

16 October, 2020

Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

The Committee is interested in views, insights and experiences on how learners with disability can be supported to access and fully participate in TAFE programs in Victoria. The Committee has specifically requested information about:

- the social and economic benefits of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability
- the experiences of learners with disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs
- barriers to learners with disability accessing TAFE and ideas for addressing these
- strategies to increase the participation of learners with disability in TAFE programs, including initiatives that have proven successful in Victoria and interstate
- the support learners with disability need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE
- the training and practical, policy and curriculum support TAFE teachers need to maximise the learning experiences of learners with disability
- the effectiveness of current government and TAFE policies and programs in supporting learners with disability and suggestions for improvement.

This paper will provide comment from Victoria University (VU) on how learners with disability can be supported to access and fully participate in TAFE programs in Victoria. This paper draws upon the expertise of Victoria University Polytechnic (VU Polytechnic) TAFE teachers, VU specialist Accessibility Liaison Practitioners, and Individual Support Workers who work closely with learners with disability. This report offers an overview of the issues with some strategies for the Inquiry Committee to consider in addressing the barriers to learners with disabilities.

Context

Victoria University and Victoria University Polytechnic is a dual sector education provider in the midst of a major strategic transformation with an unwavering commitment to the growth and development of the western suburbs region of Melbourne. The vision and mission sets its purpose to become an agile, dynamic, innovative and growing *University of Opportunity and Success*, with thriving partnerships with industry and inclusive of its diverse student communities.

One of the main elements underpinning the VU strategic plan is a transformational agenda, which applies across the Higher Education and TAFE sectors. The Transformational Agenda articulates four initiatives to forward the mission, values and plans for the future of Victoria University. With one of the most culturally diverse student populations as the core focus, the four big ideas as outlined in the *Transformational Agenda* include: -

1. Transforming lives and transforming communities as its moral purpose.
2. Learners from any background are supported, with many benefiting from a combination of vocational education and higher education, either simultaneously or at different times in the University without boundaries.
3. Developing 21st Century Skills for learners to confront 21st Century challenges.

4. Applying “Agility, Productivity and Growth” in meeting the needs of learners and communities, within the demand driven market based system, VU’s commitment to increased productivity, investment in digital technology and new online learning offerings, secures its trajectory into the future (VU Transformational Agenda, 2017, 5).

VU Polytechnic’s catchment includes areas of extreme disadvantage where people with associated chronic mental and physical health issues live, work and study. Learners with disability are welcomed and are fully accommodated to realise their academic merit and study ambitions. This is evidenced by VU Polytechnic being awarded the 2019 Inclusive Training Provider of the Year.

VU Polytechnic Statistics

At 18 September 2020, a total of 1004 Victoria Polytechnic learners declared a disability on their enrolment, representing 9.00% of the total student population.

Table 1: Numbers of domestic and international learners enrolled Victoria Polytechnic – 18Sep 20

Sum of Number of Students Row Labels	Column Labels		Grand Total
	Domestic	International	
Health, Human Services & Education	3830	93	3923
Manufacturing, Technology & Trades	4100	171	4271
Service Industries and Transition Education	2960		2960
Grand Total	10890	264	11154

Table 2: Number of TAFE learners who declared a disability on enrolment – 18 Sept 20

Sum of Number of Students Row Labels	Domestic	International	Grand Total	% of Disability
Health, Human Services & Education	410	2	412	10.50%
Manufacturing, Technology & Trades	225	3	228	5.34%
Service Industries & Transition Education	364		364	12.30%
Grand Total	999	5	1004	9.00%

Of the 1004 learners who declared a disability on enrolment, 71 have registered their illness or disability and produced medical evidence or Educational Psychologist reports to support eligibility for Victoria University [Accessibility Services](#) – See Table 3.

Table 3: Domestic and International students with Access Plans – Victoria Polytechnic 2020

	Vision	ABI	Hearing	Intell	Learnin g*	Medical	Mental Health	Mob'ty	Other*	Physica l	Carer	Student
Learners w Access Plans	1	1	3	2	9	22	17	1	11	2	2	71
% of total	1.5	1.5	4	3	13	31	24	1.5	16	3	3	

*Neuro Diverse Learners (shaded)
2020

Source: Accessibility Services Data – 30 Sept

Of these 71 VUP Learners:

- 20 Neuro-diverse learners (29%) have Learning Disability Assessment Reports. Neuro-diverse and Deaf learners comprise the majority of learners requiring individual in-class support from Auslan Interpreters and Academic Support Workers (ASW).
- 15 have an Academic Support Worker (ASW) assisting them in-class
- 2 require Auslan interpreters
- 6 are supported by Note Takers
- 7 are supported with Participation Assistants.

These 71 students were supported by Accessibility Liaison Officers (ALOs). ALOs are skilled Disability Practitioners that implement services to minimise the impact, or consequences of a learner's disability. In collaboration with the learner with disability, the ALO produces an Access Plan which is distributed to the learner's teacher. The Access Plan summarises the impact of the disability or health condition on the student's learning and includes recommendations for teaching and assessment adjustments, e.g. 'Extra writing time' for in-class assessments; recommendations for placement support; provision of Assistive Technology, e.g. Read and Write Gold software; and Academic Support Workers, e.g. Auslan interpreters, Sight Aids and Note Takers.

In 2019, total costs for ASWs for Victoria Polytechnic was \$563,431.00.

The experiences of learners with disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs at VU Polytechnic

In October 2020, Teaching and Professional staff at Victoria Polytechnic, ALOs, and Academic Support Workers (ASWs) were invited to respond to an all staff survey which asked quantitative and qualitative questions about their experience of working with TAFE learners with disability or chronic illness. Seventy-four responses providing the insights and views of 59 TAFE staff, four ALOs and 11 ASWs.

Many responses from VUP staff, ALOs and ASWs are consistent with research findings (see Cotton, 2010, NCVER). Some case studies are included to emphasise individual stories.

Survey respondents described learners as being highly engaged in TAFE. They noted that TAFE provided learners with the opportunity to meet and make new friends, learn new skills and to be out and about exploring the world independently.

Survey respondents reported that learners and parents welcome the support provided to students in TAFE programs and university. Respondents relayed that learners and their parents noted it was easier to access adjustments at TAFE compared to secondary school. This was especially the case for learners with Dyslexia.

Academic Support Workers (ASWs) reported that the provision of individual support to learners with disability led to improvements in learners' engagement in learning, confidence and functioning. ASWs also reported their presence assisted TAFE teachers to adapt teaching methods and class structure to better accommodate learning needs of the learner with disability. ASWs also reported that teachers were more likely check in with the learner about their progress.

Survey respondents reported that in many circumstances, learners commenced TAFE with undiagnosed learning disabilities and neuro-diversity needs. They noted that socially disadvantaged learners, especially those from low SES backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, and from other culturally and linguistically diverse or refugee backgrounds, are more likely to have undiagnosed disabilities or conditions that impact directly on their learning. Survey respondents suggested that barriers to educational psychology assessments include the cost of an educational psychology assessment, and the fear of stigma associated with a disability diagnosis.

Survey respondents reported that some TAFE learners with disability are greater impacted by unstable home environments, unsupportive family and social networks.

Survey respondents noted that TAFE learners with disability carried the additional load of managing mobility issues, pain, discomfort, health difficulties, sensory and communication barriers whilst trying to meet the demands of their learning and studies.

Surveyed TAFE Teachers indicated that they would like additional training in understanding the impact different disability types have on learning, and how they can better accommodate the needs of learners with disability.

Survey respondents noted that some on-line materials or web-based platforms (e.g., enrolment process) are not compliant with universal design principles. This may inadvertently create barriers to access to learning materials or restrict a learners' capacity to navigate websites independently.

Survey respondents described learners with disability faced additional barriers in obtaining work experience opportunities, travel and transport difficulties and discrimination from potential employers.

Case Study: Individual Experience, Learner M

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.

Case Study: Case Management Response to COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 and the switch to remote learning has impacted the experience of TAFE learners significantly and seen an increase in learners presenting with anxiety, stress and other issues related to remote online learning. At VU, ALOs saw an increase in contacts from learners. VU responded by reviewing all the needs of students registered with a disability in the remote learning environment, and developed plans on how to accommodate these needs. These plans were reviewed regularly and ALOs frequently liaised with VU Polytechnic teaching staff to trouble shoot emerging issues.

Whilst many learners with disability thrived in the remote environment, ALOs and ASWs reported some learners found the transition to remote learning challenging due to technology and internet issues making accessing Assistive Technology more difficult, social distancing restricting opportunities to learn 'hands-on', reliance on parents and family members to access computers/laptops with appropriate software, and challenging home environments. ALOs and ASWs reported that some learners with disability prefer face-to-face communication and were anxious communicating digitally with their learning peers and teachers (e.g. texting, emailing, using the telephone) leading to increased isolation.

Case Study: Whole of Institution Response- VU Accessibility Action Plan

The *VU Accessibility Action Plan for Students 2016 – 2020* (AAP) sets goals, targets and actions which aim to enhance the experience of learners with disability and eliminate disability discrimination across the learning design, teaching and support services areas within VU. The Plan includes objectives and projects to develop a more inclusive digital and physical environment for learners. The sixth AAP is being developed and will build upon initiatives to keep improving and enriching the wellbeing, support and experience of learners with disability. Future strategies include initiatives to boost student communications, develop targeted training modules and 'Accessibility for Learning' tools to support neuro diverse learners and learners with print disabilities.

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

People with disability comprise a significant proportion of the population, and they feature more significantly in unemployment statistics and lower in labour market participation rates when compared to people without a disability. There is recognition of the role of employment in reducing social exclusion (ABS 2009 cited by Cotton, 2010, NCVET).

With industry support of equity initiatives for graduates with disability, this discrepancy could be reduced and more inclusive organisations would evolve with greater tolerance, awareness and confidence for colleagues with disability. As employees, people with disability are more loyal, more reliable, have lower absenteeism and higher productivity rates when compared to mainstream employees. The benefits to the business of employing learners with disabilities include:

- Attract and retain the talent – Inclusive recruitment and diversity ensures the talent pool is widest.
- Mitigate risk - Employees with disability register lower attrition, turnover and absenteeism rates.
- Reputation and brand of the business is built – many studies have shown employees and customers are more loyal to businesses and organisations that demonstrate they value diversity and inclusion and that the workforce reflects the community as a whole.
- Marketing and customer retention are improved – better customer satisfaction.
- Uphold rights – government assistance is available for businesses who incur costs in supporting employees with workplace changes and other adjustments.

Summary of National VET Learners with disability data

Table 1 shows the outcomes and satisfaction for VET graduates for learners with a disability and learners without a disability for 2018 and 2019, as a percentage of the total. Unfortunately, national results for learners with disability that were employed after training in 2018 at 53.5% declined to 44.6% in 2019.

Table 1: Outcomes and satisfaction for graduates, by student characteristics 2018 (%) and 2019 (%)

	Employed after training	Improved employment status after training	Employed or in further study	Achieved their main reason for doing the training	Satisfied with the overall quality of training
Disability status (including impairment or long-term condition)					
2018					
With a disability	53.5	41.8	72.4	74.4	85.5
Without a disability	79.1	60.5	86.4	85.0	86.9
2019					
With a disability	44.6	73.7	74.8	86.4	88.1
Without a disability	67.8	86.6	84.8	88.3	89.0

Source: VET Student outcome survey 2018 and 2019 NCVET

Support learners with disability need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE

To maximise the experience of TAFE learners, VU would welcome:

- 1. Government initiatives with industry to rectify the disparities between labour market participation rates for graduates with disability, as opposed to graduates without a disability.**

Learners with disability deserve to participate in the economy on the same basis as learners without a disability. Examples of initiatives may include:

- The introduction of a quota system for middle to large employers, with eligibility for Government tenders being reserved for employers who demonstrate compliance.
- Wide ranging community education targeting employers and highlighting the social and economic benefits of employing people with disabilities.
- Promotion of Disability Action Plans more widely within small to medium commercial enterprises.

- 2. Establish a support fund for TAFE Education Providers to apply for reimbursement of costs incurred supporting learners with disability.**

There is a disparity in funding between TAFE and Higher Education. A support fund is needed whereby TAFE Education providers do not bear the complete costs in supporting learners with disability. Education Providers in Victoria could prepare annual submissions of costs incurred in supporting students with disability, allowing the Victorian government to reimburse TAFE Education providers. This fund could be used to pay for Auslan Interpreters, Sight Aides for learners who are blind or have low vision, Participation Assistants for students with ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Academic Support Workers. The funding of these staff is fundamental to learner success.

3. Introduce and fund Transition Officers for every provider to assist neuro-diverse learners.

The numbers of neuro diverse learners - Dyslexia, ADHD, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - is increasing nationally. At Victoria Polytechnic, neuro diverse learners comprise 29% of learners who register for services – see Table 3 above. These learners often require individual support to achieve competency in a range of study skills as they transition to tertiary study.

These Transition Officers can assist learners to transition from secondary school to TAFE. For example, Transition Officers can attend secondary school Student Support Group multi-disciplinary team meetings and give advice to secondary schools on how to best assist a learner transition to TAFE. The Transition Officer can assist the learner with disability to engage with Accessibility Services when they commence TAFE, and provide support to the learner as they settle into the new learning environment.

4. Provide disadvantaged learners with funding to purchase goods and services to increase opportunities for success.

- Funding to assist TAFE learners with disability to purchase laptops/computers and make access to the internet more affordable.
- Funding to offset the costs of Educational Psychology Assessments so students with suspected undiagnosed disabilities can undergo educational assessments and benefit from recommendations to improve their educational outcomes. An educational psychology assessment for Specific Learning Disability (SLD) may cost around \$1,500 - \$2,200. This cost is prohibitive and for many families from low socio economic status backgrounds. Other neuro diverse learners with undiagnosed Specific Learning Disabilities such as Dyslexia (difficulty reading), Dyscalculia (difficulty comprehending numbers and maths), Dysgraphia (difficulty with hand writing), auditory and memory processing disorders and Attention Deficit hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) could also benefit.

5. Funding to provide secondary and TAFE staff with training in relation to Disability Awareness and Inclusive Teaching Practice training (including Education Standards 2005).

This training will include information about different types of disability, interventions, and the range of support services for students and staff. Disability Awareness sessions for secondary school parents could assist to reduce stigma associated with disability and encourage parents to consider earlier intervention.

Training to staff and parents will help mitigate the social and financial impact of undiagnosed disabilities on learners and the community.

6. Extend Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support (DAAWS) scheme to include trainee qualifications

The DAAWS scheme provides federal funding for apprentices, with opportunities to practice the related theory in the work setting – practice that lecturers identify as crucial to apprentices competency. This scheme should be the same for all learners in TAFE.

Kind regards

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References

Cotton, Sandra, 2010 *Breaking down the barriers: strategies to assist apprentices with a learning disability*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).