The Voice of Multicultural Victoria

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability

Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

ECCV Submission

October 2020

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- BRITE
- Burke and Beyond
- Box Hill Institute
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Executive Summary

> "Disability shouldn't be seen as a bad thing, but an enrichment!"
> - an interviewee

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak advocacy body for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Victoria. ECCV congratulates the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee, Parliament of Victoria, on holding this Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability and thanks the Committee for inviting ECCV to make a submission.

Disabilities alone do not disadvantage learners from accessing or completing TAFE education. It is a lack of streamlined pathways for students, failure to provide reasonable adjustments, and insufficient tailored supports that make individuals disengage, feel undervalued, or limit their access to TAFE education altogether. Inclusive education requires a human rights approach and focus on equity. A number of current practices within the Victorian TAFE system do not clearly address the challenges that people with disabilities face in accessing vocational pathways and outcomes.

Disaggregated data is limited on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students with disabilities[1] within the Victorian TAFE system. The available data shows that CALD students with disabilities have lower participation rates in the education system by approximately two percent[2], and are likely to have a ten percent lower completion rate than average due to their intersecting needs[3] not being met by the system.

A number of individual TAFEs demonstrate good practice examples in supporting people with disabilities overcome obstacles to access and participation in vocational education and training. However, the lack of a whole of system strategy across Institutes for people with disability, demonstrates a need for policy and funding reform across the TAFE sector in Victoria.

The reliance on **self-advocacy** in students' educational journey puts the onus on individual students to articulate and demonstrate their needs to access **reasonable adjustments** to participate in TAFE pathways. Although self-advocacy is crucial for self-determination, many people with disability from CALD backgrounds face barriers to developing self-advocacy skills.

Individual goal-based planning needs to be embedded as an integral part of the enrolment process for all students and should be viewed as indispensable for learners with disabilities and other students who have co-occurring needs. This will ensure appropriate early identification of needs and aspirations and how these can best be met through student support, learning and industry participation. Through **formal partnerships** with specialist agencies, supports can be leveraged to improve the engagement, retention and completion rates for learners with additional needs at TAFE. TAFE Institutes can in turn be better positioned to respond to the **growing diversity** of their students who need tailored supports to achieve success.

People seek TAFE education with the goal of gaining meaningful employment, yet discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including those from CALD backgrounds, often hinders them securing **placements and work experience** that are essential to course completion**.** All students must be guaranteed **work placement** opportunities regardless of their needs, as this is not only a

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[1] ECCV uses plural of disability to emphasise that people may have multiple disabilities, therefore they should not be singled out as one homogenous group.

[2] NDIA, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Participants report, 30 June 2019.

[3] Duncan McVicar and Domenico Tabasso, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps research* report, available at: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0027/44739/impact-of-disadvantage-2818.pdf (accessed on 21 September).

prerequisite for course completion but an enhancement of employment prospects through relevant professional experience. If work placements become a legislated responsibility for TAFE providers, it will reduce pressure on students who may lack necessary self-advocacy skills and external networks to secure a relevant placement. This is particularly true for students with disabilities from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Further systemic challenges for learners with disability such as **class sizes**, lack of **peer support** and **student voice,** as well and the impacts of the **COVID-19 pandemic** also need to be considered by the Inquiry as these go to the heart of how TAFEs are funded, governed and remain accountable to the needs of the community.

These elements are ultimately key determinants in effective access to TAFE and achievement of positive vocational outcomes for people with disabilities, including those from CALD communities.

Summary of recommendations

1. That collecting and publishing data on access, participation and outcomes at TAFE for students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is made mandatory.

2. That records for students with disabilities are shared across education settings (with consent) to better support successful transition to TAFE.

3. That person-centred assessments and goal-based planning is developed as a living document for (CALD) students with disabilities on enrolment at TAFE. A holistic approach to students' needs and abilities should include parents or person's representatives being included and be delivered in languages and formats preferred by the family/representatives.

4. That a single TAFE governing body is established to ensure consistency in the way that TAFEs apply legislation, policy frameworks and standards to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.

5. That the Student Resource Package (SRP) is reformed and follows senior high school students with disabilities to TAFE until 21 years of age.

6. That the State and the Commonwealth Governments increase Community Service Obligation funding to TAFE to ensure required disability supports are adequately funded across teaching, learning and vocational pathways.

7. That the Victorian State Government funds a peer support model, in the form of intersectional hubs, at each TAFE to assist and mentor students with diverse needs.

8. That TAFE disability support staff are provided with ongoing professional development to meet intersectional student needs.

9. That additional Student Contact Hour funding be provided to support students with disabilities regardless of their course, allowing TAFEs to commit to smaller classes and permit students to complete modules in a time that is reasonable for them.

10. That TAFE teachers are required to complete cultural competency and disability training.

11. That the State and the Federal Governments fund organisations, to support students with disabilities, regardless of their NDIS eligibility, to successfully transition from school to TAFE to employment.

12. That TAFE governance frameworks include advisory committees, comprising people with a range of lived experience, to review policies and support inclusion practices.

13. That TAFEs responsibility for supporting work placements be legislated.

14. That students with disabilities are provided with online learning and participation options to mitigate barriers.

About ECCV

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak advocacy body in Victoria for multicultural communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. ECCV has over 220 member organisations, including ethnic associations and multicultural service providers, and eight regional ethnic communities' councils across the state. Since 1974, we have been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for ethnic and multicultural communities, and for the building of a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community.

ECCV has a long history in advocating for the rights of multicultural communities, informing industry practice and influencing governments on a range of issues including disability, aged care, health, employment, culturally responsive services and equitable access.

For more than four years we have been funded by the Victorian Government to deliver disability and NDIS focused projects to empower culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people with disabilities, their families and communities to effectively navigate the Australian disability system. Recently, ECCV has been contracted through the Commonwealth's National Community Connectors Program to provide additional engagement and advocacy support for CALD Victorians with disabilities, a group that remains under-represented among NDIS participants.

We acknowledge the important role that TAFE plays in creating public and economic value and the range of considerations the sector has to address to meet the diverse needs of Victorian learners. ECCV congratulates the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee, Parliament of Victoria, on holding this Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability and thanks the Committee for inviting ECCV to make a submission.

In this submission ECCV is particularly focusing on barriers and opportunities faced by CALD learners with disabilities when accessing and studying at TAFE. These recommendations have been informed through desktop research, ECCV's previous policy work on skills, disadvantaged jobseekers and disability as well as consultations with disability advocates from CALD communities, peak bodies, disability service providers and TAFE Institutions. ECCV presents these findings and recommendations to the Committee to inform its Inquiry and hopes this will increase access and opportunities for learners with disabilities from CALD backgrounds in TAFE education.

Background

"The foundations for a more inclusive state start with education."[4]

TAFE plays an important role in creating public value in Victoria and has a long history of developing relationships with diverse communities in metropolitan and regional parts of the state. According to KPMG's report *The importance of TAFE to Victoria's prosperity,* "Students enrolled in TAFE are more likely to be Indigenous, have a disability, live in a rural or remote area or come from a low socio-economic background when compared with students enrolled in private registered training providers (RTOs) and universities."[5]

It is worth noting that, despite overarching legal obligations under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic), the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* and policies, such as the Program for students with disabilities, each TAFE makes individual decisions on how to endorse and action policies and set priorities. This results in varied learning and social participation experiences and outcomes for students with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)[6] backgrounds.

ECCV emphasises the limitation that exists in current policy making when aiming to address equity of access and participation for *disadvantaged groups*. Too often a singular lens hinders policy makers from achieving effective long-term impacts.

Through interviews with individuals with lived experience, disability service providers, TAFEs and industry associations, it is evident that disabilities alone do not disadvantage learners from accessing or completing TAFE education – it is a lack of streamlined pathways for students, failure to provide reasonable adjustments, and insufficient tailored supports that make individuals disengage, feel undervalued, or limit their access to TAFE education altogether.[7] Inclusive education requires a human rights approach. However insufficient public data means that policy making within TAFE is not informed effectively by the needs and circumstances of all students. This means that people from *disadvantaged groups* who face multiple barriers to access and participation are not accommodated by current structures which can lead to long term negative outcomes.

According to ABS data, in 2018 17% of Victorians reported having a disability[8] and the proportion of Victorians born in non-English speaking countries who had any disability was equivalent. However, data shows that CALD students with disabilities have lower participation rates in the education system by about two percent compared to non-CALD people with disabilities,[9] and are likely to have a ten percent lower completion rate than the average.[10]

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[4] Victorian Department of Education and Training, Disability Action Plan 2018-2021, August 2018, Melbourne, available at: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/disability-action-plan.pdf (accessed on 20 September).

[5] KPMG, *The Importance of TAFE to Victoria's Prosperity* Final Report, June 2018.

[6] This includes first generation migrants, as well as second generation migrants whose parents were born overseas. CALD communities include people who are proficient in English as well as people with low levels of English language skills.

[7] Duncan McVicar and Domenico Tabasso, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps* research report, available at https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0027/44739/impact-of-disadvantage-2818.pdf (accessed on 21 September).

[8] Disability, Ageing and Carers Australia: Summary of Findings, available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#data-download (accessed on 20 September).

[9] NDIA, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Participants report, 30 June 2019.

[10] Duncan McVicar and Domenico Tabasso, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps research* report, available at: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0027/44739/impact-of-disadvantage-2818.pdf (accessed on 21 September).

The complex needs of people with disabilities can affect participation in educational pathways. These may be exacerbated for CALD students with disabilities because of lower English proficiency, cultural shame and stigma, and lack of support networks compared with their non-CALD peers. These intersecting barriers create additional challenges to overcome for individuals to achieve their potential.

> "Nothing just comes to us, we are always problem solving" – an interviewee

The NDIA provides some evidence of the specific barriers affecting people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite CALD NDIS participants more likely to be involved in a cultural or religious group, they are less likely to have a job or to have friends, other than family or paid staff, compared to non-CALD NDIS participants.[11] Additionally, a number of culturally and linguistically diverse communities lack English language skills and are unfamiliar with the Australian disability context. This can result in CALD Victorians with disabilities not having enough support to realise their capabilities and aspirations.

> "I want to be treated as any other student" – an interviewee

Additionally ABS data shows that 32% of people with disabilities have completed Year 12 (62% without disabilities) and only 10% of people with disabilities aged 15–64 are studying for a non-school qualification (compared to 15% of people without disabilities).[12] Further, labour force participation in Australia for people with disabilities aged 15-64 years has remained stable since 2015 at 53.4%, in contrast to an increase in the participation rate for people without disabilities (from 64.8% in 2015 to 84.1% in 2018). CALD graduates with lower levels of proficiency in English have the greatest difficulty in accessing employment opportunities: their chances of finding a job after VET are 45% lower than graduates who speak English as a first language.[13]

Data can vary slightly depending on the source and type of institution. However, evidence consistently reflects the systemic barriers that people with disabilities and those from CALD backgrounds encounter when participating in Australia's economic and social life. This, coupled with other co-occurring factors for migrants and refugees, such as interrupted education, prior qualifications not being recognised, and fewer formal supports with system navigation, further exacerbates barriers faced by migrants and refugees in accessing education, employment and public participation.

Recommendation 1

That collecting and publishing data on access, participation and outcomes at TAFE for students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is made mandatory.

Key Themes

The *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* recognises Victoria's diversity, provides for equality and recognition before the law, and protection from cruel and degrading harm. Despite students with varied abilities, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and past experiences being

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[11] Culturally and Linguistically Diverse participants, NDIA, 30 June 2019

[12] AIHW, *People with Disability in Australia* summary, October 2020, available at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/education-and-skills/educational-attainment (accessed on 25 September).

[13] Duncan McVicar and Domenico Tabasso, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps* research report, available at https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0027/44739/impact-of-disadvantage-2818.pdf (accessed on 21 September).

deemed to have equal opportunities to access and participate in education, there continues to be disparity between the experience of people with disabilities and others. This is further amplified when the person with disability is from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

ECCV recognises the Victorian Government's and TAFE system's continuous attempts to address this gap through a range of interventions and supports. In the context of current frameworks, we present the key themes below in an attempt to assist the Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability to consider solutions to some of the challenges faced by current and prospective TAFE students with disabilities.

In this submission, ECCV is focused on experiences of CALD learners with disabilities. ECCV also recommends that the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee considers the impact that a range of attributes, circumstances and needs might have on a person's ability to participate in education and the system's preparedness to support them.

> "Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation."[14]

Access: power of self-advocacy

Education starts with access. Effective access must encompass a number of key elements, including a person's previous experience, support networks, confidence and ability to navigate the education system. During interviews with industry and with current and former TAFE students with disabilities, ECCV identified a number of concerns. If these issues are addressed, students' access to and experience of courses will improve significantly.

Better integration of supports between school and TAFE

> "Enrolment procedures are designed so that the student, or an associate of the student, can complete them without undue difficulty." - *Disability Standards for Education 2005*[15]

The inconsistency of transitional student support post school is a key theme. According to interviewees' experience, those who were supported to navigate their post school options had a better chance to understand and engage in further education pathways. Disability Coordinators and other supports within school multi-disciplinary teams can be essential in learner's transition from school. However, schools have no obligation to communicate and share student reports with a TAFE's Disability Support Service. This can leave individuals with disabilities needing to self-advocate within a new environment.

People with disabilities can experience fear about open disclosure of their medical needs, particularly refugees due to insecurity associated with their visa status and the confusion surrounding entitlements.[16] Compounding issues such as lack of self-advocacy skills, language barriers, fear of discrimination, and cultural views about disability may prevent people from accessing appropriate supports and continuing with their studies:

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[14] Victorian Government, Understanding Intersectionality, available at: https://www.vic.gov.au/understanding-intersectionality (accessed on 7 October).

[15] Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Disability Standards for Education 2005.

[16] Diversitat, *Disability Findings* Report, 2017, available at: https://diversitat.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Diversitat-disability-findings-report-FINAL.pdf (accessed on 30 August).

> "If I haven't had a school coordinator, I would have struggled, as I had no advocacy skills and confidence. My mother, who doesn't speak English, wouldn't have been able to navigate the system" – an interviewee

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Recommendation 2

That records for students with disabilities are shared across education settings (with consent) to better support successful transition to TAFE.

Holistic assessment

Individuals engage in TAFE at various stages of their lives, with varied prior educational experiences and different levels of existing skills. The current model for testing and planning with students should be reviewed to accommodate such diversity, especially for people with disabilities, including from new and emerging communities and those from refugee backgrounds.

As detailed in ECCV's submission to the Victorian Government 2020 Skills Review, *Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy* current literacy and numeracy assessments are not flexible enough to reflect the capability that students bring with them to a learning environment nor do they reflect the standards of English proficiency required for employment across all industries.[17] TAFEs should have more flexibility with literacy requirements, tailored to the needs of the industry and qualification.

At present, the pre-training review completed as part of TAFE enrolment does not develop a relevant, personalised plan for each student that can become a living document for learners. This is particularly important for students with disabilities including those from CALD backgrounds who may lack self-advocacy skills, networks, supports and confidence to be able to successfully navigate their preferred pathways in line with their vocational goals.

Families of CALD students with disabilities are less likely than others to feel equipped and engaged in planning and supporting students through their educational journeys. According to NDIS CALD Family baseline indicator data, CALD family members are 14% less likely to feel in control over selecting services and 28% less likely to advocate for their family member with disabilities, compared to non-CALD families.[18]

It was unanimously agreed by people with lived experience that ECCV interviewed for this submission that CALD families' engagement and knowledge of the system needs to be facilitated and increased. This should include TAFEs making every attempt to include students and their parents in planning and information delivery in language, through translated materials and/or free interpreters, including by using tailored audio and visual tools.

When enrolling a CALD student with disability, a mandatory person centred, culturally appropriate assessment should take place for all students to initiate a goal-based plan with English language support, if required. This planning process must include the student's family and/or trusted networks and supports. This can facilitate the establishment of appropriate reasonable adjustments early on that better support access and participation in VET for people with additional needs.

> "If you don't ask for support, you don't get it" - ADCET webinar participant

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[17] ECCV, *Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy* submission, June 2020, Melbourne, available at: https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ECCV-Submission-Macklin-Review_final.pdf (accessed on 15 September).
[18] NDIA, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Participants report, 30 June 2019.

> **Recommendation 3**
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> **That person-centred assessments and goal-based planning is developed as a living document for (CALD) students with disabilities on enrolment at TAFE. A holistic approach to students' needs and abilities should include parents or person's representatives being included and be delivered in languages and formats preferred by the family/representatives.**

Bias

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) it is unlawful for a post-secondary education provider to refuse to enrol a person to a course on the basis of their disabilities. There are certain qualifications that may prevent a person with a certain disability to fully engage in a course, yet educational institutions are not permitted to pre-empt this. It must be demonstrated that there has been consultation with the student, all possible adjustments have been considered and expert assistance in coming to a decision has been sought.[19]

People with disabilities however will often experience discrimination, including at TAFE. This can include TAFE staff discouraging students from pursuing certain courses due to their disabilities without required consultation or consideration.

> ## Case Study
>
> Astur[20] migrated to Australia from a refugee camp, after fleeing her war-torn homeland. Astur arrived with no English or prior school experience. Having an educated older brother offered hope that things will improve soon. While her brother pursued higher education and employment, Astur, struggled with fitting into a compulsory education environment where her needs were not met.
>
> After a few years of schooling, Astur dropped out, yet remained determined to navigate her way to TAFE: "I was treated as any other mainstream student – no culturally appropriate support nor assistance with disability was provided. I had to catch a train and it took me two hours. I had blisters on my hands from clutches. Unfortunately, my family didn't know how to support me as they thought I was naughty. They couldn't understand the barriers I was facing."
>
> It took Astur several attempts to engage in education: "some years ago, I didn't have proper access and it was impossible to continue. I dropped out a lot throughout my life. I didn't connect with anybody. Now I am studying online and it's much better as I don't have access issues, that for many years weren't addressed and I didn't know how to advocate for myself.
>
> Before I didn't know what barriers meant so I was dropping out. I didn't understand what was making it different. Now I just want to achieve my goals."
>
> Unfortunately, with no assessment Astur was told recently that she would not be able to get placement in the disability industry. She had to find another way of pursuing her dream: "they didn't consider my abilities, so I took community services."

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[19] ADCET, *Identifying Student Requirements and Making Reasonable Adjustments*, available at: https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/working-with-students/making-reasonable-adjustments/ (accessed on 18 September).

[20] Name was changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of this stakeholder.

Learners with disabilities from CALD backgrounds may not feel they can report incidents of discrimination, especially at times when discrimination is indirect or passive. In some instances, ECCV was told that students had to seek external advocates' support to assist with TAFE meetings and complaints processes. To avoid victimisation of people with disabilities, TAFE Institutes must promote feedback and complaint mechanisms - in formats and languages accessible to individuals - that empower people to take action. Organisational culture must further be supported by the development of an inclusive environment through student awareness raising in diversity and intersectionality as well as staff capacity building in this area.

> "My friend was told: 'you won't pass because I can't do your results, I can't understand what you are trying to say'. And all that this person wanted was to work in tourism and help people with disabilities. She has a brilliant mind and is a brilliant typist." – an interviewee

Student supports improve participation

Insufficient funding leading to inequity of access

Stand-alone TAFEs work to the same policies and within the same legislative frameworks, yet they operate and apply priorities differently. The Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) explained that Community Service Obligation (CSO) funding is left to each individual TAFE to determine the way it is allocated to support students. CSO, while being the main funding pool for student supports, is seen by TAFEs as insufficient to cover costs of all reasonable adjustments.

The TAFE sector is also concerned about the differences between the funding for learners with disabilities completing their VCAL or VCE at school through the Student Resource Package (SRP), and for those completing the same course in a TAFE or dual sector University.[21] Young people in their senior secondary school years may receive SRP of up to $8,000 for reasonable adjustments and classroom support at school, which is not applicable at TAFE. This, unfortunately, creates conditions where it is more desirable to remain in a school environment compared to TAFE due to availability of supports. This may hinder some young people with disabilities in pursuing their preferred pathway.

Furthermore, the older the student, the more disparity there is between disability supports available for people in navigating their education options, especially if a person is not eligible for NDIS or has not tested their access yet:

> "Younger people have youth support. When I wanted to reengage with the system, I didn't have those workers as I was too old. The older you get the less support there is" – an interviewee

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Recommendation 4

That a single TAFE governing body is established to ensure consistency in the way that TAFEs apply legislation, policy frameworks and standards to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.

Recommendation 5

That the Student Resource Package (SRP) is reformed and follows senior high school students with disabilities to TAFE until 21 years of age.

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[21] Victorian TAFE association, *Disadvantaged young people: senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities* Research Project, January 2017, available at: https://vta.vic.edu.au/doctest/research-applied/702-youth-in-tafe-report-january-2017-1/file (accessed on 1 October).

Reasonable adjustments

Enrolment processes for TAFE are often complex and can create unintended barriers for people with disabilities. The enrolment process includes application, literacy and numeracy pre-test, pre-training review, enrolment paperwork, unit selection and sometimes an interview. Many of these processes occur online. Prospective students are provided with an opportunity to identify as having a disability status on their enrolment forms. If a person has an identified disability, then follow up contact from the Student Support Officer will be made to assess their needs.

During the initial interview, the student is expected to communicate their learning and personal needs to receive appropriate supports as part of their enrolment, through a policy of reasonable adjustment. However, such a process in a formal environment can be intimidating, particularly for people with disabilities from CALD backgrounds.

The students who can navigate this complex process can access reasonable adjustments and support. However, reasonable adjustments are not sufficiently funded to address the broad range of needs students with disabilities may have when seeking to study at TAFE. Former TAFE students shared such experiences with ECCV:

> "In a second year they couldn't provide me with the scribe, due to the budget. When I lost my support worker, I thought I will never do my diploma" – an interviewee

In other instances, interviewees explained that teachers were not available to tailor the curriculum to their needs due to the size of the class. Note takers are a valued resource, however their utility is limited, particularly when they are unable to assist with other personal supports. For example:

> "I was part of a TAFE community, but supports were so important and when they were lacking that was terrible. Why should I ask other students to take me to the toilet, when I already pay study fees?" – an interviewee

A number of people with disabilities find self-advocacy demanding and unfamiliar. Attributes and experiences such as cultural or religious barriers, or traumatic past experiences, can reduce confidence in areas where strong, self-supporting communication is required. People migrating to Australia without experience of disability supports often do not understand their options to navigate services. People 'don't know what they don't know' – if a student does not request supports, e.g. a note taker, it will not be provided.

Furthermore, CALD learners with mental health conditions and/or psychosocial disability are subject to a significant gap in their supports, as mental health conditions are often hidden. Access to support depends on a student's perception of their disabilities and capability to communicate their needs and challenges. Industry feedback suggests that it is not an intentional denial of support, but a lack of awareness and funding that prevents integrated assessments and adequate supports.

> "Able-bodied people think they understand my world, but they don't." – an interviewee

Through alignment of lived experience with genuine self-empowerment, a peer support[22] model, established as an intersectional hub within TAFE, could assist students with disabilities to build mutually supportive relationships. This would enable students to better understand their options, pathways for giving feedback and provide a culturally relevant network that can sustain their participation in education.

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[22] Amaze, *Best practice in peer support*, April 2018, available at: https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Final-Amaze-peer-support-literature-review-April-2018.pdf (accessed on 17 September).

> **Recommendation 6**
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> **That the State and the Commonwealth Governments increase Community Service Obligation funding to TAFE to ensure required disability supports are adequately funded across teaching, learning and vocational pathways.**

> **Recommendation 7**
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> **That the Victorian State Government funds a peer support model, in the form of intersectional hubs, at each TAFE to assist and mentor students with diverse needs.**

Teaching

Compulsory experience or training in disability as well as cultural competency training to all staff, not limited to specialists, will give TAFE teachers the necessary skills, confidence and strategies to ensure the best outcomes for their students.

Box Hill Institute (BHI) provided feedback that all their teachers are trained in reasonable adjustments and universal design. Their teachers help to rewrite materials in easy read and easy English formats to assist students with disabilities and those from CALD backgrounds. South West TAFE operates as a NDIS provider, which ensures ongoing teacher engagement with a disability community as part of the organisational structure.

An inclusive environment and professional development of teachers enables better student outcomes through teachers' understanding of learners' needs and aspirations, and the supports or partnerships available to provide the best person-centred service. This is challenging however, as TAFEs reported that, without further CSO funding, teachers are under increased pressure through large class sizes with a duty to meet a broad range of learner needs with limited additional supports.

> "Working conditions for teachers weren't good and their turnover was huge." – an interviewee.

Vocational curriculum should be better supported by teachers through the application of universal design principles that can be adjusted to students' needs. There is currently a lack of consistency in the ways that teachers deliver courses. Former TAFE students with disabilities shared that, in some instances, teachers were helpful in assisting with learning content, however others reported that teachers failed to send study materials to students and course content was too cramped.

Additionally, national curricula, with strict learning outcomes and timelines, do not always fully reflect local contexts. Students are therefore disadvantaged in work placements.[23] Students with disabilities, when made to arrange their own placements and advocate for their capabilities to perform tasks, may be additionally challenged to relate TAFE training content to work placement experience.

> **Recommendation 8**
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> **That TAFE disability support staff are provided with ongoing professional development to meet intersectional student needs.**

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[23] See ABC, 7.30 News, *Duty of Care,* available at: https://iview.abc.net.au/show/7-30/series/0/video/NC2001H154S00 (accessed on 30 September).

Recommendation 9

That additional Student Contact Hour funding be provided to support students with disabilities regardless of their course, allowing TAFEs to commit to smaller classes and permit students to complete modules in a time that is reasonable for them.

Recommendation 10

That TAFE teachers are required to complete cultural competency and disability training.

Partnerships

Timely and consistent TAFE support mechanisms can reduce the risk of students with disabilities being subsumed into an *engagement-disengagement* cycle – a roundabout of people doing courses that do not lead to an outcome. While increasing funding and other supports are essential, meaningful cross-sector partnerships are another way of leveraging resources and capabilities to support the participation of people with disabilities in vocational pathways.

Case Study

Box Hill Institute (BHI) recalled a time when open entry was an option offered to all their prospective students with disabilities. However, the change of the intake and support model created more options for students with disabilities to plan future pathways, and better planned access to mainstream campuses.

Collaborations with industry allowed the Institute to fill the non-education-based support gaps with specialist disability services. BHI focused on partnerships with organisations and NDIS providers, such as Disability Service Provider partner organisations.

Partnering with specialised organisations enabled the TAFE to understand the actual requirements for supporting students with disabilities. BHI progressed collaboration with the disability industry to address systemic issues, such as students' access to pathways and participation in further education.

More specifically, in partnership with Burke and Beyond, BHI was able to focus on the skills required to advance students' learning goals and design programs around individuals, with Burke and Beyond providing participants with personal development support. Burke and Beyond acknowledges that successful TAFE participation does not end with advancement of learning skills - equally important are social interaction and community participation.

A significant success driver for BHI in working with students with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds is the small number of participants in classes, which allows well-considered adjustments.

BHI's student support is tailored and flexible, e.g. with BHI also running their classes on Disability Service Provider premises to provide learners with a safe space and allow a slow transition to the TAFE campus.

"It's not only about an education outcome, but many other things. For example, we had all students engaged online during the pandemic because we offered a high level of support" – BHI

Recommendation 11

That the State and the Federal Governments fund organisations, to support students with disabilities, regardless of their NDIS eligibility, to successfully transition from school to TAFE to employment.

Social participation and independence

Participating in the learning environment also entails non-class time as part of a meaningful educational experience. For a student with disabilities and/or limited English proficiency it can be stressful to navigate a new institutional structure. Depending on their confidence and capabilities, it might take time for students to feel settled into an unfamiliar learning environment and form friendships.

"Classmates learn to adapt to you and become your supporters and advocates." – an interviewee

The Burke and Beyond student support model assigns a coach per learner to assist them with the new environment, understand systems and processes, attend classes and free time until a person is confident in building their independence. As a NDIS provider however, Burke and Beyond only services NDIS participants - many other students with disabilities miss the opportunity to get necessary support.

Participation in addressing systemic gaps

While there are already several policies and laws in place to support learners with disabilities to participate equally in education, sadly, the *Disability Standards for Education* review in 2015 showed that "the level of general awareness [of the Standards] is patchy, particularly among groups experiencing additional disadvantage (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people from new communities, of low socio-economic status, or living in a rural or remote area)."[24]

Systemic gaps are also evident in internal TAFE policies, with examples including one Institute placing actions related to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds under the category "ATSI culturally appropriate service delivery". In another instance, the use of binary gendered language such as "she" and "he", further excludes individuals with diverse gender identities.

This lack of cultural competency could be addressed through enriched TAFE governance frameworks. One option is to establish advisory committees to improve the processes that meet the needs of students, visitors and teachers from *disadvantaged groups*, including people with disabilities, individuals from CALD, LGBTIQA+ communities and/or from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Advisory committee members would have relevant lived experience and act as experts in developing and reviewing internal policies and practices and advocating for inclusive arrangements.

Recommendation 12

That TAFE governance frameworks include advisory committees, comprising people with a range of lived experience, to review policies and support inclusion practices.

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[24] Urbis, Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, July 2015, available at: https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final-report-2015-dse-review.pdf (accessed on 17 September).

Transition to employment

> "My certificate allows me to get through the door, yet the tools were not provided for me to achieve my dream" – an interviewee

The majority of students, including those with disabilities, engage in TAFE with a goal of employment. Yet learners with additional support needs fed back that some TAFEs were reluctant or unsuccessful in providing them with work placement options. This may occur for various reasons, including TAFEs lack of industry partnerships, motivation or advocacy skills.

Within post-compulsory settings, the "application of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* to third party providers of practicums, industry placements and course materials are not addressed by the Standards, giving rise to uncertainty around responsibility for provision of adjustments (in the case of placements)."[25] This removes the responsibility of TAFEs to ensure learners' success in accessing placements. In comparison, where specialist disability support and transition organisations are engaged, students with disability have secured placements and, later, transition to employment, based on an integrated collaboration model.

> "If you gave us opportunities and put us back into the community, we wouldn't sit on our backs" – an interviewee

A significant barrier in gaining paid employment for people with disabilities is a lack of work experience. Sadly, there is still a well pronounced systemic issue of providers and businesses rejecting placement applications for people with disabilities, which is a precursor to challenges with post-training employment.

Case Study

The Champions for Change project, funded by the Federal Government and led by City of Greater Bendigo, aims to create inclusive employment opportunities and job readiness for people with disabilities. The program was designed to provide employment, whilst educating employers about the benefits of hiring people with disability; trainees will be given an opportunity to work as part of local government whilst completing their qualifications.[26]

The Champions are a part of a National Champions for Change Network, that focuses on contributing to solutions to provide employment equity for employees with disability. Such initiatives, if mapped and designed to collaborate across industries, including education, will be well placed to support people with additional barriers.

TAFE responsibility for placement requirements should be legislated to ensure that no one is left behind. Pursuit of a collaborative cross-sector partnership model between the TAFE, specialist providers and industry will ensure greater opportunities for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to access meaningful work experience that positions them for future work.

Recommendation 13

That TAFEs responsibility for supporting work placements is legislated.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Mirage News, Champions for Change to highlight benefits of hiring people with disability article, available at: https://www.miragenews.com/champions-for-change-to-highlight-benefits-of-hiring-people-with-disability/ (accessed on 1 October).

COVID Normal

COVID-19 has brought a range of changes in the way students participate in learning. These have created both difficulties and opportunities.

A shift to remote learning has brought its challenges to learners with disabilities who had to reimagine daily engagement with their teachers and fellow students. A number of learners with intersecting needs, such as students from CALD backgrounds, those with gaps in previous learning experiences, poor mental health or from low socio-economic backgrounds, found it arduous and costly to pivot to an online learning environment, including acquiring IT equipment and gaining reliable access to data and internet.

One of the interviewees for this submission, as well as students at the ADCET webinar in September 2020,[27] reported that voice recognition software can be hard to use, especially during Zoom sessions and activities, which leaves students with more homework. Initially, transition to new routines and navigating change has caused anxiety and a sense of insecurity to people with multiple responsibilities. Having no supports at home made learning harder for some.

On the other hand, good practice examples of innovation and reform were also identified as a result of TAFEs switching to remote learning: classes were made smaller and shorter to ensure people's engagement, presentations were recorded, course material shared with students who required time to catch up, and online support was made available after hours. There was an overarching consensus that COVID-19 made the learning experience a little more tailored and unique, compared to in-class participation.

"Some students thrive being in their own environment – for some online worked so much better." –
an interviewee

Students with disabilities found further online learning benefits as there was no need to travel and they were able to step away at any time or turn off their cameras. By having smaller classes, teachers were able to better manage workload and provide supports to each student, including follow up calls. Some support staff encouraged the use of code letters in a chat for follow up after class, such as "A" for "anxious" "S" for "this is stressing me out".

The increase in remote working arrangements due to COVID-19 is giving rise to more opportunities for people with disabilities and diverse needs to work from home – innovation is now possible through online engagement and communication. With tailored support and access to ICT equipment, students with disabilities across Victoria can benefit from more options for vocational participation moving forward.

Recommendation 14

That students with disabilities are provided with online learning and participation options to mitigate barriers.

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[27] Australian Disability Clearinghouse, ADCET Webinar: *COVID-19 & Beyond. Perspectives from TAFE Students*, September 2020, available at: https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10409/adcet-webinar-covid-19-beyond-perspectives-from-tafe-students/ (accessed on 1 October).

Values based operations

Frameworks that TAFEs operate under should clearly articulate aspirations of social participation, achievement of individual potential and inclusive education. There must be clear expectations set for providers to focus their operations and reporting on value delivered through successful outcomes for all students, including for students with disabilities. This must include transition into employment as a necessary measure.

The Victorian TAFE system is well placed to demonstrate the value of collaboration, sharing good practice, and investment in measures that support students with disabilities and other intersecting characteristics in accessing pathways, achieving their goals and flourishing in life.

> "CALD and disability, and other diversity should be encouraged as it enriches study environment"-
> an interviewee

Conclusion

ECCV would like to thank the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee, Parliament of Victoria, for the opportunity to share our experience and that of our communities and stakeholders to the Inquiry.

The social and economic value generated by active participation and successful employment of people with disabilities can only be achieved through measures that promote human rights, equitable access to learning, streamlined pathways and increased interdependence. A holistic, human centred support model, based on outcomes, will enable individuals with intersecting needs to develop long term agency to advance their independence, live well and contribute to the community.

In partnership with industry and the community, the Victorian Government, has a responsibility to ensure that the potential of people with disabilities can be realised through the TAFE system. In this way all students will develop the necessary skills to thrive in the education, training and employment pathways of their choice.