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LAEIC - TAFE access Inquiry
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The Legislative Assembly
Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
Level 3, 2 Treasury Place,
EAST MELBOURNE, VIC, 3002

Dear Committee Chair

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

It is with pleasure that GOTAFE takes this opportunity to provide comments and input into this inquiry. As a Regional TAFE providing an array of qualifications and training to the North Western region of Victoria ranging from the Mitchell Shire and across the Hume Region, with over 9000 current enrolments, GOTAFE prides itself as an organisation that is inclusive and promotes opportunities for current and potential students with disabilities. As an integral partner in the workforce skills development of its regions, GOTAFE believes that the vocational training and education of people with disabilities should be considered as a vital step towards enabling work readiness and employability. Therefore, the perspectives of this regional provider will not only contribute but strengthen the submission.

GOTAFE Current Situation

Enrolments and Support

For the 2020 year, GOTAFE received over 900 enrolments who identified as having a disability on enrolment. Of these, 474 students accessed services from Disability Liaison Officers (support provided to students with disabilities). As part of the ongoing review of its service provision to students with a disability, in class interviews were conducted to obtain the student body's views. During this process, it was noted that an overwhelming number of students preferred to not have support from Disability Liaison Officers as it was felt that it marginalised and stigmatised the service and students. As a result, and through consultation, the service was renamed Equitable Learning Support and the scope of service delivery was broadened.

The support provided to students was now individualised, with a plan to achieve independence and autonomy during the learning journey. More technology was introduced to provide discrete support so students can achieve a higher level of independence and feel completely integrated into their peer cohort. An example of this was the procurement of C-Pens, a digital reader that a student with dyslexia, for example, can run over their printed work and the pen discretely reads the information to the student through an earpiece.

The support for students with a disability continues to range from the provision of an Auslan interpretation to reader-writers and support tutorials. There were a significant number of students with disabilities accessing digital support in order to assist them via online and self-help tools. A total of 8962 interactions were recorded using the online tools for students with disabilities.

Additionally, 274 students with disabilities receiving support also accessed the counselling services provided by GOTAFE for all students. Every student with a disability is also offered learning support sessions outside of class times in order to ensure that they maintain the workload and pressures of their studies.

The 2020 academic year provided additional challenges to students with disabilities:

1. Transitioning to online or blended learning proving challenging for many as a new level of digital literacy was now required to interact with their studies that was not required before.
2. Disengagement due to lack of digital devices and in many cases, resulting from financial challenges.
3. Higher levels of disengagement due to the new mode of delivery and the provision of support transitioning to remote delivery via Microsoft Teams and Zoom.
4. Due to the isolation imposed by COVID-19, pressure was placed the mental health of many students.

At GOTAFE, every student who declares a disability at enrolment is offered support via the Equitable Learning Team. A pre-training review is completed with each student and, where support is deemed necessary or requested, it is referred to the Equitable Learning Advisor. The Equitable Learning Advisor will:

1. Complete a needs assessment with each student individually
2. Work with the student and the trainer to develop a Reasonable Adjustment Plan
3. Assist the trainer to implement the Reasonable Adjustment Plan
4. Periodically review the Plan to the student's progress and adjust the Plan if needed

The support provided to a student is done using a mentoring model aimed at achieving independence and employability.

Resourcing

Providing support to students with disabilities is resource intensive. The support at GOTAFE is partially funded by Community Services Funding which falls short of the total cost of support services provided. Direct support attributed solely towards students with a disability include:

1. 12000 hours in-person support using casual contracts
2. 4 EFT Equitable Learning Support Advisors

In a student survey conducted in person during 2019, it was found that students with disabilities preferred peer support and self-help services over in person support. This resulted in a substantial reduction in support workers after the development of the Student Lounge on the GOTAFE Moodle platform. During this survey, it was noted that students also preferred not to have the "label" of "disability" and subsequently, the decision was made to change the service name to Equitable Learning Support.

GOTAFE have purchased a number of assistive technologies which students with disabilities are introduced to, in order to assist in their learning and attain a measure of independence. This is loaned to students until they become familiar with the technologies and assist students to apply for support via NDIS to procure their own devices.

All online learning is developed with an AA accessible rating target, mostly exceeding the rating requirements. Student engagement with their Moodle courses is further enhanced with an Optical Recognition Application called Read Easy to ensure students with both a sight impairment and a reading impairment are able to interact with their learning.

Challenges experienced within a regional context

Stigma and disclosure

During the survey conducted with students in 2019, students also commented that it was their preference not to disclose their disability at enrolment and would engage with the service only when their disability became a challenge to engagement and completion. This evidence lends itself to many interpretations including the knowledge that there is potentially a higher proportion of students who have a disability than what is being recorded. They also reported that the stigma attached to having a disability and having additional support meant they often did not want to disclose or seek support until absolutely necessary. GOTAFE see this as a social challenge to overcome in seeking to support all students where and when they need it. This is being addressed through the redevelopment of the Reasonable Adjustment Plan of the organisation which is embedded in the GOTAFE Social Justice Charter.

GOTAFE are also endeavouring to have a Student Council member who represents students with a disability to ensure the student voice is heard at various platforms within the organisation.

Advocating for employability

An important challenge facing students with a disability when transitioning to employment is a lack of education and understanding by employers as well as the physical requirements of employment prospects in rural regions. To this end, the GOTAFE Equitable Learning Advisors advocate for students with disabilities, together with not-for-profit organisations to promote the employability of the students. GOTAFE have commenced a project to further the employability of students with a disability by:

1. Setting up a process where a Reasonable Adjustment Plan can be created for potential employers together with the employer and student.
2. Developing employability pathways via the Skills and Jobs Centre, advocacy groups and an industry liaison group to develop a Work Ready Passport as a means of credentialing the employability skills of the students, with the aim of making employment easier.
3. The provision of internships within GOTAFE – providing opportunities for students with a disability to gain valuable industry experience in some support roles within GOTAFE serving students and external clients.

The challenges for some students with a disability to gain employment within the agriculture sector remains prevalent.

Resourcing and assistive technologies

Students with a disability in regional areas have additional challenges obtaining the equivalent support available to students in urban areas, due to a smaller population and lower financial means.

GOTAFE currently have three full-time students who require Auslan interpreters and only one registered interpreter in the region. To provide support to the additional students requires

interpreters to be employed from Melbourne therefore having a substantial impact on the cost of support provision. On average, for a full-time equivalent student who is hearing impaired, the total cost for a year would be \$75,000.00 (including the interpreter and reader-writer). With the Community Service Funding being stretched across all support services, the cost of support is a challenge.

The provision of funding from NDIS to students towards study and training remains an ongoing challenge for students. Often the funding available does not cover study and training requirements and this includes assistive technologies. This would leave the student out of the use of the technology when transitioning into employment providing additional pathway challenges that further inhibits employability.

Reasonable Adjustments

There appears to be a lack of developing and applying reasonable adjustment by TAFE trainers to fully support students with disabilities during their teaching and learning process. As a result, students with disabilities are struggling in their training, falling behind their peers and resulting in the need for significant remedial support. This highlights the importance of additional professional development on the specific topic of providing reasonable adjustments. The current default position is that trainers expect that every student with a disability gets a support worker in class and that the trainer has no further adjustments to make. Additionally, trainers would interview students with a disability during the enrolment process and there have been instances that students were initially declined by the trainer's bias.

Addressing this important issue would require a review of the TAE qualification to ensure there is a unit that does focus on teaching trainers how to adapt their classroom management to include students with a disability, develop and maintain reasonable adjustments, and explore teaching and assessment possibilities. GOTAFE attempts to work with every trainer who has a student with a disability to develop and implement reasonable adjustments. As part of this, the trainer is also supported to ensure that they are aware of their role in the plan. There are check-in appointments made with the trainer to ensure continued support is provided to the trainer and student. GOTAFE have also revised their enrolment process and support for students with a disability is identified through the enrolment stage and the Disability Liaison Officer then works with the potential student and trainer. This new process avoids any bias that may potentially existed at enrolment, therefore, creating a fair and equitable process.

Access and equity

GOTAFE aims to ensure full access into training and education for all students and have implemented equitable systems and processes in order to ensure equity across all teaching and learning. The access to facilities is being reviewed as part of the ongoing campus development plan where current shortcomings have been identified. Once again, this is a significant financial resource required to achieve this outcome. GOTAFE also welcomes the review outcomes of the Macklin Review which has identified areas where improvements can be made and focussed on.