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Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Submission by
Dear Dyslexic Foundation

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INQUIRY INTO ACCESS TO TAFE FOR DISABILITY

This submission is from the Dear Dyslexic Foundation (DDF). The DDF is a dyslexic-led organisation. It operates under a social model of disability whereby dyslexic individuals are properly supported according to their individual needs.

Our mission is to empower young people and adults with learning disabilities to reach their full potential. DDF gives young people and adults a platform to share their lived experience of dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Our service model is built upon peer-led support principles and we use storytelling to give dyslexic individuals, their parents, and carers a voice as a means of empowerment and self-advocacy.

We actively seek to address the many challenges that dyslexic individuals face, including barriers to diagnosis, lack of visibility, acceptance and inclusion in school and employment, and access to support services. Through collective dyslexic voice, we produce regular podcasts, host a peer-support helpline, and our online community.

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1. WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia affects 1 in 10 Australians. It is a neurobiological-based specific learning disability that significantly impacts the ability to learn how to decode and read words with impairments in processing the phonological aspects of language (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). When reading this affects fluency, comprehension and also spelling is compromised (Berent, 2017; Nation, 2019). Secondary difficulties are less obvious to identify but will co-occur with dyslexia, and can include high levels of anxiety, depression and a negative impact on feelings of self-worth. A debilitating panic reaction is experienced by some young dyslexic people when placed in an academic situation where they cannot cope. Stress can demoralise, and, in some situations, disable the person who feels unable to survive in the learning situation. It is this extra vulnerability that distinguishes someone with dyslexia from a non-dyslexic. These are just some of the barriers to learners with dyslexia accessing TAFE programmes that will be discussed within this document.

Other difficulties include working memory, motor skills, organization skills, expressive language skills, dyscalculia that affects numeracy skills and mathematics, and left and right confusion (Alexander-Passe, 2018). Dyslexia is a life-long disability, unaltered by the level of educational attainment or the quality of teaching (Lyon et al., 2003; Tanaka, 2011). A short attention span, distractibility and a range of characteristics associated with attentional dysfunction often have a significant overlap with dyslexia. These can be observed as an inability to get started when faced with certain mental activities, and problems when switching from one sort of activity to another. Dyslexia, like other specific learning disabilities, is on a spectrum from mild to severe and is not related to one's intelligence (Aaron, Joshi, & Williams, 1999).

2. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Currently there are limited economic and/or social supports for young people and adults with dyslexia in Victoria. There are significant economic and social disadvantages faced by those with dyslexia leaving them extremely vulnerable to the environment around them, be it in education, the workplace, within relationships, home life, within our community and even broader, within society (Kjersten, 2017). A dyslexic person is so often hampered by their communication difficulties, and are communicatively disadvantaged. We recognise that the challenges faced by those with dyslexia are more far-reaching than just a reading and literacy-related disability (Alexander-Passe, 2015) Those with dyslexia generally have lower life satisfaction leading to overall poor mental health and wellbeing across their life span resulting in unfortunate life outcomes (Livingston,

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Siegel, & Ribary, 2018). We also acknowledge that there is a high proportion of dyslexic individuals living with psychosocial disability secondary to their 'invisible dyslexia' and the associated barriers to active citizenship. Dyslexic Individuals have expressed feelings of stigma, discrimination, alienation of peers and the need to disguise their challenges, using coping strategies to hide their authentic self, thus creating a second persona (Alexander-Passe, 2015).

The social impacts of dyslexia are far-reaching for young people and adults. Those with dyslexia are more than 'twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders and suicidal thoughts and are 46% more likely to attempt suicide compared to persons without disabilities' (Fuller-Thomson, Carroll, & Yang, 2018). Besides the distress and often trauma families, friends, and communities can face when someone has a mental health condition (e.g. depression, anxiety and suicide) there is a high economic cost to society. The burden of mental health is costing the Australian economy 1.3 billion dollars annually and will continue to rise (Teager, Fox, & Stafford, 2019) if early identification, prevention and interventions are not accessed earlier.

Dyslexia is one of the most dominant disabilities within the workplace, yet there is little knowledge about its impact on the workforce within the Australian context. Often one's occupation or job can lead to fulfilment and provide meaning to life and in turn, this results in a greater chance to be successful. Conversely, when one struggles at work and spends social time feeling stressed and anxious about their job, it can take a toll on their physical and mental wellbeing. When those with dyslexia enter the workforce, they must adapt to a complex environment with numerous demands while receiving little to no support (de Beer, Engels, Heerkens, & van Der Klink, 2014). Dyslexia can have a significant effect on one's working practices, often negatively influencing career progression and the choice of workplace (Morris & Turnbull, 2007).

3. THE EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY ACCESSING AND PARTICIPATING IN TAFE PROGRAMS

When a young or mature person enters TAFE they are able to access disability support services although they must be able to self-advocate for their needs and know where to go to access these services. If a person doesn't disclose their disability, they are unable to access any support. If they do have a diagnosis and do disclose then they must be able to access the support needed to ensure they are able to complete their course successfully. Australian studies have explored the experiences of students with dyslexia in higher education, however there are limited studies that have been undertaken in Australia. International research has highlighted that those with dyslexia experienced

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discrimination within higher education programs due to a lack of awareness and understanding of educators (L. Maccullagh, 2014).

In Australia, students in higher education have reported that disability support services were inadequate in the type of support they provided, students experienced negative attitudes from disability support officers, from educators and other staff, and were frustrated at the need to self-advocate to access appropriate services and resources when this should be the role of the disability officer (L. Maccullagh, 2014; Tanner, 2009). Other students have voiced concerns about being segregated into special classes with students with intellectual disabilities. This was usually due to educators not having a good understanding of dyslexia (Tanner, 2009). As already mentioned, dyslexia is not related to one's intelligence yet students reported being made to feel stupid, not bright enough, accused of laziness, stigmatised and labelled dumb, and not living up to their potential (Tanner, 2009). In order to complete their courses, students also stated they needed emotional and financial support from family and friends. Some of the classroom difficulties experienced by individuals with dyslexia may face once they are at TAFE may include:

- poor reading speed, fluency and comprehension
- organisational skill
- time management
- compromised mathematical skills
- anxiety and/or depression
- negative self-image (Cotton, 2009)

Anecdotally, as a collective, students in a classroom will be made up of many mainly young men who have struggled to complete school and have become disengaged in education. This may cause classrooms to become disruptive and students to be non-compliant and demonstrate poor behaviours that they developed at school. They may also struggle with authority within the classroom. This leads to challenges for educators to be able to provide the suitable learning environment needed for those with dyslexia. Educators have also reported that students had difficulties catching up in subject areas when they enter a course from a low literacy and numeracy base. This is illustrated by one tutor's comment that, 'there is no way with all these years of failure that they are going to grasp the theory straight away'. Although individuals with dyslexia possess several factors that can contribute to their success, considering these difficulties, those with dyslexia will often need additional support to complete their course /training.

4. BARRIERS TO LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY ACCESSING TAFE AND IDEAS FOR ADDRESSING THESE

TAFE is a critical enabler for individuals who have dyslexia to obtain a qualification that enables them to live a happy, healthy life. Yet as outlined by TAFE Victoria Five Policy Priorities for a strong VET sector the current levels of funding do not cover the full costs of support needed to train for those with dyslexia. We are also concerned that enrolment requirements for VET qualifications may deter potential students with a disability. One must have functional digital and literacy skills to be able to complete the online process to apply for TAFE. Those with dyslexia are likely to find it hard to engage in this process and unable to successfully navigate the various pathways into TAFE. This process can be arduous and stressful. As dyslexia is not recognised under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) learners are unable to access any additional funds to support them access TAFE.

For those with dyslexia there can be several barriers for accessing TAFE including the following:

- low economic status – unable to pay the tuition fees and associated costs
- limited access to IT
- post-traumatic stress from school trauma
- previous unemployment
- poor self-esteem and confidence
- low literacy and numeracy skills
- lack of motivation, sense of person and self-direction
- fear of returning to study
- a lack of support networks

5. STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THE PARTICIPATION OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY IN TAFE PROGRAMS, INCLUDING INITIATIVES THAT HAVE PROVEN SUCCESSFUL IN VICTORIA AND INTERSTATE

DYSLEXIA FRIENDLY TEACHING

Awareness training should be available for all personnel, to give them the tools to better recognise and understand this hidden disability. Further, staff need to be trained with the knowledge of how create a 'dyslexia friendly' learning environment. Dyslexic learners tend to be big picture thinkers but may be less adept at processing and remembering detail. Tutors should give

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overviews of the commencement of training programme first and at the start of any new section of the training. Many people - including dyslexic individuals - prefer multisensory practical, hands-on teaching methods and learn more efficiently if they are using all sensory pathways. These include sensory information: sight, sound, touch/tactile/doing or making methods and **not** sitting for long periods just listening. For students with a learning disability weighting should be towards the visual and hands-on rather than just the auditory mode.

- **Creating dyslexia friendly resources** - When creating any learning resources, it is best practice to ensure that these are accessible to all earners. Dyslexic friendly resources need to be developed using the research informed methods. It is important to note that there is not a one size fits all solution available that automatically provides an easy learning path for all people with dyslexia. Therefore, a variety of resources need to be developed that students can try out to see if they are a help or a hindrance to their learning.
The resources need to be learning focussed rather than just assessment focussed.
There is no use providing a student with an adjustment for an allowance of extra time if the students were not provided with learning experiences that allowed them to access or acquire and absorb the learning.
- **Create a learning environment that** focuses on strengths, capabilities and resources and by creating a positive classroom environment that's tolerant of differences. Place a high value on the chosen occupation and what their contribution would make to the workplace and society. Allow for reasonable adjustments, raise awareness and acceptance of Dyslexia and learning disabilities. IT training for students including IT accommodations that can assist them, one-to-one support may be more suitable, to enable the individual learner to set their own pace. To aid memory, a checklist of key training points should be introduced during 'hands-on' training for quick referral after the training. Emphasise the focus on learning goals as this will help learners stay focused and organised.
- **Other strategies include:**
 - simplifying terms, clarifying concepts and breaking down the information
 - mind mapping or exploring concepts
 - metacognitive strategies for time management and organisation
 - assistance with technologies such as laptops and tape recordings (Cotton, 2009).
- **Take a whole of TAFE approach** to promote wellbeing and enable students to feel included and respected and enjoy a healthy peer environment including the set-up of a computer/pad bank, use of equipment, diagrams and other visual representations to present abstract concepts.

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- **Access to** low fee scholarships, assessment services, tutors, campus counsellors and the establishment of networks of support such as of self-help/ peer support groups on campus or online.

6. THE SUPPORT LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY NEED TO MAXIMISE THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCE AT TAFE

‘Dyslexia is by no means incompatible with a successful outcome, given an appropriate level of commitment on the part of the student and an appropriate level of resources on the part of their education institution’ (L. Maccullagh, 2014).

Every year the Department Education and Training delivers and regulates state-wide learning and development services for at least one-third of all Victorians. The Department is building an inclusive education system that allows all students to learn and thrive on the same basis as their peers. In 2019–20 the Department continued to develop resources and deliver professional training across a range of areas including inclusive education practices, learning difficulties, and disability awareness. This work included the Department’s partnership with Deakin University to develop *AllPlay Learn*—an evidence based online suite of inclusive education resources for students, families and schools.’

However, in TAFE this does not seem to have the same emphasis as in schools. The only teacher training for VET teachers on Dyslexia is a day or half day session through The Vet Development Centre and with no follow through or intensive training. For those with dyslexia ‘difficulties are not restricted to reading, spelling and writing, but may be experienced across a range of tasks that students encounter in higher education’ (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006) To ensure students are well supported they need to be in an environment that provides them a positive context that develops their self-identity through social and learning support. Students must have access to a disability support officer and a disability team (Caskey, Innes, & Lovell, 2018). They must also be offered reasonable adjustments to undertake assessment tasks. These could be such as extensions of time for assignments and exams and assistive technology.

Educators

Educators must have access to appropriate dyslexia training and education that builds their awareness and skills:

- understanding what dyslexia is and co-occurring difficulties that occur
- understand the challenges and the strengths that students bring to the classroom.

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- be aware that students who are non-compliant may be having difficulties with the task and need further support
- understand that dyslexia is like any other disability and as such students are entitled to reasonable adjustments
- identify reasonable adjustments that can assist students
- dyslexia must be recognised as a disability as outlined under the numerous state and federal acts and legislations.

Disability Support Officers

Must be better equipped to support students with learning disabilities by undertaking appropriate training to support dyslexic students that attend their services. This should include:

- Understanding of the strengths and challenges a dyslexic student may face
- The variety of reasonable adjustments that can support the learner
- Additional support and resources that can help the learner

TAFE providers within Correctional Services

There is a high percentage of dyslexics in the prison system and up to 40% could have some form of learning disability and or difficulty. In Victoria, there are four TAFEs that support the education of prisoners including Box Hill, Homes Glenn, Chisolm and Kangan. Currently these providers are not adequately equipped to identify and support dyslexic learners. This is the most vulnerable of our community who need to access appropriate training so they can re-enter society with employment opportunities.

The lived experience of reduced literacy or language competence frequently associated with dyslexia can too often produce a vulnerability towards criminal and deviant activities for many young dyslexic people especially young males, who end up being incarcerated within the justice detention service (Snow & Powell, 2011). The lived experience of reduced language competence and crime are well reported (Kirk & Reid, 2001) and while learning opportunities are available within detention centres, it is commonly reported that the shame of illiteracy can present an overwhelming vulnerability and reluctance to entering learning programmes. Training programmes for tutors within such establishments should therefore be offered, to ensure the right ideas and strategies are a part of the tutor training.

For young people and adults who are from disadvantaged communities, the risk for them is even greater, with intergenerational trauma, unemployment, and socioeconomic disadvantage. This population are, therefore, even less likely to access assessment and early intervention services,

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leading to disengagement and disconnection from the education system and employment opportunities. In Victoria, 40% of those in juvenile detention have a learning disability (Caire, 2013). Our current systems are failing these young people.

7. THE TRAINING AND PRACTICAL, POLICY AND CURRICULUM SUPPORT TAFE TEACHERS NEED TO MAXIMISE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY

Training and Practical

The Department of Education and Training's Annual Report for the year ending 30 June 2020 indicates that the number of students enrolled in TAFE undertaking secondary, VET and higher education qualifications and courses in 2019 across Victoria was 329,300. It would be expected that 10% - 32,930, would have dyslexia. However, the report shows the total number of people across all disability categories was only listed as 30,100. It is highly likely that dyslexic students are going undetected. They may be picked up in the LLN assessment prior to enrolment but the majority of teachers and staff have not had training in what Dyslexia is and isn't, how to identify students with dyslexia or how to make accommodations or suitable adjustments. We are also faced with the barrier of lack of assessments within secondary school especially from vulnerable and disadvantage communities.

A large number of students will not have had an opportunity to have an assessment due to the significant financial cost to a family (Bond et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2018) meaning many young people go undiagnosed until adulthood *if ever*. For some students who have had a diagnosis the shame of having a learning disability like dyslexia means that they are unlikely to disclose as they may not feel like they are in an environment that it is safe for them to do so (Alexander-Passe, 2015). Additionally, many students will have developed a variety of coping mechanisms to conceal their dyslexia.

The Skills Council articulated three priority areas in September 2019 to inform the delivery of the VET Reform Roadmap and improve the VET system. These are:

- **Relevance:** ensuring VET is relevant and responsive to the job market, employers, industry and learners.
- **Quality:** supporting public confidence in the quality and value of VET for learners throughout their lives and moving it to parity with the higher education system.
- **Accessibility:** ensuring that all prospective learners and employers can access suitable information and training when and where it is required, including a specific focus on supporting access for disadvantaged Australians.

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Destination 4—All learners access and thrive in training that is right for them The VET Reform Roadmap states that ‘*People should thrive in education and training, regardless of their personal circumstances.*’ Research tells us by implementing universal design strategies that all students, not only those with dyslexia and other learning disabilities will prosper. This type of inclusive teaching and delivery of courses will have good benefits for many students.

Two barriers identified by students in higher education have been the attitude of teaching staff who are reluctant to change their teaching practices and the need for a more inclusive learning environment (L MacCullagh, 2014). To ensure those with dyslexia can thrive within the TAFE environment, educators must undertake a Dyslexia Training Package that is more in depth and comprehensive than a half day - one day workshop. On completion of the training package educators would be able to identify students who may have dyslexia, understanding how to support them within the learning environment and know where to direct them for additional supports and services. Educators also need to understand the psychosocial impacts that dyslexia can have on individuals and how these can hamper learning (L MacCullagh, 2014). Refresher training for educators and support staff should also be available every three years to keep educators up to date with the latest research, and to ensure they continue to implement what they have learnt.

Students have reported poor communication about available resources, poor co-ordination between learning support units and departments, poor accessibility of learning support resources, poor signage of learning support units, and strict eligibility and documentation requirements for support services (L. Maccullagh, 2014; L MacCullagh, 2014). As such Disability Support Officers and departments must also be trained so they have the skills and competencies to support students with dyslexia.

Various research highlights the many valuable skills, aptitudes and attributes individuals with dyslexia can bring to the TAFE environment. By harnessing and working to their many strengths such as creativity, high-level reasoning, critical thinking and strong problem skills and their sheer determination they will thrive. Not only will those with dyslexia thrive but these characteristics and capacities, when harnessed, are highly valued within higher education and the workplace (L MacCullagh, 2014) (L. Maccullagh, 2014).

Policy and curriculum support

Research by MacCullagh (2014) identified that policy and practices need to be addressed both centrally and at the departmental level and should include changing central policies to better support accessibility, developing practical guidelines for departments, better co-ordination and evaluation of services, providing staff training and awareness, and encouraging student advocacy.

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For curriculum to be effective, it needs to be designed and developed in a way that inspires learners and educators to participate in discussions of important matters that lead to both the acquisition of knowledge and the practical skills needed to participate in the workforce (Loupis, 2006). The curriculum needs to support different learning styles that meet the different needs of dyslexic learners.

8. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT AND TAFE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS IN SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Effectiveness of Current Government Policies

In Australia over the last two decades, there has been an increase in recognition of dyslexia within the education sector, including a higher state of awareness of the impacts this disability can have on the learning and development outcomes of a person; access to reasonable adjustments and some funding support within the educator sector has been provided. However, this awareness and recognition has not translated into the workplace. At post-secondary education level there are several critical issues facing Victorians who have dyslexia, leading to a struggle to access further education and/or gainful employment.

Many young people with dyslexia disengage from school and remove themselves from formal education even before reaching Year 10. However, when they later reach the realisation that their lack of learning has led to limited employment or training options and regret their wasted years in school, it is imperative that we try and bridge this learning gap through disability access to TAFE. Research has shown that with support and appropriate reasonable adjustments, dyslexia should not be an impediment to training or employment. TAFE organisations are ideally placed to provide a positive opportunity for the dyslexic person who is struggling to fit into any meaningful employment trajectory. Dyslexics have numerous skills and attributes that could benefit employers and could be facilitated, with a pathway plan and the right credentials achieved through a TAFE programme.

Although we have seen Policies and curriculum change, there is a need to reinforce that dyslexia is a specific learning disability and as such persons who are dyslexic are protected under legislation. The impact of laws and regulations on the provision of support to students with dyslexia cannot be underestimated (Lerner & Johns, 2015). Several Australian laws and regulations support the rights of people with dyslexia. The UN General Assembly's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) ratified by Australia in 1990 has enshrined in law these rights, and include the right to education (UNCRC Article 28 1989) and to all aspects of education including technical and vocational education.

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The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1992) aims to eliminate discrimination against people with disabilities in the areas of education and work and to ensure that they have the same rights as the rest of the community. The Disability Standards for Education (2005) state that students with a disability have the right to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without a disability. This includes the provision of reasonable adjustments.

In their response to the Dyslexia Working Party Report (Bond, Coltheart, Connell, Firth, Hardy, Nayton, Shaw & Weeks, 2010), the Australian Government (2012) confirmed that dyslexia is covered under the provisions of the DDA (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005).

However, not all state Education Acts include dyslexia under the special needs section, although this is essential to allow for more funding to become available (Bond et al, 2010).

The advent of the National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with Disability (Education Council, 2014) will help build accountability as educational institutions are now required to report on-the levels of adjustments provided to students with disabilities (including dyslexia) allowing these students to access and participate in education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014).

Despite these supportive laws and regulations, barriers remain to the full implementation of this policy (Reid, 2009). These barriers include: different perspectives on dyslexia; varying interpretation of 'reasonable' adjustments; a lack of strategy for providing support for high number of students requiring this; confusion about when to label a student; lack of training by staff in identifying and supporting students with dyslexia.

TAFE policies and programs in supporting learners with disability and suggestions for improvement

The current government and TAFE policies and programs are ineffective in supporting and ensuring that those with dyslexia thrive. Although initiatives such as *The Five Policy Priorities for a Strong VET sector* and the *VET Reform Roadmap* are a good starting point, dyslexia is generally lumped in with other disabilities and is not appropriately represented or appropriately funded. As such, students with dyslexia are left without the support they need to succeed, leaving them to flounder within a system that does not recognise their learning and psychosocial needs. Instead, they are looked on as disruptive, non-compliant students. What the research strongly states is that there is a lack of understanding and awareness of dyslexia from a government with a flow on effect through to our community into institutions such as high education. A cultural shift needs to occur in higher education from the top down.

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There is much evidence that people with the learning disability dyslexia can and do make great contributions to our society both in Australia and across the world. Well known people such as Richard Branson, Winston Churchill, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Steven Spielberg just to mention a few. These are people who despite of having a learning disability have managed to make a serious contribution to our society.

At DDF we have had many and various people support our work and acknowledge their dyslexia including politician Trevor Watts MP, Rufus Black the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Tasmania and successful footballer Travis Cloke. These people are proof that with the right support those with dyslexia can achieve their potential. For any person to achieve their potential, attributes such as self-esteem, self-belief, education, and an opportunity to succeed can play an important role.

TAFE is perfectly positioned to attract people with dyslexia and have an amazing return on investment by giving these intelligent people the new start they need to receive an education and become great assets to our society. It will provide the chance to transition away from poor mental health, financial hardship, and underachieving, providing a new direction to VET & higher education pathways. This will lead to the successful lives they deserve.

Recommendations:

- Policies and procedures need to be amended to meet the needs of students with dyslexia, many of which are beneficial to all learners.
- There needs to be coordination between educators across subjects and courses and integration with disability support teams.
- Universal design approach implemented - aims to meet the needs of students with diverse language and learning skills through providing multiple ways for students to:
 - gain knowledge via different modes of content delivery—multiple means of representation
 - demonstrate knowledge via different activities and tasks—multiple means of expression and action
 - interact with their teachers, fellow students and study materials—multiple means of engagement
- Encouraging and supporting self-advocacy for students. Self-advocacy is a vital skill for the development of independence and self-esteem in young people with dyslexia (Reid, 2016).
To enable students to be able to fully participate in their education and society they need to

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be able to know and express their rights, identify what they want and effectively achieve their goals (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Reid, 2016).

- Providing assessment services for students who have been struggling and have been unidentified. Assessment services are available at many universities but there hasn't been a flow on effect within the TAFE system. Currently, the only way a student can be identified as having low literacy skills is through the LLN assessment. If a student has a low result, they should have access to a follow-up assessment to further investigate why the LLN skills are below average.
- Enable access to counselling, mentoring, tutoring and peer support programs

There are a limited number of providers that support young people with dyslexia transitioning from secondary school into higher education and/or into the workplace. There is no support under the NDIS to assist in this transition. DDF is well placed to support TAFEs in implementing improved policies and procedures and providing education packages to improve the skills and knowledge of educators and disability support teams.

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