



**AV ASPERGERS
VICTORIA**

**A SUBMISSION FROM
ASPERGERS VICTORIA
FOR THE**

**INQUIRY INTO
DISABILITY IN
TAFE
IN VICTORIA**

NOVEMBER 2020



INQUIRY INTO DISABILITY IN TAFE VICTORIA SUBMISSION

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For almost 30 years, Aspergers Victoria Incorporated (AV) has provided lived experience community support to Aspergers Autistics and their families in Victoria and across Australia. We focus on creating an inclusive and empowering community for all our Aspergers stakeholders whatever the age or gender through a strengths-building approach.

We are the only non-profit / for purpose organisation dedicated to supporting the estimated 30,000 Victorians with neurology that our community still prefer to call 'Aspergers' (currently), as well as their parents/carers/families and professionals who support them. Our primary goal is **empowerment** and building a strengths mindset in our community. Our organisation started in 1991 before Aspergers was a diagnosis with the objective of supporting students who were having difficulty with the school system as well as finding and keeping friends. All our volunteers and staff have lived experience of Aspergers and 50% of our staff are autistic.

Australia has no other specialist, Aspergers autistic organisation with specifically designed programs through the voices of our lived experience community to support our Aspergers to flourish.

1. **Peer groups:** for over 29 years we have been providing specialist autistic peer meet-ups to catch up with peers who 'get them', share stories and experiences and learn about themselves. These are currently for Teens, young adults, adults, parents/carers and partners as well as jobseekers. During COVID especially our groups have expanded using the online format and are now nationwide. Our peer groups provide preventative mental health supports in our community in a unique way.
2. Workshops to build autistic strengths, self-awareness and capabilities
3. Advocacy supports: with Schools, Tertiary providers, empowerment services and employers – as well as government submissions
4. Help team with information portal to provide dedicated Aspergers autistics information
5. Workshops to train teachers and employers about specific Aspergers autistics student needs
6. **Our AV Work Experience program** is for tertiary school students. Preparation for work for Aspergers needs to begin as early as late primary school. If education was made more relevant for the current job market and includes communication and social skills supports, enterprise building focus with a work readiness focus for Aspergers earlier in the current education and the DET support systems. Here we would like to work more with TAFE career counsellors to ensure our Aspergers stay engaged at school by realising their career plans. Also, by ensuring their career assessments are suitable for their neurology and communicated to them in the right approach.

To gather community information for this submission we have:

- joined with Amaze and other autistic organisations to gather direct survey data from our community
- surveyed our social media groups
- held face to face zoom meetings with our Members with questions about their experience and with our young autistic student advocacy group
- met with several TAFE teachers who have autistic student (diagnosed & undiagnosed) in their classrooms
- held informal discussions with staff managing disability services at several TAFEs

We have compiled 29 Recommendations outlined for your consideration below.

OUR STUDENTS

Aspergers is now known as part of Autism Spectrum Disorder or some now come under Social Communication Disorder under the DSM5, and appears in the ICD-11, with many of our community preferring the 'Aspergers' term and association. Generally, many say they find the broader community have a better understanding of Aspergers as a term and how this implies their capabilities and needs. (However, we continue to check our community views on our organisation name and this may evolve with our community views.)

Aspergers autistics have an average or above IQ, specialised knowledge, and often extraordinary creative talent, focus and productivity. We do not have an intellectual disability and are cognitively capable. Our minds create a mainly **hidden** or quirky difference so people misunderstand and misjudge us and our behaviours. Our niche autistic cohort are intelligent and capable and if given the right supports and the right environment for our individual needs we can manage school and employment and thrive. We are highly productive, loyal, creative, innovative, analytical-driven, specialist thinkers with phenomenal attention to detail

Within the autistic spectrum our Aspergers have unique strengths and challenges in particular we often appear capable but we have hidden needs and often **mask our challenges** including executive function and social communication understanding until we become overwhelmed – and our lives fall apart through anxiety and meltdowns. This is across all Aspergers gender-types.

The TAFE system has been estimated to have 35% of students who are autistic. This has grown significantly in the last 5 years with our students struggling with mainstream approaches to education as well as free TAFE offers – and Disability Employment Services (DES) providers recommending the TAFE option. Many ASD-1 are facing barriers to inclusion in normal life of school, and then also work. Those who have not had the right supports in life develop higher anxiety and are often traumatised, and co-morbid mental health issues.

Many Aspergers autistic students have key strengths and capabilities often beyond their years, also have a wide and differing range of individual and often hidden challenges with:

- social communication: including knowing when, who to and how-to self-advocate for support needs. Some also take a literal interpretation of words
- visual and auditory processing challenges: many are visual or auditory learners that need visual images and clear concise wording or clearly spoken teaching
- executive function: organisation issues including planning their study or managing timetables, time management, needing information to be chunked by teachers and repeated to absorb
- **fear of failure** and perfectionist tendencies
- working in larger teams
- unpredicted or unexplained changes (eg COVID)
- **high stress**
- sensory challenges and overwhelm in many environments that are all communicated through behaviour or withdrawal so are often misunderstood by others or seen as non-compliance, which limits our successful study, completion of tertiary study and employment.

Our autistic students we spoke to discussed their anxiety and overwhelm in the TAFE environment which reduces their ability to absorb and process information. It also impacts their ability to interact and grow social connections – or ask teachers to clarify. Their self advocacy can be compromised.

We call this our “spiky talent”. Without suitable inclusive supports, system adaptations, acceptance and reasonable accommodations, we often experience anxiety, isolation, bullying and trauma which research has proven leads onto chronic unemployment, anxiety and other mental health issues and social and economic isolation. Many teaching staff see the behaviour and not the stress and emotions or sensory overwhelm behind the behaviours.

TAFE involves learning in a socially demanding and highly sensory environment with organisational demands to process. Our intelligent students face their biggest challenges in this social environment without supports that adapt to their learning and inclusion. Our students do not have what the DET system classifies as a “language deficit”, though our autistic students’ literal interpretation and communication deficits impact their ability to learn and be included in the current school approaches.

Our key community themes for Aspergers autistic at TAFE are:

- Minimal understanding or accommodations in TAFE system for neurodiverse autistics learning needs
- Lack of support and adjustment starting at the registration/ enrolment process and right through the TAFE system
- Overwhelming sensory environments with no provision for quiet spaces or calm areas
- Lack of teacher understanding in our tertiary education community. This results in teachers trying to educate in ways that do not suit autistic learning needs, despite their Universal Design training
- Lack of training of teaching staff in how to specifically support autistics, including understanding basic learning and communication differences as well as sensory needs. There is no requirement for teacher PD training in autism
- The curriculum and its design fails to meet our autistics learning needs which includes chunking of information and checking understanding before moving forward, as well as using lengthy verbal explanations. Often this comes back to a lack of teacher

understanding and specific autism teaching training. However, we have been told and other Inquiry submissions confirm the education resources provided to TAFE teachers to teach the curriculum require **major adaptation** for teaching autistics which many teachers lack the time or understanding to provide – including lack of visual supports, subtitles in videos and more.

- Lack of funding for wellbeing/disability support centres: in the past they have had funding and prior to 2011 provided excellent supports
- Lack of transition supports from schools into TAFE Victoria or any tertiary education
- No handover of learning needs information from schools to TAFE (unless a proactive parent gets involved)
- No sensory friendly Orientation Programs suited to neurodiverse needs
- Lack of support through enrolment process which is confusing and not user friendly even for less challenged students. There are no visual explanations or outlines on the TAFE enrolment forms about what happens if they tick the box “requiring supports”
- Lack of sufficient explanation & encouragement or assurance of support if a student discloses - creating a lack of trust to disclose
- Even if student discloses a **lack of flow** through of this information to ensure support requirements by teaching staff and disability services
- Autistic students are required to advocate each and every time they require reasonable adjustments when that is a key challenge verbalising their needs
- High tertiary drop-out rate: often due to:
 - lack of suitable explanation of course requirements to the autistic
 - lack of student awareness of support available to them or these TAFE processes are unsuitable to their needs
 - inability to access required supports or adjustments: often realising too late they will fail and could have accessed supports
 - inability to manage the TAFE curriculum without the required reasonable learning adjustments
 - lack of adjusted or clear communication in ways autistics understand
 - lack of social supports or support with building social connections across TAFE
 - change of course, teacher or aides without explanation or notification to the student. Autistics find it difficult to adapt to unexplained or unpredictable change and adds to stress and anxiety
 - disability support unit not realising they require support until they are failing and often beyond help - this leads to the trauma of failing and dropping out feeling incapable
 - high anxiety due to issues with our communication needs, executive function challenges, lack of others’ understanding of our student needs and lack of suitable simple supports.
- TAFE can be a high stress environment especially large groups of people and noisy/smelly/crowded environments with harsh lighting that flickers or too many people speaking which leads to:
 - reduction in our student’s ability to listen, process and absorb – or engage
 - reduced ability to process social cues: leading to misunderstanding & bullying
 - impacts on our executive functioning which leads to a lack of organisation and lack of delivery
 - stress behaviours
 - miss out on social opportunities that promote inclusion – as well as Orientation activities that grow course understanding

DO NOT HOMOGENISE AUTISM: The famous quote from Stephen Shore, a late diagnosed autistic researcher and advocate is: *“If you meet one person with Autism you have met one person with Autism.”* Our education approach needs to recognise we are a diverse and heterogeneous autistic community which requires a variety of supports and organisations around them. One approach cannot cover the diverse needs. In education the curriculum is often not suitably engaging for our capable autistics who often think outside the box or process things quicker or slower.

The subjects are often not made relevant to our students and adapted to what they want to learn. They often have a generalised knowledge beyond the average student – or have a spikey profile where they excel in some subjects with no motivation or engagement in others which can mystify a teacher or school.

Accommodations that benefit Aspergers autistics learning generally benefit ALL students.

The Issues our Survey, focus groups and one on one discussions confirmed the findings of the 2012 “Supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder” (DHS study) mentioned in the OTARC submission to this Inquiry which provided the below visual.

Figure 6: Key areas affecting progress in higher education (DHS study)



Source: OTARC submission to this Inquiry

OUR 28 RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE TAFE EDUCATION IN VICTORIA

RECOMMENDATION 1: SPECIFIC FUNDING FOR AUTISTIC SUPPORTS IN TAFE WELLBEING/DISABILITY LEARNING CENTRES

In Victoria our Aspergers students often miss out on funding supports for the issues that impact their ability to learn. They are unable to use any NDIS funding for in-TAFE supports. Our Aspergers autistic students must have access to funded supports. Without this, the expense of the mental health supports, and resulting unemployment after school make this earlier change in approach worthwhile in longer term economic costs. The evidence (Lancet 2016) is that for every \$1 spent on wellbeing there is 5 times return for our society, our economy and the individual who feels included and empowered. This requires the ‘disability’ centres to have funding to be able to provide suitable support to the growing number of TAFE autistic students.

Without reasonable accommodations and supports a large cohort of our student are traumatised by their TAFE experience, failing to reach their potential and the statistics show they start a pathway of mental health challenges. and end up in the mental health system with too many cases of suicide. Often the supports required are adjustments and do not require large expense, more an adaptation of approach.

If you adopt a more inclusive culture, curriculum and improve teacher understanding then the accommodations and support time required likely would reduce for many students – not just our Autistics.

RECOMMENDATION 2: FUNDING & RESOURCING FOR TAFE SYSTEM TO MANAGE STUDENT NUMBERS

Recently the government has provided free TAFE leading to a large increase in student numbers, without an associated increase in required funding. With mainstream education failing many of our autistics from year 9 more are turning to TAFE to provide them with skills to find employment. The emphasis on TAFE providing employment training also means that the Disability Employment Services (DES) also encourage unemployed youth to study in TAFE when they often lack skills to complete their course. The TAFE disability support services are expected to liaise with the DES within current funding levels and support the needs of this cohort without funding support. The support staff as well as teachers are stretched to their limits with many facing burn out as they try their best.

RECOMMENDATION 3: INFORMAL NEURODIVERSE PEER MEETING/CLUBS AT EACH CAMPUS with a PEER MENTOR SYSTEM FOR NEURODIVERSE STUDENTS

Peer-to-peer support requires less financial investment, while also building a strong culture of support and belongingness, especially among historically underrepresented students including our neurodiverse autistics. For over 29 years AV has been successfully running peer groups including for Teens, Young adults, Adults, Parent and Carers and Partners. Our Peer Groups provide a wealth of learning and crafting the best peer group approaches to empower our neurodiverse community with trained peer support. We see how our approach to peer support empowers our neurodiverse autistics as well as improving their lives and learning – while growing their social capacity and supports. Peer groups also build the leadership skills and confidence of our peer leaders who we train and support. We have run peer group at Victorian TAFES previously which worked well.

Peer groups are an evidence-based way of providing support in tertiary education and are commonly used in tertiary education institutions across Britain and the USA and some tertiary organisations in Australia. Our Aspergers Victoria peer groups have been copied by other local organisations as they see the impact our empowering approach has for our autistics over many years. **Peer groups can :**

- build student engagement in the tertiary organisation as well as their education
- grow motivation to go to campus or catch up with fellow students
- provide a way to manage mental health challenges so prevalent with all students: they are viewed in research as providing an evidence-based preventative mental health service
- provides them with peer feedback on approaches to try if they are having challenges – peers can provide suggested options to assist
- provides validation for their challenges
- support students to use self-advocacy to ask for the educational supports required from their teachers/TAFE.

This method of building tertiary inclusion is evidence-based:

- This Australian study by [Crisp Rickwood & Martin](#) published in the [Australian Journal of Education](#) in March 2020 found that “While challenges exist in establishing initiatives, peer support and mentoring programs can offer valuable benefits by increasing wellbeing and fostering skill development for both participants and student facilitators.”
- This USA [study](#) found that getting tertiary students to ‘engage with peer-run organizations that focus on mental health awareness can reduce campus-wide mental health stigma and help people receive necessary mental health support.’
- Further additional [Research](#) also confirms:
‘Within undergraduate student populations, there has been a rise in the incidence of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These problems have been shown to negatively impact emotional wellbeing and academic success.1 Many elements of the undergraduate experience, including stressful transitions from high school to first year, contribute to mental health problems amongst this student body. Peer support is a relatively recent resource for universities to address growing mental health concerns on campus. Peer support, which involves trained students who voluntarily provide emotional support to peers, offers a unique function to student mental health. It can be useful throughout a student’s undergraduate career and is also beneficial to those who provide the support. While it may not replace professional mental health services, it may be a significant addition to the existing student wellness support systems on university campuses today.’

This neurodiverse peer support system could be for any neurodiverse student who is interested in meeting peers. It should be kept informal, run by students, encouraging and empowering- and **not as a therapy group**. The image of this group will be important to attract neurodiverse students and provide the right supports for their inclusion at TAFE. The peer group leader training is a critical aspect as well as clear and empowering guidelines agreed by the group through facilitation. It is **not run by adults** but by the peers themselves to grow their own skills and ensure it meets peer needs.

Funding for this can be minimal if it follows our model of support and we can provide our AV peer mentor training which has been very successful growing our peer leaders' skills for employment. **AV is happy to provide advice and support to establish a peer network with our experience in creating such peer networks.** This could be specific to TAFE campuses or as a separate group we provide specifically for tertiary students.

RECOMMENDATION 4: EASIER REGISTRATION SYSTEM, DISCLOSURE & PROCESSES TO ACCESS ONGOING SUPPORTS

Currently students who may require learning support are expected to complete an extensive TAFE registration form that is beyond many of their capabilities. These forms are very confusing. We were advised by TAFE teachers and some students that many do not complete these prior to starting their course. Many fail to understand the registration forms including the disability declaration section. As a result, many miss out on supports.

Even if the students manage to complete this form and declare their disability, the TAFE system does not notify the Disability Support Centre or their teachers or course supervisors of their learning support needs. This means for many that for every assignment or learning task they must re-apply for their learning needs again – often beyond their capacity.

The registration system for those requiring learning supports needs to be streamlined:

- Simplify registration OR provide **dedicated support** to complete the registration forms with clear communication about this available support
- Clear autistic-friendly visual information about how disclosure about diagnosis or learning need information will be used in the TAFE and how disclosure can support the student
- One notification to all relevant TAFE staff via their registration so the disability services and their teachers are notified of their support needs in a clear way so they know how to provide the required supports
- From there they do not need to re-apply during their tenure for their learning support needs, unless this changes in some way
- CLEAR STEP BY STEP VISUAL communication with outlines on how to access support
- Invest in improving simple access to communication in TAFE portals/apps (often too confusing to navigate or find information)
- You need our autistic input to improve the design of this registration system with TAFEs so they meet autistic needs

Improving these communications and processes will support ALL student.

RECOMMENDATION 5: QUIET ORIENTATION DAY FOR SENSORY SENSITIVE STUDENTS AND/ OR ALLOCATED TRANSITION COACH/MENTOR

Many of our students avoid the noise and pressure of orientation so miss out on key information. This could be solved by TAFEs providing an alternative orientation program to suit the autistic students.

RECOMMENDATION 6: REVISE SYSTEM SO STUDENTS (& THEIR FAMILIES) FEEL SAFE TO REQUEST SUPPORT VIA CONSULTATION WITH AUTISTIC STUDENTS

Currently the TAFE autistic students we met with said they did not feel safe enough to disclose their diagnosis or support needs. Often specific parts of our community are suspicious of what requesting support or disclosing a diagnosis – or even getting a diagnosis will imply for them.

The current communications and approaches mean that students do not disclose and this must be reviewed to instead create a feeling of psychological safety and a lack of negative judgement or negative implications. The **positive implications** need to be communicated clearly in plain language and we recommend this review includes students with lived experience of this support to assist improving the TAFE approaches.

With this teachers also need an earlier system to highlight students having difficulty earlier in the TAFE year – so disability services can reach out to them before they are already failing.

RECOMMENDATION 7: PROVIDE TRANSPARENT IEP TRANSITION SUPPORT FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL TO TAFE/TERTIARY SECTOR

Again, this is mentioned in other submissions including the ATEND submission mentioned above. This should also include more transparency in information shared between education levels of the relevant autistic students.

This could include:

- Handover of IEP from secondary school to TAFE disability/wellbeing team
- Ongoing IEP management at TAFE to provide consistent supports
- IEP to include circle of support for student: parents, teachers, allied health
- Schools to provide **student reports** across to the TAFE about the student learning support needs to reduce the need for the student to provide this detail, and ensure a consistency of knowledge/support
- Clear plan in how support wellbeing and mental health during the stress of transition

RECOMMENDATION 8: PROVIDE UNIQUE STUDENT IDENTIFIERS TO COVER ALL EDUCATION STAGES

The introduction of a Unique Student Identifier across all levels of education would enable seamless transition and enable the education system to track the outcomes for autistic students. This will help the development of more consistent and targeted response across all the stages of the education sector. Several other submissions have suggested this for the Inquiry into Disability Standards in Education.

RECOMMENDATION 9: MANDATORY PUBLICATION & EASY TO UNDERSTAND REPORT OF EACH TAFE'S SUPPORTS FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS

From year 8 or 9 TAFES should have lines of communication with the schools for students and their families about TAFE options including clear outlines of the disability supports available at each TAFE location to suit their needs. This should also be available and easily accessible for any student considering joining a TAFE. This information should also include transition approaches that are available in each TAFE, contact people, accommodations each course provides for and more.

This must **build trust and use plain language** – using the advice and support of existing TAFE students to improve such communications.

RECOMMENDATION 10: INTRODUCE TAFE PARENT TRANSITION WORKSHOPS & COMMUNICATION

The mental health strain on some students can be significant and with that the added load and understanding of their parents and carers managing learning at home. According to the disability support liaisons many students are more successful if their parent is included in their communication loops. Also, if a student is struggling it is helpful for their parent to know this early so they can assess how to provide further supports for their student. Currently the strict privacy requirements mean that the students lack this support option- or may not realise the benefits it can provide them. A key support would include specific communications to parents of students still at secondary school or enrolled straight from school about their student's options for support. A TAFE disability/Wellbeing co-ordinator could be tasked with this.

RECOMMENDATION 11: IMPLEMENT THE 10 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE VICTORIAN TRANSITION STUDY FINAL REPORT (DHHS) FOR SUPPORTING AUTISTIC STUDENTS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATION 12: REQUIRE TAFE TEACHER UNDERSTANDING SPECIFICALLY IN AUTISTIC TEACHING METHODS

Currently the TAFE autistic training requirements are less than a secondary school teacher. Following the Inquiry into Autism Services (Vic) the State government already accepted the need for more specific teacher understanding to be able to educate autistic students. Currently teachers only need basic unit in 'special learning needs' and universal design which provide minimal understanding.

Teachers in the tertiary system should be expected to understand autistic learning needs especially given they are up to 35% of their student cohort. Teachers **MUST** be trained and tested to ensure they understand, and know how to provide adjustments and flexibility in their teaching to different and hidden learning styles, and understand how to offer suitable accommodations to students. Including other teachers with lived experience of autism will support this target.

All teacher training MUST create understanding of autistic and non-verbal learning disability students:

- Upgrade all teacher training immediately to include required autistic teaching methods & how to provide accommodations
- Teachers then need regular training updates as evidence-based learning techniques come available
- The teachers must be assessed in their level of understanding

RECOMMENDATION 13: ANNUAL AUTISTIC STUDENT FEEDBACK ON TAFE TEACHERS PERFORMANCE & THEIR SUPPORTS

As any company requires, the client or here the autistic TAFE student should be able to provide feedback on the supports they have been provided by their teacher and the TAFE. This must be part of the TAFE performance assessment.

RECOMMENDATION 14: IMPROVE TAFE COURSES (INCLUDING VCAL) SO THEY MEET THE NEEDS OF AUTISTIC LEARNERS

Going forward we need improved implementation of universal design in education as suggested by several organisations such as ATEND in their submission to the 2020 review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005. This outlines the following: *'ATEND members spend most of our time organising and retrofitting accessibility to existing content and curriculum that has not been prepared in an accessible manner consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). For example, videos that are used in teaching that do not have captions or transcripts available, and where copyright requirements prevent these from being easily obtained, and published material that is not in an accessible format for students who use screen readers or require audio format.'*

ATEND therefore recommends that additional attention is paid within the Standards to reinforce the need for Universal Design for Learning principles to be applied to the selection and development of content prior to it becoming available to students. The Standards could require tertiary educational institutions and third-party providers to ensure that staff involved in learning design must develop content that is accessible and for this to be confirmed prior to deployment. This could be achieved by:

- a. Producing a compulsory training module for all learning designers, academic and teaching staff, completion of which is an embedded requirement either in the Standards or in registration with TEQSA or ASQA.*
- b. Producing a clear and easy to follow set of principles on the preparation of accessible learning material, for learning designers.*
- c. Including procurement and sourcing of learning content within the scope of the Standards and thus extend the Standards to cover the production of learning content for tertiary providers by third parties.'*

RECOMMENDATION 15: SUPPORTED WORK EXPERIENCE- AV's WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Currently many neurodiverse students including TAFE students miss out on the required supports to complete work experience including requirements for their TAFE courses. This means they drop out and fail their TAFE course. According to the research by the Foundation of Young Australians our students all need improved access to Work Experience opportunities as well as education approaches that get them ready for the world of work. This requires autistic crafted supports for our autistics to develop suitable enterprise and work ready skills. Our new Program delivers such support through our co-designed work experience program.

We developed this program codesigned with Asperger autistics, following community feedback that our neurodiverse autistics miss out on work experience as their school/TAFE could not provide them the right experience supports to meet their needs - or they did work experience which went wrong and they were almost traumatised by the lack of appropriate supports. Instead such experiences created trauma and TAFE system drop-outs with mental health challenges.

Our customised work experience program provides autistic student work readiness workshops with qualified lived experience job coaches to deliver empowering supported work experience opportunities. A critical part of our empowering approach allowing this program to be student-led to grow their confidence, self-understanding, career readiness and work-relevant skills. Our program means autistic students no longer will miss out on opportunities, and can succeed in their early employment requirements.

Our AV Work Experience Program is funded by the NDIS for Teens and is already proving to improve outcomes for our Teen students.

RECOMMENDATION 16: FUNDED LEARNING MENTOR/COACH ASSIGNED FOR THEIR WHOLE TAFE COURSE

Whether a student with additional learning needs has funding or not they should have access to learning supports to meet their needs. The students told us that **direct and early communication** with them by their teacher or mentor or an allocated **wellbeing co-ordinator at TAFE** would help them manage much better. This could include:

1. One to One Support Learning Mentor available across their enrolment in a course: Many have suggested some form of one to one communication to support our Aspergers autistic student, especially in secondary levels. This may not be an aid but someone at TAFE who is appointed to support them with their executive function issues such as planning – such as a wellbeing coach (mentioned below)

2. That person could also be in touch with them directly during any remote learning and keep the planning process and keep their learning momentum going
3. Communication about changes to their subject needs and assessments
4. That mentor will help them plan for the changes for impacts such as COVID brings to their subjects
5. Many of our students would have preferred direct access to their subject teachers earlier to know what was planned and what is expected of them.

RECOMMENDATION 17: PROVIDE SAME SUPPORT FOR SECONDARY VCAL STUDENTS IN TAFE AS TERTIARY TAFE STUDENTS

We received several stories of our autistic students needing the right support and guidance from educators who understood their needs at the VCAL level at TAFE. However this was lacking. They received better support at Holmesglen Tafe once they were Tafe student, post-VCAL.

VCAL supports need to be aligned with those available for tertiary TAFE students.

RECOMMENDATION 18: BUILD AN INCLUSIVE TAFE EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT REALISES INDIVIDUAL NEEDS, SUPPORTS DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Going forward we need to accept that we need different learning approaches and accommodations for individual learning needs in our education system – whether a student has PSD funding or not. *This would assist not only Aspergers students but all students in the schools.* For some this will be providing some distance learning options and for others it may be a structured school approach or a combination of the two. All Aspergers autistics, need additional supports with or without funding, and should have IEPs – and access to peer groups plus other supports. This will help to drive inclusion by embedding acceptance and accommodation of differences into the TAFE curriculum and performance reporting.

Student Programs that build inclusive learning include:

- TAFEs need to be providing ASD1 students, and their parents, with more consistent and clear information about what adjustments and supports they can provide – and **even better, encourage student requests for their ideas of their own individual potential accommodations**
- Supportive peer groups to grow engagement and supports
- Accommodate different learning styles: we know stories of support such as:
 - recording lessons so tertiary students can listen later and make notes after, giving them scope to engage in class discussion
 - sensory design on campus: Calming rooms available in various locations
 - student Calming plans: getting a drink, taking deep breaths,
 - working with noise cancelling headphones a norm at TAFE
 - specific study planning sessions to support executive function needs
 - the DET could keep a list of some of the innovative accommodation options students have suggested or requested and that have supported learning. (Encourage schools to share this state-wide)
 - supported work experience
 - the aim should be inclusion for all in the TAFE **of that student's choice.**

RECOMMENDATION 19: CREATE & IMPLEMENT POLICIES AND ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT SENSORY SENSITIVE STUDENTS

Careful approaches to design and sensory environment will help all students be calm and learn – not just autistics. This includes:

1. the provision of sensory friendly and easily accessible learning environments for autistic students enrolled with Victorian TAFE providers. Consider:
 - a. replacing existing or new lighting standards so this meets sensory environment needs for autistic people accessing supports
 - b. when renovating provide noise design improvements including noise cancelling panels, ceiling heights and sensory design techniques
 - c. design seating and desks so they provide surfaces that are sensory friendly
 - d. design outdoor areas with secluded options and seating
2. Provide dedicated **'quiet spaces'** or across all Victorian TAFE campuses with controlled sensory features including light, smell and noise controls available each day to autistic students. The students need to be provided with clear maps either via noticeboards and apps regarding the location of these. It needs to be clear these are dedicated spaces
3. Even better would be for such quiet spaces to have a **qualified support person** who oversees the space to ensure it meets the sensory needs of students and assist should a student be in meltdown or need support.

RECOMMENDATION 20: FUNDED LEARNING AID ACROSS CLASSES MORE AVAILABLE

Dedicated trained learning aide for a student who can float across several classrooms helping anyone who needs it (many of our students hate a specific aid who focuses on them only so then seeming incapable. Box Hill TAFE is able to access such funding for aides for its autistics in its apprentice-related courses (DAAS funding) and this assists them greatly. However, these aides are often changing each session which does not suit.

RECOMMENDATION 21: MORE FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS & EXTENSION

This awful experience of COVID-19 has demonstrated how our students are all very different and that a flexible approach to their learning needs can support their learning needs at school. The diversity of learning need supports our conjecture that our students need a variety of schools as well as teaching approaches available to find an approach that suits their specific learning needs so they can flourish and feel empowered. This may be taking less subjects, further adaptation to their assessments and more.

Our students though may find some areas of learning challenging, yet can be **exceptional** in others – however due to their challenges they are often missed and pigeon holed by Teachers. This means they often miss the opportunity for extension and discovering true capabilities. This leads to disengagement– and often dropping out of the system feeling misunderstood. Some call this spikey profile **Twice Exceptional Learners**. Though classed as disabled in some areas does not mean they cannot be super capable in other areas.

Many of our students feel disempowered in the current education system, trying to fit in and learn in an environment that is often not suited to their **sensory needs and best learning style**. This flexibility needs to be a longer-term goal in the current out-of-date knowledge system that needs to deliver students successfully into employment.

RECOMMENDATION 22: CLARIFY WHAT IS REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT & CHANGE TERM TO EQUITABLE ADJUSTMENT

THE TAFE system, as with Disability Standards in Education, refers to ‘Reasonable’ when referring to adjustments and costs for those needing supports. The word ‘reasonable’ generally is difficult to understand and interpret fairly, especially for teachers who don't understand support requirements.

We recommend replacement of the concept of ‘reasonable adjustment’ with the more positive concept of ‘equitable adjustment’. The term ‘equitable adjustment’ is more relevant to the modern world, and the policies that govern educational institutions and equal opportunity. The term ‘equitable adjustment’ is more accurate in terms of describing adjustments provided to enable a autistic student to learn and be assessed on an equal basis.

RECOMMENDATION 23: FLEXIBILITY IN SUPPORT FOR UNDIAGNOSED LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Many of our students do not get diagnosed until late in school or as adults yet we hear of stories where trained teachers can see they require accommodations and support – and with that often funding is not provided until diagnosis is provided which may be untenable for that student given the cost or their location in a rural area – or cultural views. This is where needs-based support should be available. For many of our capable Autistic students they will mask and try and manage when simple supports can help them. TAFE Victoria need to adopt flexible approaches to evidence of need, with diagnosis being out of reach of some students – who can access professional confirmation of need instead. Peer groups also support this as you do not require a diagnosis to attend – self-diagnosis of need is sufficient.

RECOMMENDATION 24: PRIORITISE MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR ALL STUDENTS (MINDFULNESS IS NOT ENOUGH)

Anxiety is one of the key issues for our students and families. During COVID when community anxiety is at a peak and change is a constant this really impacted many who tend to worry with their usual routines and supports falling away and massive fearful change. Anxiety is often within their family as well. Mindfulness has been proven to only support a portion of our autistic students – and can actually make some of their mental health issues **worse**.

We would recommend:

- Peer groups as an initial support and inclusion base: these provide proven mental health supports as well often seen in our AV Peer Groups across the last 29 years of operation
- TAFEs provide wellbeing co-ordinators in each TAFE specifically with counselling/coaching training and autistic understanding. These wellbeing reps would also be specifically part of TAFE Aspergers student support team – **and could oversee the Peer Groups suggested above**.
- Allocated trained whole of course coaches to support autistic students

Further work is needed on reviewing the stress supports required created by the hidden challenges of our capable Aspergers autistic students. Many of our students try and hide their worries which comes out in behaviours such a refusal to engage and more – which is mis-interpreted or mismanaged by their teacher and schools. COVID times and the switch to Remote and flexible learning has highlighted the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to supporting autistics at school. It has confirmed the need for a more flexible and individual needs-based approach, where autistics are given the opportunity to learn in the environment and style that works best for them. Mindfulness has not been proven to be a key support for our Aspergers often forcing them to confront their busy internal world, and then feeling incapable. Access to coaching and counselling options is more important. However, some did not wish to use the tele-health providers being someone they did not know or not being able to engage with the technology. Something to be considered.

RECOMMENDATION 25: DISCOVER INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS - FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM & EXTENSION

Many Aspergers have an amazing memory as well as expert focused interests. You can inspire motivation and achievement in ALL students by being flexible in your curriculum approach to encompass their expertise, strengths and interests. However, this is beyond the ability of many teachers trying to complete existing curriculum tasks.

The curriculum must extend **twice exceptional, Aspergers and ALL** students by encouraging teachers and schools to capitalise on their areas of strength and then support these students with their learning challenges and accommodations. Not categorise them as incapable because they have one aspect of learning challenge.

RECOMMENDATION 26: FLEXIBILITY IN SUPPORT FOR UNDIAGNOSED LEARNING DIFFERENCES

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RECOMMENDATION 27: DISCOVER INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS – POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY APPROACHES

As shown by the Geelong Grammar Wellbeing studies by Martin Seligman, and the Positive Education Schools trialling this that all students benefit from a Positive Psychology approach to their lives. This approach to wellbeing means that student learn better – as well as learn to work better. We hope government also includes this both in:

- Teacher training
- School curriculums
- Leadership Training and KPIs for Principals

RECOMMENDATION 28: DIVERSITY OF TAFES

A diversity of TAFE courses and approaches is essential to cater for broader learning needs rather than the approach of trying to include everyone in the one TAFE model.

RECOMMENDATION 29: TACKLE GROWING TAFE DROPOUT ISSUE

COVID has added more of a spotlight on this already growing issue. Aspergers students have high intelligence and yet often fail to reach their academic potential in the current Victorian school and tertiary system. With their capable Aspergers mind, they also have challenges with social and communications with sensory sensitivity which lead to anxiety, isolation and often drop-outs. This is one of the highest growing diagnostic categories in the education system and these intelligent, creative students are ending up with mental health issues and the DSP. Peer groups will build engagement as well as implementing other suitable supports.

A key issue in our community is school anxiety which if not managed can lead to inappropriate behaviours and School Refusal. This leads on to home schooling or total drop-out. The effects of this include mental health issues for the child, parents, families and these can be long-term effects. There is little support available to families going through this.

OUR COMMUNITY'S SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

One Member VCAL & TAFE story:

After coming across your Facebook post I felt compelled to share my son's experience in the Tafe system. It's truly been a rollercoaster ride for him, and has definitely highlighted the deficits with regards to learning support and understanding the needs of individuals on the spectrum within this particular learning framework.

B undertook VCAL foundation in hospitality in 2016 at St Bedes college-Year 11. A requirement of the course was that he undertake all the written course components at school and the practical component at Holmesglen Moorabbin. As B had received funding through the Catholic system he did have access to a teachers aide to help him out at school. This did not extend into the Tafe system where he was totally on his own with regards to support. B was required to prepare meals in the kitchen, set up tables and serve customers. He struggled largely with processing too many instructions at once. The buzz and noise in the restaurant environment was also quite distracting for him. Although the instructors knew he was on the spectrum I don't feel they had an understanding of his needs and struggles, as there was minimal attempt to check in on him, call out bullying behaviour from other students, or inform me that he wasn't coping and ask for advice on how to manage him. This is where the system needs to change. I do understand that the instructors wouldn't have had the time to spend with B. Where was the help for them? Needless to say we got to the end of the year and I was informed that he was close to failing the practical component. I was not happy!! It was only then that there was an effort to get him over the line so he could receive his VCAL year 11 certificate. But the really disappointing part of all of this was that the year 11 coordinator didn't feel he would cope with year 12 VCAL in hospitality. This was simply due to the fact that there was absolutely no support available to him at Tafe. So we were basically told to find somewhere else for him to study in 2017. B was extremely disappointed as he did enjoy the cooking, barista and front of house work. He simply needed the right support and guidance from educators who understood his needs, which would have done wonders for his confidence, and enabled him to continue with the course the following year.

In 2017 B undertook a Certificate one in Transitional Education at Chadstone Holmesglen. As this course was aimed towards young people with special needs Ben was well supported. The teachers were highly qualified, and focused on each young persons individual needs and personal development. It gave B a chance to mature and prepare for the following year where he undertook VCAL advanced (Yr 12) in Community Services. As this was a mainstram course again there was nothing in place with regards to extra support for any student with special needs. My husband and I took it upon ourselves to meet with the VCAL coordinator and counsellor at the very beginning, to work with them to formulate a plan for B, explain his difficulties and needs, and encourage them to regularly keep us in the loop with regards to B's progress and advise us on any assessments due. I must admit the teaching staff were exceptional and worked with us to help Ben get through which he did very successfully. Again though where was the support for them and Ben?

This year 2020 B is undertaking a certificate 1 in Work education through Chadstone Holmesglen. This course is aimed towards young people with special needs. If not for the pandemic Ben would have had the opportunity to undertake a work experience program at the Royal Melbourne Hosptal for 3 semesters. Unfortunately he has had to undertake the course via remote learning and some face to face class attendance. Fingers crossed he can partake in a condensed work experience program in 2021.

According to the Holmesglen website there are support services available for students with disabilities. There was no offer of this when B studied VCAL in 2016 and 2018. I can only assume the support is only available for tertiary study and not VCAL courses, which to me indicates a flaw in the system. Without the support in those VCAL years I feel many autistic students will be deterred from undertaking further studies via the Tafe route.

What a loss for employers to miss out on the unique skills and passions of our autistic community because they didn't feel supported enough to pursue further education in the current Tafe system.

COVID SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

Our remote and flexible learning experience during COVID highlighted how we need different types of schools and teaching approaches as we have such a variety of individual and educational needs. During COVID some of our students have flourished in their online-remote learning without the anxiety provoking social environment of 'school'. However, others have totally dropped their bundle and refuse to learn online or accept any change. We will cover anxiety specifically below. We have gathered direct feedback using social media channels.

Some of our students thrived because:

- reduced anxiety in dealing with social issues within the classroom
- freedom to address sensory needs and movement breaks as require
- less noise, less sensory overwhelm resulting in more learning time
- less pressure around daily executive functioning tasks, such as getting dressed, getting to school on time.

- lack of bullying, no playground or friendship issues to deal with.
- for some students (but sadly not enough) remote learning provided more 1-to-1 support
- some parents say they realised and understood better from first-hand experience of their child's issues with learning at school
- some primary schools organised online social playtime with supervision

However, many of our students also experienced learning challenges:

- Much higher anxiety through the change and uncertainty of not knowing next steps and if things would return to their 'normal'. Changes to their school routine: not knowing when school may change format again (happened overnight initially). Schools must minimise change or communicate it well where possible for our students.
- Inability to learn using online platforms: executive function and learning challenges means they were unable to process this medium: with no other options available (see below). Some were simply distracted by other online options. Some also found online far more tiring and overwhelming so learnt far less.
- Online distractions when not used to that: schools not implementing security in how online is accessed so kids can access websites etc that are unsafe and parents can't supervise that if working from home
- Executive function overwhelm: without teacher direction or parent involvement meaning they withdrew from doing activities. Many struggled to stay on task without this.
- Lack of communication from government schools about their approach
- Lack of 1:1 support from their school (tertiary offered it less). Loss of existing supports such as aides and therapy. No school check-ins on their wellbeing.
- Lack of social connections: many Asperger students are not on social media due to bullying issues, and online communication with their friends was difficult to organise, given executive function issues. This social disengagement lead to some retreating and staying in their rooms, loss of existing friendships and strategies, loss of social confidence and worth. THIS IS WHERE PEER GROUPS OFFER HUGE VALUE
- Loss of all previously gained accommodations
- Refusal to accommodate students' needs if they needed to be on campus
- Overall exhaustion leading to stress behaviours and overwhelm
- Real loss of progress and momentum leading to fear of return and for some a new total disengagement with a return to campus. School refusal is already an issue across our Asperger students as you will see outlined below. It seems without suitable transition support COVID will be adding more to the numbers who remain outside the mainstream school system.

WHY ASPERGERS VICTORIA

We strive to be interpreters in supporting Asperger autistic individuals to negotiate and manage their world- a go-between and empowering support for them in a system that frequently fails to understand Aspergers.

AV's understanding is derived from our basis of lived experience which is an imperative prerequisite for learning to 'speak Aspie' and then being able to translate Asperger Autistic needs and requirements to a system that really fails to comprehend our intricacies and differences. We have many independently capable Autistics in our community- and have seen how a strengths'-based wellbeing approach, with a few individualised supportive/preventative health supports for their challenges, can put them on the right lifepath.

We provide a range of community inclusion supports services to support Aspergers autistics- from kids to adults, parents/carers, professionals and employers – to discover their strengths and empower them to flourish. Our Board all have lived experience as do all of our staff and volunteers. At AV we have more recently prioritised developing the best employment supports for Aspergers. Our programs derive from the real stories and feedback that we hear every day from our Aspie jobseekers as well as our lived experience team.

LINKS TO OUR RECENT GOVERNMENT SUBMISSIONS

- [Inquiry into Services for People with Autism \(Vic\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers 2019 \(Vic\)](#)
- [Jobactive Inquiry](#)
- [Senate Inquiry into Autism 2020](#)

