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Submission on access to TAFE for learners with disability

Basis for this submission

The Home Education Network (HEN) is a non-profit organisation with over 1,000 members and almost 20,000 followers. HEN has been supporting home education in Victoria since 1981.

Research has consistently shown that 25% of home education is due to disability; this cohort is increasing. In HEN's 2020 survey, specific learning needs were the major factor in 33% of respondents' decision to home educate their children.

Parents undertake home education at their own expense (often with a reduced income) in a state where every child who attends school receives substantial financial support. For children with disability, a move to home education means sacrificing all the associated funding and services provided through school. And yet parents continue to make this difficult decision to go it alone in educating their child.

Home education is seen as a last resort by 24% of respondents. Put simply, students with disabilities are often home educated because school has failed them. At home, parents can provide an education uniquely tailored to their needs, but it does not result in a formal qualification. Students need to transfer to TAFE in order to obtain such qualifications.

However, home educated students are currently denied access to TAFE courses in the compulsory school years, thus delaying the commencement of qualified training until age 17.

The impact is significant.

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

Undertaking TAFE courses assists students with disabilities to expand skills, explore careers and earn qualifications. Quite simply, TAFE courses are often the key to an independent future and fulfilling life.

The experiences of learners with a disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs

Access to TAFE for students who are home educated is already extremely challenging, and a disability makes it even more so.

It is commonly stated on TAFE websites that supports are offered essentially every step of the way through applying and accessing studies (eg: Holmesglen TAFE <https://holmesglen.edu.au/Students/Student-Services/Disability-Support/>)

However, the individual experiences of students, both during enrolment and study, is often completely different.

While the first step of making contact is easy enough, from then on there are a myriad of complicated expectations and demands to fit a stereotypical “box” of possible supports, along with what is commonly a greatly protracted process of accessing them.

It is a frequent experience for students with disabilities to have to repeatedly provide extensive and detailed proof of their disabilities and learning needs, then to still have their support needs repeatedly questioned and/or refused. Private, personal medical and disability information is regularly handed over to TAFE disability officers, yet all too often students are told the officers don't have their documents. Students are told they clearly didn't send the paperwork when in reality, it has been misplaced or lost.

It is also common for professional reports and doctor's letters to be disregarded as the disability officer decides they know better than the professionals who have known and supported the student long term. There are many lived experience examples of this happening, and each experience does measurable damage to the ability of students with disabilities to have equal access to education.

Eg: 1 When requesting a note taker due to processing difficulties relating to ASD, there is a common experience for students to have the disability support workers at TAFE outright tell them they speak well so they don't need a note taker. Accessing a note taker has nothing to do with the ability to speak, and for the disability officer to overturn the needs of an individual without any medical knowledge or long-term knowledge of a student's individual needs is highly unacceptable and distressing for the student.

Eg 2: Physical access is a frequent issue for students who use mobility devices. It is not uncommon for disability toilets to be a long way from the class, on a different floor, to have broken/difficult doors, or for the toilets to be full of storage items, making them inaccessible. Doorways may be sized to fit a standard wheelchair, but are often not sized to fit a non-standard/larger wheelchair. Doors with knobs or lips in doorways also make access challenging for many people. Automatic doors or open doorways (where appropriate) would be far more accessible. Bins, vending machines and other obstacles should be kept clear of the walkways to enable easy and clear access to buildings. Placing these items in alcoves would streamline access for everyone.

Eg 3: 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.

Eg 4: 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.

Class participation can also frequently be hindered for students with disabilities due to miscommunication, or lack of communication between disability officers and classroom teachers. While maintaining privacy for students is of utmost importance, ensuring teachers have adequate knowledge and understanding of a student's individual needs is vital. 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.

There is a common misconception that students with disabilities all have the same basic range of support needs. This again creates disadvantages for those students who do not fit the perceived stereotype. Flexibility and recognition of individual needs, and what may be perceived as unusual support needs is vital to enable equal, non-discriminatory access to TAFE studies for all students with disabilities, no matter what their disabilities may be. Stereotyping disability requirements Eg: for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), frequently creates more difficulties and barriers for individuals as every student is different and frequently does not fit the perceived stereotype.

Solutions:

TAFE access and class participation can be better supported through the provision of more appropriate and accessible supports for students with disabilities such as:

- simplifying the process for support in applying to TAFE;
- recognising there is not a one-size-fits-all criteria for supporting students with disabilities - every student is different;
- allowing students to give permission for private information to be shared, and ensuring pertinent information is given to teachers and staff who require it;
- consulting people with disabilities in the planning of all support options to ensure they are genuinely viable and accessible;
- believing what people say about their disabilities and support needs instead of treating them with doubt and suspicion;
- where appropriate, continuing online study options for students who need remote access due to disability related circumstances, such as being able to attend classes remotely; and
- flexibility in adapting the support needs of students to ensure they are tailored for individual needs and do not inadvertently hinder access to studies.

Barriers to learners with disability accessing TAFE and ideas for addressing these

There are two significant administrative barriers for these students in accessing TAFE courses.

1. Discriminatory TAFE funding model.

Home educators receive no funding.

TAFE funding is provided under two schemes - VET and VETiS.

Because student needs have gone unmet in school, reentering school is not an option - why sign up for more of the same poor provision? They are therefore excluded from VETiS funding purely because school failed to meet their needs.

They are also forbidden from attending TAFE until they reach the age of 17 unless they undertake a full time course with approval from the regional director.

The full time requirement is often prohibitive for students with disability. Students must therefore wait until age 17 to commence a course on a part-time basis.

This creates a discriminatory barrier and further disadvantages students unable to undertake a full-time study in that their qualification is further delayed.

It unfairly limits their transition options, in many cases after the school system has already failed them.

This discrimination is at odds with a policy designed to “give all Victorians the opportunity to develop the skills they need.”

The discrimination is purely a policy matter and arises through the wording of the VET funding contract:

Eligibility Exclusions

- 2.4 Subject to Clause 2.5 of this Schedule 1, an individual is not eligible for training subsidised through the *Skills First* Program under this VET Funding Contract if the individual is:
- a) a student enrolled in a school (excluding a school based Apprentice/Trainee). This includes:
 - i) any government, non-government, independent or Catholic school; or
 - ii) a student registered for home schooling in Victoria.

Government schools are responsible for funding these opportunities for VET within the school curriculum through their Student Resource Package (SRP) allocation, including targeted VET in schools funding. Non-government schools make similar decisions for students on the basis of the resources available to them;

As can be seen, school-aged students are excluded from VET funding on the basis that they have access to VETiS funding. However, home educated students are excluded from both VET and VETiS.

Solution: Delete clause ii) from the VET funding contract.

2. The Centrelink Complication

Centrelink requirements complicate the TAFE funding situation because Centrelink does not recognise home education as full time education past the age of 16. As a result, students lose their centrelink payment at 16 because, in Centrelink's view, they are not in full time education.

So, low income families are left with few choices. The only options open to them are:

- a) enter school full time (reentering a situation and system that catered for them poorly; or
- b) attempt to enrol in a full time TAFE course involving work requirements that place them under pressure.

Solution: Amend the Centrelink requirements.

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

- Increased access to various supports would be greatly beneficial for students. While the following supports are offered, access is limited due to limited funding or staff availability. Increased access should include:
 - in-class support workers;
 - note takers;
 - equipment and assistive technology provision;
 - planning for assessment adjustments and/or exam provisions;
 - personalised liaison; and
 - advice and advocacy

These things are vital and a positive step towards supporting students with disabilities at TAFE. However, they tend to be limited in what can be offered and still can fail to support all students with disabilities appropriately.

- Simplified and streamlined access to appropriate and adequate supports while enrolling into a course.
- Reduce the requirement for students to repeatedly prove their disability related support needs. Once should be enough, any more is humiliating and exhausting for students.
- Simplify and streamline access supports in preparation to start classes with all supports in place as needed.

- Greater access to equipment and assistive technology provision, especially for items needed outside the standard tablet/laptop options such as - accessible lab or other specialised equipment, speech to text or text to speech provisions, vision impairment provisions.
- Train staff to believe and not question what students with disabilities say their support needs are. Continually fighting to be believed is both exhausting and humiliating.
- Train staff to not stereotype, and to recognise every student's experience of disability and support needs are unique, thus aiding staff to be open minded and supportive of all students.
- Ensure the same supports are available for students online as in the classroom - eg: note taking can be done remotely and notes emailed to the student.
- Improved and increased flexibility in study/work requirements, and on campus attendance needs.

The supports learners with disability need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE

- Improved actioning of the recognition and supports relating to the comorbidities of disabilities, mental health and medical needs. While this currently sounds good on paper, it is not readily implemented by staff.
- Flexible remote access to all classes as frequently as is safe and appropriate.
- Flexibility on attendance requirements, where missed classes are due to ongoing health, mental health and/or disability needs. It is likely they have already had to work far harder than the average student in order to succeed in passing their course. If the required work is completed, viable attendance shortfalls should not be used to deny the student their qualification.
- Improved accessibility to classrooms on all floors, toilets, labs, etc is vital.
 - Accessible bathrooms should have automatic doors and be available on all floors. Every accessible bathroom should be the equivalent of a “changing places” bathroom including adult sized change tables and hoists.
 - Classrooms should have wider than standard doorways on all rooms to ensure access for everyone.
 - Lifts should be freely accessible and not controlled by key as is the case in some buildings.
 - If ramps replaced stairs on all new/upgraded buildings, accessibility would immediately become more universal.
- Appropriate, individualised supports based on actual, personal support needs.
 - No two people have exactly the same support needs. Flexibility is vital to providing appropriate support to enable students access to studies, equal to

other students.

- Improved and increased recognition and provision for less common support needs that provide students with equal access to education. E.g. Speech to word software, supported
- Improved access and reasonable adjustments to support people with disabilities in studying courses that include lab work, trades or apprenticeships.

The training and practical, policy and curriculum support TAFE teachers need to maximise the learning experiences of learners with disability

- All TAFE teachers should have some training not just in “disability awareness” but inclusive education including universal design for learning. This should be incorporated into the basic vocational education qualification, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.
- There should also be a higher level unit in the Diploma of Vocational Education and Training related to inclusive education and universal design for learning
- Teachers who already have Certificate IV in Training and Assessment should be asked to undertake such a unit to upgrade their qualification.
- Education Managers who are responsible for programs should have the knowledge and skills to ensure that programs are inclusive to learners with disability (note qualifications suggestions previously). They should also have the expertise to guide and mentor teaching staff on such topics as universal design for learning/reasonable adjustment etc.
- All teaching staff should complete professional development related to inclusive education at least every two years for professional currency.
- Greater access to and support of disability liaison officers needs to be provided. There aren't enough disability liaison officers to cover the needs of students.
- All RTOs should be required to have a “Disability Action Plan” (or similar) put in place and actioned.

The effectiveness of current government and TAFE policies and programs in supporting learners with disability, and suggestions for improvement.

- As above - greater access to and support of disability liaison officers would make a significant difference to the effectiveness of the disability support program.
- Some TAFE programs are still segregated programs for people with disabilities. Focus should be on supporting students into regular courses – with the required

supports in place, in order to increase quality of life and access to further education and/or work opportunities post graduation.

- The TAFE application process can be daunting (e.g. accepting only online applications).
 - Considering multiple ways of applications being accepted – e.g. Via phone call/in person visits, would increase accessibility and opportunities for people with disabilities to become students.

- The requirement for language and literacy to be tested prior to offering a place in TAFE is problematic especially as this test is usually emailed to students.
 - There is no assurance that the test is completed by the applicant themselves due to being emailed.
 - Results are potentially inaccurate. E.g. a person is scared they will not be offered a place because of literacy/numeracy issues – gets someone else to do the test/or help them. Teachers may then not pick up literacy issues until mid course, when the student could have received supports much earlier on.

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