



Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Youth Associate final report to Committee

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Bio: Dylan McBurney is a 23-year-old transgender and disabled advocate living in Naarm. Despite what they were led to believe about school dropouts, they are an accomplished young person who has found success in multiple careers. In the past few years, they completed a traineeship and continued to work at Children and Young People with Disability Australia, collaborating with young disabled people nationwide. They now work with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute designing research into the wellbeing of trans and gender diverse young people. In 2024, they were nominated for a Disability Confidence Award by Australian Disability Network. Dylan is also a stage manager and producer who owns and operates youth-led production company Pilot Comedy, staging debut performances by young comedians across Australia at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

Summary of consultations:

I undertook each interview 1:1 and, aside from one in-person meeting, all on video call. The nine people I interviewed were aged 19-25 and of an even spread of ages. I interviewed one male, two females and six non-binary young people. All were studying, and half were working alongside their study. Three did not complete Year 12. I interviewed two people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and all were disabled and lived in Melbourne. Within these experiences of disability were developmental, acquired, psychosocial, chronic and physical conditions.

I was connected to some young people through their connection to Parliament of Victoria, as well as acquaintances and friends from prior study/work in the disability and live performance sectors.

Choosing what to do after you leave school

The main factors when deciding on a post-school pathway were:

- Passion for the subject
- School staff
- Parents' expectations

Some of the considerations for disabled people specifically included the physical requirements of their desired field, the duration of the course, and time spent on campus.

A big part of this decision is which VCE path young people take. Many students do not get a choice between VCE and VCE VM, even if their school offers both. High-performing students, particularly from ethnic and/or immigrant backgrounds, may have no choice in not only pursuing VCE, but choosing subjects that scale the highest. One interviewee wasn't "allowed" by their school to do VCE VM because of their high academic performance. Conversely, another interviewee continually reminded staff that they wanted to study VCE but had been placed in VCE VM when they received their new timetable.

In-demand industries

Industries being in-demand was less of a consideration for some disabled young people. Neurodivergent people needed to pursue an engaging career that they could see themselves doing in the long-term to hold their attention and promote positive mental health. Those with chronic illness and pain wanted an enjoyable career, as their time and energy is limited and they needed motivation to push through pain and fatigue to complete tasks.

A way to improve understanding of these in-demand industries is further informing students about the subsidies and supports available, especially outside of university pathways. Several young people did not know about free TAFE but would have considered those courses if they did.

Quality of school career development & knowledge of VET pathways

Only one interviewee remarked that their school's career development was 'Somewhat helpful', with the remaining 8 finding it 'Not helpful'.

Careers staff often looked at a student as the sum of their grades rather than an individual with interests and ambitions, and "putting value on people based on their academic success". A factor in one interviewee's school's career support was how often they used their school's free lunch program, which further limited the options presented.

A key failing of current career development are the narrow expectations placed on students. It was common to hear that information about VET was provided to VCE VM students and withheld from VCE students. This segregation of students begins early in school and continues until graduation – one disproportionately experienced by students with disability. One interviewee pressured to study VCE VM said teachers were 'trying to, not box students in, but to nudge them closer to that box'. They were then steered toward pursuing TAFE after high school, even after expressing strong interest in university.

Other students are led to believe university is their only option. A majority of interviewees were not at all knowledgeable about available VET pathways. Those who did knew about VET from their own research. This was either directly from the RTOs' website, from Government websites collating vocational offerings or from social media advertisements on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. Many were only informed of uni open days and not TAFE; One student recalled a single TAFE booth at their school's careers fair among countless university stalls.

Interviewee 1 is a current Engineering student and attended one of the wealthiest secondary schools in Victoria. They commented that their private, high-tuition school applied pressure to pursue lucrative fields at top universities.

Similarly, Interviewee 2, a public school leaver now studying community services at TAFE, wishes they were given information about pathways other than university, but didn't investigate outside of what was provided by their school.

"I trusted that the school would give me all the information I needed to make the choices I needed to make." - Interviewee 2

This division fails many students who believe their choices are more limited than they truly are. Non-traditional VCE, for example, is incredibly beneficial for some, such as doing less subjects over more years. Accessible alternatives to a traditional university pathway like part-time study, TAFE and apprenticeships shouldn't be discouraged.

To improve career development in schools, staff should talk through *all* pathways with students, and direct them to websites to explore their options, and find what's best

“based on a conversation, not a test”. More engaging discussions and excursions for all students about diverse post-school pathways could be provided to ensure no one slips through the cracks of this individual career support, a common experience for the disabled young people interviewed.

VET delivered to school students

VET subjects in schools are an incredibly valuable option for disabled young people who think and learn differently. One interviewee struggled with the workload of VCE and took a VET hospitality class, which “felt like release from all the stress and mental health”. They found it difficult, however, that some of the male students were disruptive, and took the class “just to get out of school”.

Access to VET varies from school to school. Interviewee 1 commented that three of their peers transferred to a different school to pursue VET subjects. For lower-income schools that do offer it, price increases are a barrier, so subsidising these classes would allow for more equitable access.

Perception of VET

Severe stigma exists around VCE VM among students. Interviewees recall VCAL/VCE VM being “for people who are not smart”, “for people with bad grades”, and for students who wanted to “get out of proper school” or looking for “an easy way out”.

Current perceptions are that it is for those who can’t handle or aren’t suited to VCE and academics, as well as those who want to study more ‘hands-on’ industries and get their certifications quickly to enter the workforce.

Quality of learning:

There was a comparison made between the quality of teaching staff, being seen as more qualified at universities. TAFE lecturers, however, seem to have more experience in and real-world connections in their industry, although they may not necessarily be skilled at teaching.

Assessments are seen as easier in VET and being competency-based makes them more accessible for those with anxiety about grades, and with developmental disability who can re-attempt an assessment without penalty. However, learning materials and assessments are often low-quality, with unclear questions and instructions.

Job outcomes:

Most university students felt that TAFE had better job outcomes. One TAFE student felt that employers prioritise university degrees.

While financial incentives and supports get young people to pursue in-demand industries, it doesn’t address the reasons these industries are short-staffed in the first place. Students are being funnelled into poor quality, unsustainable jobs and leaving the workforce like many before them. Interviewee 2, despite being only 24, studied childcare and worked briefly before burning out and leaving the industry. They mentioned working constant extended hours and being illegally placed as a room leader early in their employment because their workplace simply didn’t have the staff to fulfil the role.

Comparatively, many university students don’t end up using their qualifications after graduating due to the difficulties and pressures of university itself, commenting that “It can sap the passion from people.”

Barriers to further study

An obvious barrier to transitioning into vocational education is that many young people do not finish high school. These students aren’t given information on pathways other

than completing traditional high school, which will continue to be an inevitability for many young people with disability. Year 12 and the workload that is required of students can be harmful, more so for disabled students. Interviewee 2 had to drop out of Year 12 because the stress of completing schoolwork and getting good grades led to an extended stay in a psychiatric ward.

Young people with complex disability have unique barriers to graduating. Interviewee 2 found in-person classes difficult when showing up and staying seated 4-5 days a week caused “excruciating” pain. Online classes weren’t a suitable alternative, as they would struggle with staying grounded and not dissociating.

Many of these young people will not have received diagnoses for their health conditions. An interviewee with undiagnosed endometriosis, who couldn’t attend school when experiencing intense menstrual cramps each month, left high school at 15 after falling short of their school’s attendance requirement just 5 months into the year.

Tailored support for students with disability

A clear message from all interviewees was that equitable learning plans do not meet the needs of disabled students. Equitable learning plans are genuinely effective at a few key supports, like physical access to classrooms and requesting extensions for assessments. These plans, however, do not consider the many ways people can be impacted by their disability when studying.

The limitations of these supports affect neurodivergent students, who may have trouble focusing or experience ‘time blindness’ and can’t give the required notice to request an extension. There is also poor knowledge or capacity to support more complex disability. An interviewee spoke of her university’s support staff member being unable or unwilling to discuss how the degradation of her disability could affect her studies after acquiring a brain injury and was eventually removed from her course for that very reason.

A key factor in why these plans fail disabled students is while there are trained staff that develop these plans, lecturers are expected to implement them. These teachers are not adequately trained to or capable of accommodating disabled students. As one interviewee said of teachers’ workloads, “When you work people to their limit, they’re not gonna do a very good job.” Aside from the lack of training, ableist biases exist in individual teachers.

“Subconscious stigma can’t be educated away.”

Navigating complex systems that require disclosing and providing evidence for disability and medical conditions is a significant barrier to accessing these supports in the first place. Fighting for needed accommodations is additional work that disabled students are made to do alongside their studies, and many of these young people (often accurately) do not believe that their disability will be taken seriously or that they aren’t ‘disabled enough’ to access these supports after past negative experiences.

Young people with disability are more likely not to have a formal diagnosis or evidence of their disability, which is required to access supports. The process can be long, unclear and inaccessible, with required forms and steps being difficult to locate or complete. Institutions are often unclear about what support can and can’t be in place – transparency about inaccessible aspects of institutions and courses is crucial rather than “pretending” to be more accessible than they actually are.

Completing qualifications

One barrier to completing courses is the workload. Interviewee 1's engineering units were each expected to take 16 hours a week (64 hours total), and attending events and joining clubs were essential to making connections and securing a job post-study.

Some barriers to disabled students participating were:

- No subtitles on recorded lectures and classes
- Screen readers not being permitted in class
- Carers/support staff not permitted in class
- Classrooms physically inaccessible
- Lifts broken down/filled by non-disabled students

A wheelchair user commented that his university didn't do much to proactively improve accessibility and was only accommodated when course staff took the initiative to 3D print an accessible door handle for their classroom. He was also the only student who didn't secure an internship as nothing accommodating his wheelchair was found, and no further effort was made by the university.

Helpful resources/support:

Informing *all* students about available supports in accessible formats is crucial. Student wellbeing programs are helpful but are thought to be used more as a marketing point without being allocated enough resources. With the cost-of-living crisis and confronting political news worldwide, there are many stresses on students and burnout is common, and more holistic, capable wellbeing programs are essential.

Free public transport significantly benefits disabled university and VET students who often have no other travel options.

Influence of cost on course choice

One interviewee felt that cost had a strong influence on course choice, as their options were limited by what was offered under Free TAFE without an ATAR to apply for universities with.

Three said that course cost had some influence, and four felt it had no influence. This is in no small part due to HECS, which most cited as opening many opportunities.

However, the indexation on HECS is a stressor that many weren't aware of until after committing to it. Students aren't given enough information on how HECS debt isn't really 'no interest'. Anxiety about failing a course and being left in debt can be brutal, particularly alongside the many additional costs and challenges of being disabled. There More flexibility should be provided to allow students to fail if they need to. Similarly, when not completing free TAFE courses, disabled students should be given additional opportunities to study and enter the workforce affordably.

Conclusion

Disability compounds the barriers all Victorian students face that persist throughout our education systems. Accommodating diverse ways of thinking and learning will set young people up for success in entering and transforming Australia's crucial industries.