

## Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

In 2019, the three Gippsland Local Learning Employment Networks (LLENs) partnered the National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO) to explore the transitions of young people with disability or learning barriers from school to further education, employment and training.

The I am Ready (IAR) Partnership was formed on the basis of our collective observations that young people with disability or learning barriers were having those barriers further exacerbated by low expectations and unconscious bias. Well intentioned educators and service providers were focussing on what young people living with disability or barriers to learning, couldn't do. We observed low expectations from parents and low aspiration from students. What we heard from Disability Employment Services (DES) providers was that on leaving school, students were not job ready and lacking in confidence.

The partnership developed a program with a central core to develop employability skills, raise aspiration, build confidence and support this group of young people to navigate a career and lifelong learning skills.

Employability skills development, enable a lifelong learning mindset that is critical to navigate life and support career success.

### **Program Structure:**

A pilot program was developed with three stages:

#### **Stage 1 | I Am Exploring – Work readiness skills, 1 day per week**

- Interactive workshop style program
- Parent workshops

#### **Stage 2 | I Am Becoming Ready**

- Supported assistance to take part in work experience

#### **Stage 3 | I Am Ready**

- Part-time employment
- Further training e.g. TAFE
- School-based Apprenticeship

Each group was facilitated by an experienced trainer and supported by tertiary students on placement from TAFE Gippsland and Federation University. Program participants were selected from local schools including mainstream and specialist schools following an application and interview process. Successful applicants were deemed to have had the capacity to work a minimum of **8 hours** per week. Volunteers from industry and service providers further supported industry engagement activities. The core units of stage one were delivered one day per week over a school term followed by Work

Placement and skills workshops. The program included professional development for participating schools and parent workshops.

Funding was secured from the Department of Social Services through the Try Test and Learn Funding (*Try, Test and Learn Fund is trialling new or innovative approaches to assist some of the most vulnerable in society onto a path towards stable, sustainable independence*) and therefore in part addresses elements of the following inquiry criteria:

- the social and economic benefits of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability

The Partnership engaged the Collaborative Evaluation Unit at Federation University to undertake an evaluation. The final evaluation document is about to be published and is included as part of this submission.

**In basing our response on our experience in the development and implementation of the IAR pilot we believe we can provide an insight into practices that prepare students with disability and learning barriers for a successful transition to TAFE and other further education and Training and/or employment.**

- strategies to increase the participation of learners with disability in TAFE programs, including initiatives that have proven successful in Victoria and interstate

The I am Ready Pilot program has clearly identified a gap in the current provision of careers education and pathways planning in schools. Students with disability require the same access to resources as other students but are often seen as requiring something different that schools are not confident in delivering. In fact, the same principles of careers advice and pathways planning are relevant across all student demographics including students with disability.

A student's first introduction to TAFE is through Vocational Education and Training Delivered in Secondary Schools (VETDSS) programs which are available to students in years 10 – 12 as part of their senior school curriculum. VETDSS subjects are mostly delivered externally in a fee for service arrangement with schools and contribute to both VCE and VCAL certificates. Students who are not enrolled in a VETDSS subject often include young people with disability or learning barriers as schools have previously determined these students to be a high risk of not completing. This is a financial decision as schools are liable for the total cost of the program regardless of a student achieving the qualification.

The criteria that is applied to predetermine if a student will or will not complete a VETDSS program needs closer examination. From our experience young people whose learning needs are not being met and are less engaged at school are often considered a risk. A vital strategy that could improve engagement as well as other learning benefits for a student is overlooked along with the preparation for further education and training that comes from this early TAFE experience.

Ironically, young people with disability and barriers to learning are more likely to disengage from school and often turn to TAFE seeking an alternative VCAL, VCE or Adult Literacy program as they recognise their learning needs have not been effectively supported at school.

It was identified that the 'I Am Ready' Program filled a gap that currently exists in mainstream education, where students with learning barriers often do not receive the level of support needed to make a successful transition from school to employment, further education or training. The Program provided participants with an opportunity to take part in a program specifically tailored to their

learning needs and styles giving them the opportunity to learn the skills required to find employment or enrol in further education or training, 'It's definitely highlighted to me the shortfalls in secondary school education for students with disabilities or learning barriers for the resources to support that' (Teacher). ***I am Ready Partnership Evaluation Report***

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. 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. Students living with a disability require a curriculum-based transition strategy to prepare them for further education and training in the same way as mainstream students.

This review found that transition programs are an advantageous resource for people with barriers, with the ability to improve their academic, practical, and work-related skills (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), and to increase their confidence, self-respect, independence and social connectedness. ***I am Ready Partnership Evaluation Report***

Research has shown that transitioning to tertiary education, often allows young people who have been ostracised for their unique abilities in secondary education, to thrive when they become part of a larger group of like-minded individuals. The I am Ready Pilot Program experienced a similar phenomenon as the participants found themselves in a group of their peers. Individuals were empowered to speak up and take risks in their learning.

The Program engendered a strong sense of belonging. Participants were a part of a group of like-minded individuals and that contributed to feelings of connectiveness and encouraged them to learn from each other, '*...she just likes being a part of something because as growing up through school, she was ostracised because she was different and I think it's being incorporated and everyone was the same*' (Parent). ***I am Ready Partnership Evaluation Report***

In South Gippsland we have observed the growing confidence of a group of TAFE students who are also Yooralla participants. As hospitality students they offer regular community café events at the TAFE restaurant in Leongatha and community venues. The confidence they have developed individually and collectively flows on to other aspects of their lives including employment, self-advocacy and a social inclusion group. The key element is in the support they experience from each other as they are empowered to be their best selves.

Stakeholders taking part in focus groups agreed that there was a dramatic change in participants confidence from the beginning of the Program to its conclusion which was also demonstrated at home, in school and in the work environment. The increase in confidence also translated to increased independence with many participants arranging their own travel to and from the Program and showing a desire to take part in the mock interview and work experience components. ***I am Ready Partnership Evaluation Report***

### **Unconscious Bias:**

A key finding from the evaluation of the IAR Partnership was the recognition of unconscious bias in the attitudes and beliefs of parents, carers and educators. Even those who were enthusiastic advocates for equal opportunity for young people living with disability, were challenged to shift their thinking to a strength-based approach.

This was evidenced in circumstances such as:

- Sourcing work experience placements
- Industry immersion tours
- Choosing interview clothing
- Expectations of individuals in group activities
- Expectations of students to be on time

There were some students who were not able to fully participate in every activity but this should be determined by the student's experience with support rather than before the task or experience was attempted with participants learning about their own strengths and limitations.

Ultimately the choice to undertake further education and training (i.e. TAFE) should be determined by the students as a result of an accessible and equitable education.

In the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools, evidence supported the observation that young people with disability are missing out on career preparation

Several stakeholders noted that students with disability struggle with the transition from school to further education and employment, and this is compounded by low expectations and poor quality or non-existent career development at school.<sup>617</sup> In Victoria, young people with disability often transition from school to day programs rather than employment. Data from the Department of Education and Training's (DET) On Track survey show that only 6% of young people in special schools transitioned into open employment compared with 58% who transition into day services and 9% into supported employment settings.

The On Track survey also showed that 73% of students in special schools reported not receiving assistance with job seeking or job placement.<sup>619</sup> Young people with disability and their parents feel that school career development is inadequate and some 'have described feeling like they "have been dropped off a cliff" once the young person leaves school and reaches adulthood.'<sup>620</sup> NDS noted that the provision of career development services for young people with disability is fragmented and inconsistent. It added that sometimes schools do not offer them career development citing statistics showing 72% of students with intellectual disability report not participating in work experience compared with 14% of students without disability.<sup>621</sup> ***Parliamentary Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools***

#### **SYSTEMS RECOMMENDATIONS: PARTNERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS – from the IAR Evaluation Report**

Outcomes from this report need to be used to drive change in enabling opportunities to increase aspiration, confidence and self-advocacy skills for the participant cohort.

Recommendations include:

5. An inclusive program should be delivered for all students. As with reasonable adjustment requirements in all areas of the education curriculum, students with learning barriers require specific reasonable adjustments in their employability skill development and work exploration beyond what is currently offered in schools

6. Education providers explore opportunities to enable young people to find their tribe in order to cultivate peer support and self-belief

7. It is important to mitigate against unconscious bias. Educators need to be

provided with professional development opportunities that include awareness of disability and the impact inherent stigma and discrimination have on the lives of people with disability

8. Develop national strategies to challenge the societal culture of low expectations that persist for young people with learning barriers

9. Ongoing effort is needed to challenge historical attitudes about the meaning of a 'career' for individuals with disability. Parents, carers, and educators require specific resources and training opportunities to understand how to support positive career conversations and expectations that encourage student aspirations, and guidance

10. Investment in the development of strategies that increase employer disability awareness and confidence

***I am Ready Partnership Evaluation Report***

**Further Recommendations specific to this inquiry:**

1. Secondary school students with disability or learning barriers should have access to a structured vocational preparation pathway in years 11 and 12 that give students confidence in transitioning to TAFE
2. Secondary school students with disability or learning barriers require a modularised VET DSS pathway that maximises a student's capacity to experience success. Currently students must enrol in a full certificate and once committed, schools are liable to pay the full cost of the course even if the student doesn't complete.
3. Support students with disability or learning barriers to engage socially and participate in cultural aspects of the TAFE student community – support them to find their tribe
4. Ensure transport is available and accessible, this could mean TAFE students accessing school bus networks

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## **Appendix 1**

'I AM READY' PARTNERSHIP

PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT 1 February 2019 – 30 June 2020

**Collaborative Evaluation Unity, Federation University**