

Victorian Disability Advisory Council

The Victorian Disability Advisory Council (the Council) thanks the Hon Luke Donnellan MP, Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers and the Department of Health and Human Services for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Established under the **Disability Act 2006**, the role of the Council is to provide advice to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers around what Government can do to build a more inclusive Victoria and to increase opportunities for people with disability. The Council has an important role in assisting with the development and oversight of Victoria's state disability plan as well as a broader role to promote the rights and inclusion of people with disability. In line with priority nine of the current state disability plan **Absolutely everyone: state disability plan 2017-2020**, Council has a particular interest in inclusive education through a range of actions relating to policy and practice; workforce development; and accountability and funding.

Council commends the committee for undertaking this much-needed inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability and is pleased to reaffirm its scope. The key questions for investigation have the potential to produce recommendations and actions that will benefit not only people with disability, but also TAFE staff and other TAFE students.

Access to TAFE training for many people with disability is currently limited by:

- institutions' capacity to provide reasonable supports and adjustments so that the learning experience is accessible and inclusive
- misconceptions among intake and teaching staff that students with disability may not be able to work in their chosen profession upon completion of a TAFE course

Case study

The Council refers to a recent example of a prospective student being actively steered away from applying for a nursing course due to being Deaf. The prospective student was told not to pursue the course and that her disability would prevent her from pursuing a career in nursing. She was referred to an Inclusion Officer but was unable to access this support and received no further support to select and enrol in a course.

The student strongly advocated for a place in the course and was eventually granted a position. However, during her time in the course she continued to have limited access to the supports she needed to succeed, including access to an interpreter.

TAFE teaching staff are instrumental to the provision of supports that will allow students with disability to succeed in vocational education. To be able to do this in a consistent and evidence-informed way, teaching staff need training, resourcing and formal supports. The Council is not aware of existing policies, programs or resourcing streams that equip TAFE teachers in this way. The Council is also of the view that the general inclusion training

currently offered to TAFE teachers is insufficient to allow them to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students with disability.

The Council would also welcome the Inquiry looking at other institutional supports that could help TAFEs meet the needs of students with disability. These might include:

- accessibility and inclusivity training for key non-teaching staff, including administrative staff
- establishment of course design accessibility and inclusiveness principles, and accessibility audits of course design
- learning plans which respond to individual needs and accommodate learning style, sensory requirements, functional and equipment needs
- establishment of principles around student-to-staff ratios, particularly in courses where there are a high proportion of students who require additional support
- use of other professionals (such as Learning Specialists, Psychologists and Occupational Therapists and other allied health professionals) to support reasonable adjustments, learning supports and learning planning
- greater systematisation of handover processes between secondary school and TAFE, with processes that put the student at the centre of decision-making about their future studies and aspirations.

Council acknowledges that there are instances where specialist TAFE programs are necessary to bridge learning gaps or offer a more flexible learning program. However, these programs should have clear and measurable learning objectives and must be better linked to intended employment outcomes. The case study below recounts the experience of a specialist TAFE program that offered no viable career pathways and was restricted to a narrow range of fields (retail, hospitality and horticulture). Where specialist TAFE programs are in place, it is imperative that integration with other parts of the institution is promoted, including integration of students in specialist programs with the broader student body, and that programs and processes are in place that foster inclusive attitudes among students.

The case study draws on the experience of one Council member in attending a specialist program within a mainstream TAFE setting. We note that the ambition and capacity of this person is reflected in her current membership of a statutory Council that regularly provides advice to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers and senior staff of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Council looks forward to following the progress of the Inquiry and will be happy to be called on to contribute to its work.

Case study

V went to a specialist school for her secondary education. In her final year her career counsellor advised her to attend a specialist program in a mainstream TAFE. The counsellor didn't explore other options with V that might match up better with her strengths, interests and goals.

V was also given little time and no formal supports to help her make this decision. She strongly believes that attending a specialist school had already funnelled her into a very small set of options.

While V's specialist TAFE program was part of a mainstream TAFE campus, she and her classmates were generally segregated from other students. They even had different lunchtimes. This was the TAFE's way of dealing with incidents of harassment and bullying. V did not see any work to build appropriate attitudes, or to discipline inappropriate behaviour.

Unfortunately, many teaching and support staff also showed negative attitudes towards the students in the specialist TAFE program. Students were spoken down to and teachers used derogatory language. Some students were treated more poorly than others depending on how they interacted in class and they did not get the additional support they needed.

Many staff appeared to have low expectations of the students. High student-teacher ratios and a lack of support workers in English and Maths classes meant that students found it hard to build their skills. V felt that the focus was often on just filling time with recreation activities and field trips.

Low expectations were built into the courses themselves. The courses were designed to lead to a Certificate I in horticulture, hospitality or retail. Students chose which subject they would do at the end of their first year. Little support was given to help students make this choice. V's options and those of her classmates were narrowed to work as a gardener, at a fast food chain, or at a supermarket or a department store.

In second year, the chosen Certificate I subject only made up a small amount of class time. Class time continued to focus on recreation and general skills.

The TAFE did not generally offer students help to access work experience. Instead students would have to arrange it themselves or with the help of their parents. Many students found it difficult to navigate this process. One work experience placement that the TAFE did arrange for V was supposed to be for two weeks but ended after half a day. This was because the manager at the placement felt that having a student with intellectual disability onsite was a liability. V's parents were called to pick her up, leaving her feeling distressed and that she had done something wrong.

V feels strongly that the courses she took only focused on basic skills and did not contribute to an employment or career pathway. V believes that students should be supported to participate in meaningful education through learning plans, career advice, and access to additional supports as required, including from professionals such as occupational therapists and psychologists.