

Parliament of Victoria's Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disabilities

The Victorian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) is a professional association for teachers, allied health professionals and others working with students with a disability in schools. AASE advocates for quality education for all Australians, exhibited by its members' dedication to engage in professional learning and highlight exemplary practices in Special and Inclusive Education.

In response to the Parliament of Victoria's call for submission for its Inquiry into Access to TAFE for Learners with Disabilities, AASE conducted a survey and invited its members to provide feedback. AASE aimed to gain and present insights from teachers and school staff regarding their views on students with a disability's access to TAFE, considering their experiences supporting students who were preparing to leave school, within the 2019 cohort. The opinions and feedback were recognised as a valuable perspective based on experiences supporting students with the TAFE pathway, application and enrolment processes. The evaluation accounts for disabilities ranging from mild to severe and includes physical, intellectual and sensory impairments, as well as students with mental health concerns.

The respondents of the survey ranged from teachers, principals and VCAL/ VET coordinators and administrators, all staff within Victorian specialist schools. The data indicates that 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.

The respondents identified barriers for students to access TAFE, which contribute to the statistics, as stated above. The barriers primarily identified include:

1. Post-school readiness concerns, particularly for students to achieve the literacy and numeracy requirements to enter and undertake a TAFE course successfully.
2. Lack of information and communications from TAFE, explicitly addressing the experience of attending TAFE, including the enrolment processes, and finding suitable TAFE institutions.
3. Lack of suitable courses available, especially when students are capable and wishing to progress further than Certificate I level courses. The respondents indicated the students might have dismissed the opportunity to undertake a TAFE pathway based on the significant jump between levels of course options and a lack of suitable Certificate II courses.

Whilst the respondents recognised that students were likely to seek support from teachers and school staff when facing the barriers, there were mixed responses from the respondents on their confidence in their skills to support the students, as well as having mixed responses who agreed there were enough training and support available for them to support the students.

The respondents acknowledged the current support available for students to consider and apply to TAFE as well as for teachers and school staff to assist students on their TAFE pathway. Schools and TAFEs have been working in partnership to facilitate 'Transition Days' and 'TAFE Tasters' for students and parents to gain some experience of learning at TAFE, including assisting students with applications and giving information on different TAFE settings and courses. Furthermore, liaising with external services, such as School Leavers Employment Supports (SLES) and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), are recognised as supportive networks for information, resources and support for students, families and schools.

As for the recommendations to further support students with a disability wanting to access TAFE, the respondents identified that:

1. Further support is needed to build the skills of students to fulfil the admission requirements for a TAFE course. This can be achieved by facilitating greater communication between TAFE and Specialist Schools to outline the requirements necessary to enter and succeed in courses available, in turn assisting students' preparations for TAFE. Also, the implementation of programs which act as 'bridging courses' needs to be more suitable for students to ensure their skills are developed, enabling the transition from secondary school to TAFE.
2. Individualised support for students and parents needs to be enhanced, ensuring enrolment processes are clarified, including NDIS funding for students, as well as assisting students with completing the administrative procedures and forms to apply for a TAFE course. Realistic expectations should be established to support the individual needs of students, further supporting students with accessible opportunities.
3. Professional development for teachers and school staff is recognised as an area which requires more support. This may include training for them to support students who require different levels of support and provide more information about accessibility to TAFE.

AASE identifies the experience of teachers and school staff in supporting students with a disability to apply, enrol and access TAFE. Based on our members' experiences and perspectives, the barriers that students face in accessing TAFE involve concerns around post-school readiness for TAFE, lack of information and communications from TAFE and minimal suitable course options for students with a disability. Current support, such as Transition Day and TAFE Tasters Programs from TAFE and liaising with external services, have been identified to contribute to the improvement of TAFE pathway process.

The findings present significant insights and suggestions to better support teachers and school staff in assisting graduating students in specialist schools. Teachers and school staff can be the students' first point of contact to access TAFE. The findings also highlight the importance to provide students and families with more individualised support and tailored programs in their endeavours beyond school, specifically in accessing TAFE.