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INQUIRY INTO ACCESS TO TAFE FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY

Organisation: Swinburne University of Technology

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SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Chair
Legislative Assembly
Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Via email: TAFEaccessinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Chair

Swinburne University of Technology welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Victoria.

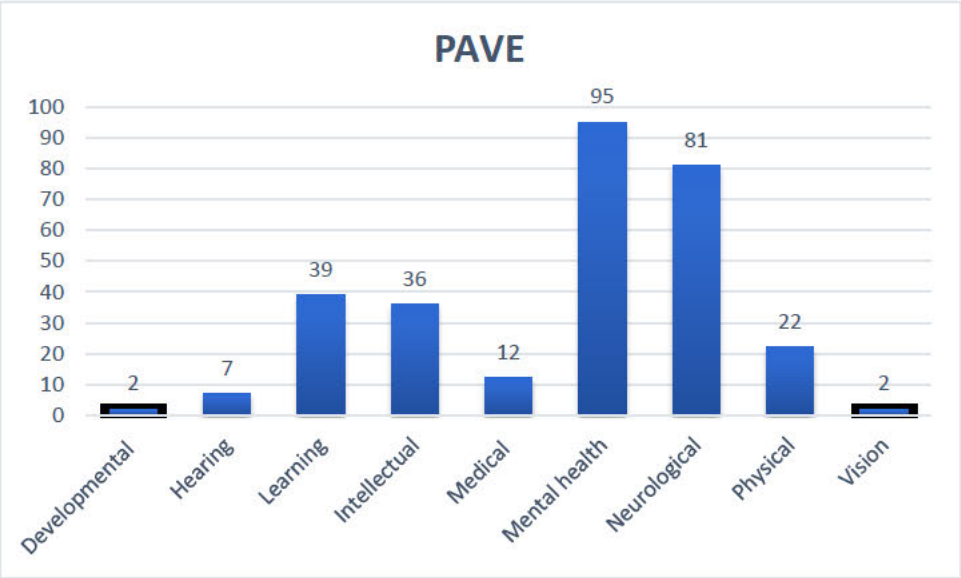
Swinburne is a dual-sector university, delivering both higher education and vocational education and training programs across our three Melbourne campuses, and our Malaysian campus in Sarawak to over 60,000 students.

At Swinburne, we are all responsible for creating a culture that provides an environment that is safe, flexible and fair. It is also culturally appropriate, friendly and professional – free from discrimination and harassment. We seek to create a culture of acceptance. We cultivate and respect the strength that difference creates. Swinburne celebrates the diversity of its community and recognises the rights and responsibilities of all those within it.

In September of 2020, Swinburne recorded 1,305 students who are registered with AccessAbility Services. Students with a disability represent 5% of Swinburne's total student population (4% in Higher education and research and 7% in Pathways and Vocational Education (PAVE)), as compared to 7% in the broader higher education sector and 20% in the general population; 1,009 of registered students are undertaking higher education degrees and 296 students are undertaking PAVE courses.

Mental health conditions (MHC) are the most prominent type of disability for PAVE students (see table below) and this is a consistent trend year on year. The second most prevalent conditions are Neurological conditions, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Together, students with these conditions account for 60% of the total disability cohort.

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We wish to draw the Committee's attention to the experiences of learners with disability at Swinburne and briefly sketch the benefits of participation in TAFE programs as well as barriers to such participation. We also suggest some ideal support structures for students with disability in TAFE and describe the Swinburne model. We seek to highlight mental health conditions and work placements before outlining the training and support needs identified by TAFE teachers, and their suggestions for enabling government policy.

The experiences of learners with disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs – Two case studies of Swinburne students

Erin went to a Special School for her secondary years, and then completed a foundation course, for people with significant disabilities. Coming to mainstream learning was terrifying for Erin and her family. Erin didn't like only associating with other people with disabilities and wanted to make new friends. Erin has excelled in her studies and loves coming to Swinburne. She has embraced the course, her teachers, and her fellow students at Swinburne. Her father reports a huge difference in Erin's mental health since her transition to Swinburne. She enjoys her course, but most of all she likes being part of the Swinburne community – she is included and belongs.

Tom has had a learning difficulty since I was 4 years old and a mental Illness where I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia at the age of 19. I have studied at Swinburne undertaking a Diploma of Horticulture since 2017. I returned from previously being at the Wantirna Campus in 2008 and a good proportion of the first semester in 2009. I was there up until I was 19 years old doing an apprenticeship in the Nursery Industry before becoming unwell. One of the hardest things I ever had to do was leave the college at such an early stage and one of my greatest triumphs was returning to study my passion for Horticulture!

The social and economic benefits of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability

The social and economic benefits of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability are covered in existing peer-reviewed and grey literature and include but are not limited to:

- Increased social engagement[1]
- Decreases in mental health symptomology[2]
- Decreased reliance on governments benefits[3].

Barriers to learners with disability accessing TAFE and ideas for addressing these

Like the benefits of participation, barriers to students accessing vocational education have been extensively explored in the existing literature. We highlight four specific barriers and propose solutions for addressing these.

Low expectations towards students with disability

Low expectations are often set for young people when there is no relatable illustration of the benefits of work and study in their immediate family. Providing mentors who can model positive behaviour through their engagement in work and study are paramount in mitigating the low expectations experienced by families that experience intergenerational unemployment.

Short duration of training packages

Training packages often include units of short duration. Unit completion is at risk when a learner's challenges are identified in week 2 or 3 of a unit of 4 or 5 weeks' duration. Even short absences due to health reasons can prevent the learner from completing a unit. Short duration units are a design feature of competency-based training and can be an obstacle to completion for learners who require additional support.

Low visibility of available services for students with Mental Health conditions

The relevance of disability services, such as Swinburne's in-house AccessAbility Services, are often not obvious to people who identify as having invisible disability, such as mental health or ASD. Any definition of disability adopted by the State Government should include a plain language, accessible description of what disabilities are covered and eligible for support. This is particularly important for young people who develop, or are first diagnosed with, mental health or neurological conditions when they are entering TAFE. Creating an inclusive definition of disabilities may facilitate increased awareness and help seeking and, thus, more targeted support for people experiencing non-visible disabilities.

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1 Macdonald, S. J., Deacon, L., Nixon, J., Akintola, A., Gillingham, A., Kent, J., ... & Dore, S. (2018). 'The invisible enemy': disability, loneliness and isolation. Disability & Society, 33(7), 1138-1159.

[2] Lloyd, C. & Waghorn, G. 2007. The Importance of Vocation in Recovery for Young People with Psychiatric Disabilities. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy,* 70, 50-59.

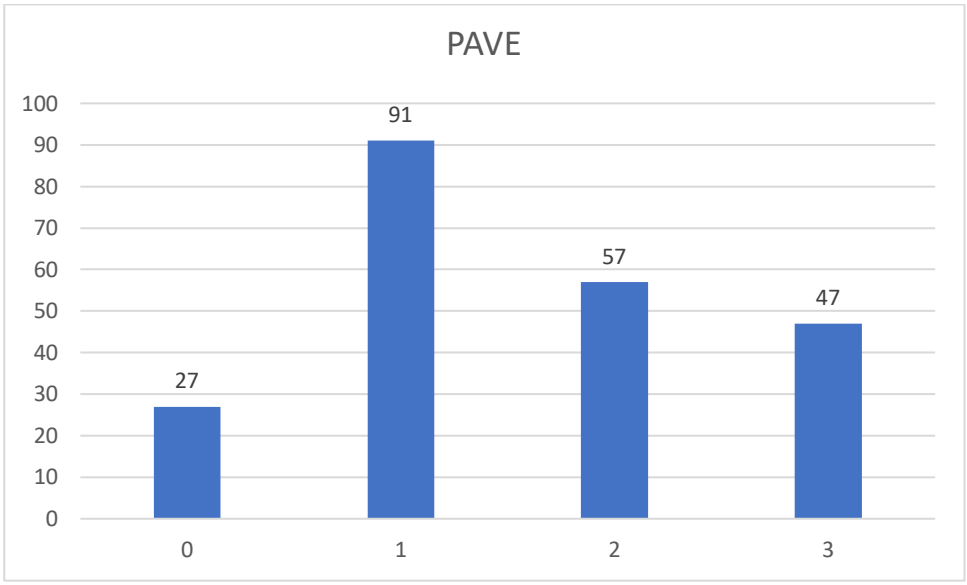
[3] Orygen Youth Health Research Centre. (2014). Tell them they're dreaming: work, education and young people with mental illness in Australia.

Complex needs and cumulative disadvantage

For higher education students, there is existing research which assesses the ways in which cumulative disadvantage through multiple equity group membership impacts the student experience and academic progress of students with disability. Analysis conducted by the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland for the Department demonstrates that students with disability have a substantially lower likelihood to complete their degree programs within 8 years of commencement than the total cohort (62.5% versus 72%). The likelihood of completion reduces further for students who belong to multiple equity groups and falls below 50% for students with disability who belong to at least two other equity groups, i.e. low SES, regional and remote or Indigenous students. Such analysis could and should be conducted at State level for students in TAFE.

Swinburne statistics for the academic year of 2019 show that 46% of students with disability entering the VET sector did not complete their studies. While we do not have analyses of students with multiple equity group membership, AccessAbility Services has developed a service use intensity scale as a proxy for the complexity of student circumstances which determines the amount of support required to enable a student to succeed in their studies. On the scale, 0 is the least complex circumstance and 3 the most complex. Factors considered in the rating include: how often students require contact to negotiate reasonable adjustments, whether students require in-class support (personal assistance, interpreters, Education Access Workers), and whether re-negotiation of equitable assessment arrangements are required frequently.

As can be seen from the figures below (in July 2020), almost half of PAVE students (47%) were in the two most complex categories. PAVE students are a more vulnerable cohort with students as young as 16 enrolling in courses and more commonly from low SES backgrounds in the outer suburbs. Moreover, mental health conditions emerge in people as young as 12 and can create interrupted education pathways for these young people.



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

As indicated by the service use intensity scale described above, student needs exist along a continuum from simple to complex and institutional support structures need to reflect the intensity of need. Ideally, inclusive tertiary learning environments can minimise the need for individual adjustments, especially for students with less complex needs.

However, students in the most disadvantaged cohorts require tailored and timely support and wrap-around services to ensure they can succeed. This includes:

- **Support prior to enrolment**: many students do not successfully enroll in their course as the online application process can be challenging to navigate. For example, in 2019, 10% of prospective Swinburne students who identify as having a disability did not complete their enrolment process. Front line customer support teams need targeted training to ensure that they can assist students living with disability to successfully enroll.
- **Robust initial assessment of need** by AccessAbility Services to determine the level of support that the student needs to succeed in tertiary study.
- **Clear referral pathways to appropriate services** within the TAFE as well as to community services.
- **Case management of students with complex needs** to ensure adequate care. This support is very resource intensive and requires a ratio of one advisor to no more than 20 students requiring case management.
- **Carer support for students living with mental health difficulties**: carer support programs are required to assist young people in remaining engaged in study. This includes education to assist the family or carer in the challenging transition to TAFE after school, and capacity building to understand funding pathways to access support, such as NDIS applications.
- **Targeted mentor programs**: especially important for those who have experienced intergenerational unemployment and lack relevant role models.

The Swinburne model of supporting PAVE student with disability

Students with disability who are enrolled in PAVE programs at Swinburne can draw on two main sources of support:

1. Student Success Coaches: https://www.swinburne.edu.au/life-at-swinburne/student-support-services/study-learning-support/student-success-coach/
2. AccessAbility Services: https://www.swinburne.edu.au/life-at-swinburne/student-support-services/accessibility-services/

Swinburne's Student Success Coach (SSC) program is funded from the Department of Education and Training Community Services Fund. A model unique to Swinburne places coaches in each teaching department and provides support to government 'high priority' cohorts, including learners with a disability. The model is considered an example of 'best practice' in VET.

The program works closely with teaching staff to identify learners who are experiencing academic and/or personal challenges that place them at risk of non-completion. Students can also self-refer when they identify they are struggling or have a specific support need. Coaches assess students' needs and, with learners' agreement, triage the student to:

- Facilitate access to student support services and community services agencies
- Provide practical strategies for managing or adjusting study loads
- Continue to 'check in' to monitor support goals and offer further assistance where necessary.

The SSC program provides a broad wrap-around support service to high priority cohorts, including integrating learner support goals into Education Access Plans. It relieves teachers from taking on a support role, one they are most often not trained or qualified for. Teachers' evaluative feedback tells us they see this service as vital as it enables them to focus on teaching and learning while feeling confident that students' support needs are being met. We recommend this model for replication, where TAFE institute funding allows.

The coaches have reported an increase in teachers referring learners with a disability who are not registered for support, and a notable rise of learners with mental health issues. As at August 2020, the SSC program referred an additional 150 learners to AccessAbility Services, up from 100 for the full year of 2019. This spike in 2020 certainly reflects the impacts of COVID-19; however, the numbers were steadily increasing each year prior. The SSC team has all undertaken the Mental Health First Aid Course and recommends that teachers would also benefit from this training.

Students need to register with AccessAbility Services to receive support from an AccessAbility Advisor who will provide advice on support services that may help with their studies. In consultation with the student and relevant teaching staff, the Advisor develops an Education Access Plan (EAP) that details the services and reasonable adjustments the student needs. These may include the support of an Education Access Worker (EAW), the provision of equipment, or the adjustment of assessment tasks and deadlines.

In addition, students have access to a range of other free services, including the Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) Centre, Wellbeing and Counselling, Accommodation and Financial Support, Careers and Placement Support, and the Skills and Jobs Centre.

Mental Health issues are prominent in the cohort but needs differ across programs

It is clear from the institutional statistics and consultation with teaching staff, SSC and AccessAbility Advisors that mental health issues are a serious concern for students in the tertiary education sector and need to be proactively addressed in policy, national programs and by individual institutions.

In the trades, there is a high number of learners with a diagnosed mental illness that first presented in adolescence. Often, these students already have established health providers in the community. This cohort do access the support of Education Access Workers when eligible and many access language, literacy and numeracy support through the LAS Centre and support with study issues and workplace conflict from SSCs and Apprenticeship Field Officers. The trade areas of Swinburne have an established partnership with Brodie's Law which has contributed significantly to creating a supportive and accepting culture among the wider apprenticeship cohort and led to employers inviting this group to large construction worksites.

The approach is focused on developing trusting relationships, early identification and early intervention. There is a concerted effort to create a culture of openness, respect and care for each other, including being empowered with the options to make informed decisions about their study support needs.

Students with disability and work placements

A significant number of learners with a disability express a high level of anxiety about the work placement component of their course, particularly in Health and Community Services courses that require learners to demonstrate competency in the workplace. The SSC in this department provides individualised support by sharing management strategies to use while on placement.

In response to the high number of students experiencing anxiety, including many learners who do not have a disability, the SSC in collaboration with Swinburne Wellbeing staff developed a Pre-Placement Self-Care program. The program focuses on how to prepare for placement, expectations of the student, strategies for alleviating anxiety and accessing support early. While this program was first delivered just prior to lockdown and when placements were suspended, the placements that did go ahead had lower numbers of students requiring intervention support at placement and an increase in students reaching out earlier in the placement to access support. We view this initiative as another example of best practice in supporting the learner to meet course requirements.

The training and practical, policy and curriculum support TAFE teachers need to maximise the learning experiences of learners with disability

The main areas where teachers seek clarification, support or capacity building include:

a) Guidance and capacity building to understand learner needs and identify students for early intervention.
b) Clarification on the role of the Education Access Workers4 (EAW) and guidance on how to communicate and collaborate with EAWs to achieve the best outcomes for the learner.
c) Clarification and guidance on how to make 'reasonable adjustments' in the context of training packages with prescriptive assessment and competency performance criteria.
d) Awareness raising and capacity building in terms of the range of learning technologies available to assist learners in their study.

TAFE Teachers in general have not received extension training to effectively work with learners with a disability. They display varying levels of expertise and depending on their employment status, take a greater or lesser role in interpreting 'reasonable adjustment' recommendations and designing compliant alternatives. Teachers employed casually are the least engaged in this endeavour, as they are contracted to provide direct teaching delivery hours only.

Teachers are responsible for implementing the 'reasonable adjustments' within an Education Access Plan. Swinburne teachers are seeking direct guidance and curriculum support in putting the plan into practice and contextualising it to specific vocational training packages and units of competency. Teachers want to feel confident that any 'reasonable adjustment' is compliant with the qualification and unit of competency performance criteria. They suggest that statements and examples of appropriate 'reasonable adjustment'

[4] EAWs provide in-class support (or remotely during COVID-19) to students, primarily through note-taking, clarifying and keeping students focussed on their studies during class time

be included into national training packages and units of competency. Another recommendation was for all TAFEs to employ a curriculum advisor with expertise in reasonable adjustment and meeting quality standards to build the capacity of teachers across the institution and the sector.

We propose that professional development activities are best delivered at state level and rolled out regularly to capture new TAFE teachers given the changing TAFE teacher workforce. It was suggested that the VET Development Centre could include such rolling trainings in their annual program. Others suggested that state-wide teacher networks could be resourced to build this capacity through moderation and validation of current practice, particularly adjusted assessments that have passed audit.

Enabling government policy

There was consensus that the largest barrier to providing effective and inclusive support to learners with a disability was resource constraints. The work attached to implementing 'reasonable adjustments' can fall on a handful of contract and ongoing teachers, a resource challenge when there are high numbers requiring support in a particular course. In 2020, there are 9 learners in Professional Writing and 20 across Screen and Media courses who require adjustments and support. Teachers shared case scenarios where multiple adjustments were required as student needs evolved over the course duration. This ongoing redesign of learning and assessment items or learning environments has a significant time cost.

Increased resourcing is sought by teachers for:

- AccessAbility Advisors and Education Access Workers
- Teachers providing individualised reasonable adjustments for high numbers of students
- Curriculum specialist support
- State-wide capacity building
- State-wide networks to undertake the work to identify, synthesise and disseminate best practice across the sector.

Teachers identified there was no government VET policy that provided guidance to TAFE on the standards and delivery of support services to learners with a disability. The Department of Education and Training Community Service Standards provide a broad framework, but teachers asserted that institutes and teachers needed more definitive standards for vocational learners with a disability.

Dual sector institutions and the lack of consistency between federal and state support

There is currently no consistency of funded support for students with disability in different post-compulsory educational settings to ensure equitable access across settings. In a dual-sector institution like Swinburne, the costs for adjustments made for higher education students can be partially recovered through the Disability Support Program. However, with the exception of dedicated funding for apprentices through the Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support Program (DAAWS), there is no financial support for the more costly adjustments the University makes for students enrolled in vocational and pathways programs. There is room for additional support to TAFEs and dual-sector universities to compensate for the often high-cost adjustments for students with disability undertaking vocational qualifications.

Individual Placement Support

Individual Placement Support (IPS) is a proven intervention for young people with mental health difficulties5. This intervention originated from Dartmouth University in the US and is now embedded in mental health services across the world.

With a fidelity model that has clear guidelines for implementation and proven evidence of efficacy, this framework has been successfully implemented in youth mental health services across Victoria, such as Orygen Youth Health, and nationally via Headspace centres (Victoria) and the Digital Work and Study Program (interstate).

For more information about the expansion of IPS please see the current Federal budget release.

In order to leverage the expansion of this evidenced base support, it is proposed that a similar role be created to include referral pathways from the VET sector to headspace. In order to ensure the success of this, it is recommended that the VET sector is provided with funds to embed a specialised placement officer at the institutional level.

Tertiary study as an eligibility criterion for Disability Support Pension and other Centrelink benefits

The current Centrelink eligibility criteria in relations to tertiary study often presents a barrier to achieving the right balance of activity for people experiencing Mental Health conditions. Many students would benefit from a reduced study load, with a scaffolded approach back to more full-time engagement. However, 'underloading' study makes students ineligible for Centrelink payments and is thus not an option. The State Government could consider lobbying for relaxing the expectations around study load for people on the Disability Support Pension and other Centrelink benefits.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. Should you require any further information, Associate Professor Nadine Zacharias, Director of Student Engagement, can be reached at [redacted]

[redacted]

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[5] Killackey, E., Jackson, H. J., & McGorry, P. D. (2008). Vocational intervention in first-episode psychosis: individual placement and support v. treatment as usual. *The British journal of psychiatry*, *193*(2), 114-120.