Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability 2020

Submission

October 2020

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(Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee)

Introduction

Mission Australia is a national, non-denominational Christian charity that has been helping vulnerable people move towards independence for more than 160 years. In the 2018-19 financial year, we supported over 160,000 individuals through 519 programs and services across Australia,[1] including over 8,000 people through 43 services in Victoria.[2] Mission Australia delivers a range of services for people experiencing disadvantage including people with disability such as Navigator, Springboard, Youth Learning Pathways, Disability Employment Services (DES), ParentsNext, Transition to Work as well as successful social enterprises such as Synergy Auto Repairs and Charcoal Lane.

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability in Victoria. This submission is based on a combination of research and insights from our service provision across Victoria. It includes testimony from some of our practitioners and the participants they work with.

A considerable proportion of people with disability experience structural, systemic and attitudinal challenges including lack of accessible transport, debilitating health issues and limited access to health and other supports, discrimination and family or caring responsibilities. Therefore, this inquiry should have regard to the broader systemic issues and challenges that people with disability experience when they access higher education opportunities including TAFE.

Recommendations

- Develop measures to address stigma in relation to physical, intellectual and psychosocial disability and make supports readily available for people with disability at different stages of their tertiary education journey.

- Increase investment in resources and funding to raise awareness in schools and educational settings of Disability Standards for Education and ensure they are implemented uniformly and cohesively across the State coupled with requisite accountability measures.

- Provide ongoing training to academic and non-academic staff at TAFE to create a supportive environment for students with disability.

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[1] Mission Australia, Annual Report, 2019, accessible at: https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2019/1320-annual-report-2019/file
[2] Mission Australia, Service Delivery Census FY 2017/18.

- Fund and establish supports through disability liaison officers who would provide targeted supports to students with disability from pre-enrolment through to completion of the TAFE courses.

- Increase accessibility of courses by providing flexible learning options for people with disability to learn at their own pace with additional support from academic staff.

- Advocate to the Commonwealth Government to ensure students in receipt of income support payments who are following certificate I and II courses are exempt from job-seeking related mutual obligation requirements.

Current context and barriers to access and completion of TAFE courses

Schools and tertiary education settings provide vital access to education as well as avenues for people with disability to explore their future aspirations and participate in the community. Level of education, particularly completion of year 12 and post school qualifications, are critical for future employment and financial stability.[3] Vocational Education and Training (VET) not only plays a significant role in equipping people with the skills and knowledge to work in a range of industries, but also has an important role in providing an education and training pathway for early school leavers, providing them with an opportunity to reconnect with education and complete a qualification.[4]

Due to numerous barriers to completing educational qualifications, people with disability are likely to have lower levels of tertiary qualifications, be underemployed or unemployed than those without disability.[5] For example, nationally, people with disability between the ages of 20 and 24 have secondary school completion rates of 64%, compared with 81% for people without disability.[6] Some of the barriers to completing VET qualifications for people with disability are outlined below.

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[3] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Future job openings for new entrants by industry and occupation, 2018, accessible at: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/2141783/Future-job-openings.pdf

[4] T. Karmel and D. Woods, Second-chance vocational education and training, NCVER, 2008,accessible at: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0017/5840/cp0508.pdf

[5] People with Disability Australia, Disability Rights Now 2019 Australian Civil Society Shadow Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UN CRPD Review 2019, 2019, accessible at: https://dpoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CRPD-Shadow-Report-2019-English-PDF.pdf

[6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Disability in Australia: Changes over time in inclusion and participation in education, 2017, accessible at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/34f09557-0acf-4adf-837d-eada7b74d466/Education-20905.pdf.aspx

There are currently 1.1 million people in Victoria with a reported disability, representing 17.19% of the population or over 1 in 6 people in Victoria.[7] Around 8% of TAFE participants in Victoria identify as having a disability.[8]

Research by Mission Australia[9] on the post-school goals of young people found that a lower proportion of young people with disability intended to go to university than young people without disability (48.3% compared with 66.1%). Conversely, higher proportions of young people with disability planned to go to TAFE or college (19.9% compared with 11.2% of young people without disability).

However, when young people were asked whether they felt there were any barriers that may impact upon the achievement of their study/work goals after finishing school, more than six in ten (63.7%) respondents with disability indicated that they felt there were barriers that would impact upon the achievement of their study/work goals after finishing school. This is notably higher than for respondents without disability (48.1%). Those who responded to this question were also asked to identify what those barriers were:

- Close to three in ten (27.7%) young people with disability saw mental health as a barrier to achieving their post-school study/work goals (compared with 16.0% of respondents without disability).

- Close to one in four (24.5%) respondents with disability saw academic ability as a barrier to achieving their study/work goals after school (compared with 20.0% of young people without disability).

- Three times the proportion of respondents with disability saw physical health as a barrier to achieving their study/work goals after school (12.4% compared with 4.0% of young people without disability).

Barriers to completing VET educational qualifications

Support to enrol and complete courses

Mission Australia services have seen a lack of appropriate support for people with disability to enrol in TAFE qualifications within VET institutions. At the enrolment stage, applicants are asked if they have a disability. However, this appears to be for the purposes of gathering demographic data rather than an attempt to assist people with disability:

"When people enrol for TAFE, they are asked if they identify as a person with disability. Not many people do because of stigma … We have had students who did tick that box and there has

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[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2020, accessible at: https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#data-download

[8] Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, Vocational Education and Training (VET) Statistics, accessible at: https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/understanding-disability/vet-statistics/

[9] Mission Australia, Young, willing and able: Youth Disability Report 2019, 2020, accessible at: https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey

been no follow up or offer of additional support. That's certainly a missed opportunity to better engage with people with disability."

Mission Australia, Student Support Coordinator

Synergy Auto Repairs

Synergy Auto Repairs is a social enterprise based in North Melbourne that offers customers a full suite of smash repair services, while providing a flexible accredited training program and support for young people aged 16-20 years with a history of motor vehicle related offences. Synergy Auto Repairs has been in operation for five years, supported over 100 young people during this period and repaired over 3,000 vehicles.

Of 116 participants, 46% identified as a person with disability, although only 19% of them were accessing disability related supports at the time of referral. It is likely that the number of young people with disability accessing the service are higher than 46% as some young people do not identify as people with disability or have not had the appropriate disability related assessments.

The program works with young people who were engaged in repeated vehicle related offences, harnessing their interest in cars and aiming to help them build a career in a field that matches their interests. They are provided with wrap-around case management supports to address a range of issues including those related to disability.

The social enterprise equips participants with the skills to commence a smash repairs apprenticeship. The initiative is an Australian-first partnership between Mission Australia, the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (NMVTRC), Kangan Institute and Suncorp Group. Young people are referred to the program through Mission Australia services, Victoria Police, Youth Justice and other social service organisations.

The training program runs for six months and gives students the practical experience and skills needed to start a panel beating or spray-painting apprenticeship. Participants also work toward completing an industry-recognised accreditation in panel beating or spray painting. All students gain on-the-job training and work experience from qualified auto industry professionals, supported by a team of tradespeople and a fulltime Student Support Coordinator.

An independent evaluation of Synergy found participants experience strong improvements in overall wellbeing, social stability and a willingness to work and stay away from negative influences during their time at Synergy, in addition to developing the skills needed to build a sustainable career pathway.[10]

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[10] M. Thielking, J. Pfeifer, K. Nolan, & C. Boyce, Synergy Automotive Repairs Program: Process Evaluation Report. Melbourne, 2016, accessible at: https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/research/young-people

Case study

Joe,* a 15 year old young man who was diagnosed with an intellectual disability was referred to Mission Australia's Synergy Auto Repairs program. At the time of referral Joe had disengaged from education. Due to some negative peer associations, Joe was involved in the justice system and was struggling to manage positive relationships with family members. He was referred to Synergy program by Victoria Police after his involvement in a vehicle-related offence.

Joe informed his case manager that he left school when he was in Year 7 and was struggling to engage with mainstream education. Prior to participating in Synergy, he commenced a bricklaying course through TAFE but dropped out after a few weeks as he found the course too challenging and less hands-on and more theory-based.

Upon joining Synergy, it was clear that Joe had low levels of literacy and numeracy, high anxiety around engaging in education and struggled to absorb a lot of information at once. Through formal assessments, it was confirmed that Joe would require additional support to complete the program and qualifications, as he had a mild intellectual disability. His case manager also advocated for Joe to access TAFE's learning supports.

Joe was enthusiastic and enjoyed his practical sessions at the Synergy workshop. However, Joe's anxiety about engaging in the formal education component of the program led to high levels of non-attendance at TAFE. To address Joe's learning needs, Synergy staff focused on providing personalised and intensive support, spending time completing face to face education sessions and regular reviews, adapting to Joe's learning needs and celebrating his progress through the program.

After a few months, Joe indicated that he lost motivation to continue with the course. Although he enjoyed the hands-on work, he was not getting the support he needed from the TAFE with the academic part of the course. Although Synergy case managers offered to support him with his academic studies, Joe disengaged from the Synergy program and therefore his TAFE studies as he found the academic pressure too overwhelming.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Another barrier at the enrolment stage is lack of information about potential financial support for students. Although there are numerous scholarships/fee free courses and subsidised qualifications on offer for TAFE students,[11] potential students are unaware of these or the application processes for these are complex and time consuming with little support for people with disability to access them.[12]

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[11] Victorian Skills Gateway, Check your eligibility for subsidised training, accessible at: https://www.skills.vic.gov.au/victorianskillsgateway/Students/Pages/vtg-eligibility-indicator.aspx

[12] Productivity Commission, Interim Report: National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, 2020, accessible at: https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf

Once enrolled in a VET institution, the level of disability-specific support provided is limited and inconsistent across Victoria. Most tertiary institutions, including universities and TAFE colleges, have access to disability supports such as regional disability liaison units or disability coordination officers who are able to provide help to students with a disability.[13]

Some tertiary institutions employ their own disability liaison officer, but others are employed regionally and shared across campuses, especially for the TAFE sector. [14] However, there are inconsistencies in terms of access and the supports provided through these targeted services:

> "There are various support people at TAFEs. Some have Student Support Officers and some have disability support workers. There's no consistency and they offer very little support to actually address the issues people experience."

> Mission Australia, Program Manager, Vic

Case study

Ben* is a man in his mid-40s who was referred to Disability Employment Services (DES) in October 2019. He was experiencing a number of challenges including learning difficulties and alcohol and drug dependence related issues.

He was enrolled to complete a Certificate III Business Administration course prior to being referred to DES. At the time of enrolment, Ben's case manager ensured the particular Registered Training Organisation (RTO) was aware of challenges Ben was experiencing. The RTO assured his case manager that further assistance would be available if needed. From the very initial stages it was evident that Ben was struggling with course content and with the assignments he was expected to complete.

Ben reached out by phoning the RTO on several occasions, however, they offered only very limited support. He then contacted his DES case manager and indicated that he may have to drop out because he found the course too stressful as he was not getting the support required from the educators or the education institute. His case manager set up fortnightly appointments with Ben to support him with his studies. Ben is continuing his course at a slower pace with the support of his DES case manager.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Lack of understanding about disability among TAFE staff

Lack of or limited understanding among school/education staff about various forms of physical, intellectual and psychosocial disability can also create environments that are not inclusive, and that

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[13] Better Health Victoria, Post-school options for people with a disability, 2015, accessible at: https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ServicesAndSupport/postschool-options-for-people-with-a-disability?viewAsPdf=true

[14] Better Health Victoria, Post-school options for people with a disability, 2015, accessible at: https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ServicesAndSupport/postschool-options-for-people-with-a-disability?viewAsPdf=true

isolate, disengage or discourage people with disability in educational settings.[15] Our services have found that young people whose disability has gone undiagnosed during their school years often struggle with the transition to further education and training:

> "The schools don't have enough resources to support children with additional needs. They are usually labelled 'difficult' or 'naughty' … Even when they have had assessments, we have seen instances where nothing was done about it. If these issues were addressed at school age, they would have an easier transition from school to tertiary education."
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> Mission Australia, Program Manager Social Enterprises, Vic

Delays in diagnosis can hinder the opportunities of people with disability from receiving the supports they need. This may have a long-term impacts on future education and employment prospects of students with disability. Among Mission Australia clients, there have been numerous misdiagnoses that result in people with disability not receiving appropriate supports with their education or being treated unfairly due to lack of understanding about their condition. For example, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is defined as a repetitive and persistent pattern of opposition, defiant, disobedient and disruptive behaviours toward authority figures.[16] ODD has a high co-occurrence with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and many children with ODD can be misdiagnosed:[17]

> "We have a lot of young people referred to us by the Police or the justice system who are likely to have ODD but not many people know about it or take it seriously … We clearly need to educate people about these disabilities to provide meaningful supports to young people with disability."
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> Mission Australia, Program Manager Social Enterprises, Vic

Discrimination in the classroom can also have a significant impact on young people with disability. Australian research has found that people with disability aged 15 and over attending an educational institute for non-school qualifications experienced discrimination at a rate of 19% in the previous 12 months, with 24% of this group reporting the source of the discrimination as the teacher or lecturer.[18]

There is a clear need for sensitivity and training for teachers who are working at TAFE colleges as they are often not resourced to provide the necessary support for people who may need additional support

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[15] See further: Productivity Commission, Interim Report: National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, 2020, accessible at: https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf

[16] Royal Australian and New Zealand Collage of General Practitioners, Oppositional defiant disorder, 2008, accessible at: https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/200806/200806fraser.pdf

[17] Royal Australian and New Zealand Collage of General Practitioners, Oppositional defiant disorder, 2008, accessible at: https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/200806/200806fraser.pdf

[18] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Disability in Australia: changes over time in inclusion and participation factsheets: community living, education and employment, 2017, accessible at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/disability-australia-changes-over-time-factsheets/fact-sheets

to complete coursework.[19] This can be challenging for people with intellectual and mental health-related disability who may need extra time to work through course materials, complete assignments and work in group settings.

Stigma around disability

Lack of understanding about disability including mental health issues contributes to increased stigma, reluctance to seek help, and misunderstandings about accessing services.[20] Stigma can also result in a lack of support and empathy for individuals living with disability, which can leave people with disability feeling embarrassed, misunderstood, and marginalised.[21] It can affect self-esteem, leading to avoiding seeking treatment, and the social withdrawal from the rest of the community through avoidance, which can contribute to social isolation.[22]

> "We have supported many people with disability who are reluctant to identify as people with disability due to stigma. Changing these attitudes and normalising help-seeking behaviour should be part of addressing barriers to accessing TAFE."
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> Mission Australia, Program Manager, Vic

Mutual obligation requirements impact on completing TAFE qualifications

For people in receipt of income support payments such as Youth Allowance and JobSeeker, study and training can be used to count towards a job seeker's activity requirement where it meets short course approval conditions. [23] However, only study at the Certificate III counts towards this requirement unless they are a participant in Disability Employment Services.[24] This means that people studying at Certificate level I or II are expected to complete employment search activities as well as their study activities, even if they are studying full time.

Nationally, a majority of people with disability are enrolled to complete a Certificate I qualification.[25] Most people with disability that receive support from Mission Australia services have disengaged from education at a young age, have lower levels of education attainment at the time of engaging with

[19] J. Jarvis, Most Australian teachers feel unprepared to teach students with special needs, The Conversation, 26 June 2019, accessible at: https://theconversation.com/most-australian-teachers-feel-unprepared-to-teach-students-with-special-needs-119227

[20] A. Jorm, Mental Health Literacy: Empowering the Community to Take Action for Better Mental Health, American Psychologist, Advance online publication, 2011, accessible at: http://www.tips-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/mental-health-literacy-ap-in_press.pdf

[21] J. Temple, Discrimination and avoidance due to disability in Australia: evidence from a National Cross Sectional Survey, 2018, accessible at: https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-6234-7

[22] J. Temple, Discrimination and avoidance due to disability in Australia: evidence from a National Cross Sectional Survey, 2018, accessible at: https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-6234-7

[23] Department of Social Services, Guide to Social Policy Law: Study and Training, 2020, accessible at: https://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/11/3/10

[24] Department of Social Services, Managing and Monitoring Mutual Obligation Requirements Guidelines, accessible at: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2018/des-managing-and-monitoring-mutual-obligations-guideline.docx

[25] Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, Vocational Education and Training (VET) Statistics, accessible at: https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/understanding-disability/vet-statistics/

services and have had a history of involvement in the justice system. With low foundational-level learning skills, they are often engaged in Certificate I or II courses and some of them need access to foundational literacy and numeracy classes:

> "Our students have overcome significant challenges like domestic violence, mental health issues, discrimination, justice related issues and deal with a range of challenges even after they engage with our services. They are doing a Cert I or a Cert II while dealing with other issues, which on itself takes a tremendous amount of effort but then on top of that they have to apply for 20 jobs, participate in training and other things … We have tried to get some leniency from the job providers without any success, this needs to change."

> Mission Australia, Program Manager Social Enterprises, Vic

COVID-19 and other related challenges

The needs of people with disability were mostly overlooked during the initial responses of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic and required community advocacy to ensure that people with disability were provided with the supports they required.[26] It has been difficult for people with disability to continue to pursue educational qualifications while managing the challenges posed by the pandemic, with limited support. For example, according to a recent research, only 22% of family members and carers of students with disability agreed they had received adequate educational support during the pandemic.[27] It is important that educational institutions are able to provide necessary support including facilitating flexible learning options as appropriate.

Some people with disability are likely to experience challenges with accessing and following courses online due to a range of reasons, including limitations due to their disability, financial disadvantage or lack of assistance to meet their support needs face to face:

> "Before the pandemic, our clients could come and use our facilities. We had laptops set up with internet and they could do their assignments and studies with on-site support from our team if they needed. With the restrictions in place, we can't open our facilities for clients and we try to provide as much support we can over the phone and online. We know some of them are still struggling, some of them have deferred and the others will be better supported when the restrictions are lifted."

> Mission Australia, Program Manager, Vic

The impact of COVID-19 has also exacerbated some of the challenges that people with disability experience and increase the likelihood of them from disengaging from services.

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[26] University of New South Wales, People with disability left behind in coronavirus response, 2020, accessible at: https://www.google.com/search?q=People+with+disability+left+behind+in+coronavirus+response&rlz=1C1GCEU_enAU888AU889&oq=People+with+disability+left+behind+in+coronavirus+response&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i60.340j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

[27] H. Dickson, C. Smith and S. Yates, Only one fifth of school students with disability had enough support during the remote learning period, The Conversation, 24 July 2020, accessible at: https://theconversation.com/only-one-fifth-of-school-students-with-disability-had-enough-support-during-the-remote-learning-period-143195

Case Study

Paul* is a 22 year old who was in out of home care and was engaged in juvenile justice system when he was young. He had been treated for ADHD and suspected intellectual disability. He was linked with Mission Australia's Synergy Auto Repairs program. At the time of his referral in 2018, he was living in a temporary youth hostel, waiting for a more permanent housing option to become available.

Paul experienced multiple challenges to education and employment, having spent extended periods of time in custody, had been expelled from school on multiple occasions and had been disengaged from education since Year 8.

Shortly after Paul's commencement with Synergy, he successfully gained transitional housing in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. Having grown up on the other side of the city, Paul felt that this was the fresh start he needed to focus on overcoming the challenges in his life. However, due to his support services being located on the other side of the city, Paul struggled to manage time to attend the appointments.

His only source of income was the Youth Allowance and he was in significant debt as a result of unpaid fines. He was being pursued by various debt collectors. After paying rent and other utilities, Paul was unable to afford to pay for essentials such as food and transport.

As he was slowly disengaging from services, he reconnected with his former peers who were a bad influence on Paul. Two of his old friends moved in with him and they caused significant damage to the property. These resulted in his neighbours complaining about them and he was evicted from his property. All these resulted in Paul disengaging with all services including Synergy despite the continued efforts by his caseworkers.

Paul was placed in an emergency accommodation and then moved into another youth shelter. Later, he was placed in a medium-term accommodation facility. Although his Synergy caseworkers were advocating on his behalf in relation to housing and other supports, he decided to leave the program.

In early 2020 when COVID-19 related restrictions came into effect, the caseworkers reached out to Paul. He was excited to hear from his old caseworkers and stated that he's still in the same medium term accommodation (almost two years) and has been subjected to further correction orders by the court. He indicated that he would be interested in reengaging with Synergy program. However, with the introduction of new COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria, he again stopped contact with the service. His caseworkers continue to try to engage him as he is about to pass the 15 – 24 year age bracket and will no longer be able to access some of the services that could potentially help him address the underlying issues.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Solutions

Meaningful solutions to addressing barriers to access to TAFE for people with disability should be holistic and there must be clear processes to work in collaboration with different layers of government, private and public education institutions, community service providers, people with disability and their families.

Early intervention through inclusive education

Early intervention at school level will prevent people with disability from disengaging from education and provide additional support at early stages to address any barriers to education that will ease the transition to tertiary education or employment.

The growing notion that inclusive education provides a greater chance for success has derived from an increasing understanding that people with disability thrive when given equivalent social and educational opportunities as their peers.[28]

Socially, students with disability find more social connections in inclusive education, higher rates of post-secondary education opportunities, and increased outcomes of employment and independence.[29] There is also evidence that educational inclusion can reduce the rates of bullying, as people who attend 'special' facilities have a higher chance of experiencing bullying than those in mainstream schooling.[30] It is therefore important that adaptations be made in the classroom for students with disability in order to allow the most equal and inclusive education to fulfil their individual needs.[31] There is a clear need for education institutions to be accessible and meet the needs of all people with disability.

Addressing stigma in relation to disability

Early intervention should also include measures to address stigma in relation to physical, intellectual and psychosocial disability and make supports available for people with disability at different stages of their tertiary education journey.

Destigmatising disability related issues and raising awareness through education campaigns, publicising information about available support services in the community are vital in ensuring encouraging people to access targeted supports.

Schools are ideal settings to provide programs and interventions that promote and improve mental health and mental health awareness, reduce stigma in relation to various forms of disability through education, encourage help-seeking behaviours and provide pathways to support.

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[28] J. Truscott, and S. Robinson, belonging and Connection of School Students with Disability. Children with Disability Australia, 2014.

[29] AllMeansAll, Inclusive Education - What Does the Research Say?' Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education, accessible at: http://allmeansall.org.au/research

[30] K. Cologon, Towards Inclusive Education: A Necessary Process of Transformation, Children and Young People with Disability (CYDA), 2019, pp. 3–9.

[31] G. Lansdown, N. Groce, M. Deluca, E. Cole, R. Berman-Bieler, G. Mitra, A. Farkas, L. Sabbe, and A. Burlyaeva-Norman, Children and Young People with Disabilities Fact Sheet, 2013

Implement Disability Standards for Education

The Disability Standards for Education (the Standards) set out expectations and obligations of schools and education providers in ensuring that students with disability are able to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as their peers without disability.[32]

A review of the Standards found that awareness among educators and education providers is relatively high, although there remains a need to support development of the skills to interpret and apply the Standards in practice.[33] It was also reported that awareness of the Standards among people with disability and their associates was sporadic.[34] As recommended by Australian Human Rights Commission,[35] more needs to be done to increase awareness about the Standards among educational staff, people with disability, their families and carers so that they can be proactively and consistently implemented. This should be coupled with an increase in funding for schools and tertiary education institutions to provide training for educators on the application of the Standards.

Training and education to TAFE educators and support staff on disability

From education surveys undertaken by the Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) in 2015 and 2016, a majority of students with disability and their families felt that in-school support was not meeting adequate standards.[36] Many teachers want to have the ability to educate their students with disability, recognising that with proper supports in place, their outcomes would improve. However, there remain limitations of resources, knowledge and opportunity in school systems for these outcomes to be achieved.[37]

It is also important to fund supports through disability liaison officers who would provide targeted supports to students with disability from pre-enrolment through to completion of the TAFE courses. They can coordinate with community services, lecturers and the student with disability to ensure they receive ongoing support.

Where students need additional support with course materials, the institutions should have access to financial and human resources to meet the needs of students with disability. As demonstrated in the case study below, providing one on one support and assistance to catch up on missed lessons can be

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[32] Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Disability Standards for Education, accessible at: https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005
[33] J Thomas et al, Review of the Disability Standards for Education, 2015.
[34] J Thomas et al, Review of the Disability Standards for Education, 2015.
[35] Australian Human Rights Commission, Working towards Equality for People with Disability, 2017, accessible at: https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications/working-towards-equality-people-disability
[36] Children and Young People with Disability Australia, Time for Change: The State of Play for Inclusion of Students with Disability, 2019, accessible at: https://www.cyda.org.au/resources/details/147/time-for-change-the-state-of-play-for-inclusion-of-students-with-disability?tmpl=component&print=1
[37] Children and Young People with Disability Australia, Time for Change: The State of Play for Inclusion of Students with Disability, 2019, accessible at: https://www.cyda.org.au/resources/details/147/time-for-change-the-state-of-play-for-inclusion-of-students-with-disability?tmpl=component&print=1

crucial for some young people. With the appropriate supports in place, the completion rates are likely to increase with a smooth transition to higher education or employment.

Case Study

Steve is a young Aboriginal man who was referred to Charcoal Lane program by one of his friends who was a former participant of the program. Steve grew up in the care of his father with his three siblings. His mother left when he was five years old and his father turned to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism. Steve had engaged with some anti-social behaviour and needed support to navigate the justice system.

He indicated that his goal was to complete his Certificate II qualification and move into gainful employment after graduating. His long-term aspiration is to establish a Yorta Yorta Young Chefs Program to support Koorie youth. He also indicated that he wanted to join the defence forces.

When he commenced his Certificate II traineeship, he was enthusiastic about participating in the work training component of the course, however, it became clear he was avoiding theory classes at the TAFE college. When his case manager inquired about missing his theory classes, he indicated that he had difficulty with literacy and numeracy.

With Steve's consent, the case manager acquired his academic records to better understand his challenges. The records indicated that when he was in Year 1 Steve had an assessment and the assessor determined that he has an intellectual disability. However, due to the transient nature of his early years, this had not been picked up by other schools and Steve did not receive the necessary supports. Due to this miscommunication, his disability was misunderstood and treated by the schools as a young person with behavioural issues.

Once his disability was understood by his services and supports Steve was supported to address his challenges through increased appropriate support. His case manager engaged with the TAFE lecturer and student support services to ensure Steve received one on one support to complete the units that he missed. His case manager is also assisting him with his application to access the NDIS.

Steve upheld his commitment to actively address the circumstances that contributed to his justice matters. His care team now consists of Dardi Munwurro, Ngwala, Vincent Care, Flemington and Kensington Legal Service, Whitelion, YSAS, Defence Recruitment, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, Charcoal Lane.

His overall attendance within the Charcoal Lane program was at 85%. Since COVID-19 restrictions came into place Steve has continued positive engagement with supports and with reopening of hospitality industry. Steve has completed 7 out of 9 TAFE units and is on track to graduate before the end of the year.

*Name has been changed for privacy

Increase flexible learning options for people with disability

Flexible delivery may assist some people with disability to remain engaged with education. Flexibility in the mode of coursework delivery is important, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where some people with disability may prefer learning online considering transport and other challenges in physically participating in classes, while others may prefer face to face education.[38] Ensuring adequate access to the technical resources (computer, internet access) for distance learning is an important part of this.

Where people with disability are unable to complete courses due to extraneous circumstances or challenges in their personal life, there should be flexible options to ensure that they do not disengage from education entirely.

Case study

Mia* is a single mother of a 4 year old child who was referred to ParentsNext program in Victoria. She did not have a support network in the local area. Mia indicated that she was experiencing anxiety and depression at the time she was linked with the service. Her sole income was the Parenting Payment.

Prior to participating in the program, Mia was engaged in a Diploma in Childcare through a well-established Vocational Training and Education institution in Victoria. However, she informed her case manager that she had missed out on course work as her son was unwell and felt that she could not continue with the course as she did not receive adequate support from the institution.

Mia was informed by the institute that she would need to re-enrol into the course and pay the full fee, which was $7000. As she was reliant on income support payments, she could not afford to pay for the course. Her case manager tried to negotiate with the institution to support Mia to complete the course. Mia felt that her best option was to start a different course through a different education institute.

Mia's case manager was able to help her find a Government-subsidised course that she was eligible for. Mia is currently studying Certificate III in Disability and as Mia is not receiving sufficient support from this institution either to manage her study load, her case manager continues to provide her with a range of supports including study support and informal counselling. Mia has been linked with some community supports to broaden her networks and is working part time as a Disability Support Worker.

*Name has been changed for privacy

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[38] Children and Young People with Disability, Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19, 2020, accessible at: https://www.cyda.org.au/resources/details/172/not-even-remotely-fair-experiences-of-students-with-disability-during-covid-19-full-report