

Federation University TAFE submission: Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with Disability

Context

As a dual-sector education institution, delivering both higher and vocational education, Federation University is pleased to contribute to the *Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability*.

Federation TAFE's scope of registration consists of 130 qualifications across the discipline areas of automotive, manufacturing, building and construction, hair, beauty, rural sciences, business, IT, education, hospitality, health care, community services and foundation programs. In 2020 Federation TAFE enrolled 4700+ learners of which 640 self-identified as having a disability representing 13.75% of our TAFE learner community.

The University has campuses located in Mt. Helen, Ballarat, the Wimmera, Berwick, Gippsland and Brisbane, with TAFE offerings on-campus at the Ballarat, Wimmera and online/in-industry TAFE learners across the state.

Federation University has a strong commitment to aspiration, participation and attainment for learners with disability, providing excellence in the provision of accessible facilities and services, reasonable adjustment, Learning Access Plans (LAPs) and a culture of inclusion.

The University has the highest proportion of learners identifying as having disability in Victoria and has consistently ranked highest in Victorian universities for the past five years for learners identifying as having disability.

The University's Disability and Learning Access Unit (DLAU) is currently supporting approximately 840 learners.

Federation University is drafting a three-year (2021-2024) Disability Action Plan led by a working group comprised of staff and learners with lived experience of disability and with significant expertise in accessibility and universal access design.

Barriers faced by learners with disability when trying to access and participate in TAFE

Pathways and Transitions to TAFE

Familiarity with and preparedness for the transition to a TAFE environment is key to learner success, however the high school setting learners are transitioning from do not always have embedded and structured experiential pathways that give learners a sense of the adult learning environment. Having access to practical information about supports and access at TAFE and understanding how to seek and engage with those supports is important so that learners are not discouraged and don't struggle when commencing.

Learners with a disability often present as unprepared when transitioning from secondary education to tertiary education. Some learners commence at TAFE with the expectation that they will have an integration aide as they have had during secondary school. Many school-leavers with disability have not previously dealt directly with staff; their needs having been communicated and mediated through parents, guardians or teachers.

The lack of transition programs limits a learner's success as they expend time at the start of their course trying to understand how to navigate the system for reasonable adjustment. Learners who have indicated disability on enrolment are directly contacted by the Disability and Learning Access Unit and have more streamlined access to support. Transition programs from school, that educate prospective TAFE learners about the supports available and promote a positive experience when disclosing, are key.

Mature Aged Learners

Historically, TAFE has been the domain of younger learners looking for practical pathways to employment as an alternative to standard secondary education or for industry specific education toward their chosen vocation.

In the contemporary TAFE landscape, learners are more balanced between school leavers/VCAL learners and mature aged learners.

Anecdotal evidence and disclosure data suggest that mature aged TAFE learners with disabilities have more significant barriers to education at TAFE than their younger peers. These barriers include; not having had a formal diagnosis of disability (now more common through identification at high school), having to navigate other responsibilities such as family and paid employment and a lack of confidence and access to using technology and online learning platforms.

Entry Level Courses

There are limited '*ground floor*' opportunities, such as Certificate 1 courses, for learners with a disability to start their adult learning pathway within the learner's comfortable knowledge, ability and confidence level. This lack of foundation, or entry level courses as beginning points for learners with disability often means learners have no opportunity to try TAFE and see if it is something that they have the capacity for. Sometimes learners enter courses that are beyond their capacity which sets them up to experience failure, an experience people with disability may have encountered before and which limits their desire to persist.

Entry level courses should be available for school leavers, or learners disengaged with secondary education and also to mature aged learners so they can start to develop the skills needed to achieve success.

Skill Development Courses

Learners with disability as well as other learners returning to study after a long gap or entering study for the first time, would benefit from targeted skills development courses or bridging courses. A major barrier to learners with disability when enrolling in TAFE is that they have had limited to no exposure to an adult learning environment. They must navigate learning barriers linked to their disability as well as confidence issues in an unfamiliar environment. A Victorian state-wide written and accredited *TAFE Skills Development Course* with a primary goal of preparing learners for TAFE certificates and Diplomas would remove barriers for learners with a disability and make TAFE more universally accessible.

Regional Barriers

Regionally based learners can face more significant barriers than their metropolitan counterparts. These barriers include fewer available courses, geographical or travel issues (Important to note that learners with disability are less likely to have access to a vehicle for self-transport, often having to rely on family or public transport which is more difficult to navigate in regional areas). Regional learners are often from a lower socio-economic background which presents a large barrier when it comes to fees and charges associated with TAFE access. A larger shift to online or blended delivery, where possible, would aid in bridging this gap. Local courses delivered at regional hubs would create opportunities for regional learners with disability to study at TAFE. Transport support to hubs would further increase the efficacy of regional offerings.

Pre-Training Review

Each learner is offered a pre-training review to ensure that the study they have chosen best suits their capacity and career objectives. Staff conducting those reviews are often under a time-pressure to process a volume of applications and do not have the depth of knowledge about disability access to assess if the learner might succeed in their chosen field with reasonable adjustment, or whether they should be advised toward alternate choices of study or bridging programs.

State government funding to support professional development for TAFE staff to undertake disability awareness training would create capacity within TAFE to provide high-quality consultation pre-training and to give sound advice about the suitability of study choice.

Possible solutions

- Encourage schools to offer transition programs for TAFE, partnering with local TAFEs for experiential elements of the program
- Increase the number of foundation and entry level courses
- Increase on-line and blended options to undertake courses
- Development of a state-accredited bridging or preparatory course for entering TAFE.
- Fund professional learning for TAFE staff to undertake the pre-training review with confidence and capacity to advise regarding reasonable adjustment or alternate study choice
- Increase awareness of Disability supports at TAFE, helping learner and parents with their understanding of how to access supports and helping to manage their expectations of such support. This should be started as early as possible with something developed between secondary school and TAFE.

The types of support learners with disability need to maximise their learning experience at TAFE

Teachers educated in Disability

TAFE teachers have the opportunity to develop positive connections with their learners and often develop an understanding of what each learner needs when it comes to their learning. While building this relationship, TAFE teachers sometimes become aware of disabilities that learners have not previously disclosed.

While TAFE teachers can be caring and build a very strong rapport with their learners, they sometimes lack knowledge and confidence in supporting learners with disability. There is the need for an accredited course that is made available and mandated for all TAFE educators so that they can be better equipped to deal with learners with a disability. Were TAFE teachers trained in how to recognise, discuss and support learners with disability, more learners may feel confident themselves to disclose and be linked in with support programs.

Better staff resourcing and funding

Learners with disability need specific adjustments to their learning so that they can succeed, whilst not undermining the learning integrity of the course of study they are enrolled in. While educators may provide a more accessible learning environment for learners through training, this should not replace dedicated staff who are highly trained in access needs and disability adjustments.

From a Disability Services perspective there needs to be a better funding model that allows disability staff to appropriately case manage learners and work with staff to understand and implement reasonable adjustments that do not undermine academic integrity. With better resourcing this barrier could be significantly reduced.

The current model of funding for adjustments for learners with disability in TAFE is confusing and insufficient. The TAFE system could be improved by adding a consistent funding model for learners with disability. There is no extra support financially for costly adjustments that TAFE makes for learners who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind or have low vision. Federation university is a dual sector institution and our Higher Education area partially recovers costs for making adjustments through the Disability Support Fund (ASSD). This reimbursement program is not available for TAFE programs and shows real inequity between TAFE and Higher Education. Additional funding, or a different funding model for TAFE learners with a disability would help to remove this barrier.

Possible solutions

- Develop and implement teacher training in disability awareness.
- Greater application of universal design of curriculum and assessments
- Greater funding for Disability Officers to be employed to meet the needs of this growing cohort
- TAFE disability support funding could adopt a similar funding model as the Disability Support Fund (ASSD) funding applied to Higher Education Learners.

The training and support TAFE teachers need to better assist learners with disability

Disability Awareness Training

The majority of TAFE educators have very little exposure to the Disability Discrimination Act (Comm. 1992) or the Disability Standards for Education (Comm. 2004). This lack of exposure and education to these acts means they are under-resourced when dealing with learners with

disability. One of the greatest barriers to learners with a disability is lack of education and/or understanding by those that deal with them at their institutions.

Most educators have the will and interest in supporting their learners with disability but lack an understanding of what is required and how to apply adjustments. TAFEs need to be supported with high-quality training resources for their teachers that are easy to view, are practical and are engaging and accessible.

Provision of a uniform state-wide and video-based module for TAFE educators on Disability Awareness would ensure that learners with disability have a more welcoming and understanding environment when beginning TAFE, whilst also preparing staff to be able to talk to learners with clear language and to properly develop clear expectations between educator and learner.

Teacher resourcing

Teachers in TAFE are often working to full time-schedules and with existing resources. TAFE teachers have limited capacity to be able to prepare resources that are universally accessible for the entire cohort. TAFE teachers would benefit from curriculum support so they can develop accessible resources for all learners. Accessible teaching materials supports the success of all learners, not just learners with disability. During COVID-19 remote learning, learners with and without disability reported that they benefited, for instance, from captioning.

Possible solutions

- Comprehensive disability awareness training to be developed and made available and mandated for all TAFE teacher registration
- Teaching staff to be supported to embed principles of universal design into all courses.

Broader strategies to increase the participation of learners with disability in TAFE courses

The Disabled Australian Apprenticeship Wages Scheme (DAAWS)

A review of the Disabled Australian Apprenticeship Wages Scheme (DAAWS) system to reduce bureaucracy, adjust for ease of engagement and ensure funding in a timely manner could increase the number of apprentices with disability, whilst supporting the academic elements of their course. The system in its current format is time-consuming and difficult to access and presents significant barriers for both the learner and employer, resulting in lower numbers of people pursuing the program.

A Holistic Online Presence

TAFE learners, specifically regional or remote ones, would benefit from a better transition to online engagement with TAFE. An accessible online presence and access to learning materials which took a holistic approach to learner learning would offer an attractive 'way in' for prospective TAFE learners. An increase in online offerings would need to be supported by a plan for access to internet, technological hardware and education on how to use these systems. TAFE's have pivoted successfully during Covid-19 remote learning to provide and promote online learning, however without planning and resourcing long-terms the benefits may be short-lived.

Possible solutions

- A review of the DAAWS scheme from an access and universal design perspective
- Increasing in online presence and effective support for learners to access this.

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