 million Building Better TAFEs initiative is focused on improving TAFE facilities for all students, including ensuring that accessibility is included in building design. The OTCD, in collaboration with the TAFE network, makes sure that all TAFE building projects comply with the minimum requirements under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* and the *Building Act 1993 (Vic)* regarding equitable access. All projects are approved by a building surveyor before an occupancy certificate is issued.

TAFEs also have their own individual policies and plans that cover works undertaken on campuses and in building assets to prioritise accessibility in refurbishment, renovation and new building. Again, The Gordon is leading the network in this space, as can be seen in The Gordon's Disability Action Plan, where participation in the Accessible Cities Taskforce and review of access to toilet facilities are highlighted.

### Example: Redevelopment of the Collingwood Campus of Melbourne Polytechnic

The government has committed \$40 million to redevelop the Collingwood campus of Melbourne Polytechnic into a first-class education, industry and community precinct including redevelopment of an existing building, an entirely new building and carpark.

Offering accessible and equitable services is core to the purpose of Victorian TAFEs and Melbourne Polytechnic will be able to improve local accessibility of education and other services via the redevelopment of the Collingwood campus. This includes improving the student experience through increasing the presence of community service providers on campus including Expression Australia. Expression Australia's activities include the promotion of Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN), employment and community support services. Taking Expression Australia as a partner on the Collingwood campus creates the potential for Melbourne Polytechnic to collaborate with Expression Australia to further enrich the delivery of AUSLAN courses and increase the involvement of the Deaf and hard of hearing community, and work with Expression Australia to deliver programs targeted to the Deaf community, for example, employment support services, leveraging other activities on campus.

The redevelopment of the infrastructure on the Collingwood campus and establishment of an integrated learning services model will enable students with disability to reach their potential through the increased accessibility of current buildings, new buildings and the campus as a whole. The design of the campus includes consideration of safe, inviting and inclusive spaces that are conducive to sign conversations. This further links to the Victorian Infrastructure Plan's key initiatives for the TAFE network, in particular creating inclusive shared spaces and improving education infrastructure.

The design of the redevelopment is being developed incorporating the 7 principles of universal access. These include:

- **Equal Access:** the design should be useful for all people, including those with disability
- **Flexibility:** the design will be flexible to accommodate students with disability, for example, by providing information signs that incorporate braille
- **Effective Communication:** the design must convey the needed information to the student, even if they have limitations in their sensory capabilities or ability to process information, for example, by using pictorial, verbal and tactile modes in the design

- Suitable space and size for use: no matter how mobile a student is, they should have enough space and the ability to effectively use the space, for example, by providing a clear line of sight to important elements for anyone seated or standing.

### TAFE Teacher Capability

The OTCD is working with the TAFE network to develop teacher capability to teach students with diverse needs. This will implement flexible approaches to teaching, support understanding of the needs of diverse student cohorts and, importantly, soft skills for communicating and interacting with all students.

Communities of practice are widely used within education settings to support staff with change and help them to embed new practice into their daily work. These communities of practice often provide teachers and staff with a forum in which to discuss the impacts of change and how to manage it effectively. The less formalised space enables frank discussion and sharing of ideas that may be difficult to consider in a more formalised teaching and learning environment.

The Disability Inclusion Working Group is reflecting on the success of communities of practice in other areas, like family violence education, and whether this would be an appropriate way for TAFE teachers to share best practice teaching, planning for universal design and reasonable adjustments strategies.

### What's next?

The government is committed to improving access, participation, inclusion, retention and completion for students with disability in partnership with the TAFE network. There is more work to be done and future work priorities for both OTCD and the TAFE network will harness the momentum of work to date and be informed by the committee's inquiry.

Following the completion of the committee's inquiry, the delivery of a TAFE Disability Inclusion Strategy in 2022 will provide greater coherence to the nature and level of support that can be expected when a student with disability engages with and undertakes training within the TAFE network.

In conclusion, the government would like to thank the committee for their *Inquiry into Access to TAFE for learners with disability*, and all stakeholders who made submissions which will support the government's continued efforts to improve disability inclusion at TAFE.

The Report, its finding and recommendations will inform the government and TAFE network's continued efforts to strengthen disability inclusion at TAFE in Victoria.

**PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**Economy and Infrastructure Committee**



# **Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability**

Parliament of Victoria  
Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

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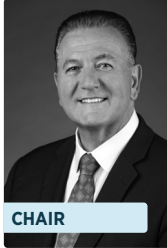
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# About the Committee

## Functions

The Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee is established under the Legislative Assembly Standing Orders Chapter 24—Committees.

The Committee's functions are to inquire into and report on any proposal, matter or thing connected with the following departments and their related agencies:

- Department of Education and Training
- Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
- Department of Transport
- Department of Treasury and Finance.

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This report is available on the Committee's website.



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# Terms of reference

## **Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability**

On 1 May 2019, the Legislative Assembly agreed to the following motion:

That this House refers:

An inquiry into disabled learners' access to TAFE to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee for consideration and report no later than 31 December 2020.

*On 26 November 2020, the Legislative Assembly passed a motion extending the reporting date for the Inquiry to 30 September 2021.*

# Chair's foreword

Learners with disability have much to gain from improved access to TAFE. A good educational experience at TAFE will provide them with the skills and knowledge to transition into meaningful work while also boosting their confidence and increasing their independence.

Throughout this Inquiry, the Committee heard from learners with disability who had been given adequate support to successfully complete TAFE courses that led to further study or open employment. We also heard from learners who struggled to make the transition or fully participate in TAFE courses due to barriers in education settings, the physical environment and people's attitudes and low expectations.

About 12% of Victoria's working age population (aged 15–64) have a disability and at 30 August 2020, 12,200 students enrolled in Victorian TAFEs (9%) reported having a disability. While the proportion of students with disability at each TAFE varies, few Victorian TAFEs have a similar proportion of students with disability to the rate of disability in the general population. This suggests some learners with disability are facing barriers to accessing and participating in TAFE.

Clear opportunities for improving access to TAFE emerged from the evidence to this Inquiry. These included the use of transition officers to help learners navigate the transition from other education settings into TAFE, improved transfer of information on learners' capabilities, aspirations and requirements to TAFE staff, and creating a safe space for learners to share their disability and support needs with their TAFE.

While at TAFE, the provision of wraparound support, greater flexibility in course design and assessment, peer support and access to assistive technology were also shown to enable learners with disability to participate in TAFE on the same basis as learners without disability and keep them engaged throughout their course.

There was also endorsement for broader measures that could be applied across the TAFE network such as the adoption of universal design for learning principles, improved professional development for both teaching and frontline staff, co-design of services and training, and the creation of teacher communities of practice to build the capability of TAFE teachers to meet the needs of learners with disability. Network-wide sharing of resources and specific funding for TAFEs to deliver disability support to their students were also strongly supported by stakeholders.

All learners with disability are entitled to access educational opportunities that match their aspirations, maximise their strengths and support them to achieve their goals. While all Victorian TAFEs are committed to improving accessibility, it was apparent that learners' experiences differ between TAFEs. The recommendations in this report aim to enhance the support individual learners receive as well as improve consistency in disability support across the TAFE network.

## Chair's foreword

The Committee sincerely appreciates the time and effort of the individuals, disability support organisations, TAFE institutes, and educators from a range of education settings who wrote submissions and attended public hearings. I thank them for sharing their views and experiences, which greatly influenced the direction of the Inquiry.

I also extend my gratitude to my fellow Committee Members, especially the Deputy Chair, Mr Gary Blackwood MP, for their valuable contributions to the Inquiry and their commitment to improving the TAFE experience for learners with disability. On behalf of the Committee, I also thank the Secretariat for their continued support and professionalism.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Eren". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Hon John Eren MP**  
**Chair**

# Executive summary

TAFE qualifications help learners to gain meaningful employment and achieve financial independence and greater wellbeing. Despite their right to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers, people with disability have lower rates of education and employment participation than people without disability. This Inquiry's terms of reference asked the Legislative Assembly's Economy and Infrastructure Committee to examine access to TAFE, or Technical and Further Education, for learners with disability. The Committee considered the barriers learners with disability face when trying to access and participate in TAFE and the support they and TAFE staff need to maximise the learning experience.

## People with disability face barriers to participation in education and employment

Australians with disability are less likely to have completed Year 12 and attained vocational education and training (VET) or university qualifications than Australians without disability. They are also more likely to be unemployed or underemployed. Learners with disability who attend TAFE report lower levels of satisfaction with their education, are less likely to complete their course and are more likely to undertake lower level qualifications than TAFE students without disability. These findings suggest learners with disability face barriers to accessing and participating fully in TAFE.

TAFE courses provide students the skills, training and qualifications they need to gain employment. Increasing the TAFE participation rates of learners with disability will improve their employment prospects and lead to greater workforce diversity. Learners with disability will also benefit from improved economic, social and health outcomes and the community will benefit from reduced government expenditure on health and welfare and greater social cohesion.

Several pieces of legislation give learners with disability the right to access and participate in education on the same basis as learners without disability. Recent government programs such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the Victorian Government's Free TAFE scheme have increased the number of learners with disability enrolling in TAFE. This has placed extra pressure on TAFEs to improve their accessibility.

## Raising learners' aspirations and awareness encourages transition into TAFE

Some learners with disability are not aware of possible TAFE pathways or lack the confidence to take them up. They may have grown up sensing others have low expectations of their abilities, which they may then internalise resulting in them

not considering TAFE. School students with disability also report receiving little or poor-quality career advice to assist them with their post-school transition. They and their families often are unaware of how TAFE operates, and the types of support TAFEs can offer learners with disability. The Committee recommends TAFEs expand their outreach programs and improve their communication with schools, community education settings and disability service providers to explain the requirements for entry and successful course completion, and the supports TAFEs can offer learners with disability.

Transition into TAFE could also be improved through the creation of a uniform way for schools to share with TAFEs information about the capabilities, aspirations and support needs of learners with disability with the students' consent. Dedicated transition officers located at TAFEs could facilitate this information transfer to relevant TAFE staff, liaise with secondary schools and provide tailored guidance to learners with disability to help them navigate the transition into TAFE. Additional measures to improve transition include the development of a suitable bridging course, support for school transition programs and greater collaboration between TAFEs and Learn Locals.

## **Learners with disability need tailored support when commencing TAFE**

Once accepted into a TAFE course, some learners with disability find the online enrolment process challenging or inaccessible resulting in them abandoning the process. TAFEs need to make enrolment more inclusive by offering learners who need additional support alternate ways to enrol, dedicated guidance to complete the process and information on how to access this assistance.

The enrolment process is designed to enable learners with disability to share their diagnosis with TAFE staff and request support, but often learners with disability do not disclose this information limiting their access to disability supports and reasonable adjustments. TAFEs should encourage learners with disability to share their disability and learning needs by creating a safe space for disclosure, promoting the benefits of disclosure and raising awareness of how and when to disclose.

TAFE Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) are a key resource for learners with disability. DLOs work with learners to develop individual learning plans to meet learners' needs, share this information with teaching staff and advocate on behalf of the student for adjustments to be made. However, DLOs can be under-resourced and learners with disability reported inconsistencies in DLO support. The Committee recommends greater resourcing and clearer processes for how DLOs provide advice, advocacy and support to TAFE students. It also recommends DLOs offer more intensive and targeted supports to high-needs learners throughout their TAFE course.

## TAFEs must ensure learners with disability can participate equally

TAFEs are required to provide reasonable adjustments to enable learners with disability to participate fully in a course and in the services and facilities the TAFE offers. These adjustments must be sufficient to give learners with disability the same learning opportunities as learners without disability and must be provided in a timely manner. Stakeholders reported inconsistencies in how TAFEs interpret and apply reasonable adjustments. The Committee recommends clearer guidance to TAFEs on how to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure greater consistency for learners with disability.

TAFEs must also ensure physical and digital infrastructure is accessible. The Committee recommends each TAFE comply with accessibility standards for information technology procurement and conduct an access audit to inform the Department of Education and Training of physical access issues and enable the Department to prioritise the allocation of resources to address these issues. TAFEs should also make greater use of assistive technology to enable students with disability to participate in courses. The TAFE network would benefit from a shared expert to provide advice on current, reliable and cost-effective assistive technology.

## Wraparound support, flexibility and a focus on wellbeing keep learners engaged

While reasonable adjustments enable learners with disability to participate in a course, additional support, flexibility and peer networks help learners to stay engaged and complete their course. Comprehensive wraparound supports tailored to individuals' needs help to address personal issues and education barriers that might otherwise undermine the ability of learners with disability to complete their course. Flexible course delivery and assessment also assist learners with disability to meet course requirements and demonstrate their competency by taking into account different learning styles and the impact of personal circumstances.

Supporting the wellbeing of learners with disability also keeps them engaged with TAFE. There was strong support among stakeholders for informal peer support networks to boost learners' confidence, wellbeing and educational outcomes. As the prevalence of mental ill health grows among TAFE students and the population more widely, TAFEs should ensure they provide adequate online and in-person mental health supports and that their staff are trained in mental health first aid.

Learners with disability also raised the negative impact they experience from stigma and discrimination while at TAFE. By creating an inclusive culture that embraces diversity and has strong policies against harassment and adequate avenues for complaint, TAFEs will create an environment where learners with disability feel safe to identify and seek support and achieve their educational goals. TAFEs should also learn from the benefits and challenges created by the introduction of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as adopting flexible training delivery and ensuring students stay connected to peers and teachers while learning remotely.



## **Learners with disability need more assistance to navigate the next steps after TAFE**

In addition to improving access and participation, TAFEs should also provide further assistance to learners with disability who want to continue their studies or transition into work. Career development practitioners at TAFEs' Skills and Jobs Centres can provide guidance to learners with disability during their studies and after. Work placements while at TAFE are crucial for learners with disability to gain workplace exposure, build networks and increase their confidence in a work setting. They have also been shown to be better than general job readiness training at helping learners with disability gain employment.

However, not all learners with disability get the opportunity to undertake work placements and not all employers have the confidence to host learners with disability. Work placements are most effective when both students and employers are provided adequate support and preparation. The Committee recommends TAFEs actively work with students and employers to develop reasonable adjustment plans prior to placements, collaborate with disability and community service organisations to provide support to students and employers, and provide work placements to learners with disability within their organisation.

## **Disability support and services should be consistent across the TAFE network**

Teachers and frontline staff make a significant difference to how learners with disability find the TAFE experience. While some TAFE staff have the confidence to support and meet the needs of learners with disability, many others need training to reach the same level of confidence. The Committee recommends all new and existing TAFE staff undertake regular mandatory disability awareness training. Teaching staff should also undertake further professional development on providing reasonable adjustments and meeting the needs of learners with specific disabilities as required.

TAFE teachers should also be trained in using universal design for learning principles when designing and delivering training. Universal design ensures learning is accessible to as many learners as possible and is more cost-effective and equitable than retrofitting course materials and assessments to meet the needs of individual learners with disability. Universal design for learning has the added benefit of improving training delivery for students of all abilities.

Unlike schools and universities, Victorian TAFEs do not receive dedicated funding to finance the disability supports they provide to learners with disability. Instead, they allocate a proportion of their Community Service Funding to cover the costs of these measures, which can be expensive and resource intensive. The Committee recommends the introduction of dedicated funding that is separate to Community Service Funding and is provided to TAFEs based on the number of enrolled students with disability and

the complexity of their needs. A bank of disability support resources should also be created to share resources across the TAFE network.

To improve consistency in how individual TAFEs support learners with disability, the Committee recommends the development of a VET delivery strategy for learners with disability that outlines standards for accessibility and the provision of disability support services. Co-design and delivery of professional development and disability support services by people with disability will also improve how TAFEs meet the needs of learners with disability, as will better data capture and analysis to identify areas of concern, track progress over time and develop measures to improve outcomes.



# Findings and recommendations

## Findings

### 2 Supporting transition and commencement

**FINDING 1:** People with disability may be exposed to a culture of low expectations from a young age, which can result in them being presented with fewer education opportunities and experiencing poorer employment, health and social outcomes over their lives. 34

**FINDING 2:** Students with disability and their families often lack awareness of how the learning environment at TAFE works and the types of disability supports that are available there. 41

**FINDING 3:** There is no uniform way for information about the capabilities, aspirations and support needs of learners with disability to be transferred to TAFEs from secondary schools or other education settings to improve the transition into TAFE. 43

**FINDING 4:** Some learners with disability need to develop further skills and knowledge to make a successful transition into TAFE. 45

**FINDING 5:** Learn Locals are supportive, inclusive and accessible learning environments where learners with disability can build the skills, knowledge and confidence to successfully transition into TAFE and into the workforce. 49

**FINDING 6:** Some learners with disability find the TAFE enrolment process difficult to navigate and inaccessible at times, which can deter them from enrolling at TAFE. 52

**FINDING 7:** Some students with disability are not receiving adequate support and adjustments at TAFE because they cannot afford the cost a formal diagnostic assessment. 56

**FINDING 8:** Learners with disability may not see the value of disclosing their disability and learning needs to TAFE staff, may be unsure of how and when to disclose, and/or may not feel comfortable disclosing. 60

**FINDING 9:** Disability Liaison Officers at TAFEs provide valuable advice, advocacy and support to students with disability but there are inconsistencies in how this support is provided across the TAFE network. 62

**FINDING 10:** Some learners with disability may require more intensive support from commencement through to the completion of their TAFE course to stay engaged with TAFE study. 64

### 3 Improving participation, retention and completion

**FINDING 11:** The TAFE environment can create sensory overload for autistic students who are sensitive to noise and light resulting in them being unable to fully participate in class and/or attend campus regularly. 68

**FINDING 12:** Not all teaching staff at TAFEs understand how to develop and apply reasonable adjustments resulting in some TAFE learners with disability not receiving the adjustments they need to be able to participate in class and campus activities on the same basis as learners without disability. 70

**FINDING 13:** Physical inaccessibility of TAFE buildings and facilities can deter learners with disability from participating in TAFE. 77

**FINDING 14:** Online learning platforms are sometimes inaccessible for learners with disability, especially when they are incompatible with assistive technology used by learners who are blind or have low vision. 79

**FINDING 15:** Individual TAFEs may not have the knowledge and resources to provide suitable assistive technology to enable students with disability to participate in courses. 81

**FINDING 16:** TAFE learners with disability have better education and employment outcomes if they have access to comprehensive wraparound supports. 90

**FINDING 17:** Learners with disability may be disadvantaged if course delivery and assessment requirements lack flexibility to account for different learning styles and personal circumstances. 94

**FINDING 18:** Peer support networks improve the confidence, wellbeing and education outcomes of TAFE learners with disability. 97

**FINDING 19:** The prevalence of mental ill health among TAFE students is significant and growing, and TAFEs often find it hard to support students with complex mental health issues. 101

**FINDING 20:** Inclusive education improves social, education and employment outcomes for learners with disability and builds positive community attitudes towards disability and diversity. 106

**FINDING 21:** The shift to remote learning due to COVID-19 restrictions suited some learners with disability but created challenges including social isolation. 109

**FINDING 22:** Work placements are essential to improve employment outcomes for TAFE students with disability and work best when students and employers are provided adequate support. 121

## 4 Enhancing system-wide performance

**FINDING 23:** Not all TAFE teachers and frontline staff are confident to recognise, interact with and support learners with disability, which can result in learners with disability disengaging from TAFE. 131

**FINDING 24:** Not all TAFE teachers feel they are adequately equipped to make reasonable adjustments and accommodate the learning needs of students with disability. 134

**FINDING 25:** Universal design for learning removes barriers and improves educational outcomes for all students and reduces the need for learners with disability to request reasonable adjustments. 144

**FINDING 26:** TAFEs find Community Service Funding, which is designed to provide support services and programs for learners with additional barriers or needs, insufficient to cover the needs of enrolled learners with disability. 150

**FINDING 27:** Unlike schools and universities, TAFEs are not given dedicated funding to meet the needs of learners with disability. 150

**FINDING 28:** There is no sector-wide policy to provide guidance to TAFEs on accessibility and the provision of disability support services resulting in inconsistent delivery of support across the TAFE network. 152

**FINDING 29:** TAFEs can find it expensive to provide some reasonable adjustments and disability supports, especially when only a few students require them. 154

**FINDING 30:** TAFE staff and students find disability support programs, services and training that are designed, delivered and evaluated by learners with disability to be more meaningful and useful. 157

**FINDING 31:** The TAFE system lacks accurate data on the experience and needs of learners with disability at TAFE to identify areas of concern, track progress over time and develop measures to improve outcomes. 159

## Recommendations

### 2 Supporting transition and commencement

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to expand their outreach programs to connect with learners with disability at mainstream and specialist schools, community education settings, disability service providers and those undertaking home schooling. 41

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** The Department of Education and Training develop a student passport or similar individual record outlining the capabilities and support needs of a learner with disability, which can be transferred with the learner's consent between TAFEs and other education settings as the learner transitions from one setting to another. 43

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to employ transition officers who would liaise with secondary schools, assist learners with disability to navigate the transition into TAFE and facilitate the transfer of information on learners' support needs to relevant TAFE staff. 44

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** The Department of Education and Training develop a state-wide accredited bridging or preparatory course for entry to TAFE that would be free for students and have eligibility criteria based on students' learning needs. 45

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** The Department of Education and Training raise awareness among TAFE staff of the learning and vocational support available at Learn Locals for prospective, current and former TAFE students with disability. 49

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** The Department of Education and Training support the creation of partnerships between TAFEs and Learn Locals to strengthen collaboration between these two education settings. 49

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** The Department of Education and Training ensure TAFEs have documented processes on how they identify learners who need additional support to enrol successfully and how they make allowances in their enrolment processes for these learners such as offering face-to-face enrolment. 52

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** The Department of Education and Training introduce funding to cover the cost of formal diagnostic assessments for learners that TAFE staff suspect may have an undiagnosed disability. 56

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFE providers to simplify their enrolment processes so they create a safe space that encourages disclosure, raise awareness among students of how and when they can disclose their disability, and promote the benefits of disclosure to learners with disability. 61

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** The Department of Education and Training ensure that TAFEs have documented processes on how they ensure each student who discloses a disability is followed up by a Disability Liaison Officer who, where needed, develops an individual learning plan with the student and communicates this plan to relevant teaching staff. 63

**RECOMMENDATION 11:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to offer targeted supports through Disability Liaison Officers to students with disability from before they enrol until they complete their course. 64



### 3 Improving participation, retention and completion

**RECOMMENDATION 12:** The Department of Education and Training ensure every TAFE campus in Victoria has a low-sensory or quiet room for students with disability to use when required. 68

**RECOMMENDATION 13:** The Department of Education and Training create a framework for providing reasonable adjustments to TAFE learners with disability to provide better guidance to TAFEs and greater consistency in the support students with disability receive across the TAFE network. 70

**RECOMMENDATION 14:** The Department of Education and Training require all TAFEs to conduct an access audit of their campuses and the Department use these audit reports to prioritise the allocation of resources to address the issues identified. 77

**RECOMMENDATION 15:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to comply with Australian Standard AS EN 301 549 for the procurement of accessible information and communication technology. 79

**RECOMMENDATION 16:** The Department of Education and Training fund an expert in assistive technology to be shared across the Victorian TAFE network to provide advice on current, reliable and cost-effective assistive technology for use by TAFE students with disability. 82

**RECOMMENDATION 17:** The Department of Education and Training support the development of programs similar to Swinburne University of Technology's Student Success Coach program at each Victorian TAFE to provide wraparound support to students at risk of non-completion including learners with disability. 90

**RECOMMENDATION 18:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to develop suitable exemptions to time limitations and attendance requirements for learners with disability who need extra time to gain and demonstrate competency or who miss class due to reasons related to their health or disability. 94

**RECOMMENDATION 19:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to establish peer support networks for learners with different types of disability and to promote these among students and staff. 97

**RECOMMENDATION 20:** The Department of Education and Training extend its mental health practitioners in secondary schools program to all Victorian TAFE campuses. 101

**RECOMMENDATION 21:** The Department of Education and Training support all TAFE teachers and frontline staff to undertake mental health first aid training. 101

**RECOMMENDATION 22:** The Department of Education and Training encourage all TAFEs to use peer-to-peer mental health apps such as TalkCampus. 101

**RECOMMENDATION 23:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to create inclusive classrooms and common areas for learners with disability to learn and interact with their peers without disability. 106

**RECOMMENDATION 24:** The Department of Education and Training ensure TAFEs have documented processes outlining how learners with disability can provide feedback and make complaints about the way they are treated and supported at the TAFE. 106

**RECOMMENDATION 25:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to create opportunities such as increased virtual office hours or study groups to ensure learners with disability studying remotely remain connected to teachers and peers outside of class. 109

**RECOMMENDATION 26:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to actively work with employers and students with disability to develop reasonable adjustment plans prior to the commencement of work placements. 121

**RECOMMENDATION 27:** The Department of Education and Training encourage TAFEs to work with disability and community service organisations to provide employers and students with ongoing support and assistance throughout work placements. 121

**RECOMMENDATION 28:** The Department of Education and Training encourage TAFEs to work with Learn Locals to provide learners with disability employment preparation support during and after completing their TAFE course. 121

**RECOMMENDATION 29:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to provide work placements and employ learners with disability within their organisation. **121**

## 4 Enhancing system-wide performance

**RECOMMENDATION 30:** The Department of Education and Training require all new and existing TAFE staff to undertake regular mandatory disability awareness training, and require TAFEs to offer professional development opportunities for staff to gain more specialised knowledge about specific disabilities as required. **131**

**RECOMMENDATION 31:** The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government for Industry Reference Committees to include an explanatory statement and examples of appropriate reasonable adjustments in national training packages. **134**

**RECOMMENDATION 32:** The Department of Education and Training fund the employment of curriculum advisers at each TAFE whose role is to conduct accessibility audits of course design and to advise teachers on how to implement reasonable adjustments while also complying with training package criteria. **134**

**RECOMMENDATION 33:** The Department of Education and Training continue funding professional development activities for TAFE teachers on making reasonable adjustments for learners with disability and expand funding for general disability awareness training to all TAFE workers. **138**

**RECOMMENDATION 34:** The Department of Education and Training direct the VET Development Centre to establish a regular annual program of professional development activities that provide general disability awareness training as well as specialist training in providing reasonable adjustments and accommodating the learning needs of students with disability. **139**

**RECOMMENDATION 35:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to establish teaching communities of practice to support and strengthen the capability of TAFE teachers to accommodate the learning needs of students with disability. **140**

**RECOMMENDATION 36:** The Department of Education and Training direct the VET Development Centre to develop a professional development workshop in universal design for learning, which all new and existing TAFE teachers undertake as required. **144**

**RECOMMENDATION 37:** The Department of Education and Training develop guidelines for TAFE teachers on how to prepare accessible learning material using universal design for learning principles. 144

**RECOMMENDATION 38:** The Department of Education and Training provide TAFEs with dedicated funding to meet the needs of learners with disability that is separate to Community Service Funding and uses a baseline plus loadings approach based on the number and complexity of needs of enrolled students with disability. 150

**RECOMMENDATION 39:** The Department of Education and Training establish a fund similar to the Australian Government’s Disability Support Fund for higher education to reimburse TAFEs for costs incurred making reasonable adjustments for individual learners with disability. 150

**RECOMMENDATION 40:** The Department of Education and Training collaborate with disability organisations to develop a strategy to improve vocational education and training delivery for TAFE learners with disability that provides guidance and outlines standards for accessibility and the provision of disability support services. 152

**RECOMMENDATION 41:** The Department of Education and Training oversee the creation of a bank of disability support resources to be shared across the TAFE network. 154

**RECOMMENDATION 42:** The Department of Education and Training ensure that TAFEs and the VET Development Centre involve people with disability in the design and delivery of disability support programs, services and professional development. 157

**RECOMMENDATION 43:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to collect data on the number of enrolled students with disability and the reasonable adjustments they receive and report this information annually to the Department. 159

**RECOMMENDATION 44:** The Department of Education and Training annually survey TAFE students who have completed or withdrawn from their course to understand their experience of TAFE and post-TAFE destination; report this information disaggregated by age, location, and disability, CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status; and use this opportunity to refer students who want assistance with their post-TAFE transition to Skills and Jobs Centres. 159

# Acronyms

AASE	Australian Association of Special Education
ACU	Australian Catholic University
ADCET	Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training
AEU	Australian Education Union
AND	Australian Network on Disability
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ATEND	Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability
Autism CRC	Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
CTPP	Community Traineeship Pilot Program
CUST	Community Understanding and Safety Training initiative
CYDA	Children and Young People with Disability Australia
DET	Department of Education and Training
DLO	Disability Liaison Officer
DSF	Disability Support Fund
ECCV	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
INLLEN	Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
NCCD	Nationally Consistent Collection of Data
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
SSC	Student Success Coach
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VAEAI	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated
VCOSS	Victorian Council of Social Service
VDAC	Victorian Disability Advisory Council
VDC	VET Development Centre
VET	Vocational education and training
VTHC	Victorian Trades Hall Council

# Tables and case studies

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## 3 Improving participation, retention and completion

CASE STUDY 3.1:	'Patrick found this process stressful and eventually gave up asking for help'	70
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## 4 Enhancing system-wide performance

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Despite their talents and aspirations, Victorians with disability have lower education and employment participation rates than Victorians without disability. These discrepancies suggest that people with disability are facing barriers to study and work. Meaningful employment creates financial independence and improves physical and mental wellbeing. It is more easily secured when people have post-school qualifications from TAFE or higher education providers.

The Legislative Assembly's Economy and Infrastructure Committee received terms of reference to conduct an inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability on 1 May 2019. TAFE, or Technical and Further Education, is provided by government-funded institutions that deliver vocational education and training (VET) courses. These courses provide students with the skills, training and qualifications needed for employment. TAFE courses are usually more hands-on and have smaller class sizes and more contact hours than university courses. They are well suited to people seeking to enter the workforce.

As part of its investigations, the Committee considered the barriers faced by learners with disability when trying to access and participate in TAFE, as well as the support they and TAFE staff need to maximise the learning experience. The Committee consulted with learners with disability and organisations that represent them, TAFE and other education providers, and the Victorian Government. These consultations were held via Zoom due to Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic restrictions.

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TAFE study and employment opportunities for learners with disability increased the urgency for this Inquiry. This report presents the evidence received by the Committee and makes a range of recommendations to improve the inclusiveness and accessibility of TAFE for learners with disability so they can achieve their education and employment goals.

## 1.1 Learners with disability face barriers to equal participation

Disability can affect a person's senses, mobility, cognition, perceptions or mood; it can vary in severity and be the result of genetic disorders, illnesses, accidents, ageing, or a combination of these factors.<sup>1</sup> According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 17% of Victorians (almost 1.1 million) in 2018 had a disability, which the ABS defines as any limitation, restriction or impairment that restricts everyday activities and has lasted,

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1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020: in brief*, AIHW, Canberra, 2020, p. 1.



or is likely to last, for at least six months.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of disability is greater among Victorians aged 65 and over (48%) compared with those under 65 (11%).<sup>3</sup>

However, the concept of disability is evolving and the social model of disability (as opposed to the medical or diagnostic model) considers disability to be caused by barriers in society, such as inaccessible buildings or people's attitudes and assumptions, that limit the ability of a person who has an impairment to participate in society on an equal basis. Removing these barriers gives people with disability greater access, independence, choice and control.<sup>4</sup>

In 2018, about 8% of Victorian students enrolled in VET identified as having a disability.<sup>5</sup> Swinburne University of Technology provided a detailed breakdown of the types of disability its VET students reported having. The most common type of disability they reported was mental health conditions followed by neurological conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Combined, mental health and neurological conditions accounted for 60% of the disability cohort. Other types of disability in decreasing order of prevalence were learning (such as dyslexia), intellectual, physical, medical, hearing, vision and developmental.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.1.1 There are multiple ways TAFEs can remove barriers for learners with disability

Submissions to the Inquiry identified that the accessibility of TAFE is not dependent on a person's ability but is based on barriers that fail to adjust, support and engage learners with disability.<sup>7</sup> Research by Mission Australia, a national charity that helps vulnerable people gain independence, found more young people with disability planned to go to TAFE when they finished school than those without disability (20% compared with 11%). This contrasts with university aspirations, where 48% of young people with disability intended to go to university when they finished school compared with 66% of young people without disability.<sup>8</sup>

The same research found almost two-thirds (64%) of young people with disability reported feeling they faced barriers that could prevent them reaching their post-school goals compared with 48% of young people without disability. When these young people were asked to identify these barriers:

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: summary of findings, 2018*, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>> accessed 25 February 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, *Social model of disability, 2021*, <<https://www.afdo.org.au/social-model-of-disability>> accessed 12 April 2021; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, *Vocational education and training (VET) statistics, 2020*, <<https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/understanding-disability/vet-statistics>> accessed 12 April 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 5–6; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 3.

- 28% with disability reported mental health concerns (compared with 16% without disability)
- 25% with disability reported academic ability (compared with 20%)
- 12% with disability reported physical health (compared with 4%).<sup>9</sup>

As explained by the Victorian TAFE Association, which is the peak body for public providers of VET in Victoria, people select post-school study options based on their interests, employment prospects, financial means, access to providers and available support. Learners with disability base their choices on the same criteria and:

should be in a position to choose a course or be able to participate in learning on the same basis as others. They should not be put at a disadvantage because a system cannot deal with their needs or provide the support that they may require.<sup>10</sup>

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), the peak advocacy body for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria, agreed that inclusive education must be based on human rights and the notion of equity. It added that the Victorian TAFE system needs to address the access barriers faced by learners with disability.<sup>11</sup>

Accessibility can be viewed as the degree to which as many people as possible can access a good, device, service or environment. Ways for TAFEs to increase the accessibility of their courses include:

- ensuring their physical environment can be used by people of all abilities
- their course delivery and assessments can be adjusted to suit learners' needs
- their students have access to assistive technology and support workers.<sup>12</sup>

TAFEs should also improve their engagement with learners with disability to improve the transition into TAFE as well as the transition onto either higher levels of study or employment.<sup>13</sup>

TAFEs provide educational support services for learners with disability, such as learning support, referral services, and help to receive reasonable adjustments and negotiate alternative assessments. They also provide access to Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) for eligible learners.<sup>14</sup> DLOs can have different titles and roles across TAFE institutes, but their purpose is to advocate for students with disability and communicate these students' support needs to other TAFE staff and/or external service providers.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 18; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 18.

Many TAFEs also develop individual learning plans for students with disability.<sup>15</sup> While all Victorian TAFEs have disability inclusive policies and practices, their application can vary between TAFE institutes, locations and courses resulting in inconsistent learning experiences for learners with disability.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.1.2 Significant gaps exist in education and employment participation

Participation in education and the level of education attained can affect employment rates and the ability to achieve financial independence. Evidence shows people with disability are less likely to have a tertiary qualification and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than people without disability.<sup>17</sup> There are significant gaps in Year 12 attainment, VET qualifications and university study between people with and without disability.<sup>18</sup>

The following sections discuss the participation levels of people with disability in education and employment. The statistics presented rest on the extent to which students and people with disability are identified as such in relevant data collections. Since disability status is based on self-disclosure or identification (or identification of school students by their parents) it is possible that not all people with disability are recorded as such. In addition, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability recently noted the lack of consistent data collection for students with disability and how it intends to examine current gaps and ways to address them.<sup>19</sup>

#### Participation in post-school education is lower for people with disability

Children and young people with disability attend school at a similar rate to those without disability. Most Australian school students with disability (89%) attend a mainstream school and the rest attend a special school, which is dedicated to students with moderate to high learning and support needs.<sup>20</sup> Over half (57%) of school students with disability receive support at school, but 10% who need support do not receive it and 21% who receive support need more.<sup>21</sup>

Despite having similar attendance rates, young people with disability are more likely to leave school early and attain a lower level of education. In 2018, 21% of people with disability aged 15–64 (who had disability as children) had left school before age 16

<sup>15</sup> For example, Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 1; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Council of Australian Governments, *2010–2020 National disability strategy*, COAG, Canberra, 2011, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, October 2020, p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020: in brief*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

compared with 9% without disability. The rate is higher among young people with autism—one-third have left school by Year 10.<sup>22</sup> In addition, people with disability aged 20 or over were less likely to have completed Year 12 than those without disability (34% compared with 66%) or attained a Bachelor degree or higher (17% compared with 35%).<sup>23</sup>

Educational attainment for people with disability has improved over time as people with disability in older age ranges are less likely to have completed Year 12 than those who are younger. For example, in 2018, 68% of people with disability aged 20–24 had completed Year 12 or its equivalent compared with 15% of those aged 85 and over (the respective rates for people without disability were 85% and 20%).<sup>24</sup>

About 9% of people with disability aged 15–64 were studying for a non-school qualification in 2018 compared with 15% of those without disability. Of the non-school students with disability, 48% studied at university and 28% at a TAFE or technical college. While university study is less common among non-school students with disability than those without disability (48% compared with 64%), the opposite is true for TAFE study (28% compared with 21%).<sup>25</sup>

### **TAFE participation is high, but the learning experience can be improved**

In 2018, about 12% of Victoria’s working-age population (aged 15–64) identified as having a disability and at 30 August 2020, 9% of students enrolled at Victorian TAFEs (or 12,200 students) reported having a disability.<sup>26</sup> Learners with disability are more likely to be enrolled in TAFE than university.<sup>27</sup>

For students at special schools with mild to severe physical, intellectual and sensory impairments or mental health concerns, access to TAFE is not straightforward. The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), a professional association for teachers, allied health professionals and others working with students with disability in schools, surveyed teachers and school staff at Victorian special schools and found:

less than 10% of students who were preparing to leave school within the 2019 cohort wanted to attend TAFE. That is, on average, 10–30 students in a specialist school wanted to attend TAFE in 2019. However, of those students who wanted to go to TAFE, more than half of the respondents identified that less than 10% of the students were successful in going to TAFE.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020: in brief*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020*, AIHW, Canberra, 2020, p. 228.

<sup>26</sup> Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 4; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, *Submission 12*, p. 1.

According to Mission Australia, people with disability often face barriers to attending TAFE such as lack of accessible transport, health issues, limited access to supports, discrimination and caring responsibilities.<sup>29</sup>

The proportion of students with disability at each TAFE institute varies; for example, 14% of TAFE students at Federation University self-identified as having a disability compared with 7% of VET students at Swinburne University of Technology.<sup>30</sup> Few Victorian TAFEs have a proportion of students with disability similar to the rate of disability in the general population. Research conducted on behalf of the Victorian TAFE network by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Project Team at regional TAFE The Gordon along with metropolitan TAFEs Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute found only five of the 12 institutes that provided data had a greater proportion of students with disability than the general population.<sup>31</sup>

Other findings from this research were TAFE students with disability report lower levels of satisfaction, are less likely to complete their TAFE course and are more likely to undertake lower level qualifications.<sup>32</sup> These observations are discussed further below.

Stakeholders who work with young people with disability told the Committee that TAFE was a popular destination and common pathway for these young people. For example, Mr Peter Kellock, Coordinator, Research Projects at the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, stated:

TAFE is a major destination. After Day Services something approaching 22, 23, 24% of students [with disability] end up in TAFE, so it is a major pathway, second only to Day Services. We do not think there is a major problem with access to TAFE; it is more about what they are actually getting when they get there and the quality of the programs and the offerings ... Only a very small minority are really taking vocationally focused pathways. Most of them are held doing Certificate I-, Certificate II-type programs in transition-to-work education units, which really, to be blunt, are a holding operation that does not provide them with long-term vocational outcomes.<sup>33</sup>

In 2019, only 6% of students undertaking apprenticeships or traineeships had a disability.<sup>34</sup> Concern that learners with disability were more likely to undertake Certificate I or II level courses than learners without disability was common among stakeholders because successful employment outcomes are more strongly linked to higher level qualifications.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 1; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Mr Peter Kellock, Coordinator, Research and Projects, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, *Submission 24*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> For example, National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 4.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) noted that Certificate I and II level courses are an important pathway for some learners with disability to gain employment skills. Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills at DET, reported almost three-quarters (73%) of TAFE students with disability were studying a Certificate III or above and the proportion of TAFE students studying at Certificate IV or above was the same for learners with and without disability at 47%. She added the top five TAFE courses for Victorian learners with disability in 2020 were the Diploma of Nursing, the Diploma of Community Services, the Certificate I in Transition Education, the Certificate I in Work Education and the Certificate IV in Accounting and Bookkeeping, highlighting students with disability are undertaking both entry-level and higher courses.<sup>36</sup>

Early school leaving often results in students with disability enrolling in TAFE to undertake foundational level studies, that is, Certificates I and II and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. These students may enter TAFE from school, Learn Locals or other community education settings, after being home-schooled, or after some time disengaged from education. In other cases, university graduates with disability may struggle to find employment in their field of study and choose to enrol in a TAFE pathway to improve their chances of finding work.<sup>37</sup>

Studying at TAFE after university is common for learners with autism, who are also likely to have commenced (but not completed) multiple TAFE courses. Two-thirds of respondents to a survey run by autism organisations Amaze, the I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, Different Journeys and Aspergers Victoria (hereafter the Victorian TAFE and autism survey), stated they had started two or more TAFE courses and over 12% reported starting four or more.<sup>38</sup>

Stakeholders highlighted the growing number of learners with disability enrolling in TAFE. For example, Amaze noted ASD was the single largest diagnostic group within the NDIS, and the individual supports provided by the NDIS have enabled more students with ASD to attend TAFE. It added the Victorian Government's introduction of free TAFE courses has also removed some of the financial barriers to TAFE study.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Aspergers Victoria stated an estimated 35% of TAFE students have ASD and this proportion has increased in recent years due to students struggling with mainstream schools, the introduction of free TAFE courses and the Australian Government's Disability Employment Services recommending TAFE to their clients.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU), which represents teachers, principals and support staff working in Victorian government schools, early childhood, TAFE, disability and adult education, predicted there may

<sup>36</sup> Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>37</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 3.

be an increased number of learners with disability undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships following the Australian Government's announcements around wage subsidies for apprentices and trainees.<sup>41</sup>

DET confirmed that TAFE enrolments for learners with disability is growing due to the introduction of free TAFE courses on 1 January 2019. It stated TAFE enrolments for learners with disability grew by 14% from 2018 to 2019, compared with a 10% increase for learners without disability. At the same time, enrolments of learners with disability at private VET providers, adult community education providers and other non-TAFE training providers fell between 3% and 6%. TAFE commencements for learners with disability grew 94% between 2018 and 2019 from 1,700 to 3,300 learners.<sup>42</sup>

The number of learners with disability enrolled in a free TAFE course was 3,700 on 30 August 2020. The most popular free TAFE courses for learners with disability in 2020 were Certificate IV in Cyber Security, Diploma of Nursing, Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, Certificate IV in Community Services and the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care.<sup>43</sup>

While the number of TAFE enrolments is increasing for learners with disability, this may not translate to an equal number of completions. Since the most popular free TAFE courses for learners with disability were two-year Diploma courses, it is too early to know how many learners who took up these courses have completed. Recent completion rates are also complicated by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>44</sup> However, completion rates for TAFE learners with disability have been low historically.

For example, data from Swinburne University show that 46% of VET students with disability in 2019 did not complete their course.<sup>45</sup> A similar figure was reported in the Victorian TAFE and autism survey which found 48% of respondents with ASD had dropped out or discontinued the most recent TAFE course they were enrolled in.<sup>46</sup> ECCV added that CALD students with disability have on average a 10% greater probability of not completing their TAFE course due to not receiving adequate support.<sup>47</sup>

Similar concerns were echoed in the Victorian TAFE and autism survey where almost half the respondents who did not complete their TAFE course (47%) blamed not receiving the support they needed from TAFE, followed by loss of interest, personal circumstances and lack of flexibility.<sup>48</sup> In its 2019 Student Satisfaction Survey, DET found 22% of TAFE learners with disability who discontinued their studies did so because of family or personal reasons and 21% because of illness or injury.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 12, 20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 13.

Table 1.1 presents data from the 2020 VET student outcomes survey conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which promotes research on the VET sector in Australia. It shows Victorian TAFE course completers with disability were less likely to report they had achieved their main reason for study and had improved their employment status compared with completers without disability. They were also less likely to be employed or in further study after their course.

**Table 1.1 Student outcomes and satisfaction for Victorian TAFE course completers by disability status, 2020**

Outcome	With disability (%)	Without disability (%)
Achieved main reason for doing the training	74.7	80.4
Employed after training	42.4	69.5
Employed or in further study after training	68.1	79.9
Improved employment status after training	34.6	56.9
Satisfied with overall quality of the training	85.3	84.4

Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *VET student outcomes 2020*, DataBuilder, January 2021, <<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/databuilder#vet-student-outcomes>> accessed 14 April 2021.

Reports of student satisfaction with TAFE are varied. While Table 1.1 shows similar satisfaction rates between learners with and without disability in 2020, data from DET's 2019 student satisfaction survey show a seven-percentage-point difference in satisfaction between students with and without disability (70% compared with 77% respectively).<sup>50</sup> Respondents to the Victorian TAFE and autism survey reported mostly positive experiences at TAFE but almost one-quarter reported not enjoying TAFE.<sup>51</sup>

### Lower educational attainment leads to lower employment rates

Compared with working-age people without disability (aged 15–64), in 2018, working-age people with disability were:

- less likely to be in the labour force, that is, in work or looking for work (53% compared with 84%)
- less likely to be employed (48% compared with 80%)
- more likely to be underemployed (10% compared with 7%)
- more likely to be unemployed (10% compared with 5%)
- more likely to be unemployed for one year or longer (22% compared with 14%).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020: in brief*, p. 20.



At 48%, Australia's employment rate for people with disability is lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 60%, placing Australia twenty-first out of 26 OECD countries.<sup>53</sup>

These statistics do not provide the full picture. People with disability who are employed are less likely to be working full-time, in ongoing employment and in senior positions than employed people without disability. For example, Vision Australia, the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia, presented survey findings that showed:

- 24% of Australians who are blind or have low vision are employed full-time and the majority of these are employed in entry-level or non-supervisory roles with few opportunities for career progression
- Australians who are blind or have low vision are twice as likely to be working part-time and three times as likely to be in temporary employment than the general population
- 11% of Australians who are blind or have low vision, and do not have a post-school qualification, are employed (compared with 28% who do have a post-school qualification).<sup>54</sup>

Research in Canada has shown similar trends regarding employment rates, entry-level positions, insecure employment and poor access to professional development opportunities for people with disability.<sup>55</sup> Of the jobseekers engaged with Australian Government employment services, 27% have a disability but they make up only 15% of jobseekers who stay employed for 26 weeks or more.<sup>56</sup> Low rates of employment can affect a person's standard of living and stakeholders highlighted that about half of all young Victorians with disability are receiving income support and one in six people with disability live in poverty.<sup>57</sup>

Unemployment levels can be even higher among people with particular types of disability. For example, in 2018, unemployment rates for people with autism were more than three times higher than for all people with disability and almost eight times higher than for people without disability. Amaze, the peak body for autistic people and their supporters in Victoria, added that these figures would worsen following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Public Policy Forum and Diversity Institute, *Skills for the post-pandemic world: scoping report*, Public Policy Forum, Ottawa, 2020, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel, *I want to work: employment services 2020*, report for Department of Jobs and Small Business, Australian Government, Canberra, 2018, p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Dr Carina Garland, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1; Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 5.

Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager at Children and Young People with Disability Australia, the national peak body representing children and young people with disability aged up to 25, agreed that the economic downturn following COVID-19 has had a greater impact on young people, especially those with disability. She said:

Overall, we know that young people with disability are one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market. They experience the intersectionality of systemic disadvantage of being both a person with disability and a young person, with this disadvantage being even further amplified by other demographic factors, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender or sexual diversity or living in a rural or regional area. Young people are also more likely to bear the brunt of economic downturn, with employers more reluctant to hire or retain younger workers due to their limited experience and lower skills during periods of cyclical weakness. This is evident in the ongoing COVID-19 economic crisis, with young workers disproportionately impacted.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has made working from home and flexible work hours more acceptable, which are accommodations that often benefit workers and jobseekers with disability.<sup>60</sup>

### 1.1.3 Better access to TAFE for learners with disability benefits individuals and broader society

Stakeholders reported a range of benefits for individuals, the economy and society more broadly if access to TAFE for learners with disability is improved. By giving learners with disability skills to enter the workforce, TAFE qualifications create pathways for economic and social participation, generate a sense of self-worth and independence, and help learners reach their potential throughout their adult lives. Greater workforce participation reduces welfare costs, improves social cohesion and creates a more inclusive society.<sup>61</sup>

TAFE providers were also considered well placed to provide accessible training due to their size and broad reach and their ability to support learners with disability to participate in further education.<sup>62</sup> TAFE is also useful for people with disability who left school early or did not do well at school to complete a qualification that improves their prospects for further education and employment.<sup>63</sup> The benefits to individual learners and society are discussed further below.

<sup>59</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

<sup>60</sup> Public Policy Forum and Diversity Institute, *Skills for the post-pandemic world*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 3; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 4; Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 5; Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, pp. 1, 5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 1; Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 5; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>63</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 13; Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, Vision Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

## TAFE course completion increases employability

Education and training help learners gain the skills, knowledge and experience they need for work, which is important for improving health, economic participation, standards of living and social inclusion. VET is more accessible than other post-school education options, particularly for early school leavers and learners with additional needs, and is proven to increase employability, especially for TAFE graduates.<sup>64</sup>

Submissions presented evidence showing the impact of VET completion on graduates' employment and earnings. For example, National Disability Services, Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, showed unemployed people with disability increased their chance of finding work by 20 percentage points after completing a Certificate III or above (from 9% to 29%). The improvement was less noticeable for unemployed people without disability whose chance increased from 52% to 62%.<sup>65</sup>

Students who complete VET qualifications at TAFE gain a wage premium of 39% compared with people who do not have post-school qualifications.<sup>66</sup> For people with disability who have a qualification higher than Certificate II, one in five earn more than \$650 per week compared with one in ten for those whose highest educational attainment was Year 12 or below.<sup>67</sup>

A parent of students with disability from Hoppers Crossing told the AEU how important TAFE is for transitioning students into work:

As a parent of two special needs students, I have seen them progress because of the courses which were specifically designed to enable high-functioning students such as they are to transition to the workforce. Take away that opportunity and you are increasing a dependency on the welfare system. Education in Australia must remain affordable and inclusive. Discrimination on any level is not allowed in employment, nor should it be in education.<sup>68</sup>

The Victorian Trades Hall Council, the peak body for unions in Victoria, also stated 'TAFE is essential to addressing inequality and creating good, secure jobs for working people' and access to it should be expanded.<sup>69</sup> Case Study 1.1 provides an example of a Victoria University Polytechnic student's pathway to employment.

<sup>64</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 10; Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 1; National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, pp. 3–4; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 4, 10; Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 2; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 2; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 5; Department of Education and Training, *Disability action plan 2018–2021*, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, 2018, p. 5; Alison Pennington, *An investment in productivity and inclusion: the economic and social benefits of the TAFE system*, Centre for Future Work, The Australia Institute, Canberra, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>66</sup> Pennington, *An investment in productivity and inclusion*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 1.

Employers also benefit from employing workers with disability as they prove to be more loyal and reliable and have lower absenteeism and higher productivity than mainstream employees. Employing people with disability also widens the talent pool available to employers, and embracing diversity and inclusive recruitment improves employers' reputation and brand among customers and employees.<sup>70</sup>

### **CASE STUDY 1.1: 'Learner M has secured part time employment as a support worker in a community agency'**

'In 2019, Learner M who has a hearing impairment and a moderate intellectual disability completed her Certificate III in Individual Support (Disability) after completing a Certificate III in Community Services the previous year. During 2018, Learner M was referred to the Learning Hub for writing support. Along with regular catch up sessions with her dedicated teachers, she was able to acquire the necessary study skills to increase her competency, complete her course and gain employment. During her studies a Participation Assistant was engaged to support her learning and to minimise the impacts of the cognitive impairment.

Learner M has secured part time employment as a support worker in a community agency and is enjoying the benefits of paid work. She is pleased to be able to contribute to the economy and to live a more independent life where she pursues individual and team sport activities within a busy schedule. Her 'everyday' life skills, study achievements, determination, positive attitude, along with her successful learning experience, will contribute to her ongoing success in sport and employment. She has ambitions to return to study after some time working.'

Source: Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4.

### **Education improves wellbeing**

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak body for social and community services in Victoria, told the Committee, 'education transforms lives. A good education can put someone on the path to success and on the path to happiness.'<sup>71</sup> TAFE does this for learners with disability by providing them the opportunity to extend their social circle, gain independence and boost their confidence and self-esteem.<sup>72</sup> This is particularly the case for students who have attended special schools and have had less chance to interact in mainstream environments.<sup>73</sup>

For example, Hume Valley School (HVS), which is based in Broadmeadows and caters for students diagnosed with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, found:

<sup>70</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, pp. 10, 13; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 3; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9.

Students at HVS have benefitted both socially and economically through their participation in TAFE, SBATs [School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships] and/or VET programs. The hands-on projects that our students have engaged in, such as; constructing a chicken coop (Certificate II in Horticulture) and performing and operating stagecraft elements in a school play (Certificate II in Creative Industries), have resulted in students succeeding collaboratively. These, and similar activities, have contributed to building positive relationships amongst students and boosting self-esteem. Students participating in SBATs are financially compensated for their work in a kitchen (Certificate II in Food Processing) and Warehousing (Certificate II in Warehouse Operations). Staff have noticed an increase in student confidence when given an opportunity to undertake a paid apprenticeship.<sup>74</sup>

Participating in TAFE also helps improve students' mental and physical health and quality of life. It can reduce isolation and give learners with disability a sense of belonging. TAFE qualifications can also open up access to higher education pathways and graduates with disability can encourage and mentor other learners with disability who aspire to further education.<sup>75</sup>

Gaining independence through further education and employment is also important for improving mental health according to the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC), an Australian cooperative research effort focused on autism. Autism CRC's Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism found adults with ASD who live independently (that is, alone or as a couple rather than with family) had a better psychological quality of life.<sup>76</sup>

Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President of AASE, echoed these sentiments stating TAFE for some students with disability:

is seen as a really desirable location for them post school and something that they look forward to doing because they want to keep learning but they want to keep learning in a comparable institution to some of the students and friends that they have made in mainstream schools and the friends that they have made along the way in sporting teams. They want to be able to continue their learning, and TAFE is a very good option for them because it is going to prepare them well for work, which is starting to prepare them to give back to the community and to be valued members of the community.<sup>77</sup>

The President of AASE, Ms Felicity Bellingham, added:

As a teacher, I am thinking of students in my classroom who I just know—I just know—could become and can become, as they become adults, people who contribute to

<sup>74</sup> Hume Valley School, *Submission 5*, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 3; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 5; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 15; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

a workplace in a really good way, and it would be good for them and good for the workplace.<sup>78</sup>

TAFE was also considered beneficial for learners with disability due to the structure of VET courses and the adaptability of teachers. For example, Amaze stated:

The applied nature of VET, its more structured curriculum, smaller class sizes, greater contact hours and shorter courses often work better for autistic learners than the self-directed learning style inherent in many university courses. Clearer pathways to work, the opportunity to demonstrate skills in practice through training and work placements undertaken as part of a VET qualification assist autistic people to overcome other barriers to employment.<sup>79</sup>

Case Study 1.2 provides the perspective of a learner with ASD who has completed a TAFE qualification.

### **CASE STUDY 1.2: 'Credit goes to the admission team for not seeing my diagnosis as a problem'**

'Mostly, my TAFE has been a fantastic facility and make learning a great experience. The structure of classes, face to face learning and practical lessons all help to prepare you for work.

I couldn't manage University with large classes and loose structures.

I felt I could deal with small class sizes. I understood the expectations better than Uni. The TAFE was very near home in my comfort zone so my anxiety was less I was in familiar environment. I felt very successful as the work was not difficult but I felt proud to have completed a course that lead to employment. I got a job as a book keeper with a large accountancy firm and now several years later had the confidence to tackle Uni online which is more in my comfort zone.

Educational transition is amazing & I am hoping to get into a traineeship next year.

I've generally found TAFE teachers to be more accepting of differing learning styles than teachers I'd previously encountered in mainstream high schools.

I have very specific areas of strength so I tried to choose something I enjoy and thought I would be good at as well as lead to employment.

Credit goes to the admission team for not seeing my diagnosis as a problem and my teacher who believed in me from the start and was positive and strengths-focused.

... a formal party once a year, a lot of practical training, excursions, large industrial facilities, canteen, and work placement. Most of the students are friendly. Very nice environment to study.'

Source: Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>78</sup> Ms Felicity Bellingham, President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>79</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 8.

As explained by Melbourne Polytechnic, TAFE is commonly seen as ‘the learning environment where students from vulnerable backgrounds can feel safe, be supported and empowered to flourish not only academically but also personally and socially.’<sup>80</sup>

### **TAFE participation benefits the whole community**

As TAFE increases employability, it increases the number of skilled workers available to industry. Industry can then expand and employ more people, which subsequently increases total economic output. Lowering unemployment also creates a wealthier and healthier workforce and community, which reduces government expenditure on income support and healthcare.<sup>81</sup> Autism CRC highlighted research showing a 10% increase in the employment rate for people with disability would have resulted in a \$40–43 billion gain for the Australian economy over the ten years to 2021.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to the economic impact, the community benefits from greater diversity and inclusion in education and workplace settings because it fosters greater understanding and respect for people with disability and the contributions they make.<sup>83</sup> Since TAFEs have a greater proportion of students with disability than other post-school settings, they are an important vehicle for reducing systemic inequality in Australia’s economy and society.<sup>84</sup>

Ms King from VCOSS provided the Committee with a summation of the benefits of greater diversity in educational settings:

Our educational institutions should look, and should be, as diverse as the communities that they serve. They should have people from all backgrounds and all income brackets and with all abilities. When they are not diverse in this manner, two things happen. Firstly, people miss out. People miss out on the transformation that I mentioned earlier. They miss out on the ability to learn, to improve and to thrive; to get a job and to get a wage. They miss out on the opportunity to be the very best that they can be. And let us be specific here. When I say ‘they’, I do mean those people who are already starting from behind: people with difficulties at home or who maybe have no home whatsoever at all; people with very little money; people with health challenges, including mental health challenges; and, yes, people with disabilities.

The second thing that happens when our educational institutions let us down is that our society as a whole misses out. We do not get the full participation in society of those who are denied a good education. We do not get their wisdom, their insights or their perspectives, their experiences or their contributions. Our workplaces, our TV screens and our parliaments are then denied a certain richness, so we all lose.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 10; Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 2; Pennington, *An investment in productivity and inclusion*, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 5; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 5; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, p. 229.

<sup>84</sup> Pennington, *An investment in productivity and inclusion*, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

## 1.2 The Victorian TAFE network serves a broad range of learners

TAFEs are one of many institutions that deliver VET along with community education providers, private training providers, schools, commercial enterprise providers and universities. There are over 4,000 VET providers across Australia. In 2017, most VET students (60%) were enrolled with private training providers, followed by 16% who were enrolled at TAFE institutes, which are government funded.<sup>86</sup>

The Victorian TAFE network is made up of 12 TAFE institutes (Bendigo Kangan Institute, Box Hill Institute, Chisholm Institute, TAFE Gippsland, GOTAFE, The Gordon, Holmesglen, Melbourne Polytechnic, South West TAFE, SuniTAFE, William Angliss Institute and Wodonga TAFE) and four dual-sector universities (Federation University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Victoria University Polytechnic).

The TAFE network operates across 90 campuses throughout Victoria and provides education and training to over 200,000 Victorian students. The network employs about 10,000 staff and delivers VET and higher education courses as well as senior secondary qualifications.<sup>87</sup> The network is managed and funded by the Victorian Government, which receives financial contributions from the Australian Government to support training services.<sup>88</sup> The Victorian Government determines resource allocation and oversees the delivery of, and expenditure of public funds for, training in the state.<sup>89</sup>

Unlike other states, Victoria has a wide range of TAFE providers. Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory have had one TAFE provider for at least 10 years, South Australia since 2012 and New South Wales since 1 January 2019. Queensland's system was established in 2013 as six Registered Training Organisations with many functions managed centrally under one Chief Executive Officer. Similarly, in 2016, Western Australia reduced its number of TAFE providers to five institutes whose main functions are centrally run by the state government.<sup>90</sup>

A review of the strengths and benefits of the Victorian TAFE system commissioned by the Victorian TAFE Association found the following strengths:

- the system is localised to metropolitan and regional areas and providers are aligned with local government and other local organisations to facilitate collaboration on social and economic development

<sup>86</sup> Carol Ey, *The vocational education and training sector: a quick guide*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2018, pp. 2–3.

<sup>87</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 5; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> Productivity Commission, *Report on government services 2020, Part B, Section 5, Vocational education and training, 2020*, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/vocational-education-and-training>> accessed 2 March 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Council of Australian Governments, *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development*, Council of Australian Governments, Canberra, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ruth Schubert and Leo Goedegebuure, *Strengths and benefits of the Victorian TAFE model*, report for Victorian TAFE Association, Melbourne, 2017, pp. 9–11.



- the number of TAFE providers results in many Chief Executive Officers spread across Victoria who can respond to local conditions and issues and who have diverse experiences and skill sets that generate innovative strategic thinking
- many Victorian TAFE providers have longstanding relationships with industry and high-profile industry specialisations
- regional Victoria is better served by local TAFEs.<sup>91</sup>

The review also found the Victorian TAFE network is diverse in terms of the scale, size, educational scope and mission of each TAFE institute. TAFE providers have good levels of collaboration and the Victorian TAFE Association acts as a broker between DET and providers.<sup>92</sup>

At the same time, the Australian VET sector has faced challenges since the 2000s when it was restructured based on a market-based delivery of programs. The market-based system involved public subsidies for private providers and decreased federal and state government investment in TAFEs.<sup>93</sup> Another criticism of the broader VET system is that the curriculum is based on an inflexible competency-based training model that is difficult to adapt to changing learner and labour market needs.<sup>94</sup>

### 1.2.1 TAFEs use Community Service Funding to provide disability support services

The Victorian Government provides TAFEs with Community Service Funding to finance a broad range of general and tailored support services and programs for learners with additional barriers or needs, such as learners with disability. For example, TAFEs use part of their Community Service Funding to employ DLOs. DET sets out minimum service standards for Community Service Funding but it is up to individual TAFEs to choose which services and programs they provide to learners with additional barriers or needs.<sup>95</sup> In 2020, DET provided almost \$50 million in Community Service Funding to Victoria's TAFE providers.<sup>96</sup>

Ms Watts told the Committee DET also provides TAFEs further funding for counselling services, such as mental health support, financial counselling and career advice, and it works with TAFEs to provide additional supports to individual students with disability such as screen readers and Auslan support.<sup>97</sup> There is also needs-based funding for regional TAFEs, some of which receive a regional loading to meet the additional needs of their students.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>93</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 2; Pennington, *An investment in productivity and inclusion*, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 18, 21.

<sup>96</sup> Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>98</sup> Mr Phil D'Adamo, Executive Director, TAFE and Tertiary Institutions, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

## 1.2.2 The TAFE funding model could be improved

The Victorian Branch of the AEU argued the capacity of TAFEs to support the needs of students with disability has been eroded for over a decade by Australian and Victorian Government policies, contestable funding, competition from private providers and funding cuts. While recent Victorian Government policies have addressed some of the financial challenges the TAFE network is facing, Victoria's hourly funding rates, which stood at \$15.22 per hour in 2018, are the lowest of any state or territory in Australia.<sup>99</sup> This has resulted in TAFEs receiving inadequate funding to cover the cost of training and often it is the students who need the most support, such as those with disability, who are the most affected.<sup>100</sup>

Another concern raised by the AEU, which has been echoed in reviews of the VET sector, is the lack of clarity around VET funding arrangements across state and Commonwealth governments, which results in a range of subsidies, loadings and costs for the same course across providers.<sup>101</sup> As Ms Meredith Peace, President of the Victorian Branch of the AEU, explained:

you could attend a TAFE in one part of the state and enrol in a Cert III in a particular qualification. You could attend a different TAFE somewhere else in the state and enrol in the same qualification, and you could be charged a different amount of money. You could also get access to a different amount of direct contact hours ...<sup>102</sup>

A recent report on the VET sector by the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University found:

These layers of complexity mean that, compared to other parts of the education system, VET has the least transparency and consistency in government contributions to the cost of the course—creating intense complexity for students and providers.<sup>103</sup>

## 1.2.3 Macklin review recommends more collaboration and a fairer funding model

In 2019, the Victorian Government announced a review of the state's post-secondary education and training system. The review was led by The Honourable Jenny Macklin, who reported her findings and recommendations in October 2020. The report focused on how to ensure Victoria's TAFE and training system is ready to equip the state with the skills needed for current and future jobs and to support economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 1; Productivity Commission, *Report on government services 2020, Part B, Section 5, Vocational education and training*.

<sup>100</sup> Ms Meredith Peace, President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Jenny Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria: driving collaboration and innovation in post-secondary education and training*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020, p. 90.

<sup>101</sup> Ms Meredith Peace, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Sarah Pilcher and Peter Hurley, *Skills for recovery: the vocational education system we need post-COVID-19*, Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, Victoria University, Melbourne, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 32.

The Macklin Review found:

in its current form, our VET system may struggle to meet the new demands it will face. Its competitive market model too often pits training providers against each other to deliver courses that generate short-term profit without the long-term benefit for learners or the economy. It also allocates too much risk to learners, who can pay widely different fees for courses that don't always guarantee a good job today, or a ticket into the transformed labour market of tomorrow.

COVID-19 has heightened these pressures, because as people lose jobs, they seek training to be ready for new ones, potentially overloading a strained system.<sup>105</sup>

The Review made 30 recommendations, including establishing a new independent body, FutureSkills Victoria, to provide unified leadership for the sector and a base for greater collaboration. It also recommended building an evidence database to inform decision-making; developing an annual Victorian skills plan; establishing collaboration labs around the clean economy, care economy and digital economy; expanding Skills and Jobs Centres at TAFEs; improving curriculum and professional learning; and creating a fairer VET funding model.<sup>106</sup>

The Review found a need for more transparency around the costs of quality VET provision and recommended a new funding model that is guided by a published set of principles, is indexed annually and is reviewed against delivery costs every three years. The model should also provide foundation skills courses for free for all Victorians who need them at any point in their career.<sup>107</sup>

The AEU supported a review of funding and the unification of the VET sector under an independent body in order to improve the quality of training and better meet the needs of students with disability.<sup>108</sup> A more unified TAFE system could provide a more streamlined delivery of disability support services, enable sharing of good practice and create more work experience opportunities for learners with disability.<sup>109</sup>

### 1.3 There are a range of policies designed to ensure equal access to education

The right of learners with disability to study at any educational institution is protected by several pieces of legislation. All education providers in Victoria must comply with the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic), the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth).<sup>110</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>108</sup> Ms Meredith Peace, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> Mr Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Students with disability policy*, 2020, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-disability>> accessed 19 October 2020.

Victoria's Equal Opportunity Act recognises the rights of people to live free from discrimination and have equal access to opportunities. Under this Act, it is against the law to discriminate against a person because of a protected personal characteristic, one of which is disability.

The Disability Discrimination Act protects every Australian from discrimination based on disability and the Disability Standards for Education sit beneath this Act. The Disability Standards for Education provide guidance on the rights of students with disability, and the legal obligations on education providers regarding enrolment, participation, curriculum development, student support services and the elimination of harassment and victimisation.

Under both Victorian and Commonwealth legislation, education providers must make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable students with disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability.<sup>111</sup> These legal obligations and other relevant Victorian and Australian government policies are covered in more detail below.

### 1.3.1 The rights of learners with disability are protected by legislation

The Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone if they have a disability in the following areas: employment; education; access to premises; provision of goods, services and facilities; accommodation; buying land; activities of clubs and associations; sport; and administration of Australian Government laws and programs.

The Act defines disability as physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological, and learning disabilities as well as physical disfigurement and the presence of disease-causing organisms in the body (for example, a virus). Disability may be something a person has now, had in the past, may have in the future (for example, a genetic condition that may develop in the future) or is believed to have (for example, if people think someone has hepatitis C). The Act also covers people who have a connection with someone who has a disability, such as friends, relatives, carers and co-workers, if they are discriminated against because of this connection.<sup>112</sup>

Under the Act, education providers such as TAFEs must offer learners with disability the same educational opportunities as every other learner, so if learners with disability meet the admission requirements for a TAFE, they have the same chance to study there as anyone else. The Act covers all processes related to study including application to a course or institution, participation in study, assessment, and participation in student activities.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *A brief guide to the Disability Discrimination Act*, <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/brief-guide-disability-discrimination-act>> accessed 21 September 2020.

<sup>113</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure: choosing your path*, 2021, <<https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/choosingyourpath/disclosure-during-study>> accessed 12 August 2021.

The TAFE provider must make reasonable adjustments if the learner needs them to complete essential coursework. Reasonable adjustments could include:

- modifying premises, such as building ramps and modifying toilets
- modifying or providing equipment, such as lowering benches or providing software
- changing assessment procedures, such as allowing more time or oral exams
- changing course delivery, such as providing an Auslan interpreter.

However, TAFE providers are not required to make such changes under the Act if this will cause major difficulties or unreasonable costs.<sup>114</sup>

The Disability Standards for Education clarify and further explain the legal obligations of education providers to make education accessible to people with disability. This includes taking reasonable steps to ensure learners with disability can:

- seek admission or enrol at an institution
- participate in courses, programs and learning experiences at the institution
- use the institution's support services

in the same way as a learner without disability, and also have the same opportunities and choices in these areas as a learner without disability. The education provider must also develop and implement strategies and programs to prevent harassment or victimisation of a student with a disability.<sup>115</sup>

For each of these areas, the Standards include a statement of rights or entitlements of students with disability, and then describe the obligations and responsibilities of education providers with which they must comply. They then give examples of measures providers can take to prove compliance.

The Standards state reasonable adjustments are measures or actions to assist a student with disability to participate in education or training on the same basis as other students and which consider the student's needs and the interests of the provider, staff and other students. The need for reasonable adjustments should be determined in consultation with the student or their representative and the process for seeking an adjustment should be accessible, transparent and be subject to review.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the development of the Standards in 2005, stakeholders noted they do not necessarily protect learners with disability because there is low awareness of them among students, their families and staff. Also, each TAFE provider decides how it will implement policies relating to learners with disability, which can result in varied experiences and outcomes.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *A brief guide to the Disability Discrimination Act*.

<sup>115</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Disability Standards for Education 2005 plus guidance notes*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2005, pp. 15–24.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>117</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 8; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 11.

In 2020, the Australian Government reviewed the Standards and found students with disability and their families and carers felt it was up to them to be aware of the laws and their rights to advocate for reasonable adjustments. They also felt there was a power imbalance between them and providers and that many educators are unaware of their responsibilities under the Standards or do not have enough information to implement them. More accountability for following the Standards and more information about how providers are meeting them were also requested. The review outlined how the Australian Government will work with state and territory governments to empower and support students with disability and their families, strengthen the knowledge and capability of providers and educators, and create more accountability for the Standards.<sup>118</sup>

### 1.3.2 The Victorian Government has a broad inclusion agenda

The Victorian Government supports inclusion and aims to ensure people with disability live satisfying and fulfilling lives, which includes participation in education and training. The Government's inclusion framework is anchored by *Absolutely everyone: State Disability Plan 2017–2020*, which aims to create an inclusive Victoria so people with disability can participate and contribute to society. Linked to this plan is *Every opportunity: Victorian economic participation plan for people with disability 2018–2020*, which aims to increase the economic participation of people with disability across Victoria. It is broken down into three areas: education and learning pathways, employment opportunities, and business ownership and opportunities.

The economic participation plan, which is being updated for 2021–2024, was developed in response to an underrepresentation of Victorians with disability in the workforce and aims to reduce barriers and discrimination to labour force participation. It looks at all the ways people participate in the economy including employment, self-employment, career progression, enterprise development, education and training, and as consumers. The Government considers TAFEs to be a key provider of supportive and quality education and training to people with disability.<sup>119</sup>

DET also has its own disability action plan that aims to build an inclusive education system where learners' needs are met, and they feel safe and supported. The plan includes providing access to buildings for as many students with disability as possible, as well as delivering professional development to TAFE trainers and assessors, providing wraparound support to learners with disability, enhancing employment pathways and promoting careers in the disability sector to learners with disability.<sup>120</sup>

In 2019, DET and the TAFE network commissioned a review into improving access and achievement for learners with disability. Its aim was to better understand the barriers faced by learners with disability and assess current practice to provide insights and

<sup>118</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Summary of the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2021, pp. 1–2.

<sup>119</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>120</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Disability action plan 2018–2021*, pp. 4, 11, 13, 17.

make recommendations for improvement. The 19 recommendations, which were endorsed by the network, focused on outreach to prospective learners with disability, identification of learners with disability at TAFE, the wellbeing of TAFE learners with disability, teaching methodology and practice, and pathways to work.<sup>121</sup>

Below are descriptions of Victorian Government initiatives that assist TAFE learners with disability.

### **Skills First reforms**

As part of the Victorian Government's inclusion agenda, Skills First is a set of reforms to Victoria's TAFE and training system designed to deliver high quality training to learners who need additional support so they can transition into real jobs. Introduced in 2017, Skills First provides funding to TAFEs to engage with learners with disability (as well as other high-needs learners) and support them to succeed in education and training. The training is aligned to industry and workforce needs in order to lead learners into employment. TAFEs also receive funding under Skills First to deliver wraparound services to learners facing disadvantage.<sup>122</sup>

### **Reconnect program**

The Skills First Reconnect program supports long-term unemployed young people and adults, including people with disability, to overcome barriers to training and work. It is delivered by 10 TAFEs and 16 Learn Locals in Victoria and it uses a local and learner-centred approach to help participants identify and achieve their vocational goals while also providing access to specialist services such as health, accommodation and relationship guidance. The program consists of four elements: engagement; wraparound support; education, training and employment; and pathways. A 2018 evaluation of the Reconnect program found it had engaged over 2,500 participants and 65% of them had enrolled in accredited training.<sup>123</sup>

### **Skills and Jobs Centres**

The Victorian Government has established 32 Skills and Jobs Centres linked to TAFEs across Melbourne and regional Victoria. They are 'one-stop-shops' for all Victorians to receive career information and support, career counselling, training information, and access and referral to workshops and training programs. They provide services to prospective learners, employers, apprentices, trainees, and workers who are unemployed, upskilling or transitioning to a new career. Learners with disability can be triaged into relevant government initiatives and referred to training and courses as well as community services and job readiness service providers.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 5, 35.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10, 18.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19; Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 160.

<sup>124</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 19, 20.

## Free TAFE

The Victorian Government's Free TAFE initiative, which began in 2019, waives tuition fees for priority courses in growth industries. From 2020 the initiative covered over 40 courses and 18 pre-apprenticeship courses. The 2020–21 Victorian State Budget included funding for up to 60,000 Free TAFE places.<sup>125</sup> By removing financial barriers to training, Free TAFE has expanded access to TAFE for people with disability. As discussed in Section 1.1.2, there has been a large increase in the numbers of learners with disability enrolling in free TAFE courses. At the same time, the strong demand for free TAFE courses has placed pressure on staff resources and TAFE providers to meet the needs of a more diverse student cohort.<sup>126</sup> In addition, Free TAFE includes a few courses at Certificate I and II levels, which are often suitable for learners with learning, intellectual or cognitive disabilities.<sup>127</sup>

### 1.3.3 The NDIS is likely to increase the number of learners with disability at TAFE

The NDIS, which is jointly funded and governed by the Australian and state and territory governments, provides support to people with disability, their families and carers through individualised support packages. It also helps people with disability access mainstream services (such as housing and education) and community services (such as sports clubs and libraries) as well as maintain informal supports with family and friends.<sup>128</sup>

The individualised support provided by the NDIS will enable more participants to engage with and participate in TAFE, which will in turn normalise the participation of learners with disability at TAFE and thus remove barriers created from self-doubt or lack of confidence. At the same time, by training the NDIS workforce, TAFE staff are gaining a greater understanding of the needs of learners with disability and will have a stronger capacity to teach them successfully.<sup>129</sup>

The NDIS funds the following supports for TAFE learners with disability:

- assistance with daily personal activities, for example, assistance with eating while attending TAFE
- assistance with coordinating or managing the transition into TAFE, such as building capacity for independent living and self-care and developing social and communication skills
- aids and equipment needed for everyday activities, such as wheelchairs or personal communication devices

<sup>125</sup> Victorian Government, *Free TAFE for lots of jobs*, 2021, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/free-tafe>> accessed 22 April 2021.

<sup>126</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 14–15; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 7.

<sup>127</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Luke Buckmaster, *The National Disability Insurance Scheme: a quick guide*, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 14–15.



- specialist transport to and from TAFE if the participant cannot use public transport and has no other transport option
- specialist support and training for TAFE staff if it is related to the individual support needs of the learner
- course fees for training to develop personal, life skills or work readiness such as a Certificate I in Work Readiness.<sup>130</sup>

The NDIS does not fund reasonable adjustments such as specific learning aids, teaching assistance, education supports and equipment. These must be covered by the TAFE provider.<sup>131</sup>

The Brotherhood of St Laurence, an independent non-government organisation that works to reduce poverty and which is also an NDIS Partner in the Community delivering local area coordination services, has noted some teething problems between the NDIS and TAFEs. It has found NDIS support workers are not always familiar with the TAFE sector and suitable courses, programs and opportunities for participants, such as Skills and Jobs Centres. Also, the bureaucratic processes and structures of the NDIS can make it difficult for participants and their families to navigate in order to access education and training opportunities.<sup>132</sup>

## 1.4 Scope of inquiry

The terms of reference for this Inquiry required the Committee to examine access to TAFE for learners with disability. To achieve this, the Committee inquired into the barriers faced by learners with disability when trying to access and participate in TAFE, the types of support learners with disability need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE, and the training and support TAFE teachers and staff need to better assist students with disability. The Committee also looked at broader sector-wide strategies to increase the participation of learners with disability in TAFE courses.

In this Inquiry the Committee defined TAFEs as the 12 TAFE institutes established under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic) and the four Victorian dual-sector universities. While this report focuses on TAFE, the Committee recognises the findings and recommendations are likely to apply to the broader VET sector too.

## 1.5 Inquiry process

The Committee called for submissions to this Inquiry in August 2020 by advertising on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and writing directly to about 180 stakeholders. The invited stakeholders included disability and social service organisations, TAFE providers,

<sup>130</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 40.

<sup>131</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

<sup>132</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability hearing, response to questions on notice received 17 February 2021, p. 1.

education organisations, business groups, unions, research centres and Victorian and Australian government bodies. The Committee also called for submissions using a video in Auslan and an Easy English guide.

The Committee received 39 submissions, which are listed in Appendix A. From December 2020 to May 2021, the Committee held four days of public hearings over Zoom. Notice of the public hearings was given on the Parliament of Victoria's website, Twitter feed and Facebook news feed. Appendix A also lists the witnesses who gave evidence at the public hearings. The public hearings were broadcast live on the Parliament of Victoria's website.

## 1.6 Report outline

This report consists of five chapters:

- This chapter, Chapter 1, introduces the Inquiry by outlining the Inquiry's context, scope and process.
- Chapter 2 explores transition into TAFE study for learners with disability and issues around study commencement.
- Chapter 3 considers how to improve participation in TAFE for learners with disability as well as increase retention and completion rates.
- Chapter 4 discusses ways to enhance system-wide performance across the TAFE network in relation to improving accessibility.
- Chapter 5 provides a short conclusion to the report.



While TAFE is a desirable pathway for many learners with disability, some face barriers when applying for and commencing TAFE study. Overcoming these barriers is an important starting point to providing learners with disability equitable access to further education and subsequently higher qualifications and/or meaningful employment. This chapter considers how to ensure learners with disability have the confidence, knowledge and support to seize the education and training opportunities available for them at TAFE. It begins by looking at the transition into TAFE and then covers the accessibility of TAFE enrolment and commencement processes.

### 2.1 Raising aspirations and awareness helps the transition into TAFE

Transition into TAFE is not always easy for learners with disability if they are not aware of or confident enough to take up TAFE pathways. In some cases, learners with disability or their families, carers and teachers might have low expectations of their capabilities, which can steer them away from some TAFE options. In other cases, learners with disability may miss out on quality career guidance to direct them towards TAFE. The following sections examine these concerns and propose ways to optimise opportunities and transition support for learners with disability.

#### 2.1.1 The first step is overcoming low expectations

One of the reasons why people with disability are less likely to pursue further education is because they may be exposed to a culture of low expectations from a young age. Misguided assumptions, poor attitudes and unconscious bias may lead family, carers, teachers and the community at large to hold low expectations of what learners with disability can and want to achieve in terms of education and employment. This can result in learners with disability being presented with fewer opportunities and choices and little information or assistance when making decisions about their education and employment.<sup>1</sup> Case Study 2.1 presents an example of how low expectations can reduce the options offered to learners with disability.

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<sup>1</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, pp. 3–4; National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 2; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 13; Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 1; Council of Australian Governments, *2010–2020 National disability strategy*, COAG, Canberra, 2011, p. 54.

This discrimination or ‘soft bigotry of low expectations’ can continue into adulthood and create poorer education, employment, health and social outcomes for people with disability.<sup>2</sup> As explained by Dr William Crisp, Policy and Project Officer with National Disability Services’ employment program Ticket to Work:

It is about expectations. I think due to ableism many people do not think that people with disabilities, particularly people with intellectual or other cognitive disabilities, can work, and those expectations are what stop these students from flourishing. If the expectation changes—if we expect kids to be able to work, and everybody around them has those same high expectations—then that is what the kids are going to assume. They are going to assume that going into open employment is the norm, so, ‘I’m going to do what everybody else is doing’. But at the moment I do not think that is a universally held opinion by many people in the community. Disability is not about being able, it is about needing the right support to be able to do what you want to do ...<sup>3</sup>

### **CASE STUDY 2.1: ‘[S]tudents should be supported to participate in meaningful education’**

‘V went to a specialist school for her secondary education. In her final year her career counsellor advised her to attend a specialist program in a mainstream TAFE. The counsellor didn’t explore other options with V that might match up better with her strengths, interests and goals.

V was also given little time and no formal supports to help her make this decision. She strongly believes that attending a specialist school had already funnelled her into a very small set of options.

While V’s specialist TAFE program was part of a mainstream TAFE campus, she and her classmates were generally segregated from other students. They even had different lunchtimes. This was the TAFE’s way of dealing with incidents of harassment and bullying. V did not see any work to build appropriate attitudes, or to discipline inappropriate behaviour.

Unfortunately, many teaching and support staff also showed negative attitudes towards the students in the specialist TAFE program. Students were spoken down to and teachers used derogatory language. Some students were treated more poorly than others depending on how they interacted in class and they did not get the additional support they needed.

Many staff appeared to have low expectations of the students. High student–teacher ratios and a lack of support workers in English and Maths classes meant that students found it hard to build their skills. V felt that the focus was often on just filling time with recreation activities and field trips.

*(Continued)*

<sup>2</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 1; Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Dr William Crisp, Policy and Project Officer, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

**CASE STUDY 2.1: Continued**

Low expectations were built into the courses themselves. The courses were designed to lead to a Certificate I in horticulture, hospitality or retail. Students chose which subject they would do at the end of their first year. Little support was given to help students make this choice. V's options and those of her classmates were narrowed to work as a gardener, at a fast food chain, or at a supermarket or a department store.

In second year, the chosen Certificate I subject only made up a small amount of class time. Class time continued to focus on recreation and general skills.

The TAFE did not generally offer students help to access work experience. Instead students would have to arrange it themselves or with the help of their parents. Many students found it difficult to navigate this process. One work experience placement that the TAFE did arrange for V was supposed to be for two weeks but ended after half a day. This was because the manager at the placement felt that having a student with intellectual disability onsite was a liability. V's parents were called to pick her up, leaving her feeling distressed and that she had done something wrong.

V feels strongly that the courses she took only focused on basic skills and did not contribute to an employment or career pathway. V believes that students should be supported to participate in meaningful education through learning plans, career advice, and access to additional supports as required, including from professionals such as occupational therapists and psychologists.'

Source: Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

Following prolonged exposure to low expectations, people with disability may begin to internalise these beliefs resulting in negative effects on their confidence, educational engagement, attainment and aspirations.<sup>4</sup> For example, a Mission Australia youth survey found young people with disability reported less confidence in their ability to achieve their post-school goals than young people without disability.<sup>5</sup>

In late 2019, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), the national peak body representing children and young people with disability aged up to 25, surveyed young people with disability, their families and teachers and found low expectations of students' abilities and aspirations contributed to poorer post-school planning and outcomes. Some of the responses included:

'Everyone just said I'd never get a job, even though I wanted to'—young person with disability over 25 years old, regional NSW

'Yes, I was told not to bother applying for postgraduate study due to my disability by a disability support officer.'—young person with disability aged 19–20 years old, metropolitan QLD

<sup>4</sup> National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 2; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 13; Ms Nicole Battle, Chief Executive Officer, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 3; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 14.

‘Yes, more difficult to know of suitable work options. Hard to get work placements that are not lip service’—family of a young person with disability aged 21–22 years old, metropolitan VIC

‘Low expectations of students. Teachers told parents at an assembly that “most [students] would not go onto university.” Situation even worse for those with both visible and invisible disabilities. My application for special consideration as part of HSC exams was denied by the school, without adequate explanation’—young person with disability aged over 25 years old, metropolitan VIC.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, students responding to the CYDA survey stated they were not encouraged to choose final year subjects that would lead to the calculation of an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank, the number which universities use to determine entry into undergraduate courses.<sup>7</sup>

The culture of low expectations can also extend to beliefs around the aspirations of young people with disability. However, Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager of Ticket to Work, informed the Committee:

young people with disabilities have the same aspirations and hopes as other young people. In some of the research that has been completed there is very little difference. Young people with and without disabilities want to access training and education. They want to make money—a lot of them want to make a lot of money—accessing sport and hobbies and having long-term relationships and things like marriage.<sup>8</sup>

The I Am Ready Partnership formed between the Baw Baw Latrobe, Gippsland East and South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and the National Disability Coordination Officer Program runs a program which builds the employability skills and confidence of young people with disability. It added:

Young people with disability and barriers to learning deserve an education that enables them to identify and build on their strengths. Often the focus is on what they can’t do without focusing on what their abilities and strengths [are]. We wouldn’t take this approach to other students where the emphasis is on encouraging individuals to step up, be their best and aspire to excellence.<sup>9</sup>

When developing the I Am Ready program, Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer of the South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN, found:

we were concerned that [students with disability] were being left behind in career planning and transition support, almost as if such aspiration might not be expected of that group of students, when in fact we are all aware that having a job or a career brings

<sup>6</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

so much more to our lives than just receiving a pay. When we think about a career, it is about our strengths—what we can do and what we would like to do, and not what we cannot do. People living with disability should have that equal footing.<sup>10</sup>

She also noted volunteers in the program held an unconscious bias about the abilities of students with disability:

We had some volunteers who came into the classroom to support the teacher during the eight employability skills session days, and LLEN staff also supported the process. I think what we were surprised to encounter was even with the best intentions of people, there was an unconscious bias—almost a feeling of ‘How do we make up for their deficit?’. It was not about, ‘Let’s focus on this person’s strengths’ or ‘Let’s bring the best out in this person’; it was ‘What will we have to settle for?’, and we encountered that frequently. But where we could challenge that and build the confidence of young people, the amount of confidence that we saw come out of those groups of kids was astonishing. It was almost like they became different people. The people who came into the program feeling very quiet and reserved and ‘I can’t do’ were young people who felt confident, who physically stood taller and had just a better attitude towards their own ability to move forward.<sup>11</sup>

Parents of learners with disability might also lose the ability to see their child’s potential if schools, communities and governments hold low expectations for their children. This can have an impact on learners’ post-school outcomes because families and carers are an important source of advice, support and opportunities for work experience through their networks.<sup>12</sup>

As Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement at the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak body for social and community services in Victoria, told the Committee, parents of learners with disability need support:

[T]here are parents who genuinely are really, really scared. They have had negative experiences, they have seen the discrimination that their children and young people have faced, that they have faced as a family, so they are really worried about sending their child into the world, into that workplace environment, for good reason, so really wrapping support around the family to break through that. But also sometimes families can be sceptical about what is possible for their child, so again, wrapping that support around the student and the family.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, parents of students with disability have reported to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability that school staff have low expectations of their children, do not consider them ‘authentic learners’ and exclude them from standard classes and activities based on

<sup>10</sup> Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 1; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.



the assumption they would not be able to participate.<sup>14</sup> In addition, almost two-thirds of respondents to the CYDA survey (64%) felt their school had low expectations of students with disability in terms of further education and employment.<sup>15</sup>

The Victorian Disability Advisory Council, which provides advice to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers around inclusiveness and how to increase opportunities for people with disability, noted this can extend to TAFE where there may be ‘misconceptions among intake and teaching staff that students with disability may not be able to work in their chosen profession upon completion of a TAFE course’.<sup>16</sup>

Stakeholders argued that education providers must recognise that students with disability have the same capability to achieve as students without disability and must offer them the same opportunities and encouragement to aspire to further education and work.<sup>17</sup> There should be a culture of high expectations and aspirations for learners with disability from early learning settings through to university.<sup>18</sup>

**FINDING 1:** People with disability may be exposed to a culture of low expectations from a young age, which can result in them being presented with fewer education opportunities and experiencing poorer employment, health and social outcomes over their lives.

### 2.1.2 Better and earlier career guidance is needed for learners with disability

In addition to having high expectations for their education and employment outcomes, learners with disability also need quality career guidance to inform them of the available opportunities at TAFE and allow them to trial TAFE study and potential work environments before making important career choices. Stakeholders called for improved career guidance for learners with disability from early school years.

#### Students with disability do not always get quality career advice at school

Effective career development during secondary school assists young people to decide whether to go on to further education, training or employment when they leave school. It gives them a good understanding of the labour market and helps them to set realistic career goals and develop a plan to achieve them.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, October 2020, p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Ms Jenni Graham, I Am Ready Coordinator, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network and Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>18</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 14.

Stakeholders identified early career development as a key step to reducing gaps in educational attainment and employment for people with disability but noted many students with disability are not receiving the career guidance they need.<sup>19</sup> Findings from the CYDA survey show career planning is often fragmented and poorer for students with disability compared with other students. For example:

- 80% reported their school did not provide support or appropriate information about career planning
- 58% reported not receiving adequate support to think about and plan for the future
- 52% reported the assistance and information provided through their school was not useful.<sup>20</sup>

Of the career development activities provided at school, 46% of students responding to the CYDA survey reported having the opportunity to undertake work experience, 30% received individual career counselling and advice and 28% had the opportunity to participate in career-related activities such as workshops, seminars or information sessions.<sup>21</sup> Fewer than one out of five students reported receiving:

- assistance with planning for post-school study or training (19%)
- assistance in understanding their strengths and skills for post-school transition (18%)
- practical assistance such as résumé writing or assistance with TAFE or university applications (16%).<sup>22</sup>

When it is provided, career development can sometimes result in students with disability receiving poor or inaccurate advice if the staff providing it have outdated attitudes, limited knowledge and poor disability awareness.<sup>23</sup> VCOS members reported students with disability at mainstream schools often do not get clear information about TAFE and vocational education and training (VET) pathways.<sup>24</sup>

Almost four out of five CYDA survey respondents (78%) reported receiving assistance and information about post-school options from sources other than school such as disability service providers or employment service providers. However, CYDA noted this could be risky if some options such as supported employment are promoted and others such as higher education are not.<sup>25</sup> The Brotherhood of St Laurence, an independent

<sup>19</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, p. 4; National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 5; Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, pp. 8–9; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 16–17; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>23</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 12.

non-government organisation that works to reduce poverty, also reported learners with disability often rely on trusted friends or family members to find out about training options and understand how to choose, apply for and enrol in a course.<sup>26</sup>

Families and carers may have limited knowledge of training and employment pathways, which limits the guidance they can provide. VCOSS also noted that for students attending specialist schools, there may be an unfamiliarity and lack of confidence to engage with mainstream settings among students and their families making it confronting or challenging to consider options such as TAFE.<sup>27</sup>

A survey run by autism organisations Amaze, the I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, Different Journeys and Aspergers Victoria (hereafter the Victorian TAFE and autism survey) found a quarter of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who had enrolled in TAFE did so because they were not sure what else to do. This suggests that some students with disability are not receiving adequate career guidance to determine whether a TAFE course is suitable for them and matches their interests and aspirations.<sup>28</sup>

Amaze also stated learners with ASD often do less career exploration than other learners due to their higher rates of early disengagement from school and low participation rates in work experience.<sup>29</sup> VCOSS agreed that students with disability in mainstream schools also have insufficient support to access meaningful work experience to get a sense of working in a particular industry or setting. Access is even poorer if students with disability live in regional areas, are in out-of-home care or are from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background.<sup>30</sup>

Lower rates of engagement with school career development and work experience led several stakeholders to argue for career planning to begin early in secondary school and also be included in foundational level courses at TAFE (such as Certificate I and II qualifications and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) for learners who have left school early. Early, individualised transition planning and work experience will help students choose a pathway that aligns with their interests, abilities and aspirations before they reach senior school years.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team, Brotherhood of St Laurence, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 18; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>31</sup> Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 12; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 15–16; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 32; Ms Felicity Bellingham, President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24; Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15–16; Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Mr Lionel Bamblett, General Manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33; Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40.

In 2018, the Victorian Government introduced reforms to school career education, which included the development of career action plans from Year 7 and transition resources for students with disability and their teachers, career practitioners and parents.<sup>32</sup> Stakeholders acknowledged the benefits of these reforms and suggested further improvements such as providing early outreach to students with disability who indicate interest in a TAFE pathway in their career action plan and giving these students practical assistance with course applications, enrolments and requests for reasonable adjustments.<sup>33</sup> This assistance to navigate their transition should begin early so students:

are not arriving at TAFE on day one of [their] class and suddenly thinking about, 'What paperwork do I need to fill out to access learning support?' and things like that.<sup>34</sup>

While students with disability should have the same access to opportunities as students without disability, school career education should be customised to their needs. As explained by Ms Wakeford from Ticket to Work:

there is a use of online careers assessments which all Year 9 students have the opportunity to do, but you can imagine we have had students in tears because of the jobs that have been suggested through those online career development assessments if they are a wheelchair user and the jobs that are coming up they cannot possibly do—so some real sensitivity around what works in careers education for students with a disability.<sup>35</sup>

Ms Fewster from VCOSS suggested school career education for students with disability could be improved by ensuring they have opportunities to gain exposure to different industries through taster days and to participate in work experience and structured workplace learning. This is especially important for students and families who do not have the networks to draw on to set up work experience placements and need schools to fill that gap.<sup>36</sup>

### **TAFEs can also assist with transition planning**

A common transition issue raised during the Inquiry was the need for more information from TAFE providers about what it is like to study at TAFE, the courses available, the enrolment process, the supports available to students with disability and how to find a suitable TAFE institute.<sup>37</sup> Many students with disability and their families are not aware of the opportunities and support available at TAFE, especially if they are not connected

<sup>32</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23; Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25; Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 14, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, *Submission 12*, p. 1; Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5.

with services that are linked or aligned with TAFEs.<sup>38</sup> As noted by Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways at dual-sector university Victoria University Polytechnic:

it is quite a shock for students coming from secondary school, where they have had quite targeted supports, individualised and so on, and they come to TAFE and that does not exist in that same individualised manner. We see that quite a lot.<sup>39</sup>

Students with disability and their families can sometimes be fearful of what is expected at TAFE, according to Ms Karen Biggelaar, Principal of Ballarat Specialist School:

There are a lot of fears, particularly fears around setting up students to fail and not wanting that experience for the young person. I know when we first started engaging with TAFE at the school there were a lot of fears around the expectations—the expectations of the community, families and the students themselves. So I think it is for the TAFE providers to be really clear on what are the necessary expectations for the learners, how participation can be supported and what the non-negotiables of the course are so everyone is very clear at the outset about what the requirements that need to be met are and also of course what adjustments can be made to the expectations to support the young person to be successful and to be included in that learning program.<sup>40</sup>

Ms Felicity Bellingham, President of the Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), a professional association for teachers, allied health professionals and others working with students with disability in schools, said students with disability need more information about the TAFE environment and would benefit from tours of the campus and classrooms. She added:

Some of our members commented that they would like more thorough subject descriptions—so for parents and families and teachers who are talking to families about which TAFEs and what courses and whether they are a suitable pathway for a student, to have really good descriptions of the subjects to give them an idea of whether that is going to suit that student and what it means and a physical experience in a classroom of what that is going to feel like.<sup>41</sup>

Students and their families may also not understand how TAFE courses work and may mistakenly assume students will have the same support they had at school, such as a full-time integration aide.<sup>42</sup> Federation University, a regional dual-sector university, agreed, stating:

Familiarity with and preparedness for the transition to a TAFE environment is key to learner success, however the high school setting learners are transitioning from do not always have embedded and structured experiential pathways that give learners a

<sup>38</sup> Australian Association of Special Education, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways, Victoria University Polytechnic, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Ms Karen Biggelaar, Principal, Ballarat Specialist School, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> Ms Felicity Bellingham, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 12.

sense of the adult learning environment. Having access to practical information about supports and access at TAFE and understanding how to seek and engage with those supports is important so that learners are not discouraged and don't struggle when commencing.

Learners with a disability often present as unprepared when transitioning from secondary education to tertiary education. Some learners commence at TAFE with the expectation that they will have an integration aide as they have had during secondary school. Many school-leavers with disability have not previously dealt directly with staff; their needs having been communicated and mediated through parents, guardians or teachers.

The lack of transition programs limits a learner's success as they expend time at the start of their course trying to understand how to navigate the system for reasonable adjustment ... Transition programs from school, that educate prospective TAFE learners about the supports available and promote a positive experience when disclosing, are key.<sup>43</sup>

Federation University suggested starting early to increase learners' and parents' awareness of the disability supports available at TAFE and how to access them, and to manage their expectations. This awareness raising should begin in secondary school prior to application to TAFE.<sup>44</sup> Aspergers Victoria, a not-for-profit organisation that provides services, support and advocacy for Victorians with Asperger's syndrome, added:

From year 8 or 9 TAFEs should have lines of communication with the schools for students and their families about TAFE options including clear outlines of the disability supports available at each TAFE location to suit their needs. This should also be available and easily accessible for any student considering joining a TAFE. This information should also include transition approaches that are available in each TAFE, contact people, accommodations each course provides for and more. This must build trust and use plain language—using the advice and support of existing TAFE students to improve such communications.<sup>45</sup>

Ms Joanne Stevenson, a Sunraysia Institute of TAFE student with disability, agreed when asked how to encourage more people with disability to go to TAFE, stating:

Get them to sit down one on one and describe it and talk about what the TAFE can offer, what there is and the additional support that they can get. And, yes, they will not look back if they do go, and it will be the best experience they can do.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Ms Joanne Stevenson, TAFE student, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence mentioned Partners in the Community, which provide local area coordination for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), are well-placed to link all people with disability (whether they are eligible for NDIS support or not) with mainstream community supports and information. It stated:

now that the NDIS is rolled out, Partners in the Community represent an underutilised, locally embedded resource for improving the capacity of TAFEs (and the wider VET system) to be inclusive of students with disability. As the ‘pre-enrolment’ phase is critical in any learner’s experience with vocational training—when the complex, often confusing nature of the course offerings, provider types, and administrative barriers are most pronounced—there is an urgent need for interventions that address aspirations, careers exploration, and course/provider suitability.<sup>47</sup>

To improve awareness of the opportunities and support available at TAFE for learners with disability, stakeholders called for TAFEs to continue delivering outreach programs to mainstream and specialist schools and expand outreach to disability service providers, Learn Locals, community education providers and students undertaking home schooling.<sup>48</sup>

Regional TAFEs Bendigo Kangan Institute and The Gordon supported greater alignment between TAFEs, disability service providers and NDIS providers to raise awareness of TAFE options among learners with disability and offer assistance and support with enrolment and completion of TAFE courses.<sup>49</sup> The Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV), the peak advocacy body for CALD communities in Victoria, also stated ‘meaningful cross-sector partnerships are another way of leveraging resources and capabilities to support the participation of people with disabilities in vocational pathways.’<sup>50</sup>

TAFEs should also offer or continue offering TAFE taster days where learners with disability can try a course to see whether it is right for them and to understand what the course involves and what will be expected of them.<sup>51</sup> In addition, improving the communication between TAFEs and schools would benefit transition planning for students with disability. TAFEs could outline the requirements for entry and success in their courses, explain the supports they offer and share up-to-date information with schools relevant to learners with disability.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 22; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 12; Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 1, 18; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 6, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 8; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>50</sup> Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 16.

<sup>51</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 9; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 22; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 12; Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 1, 18–19; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 6, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Australian Association of Special Education, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 35; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 16; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 8.

Ms Biggelaar added this communication would have an even greater impact if it was delivered by someone with lived experience:

it would be really wonderful if every TAFE had a spokesperson with a disability who has experienced training in the TAFE sector and who could reassure students and families and go out to specialist education settings and other places and explain the supports that are available with TAFE and how students with a disability can be successful and can be supported to learn like their mainstream counterparts.<sup>53</sup>

Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager at CYDA, also supported current TAFE students speaking to school students about the supports that are available to learners with disability at TAFE.<sup>54</sup>

**FINDING 2:** Students with disability and their families often lack awareness of how the learning environment at TAFE works and the types of disability supports that are available there.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to expand their outreach programs to connect with learners with disability at mainstream and specialist schools, community education settings, disability service providers and those undertaking home schooling.

### 2.1.3 Transition support should be tailored to individual learners

Stakeholders also requested specific transition supports for learners with disability when transitioning into TAFE or university from secondary school or community education.<sup>55</sup> As the manager of a regional Learn Local, an independent, non-profit organisation which delivers pre-accredited training, stated:

We have had a number of our Learn Local participants with disclosed disabilities apply for TAFE, but they have not been successful. This flags an issue about assistance or considerations being made regarding the processes involved in applying when you have a disability, when does the support start?<sup>56</sup>

The following sections present ways to improve the transition to TAFE for individual learners with disability.

<sup>53</sup> Ms Karen Biggelaar, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 47.

<sup>54</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 5; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 16; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 5.



## Information on learning needs should be shared between schools and TAFEs

One way to improve the transition into TAFE from other education settings is the sharing of information on students' learning needs with TAFE providers (with consent).<sup>57</sup> This could include information on the capabilities, support needs and aspirations of the student with disability, as well as more detailed notes on learning style, sensory requirements, and functional and equipment needs.<sup>58</sup> Schools have no obligation to share this information with TAFEs, so the handover of this information rarely occurs unless the parent of a learner with disability is proactively involved.<sup>59</sup>

As explained by the Victorian TAFE Association, the peak body for public providers of VET in Victoria:

Often students with disability come to TAFE from schools without a learning capability plan or with an assessment plan that has not been updated to reflect a student's capability and support needs. Members of the TAFE disability network indicate that better preparation and documentation at the school level and working closely with the TAFE Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) could improve this situation and lead to more effective transitions for students.<sup>60</sup>

Not only does supplying this information to TAFEs help them to better support learners with disability, it also removes the need for learners to self-advocate for support in a new environment.<sup>61</sup> Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy at the Victorian TAFE Association, suggested to streamline this process through:

something like a student passport that lists their support needs and goes with them from secondary education into TAFE or into higher education and then perhaps even into employment, so that it has information about the support needs that they have, what they have done and what they have had done for them to assist with that and what sorts of support needs they might have going forward as they transition through different stages.<sup>62</sup>

A student passport for learners with disability with information on their capabilities and support needs could be linked to learners' Victorian Student Number (VSN), issued when a student first enrolls with a Victorian education provider, or Unique Student Identifier (USI), an individual number that securely records all nationally recognised training commencements and results. With learners' consent, information on their support needs collected in other education settings could be made accessible to their TAFE institute to ease their transition.

<sup>57</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 5; Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 6; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>58</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 10; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 10; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

**FINDING 3:** There is no uniform way for information about the capabilities, aspirations and support needs of learners with disability to be transferred to TAFEs from secondary schools or other education settings to improve the transition into TAFE.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** The Department of Education and Training develop a student passport or similar individual record outlining the capabilities and support needs of a learner with disability, which can be transferred with the learner's consent between TAFEs and other education settings as the learner transitions from one setting to another.

### Dedicated officers could smooth the transition to TAFE

In addition to sharing information between education providers on the support needs of learners with disability, another suggestion to improve the transition into TAFE was the appointment of transition officers, who could be based at either secondary schools or at TAFEs and whose role would be to help learners navigate the transition to TAFE and provide the TAFE with relevant information to meet learners' needs.<sup>63</sup>

AASE agreed with the need for a dedicated officer to assist students with disability to make the transition into TAFE. As Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President of AASE, stated:

any student with disability throughout the schooling system has had a go-to person or has had a strong relationship with a professional in a school, where they have been able to ask questions and where they have been able to plan together ... So they rely very heavily on the advice and support of someone local at that school. So in planning, somehow we need to be able to plan at the TAFE level that a similar level of support may or may not be required and therefore a relationship needs to be developed, at the same time taking into account that the students are moving from a school environment to an adult learning environment. There has to be a very carefully planned transition between one location and the next so that students feel comfortable and families feel comfortable, because with a lot of the students the families need to have a level of comfort in knowing that everything is going to run smoothly. That is what happens in schools from year to year. So in going out of a school into another environment they would need a similar level of support.<sup>64</sup>

Ms Bellingham from AASE added:

TAFEs would benefit from having a person who is assigned to the job of liaising with students with disability who are coming into a TAFE to concentrate on that enrolment process. Part of that would be getting to know the student and their individual support needs, because each student with disability will have different support needs and

<sup>63</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 7; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 10; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 6; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 7; Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ms Helen Hatherly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

different literacy levels, and it would be good for a person to have the role of finding that out—talking to the teachers, talking to the student and talking to their family to find out what kind of support needs they might need.<sup>65</sup>

Victoria University Polytechnic suggested the role of transition officers at TAFEs could also involve advising secondary schools on how they can assist learners with disability to transition to TAFE, helping learners with disability access disability support services when they commence TAFE and providing support to learners as they familiarise themselves with an adult learning environment.<sup>66</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to employ transition officers who would liaise with secondary schools, assist learners with disability to navigate the transition into TAFE and facilitate the transfer of information on learners' support needs to relevant TAFE staff.

### **Bridging courses should be available to assist the transition to TAFE**

Some learners with disability require additional skills and knowledge to transition from secondary school to TAFE, particularly to enrol in higher Certificate and Diploma qualifications. For some learners, the step between secondary school and Certificates III or IV is too great and can set them up for failure and discourage them from undertaking further study. Stakeholders identified the need for bridging or foundation courses to help these students transition into TAFE.<sup>67</sup> This would be particularly useful for learners returning to study after a long gap or for learners who have had limited or no exposure to an adult learning environment.<sup>68</sup>

Currently there is a decline in the number of Certificate I and II courses that TAFEs offer, limiting the opportunities for learners with disability to undertake entry level TAFE courses and build the skills and knowledge to successfully complete higher level courses.<sup>69</sup> Federation University recommended increasing the number of entry level or foundation courses at TAFE and the development of a Victorian accredited bridging or preparatory course for entering TAFE. This aim of this course would be to prepare school leavers, learners disengaged with secondary education and mature aged learners returning to study to develop the skills required to succeed at TAFE.<sup>70</sup>

A 2020 review of the state's post-secondary education and training system led by The Honourable Jenny Macklin recommended removing eligibility criteria for foundation skills courses and making them free to all learners who need to undertake them at

<sup>65</sup> Ms Felicity Bellingham, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>68</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, pp. 5–6; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, pp. 2–3.

any stage of their career.<sup>71</sup> Currently, eligibility restrictions prevent learners from undertaking a government-funded VET course if they already have an equal or higher qualification. This prevents graduates and older learners from accessing support to reskill or retrain at a similar or lower level than qualifications they obtained earlier. It also prevents these learners from undertaking foundation courses if they have low literacy and numeracy skills or low levels of English proficiency.<sup>72</sup>

To remove barriers and assist learners with disability who need to gain further skills to succeed at TAFE, the Victorian Government should develop an accredited bridging course that is free of charge and does not have eligibility restrictions.

**FINDING 4:** Some learners with disability need to develop further skills and knowledge to make a successful transition into TAFE.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** The Department of Education and Training develop a state-wide accredited bridging or preparatory course for entry to TAFE that would be free for students and have eligibility criteria based on students' learning needs.

### Transition programs can help students with disability to thrive

Structured transition programs also play a role in helping learners with disability transition into TAFE. The Committee heard of several programs run by LLENs, which work with young people who are at risk of disengaging or who have already disengaged from school. For example, the Inner Northern LLEN, which works with young people across the cities of Darebin, Moreland and Yarra, managed a Community Transition Support project from 2013 to 2019. The project worked with 22 specialist schools and community service providers to improve post-school pathways and outcomes for young people with disability aged 18–21.<sup>73</sup>

The I Am Ready program is another example of a transition program that focuses on the strengths of young people with disability to build their employability skills and confidence and support them to navigate their career and develop lifelong learning skills. The program assists secondary school students with learning barriers to think, plan and transition into employment or further education and training. It has three stages: I Am Exploring (which focuses on work-readiness skills), I Am Becoming Ready (work experience) and I Am Ready (part-time employment, further training or a school-based apprenticeship).<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Jenny Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria: driving collaboration and innovation in post-secondary education and training*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020, pp. 97, 104.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>73</sup> Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, pp. 1–2.

Participants in the pilot program were selected from 40 mainstream and specialist schools in Gippsland. Of the 89 students who enrolled, 75 completed the program. A 2020 evaluation of the pilot program found that it filled a gap in mainstream education by building the confidence of students with learning barriers and supporting them to move into further education or employment. Students became more engaged and empowered and developed social connections with each other, the I Am Ready team and facilitators.<sup>75</sup>

Teachers, parents and employers also made positive assessments of the program. They reported a dramatic increase in participants' confidence that flowed into their home, school and work environments and made them more independent. The evaluation found that transition programs are a beneficial resource to help people with barriers improve their academic and employability skills and boost their confidence, self-respect, independence and social connectedness.<sup>76</sup>

Ms Biggelaar also gave the example of the partnership between Ballarat Specialist School and South West TAFE, which has been running the school's horticulture program for several years. About 10–12 students participate in the Certificate course each year and the TAFE provides supports and adjustments including an education support worker to assist the trainer. Ms Biggelaar stated:

There is clear communication about the expectations to all the students. They know what is required. There is clear alignment to employment opportunities with the work placements, which keeps the students very engaged and being meaningful and purposeful. There is great engagement with our local community, so the students have been out to Ballarat Botanical Gardens and Ballarat cemetery and had work placements in their local community as well, and then also there is further discussion with the students about pathways. That program has had a student pick up an apprenticeship at a local golf course, and he is going to be an amazing employee for many, many years to come ...

Those experiences then will support these young people to be confident that they can learn in a TAFE program and know what to expect when they go to a TAFE setting what the learning might look like and the types of supports that they can have. So I think having those types of programs in schools is a really important first step, because otherwise people leave the safety of the school environment that they have known all of that time and they are expected to fit into an environment that is set up for people without a disability and they have to make all those adjustments to then survive and thrive in that new environment that they are learning about.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6, Attachment 1*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>76</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Ms Karen Biggelaar, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 47–48.

She added that having the TAFE come to the school, which is a setting students are already comfortable in, creates a more positive learning experience and gives the students and their families confidence to engage with TAFE in the future. In addition, schoolteachers can share with TAFE staff how individual students learn best and TAFE staff can learn about practices schools use to support students with disability to learn.<sup>78</sup>

### 2.1.4 Learn Locals can ease the transition into TAFE

Learners with disability who are not in secondary school have fewer opportunities to take advantage of available supports and programs to ease the transition into TAFE. One pathway available to these learners is through Learn Locals. Learn Locals are community education providers that deliver pre-accredited and accredited training to meet the needs of adult Victorians experiencing disadvantage. Pre-accredited training courses are short vocational courses which can create pathways into employment or further education and training.

Learn Locals and other adult community education providers such as neighbourhood houses offer literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills training in addition to vocational preparatory courses. They are supportive, inclusive and accessible learning environments, and with over 250 Learn Locals across Victoria, they are easy to get to and can tailor their courses to meet the needs of the local community.<sup>79</sup>

They are especially suited to learners with disability who may be intimidated by larger learning institutions such as TAFEs and who have had poor or limited education experiences in the past.<sup>80</sup> Ms Nicole Battle, Chief Executive Officer of Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, explained that by offering wraparound supports and social groups, adult community education:

is a really good opportunity for us to build their [learners'] confidence and their esteem, and we find that that makes a big difference in their learning journey, because often learning is about confidence—having that confidence to know that you can do it and having the confidence to know that you can sit in a classroom of people.<sup>81</sup>

Participation rates for learners with disability in adult community education is higher than for other education provider types. In 2018, 7,970 people with disability were engaged in adult community education training.<sup>82</sup> A 2017 Deloitte Access Economics report found 64% of Learn Local pre-accredited learners with disability went on to

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 18; Ms Tamsin Rossiter, Executive Officer, Adult and Community Education Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ms Nicole Battle, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 7.

further education or training and 31% transitioned into accredited training.<sup>83</sup> Learners who transition from Learn Locals into TAFE complete their TAFE courses at higher rates than other learners.<sup>84</sup>

Adult community education stakeholders identified the potential of better collaboration and integration with TAFEs to improve outcomes for learners with disability.<sup>85</sup> For example, TAFE staff could deliver programs at Learn Locals and vice versa and Learn Locals could offer TAFE orientation sessions so learners can familiarise themselves with the TAFE environment.<sup>86</sup> Facilities could also be shared both ways and TAFEs could take advantage of the geographical spread of Learn Locals and use the Learn Local infrastructure to engage a broader range of learners.<sup>87</sup>

Clear pathways between adult community education and TAFE would improve the participation of learners with disability in TAFE.<sup>88</sup> Learners can undertake pre-accredited training at Learn Locals to prepare them for study at TAFE and also study at Learn Locals simultaneously while at TAFE. When learners complete their TAFE qualification, Learn Locals can assist them with the transition into employment.<sup>89</sup>

Increasing the awareness of adult community education among TAFE staff will help them to better meet the needs of learners with disability and understand ‘the importance of creating accessible, supportive and empowering learning environments.’<sup>90</sup> As explained by Ms Tamsin Rossiter, Executive Officer of Adult and Community Education Victoria, the sector’s peak body:

we need the whole staff of TAFE to be aware of, what is a pre-accredited program? How does it work? Can my learners be enrolled in a TAFE program and a pre-accredited program at the same time? Of course they can, which is invaluable for a TAFE teacher—to have their learners supported through, for example, additional literacy and numeracy training simultaneously to while they undertake a TAFE qualification. So we need that awareness of the Learn Local brand, how Learn Locals work. A TAFE program manager who might be a program manager of horticulture and has a cohort of learners who need some additional literacy and numeracy training, how do they access the Learn Local? Who do they talk to? So it is building those relationships.<sup>91</sup>

She added the cross-pollination of TAFE and Learn Local staff in each other’s settings would help build relationships between providers, expand the availability of TAFE services and assist Learn Local learners to transition into TAFE.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 18.

<sup>85</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 6; Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, pp. 7–8; Ms Jenny Macaffer, Chief Executive Officer, Adult Learning Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Ms Tamsin Rossiter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 11, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 18; Ms Tamsin Rossiter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Ms Tamsin Rossiter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>90</sup> Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Ms Tamsin Rossiter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

A November 2019 ministerial statement on the future of adult community education in Victoria acknowledged the value of strengthening the sector's role in supporting learners to enter and successfully complete TAFE and university courses.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the Macklin review recommended strengthening the partnerships between TAFE and training, higher education and adult community education providers.<sup>94</sup>

**FINDING 5:** Learn Locals are supportive, inclusive and accessible learning environments where learners with disability can build the skills, knowledge and confidence to successfully transition into TAFE and into the workforce.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** The Department of Education and Training raise awareness among TAFE staff of the learning and vocational support available at Learn Locals for prospective, current and former TAFE students with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** The Department of Education and Training support the creation of partnerships between TAFEs and Learn Locals to strengthen collaboration between these two education settings.

## 2.2 Tailoring assistance to individual learners will aid TAFE commencement

Once accepted into a TAFE course, the enrolment process and lack of assistance to navigate a new learning environment can deter learners with disability from commencing their course. TAFE providers gave some indication of how many learners with disability did not go on to enrol. For example, in 2019, 10% of prospective Swinburne University of Technology students who had a disability did not complete the enrolment process and The Gordon gave an example of 60 applicants who abandoned enrolment when they were asked to complete a computerised literacy assessment.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to finding the enrolment process challenging, some learners with disability do not disclose their disability to their TAFE provider, which can affect their access to disability supports and reasonable adjustments. Even when learners do disclose their disability, they may still miss out on assistance from their TAFE provider. The following sections examine these barriers and propose ways of overcoming them.

<sup>93</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 23.

<sup>94</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 5.



## 2.2.1 Enrolment processes should be more inclusive

Several stakeholders identified the enrolment process as a deterrent to commencement for prospective students, in particular learners with disability. For some prospective students the enrolment process is confusing, not user friendly and lacking in explanation.<sup>96</sup> VCOSS's Manager of Workforce and Industry Development, Ms Emily Barter, stated that a number of learners VCOSS has worked with 'would not have been able to navigate that enrolment process without the support workers. And experience shows that a number of them would have just stopped the process.'<sup>97</sup> Aspergers Victoria stated:

students who may require learning support are expected to complete an extensive TAFE registration form that is beyond many of their capabilities. These forms are very confusing. We were advised by TAFE teachers and some students that many do not complete these prior to starting their course. Many fail to understand the registration forms including the disability declaration section. As a result, many miss out on supports.<sup>98</sup>

For other prospective students, the online enrolment process is inaccessible due to the use of web-based platforms that are incompatible with assistive technology making it difficult to complete the process independently.<sup>99</sup> In addition, prospective students who have poor digital skills can find the online enrolment process 'arduous and stressful'.<sup>100</sup>

In addition to completing enrolment forms, TAFE providers may require enrolling students to undertake online literacy and numeracy tests, which can act as another barrier. See Case Study 2.2 for an example. These tests may be undertaken as part of a pre-training review to identify potential learning needs in relation to literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The pre-training review also creates an opportunity for students to disclose their disability.<sup>101</sup>

However, a 2019 review of TAFE enrolment processes by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office found none of the five TAFEs audited had a detailed documented process of how they determine students' capabilities and learning needs during the pre-training review, which could result in inconsistent assessment of prospective students across the TAFE network.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Mr Michael Meehan, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 5; Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Ms Emily Barter, Manager, Workforce and Industry Development, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> Mr Michael Meehan, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 5; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success, Bendigo Kangan Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Enrolment processes at Technical and Further Education institutes*, VAGO, Melbourne, 2019, p. 46.

**CASE STUDY 2.2: '[W]e experienced some significant barriers'**

'[I]n 2019, when our seniors students attempted to access TAFE learning through our local VET cluster program, which includes TAFE and non-TAFE providers, we experienced some significant barriers. The selected students independently completed an online assessment measuring their skills against the Australian Core Skills Framework in reading, writing, numeracy and digital capability. Sadly, we were then notified that some of our students would not be able to participate in the Certificate II courses as they scored too low in their assessments. I naturally contacted the service provider for some more information and was told by the key contact for schools that they were not funded to be able to support these students that need one-to-one literacy and numeracy support, that they were more set up to support students with physical impairments, that they needed to develop a learning disability pathway and that they were mandated to assess against the four areas. I queried what adjustments were made to the assessments to support the students to demonstrate their capacity. What about the literacy levels required to access numeracy and digital components of the assessments? Was there any consideration to the prior experiences of the students? And how can we as a school support the students and their participation? I was advised that our school was not able to provide any supports for the students, including our planned supported study allotment. The representative informed me that no adaptations or modifications to the reading, writing, numeracy and digital capability assessments could be made, and on this basis they were within their rights to decline the student applications to enrol. So my first experience supporting young people with a disability to access TAFE was not that positive. I actively referred to my expectations in regard to the Disability Standards for Education and also for registered training organisations and the wonderful examples that are shown on relevant websites, including a mature age student with a disability accessing reading material using a C-Pen turning text to audio. After providing this feedback and discussion, the service provider agreed to a change in their approach, and our students were enrolled and able to successfully participate in the programs with our school's assistance. This included our staff going with students to TAFE, a supported study group back at school and meetings between some teachers and trainers. The experience that our students had was very dependent on the capabilities of the trainer and their ability to adapt to the expectations and modify the program delivery.'

**Karen Biggelaar**

Source: Ms Karen Biggelaar, Principal, Ballarat Specialist School, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 46.

When asked how TAFEs could make the enrolment process easier, TAFE student Ms Stevenson suggested, 'Maybe you could just do, like, a one-on-one in a room, just have that one person helping you go through it all.'<sup>103</sup> The Committee heard several TAFEs have modified their enrolment process to cater for different student needs.

<sup>103</sup> Ms Joanne Stevenson, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

For example, some TAFEs allow students to take the literacy and numeracy tests at a separate time or in a different format such as in person.<sup>104</sup>

Mr Dan Mabilia, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Victorian TAFE Association, added that TAFEs recognise the standard enrolment process is not always suitable for learners with disability and they make allowances:

The allowances usually involve opportunities for people to enrol through face-to-face meetings and opportunities, so they would work with particular individuals, individuals with disability, to go through the process to fulfil the requirements for the enrolment. That includes assisting them with the electronic enrolment process, scanning documents that need to be uploaded for part of that process as well as assisting them to engage with the learning, literacy and numeracy testing process as part of the pre-training review.<sup>105</sup>

However, he added these allowances depend on the prospective student alerting the TAFE that they need assistance. Both he and Swinburne University acknowledged that customer service and enrolment staff at TAFEs need to be adequately trained to identify students who need this additional assistance and to provide the required support to enrol.<sup>106</sup>

The Committee heard a person-centred approach to enrolment is necessary, which could include dedicated support to completing the process and clear information on how to access this support.<sup>107</sup> Aspergers Victoria also suggested TAFEs seek input from learners with disability on the design of enrolment systems because this would improve the accessibility of the process for all prospective students.<sup>108</sup>

**FINDING 6:** Some learners with disability find the TAFE enrolment process difficult to navigate and inaccessible at times, which can deter them from enrolling at TAFE.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** The Department of Education and Training ensure TAFEs have documented processes on how they identify learners who need additional support to enrol successfully and how they make allowances in their enrolment processes for these learners such as offering face-to-face enrolment.

<sup>104</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> Mr Dan Mabilia, Director, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3; Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 8; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7.

## 2.2.2 Students have better outcomes if they disclose their disability

Most TAFE enrolment forms will ask if a student has a disability and if so, what type. They may also ask whether the student would like information about the disability services and supports the TAFE offers.<sup>109</sup> Research shows students with disability who disclose their diagnosis to their TAFE provider and are aware of the adjustments they need attain better training outcomes and are more likely to complete their course.<sup>110</sup>

Usually when a learner discloses a disability and provides evidence such as documentation from a medical professional, a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) at the TAFE will develop an individual learning plan with the learner and determine the reasonable adjustments the learner requires for study such as course or assessment modifications, tutoring or assistive technology.<sup>111</sup> In addition to assessing the learner's study needs and adjustments, the DLO may also seek information about the adjustments the learner required in secondary school and the support structures the learner has at home and in the community.<sup>112</sup>

### Not all learners with disability disclose their diagnosis

However, not all students with disability disclose this information when enrolling or once they have commenced study. According to a 2019 survey conducted on behalf of the Victorian TAFE network by The Gordon and metropolitan TAFEs Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute, only half of the 783 respondents told their TAFE provider about their disability.<sup>113</sup> Several stakeholders also told the Committee that a large number of students with disability did not disclose this information, particularly if they had an invisible disability such as mental ill health or dyslexia.<sup>114</sup>

The reasons students may not disclose their disability when enrolling include:

- they may not require any additional support or do not think they require support
- they are unsure if they will need support
- they may have privacy concerns about how their personal information will be used
- they fear experiencing discrimination and may worry they will not be accepted into their course
- they may be uncertain where, how or to whom they should disclose the information

<sup>109</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure: choosing your path*, 2021, <<https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/choosingyourpath/disclosure-during-study>> accessed 12 August 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, Senior Strategic Business Analyst, The Gordon Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 11; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure*.

<sup>113</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>114</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 11; Ms Heather Marsh, Manager, Equity and Diversity, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

- they may not have been explained or assured of the benefits and support they will receive if they do disclose
- they do not feel the TAFE provider needs this information
- they have not received a medical diagnosis of disability
- they are afraid their disability will become the central focus of their studies rather than their academic capability
- they are afraid it will incite curiosity or unnecessary concern in others
- they are concerned their disability will not be well understood by others
- they fear being marginalised or stigmatised by others.<sup>115</sup>

Amaze provided the following quotes from TAFE students with ASD who did not disclose their diagnosis at enrolment:

I'm worried about being bullied by my classmates, or that instructors won't know what to do with me if I tell them I'm autistic. I'll probably just try to keep my head down.

I wanted to be able to study and jump through all the same hoops as 'normal people'. In hindsight, it was excessively stressful and harmed my studies, along with my mental and physical health. I would not do it again.

Didn't feel comfortable telling.

I disclosed to them later when it came to placement.<sup>116</sup>

If students do not disclose their disability, they may experience negative impacts on their study. For example, they will be unable to negotiate reasonable adjustments, their teacher may interpret the impact of their disability as poor work performance, and it may be harder or take longer to receive adequate support if their disability or medical condition deteriorates. Also, teaching and other TAFE staff are not responsible for providing reasonable adjustments if they are not aware of a learner's disability.<sup>117</sup>

Some students do not disclose at enrolment because they do not consider themselves to have a disability, such as learners with ASD or mental ill health, especially if enrolment forms do not name specific disabilities.<sup>118</sup> For students with ASD, it is often their parents, family members or NDIS providers who disclose their diagnosis to the

<sup>115</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure*; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020*, AIHW, Canberra, 2020, p. 232; Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 24; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 24; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, pp. 3-4; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 11; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 19-20; Ms Heather Marsh, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

<sup>116</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 20.

<sup>117</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure*.

<sup>118</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 25; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 20.

TAFE provider.<sup>119</sup> And as explained by Mr Drew Burns, Coordinator of Disability Services at Federation University, learners with mental ill health may have trouble identifying that they have a disability:

It is not defined well enough, we have found, and so students then go, 'Well, I don't have a disability, I have a mental health condition' or 'I have anxiety' and 'You probably can't help'.<sup>120</sup>

Similarly, cultural views about disability can affect whether learners consider themselves to have a disability.<sup>121</sup> For example, Mr Lionel Bamblett, General Manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), which represents the Koorie Community in relation to education policy development, explained:

in our community the understanding about disability is somewhat different than in the non-Aboriginal community. We do not look at people in the context of being disabled. We look at them as a valued member of our families and our community ...

and if that is the case, sometimes some of our community members can slip through the cracks.<sup>122</sup>

Language barriers for CALD learners and a fear among refugees with disability that disclosing their needs could jeopardise their visa status are also compounding factors. As stated by an interviewee to ECCV:

If I haven't had a school coordinator, I would have struggled, as I had no advocacy skills and confidence. My mother, who doesn't speak English, wouldn't have been able to navigate the system.<sup>123</sup>

Another barrier to disclosure is not having a formal medical diagnosis. Medical assessment can often be expensive, which results in some learners remaining undiagnosed. While diagnosis rebates are available for children, the cost of assessment is not covered for adults.<sup>124</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement at Swinburne University, stated:

The biggest impediment to assisting mature age students with disability is that they have to pay for their own assessments. They are not covered for the cost of assessment as younger students are, and that provides real financial barriers and practical barriers to students to get the support, because we cannot register them through the AccessAbility [disability support] service if they do not have a diagnosis and if they have not done the assessment.<sup>125</sup>

119 Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 25; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 19.

120 Mr Drew Burns, Coordinator, Disability Services, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

121 Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 10.

122 Mr Lionel Bamblett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

123 Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 11.

124 Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 3; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 11; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 20; Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

125 Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

A survey of Victoria University Polytechnic teaching and professional staff, DLOs and academic support workers found that students from low socioeconomic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, CALD and refugee backgrounds were more likely than other students to have undiagnosed disabilities or conditions that directly affect their learning.<sup>126</sup> See Case studies 2.3 and 2.4 for examples of the impact of undiagnosed disabilities on learners' education.

**FINDING 7:** Some students with disability are not receiving adequate support and adjustments at TAFE because they cannot afford the cost a formal diagnostic assessment.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** The Department of Education and Training introduce funding to cover the cost of formal diagnostic assessments for learners that TAFE staff suspect may have an undiagnosed disability.

Another barrier to disclosure highlighted by stakeholders is the reliance on self-advocacy for students with disability to disclose and request the support and adjustments they need. Many young people with disability, especially those transitioning from secondary school to an adult learning environment such as TAFE, have never had to advocate for themselves before and therefore find it unfamiliar and difficult.<sup>127</sup> When respondents to the Victorian TAFE and autism survey were asked if they are confident talking to their TAFE about their study needs, 44% said no, 36% said partly and 20% said yes.<sup>128</sup>

Compounding factors can also have an impact on a person's self-advocacy as explained by ECCV:

A number of people with disabilities find self-advocacy demanding and unfamiliar. Attributes and experiences such as cultural or religious barriers, or traumatic past experiences, can reduce confidence in areas where strong, self-supporting communication is required. People migrating to Australia without experience of disability supports often do not understand their options to navigate services. People 'don't know what they don't know' – if a student does not request supports, e.g. a note taker, it will not be provided.

Furthermore, CALD learners with mental health conditions and/or psychosocial disability are subject to a significant gap in their supports, as mental health conditions are often hidden. Access to support depends on a student's perception of their disabilities and capability to communicate their needs and challenges.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4; Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 4; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 23.

<sup>129</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 14.

Stakeholders highlighted the need to strengthen the capacity of students to advocate for themselves and to encourage and support this among students before they leave secondary school.<sup>130</sup>

### CASE STUDY 2.3: '[H]is disability was misunderstood'

'Steve\*' is a young Aboriginal man who was referred to Charcoal Lane program by one of his friends who was a former participant of the program. Steve grew up in the care of his father with his three siblings. His mother left when he was five years old and his father turned to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Steve had engaged with some anti-social behaviour and needed support to navigate the justice system.

He indicated that his goal was to complete his Certificate II qualification and move into gainful employment after graduating. His long-term aspiration is to establish a Yorta Yorta Young Chefs Program to support Koorie youth. He also indicated that he wanted to join the defence forces.

When he commenced his Certificate II traineeship, he was enthusiastic about participating in the work training component of the course, however, it became clear he was avoiding theory classes at the TAFE college. When his case manager inquired about missing his theory classes, he indicated that he had difficulty with literacy and numeracy.

With Steve's consent, the case manager acquired his academic records to better understand his challenges. The records indicated that when he was in Year 1 Steve had an assessment and the assessor determined that he has an intellectual disability. However, due to the transient nature of his early years, this had not been picked up by other schools and Steve did not receive the necessary supports. Due to this miscommunication, his disability was misunderstood and treated by the schools as a young person with behavioural issues.

Once his disability was understood by his services and supports Steve was supported to address his challenges through increased appropriate support. His case manager engaged with the TAFE lecturer and student support services to ensure Steve received one on one support to complete the units that he missed. His case manager is also assisting him with his application to access the NDIS.

...

His overall attendance within the Charcoal Lane program was at 85%. Since COVID-19 restrictions came into place Steve has continued positive engagement with supports and with [the] reopening of [the] hospitality industry. Steve has completed 7 out of 9 TAFE units and is on track to graduate before the end of the year.'

\* Name has been changed for confidentiality.

Source: Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 14.

<sup>130</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 15; Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.



**CASE STUDY 2.4: '[T]hey really did not know what to do with me'**

'I am a former student of Victoria University. During my studies I was undiagnosed for autism, and despite knowing that I had these difficulties and kind of quite strongly advocating for myself, I found that they really did not know what to do with me and did not have any kinds of supports that they were able to offer me. This really became kind of much more of a problem for me when I moved into my main Masters degree, which had a very strong practical component. My academics were always quite strong; I had a kind of a high credit, low distinction average. But some of the subjects in the Masters had kind of prac exams where if you failed that exam, you would fail the whole subject irrespective of anything else, which just became kind of an insurmountable roadblock for me. To get around that, because there were no real supports, the only things I was ever really offered were extra reading time and extra exam time, which did not help.

I was told when I was discussing this with disability support that I—it was a bit strange. I was told that I had to tell them what I required and they could not really directly tell me. One of the things I suggested was a mentor to assist me especially with the more practical components of the course. They told me that they could not do that, which was a bit frustrating. It eventually ended up with me being pulled into a meeting because I had failed too many subjects and being told I was going to be expelled from the university, at which point I said, 'Hold on. Why are we not taking into account the discrepancy between the practical and the academic stuff?'. I was shoved aside and told, 'Well, it's too late now. We don't care about that', which was pretty frustrating. It had a pretty severe impact on me mentally, and the only real silver lining is that that did actually become the catalyst for me getting my diagnosis. Thankfully, off the diagnosis I now got into the Rise program at DHHS.'

**Thomas Quine**

Source: Mr Thomas Quine, Volunteer, Aspergers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

**Simplification, awareness and access to resources will encourage disclosure**

The following factors have been found to encourage TAFE learners with disability to disclose their diagnosis and request adjustments:

- a simple process to identify their disability and adjustment needs at enrolment
- clear information about how the information will be used by the TAFE provider
- understanding of the benefits of disclosure and assurance they will be supported if they disclose
- pre-training reviews
- access to resources such as DLOs

- self-awareness and self-advocacy skills
- awareness of the resources and supports available to them.<sup>131</sup>

As explained by Ms Heather Marsh, Manager, Equity and Diversity at Federation University:

Increasing the confidence of our learners to identify and to understand the benefit of communicating their access needs allows earlier referrals for support. Learners may have differing levels of knowledge about the kinds of adjustments available, and earlier connection with disability and learning access staff can empower and educate learners about their rights. Early identification may be encouraged through language in the pre-training review, in conversations with TAFE staff and through cues on promotional materials and course information.<sup>132</sup>

Learners with disability should be given multiple opportunities to disclose their diagnosis through a range of avenues to suit their preferred communication method. The benefits of disclosing should be communicated clearly to learners and TAFEs should create a feeling of psychological safety for learners with disability. The range of services and supports available to learners with disability and the protection of their privacy should also be promoted.<sup>133</sup>

Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Network on Disability (AND), a national organisation that supports businesses and organisations to include people with disability as customers and employees, emphasised the importance of creating a safe space to disclose:

When an individual enrolls with TAFE, how you ask questions around disability information will play a part in why someone may or may not decide to share that information. So there are many different ways that this can be done in terms of considering how you ask about disability information and at what points of their learning journey and through the point of 'The reason we want to know this information is so that we can provide an inclusive and accessible environment'. Many people may be concerned about how information is going to be used, so again, it is about being able to provide a really clear statement around who would see this information and how the information is used and what that means for the student. So again, it is about trying to really establish a safe environment for people to understand why they may share their information and equally then what that means in terms of how they can request adjustments.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 24; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 21; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 3, 9; Ms Heather Marsh, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

<sup>132</sup> Ms Heather Marsh, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

<sup>133</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 8; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 1; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Australian Network on Disability, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

A balance is needed between respecting learners' privacy and enhancing the support provided to them, which could include informing teaching staff of learners' disabilities and adjustment needs. Students with disability should be informed who their information will be shared with and when, as well as when this information won't be shared so they don't assume other TAFE staff are aware of their needs.<sup>135</sup>

In addition, TAFE staff in frontline, support and teaching roles need to be trained to identify students who may be undiagnosed or who have developed a disability during their studies to ensure appropriate support and adjustments are provided to the student in a timely manner. This is especially important if the presence of disability was not picked up at enrolment or in pre-training reviews. Staff should be aware of when to refer students to DLOs and DLOs should contact students with disability to inform them of the supports available.<sup>136</sup>

Staff training should also include cultural sensitivity so staff are aware of how cultural views on disability can have an impact on disclosure, which may result in some learners with disability missing out on relevant supports. Mr Bamblett told the Committee about the Community Understanding and Safety Training initiative (CUST) developed by VAEAI to create culturally safe and inclusive learning environments in Victorian schools. With support from the Department of Education and Training, CUST has been introduced into every Victorian government school so all school staff including teachers, administrative and ground staff are trained in understanding and engaging with Aboriginal perspectives. He suggested CUST be expanded to TAFE staff as well.<sup>137</sup>

As well as encouraging learners with disability to disclose at enrolment, TAFEs must ensure there are opportunities for learners to identify at any stage of their studies and promote these avenues. Some learners may not disclose their disability at commencement but find they need to later. This could be because they develop disability after commencing their TAFE course or their circumstances change, such as the impact of the disability on their daily life becomes greater, their personal situation changes or their study workload increases.<sup>138</sup> TAFEs therefore need to ensure there are multiple opportunities for learners to disclose their disability and learning needs throughout their course.<sup>139</sup>

**FINDING 8:** Learners with disability may not see the value of disclosing their disability and learning needs to TAFE staff, may be unsure of how and when to disclose, and/or may not feel comfortable disclosing.

<sup>135</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 18; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 21.

<sup>136</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 11; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 9; Mr Drew Burns, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

<sup>137</sup> Mr Lionel Bamblett, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

<sup>138</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure*; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 24.

<sup>139</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 24; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 3.

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFE providers to simplify their enrolment processes so they create a safe space that encourages disclosure, raise awareness among students of how and when they can disclose their disability, and promote the benefits of disclosure to learners with disability.

### 2.2.3 Disability Liaison Officers have a key role in improving access to TAFE

DLOs are a valuable resource providing advice and support to TAFE students with disability who disclose their diagnosis. Disclosure prior to commencement gives the DLO time to work with the student to develop an individual learning plan that meets their learning needs. The plan may include education access workers (such as notetakers, tutors or interpreters), alternative assessment arrangements, modified materials and equipment, campus orientation and referral to other support services. The plan usually summarises the impact of the disability on the student's learning and is distributed to the student's teacher.

TAFEs employ DLOs through Community Service Funding provided by the Victorian Government. The role may go by other names across the TAFE network such as accessibility liaison officer, student support officer, disability support worker, and so on. DLOs can act as advocates to implement adjustments on behalf of the student and can also provide reassurance to students with disability of where to go if they require additional support in the future. DLOs can also broaden teachers' perceptions and understanding of the challenges faced by learners with disability.<sup>140</sup>

Respondents to the Victorian TAFE and autism survey who received assistance from DLOs found the following assistance the most helpful:

- communicating support needs to teachers or trainers
- negotiating adjustments to assessment methods, timelines or criteria
- developing an individual learning plan
- having a contact person for queries about TAFE processes
- transition into and out of TAFE
- provision of sensory supports.<sup>141</sup>

However, stakeholders noted that DLO support is sometimes inconsistent and inadequate. For example, the Committee was informed that DLOs do not always contact students who disclose their disability upon enrolment to follow up with a learning plan

<sup>140</sup> National Disability Coordination Officer Program, *Disclosure*; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 21; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 3; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 11.

<sup>141</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 24.

and that some DLOs do not pass on the plan to teaching staff or do not provide enough information to teaching staff.<sup>142</sup> For example, a teacher at Chisholm TAFE stated:

This is my 5th year teaching VETDSS [VET delivered to Secondary Students] and in all that time I have never ever had any communication or documents to support a student up front at the commencement of the course. The onus is always on me, the teacher, to identify a problem, ask if there's anything I should know, wait, and then receive documents and Individual Education Plans that I should have received at commencement of studies.<sup>143</sup>

The Home Education Network, a non-profit organisation supporting home education in Victoria, added:

All too often in the name of "privacy", disability officers fail to provide teachers with enough information to support the student, or in many circumstances teachers do not read the relevant information and the student is left at a significant disadvantage to the average student.<sup>144</sup>

Ms Barter from VCOSS stressed the importance of early and adequate communication of individual learning plans to teachers:

Different TAFEs will call them different things, like access support or learning support, but essentially a learning plan that is developed, that is then passed onto the teachers in a timely way, that is communicated and understood and reviewed and that it is then not on that learner to explain the learning plan to their teacher. And we have examples of where students are saying they had to teach the teacher or there was already a communication breakdown before they even got to talk about their own communication needs. So that on-time, up-front and regular cycle of communication and confidence that those things will be available are highly important.<sup>145</sup>

Mission Australia and Amaze also raised the inconsistency of disability support provided at TAFEs in terms of access and the types of support offered. While most TAFEs employ their own DLO, resources are sometimes stretched and some DLOs are shared regionally or across campuses.<sup>146</sup> As more students with disability enrol at TAFE, resourcing for more DLOs will be required. Chapter 4 discusses ways to improve resourcing for DLOs across the TAFE network.

**FINDING 9:** Disability Liaison Officers at TAFEs provide valuable advice, advocacy and support to students with disability but there are inconsistencies in how this support is provided across the TAFE network.

<sup>142</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 3; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 6; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 31; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 6; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4.

<sup>143</sup> Name withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

<sup>144</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 3.

<sup>145</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>146</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 7; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 24.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** The Department of Education and Training ensure that TAFEs have documented processes on how they ensure each student who discloses a disability is followed up by a Disability Liaison Officer who, where needed, develops an individual learning plan with the student and communicates this plan to relevant teaching staff.

Stakeholders also suggested the role of DLOs could be improved for high-needs learners if more intensive support and coordination with teaching staff and community services was provided at multiple points throughout students' study at TAFE. For example, support could be provided prior to enrolment, during the first weeks of studying at the TAFE, when transitioning between units or courses and up until course completion.<sup>147</sup> The availability of this support should be made visible to learners with disability throughout their course.

The needs of students with disability vary and supports should be tailored to them. In some cases, this might involve student monitoring, case management and counselling by qualified staff.<sup>148</sup> Swinburne University outlined its tiered model of disability support ranging from Skills and Jobs Centres at tier 0, services available to all students at tier 1, specialist disability services (including counselling, mental health support, language and learning advice and career advice) at tier 2, to a case management system at tier 3. About 80% of inquiries at Swinburne are for tier 1 services and 15% are for tier 2 services. As Associate Professor Zacharias explained:

the cohort is so heterogeneous that you cannot really pigeonhole them. And it is horses for courses. The majority of students with disability we can support with a very light touch, quite general and inclusive support provisions, but then there is a significant minority of students that need ongoing support at least for one semester or often for the duration of their course.<sup>149</sup>

Mr Burns also outlined how Federation University has TAFE retention officers who meet students and attend TAFE classes and orientation sessions to inform students of the supports that are available. They can also refer students with disability to relevant services and keep in touch with students throughout their course to help them remain engaged and complete their study or training.<sup>150</sup>

VCOSS has used youth workers to similar effect in its Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP), which supports young people with employment barriers to undertake a Certificate IV in Community Services alongside paid employment. A significant proportion of CTPP participants have a disability or mental illness. The youth worker advocates for the student, communicates concerns or barriers to TAFE teachers and employers, helps with completing complex forms and requesting reasonable

<sup>147</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 12; Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>148</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 7.

<sup>149</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

<sup>150</sup> Mr Drew Burns, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 27.

adjustments, and provides access to other support services such as financial support, crisis housing, wellbeing and mental health services and medical services.<sup>151</sup>

VCOSS found '[w]hen youth workers are deeply engaged and available, trainees spoke about the difference this made and how it contrasted with previous TAFE experiences.'<sup>152</sup> As Ms Barter from VCOSS explained:

Our youth workers provide holistic support to the trainees in the program, and they are available during class as well as out of class. They provide a whole range of social and emotional wellbeing, they help connection with other peers within the program, they advocate for those young people with both their TAFE teacher as well as the employers that they are working with and they also provide assistance with various complex processes, and I think there are a lot within just enrolling in TAFE or indeed understanding and completing assessments.

They also do help advocate on a whole range of needs for the trainees or students. It could be understanding the content or helping that student communicate about their own particular learning needs, but it might also be about communicating when they cannot come to class or if they need extensions of assessments and things like that. They also help the young person access the flexible wraparound support fund to help with other barriers that might seemingly not be directly related to education but pose other barriers to them remaining engaged in the program.<sup>153</sup>

In addition to assisting the students, the youth workers allow teaching staff to do their job without also needing to provide additional counselling or mentoring to the student. As Ms Fewster also from VCOSS added, 'there is real clarity of roles, and a really complementary kind of alignment of skills, and that leads to really great student outcomes.'<sup>154</sup>

While TAFEs may not be able to provide such intensive support to all students with disability, DLOs should have the capacity to provide or facilitate access to targeted support for high-needs learners throughout a TAFE course.

**FINDING 10:** Some learners with disability may require more intensive support from commencement through to the completion of their TAFE course to stay engaged with TAFE study.

**RECOMMENDATION 11:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to offer targeted supports through Disability Liaison Officers to students with disability from before they enrol until they complete their course.

<sup>151</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 21.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>154</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

# 3 Improving participation, retention and completion

Access to TAFE goes beyond admission and enrolment. TAFEs must also provide learners with disability the support and adjustments they need to be able to participate in TAFE, continue and complete their course and receive ample preparation to move on to further study or employment. This chapter considers the elements needed to ensure students with disability have an optimal learning experience at TAFE and achieve their objectives for studying at TAFE.

## 3.1 TAFE students with disability must be able to participate on the same basis as students without disability

To maximise the learning experience for students with disability, TAFEs are required to provide reasonable adjustments that enable students to participate fully in a course and in the services and facilities the TAFE offers. This includes ensuring equitable access to physical and digital infrastructure as well as providing aids, facilities or services needed by students with disability to participate in TAFE. The following sections examine the measures TAFEs should take to improve participation for learners with disability.

### 3.1.1 Reasonable adjustments must be adequate and timely

According to the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, reasonable adjustments are measures or actions an education provider takes to assist students with disability to apply for admission, enrol, participate in a course and use the institution's services or facilities on the same basis as students without disability. An adjustment is considered reasonable if it balances the interests of all parties and takes into account:

- the student's disability
- the views of the student or the student's advocate
- the effect of the adjustment on the student's independence and ability to learn and participate
- the effect on the education provider, its staff and other students
- the costs and benefits of making the adjustment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Disability Standards for Education 2005 plus guidance notes*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2005, p. 12.



Usually, reasonable adjustments are determined between students with disability or their advocate and the TAFE's Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) after support is requested or deemed necessary at enrolment or at a pre-training review. Reasonable adjustments can also be initiated at any time during the student's course once a disability is disclosed to the TAFE and support is requested.

A support plan for the student, which may be referred to as a disability access plan, an individual learning plan or a reasonable adjustment plan, is developed by the DLO and the student and distributed to relevant teaching staff. The plan outlines the reasonable adjustments, course modifications, tutoring, assistive technology and other supports to be provided to the student. Ideally, the DLO works with teaching staff to assist them to implement the plan and the plan is reviewed regularly and adjusted if needed.<sup>2</sup>

Examples of reasonable adjustments to provide students with disability the opportunity to have the same learning experience as students without disability include:

- access or modifications to equipment, assistive technology or learning materials
- alternate teaching methods
- lesson recordings
- additional breaks during class or assessments
- extra time for assessments and/or alternate exam conditions
- timetabling changes to ensure classes are held in accessible locations
- quiet rooms and sensory-sensitive learning environments
- changes to lighting and soundproofing in classrooms and common areas
- presence of support workers, note-takers and interpreters in class
- provision of techniques and supports for students to manage stress and anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

Stakeholders stressed the need for DLOs to consult closely and meaningfully with students with disability, their families, support workers and specialists about reasonable adjustments and to ensure the adjustments are implemented within an acceptable timeframe.<sup>4</sup> DLOs also need to work closely with teaching staff to ensure teachers understand the adjustments outlined in the student's support plan and to develop accessible assessments.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 21; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 2; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 17; Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, pp. 6-7; Ms Madison Arimatea, *Submission 18*, pp. 2-9; Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 9; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 9; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 10; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 4; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, October 2020, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 9; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 30; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 4.

Aspergers Victoria suggested TAFEs provide students with disability and their parents ‘more consistent and clear information about what adjustments and supports they [TAFEs] can provide – and even better, encourage student requests for their ideas of their own individual potential accommodations.’<sup>6</sup> Learners with disability know what adjustments have worked well for them in the past and may sometimes know of suitable equipment and technology the DLO has not come across before.<sup>7</sup>

Aspergers Victoria along with Amaze, the peak body for autistic people and their supporters, and the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism also suggested that all TAFE campuses provide quiet rooms or spaces for learners with disability to find calm, recharge and self-regulate their feelings.<sup>8</sup> People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can often be hypersensitive to noise, light, odour, touch or taste. For example, low-level chatter might be heard as loud or booming and might cause ear pain. Over several hours this sensory overload can become distressing, overwhelming and affect learners’ ability to participate.<sup>9</sup>

The Australian Catholic University (ACU) has low-sensory rooms at its Melbourne and Ballarat campuses as part of its Autism Inclusion Program. The program was launched in 2020 to better support ACU’s autistic students and staff. In addition to a low-sensory room, the program also provides peer mentoring, access to comprehensive information, social and academic supports and a resource library.<sup>10</sup> The low-sensory room has stim toys, textured objects, and reference books to help students with ASD manage the challenges faced while attending campus.<sup>11</sup> As explained by Professor Sandra Jones, ACU’s Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement, the low-sensory room:

is a really important facility for students. They can go in there when they are feeling overwhelmed. They have got an access card, they can turn the lights off and they also have lockers in there so they can keep any materials that they require in a safe space, and we are putting those rooms on other campuses but also doing other things around raising awareness of some of those sensory and environmental challenges.<sup>12</sup>

When suggesting all TAFE campuses have similar rooms, Aspergers Victoria added the rooms should be advertised across campus as dedicated spaces and students be provided with maps of their location via noticeboards or apps.<sup>13</sup>

6 Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 10.

7 Ms Cathy Frazer, Executive Director, Student Engagement, International and Community Partnerships, Melbourne Polytechnic, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

8 Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 8; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 10; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 5.

9 Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 17; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 31.

10 Father Anthony Casamento, *Ground-breaking research into social inclusion*, media release, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 26 August 2020.

11 Australian Catholic University, *ACU launches groundbreaking autism inclusion program*, media release, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 29 March 2021.

12 Professor Sandra Jones, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

13 Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 10.

**FINDING 11:** The TAFE environment can create sensory overload for autistic students who are sensitive to noise and light resulting in them being unable to fully participate in class and/or attend campus regularly.

**RECOMMENDATION 12:** The Department of Education and Training ensure every TAFE campus in Victoria has a low-sensory or quiet room for students with disability to use when required.

### **Some TAFE learners with disability are not receiving reasonable adjustments**

TAFE providers raised concerns about teachers and trainers finding it difficult to balance providing reasonable adjustments with meeting course requirements. Most vocational education and training (VET) courses are based on training packages, which set standards for the skills and knowledge needed to perform a particular job. By setting skills standards, units of competency and assessment guidelines, training packages enable the national recognition of VET courses. Some teachers and trainers may mistakenly assume they cannot comply with training package requirements if they provide reasonable adjustments to students with disability and some may refuse enrolment on these grounds.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, there have been reports of TAFEs refusing to provide reasonable adjustments to learners and discouraging learners from enrolling. Deaf Victoria, the peak advocacy body representing Deaf and hard of hearing Victorians, provided the following example:

a Deaf learner wishing to enrol in a TAFE course makes an enquiry as to how his/her needs would be met prior to enrolment. This is the reply that was received in writing from the TAFE: “The Head of Learning has reviewed the course material and has determined it isn’t adaptable for your needs. Unfortunately, the webinars made by the teacher aren’t subtitled and the activities that contain videos use external links (such as YouTube) so are out of our control. The remaining material is supplied by a third party so changes cannot be made in house either ... to avoid wasting your time completing an application for a course that is unlikely to be approved in a short timeframe or meet you[r] learning needs. I would encourage you to try another provider.” This shows not just a lack of understanding of the learner’s right to access course materials, but also how to make materials accessible through engaging with a captioning provider. Subsequently, the deaf person decided not to pursue this course of study. They reported to “feeling small” after this interaction.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 7; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

TAFE teachers and trainers would benefit from professional development on how to adapt their teaching to develop and apply reasonable adjustments and consider training and assessment alternatives.<sup>16</sup> This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

TAFE providers also noted there is some confusion among TAFE staff about the definition of reasonable adjustments, which is broad and not explicit. This can result in individual TAFEs interpreting, applying and providing reasonable adjustments differently.<sup>17</sup>

Organisations representing people with disability reported examples of learners not being able to undertake their course due to poor access to reasonable adjustments such as learning materials in accessible formats and Auslan interpreters. For example, Vision Australia, the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision, conducted a survey in 2017 to which a respondent commented:

I started at TAFE in 2015 and got told to leave because of my eyesight ... The lecturer at TAFE would not give me access to any visuals on my laptop.<sup>18</sup>

This can extend beyond class to extracurricular activities such as work placements, camps and sport.<sup>19</sup> Case Study 3.1 presents another example.

In other situations, learners with disability are provided alternative options or adjustments but are still disadvantaged as shown in the following examples from Deaf Victoria:

A hard of hearing student [at] TAFE being told that they will not be able to participate in online learning like other learners as the online materials are not available with captions. Instead, they will need to attend onsite classes to receive the notes from a notetaker ...

A hard of hearing student must wait weeks to have captions added to videos already shown in class and therefore receives less time to study materials than classmates.<sup>20</sup>

Deaf Victoria also reported learners were not only finding inconsistencies in reasonable adjustments between TAFE providers but also between courses at the same institution and between staff members in the same department or course.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 3; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 4; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success, Bendigo Kangan Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Mr Robbie Johnstone, Senior Strategic Business Analyst, The Gordon Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

**CASE STUDY 3.1: 'Patrick found this process stressful and eventually gave up asking for help'**

'Patrick, a mature aged student with dyslexia, requires assistance for his reading and writing and disclosed this on his enrolment form at TAFE this year but received no follow up. When Patrick asked for support from his TAFE teachers, they told him to organise assistive material himself by going to the TAFE student HQ. From there, he was directed to go online to get the assistance needed. However, his dyslexia makes this impossible. Patrick returned to HQ and told them again about his difficulties and he was directed to their HQ online chat service. Patrick found this process stressful and eventually gave up asking for help and relied on other people around him to provide the assistance he needed.'

Patrick has previously attended several education institutions throughout his career and working life, including completing multiple traineeships and apprenticeships and the related coursework. Patrick indicates that in previous enrolments, they provided him with a wide range of assistance to support his needs. Patrick believes that TAFE's current inability to respond adequately to his needs is due to the increase in demand brought about by free TAFE.'

Source: Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, Adult Learning Australia, *Submission 17*, p. 10.

TAFEs called for clearer guidance on the provision of reasonable adjustments, either through a framework or best practice guidelines, to achieve a more consistent student experience across the TAFE network.<sup>22</sup> They also suggested establishing subject matter experts across the network who could provide advice as well as teacher communities of practice to share best practice around reasonable adjustments.<sup>23</sup> Another suggestion from Aspergers Victoria was to replace the term 'reasonable adjustment' with 'equitable adjustment' to more accurately describe these adjustments as measures that enable students with disability to participate on an equal basis with other students.<sup>24</sup>

**FINDING 12:** Not all teaching staff at TAFEs understand how to develop and apply reasonable adjustments resulting in some TAFE learners with disability not receiving the adjustments they need to be able to participate in class and campus activities on the same basis as learners without disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 13:** The Department of Education and Training create a framework for providing reasonable adjustments to TAFE learners with disability to provide better guidance to TAFEs and greater consistency in the support students with disability receive across the TAFE network.

<sup>22</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 7; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 11.

In addition, TAFE students reported the process for requesting adjustments can be unclear and intimidating.<sup>25</sup> The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak body for social and community services in Victoria, added the process for requesting reasonable adjustments:

can be inaccessible, onerous, and add additional stress and anxiety for learners seeking support. Anecdotally, information about supports is rarely made available to learners before the commencement of their course.<sup>26</sup>

Several stakeholders highlighted the importance of providing reasonable adjustments in a timely manner, and ideally before the course begins.<sup>27</sup> For example, Ms Emily Barter, Manager of Workforce and Industry Development at VCOSS, stated adjustments:

really need to be available before classes start, and a confidence that that will actually be the case. Too often we hear and have experience of when things do not actually happen until courses have already started and people are on the back foot ... For example, somebody whose first language is Auslan needs to know that their learning content is accessible to them from the get-go, not four weeks into the class.<sup>28</sup>

The Home Education Network, a non-profit organisation supporting home education in Victoria, gave an example where the delay in providing reasonable adjustments prevented a learner from participating in class:

A student wishing to study science was required to complete an OH&S assessment to participate in practical lab classes using their mobility aids as part of their accessibility for the desired course. Between the disability officer and the course manager, it took more than 80% of the required class time for anyone to address this need for access to the class. The significance of this delay prevented the student from studying the desired course at the time of application causing significant ongoing ramifications for their study pathway.<sup>29</sup>

Case Study 3.2 presents another example of a TAFE not providing reasonable adjustments in time and in some cases not at all.

Evidence received at hearings for the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability also showed primary, secondary and further education students with disability are missing out on reasonable adjustments, such as equipment and learning assistance, and individualised planning. Without adjustments and planning, students with disability are unable to receive quality education and participate in class and on campus on an equal basis to students without disability.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 14; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 29; Ms Emily Barter, Manager, Workforce and Industry Development, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, pp. 231–232.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, over three-quarters (77%) of non-school students did not receive any support or adjustments from their educational institution. Of those who did, the most common was alternative assessment (38%) followed by a counsellor or disability support person (31%), special tuition and equipment.<sup>31</sup> About one in nine (11%) non-school students who did not receive support did need support.<sup>32</sup>

### CASE STUDY 3.2: '[M]y learning has been negatively impacted'

'My experience of TAFE changed drastically when I left Federation College and moved to the general TAFE campus. I was originally going to begin my Certificate IV in IT at the beginning of semester 1 2019. However, in the October prior to this I met with the lead IT teacher and a representative of the Disability and Learning Access Unit, or the DLAU, at the campus, along with an orientation and mobility specialist and an orthoptist from Vision Australia, who made assessments of the campus, including lighting and accessibility and then forwarded quite detailed reports, including suggestions for modifications, to the TAFE.

When I met with the lead IT teacher in January 2019 to complete my enrolment, I discovered that none of the recommendations had been implemented. Of particular concern was that the concrete stairs, which I would need to use to navigate between the two floors where the classes would be held, remained unmarked. To me, the stairs just looked like a ramp, which was extremely dangerous. I was told that numerous requests to the facilities team regarding making the suggested modifications had been made and they had decided that it was too expensive to go ahead with the changes. Because of the safety issues involved I could not begin my studies until the appropriate modifications were made. I had people advocate quite strongly on my behalf for many months that these modifications needed to be made to enable me to access education in my chosen field of IT. After many meetings with DLAU and facilities team members, as well as other university staff, I was advised that the modifications would be made as soon as possible. In April 2019 it was finally deemed safe enough for me to begin my Certificate IV in semester 2. I completed orientation and mobility training regarding the safe use of the stairs and was confident in using them. Unfortunately other changes, including changes to lighting, blinds and signage, were not made, which made it very difficult for me to access certain areas of the classrooms and made it difficult to participate in group activities. I also had difficulties in orientating myself.

*(Continued)*

<sup>31</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia 2020*, AIHW, Canberra, 2020, p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> Committee analysis of Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Table PTPN14, *People with disability in Australia 2020*, cat. no. DIS 72, 2020, accessed 19 May 2021.

**CASE STUDY 3.2: Continued**

Once I began my studies the teaching staff were very supportive. I used the in built magnification and speech functions on the classroom computers. I was provided with an electronic magnifier with an inbuilt distance camera, which was extremely helpful in seeing long distance. Even so, I still got very visually fatigued. Despite being told that due to my low vision and visual fatigue I would be given extra time to complete my assignments and assessments, this did not happen and still has not happened. The general campus environment is now safe for me, even if it is challenging to navigate at times. I am now happy about the modifications that have been made, although I am very disappointed that it took so much time before they were done. It is also a disappointment that so much external pressure from my advocates had to be placed onto the university prior to them agreeing to implement the recommended modifications which allowed me to study in a safe and equal environment.

I commenced a Certificate IV in Cybersecurity at the same institution in 2019. Due to COVID-19, the entire course was delivered online until February this year, when I returned to onsite learning. A new computer lab has been built and the necessary modifications have been included, although the site has still not been modified, which makes orientation difficult. I received an access disability keyboard in March and access to a text to speech program in April this year. I feel as though I have been discriminated against and that my learning has been negatively impacted.'

**Gabriel Gervasoni**

Source: Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 15–16.

A TAFE teacher informed the Committee that students with disability often fail or do not complete their course if they do not have reasonable adjustments in place, stating:

Often support is far too thin on the ground, takes too long to be established, or is the result of a lack of widespread awareness and training for teacher and managers about the issues ... and their duty of care and their obligation to provide equitable access to education.

Students are not given the option to suspend or postpone their studies if experiencing an episode of serious health issue, resulting in student[s] being financially liable for the classes they were not able to attend due to illness. This in turn threatens their access to funded study in later attempts.<sup>33</sup>

These sentiments were shared by other stakeholders who called for greater access to assistive technology, more willingness to modify curriculum, flexibility to complete courses over a longer period, more time with classroom teachers and the provision of in-class support workers and onsite counsellors.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Name withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 5; Ms Meredith Peace, President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.



### Lack of funding and resources may result in TAFEs not providing adjustments

The Committee heard a common barrier for TAFEs providing reasonable adjustments is a lack of resources and funding.<sup>35</sup> For example, a former TAFE student with disability shared with the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), the peak advocacy body for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria:

In a second year they couldn't provide me with the scribe, due to the budget. When I lost my support worker, I thought I will never do my diploma.<sup>36</sup>

Deaf Victoria also provided the following example:

A deaf TAFE student being told that they could only have one Auslan Interpreter for a theory class as two was too expensive. This meant that every 20–30 minutes the interpreter would stop interpreting (and leave the class as was advised by the Disability Liaison Officer) to have a break to meet their OHS/WHS needs. During these breaks, the deaf learner could not participate in class activities or discussion. No accommodations were made by the trainer to accommodate these times without an Interpreter.<sup>37</sup>

Vision Australia and VCOSS added that cost-cutting measures in the TAFE sector have resulted in fewer specialist supports.<sup>38</sup> A TAFE teacher reported to VCOSS:

We might have had people come into the classroom to support language, literacy and numeracy, but we don't get that now. Students will have to make an appointment in their lunch break and maybe do it as a group whereas before they would have been able to do it one on one ... This support can be make or break for learners with disability. While there are other support services, one, they're limited, but also, students may or may not choose to take those up.<sup>39</sup>

Insufficient staffing resources also reduce TAFEs' capacity to provide reasonable adjustments, particularly as the increased number of casual and contract teachers along with greater numbers of students with disability needing support places significant time pressure on teachers to redesign learning and assessments to improve accessibility.<sup>40</sup> Chapter 4 discusses how to improve funding and resources for TAFEs to provide better support to learners with disability.

<sup>35</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 5; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>36</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; Mr Bruce Maguire, Lead Policy Adviser, Vision Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, p. 232.

### 3.1.2 Each TAFE should conduct an access audit

Learners with disability can encounter physical barriers to participate in TAFE courses if buildings, facilities and equipment at TAFE campuses are inaccessible. Building entrances, stairs, doors, signs and public announcements can all have an impact on access. The Committee came across multiple instances of the physical barriers faced by learners with disability at TAFE, including:

- only one ramp access point on campus
- doorways not sized to fit larger wheelchairs
- doors with knobs or doorways with lips
- accessible toilets situated far from class, on a different floor, with difficult doors or full of storage items
- bins, vending machines or other obstacles in walkways
- not enough lifts to access upper floors
- not enough accessible toilets.<sup>41</sup>

These barriers can be more pronounced in regional and remote areas.<sup>42</sup> For example, Federation TAFE student, Mr Gabriel Gervasoni who is legally blind stated:

A big thing is adding in elevators, so that people with, for example, wheelchairs can go between classrooms. Like, in my building there are no elevators, or no lifts, so people with wheelchairs cannot learn IT, at all, onsite, so making modifications so everyone can access the buildings no matter their disabilities.<sup>43</sup>

TAFE buildings and facilities need to comply with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth), its associated Disability Standards for Education and relevant Australian Standards. Many TAFE campuses have inherited existing infrastructure that can be outdated and have inaccessible facilities.<sup>44</sup> While existing buildings are exempt from compliance with the standards, TAFEs should be aware of current or potential access barriers and have a plan to schedule modifications to improve accessibility.<sup>45</sup>

Physical accessibility should also ensure people with disability have similar access to people without disability. For example, ramps or lift should be placed adjacent to stairs and accessible toilets should be located with other toilets so people with mobility limitations do not have to go the long way to enter classrooms or to use facilities.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 2; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Education and Learning*, issues paper, October 2019, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, TAFE student, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Mr Peter Hirst, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 5.

As explained by Dr Carina Garland, Assistant Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC), the peak body for unions in Victoria:

[W]e do hear from our workers who are from our affiliate unions that they do have to spend a lot of time trying to help students with disabilities access the campuses in various ways, whether that is trying to book classrooms where people are able to actually go to class and of course the issue of bathrooms as well. It is a basic dignity question there I think of course—making sure that the facilities are appropriate and not on the other side of campus for someone who is trying to learn.<sup>47</sup>

Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Network on Disability (AND), a national organisation that supports businesses and organisations to include people with disability as customers and employees, gave another example of the need for dignified access:

To meet building code standards having a lift in place would get a tick. But if the lift is a goods lift and you only have one and it is not part of the main entry process, then that is not a very dignified approach for anyone in terms of accessing the levels above or below. So you would pass code, if you like—it gets that tick—but for a dignified experience it is not there at all. And ... making sure that people have the independence to use the facility as well, so there is not a reliance on another individual to help them access an area, would come into that dignified approach as well.<sup>48</sup>

She explained how AND works with businesses to ensure dignified access for people with disability:

[W]e work with businesses around developing what we would call a dignified-access checklist which not only looks at the building code standards but equally looks at a dignified approach: so what is the experience like for individuals when they are trying to interact with the building? And by doing that not only are we looking at your compliance but we are equally lifting above it so that it is a positive experience. From doing that you can then start to prioritise those areas that need to be focused on first and be able to plan ahead for how you are going to remove those barriers, whether that relates to stairs and ramps, lifts or fit-outs, equipment and tables and chairs that are used—the physical environment obviously spans a huge array of the built environment—and equally going to the level of your bathroom facilities, your kitchen facilities or where information or equipment is stored. Sometimes there are some workarounds that do not necessarily mean a change to the building but are a change to the way that you use the building or the infrastructure to allow more accessible access for your learners.<sup>49</sup>

VTHC stated that members of its affiliated unions report ‘having to fight tooth and nail for years to help students and staff with disabilities access basic entitlements such as bathroom facilities and ramps’ largely due to the lack of specific funding for physical

<sup>47</sup> Dr Carina Garland, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Australian Network on Disability, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

modifications at TAFE to meet the needs of students with disability. Often requests for infrastructure changes are not considered reasonable adjustments because they are too expensive and would benefit only a few students.<sup>50</sup>

VTHC recommended the establishment of a TAFE maintenance fund to cover the update and expansion of physical infrastructure at TAFEs to make them accessible. The fund would provide one-off payments for specific work and a maintenance fund for ongoing upkeep.<sup>51</sup> Metropolitan TAFE Melbourne Polytechnic has committed to completing a full infrastructure audit to understand access barriers on its campuses and to prioritise investment to improve accessibility. It recommended all Victorian TAFEs do the same ‘to develop a long-term plan to identify resources required and key investment opportunities.’<sup>52</sup>

An access audit undertaken by an accredited consultant will consider entrances and doorways, lighting, signage, desk heights, circulation space, accessible toilets, accessible parking and assistive listening technology such as hearing loops. The audit report will identify access barriers and suggest a schedule for immediate and medium-term changes and a plan for future modifications. If all TAFEs undergo an access audit, the Victorian Government will have a better understanding of the work required to meet accessibility standards across the network and how much modifications would cost.

**FINDING 13:** Physical inaccessibility of TAFE buildings and facilities can deter learners with disability from participating in TAFE.

**RECOMMENDATION 14:** The Department of Education and Training require all TAFEs to conduct an access audit of their campuses and the Department use these audit reports to prioritise the allocation of resources to address the issues identified.

### 3.1.3 Digital technology used by TAFEs must meet accessibility standards

Another participation barrier identified by stakeholders was the inaccessibility of technology used to deliver online learning at TAFEs.<sup>53</sup> There has been a steep rise in online learning at TAFE over the past decade and some of the online learning platforms such as Blackboard and Moodle are incompatible with assistive technology such as

<sup>50</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4; Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 16.

screen readers for students who are blind or have low vision.<sup>54</sup> As explained by Vision Australia:

It is now virtually impossible for a TAFE student to avoid interacting in one way or another with an online learning platform, even for those courses that have a substantial “hands on” or practical component. Online learning has developed rapidly, and its associated technology has been adopted with little systematic assessment of its impact on students with disability in general, and students who are blind or have low vision in particular ... As online learning proliferated in the university and TAFE sectors, Vision Australia staff received an increasing number of reports from clients who were finding it difficult or impossible to access course delivery and curricular content due to accessibility barriers. In some cases, these barriers forced students to discontinue their studies, but even where students found ways of minimising them, they experienced much higher levels of stress and poorer educational outcomes than other students.<sup>55</sup>

The shift to remote learning in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of online learning, and according to Mr Bruce Maguire, Lead Policy Adviser at Vision Australia, accessibility considerations ‘often fall by the wayside’ when change occurs at such a rapid rate.<sup>56</sup> Vision Australia has found the major concerns with online learning platforms are:

- developers not complying with international accessibility standards making discussion boards and collaborative tools impossible to use
- disability support staff not knowing enough about the platforms to assist students
- teachers being unwilling to change the design and delivery of the course to make it more accessible.<sup>57</sup>

Ms Whalley from AND also highlighted the need for TAFEs to ensure the suppliers they use for their digital platforms meet accessibility standards:

This is where the role of government and employers has a huge power, if you like, to be able to really shift the way suppliers are offering and providing digital solutions—and ensuring that when you are requesting, say, for example, a new digital learning solution or reviewing any learning packages the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are considered throughout. So WCAG, for short—web content accessibility guidelines—is a global standard relating to the accessibility of digital environments, particularly websites and e-learning, as an example. So it is really the role of employers and the role of government to ensure that when you are requesting new services WCAG is very much a requirement to ensure that whatever you purchase will be accessible to learners with disability, such as individuals who may use screen-reading software or perhaps do not use the control of a mouse and they use the keyboard to tab through a learning. If it is not accessible for individuals, then they will not even be able to start the course. So making sure that everything that we build and develop is accessible is certainly a key.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

Developers of learning technologies should follow accessibility guidelines, standards and best practice throughout the technology's life cycle. Incorporating accessibility from the outset is cheaper and less time consuming than trying to retrofit the technology later. Vision Australia recommended TAFEs adopt Australian Standard AS EN 301 549 for the procurement of accessible information and communication technology and that disability support staff be provided with 'accurate, comprehensive and consistent information about the provision of reasonable adjustments for students who are blind or have low vision'.<sup>59</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic reported it has made an accessibility plugin available in all its Moodle sites that automatically creates alternative formats of learning content files such as electronic braille, BeeLine Reader, audio and ePub. The plugin also checks course materials against international accessibility standards and produces an accessibility score for each uploaded file. This helps to educate teachers about accessibility and gives teachers guidance and tips to rectify identified problems.<sup>60</sup>

**FINDING 14:** Online learning platforms are sometimes inaccessible for learners with disability, especially when they are incompatible with assistive technology used by learners who are blind or have low vision.

**RECOMMENDATION 15:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to comply with Australian Standard AS EN 301 549 for the procurement of accessible information and communication technology.

In addition to inaccessibility, VCOSS informed the Committee that some students with disability have encountered technical challenges with online learning platforms such as the late uploading of work and assessments, which can create anxiety and stress for students and lead to disengagement.<sup>61</sup> Students may also find it difficult to use the learning platform as demonstrated by a trainee who stated to VCOSS:

There have been issues with the learning platform ... It's been very difficult and this is before my disabilities come into play.

After I enrolled ... getting access [to the online learning platform] the first time took up to two months for some people. So teachers had to download assessments and send them to us separately ... I've had issues where I've been randomly locked out of my account. The problem is in the system ... I called a number of times [to student support] each time I got a warning email—they would say, don't worry you won't get locked out. Then I got locked out and how am I going to get access to my classes, the links are there

<sup>59</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>60</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>61</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 27.

... I almost dropped out last study period, almost 10 weeks ago because it was just not happening. It wasn't working ... I wake up in the morning thinking, am I going to have access to [the online learning platform] today, will I be able to do my work?<sup>62</sup>

VCOSS called for investment in technological infrastructure and resourcing to ensure online platforms are accessible and staff have the knowledge to quickly troubleshoot problems.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.1.4 TAFEs need assistance to expand the use of assistive technology

Assistive technology includes devices, software or equipment that help people with disability to perform tasks they would otherwise be unable to do, or to perform tasks in an easier and safer way. In terms of education, assistive technology can be used to read aloud text from a computer, to type text from speech and to hear a teacher's voice more clearly among other things. For example, GOTAFE has procured C-Pens, which students such as those with dyslexia can use to discreetly listen to text through an earpiece as they run the pen over printed text.<sup>64</sup>

GOTAFE has purchased several assistive technologies to loan to students with disability until they are familiar with the devices and it then assists students to apply for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support to purchase their own devices.<sup>65</sup> Vision Australia also offers further education bursaries for post-secondary students to purchase assistive technology to help them complete their studies.<sup>66</sup>

Some TAFEs are more advanced than others regarding knowledge about and provision of assistive technology. Mr Maguire from Vision Australia advised that students with disability often do not know which technology works best with the systems used at TAFE and DLOs are not always able to support students to choose suitable assistive technology. He said:

The staff at TAFE should be in a good position to tell prospective students, 'If you are going to study here, then this is the specific technology that we know works with our system' ... the key is having knowledgeable staff who can advise students appropriately, because we have certainly talked to students who have said that they are used to using one particular piece of technology that they might have learned how to use at school and then they go to TAFE and find that that technology does not provide them with the kind of access that they need and the student support staff at TAFE really do not know what technology is best. So there is a scramble when the student starts to find and explore a range of technologies, and it is not a good time to do that when you are trying to study—to kind of explore the kind of technologies that you might need.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, Vision Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2–3.

Melbourne Polytechnic agreed that TAFE staff are not always up to date with developments in assistive technology and lack guidance and training in its use and suitability for individual students.<sup>68</sup>

The Victorian TAFE Association, the peak body for public providers of VET in Victoria, added:

DLOs often complete a considerable amount of research into effective and useful digital solutions for students to assist the student to be as independent as possible. This is not only a lengthy process but can also be unreliable as the rapid pace of change in technologies mean that DLOs may recommend the purchase of an item which may end up proving ineffective for the student.<sup>69</sup>

Along with Melbourne Polytechnic and Bendigo Kangan Institute, the Victorian TAFE Association suggested the need for collaboration across the TAFE network and the sharing of a subject matter expert to provide advice on current, reliable and cost-effective assistive technology for students.<sup>70</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success at Bendigo Kangan Institute, added:

What we need to get to is a point where we have got access to a predefined list of all software for TAFE, making it a lot easier for the students who change institutes, as they are exposed to the same processes and can access the same software that they will use across their study journey.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to knowledge sharing, stakeholders called for funding to procure devices and resources to assist students with disability to use assistive technology.<sup>72</sup> For example, TAFEs need to provide students with assistive technology to use at home individually not just on shared library computers.<sup>73</sup> Also, some assistive technology can be resource intensive, such as checking automatic captioning of video content for errors and subsequent editing. The Victorian TAFE Association suggested such resource-intensive requirements and costs could be shared across the TAFE network to ease the burden on individual TAFEs and provide consistent support to students with disability across the network.<sup>74</sup>

**FINDING 15:** Individual TAFEs may not have the knowledge and resources to provide suitable assistive technology to enable students with disability to participate in courses.

<sup>68</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 4; Ms Cathy Frazer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, pp. 4–5; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>72</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 6; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> Mr Chris Edwards, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 10.



**RECOMMENDATION 16:** The Department of Education and Training fund an expert in assistive technology to be shared across the Victorian TAFE network to provide advice on current, reliable and cost-effective assistive technology for use by TAFE students with disability.

## 3.2 Wraparound support, flexibility and wellbeing are key to completion

In addition to providing reasonable adjustments to enable learners with disability to participate in education on the same basis as learners without disability, TAFEs also need to provide other support to help these students continue their studies and complete their course. This includes the provision of wraparound support, course and assessment flexibility, opportunities for peer networks, mental health support and transition support into further study or employment. These measures are discussed in the following sections.

### 3.2.1 Wraparound support can make all the difference for learners with disability

While all TAFEs are actively working to improve access and equity, ‘there is an opportunity to be more flexible, more person-centred and for supports to more comprehensively “wrap around” people and address barriers to participation and attainment,’ according to VCOSS.<sup>75</sup> Wraparound supports are support services tailored to an individual’s needs and delivered by different providers in a coordinated manner. They can include services to address personal issues such as housing stress and mental ill health, delivered alongside services to address education barriers such as low literacy and numeracy or poor internet access.

TAFEs can provide students with disability access to support services either directly or through referral to external providers. For example, GOTAFE provides counselling services and learning support sessions to students with disability; Bendigo Kangan Institute provides mental health support, counselling and welfare services; and The Gordon and Swinburne University of Technology provide counselling services and case management for students with complex needs.<sup>76</sup>

However, some stakeholders claimed a lack of support services from TAFE, particularly tailored support; post-diagnosis support; support with decision making, living skills and self-advocacy; and language, literacy and numeracy support.<sup>77</sup> Without tailored

<sup>75</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 7; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 20; Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 32; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 6.

supports, learners with disability can feel undervalued and disengage from TAFE.<sup>78</sup> See Case Study 3.3 for an example.

### **CASE STUDY 3.3: 'If it wasn't for my 1:1 support worker I would not have been able to attend TAFE'**

'I have ASD and a language and learning disorder. I find it hard to understand language—its like a verbal jig saw puzzle I have to work out. I enrolled for TAFE with help from my mum because I didn't know what to do and I was a bit worried about it. I didn't feel safe being there for the first time by myself. I didn't know how to get to the correct building to enrol. I was very nervous and shy about talking to the people there. I can't remember seeing a sign to show me where to go for help. I registered with disability support services but didn't get any help from them during my practical classes.

TAFE was not able to help me with a 1:1 support worker so my mum found a teacher privately who could support me 1:1 to help me understand what I had to do in class and how to do it. I'm not stupid, I just need help to understand. We paid for her to help me at TAFE. My 1:1 worker helped me to understand the theory and instructions for the practical work. I got distracted and didn't like the loud noises from the electric tools in the workshop like the large drop saw and other high pitched sounds eg. when cutting the wood—it hurt my ears even when wearing ear protection.

When my teacher found out I needed extra help to learn in class he tried to help me and let me ring him out of class to ask questions and get clearer instructions on what I was supposed to do. It would be better if the workbooks were written in a way that was easier to understand. By the end of the course I felt more comfortable. I really want to finish my whole course when covid restrictions are lifted and let me go back to TAFE. If it wasn't for my 1:1 support worker I would not have been able to attend TAFE and do my course. I didn't get the help I needed from disability support services and my teacher wasn't told in the beginning that I needed extra help which made accessing TAFE harder for me. My 1:1 support worker picked me up from home and drove me to TAFE then bought me back home again.'

Source: Mr Johann Davey, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

A 2018 evaluation of Skills First, a set of Victorian Government reforms to the TAFE and training system designed to deliver high quality training to learners who need additional support to transition into employment, found job outcomes improved slightly for learners overall but remained the same for learners facing disadvantage. This suggests TAFEs need to improve how they work with external health and community services to fully support learners facing disadvantage. The evaluation recommended a holistic approach to delivering support to these learners to improve their training outcomes.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 31.

Some students with disability face challenges that are hidden to others and their behaviour may be misunderstood or misinterpreted as non-compliance affecting their study and course completion. For example, students with Asperger's syndrome can struggle with perfectionist tendencies, unpredicted change, teamwork and executive function such as organisation and time management.<sup>80</sup> Case Study 3.4 provides an example of being misunderstood and the benefit of a support worker to bridge that gap.

#### **CASE STUDY 3.4: 'I struggled in the course before they gave me assistance with a support worker'**

'I struggled in the course before they gave me assistance with a support worker, I have learning difficulties and speech problems and [with my] support worker's assistance we got my portfolio in order which actually showed I was up to date with my work. She helped explain things to me and has been my voice to the teachers and I was very comfortable with her. We had a good relationship which helped my confidence and anxiety.

When I did the Diploma of Fashion 2020:

For my first year leaving my safety net of school I was extremely nervous on how I would manage outside of my school bubble. My support worker was more than willing to be my aide again which gave me reassurance going forward as having no familiar faces makes it extremely hard for me with my language and lack of confidence with new people.

My support worker helps find new ways for me to answer questions on my assignments and projects and when it comes to public speaking, she is by my side and when I struggle explaining things she is there and whispers the words I have problems pronouncing.

Due to Covid-19 I was struggling in pattern making I decided it was best to drop the course and do it later when I am attending Kangan due to it been to[o] hard doing it online. Online technology was new to us all so at the start it was hard to figure out not just for the students but teachers as well. Lots of challenges online especially when doing illustrations and design work it was hard to visualise things on the computer to what you were doing in front of you.

My support worker had to be able to access everything I had so she was able to help me where necessary and she even had to change her timetable around to suit my online classes and my support workers discussed things with the Disability Liaison Officer to help in my study period online just so I could stay up to date on my classes.'

Source: Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 3.

A common concern for stakeholders was the misconception that all learners with disability have the same support needs. They stressed that each learner with disability has unique needs and TAFEs should tailor supports accordingly. This means TAFEs need to ensure they can provide access to sufficient supports to all learners with disability.<sup>81</sup>

Learners with disability may be facing multiple challenges that could have a cumulative impact on their studies. For example, they may be experiencing health difficulties, pain, discomfort, mobility issues, sensory and communication barriers as well as co-occurring conditions such as mental ill health.<sup>82</sup> Some may lack financial resources, internet access, access to transport, supportive families or networks, or a stable home environment. Others may have low literacy and numeracy, poor English proficiency, an interrupted education, post-traumatic stress or a history of exclusion or bullying.<sup>83</sup>

A combination of these factors can further undermine the ability of learners with disability to access, participate and continue with TAFE study, and support services will not be effective if they overlook these multiple challenges.<sup>84</sup>

Other groups of learners may encounter additional barriers. For example, learners with disability from CALD or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds may be at a disadvantage if the TAFE environment and/or support services do not feel culturally safe.<sup>85</sup> See Case Study 3.5 for an example. Learners with disability in regional areas may have to contend with fewer available courses and poor access to public transport.<sup>86</sup> Also, mature aged learners with disability may be returning to study after many years, may not have a formal diagnosis of disability, may be unfamiliar with online learning platforms, may lack confidence and may have to juggle paid employment and/or have caring responsibilities.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 3; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 15; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 22; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 9; Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, pp. 2, 5; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 7; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 10; Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, pp. 2, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 9; Mr Woody Eke, Senior Policy Officer, TAFE and Higher Education Unit, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>86</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 12; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 2.

**CASE STUDY 3.5: '[N]o culturally appropriate support nor assistance with disability was provided'**

'Astur\* migrated to Australia from a refugee camp, after fleeing her war-torn homeland. Astur arrived with no English or prior school experience. Having an educated older brother offered hope that things will improve soon. While her brother pursued higher education and employment, Astur, struggled with fitting into a compulsory education environment where her needs were not met.

After a few years of schooling, Astur dropped out, yet remained determined to navigate her way to TAFE: "I was treated as any other mainstream student—no culturally appropriate support nor assistance with disability was provided. I had to catch a train and it took me two hours. I had blisters on my hands from clutches. Unfortunately, my family didn't know how to support me as they thought I was naughty. They couldn't understand the barriers I was facing."

It took Astur several attempts to engage in education: "some years ago, I didn't have proper access and it was impossible to continue. I dropped out a lot throughout my life. I didn't connect with anybody. Now I am studying online and it's much better as I don't have access issues, that for many years weren't addressed and I didn't know how to advocate for myself.

Before I didn't know what barriers meant so I was dropping out. I didn't understand what was making it different. Now I just want to achieve my goals."

Unfortunately, with no assessment Astur was told recently that she would not be able to get placement in the disability industry. She had to find another way of pursuing her dream: "they didn't consider my abilities, so I took community services."

\* Name has been changed for confidentiality.

Source: Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 12.

Swinburne University of Technology presented research showing the impact of cumulative disadvantage on the student experience and academic progress of higher education students with disability. The research showed students with disability are less likely to complete their degree within eight years of commencement than the total cohort (63% compared with 72%). Completion rates fell below 50% if students with disability also belonged to two or more other equity groups such as low socioeconomic status, regional or remote residence, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.<sup>88</sup>

Similar research has not been conducted for TAFE students with disability, but an analysis of VET students at Swinburne receiving AccessAbility (disability support) services found a high proportion of these students have complex circumstances.

<sup>88</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 4.

Swinburne developed a service use intensity scale to measure the complexity of students' circumstances based on how often they requested reasonable adjustments or negotiated assessment arrangements and whether they needed in-class support. The scale ranged from 0 as the least complex to 3 as the most complex. In July 2020, almost half of Swinburne's VET students (47%) fell into the two most complex categories.<sup>89</sup> It concluded:

As indicated by the service use intensity scale described above, student needs exist along a continuum from simple to complex and institutional support structures need to reflect the intensity of need.<sup>90</sup>

TAFE providers acknowledged successful educational outcomes were more likely for students with disability who have access to a 'comprehensive array of wraparound supports'.<sup>91</sup> The Gordon reinforced the need for a holistic approach to accommodate the diverse range of needs that students with disability may have, adding:

These must be reviewed on a case by case basis and can be done by creating dedicated staff positions whose role it is to identify and determine the adjustments or services required to optimise student success.<sup>92</sup>

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer of VCOSS also stressed the importance of wraparound support:

We need to make sure the right help is provided to all learners and at the right time. We need flexible wraparound supports for all students, and these must be easy to access. It could be a youth or a support worker or access to financial assistance. And we need better disability supports at TAFE. The support needs to be proactive, it needs to be tailored and it needs to be flexible.<sup>93</sup>

While TAFEs can provide some services in-house, they will have greater capacity to support learners with disability if they partner with disability service providers, community service organisations and specialist agencies. Referral to these service providers will enable TAFEs to meet the growing diversity of their students' non-educational support needs.<sup>94</sup>

Professor Jones from ACU, who is also an autistic person, highlighted the need for TAFEs to provide a contact person that students with disability feel confident will understand their condition because it is not possible for every staff member at TAFE to have a thorough understanding of all conditions and associated student needs.<sup>95</sup> She added:

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, pp. 4, 16; Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 10; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

there are a lot of overlaps between different disabilities but there are a lot of really unique aspects as well, and if you do not have someone who has that really deep knowledge, it can be really difficult to translate that in a way so that the teaching staff are actually going to really understand what is required and in a way that the students feel supported. And it is also about the comfort to ask those questions. You know, I get a lot of questions from students because they know that I am not going to think 'That's a dumb question' or I am not going to need them to explain to me what they actually mean or why that is a problem. Obviously it would depend on the resourcing that you have and the structure, whether that is a physical person on each campus or whether, you know, in our wonderful world of remote everything, that could be a person that you could reach out to by email or Zoom chat. It is just having that person—whether that is for one TAFE or five TAFEs or 10 TAFEs—so that I know that there is an autistic person or a person with expertise in autism that I can contact and say, 'How would I do this?'. That also really resources the teaching staff too, because if that person has developed an expertise in what works at TAFEs, what has worked in another TAFE or what has worked in another course, it is much easier than every single teaching staff member having to start out from the ground and work it out.<sup>96</sup>

In addition, TAFE students with disability need to trust that support will be available for them throughout their course according to Ms Barter from VCOSS:

it is about knowing that there is going to be support from the start right through to the end and a knowledge that needs will go up and down. They will not start up high and taper off; we have absolutely found that needs ebb and flow depending on course content, when assessments are due and also the experiences and what is going on for those young people or students at the time.<sup>97</sup>

One concern raised by stakeholders was the naming of disability support services at TAFE. As discussed in Chapter 2, some students who need support may not consider themselves to have a disability so they may not approach services that have 'disability' in their name.<sup>98</sup> Other students may not seek help if the name of the services is not clear, according to Ms King from VCOSS:

one of the things that I have heard from a number of students is there is often support available at a TAFE but it was called something that did not sound like help, so people did not actually know where to go to get assistance. None of us will like asking for help at the best of times. They were often pretty reluctant. But they did not actually even know where to go in a TAFE. It is so different from a school where you have often got a smaller community et cetera around you. It can feel pretty overwhelming, and if something has got a fancy name which actually means help but it does not sound like it, that does not help either.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>97</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, Associate Director, Employment and Education Partnerships, Orygen, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

For CALD students with disability, support must be culturally appropriate and should involve students' family or network and include English language support if needed.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Koorie students with disability also need support services that are culturally safe. Mr Woody Eke is the Senior Policy Officer in the TAFE and Higher Education Unit of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), which represents the Koorie Community in relation to education policy development. He highlighted the Victorian Government's funding of a Koorie Liaison Officer and two Koorie Student Support Officers at each Victorian TAFE as a significant improvement in the support available to Koorie learners at TAFE. He called for:

a smooth implementation of filling those positions in the TAFEs and having every TAFE on board with a well-resourced student support unit and also the Koorie units within the TAFEs—so re-establishing or establishing those within each TAFE around the state and ensuring that there is somewhere where Koorie students and Koorie students with a disability can go within their TAFE that is culturally safe, that is staffed by Koorie staff that have relationships with Koorie services and mainstream disability services.<sup>101</sup>

The Committee heard of two programs running in Victoria that provide wraparound support to TAFE learners experiencing academic and personal challenges: Swinburne's Student Success Coach (SSC) program and VCOS's Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP). While these programs are not designed specifically for learners with disability, a large proportion of participants have disability and a growing number have mental ill health.<sup>102</sup> Further details about the programs are provided in Case studies 3.6 and 3.7.

Stakeholders supported the use of allocated coaches or other support workers to assist learners with disability to manage their studies and navigate TAFE.<sup>103</sup> The positive impact of the SSC and CTPP programs on retention and employment rates highlight the importance of wraparound support for TAFE learners with disability. The inclusive nature of making these programs available to all students has the added benefit of not singling out learners' disability and reducing stigma, which encourages students to seek support.

A 2020 review of Victoria's post-secondary education and training system led by The Honourable Jenny Macklin recommended expanded funding of Skills and Jobs Centres located in TAFEs to provide wraparound case management and support.<sup>104</sup> The Victorian Government should support the development of similar programs to SSC and CTPP at each Victorian TAFE, whether they run on their own or through Skills and Jobs Centres.

<sup>100</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 11.

<sup>101</sup> Mr Woody Eke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>102</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 6; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 9–10; Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>104</sup> Jenny Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria: driving collaboration and innovation in post-secondary education and training*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020, p. 21.



**FINDING 16:** TAFE learners with disability have better education and employment outcomes if they have access to comprehensive wraparound supports.

**RECOMMENDATION 17:** The Department of Education and Training support the development of programs similar to Swinburne University of Technology's Student Success Coach program at each Victorian TAFE to provide wraparound support to students at risk of non-completion including learners with disability.

### **CASE STUDY 3.6: Swinburne's Student Success Coach program**

Swinburne University of Technology runs a Student Success Coach (SSC) program that places coaches in each teaching department to support high priority student cohorts including learners with disability. It provides broad wraparound support services to students and relieves teachers from taking on a support role. The coaches can be teachers, career advisors, disability support workers, youth workers and so on.

Students can self-refer to the program if they find themselves struggling, but often coaches work with teaching staff to identify students at risk of non-completion due to academic and/or personal challenges. Coaches assess students' needs and with students' agreement can arrange access to student support services and community services agencies, develop strategies to manage or adjust study loads, and continually check in with the student to monitor progress and offer further help if needed.

The SSC program began in 2018 specifically for VET students. In 2020, the program supported 2,500 learners and by August 2020, the program had referred an additional 150 learners to AccessAbility Services (Swinburne's disability support service) up from 100 in all of 2019. The program is funded through Community Service Funding. As a dual-sector university, Swinburne has comprehensive student support services that it can draw upon. Standalone TAFEs may not have such a full complement of services.

Most student participants (92%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the program and 91% felt the SSC support kept them engaged with their studies. Swinburne is planning to conduct an impact assessment at the end of 2021 to measure the impact of the program on retention rates.

Sources: Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, pp. 5-6; Swinburne University of Technology, *Lessons learned from Swinburne SSC program*, supplementary evidence received 11 March 2021; Ms Jill Slater, Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 22-23.

### CASE STUDY 3.7: VCOSS's Community Traineeship Pilot Program

VCOSS manages the Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP), which supports young people facing employment barriers, such as learners with disability, to undertake a Certificate IV in Community Services alongside paid employment. CTPP provides wraparound support to trainees through collaboration with employers, local partner organisations, youth workers, VET providers and teachers. Each participant has a youth worker who attends class with them providing 1:1 support both in and out of class. The program also has a strong peer support focus.

The first group of CTPP participants achieved an 80% retention rate and over 50% of them gained further employment with their employer following the traineeship. The youth workers were considered vital to CTPP's success by developing students' practical skills, confidence and resilience, supporting peer engagement, helping with enrolment forms and requests for reasonable adjustments, and providing access to wraparound supports such as financial support, crisis housing, wellbeing and mental health services, medical needs and purchasing work clothes.

As explained by Ms Emily Barter, Manager of Workforce and Industry Development at VCOSS, the youth workers:

provide a whole range of social and emotional wellbeing, they help connection with other peers within the program, they advocate for those young people with both their TAFE teacher as well as the employers that they are working with and they also provide assistance with various complex processes, and I think there are a lot within just enrolling in TAFE or indeed understanding and completing assessments.

A TAFE teacher gave the following feedback about the CTPP:

Youth workers in the classroom—I found that to be really good ... In terms of emotional support potentially needed for the cohort but also they had that original relationship with them ... so it was good to have them supporting the trainees emotionally and knowing when things were perhaps off, given I hadn't built those relationships yet.

According to VCOSS Chief Executive Officer, Ms Emma King, CTPP youth workers:

provided real support, and in providing that support it is the difference between dropping out and finishing ... and for many of them not only succeeding in finishing their traineeship and their qualifications but they have got a job on the other side. So having a youth worker or a support worker has literally meant the difference between success and failure.

Sources: Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 7–8, 22; Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer and Ms Emily Barter, Manager of Workforce and Industry Development, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 14–15.

### 3.2.2 Flexible course delivery and assessment support learners' diverse needs

Learners with disability have a greater likelihood of completing their course if there is flexibility in how it is delivered and assessed.<sup>105</sup> Several stakeholders raised concerns that TAFEs do not always adapt courses and assessments to cater for the needs of students with disability.<sup>106</sup> In some cases, the lack of adaptation may be due to TAFEs adhering strictly to national curriculum requirements such as the VET training packages.<sup>107</sup> Training packages can include units of short duration, that is four or five weeks, which can pose difficulties for learners who need additional support.

For example, unit completion may be at risk if a learner's challenges are identified in week two or three, or if the learner has short absences due to health reasons.<sup>108</sup> The Home Education Network argued for flexibility in attendance requirements if students with disability miss class due to ongoing health reasons, especially if the required work is completed.<sup>109</sup> It gave the following example:

After much difficulty, a student with disabilities managed to enrol in TAFE to study a Cert IV in justice that ran for six months. During the study period, they had a significant physical collapse on campus, resulting in a week-long hospital stay. Upon returning to TAFE, the student caught up on required schoolwork, going above and beyond the average student in ensuring they accomplished what was required to pass the course. After completing the course, they were refused their certificate due to having missed classes for medical reasons associated with their disability that was beyond their control. Penalising students because of missed attendance due to their disability is discriminatory and creates significant debt, loss of time in studies and adversely affects the mental health of students in a major way.<sup>110</sup>

Mission Australia also called for flexible options to ensure learners with disability do not disengage from education if extraneous circumstances or personal challenges prevent them from completing their course.<sup>111</sup> One way of assisting such students is connecting them with career practitioners at TAFEs' Skills and Jobs Centres who can help them to build on their previous learning. As explained by Ms Gina Chinnery, Associate Director, Employment and Education Partnerships at Orygen, a not-for-profit organisation that conducts research into young people's mental health:

Often for young people, if they have had quite a significant mental illness or something, it might really shift where they want to head in terms of their training. But absolutely, thinking about, 'Well, you've completed half of a Cert IV in whatever it is. How can we

<sup>105</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 14; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 15; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 7; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 20; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 15; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, pp. 10–11; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Education and learning*, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 15.

take some of that?'. So having people in the TAFE ... whether it is the career practitioners who are based in TAFE or the support services, so that they can work with each other to make sure we are maximising the gains that they [students] have already made.<sup>112</sup>

Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU), noted that compressed delivery of VET not only disadvantages students who need more time to learn course content but also those who need more time to demonstrate they have acquired the relevant skills and knowledge. He stated, 'being able to have the time and flexibility to demonstrate competency is incredibly important' and that TAFEs need to be flexible with time limitations and supports.<sup>113</sup>

VTHC agreed that training packages have 'little room for flexibility or to build foundational understandings, and then develop skills.'<sup>114</sup> This can be a barrier for neuro-diverse students who may need extra time and alternative teaching techniques to gain competency. Other students may need more time to gain the experience to work independently in a mainstream environment.

Some learners with disability may find it difficult to keep up with course pace and content, and they may benefit from different teaching styles, more time to complete courses, online learning, the option to take fewer subjects, and/or extra time with teachers to ensure they have understood the content before moving forward.<sup>115</sup> Some stakeholders reported an unwillingness of teachers and trainers to adapt course delivery to meet the needs of students with disability, or a lack of resources to enable them to do so.<sup>116</sup> Mr Mullaly highlighted the requirement for TAFEs to tailor courses to student needs and added:

the very basis of our system should enable us to tailor things to the needs of individual students with disability. The biggest hurdle to that at the moment is the resources available to make that happen meaningfully for each of those students.<sup>117</sup>

Research conducted on behalf of the Victorian TAFE network by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute found 'flexibility in [teaching] delivery is critical to enhance learning outcomes for all students.'<sup>118</sup> It recommended the establishment of teacher communities of practice to share best practice teaching strategies and developing the capability of teachers to implement flexible teaching approaches. Chapter 4 discusses improving the TAFE workforce's capacity to better meet the needs of learners with disability.

<sup>112</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>114</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11; Ms Madison Arimatea, *Submission 18*, p. 2; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 13; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 3, 11; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 3; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 16; Ms Meredith Peace, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 14; Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 4; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 16.

<sup>117</sup> Mr Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10.

**FINDING 17:** Learners with disability may be disadvantaged if course delivery and assessment requirements lack flexibility to account for different learning styles and personal circumstances.

**RECOMMENDATION 18:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to develop suitable exemptions to time limitations and attendance requirements for learners with disability who need extra time to gain and demonstrate competency or who miss class due to reasons related to their health or disability.

### 3.2.3 Peer networks and mentoring can boost learners' confidence, wellbeing and engagement

According to a 2019 survey by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute, one of the most common barriers to TAFE study for learners with disability is lack of confidence and self-doubt. The highest levels of self-doubt and low confidence were found among students who are blind or have low vision and students with mental illness. However, over one-third of students among each type of disability reported self-doubt and poor confidence as the biggest barrier to study.<sup>119</sup>

Dr Judith Hudson, Non-Executive Director of the Dear Dyslexic Foundation, a dyslexic-led organisation that aims to empower young people and adults with learning disabilities to reach their full potential, gave the following example:

So a young person with dyslexia is no less capable than someone who is not dyslexic, but after years of failure—academic failure or failure in the school system—he or she may have experienced a negative impact on their self-esteem. They have low self-confidence levels and low feelings of self-worth. So they are often hampered by their communication difficulties as well and can be disadvantaged in that direction. Those with dyslexia generally have lower life satisfaction, lower life expectation in terms of achievement and poor health and wellbeing across a life span, and assisting a young person to build positive self-advocacy skills can only serve to counter this life trajectory.<sup>120</sup>

Stakeholders suggested learners with disability could overcome low confidence through mentoring, peer support programs, and smaller, welcoming learning environments.<sup>121</sup> Establishing inclusive common areas for all students to mingle and providing opportunities for learners with disability to meet similar learners, make connections

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Dr Judith Hudson, Non-Executive Director, Dear Dyslexic Foundation, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

<sup>121</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 7; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 16.

and ‘find their tribe’ were also promoted as ways to improve wellbeing and boost confidence.<sup>122</sup>

Peer groups and networks were strongly endorsed by stakeholders to enable learners with disability to build mutually supportive relationships, participate in the social aspects of TAFE and improve their engagement with TAFE.<sup>123</sup> As a trainee reported to VCOSS:

At the end of the day, yes, assessments and work placement is very important and those are a core part of the traineeship, but alongside it’s good to have the peer to peer relationships and to build rapport that might help you get employment through them or they might get it through you, if you’re both recommending workplaces—so networking.<sup>124</sup>

While there are formal mentoring programs at TAFEs, research shows informal, peer-based mentoring and support groups are the most effective.<sup>125</sup> Ms Catherine Dunn, Individual Advocacy Officer at Deaf Victoria agreed, stating:

a lot of TAFEs do already have models such as this, like student support services or mentoring services, so that a Deaf person can go in and have advice from another Deaf person. But unfortunately at the moment they are only people that are not Deaf. So it means that the Deaf student does not feel like they have a person that is ‘like me’ and is not able to have a quick conversation in the same language, in Auslan, just to clarify something quickly or bounce ideas off. Sometimes they feel that they cannot relate to their peer mentor because they are not Deaf as well. So I think that that would be a quick, short win—to have peer support or mentors available that are other Deaf people that have been through a similar qualification.<sup>126</sup>

Mr Samson Hailu, who has cerebral palsy and has completed several Certificate courses at TAFE, explained how a peer mentor would have been helpful for him while at TAFE:

I think some of the supports that would have helped me back then would’ve been things like someone to be able to take their time in being able to explain to me things ... kind of like a tutoring outside of class to be able to help you finish the course and also to be able to assist me in guiding me through the assessments and the units that needed to be completed. One of the ways I feel this could have been achieved is maybe hiring students who’ve potentially completed the course you’re trying to complete who have

<sup>122</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10; Ms Jenni Graham, I Am Ready Coordinator, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network and Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

<sup>123</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, p. 5; Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 8; Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 14; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 23; Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>124</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 24.

<sup>125</sup> Orygen, *Vocational Education and Training (VET) student mental health*, youth mental health policy briefing, Orygen, Melbourne, 2018, p. 7.

<sup>126</sup> Ms Catherine Dunn, Individual Advocacy Officer, Deaf Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 55.

that knowledge behind them and then supporting students and helping them, tutor them through the course.<sup>127</sup>

Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer of ECCV added:

the key thing with peer support workers is that they do have lived experience—and in this context that they have a disability or that they have an experience as a migrant or refugee and of trying to navigate a complex system like the education and training system. I guess, like for all of us, being able to see yourself in the person that is supporting you is really critical as part of that engagement and trust.<sup>128</sup>

This was supported by Ms Chinnery from Orygen who said:

if you are a young person and you can see another young person who is quite open about their mental health, it just normalises that experience but also can help provide a bit of an advocacy piece for those students that might not know how to talk about that to their support service or to their teacher or whoever.<sup>129</sup>

According to Aspergers Victoria, which runs peer groups for teens, young adults, adults, parents and carers as well as peer groups at Victorian TAFEs, peer-to-peer support helps build student engagement with the TAFE, motivates students to attend campus and catch up with fellow students, helps students manage mental health challenges, provides students with feedback from their peers on how to approach challenges and builds their self-advocacy skills.<sup>130</sup> Amaze added peer mentor programs can also support students with ASD to navigate disclosure of their condition, organise their studies, negotiate extensions and settle into student life.<sup>131</sup>

Social isolation is also common among students with ASD and peer support networks can help build their social connections.<sup>132</sup> Ms King from VCROSS noted this extends to all students with disability:

Peer support is so important. We know that that connection and that sense of belonging are critically important to helping people have a great start in the system and staying in, whether it be our TAFE system or any other form of higher education. That is actually really critical, because it can feel pretty lonely. You know, when you leave school or some other form of support and you find your way into TAFE, for example—because this Inquiry is specifically about TAFE—peer support is really critical. I think anything that we can do around peer support is vital. I am thinking here even of some of the work that I know residential colleges for unis do, which is they connect people up with others who might be from their local country community, for example, to help them stay connected rather than feel lonely and drop out et cetera along the way.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Mr Samson Hailu, former TAFE student, National Disability Services, *Video presentation*, supplementary evidence received 10 March 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

<sup>129</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>130</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 30.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>133</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

Peer support is a key feature of VCOSS's CTPP, as explained by Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement at VCOSS:

We have defined intake points and people come in as a group or a cohort, and before they even set foot in the classroom to engage with the curriculum there are, I think, two weeks ... of just intensively getting to know one another and establishing their own individual identity within the group, as well as a group identity, and the teacher, the educator and the youth worker are part of that group as well. It helps with the stickiness or the retention in the program.<sup>134</sup>

Rather than continually asking their teachers, CTPP participants have set up their own WhatsApp groups and ask questions of each other, and some of the participants have developed leadership skills through their interactions in these groups.<sup>135</sup>

Ms Chinnery mentioned some education providers in Australia were tapping into their social work students and training them to work as mental health peer workers. This enables the social work students to build up their placement hours while also supporting students with mental ill health. She suggested a similar arrangement could be established in TAFEs.<sup>136</sup>

**FINDING 18:** Peer support networks improve the confidence, wellbeing and education outcomes of TAFE learners with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 19:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to establish peer support networks for learners with different types of disability and to promote these among students and staff.

### 3.2.4 Supporting students' mental health improves their education outcomes

Mental health conditions are the most common type of disability among TAFE students, reflecting the known prevalence of mental illness among the general population of young people.<sup>137</sup> Research shows at least one in four young people will have experienced mental ill health in the past year and VET students were more likely to experience mild to moderate levels of psychological distress than non-students. VET students with mental illness have been shown to have low rates of subject completion.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement, Victorian Council of Social Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>135</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>136</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>138</sup> Orygen, *Vocational Education and Training (VET) student mental health*, p. 1.



A significant barrier to TAFE completion for learners with mental ill health is stigma and discrimination resulting in students not feeling comfortable disclosing their condition. As Ms Chinnery from Orygen explained, this can result in:

not being able to potentially tap into some of the resources and the supports that might be available to them through the TAFE provider. Obviously in terms of completing courses and things like that there may be some cognitive—or difficulties with side effects from medication that might make it difficult to complete courses. It could be disruptive. You know, mental health can go up and down, so there might be disruptions along the term of their studies that may make it really difficult to complete studies.<sup>139</sup>

She added that rates of disclosure are much lower than the rates of mental ill health among young people suggesting that learners feel uncomfortable sharing this information with their TAFE. This could be because of language:

even saying ‘disability services’ or ‘disability support’—a lot of young people particularly with mental ill health might not associate mental illness with having a disability. You know, you have got a disability support service potentially, but young people that have mental illness might feel like that is not somewhere that is for them as well, so they might not feel that that is a space that they can access.<sup>140</sup>

She suggested TAFEs present information about mental ill health and the available supports to all students during the orientation process.<sup>141</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement at Swinburne University, agreed that students with mental ill health ‘often do not identify with the disability label’ so may miss out on accessing services.<sup>142</sup>

Other barriers faced by learners with mental ill health include difficulty keeping up with course pace and content, difficulty interacting with other students and teachers, difficulty concentrating, fatigue and exhaustion, low motivation and exacerbation of stress and anxiety if there are sudden changes to the course.<sup>143</sup>

A 2018 Orygen briefing paper found public and private VET providers feel they have limited capacity to provide students with effective mental health support such as counselling.<sup>144</sup> Ms Cathy Frazer, who is the Executive Director, Student Engagement, International and Community Partnerships at Melbourne Polytechnic, noted that the numbers of students disclosing mental ill health has increased in recent years as has the number of students who do not identify as having a disability but are accessing on-campus counselling services. In 2020, there were more than 900 counselling consultations for mental health issues at Melbourne Polytechnic. She continued:

<sup>139</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

<sup>143</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>144</sup> Orygen, *Vocational Education and Training (VET) student mental health*, p. 1.

it is important to recognise that TAFEs are not specialist mental health facilities. We provide general services and support learners to participate in their learning; however, we are seeing increasing complexity in terms of the students that require support, and that impacts on, I guess, the confidence and the capability of teachers to support those learners in a classroom or a training setting. I think it is really important to recognise the need for TAFEs—we only have students with us for a relatively short period of time—to enhance those connections with community organisation specialist mental health providers. But there is a gap. So some on-the-ground experience is we might have a student in crisis and, other than ringing a crisis assessment team or calling an ambulance, often there is nowhere to refer that student to. So there is, I guess, a burden on the TAFEs to deal with those issues on the ground.<sup>145</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic is training teachers and students in mental health awareness and mental health first aid. It suggested extending this training across the TAFE network.<sup>146</sup> Ms Chinnery supported mental health first aid for TAFE staff but suggested additional support or follow-up training as well:

Mental health first aid can be helpful initially, but in my opinion you need ongoing training and ongoing engagement to develop a better understanding of how to support student mental ill health, because it can get a bit lost. I would suggest having any sort of training delivered by people with lived experience themselves, whether it is a clinician and a peer worker delivering, and making sure that that is something that is delivered together so that teachers can really ask someone with lived experience what it is actually like. I suggest having regular follow-up training or support ... so having co-reflection or some kind of follow-up sessions with teachers together so they can talk through some of the things they are experiencing in the classroom and are able to be supported by mental health professionals to understand how to manage those situations. Because with all this new free TAFE I can imagine they are going to get a lot more students presenting that might have some mental health issues, so I suggest making sure that those teachers are feeling like they do have the tools and know what to do when that is happening in front of them in the classroom, which is really tricky. The ongoing piece is really important.<sup>147</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic also endorsed partnerships between TAFEs and mental health organisations and incorporating self-care and stress management techniques in vocational courses.<sup>148</sup>

These measures would benefit all TAFE students, especially those with disability. A 2019 Mission Australia Report found young people with disability experienced higher rates of stress, mental health issues, bullying or emotional abuse and discrimination than young people without disability.<sup>149</sup> Learners with disability may also have co-occurring mental

<sup>145</sup> Ms Cathy Frazer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

<sup>146</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

<sup>147</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

<sup>148</sup> Ms Cathy Frazer, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

<sup>149</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 23.

health conditions, particularly learners with ASD.<sup>150</sup> Autistic adults have higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general population.<sup>151</sup> Similarly, people with dyslexia are twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders and suicidal thoughts than people without disability.<sup>152</sup>

The experience of TAFE can also affect the mental health of students with disability. Almost half (48%) of the respondents to a survey run by autism organisations Amaze, the I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, Different Journeys and Aspergers Victoria (hereafter the Victorian TAFE and autism survey) stated that TAFE had a negative effect on their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>153</sup> When asked how other TAFE students cope with the barriers they face, TAFE student Mr Gervasoni stated:

for some of the people I know one of the main issues is having to advocate for themselves and having to push through the barriers is really difficult for their mental health. That makes them—I really do not know how to describe it—really anxious and not confident enough to do it ...<sup>154</sup>

At the same time, 44% of respondents to the Victorian TAFE and autism survey stated TAFE had a positive effect on their wellbeing due to the connections they had made there and the confidence they gained.<sup>155</sup>

Mental health supports such as mentoring, counselling and coaching can improve retention and completion rates at TAFE for students with mental ill health.<sup>156</sup> The adequacy of mental health support varies between TAFE providers as illustrated by Ms Rebecca Hope, a Holmesglen graduate with ASD level 1 and an anxiety disorder:

In my experience at Holmesglen the mental health support was already there, embedded in the course, because all of the teachers were trained, as I said, and I could go and seek support from any staff member at any time if I was feeling anxious. However, in the mainstream system that just was not available. I was not able to go and seek support when I was anxious about assessments or things that were happening in the class, and as a result I kept a lot of it inside. The only thing I could do was go out into the corridor and contact someone for help, like my mum or someone from school, because they just did not provide the support. This particular place's view was, 'Oh, she can do the work. She can behave. She's not an issue'. That is not the case. On the outside I might look fine—we might look fine—but on the inside we are struggling just to sit in that classroom. And having a go-to person, at least one safe person to go to in that setting, would set us up psychological safety and thus reduce our anxiety so we can learn more effectively.<sup>157</sup>

150 Ms Nicole Rees, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Amaze, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

151 Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 21.

152 Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 5.

153 Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 29.

154 Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

155 Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 29.

156 Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

157 Ms Rebecca Hope, TAFE graduate, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways at Victoria University Polytechnic, noted the stigma surrounding mental health can result in students finding face-to-face support confronting so TAFEs may be more successful providing access to support via text message or online.<sup>158</sup> Online consultations are also useful for providing immediate connections compared with in-person counselling, which can take longer to set up.<sup>159</sup> Bendigo Kangan Institute provides mental health support services in person, over the phone and online. It also offers a free mental health peer-to-peer support app called TalkCampus, where students can get 24/7 peer-to-peer support and the app can escalate issues in real time.<sup>160</sup>

Amaze recommended the Victorian Government extend to TAFEs its mental health practitioners in secondary schools program, which places a suitably qualified mental health practitioner in every Victorian Government secondary school campus by the end of 2021.<sup>161</sup> The mental health practitioner, who could be a mental health nurse, occupational therapist, psychologist or social worker, provides counselling, coordinates external support services for students and contributes to school-wide health promotion. Extending this program to TAFE will provide additional support to TAFE disability services, particularly as the cohort of students with mental ill health is increasing in size.

**FINDING 19:** The prevalence of mental ill health among TAFE students is significant and growing, and TAFEs often find it hard to support students with complex mental health issues.

**RECOMMENDATION 20:** The Department of Education and Training extend its mental health practitioners in secondary schools program to all Victorian TAFE campuses.

**RECOMMENDATION 21:** The Department of Education and Training support all TAFE teachers and frontline staff to undertake mental health first aid training.

**RECOMMENDATION 22:** The Department of Education and Training encourage all TAFEs to use peer-to-peer mental health apps such as TalkCampus.

<sup>158</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways, Victoria University Polytechnic, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

<sup>159</sup> Ms Jill Slater, Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

<sup>160</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>161</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 29.

### 3.2.5 Inclusive education reduces stigma and discrimination

Ill-informed and negative community perceptions about disability can result in learners with disability feeling embarrassed, misunderstood and marginalised.<sup>162</sup> Poor understanding of disability creates stigma, where a person is seen negatively because of their disability and is defined and stereotyped because of it. It can lead to others not providing support and empathy for people with disability. As a consequence, people with disability can have poor self-esteem leading to withdrawal from others, social isolation and reluctance to seek support.<sup>163</sup> As explained by Mr Troy Crellin, Manager Social Enterprise Programs at Mission Australia:

By the time they [young people with disability] are engaging with a service like us at 16, 17, 18, they have disengaged from education or have had negative experiences. You carry that stuff with you, so you have got a lifetime of preparation towards a certain way of thinking.<sup>164</sup>

A 2019 survey of GOTAFE students with disability found ‘they often did not want to disclose or seek support until absolutely necessary’ due to the stigma attached to having a disability and receiving additional support.<sup>165</sup> Similar sentiments were heard at the National Youth Disability Summit run in 2020 by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), the national peak body representing children and young people with disability aged up to 25. One young person stated, ‘Attitudes can be a big barrier. If you have a teacher that you’re afraid of or doesn’t understand you, you don’t want to go to those classes.’<sup>166</sup>

Ms King from VCOSS added:

Some educators are simply uncomfortable with disability. It scares them; they are not trained for it. Some assume people with disabilities are not up to the task. This can take the form of either outright discrimination or the so-called soft bigotry of low expectations ...<sup>167</sup>

Discrimination was mentioned as a common concern for learners with disability. Mission Australia cited research showing 19% of learners with disability aged 15 and over attending a non-school educational institute experienced discrimination in the past 12 months and of these, 24% reported discrimination from their teacher or lecturer.<sup>168</sup> As Ms Olivia Beasley, a Deaf Victoria Board member and Educational Sub-Committee member, illustrated:

<sup>162</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 5; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 9.

<sup>163</sup> Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 9.

<sup>164</sup> Mr Troy Crellin, Manager, Social Enterprise Programs, Mission Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>165</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> Ms Miranda Cross, Policy Officer, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

<sup>167</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 12.

<sup>168</sup> Ms Michele Leonard, Victorian State Leader, Mission Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

My brother was very fresh to the TAFE sector last year and he was very much looking forward to his new start to education in the tertiary sector; however, he faced barriers from the very beginning at the enrolment stage. Unfortunately his experience was quite negative, and he was faced with very patronising approaches from teachers and was believed to not be at the same level as other students.<sup>169</sup>

Some TAFE staff may discriminate against learners with disability by discouraging them from studying certain courses without further consideration or consultation.<sup>170</sup> In some instances, there is discrimination in industry, which can lead to discrimination in TAFE courses preparing students for work in that industry. Ms Semmens from Victoria University Polytechnic gave the following example:

everyone is very cognisant about not discriminating against people having access to TAFE, clearly, because they have got a disability. But, for instance, we had a young woman who was completely deaf—she was still verbal, except she was completely deaf, and she was in aged care. You think, ‘Okay, well, there is technology now. There are lights, there are all sorts of assistive things that can help’, but the reality is that most aged-care facilities are not set up and do not have those sorts of technologies that would enable her to be able to work in a safe way. So it is not even about her technical competence in the job. She left that course and went into a different course. So was it directly about her disabilities? Yes and no. Not really. It was really about the systemic lack of support in the industry for people with disabilities to work competently in those fields.<sup>171</sup>

Dr Garland from VTHC added that many workers and apprentices with disability face discrimination in the workplace when employers do not make reasonable adjustments during the interview process or on the job.<sup>172</sup> TAFE learners with disability, particularly those from CALD backgrounds, may feel they can not report incidents of discrimination especially if they are indirect or passive.<sup>173</sup> ECCV Chairperson Mr Eddie Micallef stated:

We need to have mechanisms to make sure that people are aware of their rights, and in some cases those with a disability have difficulty in understanding their rights. I think you will see there is a mention of the literacy aspect of people with disabilities knowing their rights, knowing where to go to get support.<sup>174</sup>

In addition to discrimination at TAFE, learners with disability can be segregated into programs for people with disability or experience exclusion within mainstream courses.<sup>175</sup> For example, TAFE learners with intellectual disability are often studying work education units, which focus on literacy, numeracy and employability skills, rather

<sup>169</sup> Ms Olivia Beasley, Board Member and Educational Sub-Committee Member, Deaf Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 51.

<sup>170</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 12.

<sup>171</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

<sup>172</sup> Dr Carina Garland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

<sup>173</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 13.

<sup>174</sup> Mr Eddie Micallef, Chairperson, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 29.

<sup>175</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, pp. 5–6; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Education and learning*, p. 3.

than units in other teaching areas.<sup>176</sup> While these courses make it easier to provide specialist support to students, they ultimately segregate and discriminate against them, according to VTHC.<sup>177</sup>

Segregation has a negative impact on education and employment outcomes and learners' sense of community and belonging. Learners with disability have the right to study regular courses and learn alongside and be treated equally to students without disability.<sup>178</sup> People with disability can experience discrimination and exclusion throughout their lives resulting in poorer education, employment, health and social outcomes.<sup>179</sup> In addition, years of discrimination and exclusion can have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people with disability and cause complex trauma.<sup>180</sup>

Stakeholders supported inclusive education, where learners with disability fully participate in learning with their similar-aged peers.<sup>181</sup> Inclusive education has been shown to increase social connections, improve education and employment outcomes, promote independence and reduce rates of bullying.<sup>182</sup> As Ms Beasley stated:

The classroom should be created in a way that enables full participation and integration of the Deaf student with the rest of the students. They should not feel singled out or segregated ... It is really important for a student to feel equity and feel that they are going through the same experience as their other classmates. They should not be feeling the pressure or the anxiety prior to starting their class or their educational experience. They should really feel peace of mind and should feel confident in the system to access their education.<sup>183</sup>

A culture of inclusion encourages learners with disability to ask for support.<sup>184</sup> At the same time, providing learners with disability the psychological safety to disclose their diagnosis also promotes inclusion and helps to reduce stigma.<sup>185</sup> As explained by Mr Crellin, his role involves:

helping young people to understand why it is important that they mention that they have a disability at the start point—because you are able then to access extra supports. And what we see is that the young person accessing that support means they get extra help in the classroom but then other young people can actually utilise that support as

<sup>176</sup> Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9.

<sup>178</sup> Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 2; Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, pp. 7–8; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9; Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 5; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Education and learning*, p. 3.

<sup>179</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission 21*, p. 1.

<sup>180</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

<sup>181</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Ms Michele Leonard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 40; Ms Olivia Beasley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 52.

<sup>182</sup> Ms Michele Leonard, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>183</sup> Ms Olivia Beasley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 52.

<sup>184</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 21.

<sup>185</sup> Mr Troy Crellin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21; Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

well. So the destigmatising actually happens at a peer support level as much as it is occurring [in] the classroom. It is just about that first step of actually recognising the disability.<sup>186</sup>

He added when learners with disability seek and receive support and achieve at TAFE, they also empower other learners with disability to build self-advocacy and do the same:

Once we actually see others achieving from our own communities and from own experiences, we are actually more likely to feel that confidence in ourselves. I think there are some really strong leaders in disability that have some really strong stories that are really empowering for young people ... because there is nothing more empowering than seeing others achieving when you are used to being stigmatised and having that experience of feeling like you are experiencing disadvantage.<sup>187</sup>

Integration and inclusive education also foster inclusive attitudes and build positive perceptions of diversity among students without disability.<sup>188</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager at CYDA, stated that this should begin in early education:

[M]oving further than integration to genuine inclusion is really what we advocate for very strongly and what we see coming through with the human rights approach—so having children with disability being able to learn alongside children without disability, building that exposure, that culture of inclusion and understanding, from a very early age. We commissioned an evidence review a couple of years ago around inclusive education ... that overwhelmingly shows positive benefits of inclusive education genuinely—with everybody being in the same room, you know, with the supports they need to be able to participate—benefits not only to students with disability but students without disability as well and parents and teachers and the broader school community. There are a lot of flow-on benefits when we start to bring genuine inclusion into the picture, and we know there is a lot of work to be done in terms of changing community attitudes.<sup>189</sup>

TAFEs are becoming more inclusive of learners with disability. For example, GOTAFE is planning to have a student representative with disability on its Student Council to ensure the voices of learners with disability are heard.<sup>190</sup> It has also renamed its disability support service to Equitable Learning Support following consultation with students who felt the original name marginalised and stigmatised the service and them.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, Melbourne Polytechnic uses the name Equity and Access Service.<sup>192</sup> By making its Student Success Coach program (covered in Section 3.2.1) available to all

<sup>186</sup> Mr Troy Crellin, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>188</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, p. 2; Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

<sup>189</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

<sup>190</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>192</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 2.



learners, Swinburne is 'sending a clear message that all learners need support at times', which helps to reduce the stigma around disability.<sup>193</sup>

While TAFEs are becoming more proactive at including all learners and reducing stigma and discrimination against learners with disability, stakeholders endorsed each TAFE having a clear and enforceable policy regarding bullying and discrimination as well as an accessible mechanism for feedback and complaints. A robust complaints mechanism in accessible formats and language would empower learners with disability to raise issues and have them addressed.<sup>194</sup>

**FINDING 20:** Inclusive education improves social, education and employment outcomes for learners with disability and builds positive community attitudes towards disability and diversity.

**RECOMMENDATION 23:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to create inclusive classrooms and common areas for learners with disability to learn and interact with their peers without disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 24:** The Department of Education and Training ensure TAFEs have documented processes outlining how learners with disability can provide feedback and make complaints about the way they are treated and supported at the TAFE.

### 3.2.6 The COVID-19 pandemic created benefits and challenges for learners with disability

The emergence of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 created significant disruptions for educational institutions including TAFEs. Government restrictions to slow the spread of the virus such as social distancing shifted TAFE study to remote learning. Some learners with disability thrived in an online learning environment whereas others struggled. TAFEs can learn from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners with disability to improve course design and delivery.

Some of the benefits that remote learning offered learners with disability include:

- removing the need to attend campus, which was useful for students who felt anxious in class, had difficulty getting around campus or had sensory hypersensitivity
- recorded classes enabled students to learn at times that were more suitable for them, to take breaks during class and to listen to classes multiple times

<sup>193</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 19.

<sup>194</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 8; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 13; Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 5; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 11; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10.

- shared course material gave students more time to study
- smaller and shorter classes to ensure engagement suited students with disability better
- increased teacher support, which was available online after hours.<sup>195</sup>

RMIT's College of Vocational Education found attendance improved for some of its programs following the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and this was sustained for 10 weeks in some areas.<sup>196</sup> According to TAFE student Mr Gervasoni:

learning online was probably easier than learning onsite. At my house I know where everything is, there is adequate signage, everything is set up to my specifications. So it was a lot easier at home than it is on campus.<sup>197</sup>

Some TAFEs are embedding mixed delivery methods as ongoing practice providing students flexibility. However, TAFEs should be mindful that online delivery does not suit all students who may not have a safe place to study at home or who do not have the tools, resources and supports to study from home.<sup>198</sup>

At the same time, the shift to remote learning created the following challenges for learners with disability:

- online learning required greater levels of digital literacy and access to the internet at home, which was financially difficult for some
- loss of access to computers on campus to complete work
- isolation had a negative impact on many students' mental health
- in-person supports and social events shifted to online delivery via Microsoft Teams and Zoom, which was not always suitable or comfortable and resulted in increased isolation
- disruption to structures and routines created anxiety
- some online resources were incompatible with screen-readers, voice recognition software and other assistive technology
- for students who struggle with independent learning, lack of direction from teachers led to students withdrawing from study.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 19; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 13–14; Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8; Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>196</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 141.

<sup>197</sup> Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

<sup>198</sup> Mr Chris Christoforou, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

<sup>199</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 15; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 19; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 10; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 14; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 2; Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from CALD and refugee backgrounds were more likely to struggle with the shift to online learning due to it being difficult and costly to acquire computer equipment and have reliable access to data and the internet.<sup>200</sup> TAFEs assisted students with accessing technology. For example, Bendigo Kangan Institute loaned laptops and internet dongles to students who needed them while studying remotely.<sup>201</sup>

Professor Jones from ACU stated the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on learners with ASD, which was:

probably the opposite to what anecdotally people would expect. There is that stereotype that autistic people, because they do not like to communicate, will love online learning because it is all distant and they do not have to worry about the social aspects. Most of the students found it really difficult ...

Being really honest, I do not like this kind of setup, this Zoom meeting. You are all lovely people, but for someone who struggles with eye contact, having you right there, that big, in the middle of my screen, is actually harder than being in a room with you, where I can kind of look away or look at something else. So knowing that students might need to turn their videos off, for example, and that does not mean that they are not paying attention, and providing an option for students to send a private chat message if they have not understood something, I think there are those sorts of adjustments we can make, but also being aware that communication is tricky. Not being able to just catch up with the teacher after the lecture and say, 'Oh, I didn't quite understand that' or 'You said something about the assignment date changing, but I missed it'—you lose a lot of that when you move to online, because with a lot of the questions that as an autistic person I might not feel comfortable asking in front of the whole class I would feel comfortable walking up to my lecturer afterwards and saying, 'Can I just ask you this?'. I think those sorts of things can make a huge difference.<sup>202</sup>

Ms Semmens from Victoria University Polytechnic added that remote learning might have suited students with anxiety and depression, but it might not have been helpful overall. She said:

while they may have welcomed the ability to remain isolated, that is not necessarily particularly helpful in terms of workforce training into the future. So the fact that they felt satisfied, I do not necessarily think the correlation is that that is a desirable state necessarily for those students either.<sup>203</sup>

Ms Chinnery from Orygen agreed that online connection during COVID-19 was not always ideal, stating:

We have worked with lots of young people with mental ill health who have lost all their connections to their friends through what has happened over time or lack confidence to get out of the house—those kind of things—and having somebody who is the same

<sup>200</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 19; Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>201</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>202</sup> Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>203</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

age and has had the same experience being able to talk through that with other young people can be priceless, essentially. So yes, absolutely that isolation is really tricky. The online side of things can be helpful, but meeting with other young people in person is obviously going to be much better for those young people to learn how to engage.<sup>204</sup>

On the other hand, studying and working remotely created new opportunities for people with disability. Remote working arrangements and online communication during COVID-19 made flexible hours and work from home possible and more acceptable to employers, which ultimately could provide people with disability more opportunities to participate in employment.<sup>205</sup>

However, overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many employment barriers people with disability face due to softer labour market conditions and increased competition for fewer job vacancies.<sup>206</sup> It has also increased pressure on the TAFE system as people who have lost jobs are seeking to upskill or retrain in other fields.<sup>207</sup> TAFE will be critical in assisting people with disability to gain the skills and knowledge needed for employment, which increases the urgency for TAFEs to better meet the needs of learners with disability.<sup>208</sup>

**FINDING 21:** The shift to remote learning due to COVID-19 restrictions suited some learners with disability but created challenges including social isolation.

**RECOMMENDATION 25:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to create opportunities such as increased virtual office hours or study groups to ensure learners with disability studying remotely remain connected to teachers and peers outside of class.

### 3.2.7 TAFEs should do more to help students with disability who want to transition into further study or employment

The meaning of success at TAFE can vary between students with disability. For some students and their families, success means completing their course and progressing to higher study or gaining employment. For other students, building their skills, independence and resilience through participating at TAFE could be their goal.<sup>209</sup> An assessment of TAFE outcomes should take this into account, as explained by Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy at the Victorian TAFE Association:

<sup>204</sup> Ms Gina Chinnery, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>205</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 19; Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>206</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 11; Public Policy Forum and Diversity Institute, *Skills for the post-pandemic world: scoping report*, Public Policy Forum, Ottawa, 2020, p. 6.

<sup>207</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 8.

<sup>208</sup> Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

<sup>209</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 8.

From talking to practitioners, their main concern is that we set students up for success; we do not set them up for failure. The success that they achieve is really at the start of their engagement with tertiary education. Whether it is in higher education or in TAFE, their success is based on a strong foundation from which to build, and for many students Certificate I, Certificate II and foundation courses are the right level from which to proceed to higher qualifications. So it is really that we need to give people—all people, all learners—a basis from which to achieve success, and we need to have a very broad lens, I think, as to what success means for individuals. I do not think we can measure success in the same way for everybody, and particularly with people with disability the success that they achieve will be a very individual thing.<sup>210</sup>

Some stakeholders were concerned that there are not enough Certificate II courses at TAFE for students with disability who wish to progress further after completing a Certificate I, restricting their TAFE pathway.<sup>211</sup> As explained by Ms Felicity Bellingham, President of the Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), a professional association for teachers, allied health professionals and others working with students with disability in schools, students with disability:

often go into a Cert I, but some of our members said that there has been a reduction in Cert IIs that are appropriate, whereas Cert III, a lot of our members said that step is a bit too difficult. But Cert IIs would be ideal for preparing students who are very capable of having a position in a workplace, and a Cert II would provide that kind of preparation. The kinds of areas that Cert IIs could potentially look at are retail, hospitality, child care, aged care, allied health.<sup>212</sup>

However, other stakeholders noted that Certificates I and II do not result in good employment outcomes for students with disability and these students need to be supported into higher level courses.<sup>213</sup> For example, Mr Peter Kellock, Coordinator, Research and Projects at the Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN), which works with young people across the cities of Darebin, Moreland and Yarra, stated:

We do not think there is a major problem with access to TAFE; it is more about what they are actually getting when they get there and the quality of the programs and the offerings ... Only a very small minority are really taking vocationally focused pathways. Most of them are held doing Certificate I-, Certificate II-type programs in transition-to-work education units, which really, to be blunt, are a holding operation that does not provide them with long-term vocational outcomes.<sup>214</sup>

210 Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

211 Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, *Submission 12*, p. 1; Ms Helen Watkins, Head of Professional Studies, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

212 Ms Felicity Bellingham, President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

213 Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 2.

214 Mr Peter Kellock, Coordinator, Research and Projects, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16.

Similarly, Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager of employment program Ticket to Work, argued:

We know that the data shows that students with disabilities are often going into foundation-level courses, and there are very few employment outcomes from those foundation-level courses, so the Certificate Is and Certificate IIs. Often students with disabilities and particularly intellectual disabilities do multiple courses of these foundation levels, so they are not moving up into the higher level of qualification. The research shows that foundation-level courses do not equate to employment outcomes. They should be there to actually support students to actually move into a higher level of qualifications with the appropriate supports so that they can actually gain the benefit of TAFE and vocational education in actually achieving outcomes. Some of those foundation courses, even though they advertise them and focus on them being a pathway to employment, the data that is coming out—and it is limited data—is that that is not the case. It is just not leading to the outcomes that people are expecting and not leading to those higher levels.<sup>215</sup>

Ms Tracey Jeffery, Manager, Careers and Training Services at The Gordon, explained how The Gordon's Skills and Jobs Centre is working with Learn Local providers to set up pathway programs to support learners with disability into foundation-level and higher-level TAFE courses. She said:

We have found that that is a really successful way of picking up some people in the community that might not have accessed TAFE before and just making sure that they are really set up with everything that they need before they get to TAFE and working with our Learn Local partners, who do a really excellent job of that, in providing that support, so that students are really set up and ready to go when they do get to TAFE.<sup>216</sup>

Data from the Department of Education and Training show that 73% of Victorian TAFE learners with disability were studying at Certificate III level or above at 30 August 2020, and 47% were studying at Certificate IV level, which is equal to the rate for learners without disability.<sup>217</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 1, employment rates for people with disability are lower than the rates for the general population. According to Ms Maeve Kennedy from CYDA:

young people with disability are one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market. They experience the intersectionality of systemic disadvantage of being both a person with disability and a young person, with this disadvantage being even further amplified by other demographic factors, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender or sexual diversity or living in a rural or regional area. Young people are also

<sup>215</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>216</sup> Ms Tracey Jeffery, Manager, Careers and Training Services, The Gordon Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>217</sup> Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 32–33.

more likely to bear the brunt of economic downturn, with employers more reluctant to hire or retain younger workers due to their limited experience and lower skills during periods of cyclical weakness.<sup>218</sup>

Studies have shown post-training employment gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students are mainly due to lower work engagement prior to study rather than course completion. This indicates more needs to be done to help TAFE students with disability gain work experience and prepare for employment prior to completing their course.<sup>219</sup>

Only 26% of respondents to the Victorian TAFE and autism survey reported TAFE had helped or partially helped them to find work related to their course.<sup>220</sup> Similarly, learners with disability told the ECCV that some TAFEs were reluctant or not able to find them a work placement. One ECCV interviewee said, 'My certificate allows me to get through the door, yet the tools were not provided for me to achieve my dream.'<sup>221</sup> Mr David Kennedy, Executive Officer of INLLEN, agreed stating:

They get through, but once they finish TAFE there is a bit of a hiatus in terms of them sitting on the couch for a year and a half before much happens. So what happens in a lot of cases is those young people end up in day services after they have been through TAFE. At the end of the day we are sort of going, 'Yes, we don't want young people in day services', but the end result is that is where they end up, because we have not set up the structure to transition kids from TAFE to then the job.<sup>222</sup>

Some stakeholders called for better career development at TAFE for learners with disability, such as regular career planning with an adviser at the TAFE's Skills and Jobs Centre.<sup>223</sup> Vision Australia also supported TAFEs providing 'informed and realistic vocational advice' based on labour market knowledge to avoid learners studying course after course without finding meaningful employment.<sup>224</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, an independent non-government organisation that works to reduce poverty, agreed stating:

Our research has identified that while general employability skills supports, such as interview skills and resume writing, are increasingly common in TAFE, there remains limited targeted support for learners that builds understanding of labour market opportunities, limited building of learner awareness of the utility of their qualifications

<sup>218</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 38.

<sup>219</sup> National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 5.

<sup>220</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 33.

<sup>221</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 18.

<sup>222</sup> Mr David Kennedy, Executive Officer, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>223</sup> Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31; Ms Rachael Murphy, I Am Ready Coordinator, Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

<sup>224</sup> Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 3.

for both the vertical and horizontal mobility within an industry and limited access to meaningful workplace exposure and workplace experience that is crucial for building networks that enable employment outcomes.<sup>225</sup>

### Work placements are critical for transitioning from TAFE to employment

Research shows work experience and training placements during school and TAFE improve employment outcomes for learners with disability. Not only do learners gain valuable workplace exposure, build networks and increase their confidence to find work after their course, employers also get the chance to see learners' potential and skills in a real-world setting.<sup>226</sup> On-the-job training through work placements has been found to be more effective than developing learners' job readiness at school or TAFE before they gain employment experience.<sup>227</sup> See Case Study 3.8 as an example.

While stakeholders saw work-based learning and work experience while studying as vital to help learners with disability gain employment, they emphasised the need for employer and learner supports. As explained by Ms Wakeford from Ticket to Work:

if there is not extra support or if people are just being placed in jobs in work experience without thought around what the needs of the employer and that young person are, we often see what we call the 'place and pray' approach—we put a young person with a disability into a work placement and just pray that it works out without any thinking about what kinds of supports would be required or very little understanding of what supports would work in that work experience.<sup>228</sup>

Mr Mullaly from the AEU also stated:

something that we often do not talk about that is really important here, and that is if we are talking about supporting students with disability to get training and to get qualifications to get a job, we actually have to have our teachers really well placed to talk with business and industry about how we can ensure that businesses are well placed to accommodate the needs of those students and make them productive members of their workforces.<sup>229</sup>

<sup>225</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team, Brotherhood of St Laurence, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7; Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 2; National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 4; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 25; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 32; Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>227</sup> Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Submission 8*, p. 3.

<sup>228</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 23.

<sup>229</sup> Mr Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.



### CASE STUDY 3.8: 'I gained vital skills not just for that particular industry but for general working life'

'I was diagnosed 16 years ago with what is now known as ASD level 1, as well as an anxiety disorder. Over the last few years I have undertaken four TAFE courses at two different institutes. My first foray into TAFE came when I was a final-year student at Rossbourne School, which is a special needs secondary school for students who cannot qualify for the government special schools but at the same time require more support than the mainstream can provide. This course was a VETiS [VET in Schools] course. It was a Certificate II in Animal Studies. As the school enrolled me—because I was enrolled through the school—they disclosed my disability, but this particular provider did not give me the emotional support I needed. As a result I often found myself very anxious attending and I was too frightened to express my needs for fear of being ridiculed.

At the end of 2018, when I left Rossbourne, I found my way to Holmesglen, and I started off in their community and transitional education department, initially in the VCAL foundation course in 2019, which I thoroughly enjoyed. All of the teachers were very knowledgeable about my needs and knew exactly how to assist me, and as such my anxiety was greatly reduced. At the start of 2020 I was fortunate enough to be accepted onto the integrated practical placement program [a structured study program designed to transition students with a learning disability into paid employment] ... and I was part of the first contingent of students to be placed at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, which came aboard at the start of last year. Now, we were meant to have three work rotations, each of nine weeks in duration. However, COVID severely disrupted this and we were only able to undertake one five-week rotation. I did this rotation in the human resources/people and culture department of the hospital, and through that experience I gained vital skills not just for that particular industry but for general working life. It inspired me to go and look for a business traineeship, which I am thrilled to say I have now secured at a recruitment firm ...'

#### Rebecca Hope

Source: Ms Rebecca Hope, Holmesglen graduate, Amaze, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 27–28.

The Committee heard about successful work placement programs at TAFE for learners with disability. For example, TAFE Gippsland has partnered with Yooralla, a disability support organisation, to deliver a hospitality training program at TAFE Gippsland's Wildflower Training Restaurant based in Leongatha. The program helps learners to develop customer service and food preparation skills. It has been successful at helping learners with disability gain employment in the Gippsland hospitality sector as well as in other industries. In some instances, learners gained employment before completing their training.<sup>230</sup>

<sup>230</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 11.

Another example is the partnership between Holmesglen and the Royal Children's Hospital to deliver an integrated practical placement program. Students studying a Certificate I in Work Education complete three work placements at the hospital in areas such as human resources, medical records, allied health, volunteer and family services, the early learning centre, the kitchen, mailroom and the equipment department. Students apply for placements based on their skills and interests and are supported by a TAFE teacher and a job coach employed by a disability employment service. Four students have gained employment at the hospital and four in other settings.<sup>231</sup>

Stakeholders suggested TAFEs build work placements and experience into courses and to partner with employers and community organisations to offer learners with disability workplace exposure along with adequate support. Support could include individualised assistance to find and participate in work placements as well as raising awareness of external supports such as transition to work support available to some students through the NDIS.<sup>232</sup> TAFEs should also ensure students with disability understand their rights at work, how an inclusive workplace operates and how reasonable adjustments can be provided.<sup>233</sup>

To support students who are anxious about their work placements, Swinburne's Student Success Coach program has worked with Swinburne wellbeing staff to develop a pre-placement self-care program that helps students prepare for placement, have realistic expectations, learn strategies to deal with anxiety, and access support early when needed. Following the program, Swinburne found more students sought support early during their placement and fewer students required intervention support while on placement.<sup>234</sup>

GOTAFE has also developed a project to increase workplace exposure and improve the employability of students with disability. The project involves creating reasonable adjustment plans together with employers and students, developing a Work Ready Passport to document students' employability skills, and providing internships within GOTAFE for students with disability.<sup>235</sup>

However, stakeholders noted that work placement opportunities in TAFE courses are limited for learners with disability. Some struggle to organise work placements but the most common barrier was difficulty finding disability-confident employers who are willing to take on a student with disability, particularly if the employers are not offered any extra support to do so.<sup>236</sup> For learners with disability who managed to secure work

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., pp. 9–10.

<sup>232</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 18; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 9; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10; Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 7; Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

<sup>233</sup> Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

<sup>234</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 7.

<sup>235</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

<sup>236</sup> Mr Michael Meehan, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 18; Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 32–33; Mr Trent McCarthy, Chair, Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

placements, some reported the placements were not inclusive, lacked opportunity to provide feedback and in some instances, employers were condescending.<sup>237</sup>

There was agreement that many employers are willing to offer work placements to learners with disability, but they lack disability awareness and confidence or feel they do not know how to accommodate the needs of students with disability in the workplace.<sup>238</sup> As explained by Ms King from VCOSS:

Sometimes we know that there are employers who absolutely want to do the right thing, but they are worried that they are going to get it wrong or they are not quite sure what questions to ask ... it is almost around showing that it does not have to be hard. I think sometimes it just feels a bit too overwhelming. If you are running, for example, a small business and thinking about, 'Well, how and what adaptations do I need to make?', I think there is a component there around saying, 'Well, actually, what support might be available for an employer to provide some adaptations, whether it be in technology or other things?'. That actually is not terribly hard but it can feel like it.<sup>239</sup>

While some employers might assume reasonable adjustments are too arduous or costly, a study by AND and Macquarie University found 73% of adjustments learners with disability need for work placements are likely to require no associated costs to the university or to the employer.<sup>240</sup>

Employers who have limited understanding of disability and how to provide an accessible workplace would benefit from training, support and resources to better understand disability and reasonable adjustments and how to meet the needs of individual students.<sup>241</sup> TAFE student, Mr Gervasoni, suggested TAFEs liaise with employers who are considering providing work placements to students, advise them of the contributions students with disability can make and encourage them to take on students.<sup>242</sup>

Ms Fewster shared with the Committee what VCOSS has learned about building the supervisory capability of employers it works with:

There is not always like an off-the-shelf, standardised approach to providing supervision. So if you have got a worker, for example, with disabilities who needs reasonable adjustments et cetera and as a supervisor, a manager, particularly if you are early in your career of supervising staff, you may not have had experience working with a person with a disability as a colleague or providing that management or supervisory support. So some of the kind of work that we do, for example, in the development of the family

<sup>237</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 37.

<sup>238</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 7; Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24; Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

<sup>239</sup> Ms Emma King, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>240</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>241</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 16; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 8; Ms Jenni Graham, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

<sup>242</sup> Mr Gabriel Gervasoni, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

violence workforce, is actually about looking at what are the gaps in knowledge for new and emerging supervisors as well as people a bit more established in their management practice, and what are the bespoke training needs? Is there a particular kind of training resource that we need to develop? Are there orientation guidelines et cetera, orientation to work guidelines?<sup>243</sup>

Another way to encourage hesitant employers to offer work placements to learners with disability is showing them examples that have been successful in previous situations.<sup>244</sup> VCOSS has done this by setting up a well-received community of practice for workplace supervisors to share their knowledge and experience about supporting the different needs of learners.<sup>245</sup>

Prior to work placements, TAFEs should work with students to identify their needs and then transfer this information to the employer so reasonable adjustments are set up to support the student.<sup>246</sup> In some cases, students with disability may lack confidence to discuss these needs with the employer, as explained by Ms Barter from VCOSS:

We have got some really good practical examples where ... the trainee or the student on placement has not felt confident to share what their learning needs are or their particular needs around what is going on in their life at the moment, such as simple things like changing start and finish times or looking at the number of days of work that that young person may need. It is that sharing and understanding—obviously with consent and adhering to privacy—around what are those support needs and making sure that people understand them so it is not on that young person entirely to communicate these things that they might feel are tricky to communicate.<sup>247</sup>

Policy Officer at CYDA, Ms Miranda Cross, agreed citing young people's views at the National Youth Disability Summit:

they really wanted employers and educators to be the ones that reached their hands out and ask the questions. It is really burdensome for young people when they are entering different settings to have to lay out everything they need straightaway ... They wanted educators and employers to proactively ask students what they need and advertise reasonable adjustments ...

I guess the resounding theme that came across from young people was: when employers and educators put it out first and reach that hand out it is incredibly helpful, and they know it is a safe space.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>243</sup> Ms Deborah Fewster, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

<sup>244</sup> Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>245</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 18.

<sup>246</sup> Ms Rachael Murphy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

<sup>247</sup> Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>248</sup> Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 41.

The Committee heard employers are more willing to offer placements if they receive adequate support and their needs are also considered.<sup>249</sup> Stakeholders outlined the importance of providing employers and workplace supervisors one-on-one support, ongoing communication and a point of contact if the placement is not going well.<sup>250</sup> Ms Whalley from AND suggested support should be provided to employers throughout the placement:

particularly the onboarding or the initial engagement with a student with disability, for example, so being able to support an employer around the questions to ask and also an effective process to implement workplace adjustments to remove the fear around getting it wrong or feeling that they might get it wrong, and also being able to provide that education and information around the types of adjustments. We certainly recommend that the person with disability is the expert in terms of what adjustments they may require, but for an employer, or certainly within the TAFE environment, to feel confident to be able to ask questions that explore the most effective workplace adjustments and then knowing the right process steps to take to implement those adjustments really helps, have a successful placement.<sup>251</sup>

Dr William Crisp, Ticket to Work Policy and Project Officer, suggested TAFEs work more closely with industry to support learners with disability into work placements.<sup>252</sup> He and Ms Wakeford from Ticket to Work advocated for a:

blending of support so that employment supports or employment organisations are able to work with students before they leave school. So ... starting to look for employment or looking at internships or looking at industry mentoring or a range of different things while the student is still at the TAFE so that the transition is quite a smooth one and hopefully they are leaving TAFE with a job, whereas currently often the course stops and there is some time to kind of get the right employment supports. So that blending of supports is really key and that collaboration between different sectors so we do not work in that kind of silo approach.<sup>253</sup>

National Disability Services and Amaze supported the expansion of Ticket to Work into TAFE, stating it is proven to be a successful and cost-effective program to place young people with disability in open employment.<sup>254</sup> Case Study 3.9 provides more information on Ticket to Work.

249 Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

250 Ms Emily Barter, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Ms Jenni Graham, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 32.

251 Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

252 Dr William Crisp, Policy and Project Officer, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

253 Ms Michelle Wakeford, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

254 National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, p. 9; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 33.

### CASE STUDY 3.9: National Disability Services' Ticket to Work program

Ticket to Work is a program that prepares secondary school students with disability for work. Local networks work with young people, their schools and families to tailor curriculum, work experience and School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATs) to build participants' work readiness and view of themselves as workers. The networks, which consist of employment service providers, training organisations, further education providers, NDIS supports and employers, coordinate and provide individualised support for participants, most of whom have a cognitive disability.

Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager of Ticket to Work, explained:

when young people are getting that [work] experience, we do not find necessarily that the school is the best placed to support the employer and that young person. So if we can utilise other things, such as employment services or NDIS employment supports, to do that vital kind of work on the job and make sure that it is a good match, it really does benefit ...

An evaluation of Ticket to Work found participants are more likely to be socially active, independent, working in open employment and have completed Year 12 than other young people with similar disability. Ticket to Work has 34 networks nationally, which work with 205 schools, 145 local organisations and 2,436 employers. It has delivered 1,649 jobs for young people with significant disability.

Sources: National Disability Services, *Submission 9*, pp. 6–9; Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Manager, Ticket to Work, National Disability Services, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 24.

Other stakeholders agreed that TAFEs should build partnerships with employers to give learners with disability greater access to employment and training opportunities.<sup>255</sup> Some suggested TAFEs also work with community service organisations and Learn Locals which can support students on placements and as they transition into employment.<sup>256</sup> Ms Tamsin Rossiter, Executive Officer of Adult and Community Education Victoria, the state's peak body for the adult community education sector, stated:

our training can also be offered post-accredited, so we can deliver training to prepare students to transition to TAFE, we can assist learners simultaneously while they complete their TAFE qualification but we can also run a prepare-for-employment pre-accredited course once they finish their TAFE qualification. So working closely with the TAFE, it would be a fantastic initiative to see more of this happening to help learners once they have finished their TAFE qual to transition into work, whether that is through

<sup>255</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 8; Ms Nicole Battle, Chief Executive Officer, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14; Mr Trent McCarthy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19; Mr Peter Kellock, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>256</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 8; Ms Tamsin Rossiter, Executive Officer, Adult and Community Education Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 13–14.

work experience or whether it is preparing people for job interviews and preparing them for employment, résumés et cetera. Our sector does a lot of that type of work, and it would be great to be able to work in with a TAFE more to be able to offer that post-qualification training.<sup>257</sup>

There is opportunity for greater collaboration between TAFEs and the adult community education sector to assist learners with disability to gain workplace exposure. For example, in 2019, Adult Learning Australia, the sector's national peak body, and a Learn Local shared some TAFE students on work placements, one of whom had a disability.<sup>258</sup> Another suggestion was for TAFEs to employ learners with disability while they are studying, in roles such as social media managers, photographers, office administration, catering assistants, peer mentors and tutors.<sup>259</sup>

South West TAFE, located in Warrnambool, Hamilton, Portland and Colac, already employs learners with disability through its annual traineeship program for prospective employees, which has a quota for people with disability. Participants are identified through employment service providers and are placed with different teams at the TAFE. An additional benefit of the program has been an increased awareness among TAFE staff of the needs of employees with disability.<sup>260</sup>

INLLEN also supported the development of enterprise skills and entrepreneurship among learners with disability so they can start their own businesses. Mr Kennedy stated self-employment should be promoted to young people with disability as a real alternative to employment because:

it is really teaching kids to survive in the twenty-first century, and that might not be a full-time job. It might be a part-time job and a small side act of a business on the side that they are very passionate about and something they can actually do.<sup>261</sup>

He gave the example of a senior campus of a special school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, which has restructured its Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning curriculum to teach students entrepreneurial skills. The school aims to set up a social enterprise that will give students opportunities to develop skills in four units: coffee shop business, horticulture, basic business skills and warehousing.<sup>262</sup> As explained by Mr Kellock from INLLEN, 'self-employment rates for people with disability are more significant than they are for the mainstream population, and it is an under-utilised pathway that could have a far stronger focus.'<sup>263</sup>

257 Ms Tamsin Rossiter, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 13–14.

258 Ms Jenny Macaffer, Chief Executive Officer, Adult Learning Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 14.

259 Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 11.

260 Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 29.

261 Mr David Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

262 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20; Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability hearing, response to questions on notice received 19 January 2021, pp. 1–2.

263 Mr Peter Kellock, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 17.

**FINDING 22:** Work placements are essential to improve employment outcomes for TAFE students with disability and work best when students and employers are provided adequate support.

**RECOMMENDATION 26:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to actively work with employers and students with disability to develop reasonable adjustment plans prior to the commencement of work placements.

**RECOMMENDATION 27:** The Department of Education and Training encourage TAFEs to work with disability and community service organisations to provide employers and students with ongoing support and assistance throughout work placements.

**RECOMMENDATION 28:** The Department of Education and Training encourage TAFEs to work with Learn Locals to provide learners with disability employment preparation support during and after completing their TAFE course.

**RECOMMENDATION 29:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to provide work placements and employ learners with disability within their organisation.





# 4 Enhancing system-wide performance

Previous chapters looked at the ways TAFEs can tailor the support they provide to individual learners with disability. However, there are also opportunities to improve the way the TAFE system as a whole interacts, supports and works with learners with disability to create a more consistent and valuable experience for them. This chapter considers how to improve the disability confidence of the TAFE workforce, incorporate universal design into training delivery, streamline disability support services across the TAFE network and collect better data to measure and improve outcomes. It also examines the introduction of disability-specific funding for the TAFE sector.

## 4.1 TAFE workers need guidance to build their disability confidence

A common concern of stakeholders was the lack of disability awareness and confidence among TAFE teachers and frontline staff.<sup>1</sup> While some of the TAFE workforce are confident in their skills to support learners with disability and are meeting these learners' needs, many still need training to reach the same level of confidence. When TAFE staff lack understanding of disability and how to interact with learners with disability, it can create a non-inclusive environment and increase the risk of these learners disengaging with TAFE.<sup>2</sup> It also makes staff less equipped to identify learners who may have an undiagnosed disability and who may need additional support.<sup>3</sup>

Learners with disability reported a lack of TAFE teachers trained to support students with disability and varying levels of disability confidence among TAFE teachers. For example, a survey run by autism organisations Amaze, the I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, Different Journeys and Aspergers Victoria (hereafter the Victorian TAFE and autism survey) found 43% of respondents stated none of their teachers had a good understanding of autism, 38% said some of their teachers had a good understanding and 18% reported all of their teachers had a good understanding.<sup>4</sup> Industry-trained teachers were seen as less confident than those trained as educators, and teachers who led courses specifically for students with disability were considered to have stronger skills.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Mr Michael Meehan, *Submission 11*, p. 1; Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter, *Submission 12*, p. 1; Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 3; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 7; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, pp. 6–7; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 11; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 27; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12.

2 Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 3; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 7.

3 Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 11.

4 Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 28; Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team, Brotherhood of St Laurence, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

Some learners did not feel safe talking to teachers and staff about the impact of their disability on their learning if there were low levels of disability awareness among staff.<sup>6</sup> A participant in the 2020 National Youth Disability Summit run by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), the national peak body representing children and young people with disability aged up to 25, stated:

All the barriers I face came down to a lack of education and a lack of access to resources to be educated upon. Lots of the time my teachers wouldn't understand how to respond to situations, or like help to overcome the barriers, because they didn't know you didn't have the resources to handle those situations.<sup>7</sup>

When a learner has to 'teach the teacher' about disability it can lead to a poorer education experience, as a trainee explained to the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak body for social and community services in Victoria:

We don't use the terms high functioning and low functioning. It hasn't been relevant in many years – it's ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], you're on the spectrum, we don't label the part of it anymore. It's difficult and unnecessary. So [the teacher says], oh, she's high functioning, she's coherent, she's able to do this, she's not learning deficient. And it's not entirely accurate and I ... still have difficulties. I can learn like everyone else can but my mannerisms are different.

It's difficult for them to get it out of their head as it's not an initial thing they've been taught so it's a hinderance more than anything so from experience it became very problematic. They would try to help me and they're looking up resources and using outdated resources like high functioning.

So yeah, it's not a fun time and it can lead to some backwards progress and it gets in the way more than I would like to admit, more than it seems possible. It seems like little inconvenient things but they really build up and it's pretty bad.<sup>8</sup>

A survey conducted on behalf of the Victorian TAFE network by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute found that teachers do not always have the soft skills necessary to build rapport with learners with disability. For example, a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) reported that teachers 'don't seem to have the skills to work with people outside their frame of reference' and a student stated, 'If teachers were trained to deal with people with disabilities in a more compassionate and understanding way, it would help immensely.'<sup>9</sup>

TAFE staff also reported having mixed levels of disability confidence and wanting training and capacity building to meet the needs of learners with disability and to understand their experience.<sup>10</sup> Teachers who lack disability awareness may

6 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 25–26.

7 Ms Miranda Cross, Policy Officer, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

8 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 26.

9 The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12.

10 Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 7.

not recognise non-compliance or misbehaviour as signs that students are having difficulty completing tasks and require additional support.<sup>11</sup> As explained by Professor Sandra Jones, Australian Catholic University's (ACU's) Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement, the university, through its Autism Inclusion Program, is:

raising awareness of some of those issues so that if a student sits in the classroom and they have got their sunglasses on or their headphones on there is not that automatic assumption that they have got a hangover or they are listening to music but there is actually reason for that.<sup>12</sup>

ACU's Autism Inclusion Program was launched in 2020 to better support ACU's autistic students and staff. It provides peer mentoring, access to comprehensive information, social and academic supports, a resource library and a low-sensory room.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism, which runs the Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism, reported the following comments from tertiary education staff about the challenges they face working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):

But he was always anxious, always very literal. I said that I thought he should dictate the work to me and he was horrified and he said, 'I would never presume to dictate to you.'

It was made very clear at the start that he works to quite a rigid framework, that he needs structure. That became apparent in the first class when he advised me that at five past 10 it was five past 10 and I said there would be a break at 10 o'clock.

No matter how aware you are of autism, sometimes you can make the mistake yourself and think oh-oh, damn, that's why his behaviour has changed, because you've ruined his or her routine. That's why he's arcing up. We've stuffed up something. If you're not aware of autism, as an employer or as a teacher, yeah you really can cause a lot of disruption to their lives and not be aware of it.<sup>13</sup>

Poor disability awareness and confidence is not limited to teachers. According to Federation University, staff conducting pre-training reviews, which aim to ensure learners have chosen the best course for their capacity and career objectives:

are often under a time-pressure to process a volume of applications and do not have the depth of knowledge about disability access to assess if the learner might succeed in their chosen field with reasonable adjustment, or whether they should be advised toward alternate choices of study or bridging programs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Professor Sandra Jones, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement, Australian Catholic University, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 3.

Stakeholders also reported that TAFE teachers and administrators do not have a deep understanding of their obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* to ensure students with disability are able to participate in education on the same basis as students without disability.<sup>15</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic referred to research showing that TAFE access and achievement for learners with disability 'is improved when teachers and staff take personal responsibility for inclusion. Therefore, building staff's disability confidence can create a more inclusive culture for people with disability.'<sup>16</sup> Many stakeholders argued for the provision of training to create a more inclusive environment for learners with disability and to increase the disability confidence of teachers and other TAFE staff.<sup>17</sup>

Ms Miranda Cross, Policy Officer at CYDA provided the following quotes from National Youth Disability Summit participants regarding the need for training teachers in disability awareness:

I feel like my idea of inclusive education would be more training and awareness for teachers and how to be inclusive in the classroom, better strategies in dealing with students who have overloads or breakdowns in the class and training on how to support students who are not understanding, because we can hide very well ...

I think there's generally no framework available for even teachers and staff with the best intentions ...

Running training courses for teachers on how to help students with disability learn, how to recognise how people learn and how to notice when people need help. Noticing when people are reaching out for help, because so many students are doing it and it often goes unnoticed.<sup>18</sup>

While all TAFEs provide professional development for staff on inclusiveness, the Victorian TAFE Association, the peak body for public providers of vocational education and training (VET) in Victoria, cited research that found TAFE teachers want 'additional training in understanding the impact different disability types have on learning, and how they can better accommodate the needs of learners with disability.'<sup>19</sup>

According to Victoria University Polytechnic, disability awareness training should include 'information about different types of disability, interventions, and the range of support services for students and staff.'<sup>20</sup> As the number of learners with disability

<sup>15</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 13; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> I Am Ready Partnership, *Submission 6*, p. 5; Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 18; Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 6; Australian Association of Special Education, *Submission 12*, p. 2; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 7; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, p. 2; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 9; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 2; Dr Carina Garland, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>19</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 7.

enrolling at TAFE is growing, all staff are increasingly likely to interact with learners with disability, so the training should be made available to all TAFE staff including enrolment staff, teaching staff, educational support staff, disability support staff, student counsellors, course advisers and administrative staff.<sup>21</sup> As explained by Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer of South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network:

It is not about teachers who want to specialise in teaching kids with disability. I think young people with disability should be integrated across all certificate levels and just be able to access the support they need when they need it.<sup>22</sup>

The benefits of training TAFE staff to recognise, interact with and support learners with disability include increasing the confidence of learners with disability to disclose their diagnosis, reducing staff bias and discrimination against learners with disability, identifying students struggling with study earlier in the year and recognising the strengths of learners with different types of disability.<sup>23</sup>

Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Network on Disability (AND), a national organisation that supports businesses and organisations to include people with disability as customers and employees, added that increasing the disability confidence of TAFE staff is not only about the learning experience:

it is actually the interaction of your environment as a whole, and how we make sure that is an inclusive feeling for all of your learners so that everybody can benefit from a diverse student environment ... it is certainly around making sure that teachers are all educated on what it means to provide adjustments, the breadth of disability and an understanding of inclusive education.<sup>24</sup>

The Disability Standards for Education recommend initial and ongoing disability awareness training for staff of educational institutions:

Attitude is one of the main barriers to non-discriminatory access to education and training for people with disabilities. To counter any inherent discrimination in the provision of education and training, it is recommended that staff induction and professional development programmes include components on disability awareness and rights and on the obligations of education and training providers under the Standards. Such programmes should enable staff to provide assistance that is helpful, for example during enrolment, without being patronising in language, attitude or actions.

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, pp. 1–2; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 7; Amaze, *Submission 35*, pp. 22, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ms Wendy Major, Executive Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 6; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, pp. 9–10; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 7; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34; Mr Kyal Kay, Senior Program Facilitator, I CAN Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Australian Network on Disability, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

It is further recommended that timely, relevant and ongoing professional development is provided to staff, to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge, skills and understanding to enable students with disabilities to participate in the full range of educational programmes or services, on the same basis and to the same extent as students without disabilities.<sup>25</sup>

Ms Whalley outlined how AND has conducted disability confidence training with university staff:

[W]e have worked with a number of universities on providing what we would call disability confidence training, and there are various aspects within that training that support student-facing roles—anyone in a student-facing role—to provide an inclusive experience for learners. This would include an understanding of disability and the breadth of disability, inclusive language so that teachers and student-facing staff are aware of inclusive language that will help people feel welcomed and supported in their journey, and how to support either the learning or access plans that students have in place to ensure that those requirements that have been requested from a reasonable adjustment process can be implemented.

We have seen education providers provide this training as mandatory or across different faculties and used an interactive training session to share and discuss what that means in practice so they can really understand what it would take to provide that welcoming and inclusive experience for their learners. Being able to provide that disability confidence training is very effective in supporting access plans and welcoming students with disability.<sup>26</sup>

Several stakeholders called for disability awareness training to be mandated for all TAFE teachers, either by embedding training in teaching qualifications and/or through ongoing professional development to ensure their knowledge is up to date.<sup>27</sup> As explained by Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy at the Victorian TAFE Association:

the idea of mandating disability awareness is supported and I think is highly doable. It could be mandated in initial teacher training in a general sense of disability awareness, and it could be as part of continuing professional development for teachers during their careers. For example, the VET Development Centre runs a series of programs aimed at specific issues to do with disability and disability awareness in particular areas. So there are opportunities within the system for people to come in and out of growing their disability awareness ... all teachers should have a level of disability awareness going into teaching and if they do not have that they need to get it as quickly as possible within the system, and then their overall disability awareness will develop through a range of systems as they progress through their own careers. It may be that they only need

25 Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Disability Standards for Education 2005 plus guidance notes*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2005, p. 37.

26 Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

27 Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 10; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 5; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 2; Ms Pam Jonas, Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

a certain level of disability awareness to deal with what they have to, but then other teachers may be challenged in more specific ways, and they can get the training that they need at the time that they need it.<sup>28</sup>

The idea of training every teacher in general disability awareness and then providing more in-depth training about specific disabilities for teachers to take when required was also supported by Vision Australia, the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision. Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy at Vision Australia, said:

because blindness and low vision is a low-incidence group, not every TAFE teacher is going to experience it every year. So I think it is really critical that there is that general—and it could just be an online course—something about understanding disability, understanding that you will have students that will have that and will have particular needs, and the importance of asking them about what their needs are and how you might go about accommodating them, and then having those specific courses ... when you do have a student that actually helps give you that detail and greater understanding at the time when you need it.<sup>29</sup>

The Dear Dyslexic Foundation, a dyslexic-led organisation that aims to empower young people and adults with learning disabilities to reach their full potential, argued for teacher training on dyslexia ‘that is more in depth and comprehensive than a half day-one day workshop.’ It added that teachers and support staff should undergo refresher training every three years to ensure they are up to date with the latest research and can continue to meet the needs of learners with dyslexia.<sup>30</sup>

Disability awareness training for teachers should be accompanied by practical, engaging and accessible resources and should be provided by people with lived experience of disability. The training could be provided via video, webinar, online learning or face to face.<sup>31</sup> However, Ms Whalley highlighted the benefits of in-person training:

Certainly e-learning is a valuable way to learn information and it is often very effective in terms of being able to fit into the schedules of teachers and being able to ensure that that information comes across, but there is certainly huge value in being able to provide face-to-face training that allows individuals to ask questions in a very safe environment so that they can really explore and understand the impact of disability but equally their role in providing an inclusive environment. Often to get to that level of confidence, being able to discuss and share previous examples and ask questions that they may have been fearful to ask before is very effective, so in an ideal world being able to have a short

<sup>28</sup> Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, Vision Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 12; Ms Christine MacJouvelet, Chair, Dear Dyslexic Foundation, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism’s (Autism CRC’s) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA), *Submission 7*, p. 9; Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 5; Ms Wendy Major, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.



e-learn that gives that foundation knowledge and then a face-to-face or webinar-style environment that allows some interaction and discussion around disability confidence and providing inclusive environments is very effective.<sup>32</sup>

The Gordon echoed this view reporting findings from its research that showed TAFE staff found online modes of training delivery not ‘engaging enough’ and ‘wanted the opportunity to interact with, and learn from, their colleagues during training.’<sup>33</sup>

Some learners with disability need more specialised support, so staff may need specialised disability confidence training. This could mean partnering with specialist organisations who can provide additional support and professional development.<sup>34</sup> For example, the Dear Dyslexic Foundation has been working with Corrections Victoria to develop better disability awareness training and support to the four TAFEs that provide education to prisoners.<sup>35</sup>

The Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV), the peak advocacy body for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria, added that TAFE teachers and disability support staff should undertake training in cultural competency and meeting the intersectional needs of students, which are brought about by their exposure to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation due to different aspects of their identity, such as ethnicity, gender and age.<sup>36</sup> Executive Officer of ECCV, Mr Chris Christoforou highlighted:

the development of the Wurreker strategy more than two decades ago for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, and that has been quite effective in terms of making sure that post-compulsory education is safe and accessible for our First Nations peoples. Nothing comparative exists for migrant and refugee communities ...<sup>37</sup>

ECCV noted Box Hill Institute trains all its teachers in reasonable adjustments and universal design, who then help to produce Easy English formats of materials to reach learners with disability and learners from CALD backgrounds.<sup>38</sup>

Other TAFEs demonstrated how they ensure their staff are disability confident. For example, Bendigo Kangan Institute encourages staff to undertake online modules developed by the National Disability Co-ordination Officer program and the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) in addition to providing internal ongoing development and awareness training through an educator passport program, a dedicated contact point for support, and online reference guides.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ms Amy Whalley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ms Shae Wissell, Chief Executive Officer, Founder and Executive Director, Dear Dyslexic Foundation, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, pp. 5, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, pp. 2-3; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success, Bendigo Kangan Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

Melbourne Polytechnic also provides an advice hub for teaching staff run by the Student Equity and Access team and is developing a disability awareness training module to be undertaken by all existing and future staff. It also highlighted the resources and information provided by ADCET for students, teachers and DLOs.<sup>40</sup>

**FINDING 23:** Not all TAFE teachers and frontline staff are confident to recognise, interact with and support learners with disability, which can result in learners with disability disengaging from TAFE.

**RECOMMENDATION 30:** The Department of Education and Training require all new and existing TAFE staff to undertake regular mandatory disability awareness training, and require TAFEs to offer professional development opportunities for staff to gain more specialised knowledge about specific disabilities as required.

### 4.1.1 TAFE teachers want training on how to accommodate learners' needs

In its interim report, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability reported varied workforce capability across education settings regarding the ability to modify curriculum and provide reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of learners with disability. It found teacher training on disability to be insufficient and only covered in detail if student teachers chose to study electives on the education of students with disability.<sup>41</sup>

Research undertaken by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute also found not all TAFE teachers felt adequately equipped to accommodate diverse student learning needs. When they surveyed learners with and without disability on how well their teachers adapted training delivery to meet their needs, 11% of learners with disability said 'not at all' well and 21% said 'not very well' compared with 3% and 11% of learners without disability respectively.<sup>42</sup>

Similar findings were reported in the Victorian TAFE and autism survey where 42% of respondents stated their TAFE teachers met their support needs 'not at all' well, 38% stated 'partly' and 21% stated 'very well'.<sup>43</sup> In its 2019 Student Satisfaction Survey, the Department of Education and Training (DET) found 68% of TAFE learners with disability were satisfied their teachers understood their learning needs compared with 74% of TAFE learners without disability.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *Interim report*, October 2020, p. 235.

<sup>42</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 13.

Stakeholders also told the Committee that some TAFE teachers lacked training to adapt curriculum to meet the specific needs of learners with disability.<sup>45</sup> Amaze provided some quotes from TAFE learners who shared some of their experiences with teachers:

A common phrase I got was ‘you will need to learn to adapt to work in the workplace, accommodations will not be made for you’.

Teachers said ‘the information is on the website’ when I asked questions, but sometimes I couldn’t figure it out. I just needed someone to step me through it occasionally so I was more confident I was on the right track but that didn’t happen.

I have asked for help but I don’t think my teacher is particularly good at giving it. The way assignments are worded often confuses me.<sup>46</sup>

The Gordon also shared quotes from TAFE teachers and leaders on how well equipped teachers felt to adapt curriculum for learners with disability:

‘We could do more around curriculum development and teaching development. We haven’t necessarily gone as far we could around supporting teachers.’—TAFE leader

‘They don’t get taught how to support reasonable adjustments.’—Teacher

‘Teachers constantly request professional development on disability.’—Teacher

‘Not a lot of support for teachers to teach.’—Teacher

‘I don’t think we as teachers have the full toolbox’—Teacher<sup>47</sup>

Ms Katie Koullas, a former TAFE teacher and Chief Executive Officer of Yellow Ladybugs, an autistic-led non-government organisation that supports autistic girls, told the Committee:

We have a low understanding of autism and what that means in VET, and that leads to not enough adjustments at the ground level. I saw it firsthand. We were not explained at all how to give any modifications or support to autistic students, and it is only through my own lived experience I was able to naturally offer those adjustments. So we are failing autistic students at the moment. We are not given enough training. There should be compulsory training and professional development, and that should be given by autistic individuals who have gone through this and have that lived experience.<sup>48</sup>

Case Study 4.1 outlines how teachers need more training and resources to better accommodate the learning needs of learners with ASD.

<sup>45</sup> Name withheld, *Submission 2*, p. 2; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 15; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, pp. 7–8; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 3–4; Mr Bruce Maguire, Lead Policy Adviser, Vision Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>48</sup> Ms Katie Koullas, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Yellow Ladybugs, and former TAFE teacher, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

### CASE STUDY 4.1: '[T]he thing that I hear the most from our amazing TAFE staff is that there are not enough resources out there'

'I am a Senior Program Facilitator with the I CAN Network. I work in and with TAFEs. Part of my job as a mentor is to help young autistics as young as five and sometimes as old as 20 to reach these tertiary pathways, whether that be employment, whether that be going on into universities or going through TAFEs. I am autistic myself, having been diagnosed with Asperger's at the age of 14, and I am dyslexic as well. So I myself have been a student at TAFE and have experienced similar challenges, but the thing I want to emphasise first is that TAFE has created a great environment that challenges preconceptions around tertiary education. First and foremost within the autism community, a lot of older autistics my age and older still think they cannot go to uni simply because they are autistic. TAFE challenges these preconceptions every day and is so important to helping my mentees achieve their best.

But the thing that I hear the most from our amazing TAFE staff is that there are not enough resources out there to train them in how to help autistic individuals ... the I CAN Network works with the education department ... to build a comprehensive action plan of how we can best help TAFEs support their autistic students. ... [What is needed is] things such as plans for greater sensory needs because if you do not meet sensory needs, you have sensory meltdowns. They are two sides of the same coin. When you are helping autistic individuals, they are more comfortable and as a result they will have higher academic performance and lower cases of anxiety attacks and your related complications. So we really, really need more training—more comprehensive autistic-consulted training—in the area to really bring up to speed our autistic students because this TAFE is so important. If we can get this right, we can begin to combat the severe unemployment and disenfranchisement within the autistic community.'

#### Kyal Kay

Source: Mr Kyal Kay, Senior Program Facilitator, I CAN Network, Aspergers Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 28–29.

The Gordon noted many TAFE institutes do not run training for teachers on pedagogical practices for learners with disability and while DLOs are experts on diversity and inclusion, they cannot provide adequate pedagogical support to teachers.<sup>49</sup> Other TAFEs such as Victoria University Polytechnic and Swinburne University of Technology added their teaching staff would like more training, support and capacity building around:

- accommodating the needs of learners with disability
- the role of education access workers (such as note takers, tutors, participation assistants and Auslan interpreters) and how to communicate and collaborate with them

<sup>49</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12.

- providing reasonable adjustments that meet the assessment requirements and competency performance criteria of training packages
- the range of assistive technologies available for learners with disability.<sup>50</sup>

Since they are responsible for implementing reasonable adjustments, TAFE teachers want to feel confident the adjustments comply with VET training packages, which are standards for the skills and knowledge needed to perform a particular job set nationally by Industry Reference Committees and endorsed by the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Swinburne teachers suggested training packages include statements and examples of appropriate reasonable adjustments to provide guidance. They also suggested TAFEs employ a curriculum adviser with expertise in reasonable adjustments to provide guidance to teachers.<sup>51</sup>

The Victorian Disability Advisory Council (VDAC), which provides advice to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers around inclusiveness and how to increase opportunities for people with disability, stated:

TAFE teaching staff are instrumental to the provision of supports that will allow students with disability to succeed in vocational education. To be able to do this in a consistent and evidence-informed way, teaching staff need training, resourcing and formal supports. The Council is not aware of existing policies, programs or resourcing streams that equip TAFE teachers in this way. The Council is also of the view that the general inclusion training currently offered to TAFE teachers is insufficient to allow them to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students with disability.<sup>52</sup>

VDAC stated that TAFEs would benefit from the development of accessibility and inclusiveness principles for course design and the auditing of course accessibility.<sup>53</sup>

**FINDING 24:** Not all TAFE teachers feel they are adequately equipped to make reasonable adjustments and accommodate the learning needs of students with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 31:** The Victorian Government advocate to the Australian Government for Industry Reference Committees to include an explanatory statement and examples of appropriate reasonable adjustments in national training packages.

**RECOMMENDATION 32:** The Department of Education and Training fund the employment of curriculum advisers at each TAFE whose role is to conduct accessibility audits of course design and to advise teachers on how to implement reasonable adjustments while also complying with training package criteria.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 4; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Victorian Disability Advisory Council, *Submission 30*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

## TAFEs should make the most of existing professional development resources

Stakeholders noted the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, the national qualification to become a VET teacher, does not include training on how to accommodate curriculum to meet the needs of learners with disability in its core units.<sup>54</sup> To complete the Certificate, students must undertake nine core units and one elective unit. Two of the available elective units focus on learners with disability: TAEXDB401 Plan and implement individual support plans for learners with disability, and TAEXDB501 Develop and implement accessible training and assessment plans for learners with disability. These elective units were introduced in 2019.<sup>55</sup>

Amaze stated, 'While an optional unit in inclusive education is available [in the TAFE teaching qualification], we are concerned that uptake may be low among those teaching mainstream courses.'<sup>56</sup> There were suggestions that units focusing on meeting the needs of learners with disability be made mandatory in the TAFE teaching qualification but as Ms Jonas from the Victorian TAFE Association said, 'those two particular electives may not be the best.'<sup>57</sup>

Witnesses from dual-sector universities agreed that making these units mandatory was not the smartest option. For example, Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways at Victoria University Polytechnic, argued:

That seems like a neat solution, and that may be part of it. But what we do know from our experiences of employing staff with that mandatory qualification is that the specialists and so on required to deliver those particular units may not necessarily be readily available ... [There is also] a wide variety of public and private providers, so there would be huge variance, I would suggest, in the quality of what is delivered in that space. But also it is something that is done at the start of somebody's teaching while embarking on teaching in TAFE, and sometimes you are not really at the pointy end to absorb that. I am not saying we shouldn't, but you have not had the experience and the contact with students to make it come alive for you to understand the application of that. So I fear that if we do that, it would simply be, you know, like some generic theory around this stuff, assessments based on multiple choice whatever, and then when they come to the real-world situation of sensitively having to broach the subject with somebody who perhaps has not disclosed or somebody who clearly needs support, the way that that referral happens and the way that we care and support our students to connect with services may not be part of that unit.<sup>58</sup>

Ms Jill Slater, Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives at Swinburne, agreed that providing this training in the TAFE teaching qualification is too early because it lacks the context of practice. She added the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is

<sup>54</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 11; Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, *Submission 24*, p. 7; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 4; Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways, Victoria University Polytechnic, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 25–26.

already very full and delivered in such a short period of time that it is unlikely students will be able to gain in-depth knowledge and skills in meeting the needs of learners with disability.<sup>59</sup>

Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills at DET, reminded the Committee that the Australian Government is primarily responsible for TAFE teaching qualifications.<sup>60</sup> She added DET introduced a two-year program in mid-2019 to support the professional development of TAFE teachers. The TAFE Teaching Capability Development Fund enables teachers to undertake professional development activities in four areas: teaching excellence and assessment practice, industry immersion, digital literacy, and capacity for innovation and change. As of October 2020, most of the professional development undertaken was in improving teaching excellence and digital literacy.<sup>61</sup>

There was strong support from stakeholders for the provision of professional development to TAFE teachers so they could better implement reasonable adjustments.<sup>62</sup> Regional TAFE GOTAFE said:

There appears to be a lack of developing and applying reasonable adjustment by TAFE trainers to fully support students with disabilities during their teaching and learning process. As a result, students with disabilities are struggling in their training, falling behind their peers and resulting in the need for significant remedial support. This highlights the importance of additional professional development on the specific topic of providing reasonable adjustments.<sup>63</sup>

Ms Olivia Beasley, a Deaf Victoria Board member and Educational Sub-Committee member, added further explanation:

The classroom should be created in a way that enables full participation and integration of the Deaf student with the rest of the students. They should not feel singled out or segregated. The teachers themselves should be equipped with the knowledge to approach the student after their class and see whether or not there are any other adjustments that should be made or any improvements that can be made to that setting. The teachers, once again, should have the skill to know how to make those reasonable adjustments. If, for example, an interpreter was not able to be provided for a session or if captioners were not available, they should have the skill in knowing other ways they can make adjustments and having a conversation with the student in regard to this. Unfortunately, the landscapes are often inequitable for Deaf students.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ms Jill Slater, Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36; Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>62</sup> For example, Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 8; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 4; Ms Nicole Rees, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Amaze, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ms Olivia Beasley, Board Member and Educational Sub-Committee Member, Deaf Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 52.

Ms Heather Marsh, Manager, Equity and Diversity at Federation University, told the Committee:

Our TAFE teachers regularly demonstrate that they are committed to access for learners with disability, providing adjustments in a timely and practical manner. But building both the competence and confidence of our teachers to discuss access needs prior to the commencement of study and plan for adjustments, particularly those that may require resourcing to deliver, will enhance student success.<sup>65</sup>

Both Ms Semmens and Ms Slater suggested the VET Development Centre (VDC) offer professional development courses including regular generalist disability awareness courses based on lived experience for all teachers, alongside specialist courses for teachers who need further guidance on how to implement reasonable adjustments to meet the different needs of learners with disability.<sup>66</sup> The Victorian Government established the VDC in 2005 to promote the development and professional standing of people working in the VET sector. It delivers Victorian Government-funded continuing professional development through webinars, workshops and seminars to the Victorian VET workforce.

As Ms Semmens explained:

In Victoria the VET Development Centre offers training. I would see that as a terrific way to reach wide numbers of people—very affordable training for TAFE teachers to do. And not just TAFE teachers but the support workers too—the administration staff, professional staff. Often they see it and recognise there are issues, but they are the admin officer so what are they going to do about it? But they do have a massive role because they are front of house. From my view, I think it needs a multipronged approach and not simply just tacking it onto the [TAFE teaching qualification] ...<sup>67</sup>

Swinburne and the Victorian TAFE Association also backed regular rollouts of disability training through the VDC's annual professional learning program.<sup>68</sup>

The Victorian TAFE Association and The Gordon also highlighted the resources available through ADCET on how to adapt pedagogy for learners with disability.<sup>69</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic hosts the deafConnectEd website, which provides information for learners who are Deaf or hard of hearing as well as information and support to teachers, interpreters and notetakers who work with Deaf or hard of hearing students. It offers general deafness awareness training and specialist training.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ms Heather Marsh, Manager, Equity and Diversity, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; Ms Jill Slater, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>67</sup> Ms Dianne Semmens, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>68</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 9; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 5.



The ACU's Autism Inclusion Program also offers two levels of training based on professional development needs. Professor Jones described how the program provides general autism awareness training and:

Then we do tailored training depending on the particular needs. We are working with different areas of the university around specific aspects. One of our schools has come to me and said, 'Look, I know that group work is a real challenge for these students. What could we do around group work to make that more accessible for the students? What changes could we make?'

So it is really driven by needs in two directions. One is staff coming to us and saying, 'Look, this is an area that I would really like some support with. How do I actually scaffold assignments better?' or 'How do I support students with exams?' or 'I have a student and I'm not really sure why this is an issue for them', so we do that.<sup>71</sup>

As noted by Ms Koullas from Yellow Ladybugs and Mr Kyal Kay, member of the I CAN Network, which provides autistic-led group mentoring programs, training and consultancy, the professional development:

resources already exist to do upskilling and reskilling within a timely and cost-effective time frame. So if ... this is something that needs to be implemented, it does not mean you need to take all the teachers out of the faculty for two years and make them reskill. This can be done very quickly and very succinctly to teach everyone, to catch everyone up to speed.<sup>72</sup>

TAFE teaching and disability support staff should also be trained in assistive technology and how it interacts with mainstream technology and online learning platforms. They should be aware of the range of assistive technology available and be able to advise prospective students of the technology that works best with the TAFE's systems.<sup>73</sup>

DET provides additional funding to support the professional development of TAFE teaching staff.<sup>74</sup> However, this could be expanded to cover other TAFE staff as well. Having a regular annual rollout of general and specialist professional development activities will increase the opportunity for all TAFE workers, whether they are teaching or non-teaching staff or whether they are new or experienced, to gain up-to-date training in meeting the needs of learners with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 33:** The Department of Education and Training continue funding professional development activities for TAFE teachers on making reasonable adjustments for learners with disability and expand funding for general disability awareness training to all TAFE workers.

71 Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 34–35.

72 Mr Kyal Kay, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30; Ms Katie Koullas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

73 Vision Australia, *Submission 26*, p. 5; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 10; Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

74 Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 27.

**RECOMMENDATION 34:** The Department of Education and Training direct the VET Development Centre to establish a regular annual program of professional development activities that provide general disability awareness training as well as specialist training in providing reasonable adjustments and accommodating the learning needs of students with disability.

### Teachers should have the opportunity to share knowledge and best practice

Another suggestion to improve teachers' confidence in providing reasonable adjustments and accommodating students' learning needs was the sharing of best practice teaching strategies through peer mentoring or forums such as teacher communities of practice.<sup>75</sup> As Ms Kira Clarke, Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, an independent non-government organisation that works to reduce poverty, explained:

There is also an opportunity for greater knowledge sharing across the institutions, across the TAFE sector, in Victoria. So through the Jobs and Skills Centres, there is a lot of intellectual and cultural capital there related to providing support for learners with disability and high-needs learners, but what we have observed is you often have really great practices being developed—for example in Swan Hill, and really great practices being developed in Bairnsdale—that could be shared. So more cross-institutional sharing of some of this best practice, I think, is a really important step of rolling out some of that skill development more widely at a system-wide level.<sup>76</sup>

Mr Robbie Johnstone, Senior Strategic Business Analyst at The Gordon, outlined findings from the research undertaken by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute, which showed teachers want to learn from their colleagues' experience with meeting the needs of learners with disability. He added:

One of the key recommendations was to establish what we are calling teacher communities of practice, where we can share best practice teaching strategies, including planning for universal design and reasonable adjustments, and through those communities draw on existing online resources to support teachers in working with students with disability.<sup>77</sup>

Amaze also supported providing TAFE educators access to the Diverse Learners Hub, which the Victorian Government is establishing for schools in 2021 to provide coaching and resources to teachers who work with learners with ASD.<sup>78</sup> It stated this was an

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 35; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 12; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, Senior Strategic Business Analyst, The Gordon Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>78</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 2; Ms Nicole Rees, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

important adjunct to professional development because even teachers ‘who have undergone autism training benefit from support to translate theory and policy into practice.’<sup>79</sup>

Since TAFE teachers and support staff cannot be expected to be experts on all types of disability and how different disabilities impact on learners’ education, several stakeholders recommended TAFE staff work alongside external specialist support agencies to implement best-practice modes of delivery and flexible learning.<sup>80</sup> Maximising the skills of DLOs and improving communication between DLOs and teaching staff will also ensure individual learning plans are fully realised.<sup>81</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION 35:** The Department of Education and Training support TAFEs to establish teaching communities of practice to support and strengthen the capability of TAFE teachers to accommodate the learning needs of students with disability.

### Teachers need time and resources to implement reasonable adjustments

The capacity of TAFE teachers to provide reasonable adjustments for learners with disability is limited not only by lack of training but also lack of time and resources.<sup>82</sup> Several stakeholders raised the insecure employment status of TAFE teachers, many of whom are employed casually or on short-term contracts. As explained by Swinburne, TAFE teachers:

depending on their employment status, take a greater or lesser role in interpreting ‘reasonable adjustment’ recommendations and designing compliant alternatives. Teachers employed casually are the least engaged in this endeavour, as they are contracted to provide direct teaching delivery hours only.<sup>83</sup>

Casual teachers face significant time pressures and workloads and do not have access to additional paid hours for professional development, providing individual support to students and adapting curriculum to meet the needs of learners with disability.<sup>84</sup> According to Mr Bruce Maguire, Lead Policy Adviser at Vision Australia, ‘accessibility often is a casualty in that environment.’<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 28.

<sup>80</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, pp. 4, 6, 11; Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2, 5–6; Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Ms Nicole Rees, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 1; Mission Australia, *Submission 28*, pp. 7–8; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, pp. 3–4; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 10; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 34; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 27; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2.

In addition to insecure work, the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) reported TAFE staff are also facing large class sizes and pressure from management to compress courses to reduce delivery hours. This has an impact on learners with disability who need more time to cover course material and it reduces their teachers' capacity to support them.<sup>86</sup>

DET noted the Victorian TAFE Teaching Staff Multi-Enterprise Agreement 2018 between the AEU and the Victorian TAFE Association includes reforms to increase delivery hours and reduce the proportion of TAFE teachers in casual employment. It argued that the resulting increase of ongoing TAFE teaching positions will create stability and improve the quality of training for learners including those with disability.<sup>87</sup>

## 4.2 Universal design will reduce the need for reasonable adjustments

Stakeholders supported TAFEs applying universal design principles when designing and developing course content and materials, delivery methods, assessments and learning environments.<sup>88</sup> Universal design ensures products and environments are accessible and usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. It removes barriers and creates a level playing field for everyone. In terms of education, universal design for learning provides students with more than one way of absorbing information, learning, and demonstrating their knowledge and skills.<sup>89</sup> As explained by the Victorian TAFE Association:

Universal design, that is, designing learning to meet the needs of the variety of learners, is widely accepted as a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. Courses designed in this context offer flexibility so that students can customise and adjust their learning experience to meet individual needs. Universal design guides the creation of learning outcomes, resources and assessments that work for everyone and is designed to improve the learning experience and outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities, who often require reasonable adjustments to learning and assessment to enable them to be successful.<sup>90</sup>

Traditionally, TAFE courses revolved around face-to-face interaction in classrooms, workshops or laboratories, but universal design for learning extends this to include recorded classes, captioning, Auslan interpretation, use of websites and videos, alternate formats of materials, assistive technology, providing notes prior to class, and giving students choice in how they engage with the course.

<sup>86</sup> Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 27.

<sup>88</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 7; Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 15; Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; Name withheld, *Submission 27*, p. 15; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 7–8; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 15; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 9; Federation University, *Submission 34*, pp. 4–5; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 8; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 4; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 7–8.

There are multiple benefits of incorporating universal design in training delivery. First, universal design of course materials and assessments supports the success of all learners, including those without disability and learners who choose not to identify as having a disability.<sup>91</sup> For example, learners with and without disability reported benefits from recorded classes and captioning of classes when TAFEs switched to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students could replay videos multiple times and could control the speed of delivery by pausing and rewinding or adjusting the video playback speed.<sup>92</sup>

Second, if training delivery is designed to be more inclusive, it reduces the need for individual learners to request reasonable adjustments, especially learners with less complex needs.<sup>93</sup> While universal design for learning will not remove the need for assistive technology and other adaptations for some individuals with more complex needs, in many cases it will lessen the need for reasonable adjustments.<sup>94</sup>

Minimising the need for reasonable adjustments through universal design for learning benefits both students and teachers. Not only will students have multiple ways of engaging with the course, they will not feel singled out or stigmatised when requesting and receiving reasonable adjustments or additional support. Teachers will benefit from not having to apply individual adjustments to the curriculum and not having to develop alternative assessments for individuals.<sup>95</sup>

According to research undertaken by The Gordon, Melbourne Polytechnic and Box Hill Institute, 'TAFEs often implement reasonable adjustments rather than investing in universal design for learning'.<sup>96</sup> This was echoed by the Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability (ATEND), the peak professional organisation for disability practitioners and National Disability Coordination Officers in the higher education and VET sectors in Australia. In its submission to the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education, it stated:

ATEND members spend most of our time organising and retrofitting accessibility to existing content and curriculum that has not been prepared in an accessible manner consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). For example, videos that are used in teaching that do not have captions or transcripts available, and where copyright requirements prevent these from being easily obtained, and published material that is not in an accessible format for students who use screen readers or require audio format.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 29; Dear Dyslexic Foundation, *Submission 32*, p. 12; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 8; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 13; Council of Australian Governments, *2010–2020 National disability strategy*, COAG, Canberra, 2011, p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 5; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 5; Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 5.

<sup>94</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 8.

<sup>96</sup> The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability, submission to Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2020, p. 1.

Ms Jonas from the Victorian TAFE Association agreed that TAFEs are often retrofitting accessibility measures but there is increasing effort to incorporate universal design in training delivery:

In terms of universal course requirements or universal design, the areas that we have been looking at are trying to build inclusiveness into the system rather than bolt it on. So at the moment I think we have a system where we bolt on things rather than have an inbuilt capacity. Universal application at the moment, as I say, is in its infancy in the TAFE system. Universal curriculum design is in its infancy. We are certainly trying to make inroads in that area, and it is an area that a number of our TAFEs and our teachers are looking at. It is not an easy thing to do in terms of what is there. We are trying to, as I say, change a system that is currently not designed to have everybody included in it into a system that is designed in that particular way.

We are sharing practice around universal curriculum design. Our DLOs are progressing universal curriculum design, and that is one of the areas ... they are working on with teachers in their own institutions.<sup>98</sup>

The Victorian TAFE Association and the Home Education Network, a non-profit organisation supporting home education in Victoria, called for all TAFE teachers to be trained in universal design for learning principles by including it in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and requiring existing teachers to undertake relevant professional development.<sup>99</sup>

In its aforementioned submission, ATEND also recommended the production of a compulsory training module in universal design for all learning designers and academic and teaching staff as a requirement within the Disability Standards for Education or for teacher registration. It also recommended the development of 'a clear and easy to follow set of principles on the preparation of accessible learning material, for learning designers'.<sup>100</sup> Mr Maguire from Vision Australia also supported:

the development of guidelines for ensuring that course content is accessible at all stages and having processes that provide a way for those guidelines to be applied across the institution and between institutions—one of the things that often happens is that individual teachers will prepare their own content and some will use whatever guidelines might exist and others will not. So we think it is important that the Government work with the TAFE system to develop processes that ensure that all content incorporates those guidelines, which are based on the principles of inclusive design.<sup>101</sup>

The final report of the review of the Disability Standards for Education did not make any recommendations in relation to universal design for learning.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>99</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 7; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability, submission to Department of Education, Skills and Employment, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Summary of the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2021.

Rather than TAFEs taking a reactive approach to adapting curriculum to meet the needs of learners with disability, the application of universal design for learning is a more equitable and constructive approach. It ensures the TAFE fits the individual learner rather than the learner having to fit in with the TAFE. The Department of Education and Training should promote universal design for learning by ensuring TAFE teachers are trained accordingly and producing guidelines for TAFE teachers.

**FINDING 25:** Universal design for learning removes barriers and improves educational outcomes for all students and reduces the need for learners with disability to request reasonable adjustments.

**RECOMMENDATION 36:** The Department of Education and Training direct the VET Development Centre to develop a professional development workshop in universal design for learning, which all new and existing TAFE teachers undertake as required.

**RECOMMENDATION 37:** The Department of Education and Training develop guidelines for TAFE teachers on how to prepare accessible learning material using universal design for learning principles.

### 4.3 TAFEs should have specific funding to provide disability supports

As outlined in Chapter 1, TAFEs finance the disability supports they provide, such as assistive technology, DLOs and infrastructure modifications, with part of their allocated Community Service Funding. The Victorian Government provides TAFEs with Community Service Funding to cover a range of general and tailored support services and programs for learners with additional barriers or needs, which includes learners with disability. It is up to each TAFE to decide how much of this funding should be allocated to disability support services.

In 2020, almost \$50 million of Community Service Funding was provided to Victoria's TAFE providers.<sup>103</sup> Mr Phil D'Adamo, DET's Executive Director, TAFE and Tertiary Institutions, described how Community Services Funding is determined:

Ours is a broader bucket in relation to support, and it is tied to minimum service standards, so our community services fund is really targeted towards a broader suite of support services or factors that go to that support, such as building networks with local organisations and services; the partnership approach; inclusion and engagement support services, which is highly relevant; educational support services; social support services; career advice and support to our jobs and skills centres; and also job

<sup>103</sup> Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 34.

readiness and connectedness. So it is a bucket of funding that goes towards multiple purposes. How we arrive at what is appropriate funding or not appropriate funding is we have essentially a level of base funding which goes through the supports provided through Skills and Jobs Centres, which are incredibly valuable, particularly for people experiencing disability, and to helping that transition into TAFE. That is one part of it. The second part of it relates to the costs associated. One of them is establishing Skills and Jobs Centres. The other is related to operating those centres. And the third element of that funding is needs based, and what that looks at is it takes into consideration issues such as regional loading in relation to some of our regional areas which have got greater need and demand than others. We provide a loading for that. We also look at the disadvantaged cohort. We look at data in relation to that to make sure that our funding is meeting that particular purpose as well, and that is to recognise that students may require different levels of support. It is not specific to it, but there is a calculation that goes towards the level of funding and ensuring that that is aligned with the level of support that is needed.<sup>104</sup>

Consequently, TAFEs do not receive specific funding to cover the disability support services they provide. As explained by the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC), the peak body for unions in Victoria:

TAFEs are doing their best to find the funds to provide the support, and the aids and adjustments necessary to make training accessible, yet, there isn't specified funding for this purpose. Currently it all falls into a limited pool of 'TAFE Community Service Obligations Fund,' whereby individual TAFEs have discretion in how it is spent. The Community Service Obligations Fund covers a range of wrap around services that form part of TAFE, including but not limited to library staff, counselling services, building works, and disability support.<sup>105</sup>

The concern that the Community Service Funding model was insufficient for TAFEs to cover disability support services was echoed by many stakeholders.<sup>106</sup> For example, the Victorian TAFE Association stated that increasing enrolments of learners with disability has stretched TAFEs' resources especially since Community Service Funding 'serves a much broader purpose' than disability support.<sup>107</sup> It added:

In essence learners with disability compete for resources under the CSF [Community Service Funding] along with all other disadvantaged student cohorts. This stands in contrast to these learners' peers in school education and higher education, as unlike schools and universities where there is targeted funding for learners with disability, there is no targeted funding for learners with disability in TAFE. It is a question of equity that learners, wherever they choose to learn, should have the same access to the

<sup>104</sup> Mr Phil D'Adamo, Executive Director, TAFE and Tertiary Institutions, Department of Education and Training, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

<sup>105</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>106</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 13; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 6; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 34; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 14; GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, p. 2; Dr Carina Garland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 1; Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15; Ms Meredith Peace, President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, public hearing, Melbourne, 10 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 14.



resources that enable them to undertake their learning in the most effective way for them, and in a way that is most likely to result in the best outcome from their education and training.<sup>108</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 1, current funding for TAFE courses fails to cover actual delivery costs. This was one of the findings of the 2020 review of Victoria’s post-secondary education and training system led by The Honourable Jenny Macklin, who recommended a new funding model for the VET sector.<sup>109</sup> When funding is stretched, available support for learners with disability is limited, as explained by a TAFE teacher to VCOSS:

In TAFEs when funding cuts happen, supports are the first to go and so I’m not saying they’re not there but they’re the things that become quite scant and watered down.<sup>110</sup>

TAFEs also described the challenges they faced to finance disability support services through Community Service Funding. For example, Mr Hemant Kokularupan, Manager, Student Success at Bendigo Kangan Institute, stated that TAFEs:

understand the importance of remaining technologically current to offer the best support to our students living with a disability. However, the costs of some of these assistive technologies can be financially challenging to manage on top of the already existing cost of supplying tutoring, educational assistance and support for our students living with disability. Whilst we understand our obligation and responsibilities to provide this support, the financial impost on TAFEs to provide adjustments requires a broader discussion.<sup>111</sup>

Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement at Swinburne University, added, ‘If students need direct support in the form of Auslan interpreting or support workers, this is often very expensive to provide.’<sup>112</sup> GOTAFE agreed, stating:

Providing support to students with disabilities is resource intensive. The support at GOTAFE is partially funded by Community Services Funding which falls short of the total cost of support services provided. Direct support attributed solely towards students with a disability include:

1. 12000 hours in-person support using casual contracts
2. 4 EFT [equivalent full time] Equitable Learning Support Advisors

...

Students with a disability in regional areas have additional challenges obtaining the equivalent support available to students in urban areas, due to a smaller population and lower financial means. GOTAFE currently have three full-time students who require

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Jenny Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria: driving collaboration and innovation in post-secondary education and training*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2020, pp. 90–91.

<sup>110</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, pp. 34–35.

<sup>111</sup> Mr Hemant Kokularupan, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director, Student Engagement, Swinburne University of Technology, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

Auslan interpreters and only one registered interpreter in the region. To provide support to the additional students requires interpreters to be employed from Melbourne therefore having a substantial impact on the cost of support provision. On average, for a full-time equivalent student who is hearing impaired, the total cost for a year would be \$75,000.00 (including the interpreter and reader-writer). With the Community Service Funding being stretched across all support services, the cost of support is a challenge.<sup>113</sup>

In addition to difficulties financing technology and education access workers, TAFEs also lack funding to employ enough DLOs to meet demand.<sup>114</sup> DLOs work individually with teachers to help them understand and implement reasonable adjustments for learners with disability based on individual learning plans. This work can be time consuming and demand for it is growing as more learners with disability are enrolling at TAFE.<sup>115</sup> As explained by VTHC:

Many TAFEs say they offer individual learning plans for students with disabilities, yet only have the funding for a small number of disability support officers. This ultimately results in those workers being spread too thin across a number of students, and, despite their best efforts, leads to these individual learning plans being poorly executed. Often, to execute these plans, disability support officers undertake time-consuming applications for funding for inclusive infrastructure for students with disabilities, only to have the application knocked back. This leads to them lacking the time to meet with teachers and other TAFE workers to discuss the needs of the student. The lack of funding for disability support officers is failing both on the basic accessibility front and specialised training front.<sup>116</sup>

Amaze also provided evidence to suggest DLO resources at TAFEs were stretched:

A Disability Liaison Officer we consulted explained at her (multi-campus) institute, there are just two DLOs, which significantly rations the reach and scope of the support they can offer. Another reported there was just one DLO at their Institute, also spread across multiple campuses. These staff are a critical lynchpin for students with disability. Investment in their capacity and capabilities is needed.<sup>117</sup>

Several stakeholders called for regular ongoing funding for an increased number of DLOs at TAFEs to meet demand.<sup>118</sup> VTHC supported a mandatory minimum ratio of DLOs to students with disability.<sup>119</sup> The Victorian TAFE Association also asked for a reasonable number of DLOs to meet the needs of learners with disability but noted it is difficult to determine a specific ratio because of the range of complexity in terms of needs and supports among this group of learners.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>113</sup> GOTAFE, *Submission 39*, pp. 2–4.

<sup>114</sup> Home Education Network, *Submission 10*, p. 7; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 24; Mr Dan Mabilia, Director, Policy and Advocacy, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9; Ms Olivia Beasley, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>115</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 11.

<sup>117</sup> Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 8; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4.

<sup>119</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 6; Mr Dan Mabilia, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

Ms Meredith Peace, President of the Victorian Branch of the AEU, noted that cuts to Community Service Funding in 2012 resulted in the loss of onsite support workers for learners with disability, and while funding has since increased it has not been restored to pre-2012 levels.<sup>121</sup> DET noted that funding through the Skills First reforms introduced in 2017 to deliver wraparound support to high-needs learners also supports learners with disability.<sup>122</sup> Ms Watts added:

the Government has provided additional funds for mental health support, for financial counselling support and with and for different career guidance support. The Department works really closely with TAFEs to ensure that, on an individual student basis, students are given access to the additional services that they require, and that may be, for example, additional equipment, it may be ensuring that screens are available for our visually impaired students or it may be Auslan support for those with hearing disabilities. So it is genuinely on a case-by-case basis, and each TAFE makes determinations and decisions based on what the student requires.<sup>123</sup>

However, a recurrent theme in the evidence was the lack of specific funding for disability support services in the TAFE sector compared with the school and higher education sectors.<sup>124</sup> Under the Victorian Government's Student Resource Package, school students with disability receive core learning funding and are also eligible to apply for equity funding through the Program for Students with Disabilities, which is a supplementary funding program for students at Victorian Government schools. Schools receive funding for eligible students based on students' learning needs, which are classified into one of six levels. In 2020, the funding ranged from \$7,638 for Level 1 to \$58,294 for Level 6 and schools could allocate the funding to various supports such as specialist staff, equipment and materials.<sup>125</sup> TAFEs are not able to apply for this funding even if eligible students are undertaking their secondary school qualification such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning or one of their senior secondary subjects at TAFE.<sup>126</sup>

There is also a disparity in funding for learners with disability between the TAFE and higher education sectors. University students with disability are eligible for assistance through the Australian Government's Higher Education Disability Support Program, which provides funding based on enrolment numbers of domestic students with disability at a university, and the total number of students with disability at all eligible higher education providers. A component of the Program is the Disability Support Fund (DSF), under which universities can claim reimbursements for students whose

121 Ms Meredith Peace, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 6.

122 Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 18.

123 Ms Lee Watts, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

124 Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 13; Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 14–16; Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 24; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 5; Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mr Joe Ormeno, Chief Executive Officer, The Gordon Institute of TAFE, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20; Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 22.

125 Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 14; Department of Education and Training, *Program for Students with Disabilities levels 1-6*, 2019, <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/finance/Pages/srpref015levels.aspx>> accessed 10 June 2021.

126 Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 15.

needs exceed \$10,000 in a calendar year. The funding can go towards staff training; modifications to course content, teaching materials and delivery methods; and educational support and equipment costs.<sup>127</sup>

According to the Victorian TAFE Association:

All Victorian TAFEs and dual sector universities are registered with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) as approved senior secondary providers and deliver senior secondary qualifications ... A question that should be asked and addressed is why there is no targeted funding for students with disability if they choose to study at a TAFE for their senior secondary education.

...

Again, the question deserves to be asked as to why there is no targeted funding for students with disability if they choose to study in a TAFE rather than in higher education, particularly given that more learners with disability on average are likely to be studying at TAFE. In supporting learners with disability, TAFEs and dual sector universities have developed courses, structures and support systems that are as much as possible centred on the needs of learners with disability.

TAFE institutes each serve a diverse community with different educational and support needs. It appears that in other sectors of education, governments (federal and state) are alert to the distinctive needs of learners with disability, and the additional costs that are incurred in meeting these needs, which are met through targeted support programs.<sup>128</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic added that funding allocated to university students with disability can follow them into any university program giving them greater flexibility.<sup>129</sup> Dual-sector universities, which can recover some costs for making adjustments through the DSF, have greater flexibility with how they spend their Community Service Funding, but standalone TAFEs 'may not be in this position and are potentially more likely to expend their CSF [Community Service Funding] funds on core services such as counselling, disability and Indigenous support.'<sup>130</sup>

There was strong support among stakeholders for specific funding to TAFEs to meet the needs of learners with disability.<sup>131</sup> Suggestions included:

- extending the Program for Students with Disabilities for Victorian Government schools into TAFE

<sup>127</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Higher Education Disability Support Program, 2020*, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-disability-support-program>> accessed 10 June 2021; Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, *Changes to the Higher Education Disability Support Program, 2019*, <<https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10217/changes-to-the-higher-education-disability-support-program>> accessed 10 June 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>129</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> Federation University, *Submission 34*, p. 4; Swinburne University of Technology, *Lessons learned from Swinburne SSC program*, supplementary evidence received 11 March 2021, p. 3.

<sup>131</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 6; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 8; Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, pp. 8–9; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 8; Mr Jeremy Irvine, Executive Director, Victorian TAFE Association, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mr Joe Ormeno, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

- providing base funding to each TAFE with additional loadings based on the number and needs of enrolled learners with disability
- a combination of specific funding for learners with disability and a maintenance fund for the ongoing upkeep of accessible infrastructure
- a support fund to reimburse TAFEs for the costs incurred to support learners with disability.<sup>132</sup>

It was also suggested that funding be allocated to students, so it is transferable across courses and institutes, and that the funding be matched with the complexity of each student's needs.<sup>133</sup>

In its 2020 paper on the VET system in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, which is an education and health policy think tank at Victoria University, recommended the creation of a fairer funding model for students with additional needs using a 'baseline plus loadings' approach.<sup>134</sup> It noted that a similar loading approach exists in most states and territories for regional students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.<sup>135</sup>

**FINDING 26:** TAFEs find Community Service Funding, which is designed to provide support services and programs for learners with additional barriers or needs, insufficient to cover the needs of enrolled learners with disability.

**FINDING 27:** Unlike schools and universities, TAFEs are not given dedicated funding to meet the needs of learners with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 38:** The Department of Education and Training provide TAFEs with dedicated funding to meet the needs of learners with disability that is separate to Community Service Funding and uses a baseline plus loadings approach based on the number and complexity of needs of enrolled students with disability.

**RECOMMENDATION 39:** The Department of Education and Training establish a fund similar to the Australian Government's Disability Support Fund for higher education to reimburse TAFEs for costs incurred making reasonable adjustments for individual learners with disability.

<sup>132</sup> Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 6; Australian Education Union, *Submission 24*, pp. 8–9; Dr Carina Garland, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 2; Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Mr Joe Ormeno, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 20.

<sup>133</sup> Mr Jeremy Irvine, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11; Ms Frances Coppolillo, Chief Executive Officer, Melbourne Polytechnic, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> Sarah Pilcher and Peter Hurley, *Skills for recovery: the vocational education system we need post-COVID-19*, Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, Victoria University, Melbourne, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

## 4.4 A network-wide strategy will deliver consistency for learners with disability

Individual TAFEs have adopted a range of policies to ensure inclusive education for learners with disability. These include disability action plans or accessibility and inclusion plans, access and equity policies, equal opportunity policies and student welfare policies. They have also set up projects or taskforces to create an inclusive culture for their students and staff and to improve the education experience for learners with disability.<sup>136</sup> While these policies foster a consistent approach within a TAFE, there remains inconsistency between TAFEs in how learners with disability are supported.

For example, Mr Samson Hailu, who has cerebral palsy, told the Committee about his experiences at different TAFEs after completing several courses including a Diploma in Community Services in 2020:

Initially when I was doing the Certificate IV in IT in 2013, I went to a different TAFE thinking that they would offer me the same sort of supports but then I realised, 'Look, not everyone is going to offer you the same sort of support' and I was obviously wondering to myself, 'Why is that?' so I went and asked the Disability Liaison Officer there and they were just like, 'Oh, we get a different funding stream', or 'Our system is different'.<sup>137</sup>

His experience led him to enrol in a different TAFE where he knew he could get the support he needed. As explained by the ECCV:

A number of individual TAFEs demonstrate good practice examples in supporting people with disabilities overcome obstacles to access and participation in vocational education and training. However, the lack of a whole of system strategy across Institutes for people with disability, demonstrates a need for policy and funding reform across the TAFE sector in Victoria.<sup>138</sup>

Ms Nicole Rees, Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Manager, Policy and Advocacy at Amaze, agreed, stating, 'the offerings across and between TAFEs are so vastly different. So we are calling for a network-wide charter to have a base offering for students with disability.'<sup>139</sup>

Other stakeholders echoed the need for sector-wide standards or guidelines for accessibility and the provision of disability support at TAFE. Swinburne reported:

Teachers identified there was no government VET policy that provided guidance to TAFE on the standards and delivery of support services to learners with a disability. The Department of Education and Training Community Service Standards provide a

<sup>136</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Submission 13*, p. 17; Victoria University Polytechnic, *Submission 14*, p. 5; Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission 31*, p. 13; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 3; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> Mr Samson Hailu, former TAFE student, National Disability Services, *Video presentation*, supplementary evidence received 10 March 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Ms Nicole Rees, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

broad framework, but teachers asserted that institutes and teachers needed more definitive standards for vocational learners with a disability.<sup>140</sup>

VTHC called for:

overarching uniform rules about accessibility and support for students with disabilities, encompassing a minimum level of individual support, funding for the students' specific needs, and funding for TAFE campuses to become accessible.<sup>141</sup>

And Deaf Victoria requested the establishment of:

state level standards and guidelines for how access services are delivered within the TAFE sector to clarify the rights of learners and responsibilities of TAFE institutions including clear processes for remedy and consequences for non-compliance.<sup>142</sup>

As Ms Clarke from the Brotherhood of St Laurence stated, 'it is apparent that tweaks that address individual barriers are not going to be sufficient. There is a need for more holistic, system-level improvement.'<sup>143</sup> Mr Lionel Bamblett, General Manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), which represents the Koorie Community in relation to education policy development, noted that the Wurreker strategy, developed between VAEAI and the Victorian Government to improve VET delivery for Koorie students, has provided consistent support to Koorie students across the TAFE network. Every Victorian TAFE must develop a Wurreker Implementation Plan with the local community that is consistent with the aims and objectives of the Wurreker Strategy.<sup>144</sup> The Victorian Government could develop a similar strategy for learners with disability.

**FINDING 28:** There is no sector-wide policy to provide guidance to TAFEs on accessibility and the provision of disability support services resulting in inconsistent delivery of support across the TAFE network.

**RECOMMENDATION 40:** The Department of Education and Training collaborate with disability organisations to develop a strategy to improve vocational education and training delivery for TAFE learners with disability that provides guidance and outlines standards for accessibility and the provision of disability support services.

<sup>140</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 25*, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9.

<sup>142</sup> Deaf Victoria, *Submission 19*, p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> Mr Lionel Bamblett, General Manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 31.

#### 4.4.1 Shared resources will ease the burden on individual TAFEs

Several stakeholders saw the benefit of greater collaboration and a more unified approach towards supporting learners with disability across the TAFE network.<sup>145</sup> In response to how a unified system could support students with disability, Mr Mullaly from the Victorian Branch of the AEU stated:

there is a deep connection between having a standard that is being delivered in terms of provision from one TAFE to the other, and that is particularly important for students with disability. There is a lot ... [of] great practice in individual TAFEs. A more unified TAFE system would enable us to actually share that practice in a much better way ... A more unified system will better position our TAFEs in conjunction with government, of course, and in conjunction with business and industry to identify where there are strengths and where TAFEs can fill the gaps and where we can marry that up with the needs of students with disability.<sup>146</sup>

Ms Jonas from the Victorian TAFE Association described how TAFEs are already sharing resources relating to universal design for learning, best practice and professional experience through ADCET and the TAFE Disability Network, the network of DLOs working in Victorian TAFEs. However, there are opportunities for TAFEs to share equipment and other resources. She suggested:

other areas for sharing could be something like a centralised resource bank or a catalogue of equipment that exists in various TAFEs. Many times TAFEs buy equipment specifically for a student. Once that student has used that equipment it goes into storage and may never be used again, but there may be another TAFE or another provider that needs to access that equipment. If there was a centralised catalogue of equipment that was available to share, that would probably save quite a lot in terms of cost for people. Transcripts of podcasts, for example, for students where they have had audio transcripts made of learning, those sorts of things could be shared, again perhaps through a central system.<sup>147</sup>

Ms Marsh agreed Federation University would benefit from 'collaboration with its sector colleagues to share approaches, to share resourcing and to develop training and materials'.<sup>148</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic was more specific, giving the example of captioning services:

[T]eaching staff who create video content and resources must be trained in how to use and audit them effectively. Staff must be committed to review and edit auto captions for errors if they are to be accurate and beneficial for students. The pace of captions also needs to be adjusted if they are to be read easily, especially by students who do not have English as a first language. This is a resource intensive requirement and could be a

<sup>145</sup> For example, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 5; Victorian Trades Hall Council, *Submission 16*, p. 9; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, p. 7; Ms Meredith Peace, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10; Mr Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>146</sup> Mr Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 10.

<sup>147</sup> Ms Pam Jonas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 11.

<sup>148</sup> Ms Heather Marsh, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 21.



cost that is shared across the TAFE Network. It is recommended that consideration be given to the sharing of resources that would support the captioning review and editing across the TAFE Network in order to ensure consistent access to content for students with disability.<sup>149</sup>

Shared resources would be especially helpful for regional learners with disability as explained by Mr Maguire from Vision Australia, who said:

a lot of students in regional areas face issues around internet connectivity, and students who are blind or have low vision particularly experience those things too. I think it is also more challenging in regional areas to access resources that might be available in metro areas, and there are also probably fewer students who are blind or have low vision in regional areas. So a particular TAFE may not have the experience in providing supports that you might find in a larger TAFE in a metro area, which is why I think it is so important to have resources that all TAFEs can access so that you can provide a more consistent experience right across the board.<sup>150</sup>

There is a wide range of disability supports and equipment that TAFEs need to be able to access to support learners with disability. However, some of these supports and adjustments are expensive to provide and may only be required by a few students. In these instances, it would be more cost-efficient if there was a central bank of resources that TAFEs across the network could share.

**FINDING 29:** TAFEs can find it expensive to provide some reasonable adjustments and disability supports, especially when only a few students require them.

**RECOMMENDATION 41:** The Department of Education and Training oversee the creation of a bank of disability support resources to be shared across the TAFE network.

#### 4.4.2 Co-design of services and support will improve outcomes

The Committee came across support for the co-design of disability services with learners with disability to improve their educational experience at TAFE. The involvement of learners and staff with lived experience of disability was endorsed for the development of TAFE policies, inclusion practices, training, services and programs.<sup>151</sup> Ms Cross from CYDA stated participants of the National Youth Disability Summit were strong supporters of co-design:

<sup>149</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 7.

<sup>150</sup> Mr Bruce Maguire, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 4.

<sup>151</sup> Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, *Submission 15*, p. 5; Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 29*, p. 10; Bendigo Kangan Institute, *Submission 36*, pp. 7–8; The Gordon Institute of TAFE, *Submission 37*, p. 10; Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 6; Ms Katie Koullas, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26; Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

They often said throughout the summit, through every day, that no-one understands young people's needs better than young people. If they are not in the process, it is not going to be right.<sup>152</sup>

She also shared a quote from a participant about including the voices of learners with disability when designing and delivering education:

Inclusive education lets us decide what we want from our education. It will do anything in its power to achieve that. It would ask me, us, disabled young people, what is it doing wrong, and it would listen to our answers. It would act on what we have told it. It would consider me the key stakeholder not only in my life but the education system overall. It would like me being viewed as somebody people could learn from.<sup>153</sup>

The Macklin review endorsed the co-design of courses and curriculum with organisations working with diverse learners such as those with disability.<sup>154</sup> Ms Catherine Dunn, Individual Advocacy Officer at Deaf Victoria gave an example of a course co-designed with Deaf people:

The community obviously know what they have a hunger for learning, and it might be, for example, a Certificate in TAE [Training and Education]. I know that a lot of Deaf people previously wanted to be part of the TAE course. The community had such an interest that they decided to have a Deaf-only, Auslan-only, version of this TAE so that the course was provided completely in Auslan, and it meant that there were no additional barriers; it was a completely accessible and inclusive course. That is an example of a co-design approach that we would love to see in future for future topics and subjects.<sup>155</sup>

ACU's Autism Inclusion Program is an example of a program that is centred around the voices of learners with disability. Professor Jones shared how the program is driven by autistic students, staff and alumni:

When I first wanted to set up this program I went and looked at what was happening at other universities. There was lots of great work happening, and I think that is really important to note, but two things stood out to me. One was that these programs almost universally were not developed by autistic people or with autistic people; they were developed for autistic people. I think the same with any disability—that really is an important issue. But also a lot of programs are singular in focus—so I saw some wonderful mentoring programs, but they were mentoring programs that sat alone without environmental adjustments or other things that were actually necessary to make this work. So when we started the program at ACU the commitment was to develop a really comprehensive program that addressed all of these different barriers but that was led and informed very much by autistic voices. So I lead the program as an

<sup>152</sup> Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 44.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>154</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 23.

<sup>155</sup> Ms Catherine Dunn, Individual Advocacy Officer, Deaf Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, 11 May 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 54–55.

autistic person and we have an expert advisory group that consists of autistic students and alumni and staff, so we are very much making sure that all of the work that we are doing is actually beneficial and what the students are looking for.<sup>156</sup>

She added that it is important that professional development for teachers is designed and delivered by people with disability. For example, teachers can ask questions of the trainer and get a better sense of the experience of learners with disability:

[T]hat is why having the program led by autistic people is really important, because I can give that presentation but then people can ask me those sorts of personal questions—‘Well, what do you do?’ or ‘How does that work for you?’—and I think that definitely makes our staff feel more comfortable asking the questions.<sup>157</sup>

Coordinator of Disability Services at Federation University, Mr Drew Burns agreed, stating:

What we also have experienced is that where lived experience trainers deliver that training it provides a powerful context for the TAFE teachers. And we know real-life examples ... of barriers and adjustments ... support TAFE teachers to translate their learning to a practical classroom model ...<sup>158</sup>

Professor Jones also gave the example of students with ASD instigating topics for teachers’ professional development:

[O]ur program has an expert advisory group of our autistic students and alumni, so they will often bring things to me and say, ‘This is a consistent issue for us’ in this discipline or at university in general, and then we will work through that. So it is very much about: ‘What do the teaching staff need? What do the students need?’, and then developing the modules that are required.<sup>159</sup>

Ms Cross added that National Youth Disability Summit participants were ‘passionate’ about professional development for teachers being ‘co-designed by those with lived experience of being both a young person and a young person studying at TAFE.’<sup>160</sup>

In addition to designing and delivering services and training, stakeholders also raised the importance of getting learners with disability to evaluate and give feedback on disability support services and reasonable adjustments.<sup>161</sup> As Ms Dunn explained:

It is really important to bring into the picture or into the conversation somebody who is Deaf themselves—into that review process—so that the TAFE can engage someone,

<sup>156</sup> Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 33.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>158</sup> Mr Drew Burns, Coordinator, Disability Services, Federation University, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 March 2021, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 26.

<sup>159</sup> Professor Sandra Jones, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 35.

<sup>160</sup> Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 43.

<sup>161</sup> Aspergers Victoria, *Submission 33*, p. 9.

whether it be someone from an organisation such as Deaf Victoria, to be part of that evaluation process ... to ensure that there is continuous improvement.<sup>162</sup>

Ms Dunn suggested the creation of a panel or group of people from the Deaf community to regularly review accessibility at TAFE and provide suggestions for improvement.<sup>163</sup> Ms Beasley also from Deaf Victoria added:

It is really important to engage with the Deaf community and the students who have gone through that journey. They understand the sector, they study through the sector, so it is important to bring them on board to gain their feedback.<sup>164</sup>

Co-design puts learners with disability at the centre of learning and by feeling valued and supported, learners with disability are less likely to disengage from education and are more likely to complete their course.<sup>165</sup>

**FINDING 30:** TAFE staff and students find disability support programs, services and training that are designed, delivered and evaluated by learners with disability to be more meaningful and useful.

**RECOMMENDATION 42:** The Department of Education and Training ensure that TAFEs and the VET Development Centre involve people with disability in the design and delivery of disability support programs, services and professional development.

## 4.5 Better data capture will help TAFEs to measure and improve outcomes

The Committee heard of data gaps relating to the experience of learners with disability at TAFE. Without accurate data, it is difficult for TAFEs and the Victorian Government to identify areas of concern, measure the impact of new or changed practices and set targets for improving TAFE outcomes for learners with disability. Stakeholders identified the following data gaps:

- data to understand why some learners are discouraged from studying at TAFE
- data to understand the effect of cumulative barriers on access to TAFE for learners with disability, such as mature age, regional or remote location, low socioeconomic background, CALD background and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background
- data on community attitudes towards people with disability and their impact on learners' aspirations and post-school destinations

<sup>162</sup> Ms Catherine Dunn, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 54.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ms Olivia Beasley, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 54.

<sup>165</sup> Macklin, *Future Skills for Victoria*, p. 174.

- data to understand why learners with disability are not completing their TAFE course
- data on the types of reasonable adjustments TAFEs provide learners with disability.<sup>166</sup>

Associate Professor Zacharias from Swinburne noted that higher education providers have much better data on the experience of learners with disability than TAFEs.<sup>167</sup> Schools also have better data following the introduction of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with Disability in 2013. By 2015, all Australian schools were reporting data annually to the Australian Government about students with disability who were receiving adjustments. Since 2018, the Australian Government has been using the NCCD to calculate the level of student with disability loading it pays to schools. In addition, national reports using high-level, de-identified information from the NCCD inform policy design and program planning for students with disability.<sup>168</sup>

Mr Johnstone from The Gordon called for:

collecting data on what reasonable adjustments are occurring across the [TAFE] network to monitor patterns and trends over time, and this can be used to inform how we apply the funding model for those reasonable adjustments as well.<sup>169</sup>

Melbourne Polytechnic echoed the need for a ‘consistent approach to data collection and reporting across the TAFE Network’ to measure the disability supports and services students are accessing. This information would enable better planning for future services and resourcing, and greater collaboration between TAFEs.<sup>170</sup>

In addition to gaining a better understanding of the experience and needs of learners with disability at TAFE, better data collection would allow for benchmarking and monitoring of learners’ progress as well as the setting of targets around learners’ access to TAFE, participation and course completion. Stakeholders also called for the public reporting of data trends over time disaggregated by disability type to identify issues for specific groups of learners.<sup>171</sup>

DET would have a better understanding of the extent and types of reasonable adjustments learners with disability receive if TAFEs collected and reported data annually. This information would help to inform DET of the resourcing TAFEs require to meet the needs of learners with disability and how this is changing over time.

<sup>166</sup> Ms Kira Clarke, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 2, 6; Mr David Kennedy, Executive Officer, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 7 December 2020, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 16; Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 16–17; Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28; Ms Miranda Cross, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39; Ms Maeve Kennedy, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 39.

<sup>167</sup> Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 28.

<sup>168</sup> Australian Government, *What is the NCCD?*, 2020, <<https://www.nccd.edu.au/wider-support-materials/what-nccd>> accessed 15 June 2021.

<sup>169</sup> Mr Robbie Johnstone, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>170</sup> Melbourne Polytechnic, *Submission 38*, p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 23*, p. 5; Amaze, *Submission 35*, p. 13; Ms Nicole Rees, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 25.

TAFEs would also benefit from a better understanding of the experiences of learners with disability at TAFE and their post-TAFE destination. DET could survey TAFE completers and students who have withdrawn from their course in a similar way to the On Track survey it conducts annually with Year 12 completers and early school leavers. As with the On Track survey, a referral service could be provided for respondents who appear to be experiencing difficulties with the transition to further education or employment following TAFE.

**FINDING 31:** The TAFE system lacks accurate data on the experience and needs of learners with disability at TAFE to identify areas of concern, track progress over time and develop measures to improve outcomes.

**RECOMMENDATION 43:** The Department of Education and Training require TAFEs to collect data on the number of enrolled students with disability and the reasonable adjustments they receive and report this information annually to the Department.

**RECOMMENDATION 44:** The Department of Education and Training annually survey TAFE students who have completed or withdrawn from their course to understand their experience of TAFE and post-TAFE destination; report this information disaggregated by age, location, and disability, CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status; and use this opportunity to refer students who want assistance with their post-TAFE transition to Skills and Jobs Centres.



## 5 Concluding remarks

Economic, health and social outcomes for people with disability improve with post-school qualifications and meaningful employment. As training providers that prepare people with the skills and knowledge to enter the workforce, TAFEs should be accessible to learners of all abilities. During this Inquiry, the Committee heard of a range of measures and initiatives Victorian TAFEs have implemented to enhance accessibility and improve the education experience of learners with disability. However, current and former TAFE students with disability reported inconsistent provision of disability support between TAFEs and the persistence of barriers to accessing TAFE.

A common barrier that learners with disability face prior to commencing TAFE is a culture of low expectations that can result in learners lacking the confidence to consider or apply for TAFE study. Transition into TAFE is also impeded by poor career development at school and a lack of avenues for schools to transfer information on the capabilities, aspirations and support needs of students with disability to TAFEs. There is a need for transition officers at TAFE to assist prospective learners with disability to navigate the transition and set them up for a positive education experience.

Research shows that learners with disability who disclose their diagnosis to TAFE staff and seek support and reasonable adjustments are more likely to have a positive learning experience and complete their course. However, the Committee heard that learners with disability commonly do not disclose this information or seek support. It is vital for TAFEs to create an inclusive and safe space for learners with disability to feel comfortable to share their diagnosis and request reasonable adjustments.

At the same time, TAFE teachers should be using universal design for learning principles to design and deliver training that is accessible to as many learners as possible rather than modifying their training delivery only after learners with disability request adjustments. Universal design for learning is a more equitable, cost-effective and constructive approach to meeting the needs of learners with disability and has the added benefits of reducing stigma and easing the burden on teachers to make ad hoc adjustments for individual students.

Other measures that would maximise the experience of learners with disability at TAFE include providing learners wraparound support services, embedding flexibility in course design and assessment, equipping Disability Liaison Officers to provide targeted support to students from course commencement through to course completion and establishing peer support networks for learners with disability. All TAFE staff should undertake regular disability awareness training with additional professional development for teaching staff on universal design for learning principles and implementing reasonable adjustments.



The sharing of knowledge and experiences through teacher communities of practice will also strengthen the capability of TAFE teachers to meet the learning needs of students with disability. In addition, professional development and disability support services designed and delivered by people with lived experience of disability have greater impact and are more useful for TAFE staff and learners with disability.

TAFE staff highlighted the need for an overarching policy to guide how they should meet the needs of learners with disability. Victorian TAFEs would benefit from the development and implementation of a network-wide strategy to provide guidance to TAFE staff and outline standards for accessibility and the provision of disability support services to students. The sharing of physical and human resources across the TAFE network would also ease the burden on individual TAFEs to provide reasonable adjustments, which can sometimes be resource intensive.

Unlike schools and universities, Victorian TAFEs do not receive specific funding to finance the disability supports they provide and can struggle to cover the associated costs. TAFEs currently need to allocate a proportion of their Community Service Funding to fund these measures. Dedicated funding that takes into account the number of enrolled students with disability and the complexity of their needs would give TAFEs more reliable means to provide adequate and timely support and adjustments to learners with disability.

People with disability have the right to access and participate in education on the same basis as people without disability. Improving access to TAFE for learners with disability will improve their employment prospects, social participation, sense of self-worth and independence. This will have flow-on effects on their families and the wider community through reduced government expenditure and the creation of a more inclusive society.

**Adopted by the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee  
Melbourne  
16 August 2021**

# Appendix A

## About the Inquiry

### A.1 Submissions

Submission number	Individual or organisation	Date received
1	Mr Johann Davey	26 August 2020
2	Name withheld	27 August 2020
3	Mr Darrell Saddington	27 August 2020
4	Mr Peter Hirst	17 September 2020
5	Hume Valley School	12 October 2020
6	I Am Ready Partnership	13 October 2020
7	Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC's) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA)	14 October 2020
8	Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network	15 October 2020
9	National Disability Services	15 October 2020
10	Home Education Network	15 October 2020
11	Mr Michael Meehan	15 October 2020
12	Australian Association of Special Education (AASE), Victorian Chapter	15 October 2020
13	Department of Education and Training	16 October 2020
14	Victoria University Polytechnic	16 October 2020
15	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria	16 October 2020
16	Victorian Trades Hall Council	16 October 2020
17	Adult and Community Education Victoria, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and Adult Learning Australia	16 October 2020
18	Ms Madison Arimatea	16 October 2020
19	Deaf Victoria	16 October 2020
20	Mr Gabriel Gervasoni	18 October 2020
21	Children and Young People with Disability Australia	19 October 2020
22	Name withheld	21 October 2020
23	Brotherhood of St Laurence	22 October 2020
24	Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch	22 October 2020

Submission number	Individual or organisation	Date received
25	Swinburne University of Technology	22 October 2020
26	Vision Australia	22 October 2020
27	Name withheld	23 October 2020
28	Mission Australia	28 October 2020
29	Victorian Council of Social Service	30 October 2020
30	Victorian Disability Advisory Council	4 November 2020
31	Victorian TAFE Association	6 November 2020
32	Dear Dyslexic Foundation	16 November 2020
33	Aspergers Victoria	16 November 2020
34	Federation University	19 November 2020
35	Amaze	19 November 2020
36	Bendigo Kangan Institute	4 January 2021
37	The Gordon Institute of TAFE	4 January 2021
38	Melbourne Polytechnic	14 January 2021
39	GOTAFE	10 May 2021

## A.2 Public hearings

### Monday 7 December 2020

Melbourne

Name	Title	Organisation
Ms Kira Clarke	Senior Research Fellow, Youth Opportunities Team	Brotherhood of St Laurence
Ms Joanne Stevenson	TAFE student	Brotherhood of St Laurence
Ms Helen Watkins	Head of Professional Studies, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE	Brotherhood of St Laurence
Ms Tamsin Rossiter	Executive Officer	Adult and Community Education Victoria
Ms Nicole Battle	Chief Executive Officer	Neighbourhood Houses Victoria
Ms Jenny Macaffer	Chief Executive Officer	Adult Learning Australia
Mr Peter Kellock	Coordinator, Research and Projects	Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network
Mr David Kennedy	Executive Officer	Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network
Mr Trent McCarthy	Chair	Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks
Ms Felicity Bellingham	President	Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter
Ms Helen Hatherly	Vice-President	Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter
Ms Wendy Major	Executive Officer, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network	I Am Ready Partnership
Ms Jenni Graham	I Am Ready Coordinator, South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network and Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning and Employment Network	I Am Ready Partnership
Ms Rachael Murphy	I Am Ready Coordinator, Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network	I Am Ready Partnership

**Wednesday 10 March 2021**

Melbourne

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Dr Carina Garland	Assistant Secretary	Victorian Trades Hall Council
Ms Meredith Peace	President	Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch
Mr Justin Mullaly	Deputy President	Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch
Mr Justin Bowd	Research Officer	Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch
Ms Emma King	Chief Executive Officer	Victorian Council of Social Service
Ms Deborah Fewster	Manager, Advocacy and Engagement	Victorian Council of Social Service
Ms Emily Barter	Manager, Workforce and Industry Development	Victorian Council of Social Service
Ms Michelle Wakeford	National Manager, Ticket to Work	National Disability Services
Dr William Crisp	Policy and Project Officer, Ticket to Work	National Disability Services
Mr Chris Christoforou	Executive Officer	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
Mr Eddie Micallef	Chairperson	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
Ms Lee Watts	Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills	Department of Education and Training
Mr Phil D'Adamo	Executive Director, TAFE and Tertiary Institutions	Department of Education and Training

## Friday 12 March 2021

### Melbourne

Name	Title	Organisation
Mr Bruce Maguire	Lead Policy Adviser	Vision Australia
Mr Chris Edwards	Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy	Vision Australia
Mr Jeremy Irvine	Executive Director	Victorian TAFE Association
Ms Pam Jonas	Senior Adviser, Policy and Advocacy	Victorian TAFE Association
Mr Dan Mabilia	Director, Policy and Advocacy	Victorian TAFE Association
Mr Hemant Kokularupan	Manager, Student Success	Bendigo Kangan Institute
Mr Joe Ormeno	Chief Executive Officer	The Gordon Institute of TAFE
Ms Tracey Jeffery	Manager, Careers and Training Services	The Gordon Institute of TAFE
Mr Robbie Johnstone	Senior Strategic Business Analyst	The Gordon Institute of TAFE
Ms Frances Coppolillo	Chief Executive Officer	Melbourne Polytechnic
Ms Cathy Frazer	Executive Director, Student Engagement, International and Community Partnerships	Melbourne Polytechnic
Ms Dianne Semmens	Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vocational Education and Pathways	Victoria University Polytechnic
Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias	Director, Student Engagement	Swinburne University of Technology
Ms Jill Slater	Manager, Community Service Funded Initiatives	Swinburne University of Technology
Ms Heather Marsh	Manager, Equity and Diversity	Federation University
Mr Drew Burns	Coordinator, Disability Services	Federation University
Mr Lionel Bamblett	General Manager	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated
Mr Woody Eke	Senior Policy Officer, TAFE and Higher Education Unit	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

## Tuesday 11 May 2021

Melbourne

Name	Title	Organisation
Ms Shae Wissell	Chief Executive Officer, Founder and Executive Director	Dear Dyslexic Foundation
Dr Judith Hudson	Non-Executive Director	Dear Dyslexic Foundation
Ms Christine MacJouvelet	Chair	Dear Dyslexic Foundation
Ms Gina Chinnery	Associate Director, Employment and Education Partnerships	Orygen
Ms Amy Whalley	Acting Chief Executive Officer	Australian Network on Disability
Mr Gabriel Gervasoni	TAFE student	-
Ms Michele Leonard	Victorian State Leader	Mission Australia
Mr Troy Crellin	Manager, Social Enterprise Programs	Mission Australia
Ms Nicole Rees	Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Manager, Policy and Advocacy	Amaze
Ms Katie Koullas	Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Yellow Ladybugs, and former TAFE teacher	Amaze
Ms Jan Davis	Architect and Leader, Work-based training initiatives for students	Amaze
Ms Rebecca Hope	TAFE graduate	Amaze
Ms Tamsin Jowett	President	Aspergers Victoria
Mr Kyal Kay	I CAN Network member	Aspergers Victoria
Mr Thomas Quine	Volunteer	Aspergers Victoria
Professor Sandra Jones	Pro Vice-Chancellor, Engagement	Australian Catholic University
Ms Maeve Kennedy	Policy and Programs Manager	Children and Young People with Disability Australia
Ms Miranda Cross	Policy Officer	Children and Young People with Disability Australia
Ms Karen Biggelaar	Principal	Ballarat Specialist School
Ms Catherine Dunn	Individual Advocacy Officer	Deaf Victoria
Ms Olivia Beasley	Board member and Educational Sub-Committee member	Deaf Victoria

# Glossary

Accessibility	The degree to which as many people as possible can access a good, device, service or environment.
Assistive technology	Devices, software or equipment that help people with disability to perform tasks they would otherwise be unable to do, or to perform tasks in an easier and safer way.
Australian Standard AS EN 301 549	The minimum standard for the accessibility of information and communication technology products and services such as hardware, software and other technologies that people may interact with.
Disability Liaison Officer	A TAFE staff member whose purpose is to advocate for students with disability and communicate these students' support needs to other TAFE staff and/or external service providers. The title and role of DLOs may vary across TAFE institutes.
Disability Standards for Education	The <i>Disability Standards for Education 2005</i> (Cth) provide guidance on the rights of students with disability and the legal obligations on education providers. The Standards sit beneath the <i>Disability Discrimination Act 1992</i> (Cth).
Learn Locals	Community education providers that deliver pre-accredited and accredited training to meet the needs of adult Victorians experiencing disadvantage.
Pre-accredited training	Short vocational courses which can create pathways into employment or further education and training.
Reasonable adjustments	Measures or actions an education provider takes to assist students with disability to apply for admission, enrol, participate in a course and use the institution's services or facilities on the same basis as students without disability.
TalkCampus	A free mental health peer-to-peer support app where students can get 24/7 peer-to-peer support.
Universal design	A set of principles that ensure products and environments are accessible and usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. In terms of education, universal design for learning provides students with more than one way of absorbing information, learning, and demonstrating their knowledge and skills.
VET Development Centre	A centre established by the Victorian Government in 2005 to promote the development and professional standing of people working in the VET sector. It delivers Victorian Government-funded continuing professional development through webinars, workshops and seminars to the Victorian VET workforce.
Victorian TAFE and autism survey	A 2020 survey of almost 100 prospective, current or recent TAFE students with autism run by autism organisations Amaze, the I CAN Network, Yellow Ladybugs, Different Journeys and Aspergers Victoria.
Victorian TAFE network	A network made up of 12 TAFE institutes (Bendigo Kangan Institute, Box Hill Institute, Chisholm Institute, TAFE Gippsland, GOTAFE, The Gordon, Holmesglen, Melbourne Polytechnic, South West TAFE, SuniTAFE, William Angliss Institute and Wodonga TAFE) and four dual-sector universities (Federation University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and Victoria University Polytechnic). The network is managed and funded by the Victorian Government, which receives financial contributions from the Australian Government to support training services.
Wraparound supports	Support services tailored to an individual's needs and delivered by different providers in a coordinated manner. They can include services to address personal issues such as housing stress and mental ill health, delivered alongside services to address education barriers such as low literacy and numeracy or poor internet access.





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