



TAFE: Accessible for all

VCOSS Submission to the inquiry into
Access to TAFE for learners with disability

October 2020

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Victorian Parliament's Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability.

Access to high-quality education can transform lives. But all too often education systems do not provide the opportunities and supports learners with disability need to thrive.

Our workplaces and education settings should be as diverse as the communities they represent, but this can only happen if the education systems that provide people with opportunities to dream big are inclusive, accessible, and are able to meet the needs of individual learners.

TAFE provides a strong focus on access and equity by providing a breadth of foundational courses and offering a range of support services, however, there is an opportunity to be more flexible, more person-centred and for supports to more comprehensively 'wrap around' people and address barriers to participation and attainment.

This submission draws on the insights and expertise of a representative sample of trainees, TAFE teachers, youth workers and other stakeholders involved in the Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP), a traineeship model developed by VCOSS, funded by Jobs Victoria, and currently implemented in Melbourne's south-east and north. These lived experience perspectives, together with VCOSS's policy insights, highlight opportunities to make TAFE more accessible and inclusive for learners with disability. In doing so, this submission shines a light on aspects of the current system that present barriers to engagement and retention.

What we are talking about is transformational change. It will require a shift in attitudes, a lifting of aspiration, and a comprehensive response by government and across the education and training system (including, but not limited to education and training providers), and the wider community in order to boost opportunities for learners with disability.

The challenge should not be under-estimated. People with disabilities confront significant, entrenched barriers to access and inclusion. Initiatives to improve awareness and

understanding of disability and, crucially, the rights of people with disability will be required, alongside significant investment that enables learners with disability the opportunity to dream big and follow the education and employment pathway they choose.

The Community Traineeship Pilot Program

The Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP), managed by VCOSS and funded through Jobs Victoria, supports young people experiencing barriers to labour market participation to undertake a Certificate IV in Community Services alongside paid employment, while supporting community service organisations to host traineeships and meet their future workforce needs.¹

This program is not designed specifically for learners with disability, however, as the program supports its fourth group of young people, anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of trainees who have engaged in this program have a disability or mental illness.

A key feature of the program is a comprehensive, learner-focused structure of support, designed to foster collaboration between a range of key stakeholders to ensure learners don't fall through the cracks. These key stakeholders include trainees, employers, Local Partner Organisations, youth workers, VET providers and teachers who all work together. The model also has a strong focus on peer support, which provides further scaffolding for the trainee. For example, trainees are brought together in classes run specifically for them. A dedicated youth worker attends class with them, providing 1:1 youth work support to individual trainees, whilst assisting the whole group to build connection and mutual support. This assists trainees to build their identity as part of a learning community.

“[The CTPP] does put me as a trainee at the centre. I think it's a combination between a person centred approach and collaboration as everyone is working towards a common goal... I think with regards to it being student led, we're often encouraged to give feedback to our youth workers and our TAFE teacher, to see what goals are needed, what we want to accomplish throughout the traineeship, what social gatherings we want to achieve” – Trainee One

The Community Traineeship Pilot Program achieved a **retention rate of 80 per cent** for the first group of participants, with **more than 50 per cent gaining further employment** with their employer upon completion of their traineeship. This compares very favourably to the

¹ VCOSS, *Unlimited Potential. CTPP Employer VET Flyer*, viewed at <https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CTPP-Employer-VET-Flyer-Web-Upload.pdf>

national rate for non-trade traineeship retention, which is approximately 55 per cent.² The developmental evaluation of the CTPP has identified the flexible, high-support components of the model as a key success factor thus far.

The program highlights the immense value in making an upfront, proactive investment in support for learners who experience disadvantage – rather than waiting until there is a crisis – and sustaining that support for the duration of the course, flexing up and down depending on the individual needs of the learner.

The long-term costs of *not* providing this support are significant – not only impacting the performance of the vocational education and training system but contributing to growth in inequality (for example, trajectories into unskilled, low-paid, insecure work or even long-term unemployment for young people who may have disengaged from education and training without a qualification).³ In other words, the cost of *not* providing this support is much too high for young people and society more broadly.

² NCVET, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: completion and attrition rates for apprentices and trainees* 2019, July 2020.

³ A Powell, F Salignac, A Meltzer, K Muir & M Weier, *Background report on young people's economic engagement*, Report for Macquarie Group Foundation, Centre for Social Impact, February 2018.

Method

To inform this submission, VCOSS consulted with three trainees from the CTPP, two TAFE teachers and one youth worker. These participants spanned three participant groups of the CTPP.

VCOSS takes a broad approach to the term disability, which includes experiences of mental ill health, and does not limit this term to a medical model.

All three trainees interviewed for this submission identified with having a disability or illness. Two trainees gave consent for their names and quotes from their interviews to be used in this submission. We refer to the trainees as 'Trainee One' and 'Trainee Two' to ensure other program participants are deidentified and to provide continuity of each trainee's experience. One trainee did not provide consent for their name or quotes to be used. We do not differentiate between TAFE teachers.

VCOSS's aim is to amplify the voices of voices of the trainees in this submission to highlight their experiences and needs.

VCOSS also consulted with members, and disability advocacy organisations who are part of the 'Empowered Lives' network of Victorian disability advocacy organisations.⁴

⁴ Empowered Lives, <http://empoweredlives.vcoss.org.au/>

Recommendations

Supporting access to TAFE

- Advocate to state and national counterparts for a comprehensive review of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, in consultation with people with disability, families, carers, advocates, human rights experts and lawyers to strengthen protections and supports for learners with disability
- Provide new, targeted funding for secondary schools and Learn Locals to address identified gaps in transition support for students who are interested in pursuing a TAFE pathway.
- Provide greater opportunities for students in secondary school to access meaningful workplace experiences, including when undertaking VCAL or VET in Schools.
- Invest in additional pathway support to assist learners with disability transition from a Certificate I to a higher certificate or employment pathway
- Capitalise on existing Learn Local education infrastructure to ensure TAFE is accessible in a greater geographical spread and in trusted environments
- Increase funding for teaching hours to embed practical skill development including employment skills and complex skills (sometimes referred to as 'soft skills') into the training curriculum. This could also be supported by a youth or support worker in the classroom
- Provide access to a youth or support worker in the classroom to support learners with disability to address and overcome complex barriers to engagement, challenges that may arise during their training, and to support communication with TAFE teachers and employers
- Invest in resources to create supported peer connections and networks to boost engagement and retention and support learner wellbeing

Accessibility of TAFE

- Invest in awareness campaigns across the TAFE community to boost understanding of disability and the rights of people with disability
- Include comprehensive disability specific training in all teaching qualifications and provide additional resources for staff to undertake mandatory ongoing disability related professional development. Training design and delivery should be co-designed with people with disability

- Create accessible feedback frameworks and processes to enable learners with disability to provide direct and continual feedback about their experiences and learning needs
- Invest in technological infrastructure and resourcing to ensure online learning platforms are accessible, with enough human resource capacity to enable staff to troubleshoot issues promptly
- In the absence of changes to the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, consult with people with disability to create robust institutional policy frameworks that put the needs of learners at the centre
- Ensure learners with disability are proactively informed about their rights at the time of enrolment, and about services and assistance available to support their learning needs
- Provide learners with disability individual and tailored support and adjustments to boost engagement, retention and course completion
- Ensure learners with disability are meaningfully consulted about what a learning adjustment looks like, and provide adequate resources to ensure adjustments are implemented and provided within a reasonable maximum timeframe.
- Provide learners with disability access to pathways for support without needing a formal diagnosis or having to undertake extensive paperwork
- Implement structures to facilitate better collaboration between learners with disability, teachers and disability supports to ensure learning plans and learning needs are communicated in a timely way
- Boost retention by resourcing language, literacy and numeracy support that takes place in the classroom or is offered proactively
- Create a compliance system that ensures quality but does not overburden training providers
- Bridge the funding gap between the 'volume of learning' set by the Australian Qualifications Framework and the nominal hours the Victorian Government funds
- Remove demand-driven funding and ensure training providers have sufficient resources to support learner retention
- Provide TAFEs with additional resources to design and deliver training to smaller class sizes to ensure learners with disability get access to the in-class support they need
- Streamline the compliance requirements and invest in infrastructure and resources to enable TAFE teachers to collaborate with employers to design context specific assessments for learners undertaking a traineeship, apprenticeship or student placement

Employment

- Build the disability knowledge and confidence of employers through targeted training, support and resources

Supporting access to TAFE

High expectations and aspirations

RECOMMENDATION

- Advocate to state and national counterparts for a comprehensive review of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, in consultation with people with disability, families, carers, advocates, human rights experts and lawyers to strengthen protections and supports for learners with disability

“I asked a trainee for their strengths, and they said, ‘I don’t know, I’m not good at anything’” – TAFE teacher

Students with disability are less likely to pursue studies at TAFE or university than their peers.⁵ Discriminatory attitudes are a key factor. From a young age, many children with disabilities are exposed to a culture of low expectations, in the community and in education settings. This can impact the learner’s confidence, engagement, attainment and aspiration.

Key issues include:

- Current legislative frameworks that protect the rights of learners with disability are not well known or understood, are insufficiently robust and are not supported by training or expertise across the teaching workforce.⁶
- As a consequence of low expectations, poor attitudes and assumptions, some students with disability have less agency and are presented with fewer options and choices.
- These factors can heighten the risk of learners with disability disengaging from education (students with disability are less likely to complete Year 12 or equivalent compared with their non-disabled peers⁷) and have an adverse impact on post-

⁵ AIHW, *People with disability in Australia: Non-school education*, September 2019.

⁶ Victorian Council of Social Service, *The right standards for change*, September 2020.

⁷ AIHW, *People with disability in Australia: Highest level of education*, September 2019.

school outcomes. Young people with disability who responded to Mission Australia's youth survey indicated they were less confident about their ability to achieve their post-school goals in comparison to young people without disability.⁸

Education settings need to embed a culture of high expectations and aspirations of learners with disability from early learning through to post-education and training. TAFE and training institutions have a role to play in ensuring the teaching workforce is adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to better understand and support learners with disability. TAFEs also have a role to play in supporting employers to hold high expectations of learners who undertake workplace training as part of their studies. This in turn needs to be supported by stronger legislative frameworks and protections for learners with disability, underpinned by access to appropriate and resourced individualised supports including reasonable adjustments.

Transitions

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide new, targeted funding for secondary schools and Learn Locals to address identified gaps in transition support for students who are interested in pursuing a TAFE pathway
- Provide greater opportunities for students in secondary school to access meaningful workplace experiences, including when undertaking VCAL or VET in Schools
- Invest in additional pathway support to assist learners with disability transition from a Certificate I to a higher certificate or employment pathway
- Capitalise on existing Learn Local education infrastructure to ensure TAFE is accessible in a greater geographical spread and in trusted environments

Access to TAFE begins well before a learner steps through the physical or virtual door of a TAFE or classroom. For many learners, senior secondary school is a key transition point into pursuing further education and training. For others, the transition is via their local Neighbourhood House or Learn Local Organisation.

⁸ Mission Australia, *Young, Willing and Able: Youth Survey Disability Report 2019*, 2019.

VCOSS members and trainees shared diverse experiences about the transition to TAFE for learners with disability. The consensus is that more needs to be done to support learners at significant transition points.⁹ Transition supports need to be more robust, flexible and adaptive to student's needs, and deeply embedded in mainstream as well as specialist education settings for school-aged students and need to be clearer and appropriately resourced for post-school learners.

Transition from senior secondary school

Students with disability in secondary school need access to early, individualised and tailored support to explore post-school pathways that align with their interests and abilities. This transition planning should ensure that students have access to the school-based pathway that meets their immediate needs and aligns with their post-school goals. For some students this will be VCE. For others, it will be VCAL, VET in Schools, School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATs), or Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) opportunities.

Key transition issues for students with disability across mainstream and special education settings include:

- Lack of support for learners to develop their interests and aspirations
- Schools and teachers have insufficient knowledge, training and resources to support transition pathways
- Insufficient engagement with families and carers. Families and carers are an important source of advice for learners and provide important opportunities to workplace experiences through social and family networks. There can be closer relationships between education providers and the families and carers of learners with disability. This should include support for families and carers to boost their aspirations and expectations of learners with disability¹⁰
- There is insufficient knowledge and provision of reasonable adjustments in school, during workplace or training opportunities, and at TAFE

⁹ Mission Australia, *Young, Willing and Able: Youth Survey Disability Report 2019*, 2019.

¹⁰ Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Student Engagement with Employers: Work Experience, Structured Workplace Learning, and Part-time work out of school hours*, Community Transition Support, 2019.

- Students with disability need greater access to opportunities to engage in work experience and placements, including through VET in Schools to support successful transitions¹¹
- Employers, who provide work experience, placement, volunteer and paid work opportunities, may have limited understanding of disability and how to provide an accessible and inclusive environment. Employers need training and support to understand disability, reasonable adjustments and access to funding, and how to support the needs of individual students and workers.

Access to career activities and workplace experience can be vital to supporting students with disability pursuing post-school pathways and reasonable adjustments, and employer knowledge of individual learner's needs should be paramount. Evidence shows "the fewer career development activities young people participate in, the more likely they are to be uncertain about their careers, disengaged from education or training, and unemployed".¹² Access to these important opportunities may be harder for students with disability in rural and remote areas, who have an out-of-home care experience, whose first language is not English, or who may experience the compounding effects of racism.

TAFEs have a role to play in building strong networks and connections with schools to provide clear and accessible information to students with disability about career pathways, and to promote available wellbeing and disability specific supports. VCOSS has previously highlighted existing gaps in the Victorian Skills Gateway website that could assist with providing clearer information or pathways to prospective students.¹³ Students with disability also need access to information and support via communication channels other than the internet including face to face or via phone.

Mainstream education settings

VCOSS members highlighted mainstream education settings generally perform poorly in supporting students with disability to engage in meaningful career activities and explore post-school options including TAFE. Key issues for secondary students with disability in mainstream settings include:

¹¹ Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, *Student Engagement with Employers: Work Experience, Structured Workplace Learning, and Part-time work out of school hours*, Community Transition Support, 2019.

¹² Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee, *Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools*, August 2018.

¹³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *An Aspirational Vocational and Applied Learning System*, April 2020.

- Lack of training, awareness and understanding of disability by career practitioners and teaching staff which can contribute to a culture of low expectations and lead to poorer post-school outcomes
- Insufficient tailored and individualised support in navigating career pathways and opportunities, including access to meaningful workplace experiences or Structured Workplace Learning. This can lead to a mismatch in the student's interests and a placement, which can contribute to poor experiences and a placement failing
- Unclear information about pathways particularly in relation to TAFE and the VET system, including for students undertaking VCAL and VET in Schools.

All students with a disability have a right to access and experience inclusive education in a mainstream school setting. There is still an identified need for more career practitioner positions within mainstream schools to ensure students with disability get the tailored and individualised support they need.

Special education settings

VCOSS members report special education settings generally perform well in providing students with disability highly tailored and individualised support post-school, and that access to TAFE to undertake a Certificate I can be well-supported.

Key issues for students with disability in special education settings include:

- Knowledge of and confidence in employment and training pathways in mainstream settings among family and carers can be limited. It can be confronting and challenging for families, carers and students to consider options beyond supported settings, such as day services or supported employment. Families and carers need support to understand a range of mainstream pathways available to support their children's aspirations and choice.
- There is mixed quality and outcomes for students undertaking a post-school Certificate I
- Further pathways and transition supports from Certificate I are significantly underdeveloped and insufficiently resourced. This can lead to students with disability ceasing further education and training upon the completion of a Certificate I and/or being insufficiently supported to transition into higher qualifications or mainstream settings including employment.

Post-school learners

Neighbourhood Houses and Learn Local providers are important parts of the community and training landscape and provide important pathways into TAFE. For example, learners who transition from Adult and Community Education offered by Learn Locals into TAFE complete courses at higher rates.¹⁴

Learn Locals offer pre-accredited and accredited training and provide community-based learning environments that can be more accessible for learners with disability who find larger institutions such as TAFEs overwhelming, or as a soft entry point into the education system. Local environments and smaller class sizes can help overcome barriers including for people with limited educational experience, those for whom English is not their first language, or those who have had poor experiences with education in the past.

As this inquiry explores the accessibility of TAFE for learners with disability, it is important to reflect on the need to sustain a variety of high-quality options for learners with disability that suit their needs and are available in their local communities.

Where TAFEs do not service particular geographical communities, or there is poor engagement of learners with disability, consideration should be given to encourage TAFEs to leverage existing education infrastructure provided by Learn Locals. This could extend the availability of TAFE in a greater geographical spread in a trusted environment.

While Neighbourhood Houses and Learn Locals are a well-established pathway into TAFE, there is an opportunity to strengthen the transition for learners with disability. A learner's journey is not always linear and providing individualised and intensive supports to guide these transitions are resource intensive. Learn Locals and TAFE should be adequately resourced to provide these supports and to strengthen partnerships to support transitions.

¹⁴ Department of Education and Training, *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper*, 2018, p.19

Life skills

RECOMMENDATION

- Increase funding for teaching hours to embed practical skill development including employment skills and complex skills (sometimes referred to as ‘soft skills’) into the training curriculum. This could also be supported by a youth or support worker in the classroom.

“The traineeship I think is helping me achieve most of my goals with regard to people handling skills, empathy, person centred approach, and collaborative approaches with role plays as well as part of our assessment” – Trainee One

Trainees and TAFE teachers interviewed for this submission emphasised the importance of supporting learners to acquire a range of practical skills to assist their participation and engagement in TAFE and the workplace, such as how to behave in a professional environment, tips and tricks on managing course work, and developing complex skills (sometimes referred to as ‘soft skills’) which are becoming increasingly important,¹⁵ such as collaboration and adaptability.

There is growing momentum to increase “general capabilities, employability skills, soft skills or graduate capabilities” across the primary and secondary school curriculum¹⁶ which will be especially important for students who do not have the social capital to develop these skills outside of a school environment through family networks or extracurricular activities.

Learners with disability who have not been supported to develop these skills prior to TAFE need support to develop these skills. For learners with disability who experience mental ill health, have not completed secondary education, have not been in education for an extended period, or are experiencing adversity, the need can be compounded. As one trainee shared, being out of the education system for a long time while managing adversity or something else going on in your life, without support, means it can take a long time to understand how to study.

Compliance and funding act as constraints for TAFE teachers to provide a more active role in supporting learners to develop these skills. In the CTPP, this barrier was overcome by

¹⁵ Deloitte Access Economics, *Soft skills for business success*, DeakinCo., 2017.

¹⁶ Education Council, *Looking to the Future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*, June 2020.

providing trainees with access to a youth worker who could deliver more tailored individual support for the trainee.

“There’s more room for skill development in relation to self-confidence, resilience, timetabling, basic skills... There is no capacity to do that in our teaching role. We would need more hours allocated.” – TAFE teacher

Wrap around supports

RECOMMENDATION

- Provide access to a youth or support worker in the classroom to support learners with disability address and overcome complex barriers to engagement, challenges that may arise during their training, and to support communication with TAFE teachers and employers

Support from a youth worker or support worker can make or break a learning experience.

“I think [the CTPP] is a great program. I don’t think students would have come into the Cert IV [in Community Services] without youth workers and the extra support” – TAFE teacher

Having a youth worker alongside a teacher in a classroom has proven to support the education and wellbeing needs of young people facing complex barriers to education.¹⁷

Feedback from trainees, youth workers and TAFE teachers in the CTPP highlighted the importance of youth worker support, not only to support the development of practical skills, confidence and resilience outlined above, but to:

- support social activities and engagement with peers, including supporting trainees to become peer leaders in their own right

¹⁷ R Broadbent, K Hart, T Papadopoulos, *The Hester Hornbrook Academy Classroom Youth Worker Research Project*, Final Report, Victoria University, July 2019.

- be an advocate and support communication of any concerns or barriers to TAFE teachers and employers
- provide extra supports such as tutoring, filling in complex forms such as enrolment, or a request for reasonable adjustments
- support trainees to navigate and overcome challenges that arise during their traineeships, for example, mental ill health, family violence or homelessness
- facilitate access to the Flexible Wrap Around Support fund (available as part of the CTPP) that can be used to address barriers to engagement, for example by providing access to financial support, crisis housing, wellbeing and mental health services, medical needs, right down to buying new clothes to be able to attend work.

When youth workers are deeply engaged and available, trainees spoke about the difference this made and how it contrasted with previous TAFE experiences.

However, when youth workers are unable to be deeply engaged or able to provide clear communication channels to support a learner navigate challenges, it can lead to significant barriers in access and participation at TAFE.

“... ever since [my previous youth worker] stepped down and he stepped in, he’s had zero involvement... It can be hard to maintain that sense of being represented...” – Trainee Two

The CTPP is designed to foster collaboration between a range of key stakeholders with a dual goal of supporting young people experiencing barriers to labour market participation to undertake a community services qualification, while supporting community service organisations to host traineeships and meet their future workforce needs.¹⁸ Though this program is not designed for young people with disability specifically, the wrap around support model is an example of inclusive, learner-centred design that supports learners with a range of needs or experiences. TAFE teachers and the youth worker identified a significant percentage of all three traineeship participant groups having a disability or mental ill health.

The collaborative model of the CTPP means TAFE teachers and employers are supported to understand and meet the needs of each specific group of trainees, through the support of a youth worker.

¹⁸ VCOSS, *Unlimited Potential. CTPP Employer VET Flyer*, viewed at <https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CTPP-Employer-VET-Flyer-Web-Upload.pdf>

“We advocate on behalf of young people with their consent to talk to TAFE teachers or people in the background who might seem unapproachable at times, to let them know the young person is doing great in the program, they have the support around them to maintain engagement, and that things sometimes happen because it’s real life. It’s important to have those conversations with TAFE teachers to support their understanding about what that means in real life. We’re getting teachers to understand the cohort that they’re teaching as well. We’re working with young people who previously may not have been given an opportunity... so here are the things you need to be aware of” – Youth worker

“Youth workers in the classroom – I found that to be really good... In terms of emotional support potentially needed for the cohort but also they had that original relationship with them... so it was good to have them supporting the trainees emotionally and knowing when things were perhaps off, given I hadn’t built those relationships yet” – TAFE teacher

Good communication is key. One TAFE teacher highlighted the connection between having an engaged youth worker with great communication to learner outcomes.

Peer support

RECOMMENDATION

- Invest in resources to create supported peer connections and networks to boost engagement and retention and support learner wellbeing

“Last year in Year 12 I did an SBAT (School Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship) and found it different because with the youth workers [in the traineeship] they collaborate with all the trainees and we’re put into a separate course together. There are more social gatherings, online obviously [due to COVID-19], whereas TAFE last year... we didn’t have that opportunity for [facilitated] social interaction, we mostly just texted each other for assessments... with my class now everyone is engaged... This changes how I enjoy

class and how I engage. It makes it better because people get to know each other better, we can have a bit of a laugh. A traineeship is more than just assessments, you need to have some joy as well. It also increases my productivity” – Trainee One

Peer support and connection is a vital part of a good learning experience and can support engagement and participation in education. As highlighted by Trainee One, the youth worker supported their social engagement which led to a more meaningful and enjoyable TAFE experience.

Another trainee spoke about the importance of the youth worker supporting and participating in a peer support class which provides an opportunity to build relationships, but also helps with processing and reflecting on coursework. Facilitating these relationships is a core part of the traineeship as reflected by one of the youth workers:

“We work on creating social peer groups... so young people are sustainable in their own learning long-term. We want independent learners. We want them to be peer leaders in their own right” – Youth worker

Social connectedness is an important factor in maintain engagement and wellbeing in education settings. VCOSS members report young people with disability may disengage from education based on poor experiences such as discrimination, bullying and low expectations that can begin from as early as kindergarten.

A 2019 Mission Australia report found that young people with disability experienced higher rates of concern and stress than their non-disabled peers over a range of areas including:

- coping with stress (49.9% compared to 44.5%)
- mental health (45.5% compared to 32.4%)
- school or study problems (39.9% compared to 31.1%)
- suicide (25.6% compared to 13.5%)
- bullying/emotional abuse (25.5% compared to 13.6%), and
- discrimination as a personal concern (19.4% compared to 9.7%).¹⁹

These findings highlight the need for a wellbeing focus – including investment in individualised support – for learners with disability.

¹⁹ Mission Australia, *Young, Willing and Able: Youth Survey Disability Report 2019*, p, 38, 2019.

“At the end of the day, yes, assessments and work placement is very important and those are a core part of the traineeship, but alongside it’s good to have the peer to peer relationships and to build rapport that might help you get employment through them or they might get it through you, if you’re both recommending workplaces – so networking” – Trainee One

Accessibility of TAFE

Disability awareness

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in awareness campaigns across the TAFE community to boost understanding of disability and the rights of people with disability
- Include comprehensive disability specific training in all teaching qualifications and provide additional resources for staff to undertake mandatory ongoing disability related professional development. Training design and delivery should be co-designed with people with disability
- Create accessible feedback frameworks and processes to enable learners with disability to provide direct and continual feedback about their experiences and learning needs

“I struggle with general questions being impolite due to having ADHD and autism. So I ask a question and they say, wow that’s rude. I don’t feel supported and I don’t feel like I’m able to ask the questions because there’s no attempt for them to understand in a way. I generally mute my mic in class and shut up because the way some people say things compared to how I say things – one of us is considered rude or not able to be understood, compared to how different I am to others and that kind of thing” – Trainee Two

TAFE is not accessible to learners with disability when there is low disability awareness among teachers, employers and students, and when learners don’t have the opportunity to communicate their learning needs.

Trainees spoke about the difficulties they experienced when they were still learning and understanding a new diagnosis and how it impacts them, or when trying new medication or ways of managing their disability or illness. It is important for learners to have opportunities

to safely discuss these experiences and how they impact their learning needs with teachers and employers.

When trainees were consulted and listened to about their individual needs they reflected they felt supported in progressing by knowing their support needs, having a plan in place and being comfortable communicating with their youth worker, teacher and workplace supervisor.

Conversely, when communication is poor or the trainee has to 'teach the teacher' about disability, the learning experience can deteriorate quickly.

“We don’t use the terms high functioning and low functioning. It hasn’t been relevant in many years – it’s ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], you’re on the spectrum, we don’t label the part of it anymore. It’s difficult and unnecessary. So [the teacher says], oh, she’s high functioning, she’s coherent, she’s able to do this, she’s not learning deficient. And it’s not entirely accurate and I have still have difficulties. I can learn like everyone else can but my mannerisms are different.

It’s difficult for them to get it out of their head as it’s not an initial thing they’ve been taught so it’s a hinderance more than anything so from experience it became very problematic. They would try to help me and they’re looking up resources and using outdated resources like high functioning.

So yeah, it’s not a fun time and it can lead to some backwards progress and it gets in the way more than I would like to admit, more than it seems possible. It seems like little inconvenient things but they really build up and it’s pretty bad” – Trainee Two

The community has a long way to go to be inclusive and have better disability awareness, and educational and employment settings are no different. Embedding disability specific training in teaching qualifications like the Cert IV in Training and Assessment, mandatory professional development to ensure knowledge is up to date and supporting more people with disability to become teachers will support disability awareness and the accessibility of TAFE. Appropriate resources need to accompany these changes. However, just as important is the need to place learners with disability at the centre of their learning. This

means asking each individual learner what their needs are, providing continuous opportunities to communicate feedback about what is working or not working, and acting on what the learner identifies they need.

Supporting engagement and learning needs

Technical challenges

RECOMMENDATION

- Invest in technological infrastructure and resourcing to ensure online learning platforms are accessible, with enough human resource capacity to enable staff to troubleshoot issues promptly

One of the first things trainees spoke about were the technical challenges in having work and assessments uploaded on time and difficulties in accessing the online learning platform.

“They don’t upload my assessments on time... The course work was uploaded late. It sits in a technical department, student engagement, and out of the teacher’s control. The teacher has been understanding of course but it’s frustrating when you want to do it but you’re unable to... When they accepted my enrolment form it was a bit demoralising when we were then unable to access the content. And then once you’ve got it, you’ve only got about two weeks or so, so the pressure.”

“The issue is it hasn’t been an isolated incident because it started back in April, then in Term 3, then in October as well” – Trainee One

When systems are unable to support learner’s needs, students are at risk of experiencing poor mental health which can lead to disengagement. All learners have different needs but current systems don’t have the level of flexibility required. TAFE can be more accessible to learners with disability by providing coursework and access to online learning platforms with sufficient time for learners to become acquainted with the material and the technology. Clear communication is also needed to minimise anxiety and stress brought on by uncertainty.

“There have been issues with the learning platform... It’s been very difficult and this is before my disabilities come into play.

After I enrolled... getting access [to the online learning platform] the first time took up to two months for some people. So teachers had to download assessments and send them to us separately... I’ve had issues where I’ve been randomly locked out of my account. The problem is in the system... I called a number of times [to student support] each time I got a warning email – they would say, don’t worry you won’t get locked out. Then I got locked out and how am I going to get access to my classes, the links are there... I almost dropped out last study period, almost 10 weeks ago because it was just not happening. It wasn’t working... I wake up in the morning thinking, am I going to have access to [the online learning platform] today, will I be able to do my work?” – Trainee Two

Reasonable adjustments

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the absence of changes to the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, consult with people with disability to create robust institutional policy frameworks that put the needs of learners at the centre
- Ensure learners with disability are proactively informed about their rights at the time of enrolment, and about services and assistance available to support their learning needs
- Provide learners with disability individual and tailored support and adjustments to boost engagement, retention and course completion
- Ensure learners with disability are meaningfully consulted about what a learning adjustment looks like, and provide adequate resources to ensure adjustments are implemented and provided within a reasonable maximum timeframe
- Provide learners with disability access to pathways for support without needing a formal diagnosis or having to undertake extensive paperwork

- Implement structures to facilitate better collaboration between learners with disability, teachers and disability supports to ensure learning plans and learning needs are communicated in a timely way

TAFEs have structures in place designed to support learners with disability gain access to reasonable adjustments, including learning equipment or aides, greater flexibility in submitting work and when undertaking assessments.²⁰

Access to these supports require learners to complete a range of application forms and learners are required to provide somewhat extensive documentation detailing their illness or disability. This process itself can be inaccessible, onerous, and add additional stress and anxiety for learners seeking support. Anecdotally, information about supports is rarely made available to learners before the commencement of their course. Early information would minimise difficulties ahead of time.

“If you’re going through stuff, [filling in forms is] the last thing you want to do... The last thing I want is some more anxiety for more forms on top of assessment tasks - [but] unless [students] did that they then couldn’t potentially get special consideration and equitable support in that way” – TAFE teacher

Learners with disability need to be appropriately consulted about what is communicated in their request for additional needs or learning plans. Alongside a learning plan, learners also need to be supported to communicate their learning needs directly to teachers if that is their preference.

“I tried to make time to have a chat with [my new teacher], or with him and my [youth] worker to go through my disabilities and learning needs. Apparently they’d given [the teacher] a once over but I haven’t listed it in my documents and my [youth] worker hasn’t been involved. Apparently they’ve said I’ve got a learning disability but that’s not it at all. Now I have to go back [and fix it]...”

²⁰ For example, dual sector university, Victoria University has Access Plans, <https://www.vu.edu.au/current-students/campus-life/advice-support/disability-accessibility-services>; RMIT has an Equitable Learning Plan: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/students/support-and-facilities/student-support/equitable-learning-services>; Chisholm has disability support services: <https://www.chisholm.edu.au/students/support-services/disability-support>.

I've been trialling new things since January [since a new diagnosis] so it's new and I'm trying to learn how to handle it (ADHD). It means having to adjust my learning techniques and study habits because apparently they're not normal. So I'm treading water about what it means and how it affects me...

I try to communicate that and I struggle but also I'm given no opportunity. So before my communication issues impact anything, there are communication issues and breakdowns.

It seems like I'm not paying attention but I'm trying to focus. When I try to focus on things it's hard. But I'll cross stitch and play video games during class and often I'll have to hide my hands and the teacher then asks, um are you playing video games etc... I'm not looking forward to having to go through the whole motion again. I tried to set up support to do that but they've just said it's covered, I've got it, but it's been misconstrued or misunderstood. Like I haven't been given the chance to explain myself and having someone explain on my behalf and not correctly articulate it because they're not me and they don't understand exactly how it is.

It makes it very difficult because then when I get the chance to go back over it, they're like, oh wait it's not this, and I have to ask, what makes you think it's this when it's not this at all. And the answer might be that it was so and so's interpretation.

... I often have to do reminders afterwards, so it's more time; remember it's not this thing. Then there's the time spent unlearning, the back and forth which could take longer to articulate if it's in an email, or for me to articulate the response. If I'd been given the chance to tell the teacher about it in the first place, it could be done in 20 minutes in and out. It's a long thing I didn't want to have to go through. It's tiring. I'm constantly tired" – Trainee Two

Learning plans also need to be readily available to TAFE teachers so they can meet the needs of their students. Processes need to be embedded and be consistently applied to enable collaboration between the learner, teacher and disability support.

“I never saw anything about these students getting... a learning plan... Quite often I would send emails saying, did you apply? Students would say, yes I did. Well, nothing came down to me to say that yes they did and here’s your plan” – TAFE teacher

Youth workers in the CTPP can play an important role in bridging the gap and support learners with disability in communicating their learning needs, but this needs to be done with the consent of the learner.

There should be accessible pathways available for learners to access the supports they need without having to provide medical documentation. The need for medical documentation risks excluding learners who need support but who have not obtained a formal diagnosis. This may disproportionately impact learners with mental ill health. Anecdotally, VCOSS stakeholders have reported this process can be difficult and prevent learners from accessing supports, particularly if their disability or illness is related to mental health.

“From the parameters we talked about in relation to disability – using a social model of disability, not a medical or diagnostic model and including mental ill health – up to 80 per cent of trainees would identify with having a disability and mental ill health.

We have had to provide the TAFE teachers information about what the adjustment is. So we talk to the young people about what their needs are, and figure out what this is, and then we can talk to the supports and reasonable adjustments they need. It’s a case by case scenario. If a young person doesn’t want to disclose those things then we will simply go into the fact that the pilot program is about providing opportunities and negotiate on their behalf on those things. We’ve definitely had to educate teachers in who they’re actually teaching” – Youth worker

Once additional learning needs or adjustments have been identified, they need to be provided in a timely manner so learners can engage in education on the same basis as their peers.

“Because TAFEs have been stripped of resources, [I remember] one woman was sight impaired and waited ages to get some equipment to come through to enable her to actually have the technology like

a screen reader... that took ages to come through from the TAFE” – TAFE teacher

Language, literacy and numeracy

RECOMMENDATION

- Boost retention by resourcing language, literacy and numeracy support that takes place in the classroom or is offered proactively

Students with disability face higher rates of suspension and expulsion at school²¹ and have lower completion rates of Year 12 or equivalent than their non-disabled peers.²² In addition, while approximately 15 per cent of students require reasonable adjustments to participate on the same basis as their peers, only four per cent of students receive targeted individual funding under the Program for Students with Disabilities in Victorian primary and secondary schools.²³

This is important contextual information about how TAFE can better support the needs of learners with disability. It means some learners need additional support with language, literacy and numeracy to ensure TAFE is accessible. This support should be provided not only in foundational courses but be embedded in or alongside higher level certificate and diploma courses in the classroom. Over time, cost cutting measures in the TAFE sector have reduced the availability of these supports in the classroom.

“We might have had people come into the classroom to support language, literacy and numeracy, but we don’t get that now. Students will have to make an appointment in their lunch break and maybe do it as a group whereas before they would have been able to do it one on one... This support can be make or break for learners with disability.

While there are other support services, one, they’re limited, but also, students may or may not choose to take those up. It’s another thing

²¹ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *The Education State: Expulsion data for Victorian Government Schools in 2019, 2020*; Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions*, August 2017.

²² AIHW, *People with disability in Australia: Highest level of education*, September 2019.

²³ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *The Education State: Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, 2016.

to actually think about how to organise to do that, and other than actually taking students to the library to meet so and so to make the connection in that way, they may not do it.

[Students may want to take up those supports] but may not want to be stigmatised for having that support, they may struggle to go out of their way to make those connections – there is often high anxiety around this... This support needs to happen in the classroom or through proactive supports” – TAFE teacher

Funding, flexibility and student support services

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a compliance system that ensures quality but does not overburden training providers
- Bridge the funding gap between the ‘volume of learning’ set by the Australian Qualifications Framework and the nominal hours the Victorian Government funds
- Remove demand-driven funding and ensure training providers have sufficient resources to support learner retention
- Provide TAFEs with additional resources to design and deliver training to smaller class sizes to ensure learners with disability get access to the in-class support they need
- Streamline the compliance requirements and invest in infrastructure and resources to enable TAFE teachers to collaborate with employers to design context specific assessments for learners undertaking a traineeship, apprenticeship or student placement

“There is an understanding in this program [the CTPP] of what young people need before they go off to TAFE. Whereas outside of this program, a learner with disability will just go off to TAFE and work it out or just try and make do within the structure that exists” – Youth worker

Current funding models and compliance measures are prohibitive and do not allow for sufficient flexibility to enable innovative practice, for courses to be responsive to industry need,²⁴ or to meet the needs of learners with disability.

Aspects of this have already been highlighted in this submission, including concerns about reasonable adjustments and learning plans. Additional constraints include:

- Significant funding is spent on compliance and to pay for overheads, reducing the funding available for other resources including course development.
- There is a discrepancy between the ‘volume of learning’²⁵ the Australian Qualifications Framework sets for qualification levels and the number of hours that the Victorian Government funds per course. This impacts course design and delivery.
- As funding is attached to enrolments and drip-fed to VET providers throughout the duration of a course based on the student’s ongoing engagement, this means that TAFEs may have less resources to provide wrap around supports that assist students to overcome barriers to improve retention.

The highly casualised nature of the workforce means TAFE teachers have significant workloads and have insufficient access to additional paid hours needed to be flexible in meeting the needs of individual learners. For learners with disability who may require additional support, this can create barriers to engagement and retention.

“The funding model and compliance side is a barrier in having the flexibility to support people into the education system... An enormous workload has been imposed upon us teachers” – TAFE teacher

This is happening in an environment where cuts to funding often result in support services being the first to go, further limiting available support for learners with disability.

“In TAFEs when funding cuts happen, supports are the first to go and so I’m not saying they’re not there but they’re the things that

²⁴ A Jones, *Vocational education for the twenty-first century*, University of Melbourne, August 2018. Also see: VCOS, *An equitable and agile VET system*, 2020.

²⁵ Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Volume of Learning: An Explanation*, May 2014.

become quite scant and watered down” – TAFE teacher

Funding also impacts on minimum class size. Trainees told us having a smaller class size specifically for their group, comprising young people who have experienced barriers with engaging in the workforce, helped create a supportive learning environment and facilitated peer support groups with the assistance of a youth worker. Funding that is attached to enrolments and drip fed to VET providers directly impedes the ability of TAFEs to provide smaller classes with additional support for specific cohorts to provide individual and tailored support that many learners need to maintain engagement and improve retention.

Funding and flexibility also impacts the ability of TAFE teachers to provide engaging and industry-relevant content and assessments. One teacher spoke about the lack of infrastructure and resourcing to support building relationships and connections with employers to tailor content and assessments to each trainee’s employment.

“We were trying to contextualise the assessments to be in the workplace from the get go... That was a problem from the beginning, having to scramble around changing those [assessment tasks] and go through the beast of compliance internally to get approval to go with those assessment tasks” – TAFE teacher

Flexibility in course design and delivery can help boost motivation and engagement and enable learners to see direct links between the content they are learning and the work they are undertaking.

Employment

RECOMMENDATION

- Build the disability knowledge and confidence of employers through targeted training, support and resources

The impacts of COVID-19 in Victoria have been wide reaching and have seen many organisations and businesses close. Trainees felt these impacts acutely as some were placed on JobKeeper, had shifts significantly reduced or were unable to continue working while essential worker restrictions remained in place.

We have already made the case for the importance of on the job training. Trainees spoke about the valuable opportunities that participating in paid work alongside their TAFE course provide with them. These included:

- supporting employment pathways and networking
- providing an opportunity to prove themselves
- supporting aspirational thinking about career opportunities.

The additional wrap around support provided by the youth worker role is as important in the workplace as it is in the classroom.

“We’re as collaborative with employers. We might talk about the impacts of COVID, or if the young people are having bad days, bad weeks, or if mental health is playing a part in their day to day – we don’t have to go into specifics. With the young person’s consent, we can speak with their employer around negotiating plans to maybe get the trainee back on track in the workplace” – Youth worker

One trainee reflected the youth worker support, knowing that the program design intentionally supported their wellbeing, having a support plan, and good communication was a significant contrast to previous employment experiences, even through TAFE placements. This trainee spoke about feeling like they had to wear a mask to get a job, not feeling empowered to disclose their support needs and then feeling pressure and not coping when

they experienced symptoms of their disability or illness. This contributed to difficulties maintaining employment or opting to undertake casual employment with greater flexibility. These environments can be particularly challenging for learners with disability when they are in a recovery process.

One of the significant benefits of the CTPP is that it aims to support the community services sector meet their future workforce needs. This means that for some trainees, gaining employment beyond their traineeship in their host organisation or other community services organisation is a real employment pathway.

Trainees reflected previous work placements through TAFE aimed at supporting disadvantaged cohorts of young people were not inclusive, had limited opportunity to provide feedback and while the intentions were good, employers were at times condescending and only hired people external to the program. This can be a significant issue for learners with disability, who may experience stigma or discrimination based on poor disability awareness, rather than being valued for their contributions.

“Risk management is a big thing for organisations. Instead of seeing the potential of a trainee and see it as a great opportunity, great value for the organisation, they see the risks or that it’s resource heavy. This isn’t the case at all for learners with disability, but it’s a perception and people want a ready to go worker.” – Youth worker

