

***Future Opportunities for Adult Learners in Victoria:
Pathways to Participation and Jobs***



**Victorian TAFE Association Response
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Contents

Introduction.....	3
TAFE and Learn Local cooperation.....	3
Recognising diversity in literacy.....	4
Youth in TAFE.....	5
High needs learners.....	5
Addressing barriers.....	6
Foundation skills programs for at-risk groups.....	7
Other recommendations.....	8
Key contact.....	8

Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association is the peak body for Victoria's public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), including 12 TAFE Institutes, four dual sector Universities and an Associate member, AMES.

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the discussion paper, *Future Opportunities for Adult Learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs*. The Victorian TAFE Association wishes to provide brief commentary on the following:

- TAFE and Learn Local cooperation
- Recognising diversity in literacy
- Youth in TAFE
- High needs learners
- Addressing barriers
- Foundation skills programs for at-risk groups
- Other recommendations

TAFE and Learn Local cooperation

Recently, the Victorian TAFE Association and the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board commissioned Victoria University's Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) to conduct research on levels of collaboration between the two sectors. The research was motivated to explore mechanisms that encourage effective collaboration between TAFEs and Learn Locals in the provision of adult, community, technical and further education and support services within Victorian communities.

The resulting research noted that the benefits of existing collaborations included the ability to better meet student needs; providing better skills for the local community; and improved capability and financial position for participating organisations. It also laid out a roadmap to encourage greater levels of collaboration between the two groups so as to amplify already existing activities and to maximise benefits.

The resulting 'roadmap' envisages collaboration that would operate on two levels: at a system level to drive and enable greater provider collaboration; and at a provider level to give practical effect to the system level measures. The report goes further and provides a list of elements that should be present for optimal collaboration, including:

- Agreement on a definition of collaboration
- Clear objectives for collaboration, including by outlining the benefits that arise from collaboration and an understanding of the role of TAFEs and Learn Locals
- The adoption of guiding principles
- That the Statement of Ministerial Expectations that applies to both TAFEs and the ACFE Board include a requirement to collaborate and guidance on how to measure the success of collaboration
- A number of initiatives to support and establish collaboration, including those to reduce transaction costs and improve organisational capability to investigate, implement and sustain collaboration.

TAFE and Learn Locals have a key role in capturing and providing education and training to cohorts that would otherwise be disenfranchised from tertiary education. TAFE has the infrastructure and resources to oversee collaborative activities and provide further pathways, while Learn Locals are well-placed to engage and support learners with pre-accredited

training. Through strong working relationships, Learn Local Organisations and TAFE institutes are able to develop an understanding of each other's systems and ensure ongoing support for learners.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that these facts make the TAFE network and Learn Local Organisations pivotal components in any strategy or initiative to tackle issues of literacy. And with this, any initiatives/proposals that encourage greater levels of collaboration to leverage and maximise their impact should be pursued. As such, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that consideration be given to mechanisms to enable and foster greater collaboration between TAFEs and Learn Locals. This would include adopting policies and deploying resources to enable the implementation of the recommendations arising from the CIRES report.

Recognising diversity in literacy

The move to ensure all Victorians achieve a minimum level of literacy is to be commended. But in doing so, care must be taken to ensure recognition of diversity and the impact this might have in the development of initiatives and programs. Ways in which diversity might be important include (but are not limited to):

- *Cultural background*: Victoria is rightly proud of the rich diversity of cultural backgrounds that make up its population, each with its own unique and rich literary features and traditions. Care must be taken to ensure that programs or initiatives to support literacy can accommodate and serve those from diverse backgrounds and recognise diverse notions of literacy. Cultural background may also be relevant in determining matters such as the manner of program delivery and the best way to deploy policy interventions.
- *Generational matters*: language is a live and evolving phenomenon, and what is judged as literate similarly changes. Different generations demonstrate different patois and vernaculars. There must be some facility to recognise new and evolving terms and new ways in which language is used and conveyed. Similarly, notions of literacy must recognise terms that are increasingly obsolete.
- *Migrants*: the interventions that are developed should be cognisant of and be flexible enough to cater to migrants, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- *Students with disabilities*: students with disabilities face challenges that are not experienced by other students. This affects their schooling and ability to develop literacy and numeracy skills. Further, some students may demonstrate different types of literacy and may struggle to demonstrate more common forms of literacy (for example, the deaf and hard of hearing may be proficient in Auslan but not in other forms of communication).
- *Technological literacy*: older Victorians may be literate in more traditional forms of communication but may struggle with newer forms of literacy delivered through modern technologies. Literacy programs should also include those that enable Victorians to be literate across multiple forms and platforms.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that any policies, programs or initiatives developed to address adult literacy pay consideration to the impact of diversity. Programs that are deployed should be developed in such a manner and with sufficient flexibility to enable the needs to these and other diverse cohorts to be considered.

Youth in TAFE

The Victorian TAFE Association has commissioned research that shows that Victoria's TAFE institutes annually provide secondary education to almost 6,000 students, with increasing numbers of early school leavers completing their senior school certificates in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector universities year on year.¹

The senior secondary settings in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector Universities consistently attract young people who have struggled in school, have experienced disrupted learning for a variety of reasons and are from low socio-economic status. Such students typically face difficult learning backgrounds, which leads them to gravitate towards communities and professions that accept them. Importantly, such students also demonstrate difficulties with respect to literacy and the TAFE setting is often the last resort for a cohort that would otherwise be left disenfranchised from education.

Despite TAFE playing such a significant role in secondary education and addressing literacy and learning needs, anomalies in funding for programs to facilitate and/or support school attendance are denied to TAFE secondary students, placing them at an unfair disadvantage compared to those studying in more traditional settings. Examples include:

- Transport and travelling allowances: TAFE institutes do not meet eligibility requirements for such programs, meaning TAFE secondary students are denied access to resources that make attending school easier.
- Scholarship programs: TAFE secondary students are ineligible to apply for programs to address financial barriers (an example being the Lynne Kosky Memorial VCAL Scholarship).

TAFE secondary students are often an afterthought in the design, implementation and disbursement of support and resources for students and in the development of initiatives to support literacy. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that the policies arising from this review give consideration to students in TAFE settings and to the broader question of learning, social supports and resources available to TAFE secondary students.

High needs learners

Tackling the needs of high needs learners is a two-pronged matter. It requires first that a definition be developed; second that appropriate policies, supports and interventions be developed and implemented.

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that high needs learners be defined as those who:

- require significantly more support than other learners, typically manifesting in a need for greater levels of academic support (both in terms of staff and other resources) and for support to develop other abilities (such as communication skills, social skills and self-confidence).
- are young learners disengaged from school. Such learners may be adept at avoidance strategies, such as arriving late to classes and returning late from breaks; arriving unprepared for learning; and/or, where relevant, arriving without required equipment (such as tools or appropriate clothing).

¹ Jonas, Pam, Schultz, Nita and van Son, Jo (2017), *Disadvantaged young people: senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities*, Victorian TAFE Association (<https://vta.vic.edu.au/doctest/research-applied/702-youth-in-tafe-report-january-2017-1>, accessed 24 August 2018).

- have low self-esteem, presenting as a lack of eye contact, unwillingness to participate in discussions or unwillingness to take part in activities.
- have high levels of anxiety, resulting in students who withdraw and separate themselves from the rest of the group; perceive comments or attempts to engage them as negative; fear entering a room that has people in it; fear using public transport; are unwilling or unable to communicate with peers or with teachers; and/or display poor health (headaches, stomach aches, tiredness, or generally feeling unwell).
- have high levels of anger or aggression that may be directed at teachers or peers, presenting as extreme negativity and disrespect; poor health; and moodiness and anger; or physical and social withdrawal.
- self-harm, with evidence of self-harm appearing as, among other things, a series of scratches on arms, or legs.

Support for such learners could be provided by:

- *Delivering programs to small groups.* Victorian TAFE Association members advise that delivery to and working in small groups (of three to five people) would be preferable to individual or large groups settings, since small groups encourage the development of communication and social skills that would not occur in individual settings and would address anxieties associated with delivery to large groups. However, there should be some facility to enable individualised options where these are deemed suited.
- *Providing facilitated access to technology.* For young learners, newer technologies offer a comfortable medium that can be used as a means or a bridge for communication. For adult learners, it offers opportunities to build confidence in using computers and less familiar technology.
- *Provide individualised support for learners.* By way of example, The Gordon Institute's partnership with Northern Futures to deliver accredited Foundation Skills training utilises a case-management approach that individualises support for learners. Working with on-site case-managers, the approach provides individuals with self-awareness, resilience, and the skills to change detrimental behaviour and environments that impact on their community connections, education and employment.

Addressing barriers

As noted elsewhere, at-risk learners generally require additional resources to ensure their learning needs are met. The viability of support is generally dependent on a provider's capacity to ensure sufficient numbers of students to justify associated resource allocations. But competition among providers, with each competing to obtain a given pool of students, means that ensuring sufficient student load can be challenging. This problem is particularly amplified in regional settings, where the pool of students is smaller than in metropolitan locations. In the latter case, the resulting regional competition dilutes the pool of learners available to any one provider, affecting a provider's ability to properly support at-risk students.

Competition may also impact in a form of 'coordination failure' and misalignment between the aims of competition (which encourages profit maximisation and greater 'efficiencies') and those of the community and government organisations that work with and support at-risk cohorts (which requires far more personalised (and therefore more costly) education and training services, with related high levels of resources).

There is, therefore, a misalignment between the policy aims of competition and policies that seek to ensure the needs of at-risk learners are met. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that consideration be given to this misalignment so that they work congruously and enable the needs of at-risk students to be met.

Other barriers directly affect students. For example, a student may reach the maximum funded course hours in his/her first attempt at a Foundation Skills course. But at-risk students often take longer to master skills, struggle to successfully complete required units (many require multiple attempts to complete required units) meaning they need greater time to build skills and to progress from one level to the next than the general student cohort. However, current arrangements mean subsidised training may not be available to such students after initial unsuccessful attempts, creating a financial barrier to their ability to reattempt and complete required units. Unable to access the subsidy, at-risk students instead choose to forego education, resulting in further disengagement.

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that flexibility be introduced to enable some learners to repeat the same level Foundation Skills course with continued subsidy and support. One option would be to apply an exemption for at-risk students that would enable such learners to progress.

Foundation skills programs for at-risk groups

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that there are a number of initiatives that could be adopted to improve the operation of foundation courses to make them more beneficial for at-risk groups. These changes include:

- *Enabling the introduction of units:* Prior to 2013, vocational units could be readily imported into foundation skills courses. While the packaging rules still allow elective units to be imported, government funding ceased for units that were not specifically listed in the training package. Changing this to enable new units to be imported as industry needs are identified would facilitate the development of a variety of streams and bridging and pathways courses that relate to industry need. This would improve the employment prospects for at-risk groups and help to stimulate industry interest/involvement. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that changes to funding arrangements be made to enable the inclusion of relevant units.
- *Teacher training:* It is imperative that the teachers who deliver courses to at-risk groups have an understanding and receive appropriate training to deal with the complex issues and barriers faced by at-risk learners, coupled with an understanding of the skills requirements for a given industry context. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that appropriate teacher training be developed, funded and implemented.
- *Engaging industry:* industry engagement is essential and is most successful when industry is well informed about the benefits and opportunities for literacy and numeracy training. Industry participation could take a number of forms, such as providing guest speakers, through site visits, and work experience opportunities. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that appropriate avenues be developed to enable greater industry participation.
- *Regionality and local needs:* this would ensure that programs are aligned with regional demand and local employment opportunities, and include industry involvement in program development. The meeting of local needs would also benefit from greater levels of collaboration between TAFE and Learn Local providers. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that policies and programs that enable the adoption and development of regional and localised approaches that are cognisant of local community and industry settings should be considered and adopted.

- *JobActive Providers*: this would involve greater interaction with JobActive providers. This recognises that many at-risk or unemployed learners would also be registered job-seekers.
- *Development funding*: the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that funding be provided to enable and support providers with the design of programs, to support teacher training, to engage with employers and to maintain a regional network of partners.

Other recommendations

The Victorian TAFE Association wishes to make the following brief comments:

- *Micro-credentials*: micro-credentials at pre-accredited level would be a very new concept for employers, suggesting that their introduction would need to be piloted. Our members advise of some interest from employers for accredited skills sets, including job-ready and employability skills, but that further analysis and ‘piloting’ would be desirable.
- *Work-experience and insurance*: our members advise that insurance coverage for work experience would be an essential component for supporting learners to engage in work experience.
- *Cohesion*: recently, the Victorian Government, under the auspices of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), undertook a review of literacy and numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications. Many of the issues analysed in that review are likely to have overlap with those that affect Future Adult Learners. Further, there may be mental and physical health issues or social problems that contribute to a student’s difficulties with learning, meaning that there would be merit in analysing the impacts of these factors, as well as any existing interventions. The development of robust, effective and long-lasting initiatives will be greater where there is greater coordination of activities and an appreciation that many factors impact upon learning. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that this review work with and consider the outcomes, issues and recommendations arising from the VCAA review and indeed to other relevant reviews (including those from other jurisdictions) and activities to ensure the formation of rigorous recommendations to maximise benefits to learners.

Key contact

To discuss the matters in this submission further, please contact:

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