The Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism's (SASLA) response to the inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with a disability

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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum.

autismcrc.com.au

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https://www.latrobe.edu.au/

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) is Australia's first centre dedicated to autism research. It has a strong focus on research translation through the development of evidence-based tools and collaborates with other autism research centres and institutes both in Australia and internationally. OTARC is situated in the School of Psychology and Public Health within the College of Science, Health and Engineering (SHE) at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia.

https://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc

Introduction

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism's (Autism CRC) Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability.

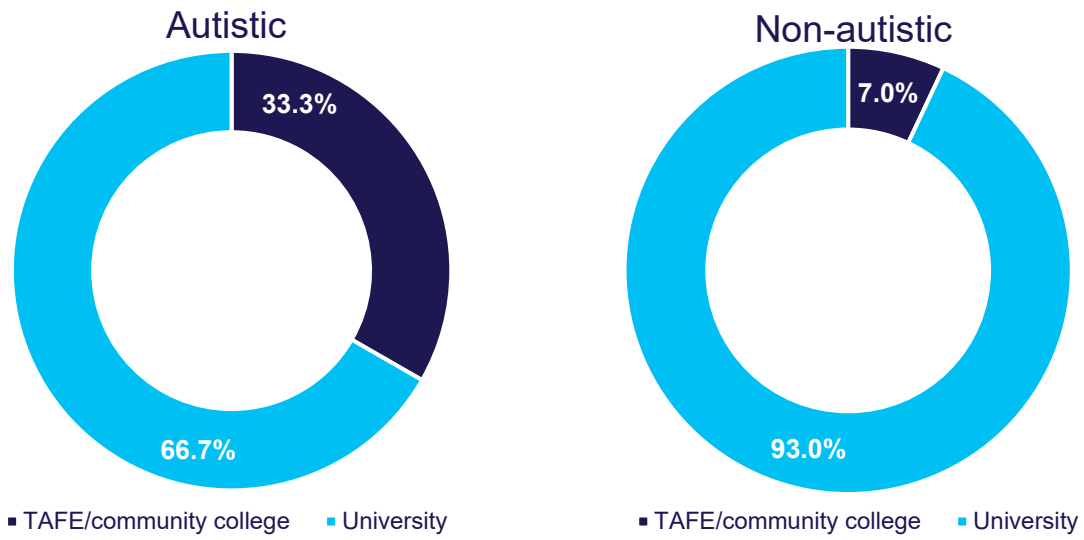
Autism spectrum disorder (*hereafter referred to as autism and those who have a diagnosis as autistic)* is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by challenges with social communication and interaction and engagement in restricted, repetitive behaviours, interests and activities and sensory sensitivities[1]. In 2018, 205,200 Australians were identified as autistic in the Disability, Ageing and Carers, survey[2] and 29% of NDIS participants with an approved plan had a primary disability of autism making it the largest primary disability category for the NDIS Australia wide[3]. This is a substantial proportion of the disabled population likely to be accessing a TAFE education in Victoria. Numbers are likely to increase in the future due to:

- The introduction of a National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Australia in 2018[4],
- The role out of a Victoria wide maternal child health nurse training package on early signs of autism (delivered by La Trobe's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre in 2019), and
- The release of the Victorian autism plan (2019).

The SASLA team have found that if they were participating in tertiary education, Australian autistic youth (n = 58) were more likely to be studying at TAFE/community college than University compared to their non-autistic peers (Figure 1)[5].

[1] American Psychiatric Association, 2013
[2] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018
[3] National Disability Insurance Agency, 2018
[4] Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism, 2018
[5] Flower et al (2020)

Figure 1: Australian autistic youth attending tertiary education

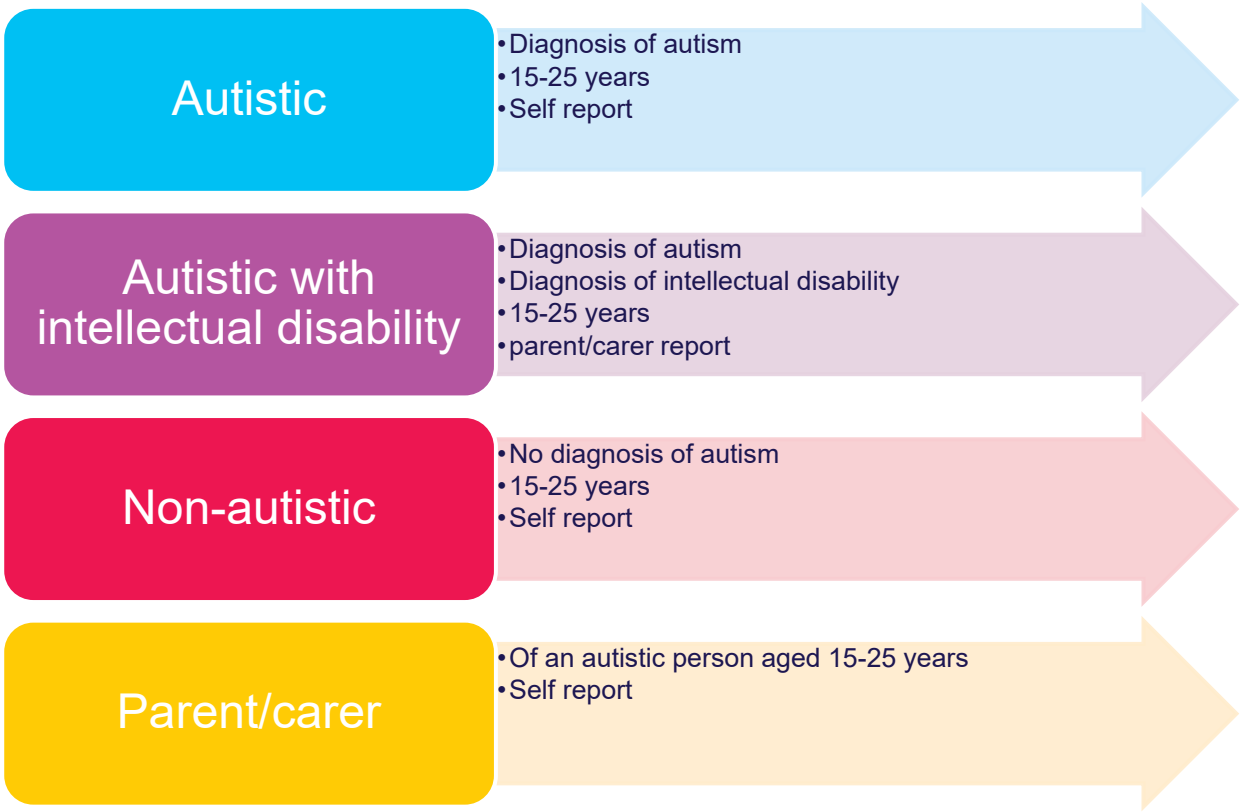


The Autism CRC established the SASLA study in 2014, as part of Program 3 – Adulthood, with Professor Amanda Richdale as the project lead[6]. The aim of this project is to provide a comprehensive profile of young Australian adults on the autism spectrum. The young people participating in SASLA span the breadth of the target age range (15 to 25 years, *n* = 141 autistic individuals and *n* = 220 non-autistic participants) and represent a wide range of locations across Australia. To see a full cross-sectional profile of the Australian sample (without intellectual disability) please see the snapshot here.

The SASLA study is an online survey-based project, which follows young people over a 2-year period. Data collection for the baseline survey commenced in 2015, recruiting across four populations (See Figure 2)

[6] A.Richdale@latrobe.edu.au, +61394791742

Figure 2: SASLA survey sample groups



The focus of this submission is to provide evidence-based recommendations that will contribute to the Committee's understanding of the needs of autistic Victorians accessing TAFE. In making these recommendations we will be drawing on current evidence from our research in the following samples:

1. An autistic sample with a co-occurring intellectual disability

Participants included 21 young autistic adults (mean age = 20.67 years, average age of diagnosis = 5.35 years), and 18 of these had surveys completed by their parent/carer. Participants were from across Australia.

2. A Victorian sample

We have isolated the Victorian sample from our wider study. Participants included 30 young autistic adults (mean age = 19.17 years; average age of autism diagnosis 10.25 years), and a comparative group of 151 non-autistic young adults (mean age = 17.91 years). Among the young autistic adults, 80% had received interventions or support for their social and communication difficulties or autism spectrum disorder including: early intervention, ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), an integration aid in primary or high school and other supports.

3. Supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder study sample

A Victorian DHS funded study undertook a needs analysis for autistic tertiary education students, their parents, and their teachers in Victoria, and created and evaluated an autism tertiary education action plan[7]. Focus groups consisted of autistic individuals (*N* = 23), their families (*N* = 15), tertiary institution staff (*N* = 31), and an online survey comprised staff (*N* = 65), family members (*N* = 28) and student participants (*N* = 16). The final report can be requested from Professor Amanda Richdale[8] and a copy of the final recommendations can be found in Figure 7.

This submission will offer information and recommendations on the following terms of reference:

- Social and economic benefits of improving access to TAFE for learners with disability,
- Experiences of learners with disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs,
- Barriers to learners with disability accessing TAFE and ideas for addressing these,
- The training and practical, policy and curriculum support TAFE teachers need to maximise the learning experiences of learners with disability.

[7] Richdale et al (2012), Cai et al (2016)
[8] A.Richdale@latrobe.edu.au

Summary of recommendations

1. Improve educational and vocational opportunities for autistic youth by providing inclusive, flexible and diverse study opportunities within Victorian TAFE providers.
2. Acknowledge the difficulties faced by autistic students in combining work and study by ensuring there are flexible options for part time study, and that the process for how to achieve this is made clear and easy to follow.
3. Improve opportunities for autistic students to interact with their peers by providing a diverse range of activities including face-to-face and online approaches.
4. Have clear, enforceable polices regarding bullying and discrimination behaviours.
5. Ensure that the equity services provided to students are collaborative and individualised in nature, to empower the student, with or without a nominated support person, to make decisions regarding their study supports.
6. Implement the 10 recommendations from the Victorian transition study final report funded by DHS (VIC) for supporting autistic students in Victorian tertiary education (Figure 7).
7. Implement sensory sensitive policies that support the provision of accessible learning environments for autistic students enrolled with Victorian TAFE providers.
8. Have a dedicated ‘quiet space’ with controlled sensory features (e.g., light) available to autistic students on all Victorian TAFE campus.
9. Consider dimmer lighting across equity service spaces to provide an accessible environment for autistic people accessing supports.
10. Utilise existing resources available such as the Neurodiversity HUB (https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/) that offer resources to students, teachers and tertiary education staff free of charge.
11. Improve communication between TAFE Victoria and Victorian schools to ensure transitioning autistic students are receiving the information and supports required to access a TAFE education.
12. Ensure that TAFE Victoria disability support policies acknowledge the difficulties in obtaining an autism diagnosis and offer flexibility in evidence provision requirements to access supports.
13. Ensure TAFE Victoria disability services consider the high levels of co-occurring conditions that an autistic student may also be experiencing when providing supports.
14. Create opportunities for safe and supported disclosure for autistic students inclusive of an accessible website containing information for students, email and phone contact details to suit an individual’s chosen communication method.

15. All diagnosis disclosure is followed up with student equity and a Learning Adjustment Plan is discussed and developed with the student and significant person if nominated.
16. Create opportunities for prospective students to see what TAFE is like, such as a ‘soft test’ (like a soft opening) to explore what TAFE has to offer and to reduce transition shock.
17. Provide autism-specific training for TAFE Equity and Diversity staff who support autistic students.
18. Provide accessible resources about autism for all TAFE staff to ensure they are well educated and confident in communicating with and supporting autistic students.
19. Provide accessible resources about teaching autistic students and implementing individualised learning adjustment plans for all TAFE teaching staff.

Terms of reference

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

There are a multitude of benefits, both social and economic, in improving access to TAFE for autistic Victorians. As stated in the introduction, a substantial number of those seeking to access TAFE who have a disability are likely to be autistic. Improving access for autistic Victorians has the potential to benefit Victoria in the following ways:

- increasing the proportion of autistic people who are employed,
- decreasing the stress and impact on disability employment services,
- decreasing the stress on mental health services, and
- increasing social inclusion, independence, adult productivity and quality of life.

Employment

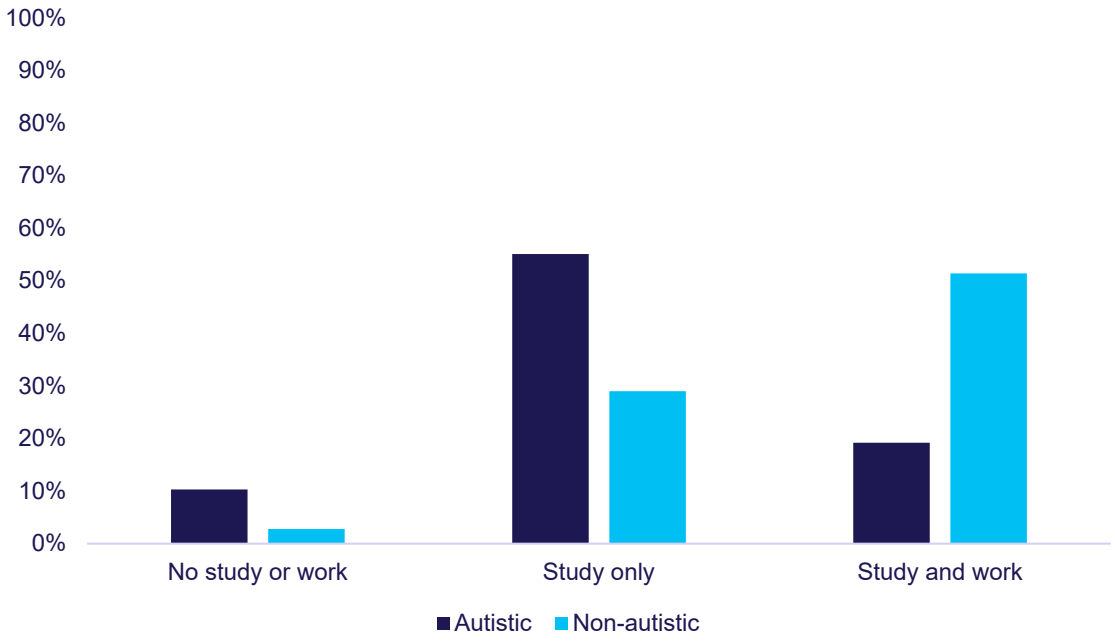
Employment is an important way for autistic people to feel empowered, independent and included in their communities. It also has the potential to substantially improve their contribution to the Victorian economy. Autistic people are underrepresented in the Australian workforce with only an estimated 27% employed compared to those with other disabilities (48%) or without disabilities (80%)[9]. These figures are well below the OECD average, where 60% of those with a disability are employed placing Australia 21 out of 26 OECD nations[10], and indicating much scope for improvement. By increasing the employment rate of disabled people by just 10% the Australian economy could gain $40-43 billion over nine years (estimated between 2012-2021)[11]. Vocational Education and Training, including TAFE, has an excellent track record in getting people into jobs and further education with 86.5% of graduates employed or enrolled in further study after completion of their course[12]. This is an excellent pathway for autistic people to gain the necessary skills for further employment. Further, given the benefits of vocational training for autistic people[13], TAFE offers a unique opportunity to assist autistic people gain skills and experience needed to successfully attain employment.

[9] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018)
[10] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2011)
[11] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015), Hedley et al (2017), Deloitte Access Economics (2015)
[12] NCVER 2016
[13] Flower et al (2019)

When we asked autistic SASLA participants (Australia wide sample) who had completed high school, about the activities they were currently undertaking, and where and how they were participating, the results (illustrated in Figure 3) showed that following high school, compared to non-autistic youth, autistic youth were:

- more likely to **not** be engaged in either, study or work (2.8% vs 10.3%),
- more likely to be studying without working at the same time (29.0% vs 55.1%),
- much less likely to study and work at the same time (51.4% vs 19.2%),
- more likely to study part time (36.8% vs 14.0%), and
- more likely to study at TAFE /community college than at university (33.3% vs 7%)[14].

Figure 3: Self-reported post school activities in Australia



This has practical implications for the delivery of integrated study and on-the-job training including the necessity of flexible study options and the option to study part time.

Engaging in best practice employment interventions for autistic people has the potential to substantially reduce economic costs even if targeted at relatively small numbers of people. For example, the Dandelion program, which is a paid work experience program for autistic tertiary students, is estimated to have generated $26 million for Australia's GDP over five years[15].

[14] Flower et al (2020)
[15] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015)

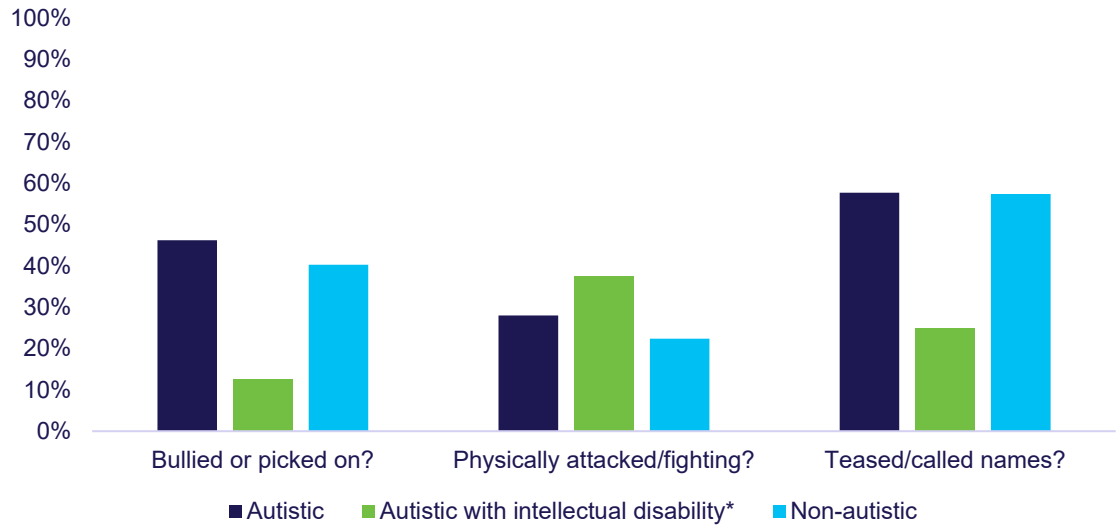
Vocational training with appropriate supports and onsite training has the capacity to benefit autistic job candidates and provide effective transition into workplaces. TAFE Victoria is ideally placed to offer such training and reduce the significant economic cost of their un- and under-employment on the Victorian economy.

Social inclusion

Social inclusion involves feeling accepted within your local community and being able to contribute to society in a meaningful way through participation in this community. One example would be being accepted and included in social activities by fellow TAFE students. True inclusion can lead to greater acceptance and less abuse of autistic people in the general community, with a larger proportion of autistic people participating in, and being represented in all facets of society. However, our research has shown that the inclusion of autistic people in Victorian society is still a work in progress. Our findings on bullying and independent living are a case in point.

Autistic youth in Victoria, as shown in Figure 4, are reporting being bullied or picked on and having been physically attacked or involved in fighting at higher levels than non-autistic Victorians. This was even higher in the case of those who are autistic with a co-occurring intellectual disability who experience high rates of physical attack and fighting while studying. This may serve as a disincentive for societal participation and certainly indicates a lack of social inclusion by peers. This is further evidenced by 32% of autistic youth reporting that they did not interact with their peers compared to 4% of our non-autistic youth, and 9% of autistic youth reporting that they did not get on well, or got on badly with their peers while studying compared to 6% of non-autistic youth.

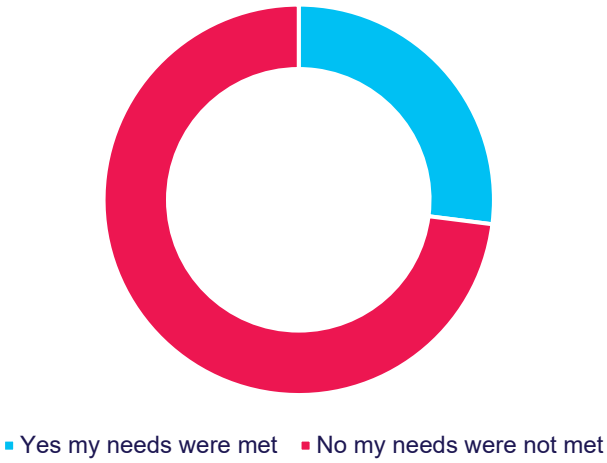
Figure 4: Self-reported bullying during study in Victoria



**Australian sample*

And in 2012, autistic students in the DHS focus groups indicated that their social needs in higher education were not adequately met (Figure 5)[16].

Figure 5: Percentage agreement by autistic students that their "social needs were met in higher education"



Independence is also very important. There is still a lot of work to be done to enable autistic adults to live independently. Only 10% of young autistic adults in Victoria reported living independently from family. In a large, Australian longitudinal study we found that living independently (i.e., living alone or as a couple vs. living with family) was related to better psychological quality of life for autistic adults[17]. Tertiary study can be starting a point in developing independence through improved employment opportunities, increased opportunities to extend social circles, develop crucial daily living skills, and foster autonomy. This will lead to reduced stress on employment and mental health services saving the Victorian

[16] Richdale et al (2012)
[17] Lawson et al (2020)

government significant economic costs, and by improving the diversity and inclusion in the wider community, create a diverse and productive Victoria.

Improving access of autistic Victorians into TAFE also directly meets two of the Victorian Autism Plan's[18] guiding principles:

> **"Opportunity: Opportunity is about having the means to control and improve your circumstances through access to education, employment and positions of leadership and influence."**
>
> **"Diversity: Human rights belong to all people without discrimination, and the diversity of the people of Victoria enhances our community."**

Recommendations

1. Improve educational and vocational opportunities for autistic youth by providing inclusive, flexible and diverse study opportunities within Victorian TAFE providers.

2. Acknowledge the difficulties faced by autistic students in combining work and study by ensuring there are flexible options for part time study, and that the process for how to achieve this is made clear and easy to follow.

3. Improve opportunities for autistic students to interact with their peers by providing a diverse range of activities including face-to-face and online approaches.

4. Have clear, enforceable polices regarding bullying and discrimination behaviours.

5. Ensure that the equity services provided to students are collaborative and individualised in nature, to empower the student, with or without a nominated support person, to make decisions regarding their study supports.

[18] Department of Health and Human Services (2019)

Experiences of learners with disability accessing and participating in TAFE programs

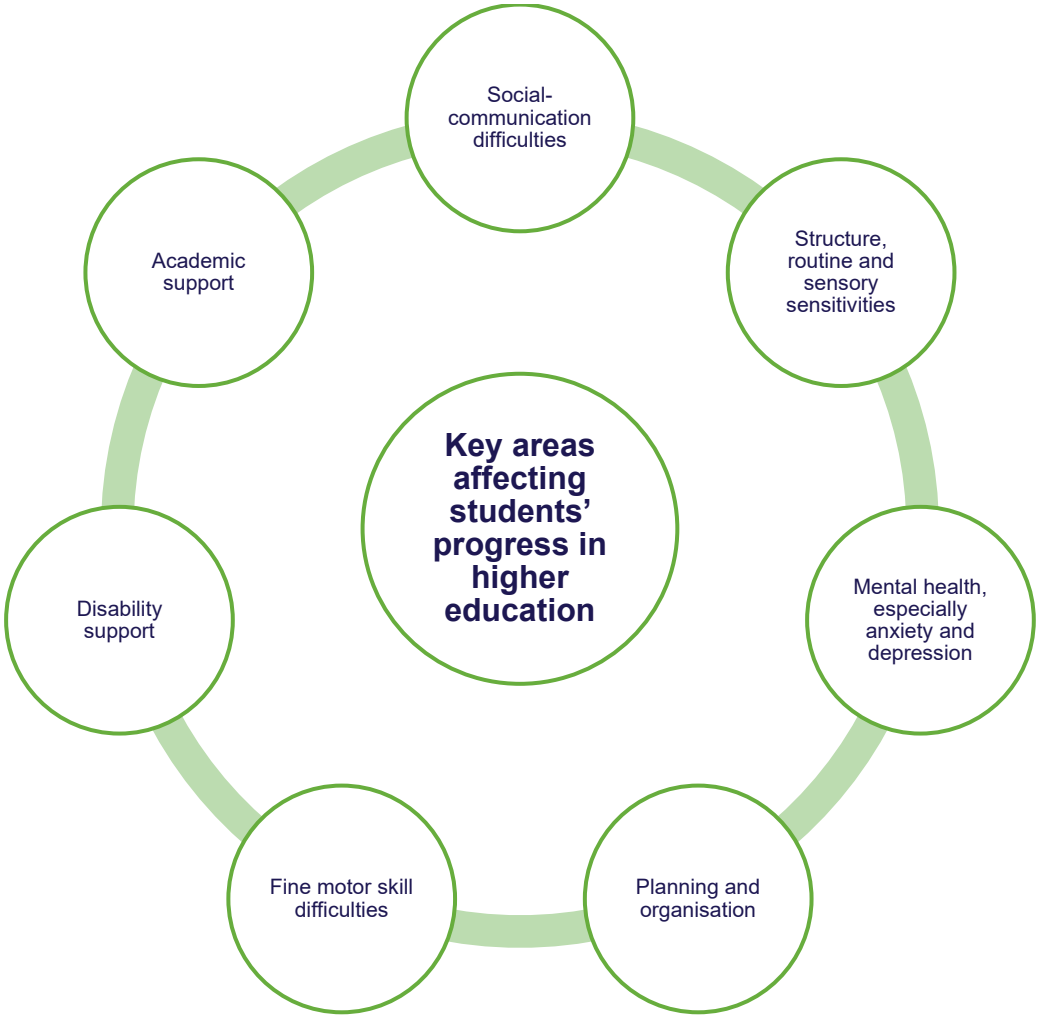
Victorian autistic youth on the whole reported liking school/study (81%) but 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that school/study was challenging (68%). This pattern is echoed by autistic Australian's with a co-occurring intellectual disability with 100% stating that they liked school/study and 75% agreeing that school/study was challenging. This offers an exciting opportunity for TAFE Victoria to engage with the autistic population. By providing an inclusive and accessible space to further autistic Victorians' education, TAFE Victoria can improve their lifelong prospects and further social inclusion.

Concluding in 2012, the "Supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder" (DHS study) undertook focus groups with autistic students from TAFE and universities, teaching staff and parents of autistic students to understand their experiences in transition to higher education, what it was like while there and what challenges were faced in maintaining study. Focus groups of autistic students and their families revealed that in terms of transition supports:

- students had difficulties choosing a course and lacked transition support,
- students' educational needs were not met, and
- students were not well prepared for higher education.

Figure 6 shows a summary of challenges reported by the autistic students when asked about what was affecting their progress in higher education settings.

Figure 6: Key areas affecting progress in higher education (DHS study)



Autistic tertiary students also reported a need for structure and routine which can be lacking in education settings[19], thus increasing stress and anxiety, and leading to decreased productivity and social participation. Anxiety and meltdowns can affect an individual's ability to complete education and impact employment.

Autistic higher education students said:

> **"For me organizing myself is difficult because I don't know how long it takes to do things. So I think it'll take a day but ends up taking 4 days. And then that displaces your whole plan."**

[19] Richdale et al (2012)

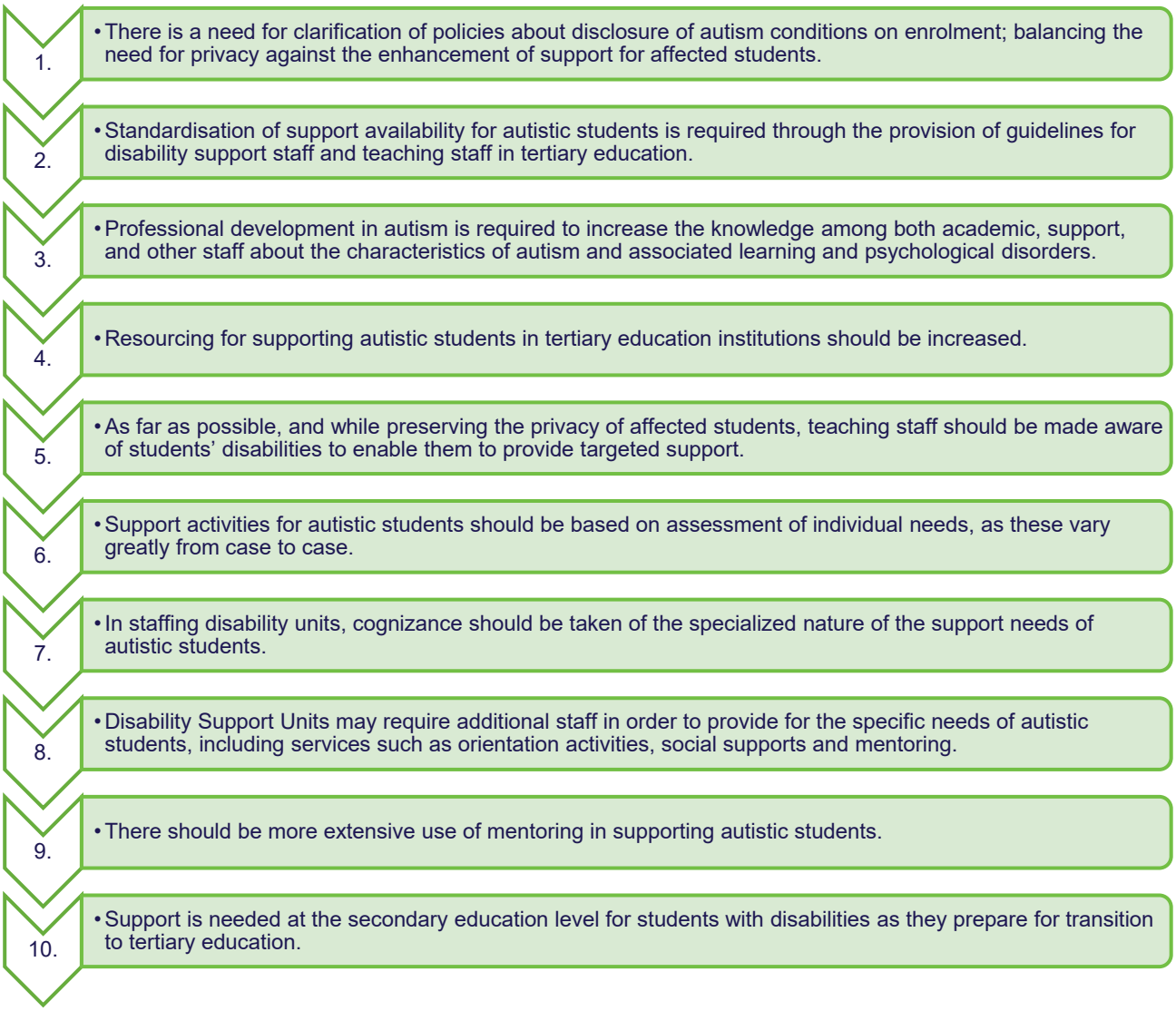
> **"My brain is unable to process multiple information at the same time. I can think about my own thoughts and what I need to say for the topic, but I can't think about the person, what they are feeling, and what they need to hear."**
>
> **"I've had a screaming fit in the middle of the corridor at the admin building. My particular lecturer walked away from me when I asked for help and I said, don't you walk away. And I really lost it."**

As shown in Figure 6, autistic students identified sensory sensitivities as an important issue affecting their ability to maintain study. Studies have shown that up to 90% of autistic people experience sensory issues[20]. One such important issue experienced by many autistic people is hyper-sensitivity. This means that everyday sensory inputs are experienced as overwhelming or even painful. For example, low level chatter in a communal space can be experienced as loud or booming, causing pain in the ears. Over the course of a day, this can be very uncomfortable and distressing, and studies have shown that these sensory issues can negatively affect learning[21]. However, a study on autistic adults has shown that a quiet space, with preferably controllable lighting, can support these sensory issues[22].

The final report for the DHS study outlined 10 recommendations for tertiary education providers to improve access and accessibility for their institutions that remain relevant to improving access to Victorian TAFEs (Figure 7).

[20] Leekam et al (2020)
[21] Jones et al (2020)
[22] Robertson et al (2015)

Figure 7: 10 recommendations to supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for autistic students.



Recommendations

6. Implement the 10 recommendations from the Victorian transition study final report funded by DHS (VIC) for supporting autistic students in Victorian tertiary education.

7. Implement sensory sensitive policies that support the provision of accessible learning environments for autistic students enrolled with Victorian TAFE providers.

8. Have a dedicated ‘quiet space’ with controlled sensory features (e.g., light) available to autistic students on all Victorian TAFE campus.

9. Consider dimmer lighting across equity service spaces to provide an accessible environment for autistic people accessing supports.

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

Service accessibility and suitability

Several Australian studies of autistic individuals and their parents/carers have expressed concern about the availability and cost of services across the lifespan[23]. For example, a thematic analysis of data of the SASLA community survey in 2020[24] identified significant problems with accessibility and adequacy of services, including:

- difficulty in locating available services, particularly after high school,
- lack of adaptation of the curriculum to cater for individual needs of autistic students in education settings,
- lack of support to acquire upskilling to improve employability,
- lack of day programs,
- lack of practical supports and accommodations at university,
- lack of supports in fostering decision making, living skills and self-advocacy,
- difficulty in navigating the system if you do not fit typical categories of support, and
- lack of post diagnosis supports.

The analysis also identified inadequacies in knowledge of autism and associated difficulties in front-line service providers, including many psychologists and psychiatrists, police and support workers. These factors make interactions between autistic persons and service providers unnecessarily stressful and difficult and make it harder to collate evidence of hardship for special consideration in educational settings.

[23] Flower et al (2019)
[24] The SASLA community is comprised of autistic individuals aged 17–27, their parents/carers, members of autism specific organisations and individuals who work with autistic people. Twenty-two community members responded, and selected quotes are published herein with their permission.

Co-occurring conditions

It is well established that autistic people are at a high risk of co-occurring conditions, including mental and physical health difficulties. This population has higher rates of epilepsy[25] and hearing or visual impairment[26], anxiety and depression than the general population. Current rates of clinical anxiety or depression in autistic adults range from 23% to 46%, while lifetime rates for anxiety and depression are 42% and 37% respectively[27], which far exceed the Australian general population rates of 26.3% and 15% for anxiety and depression respectively[28]. Table 1 shows the prevalence of mental, physical and cognitive conditions reported by Victorian SASLA participants when they completed the survey.

Table 1: Prevalence of self-reported current mental and physical health conditions.

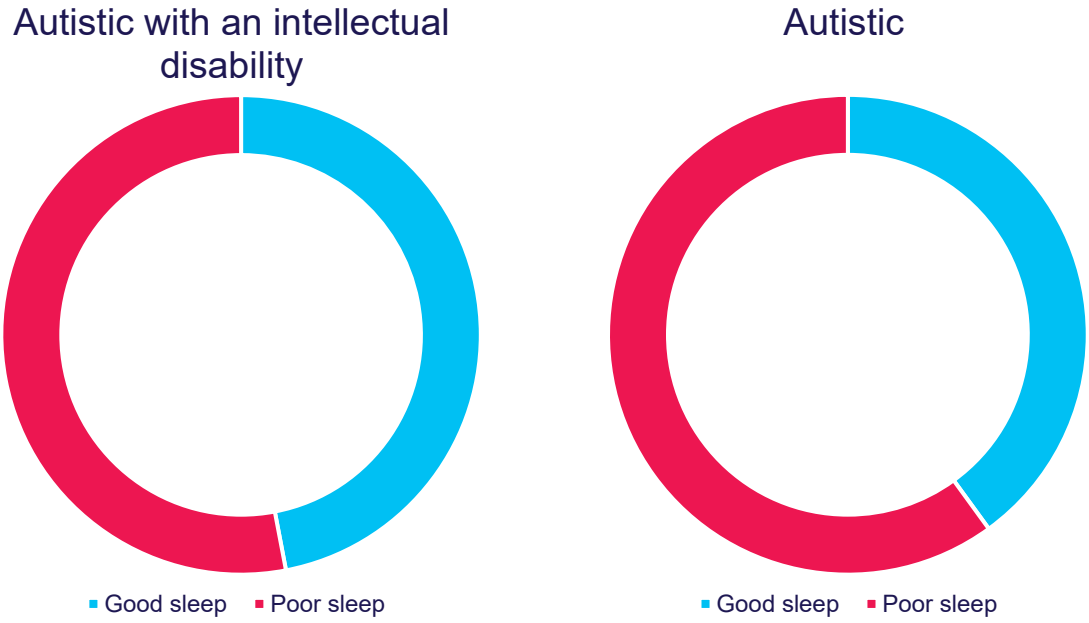
Condition	**Autistic** (Victoria sample *n* = 30)	**Autistic with intellectual disability** (Australia sample, *n* = 21)	**Non-autistic** (Victoria sample, *n* = 151)
Anxiety	50%	62%	22%
Depression	27%	5%	11%
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	10%	29%	4%
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)	10%	29%	1%
Speech or language impairment	3%	33%	0%
Hearing impairment (e.g. deafness)	3%	5%	3%
Seizure disorder (e.g. epilepsy)	0%	24%	1%
Visual Impairment (e.g. low vision)	3%	5%	5%

In addition to the difficulties described above, sleep disturbances, which are associated with poor mental health, are also common, with 64% of autistic individuals in the age range of 15-80 years reporting poor sleep, compared with only 46% of non-autistic adults of similar ages[29]. As you can see in Figure 8, 60% of SASLA's autistic Victorian sample and 53% of autistic Australians with a

[25] Lukmanji et al (2019)
[26] Do et al (2017)
[27] Hollocks et al (2019)
[28] ABS (2008)
[29] Jovevska et al (2020)

co-occurring intellectual disability were experiencing poor sleep. Research has found that autistic individuals who were classified as having insomnia were more likely to be unemployed compared to autistic adults without insomnia[30]. Along with high rates of anxiety and depression also being reported as co-occurring conditions by autistic Victorians (50%), and those with a co-occurring intellectual disability (62%), co-occurring conditions are a major barrier to participation in higher education. These figures clearly demonstrate substantial need for autistic-specific mental health supports in early adulthood to ensure a successful TAFE career.

Figure 8: Self-reported sleep difficulties

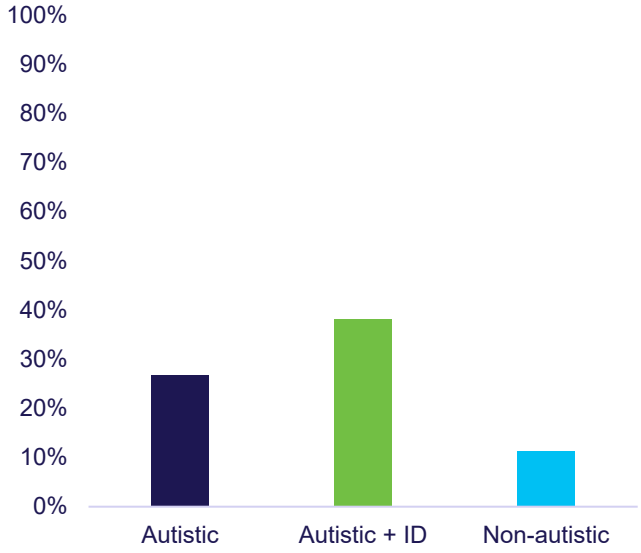


Co-occurring conditions are barriers to participation in further education as they impact on mood and learning. Without a clear understanding of how to best support autistic Victorians in study post-high school, we seriously risk limiting a large proportion of the Victorian population starting a TAFE course or being able to complete their course successfully. There is an opportunity for TAFE to offer supports for co-occurring conditions, reducing the impact they have on students that also deal with autistic traits that may make learning more difficult and increase their chances of successfully completing a qualification.

[30] Baker et al (2019)

Transition supports

Figure 9: Transition support received when leaving high school

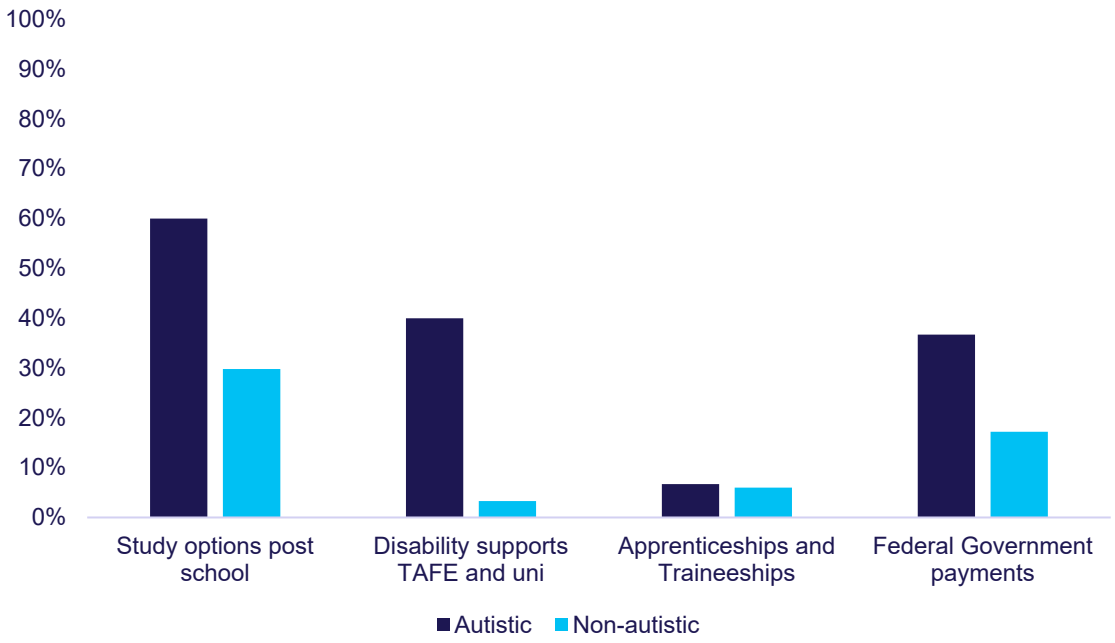


Transition support services for autistic Australians with and without an intellectual disability who are moving from school to further education are fundamental to improving accessibility of TAFE for autistic Victorians. Figure 9 shows the rates of transition supports reserved by our autistic and non-autistic Victorian SASLA samples and our Australian autistic young people with a co-occurring intellectual disability sample. Rates are low for all groups and even though the rates are higher for autistic youth (with or without an intellectual disability) the rates are still less than 40% showing substantial room for improvement. When we look at the types of transition supports received (Figure 10), autistic school leavers received more information about study options than about disability supports available, information about apprenticeships and traineeships, or what federal government financial supports are available. This is a trend in the right direction as autistic students are clearly receiving more supports than the non-autistic group, however only 40% of autistic youth are receiving information on disability supports in tertiary education settings and very few, only 7%, knew about traineeships and apprenticeships. There is clear scope for improvement in educating potential autistic students about the opportunities and supports available at TAFE and ensuring they are aware of TAFE as a supportive and inclusive tertiary education option.

> **"My son was very poorly supported for the transition from high school to adult life and this was stressful for both of us. His mental health was severely impacted"** [31] (parent of autistic student)

[31] Richdale et al (2012)

Figure 10: Types of transition support received when leaving high school in Victoria



Disclosure of diagnosis

The DHS study found that autistic students' needs may not be well understood by staff due to the communication and behavioural difficulties they experience as a characteristic of their diagnosis. Such as not wanting to communicate concerns to staff, being unable to demonstrate knowledge in the assessment format requested by staff, literal interpretation of instructions given by staff and a preference not to participate in group assignments[32]. Autistic students said:

> **"[Not asking for help because] it's embarrassing and not wanting to look like an idiot in front of everyone."**
>
> **"I can't articulate my thoughts very well. I mean I can't write them down, I can speak it and talk about it in very very knowledgeable. I just can't write about it."**

These difficulties may also stop students from disclosing and gaining the supports they need to thrive. In fact, the DHS study found that 44% of autistic students did not disclose at enrolment because they had not yet received a diagnosis[33].

[32] Richdale et al (2012)
[33] Richdale et al (2012)

The DHS study also reported that finding an opportunity to disclose is limited. At most tertiary institutions, the first opportunity to disclose their need for support is on their enrolment form. This is an ineffective way of collecting this information as the forms do not specify specific disabilities, some autistic people do not view themselves as disabled even if they may require supports to thrive at TAFE, and no information is supplied regarding reasons to disclose or the potential benefits of disclosure. Staff said:

> **"When the students do an enrolment form they need [to specify that they need] support then that gets sent off to student services and then we'll get contacted. But if nothing is initially ticked on the enrolment form then we don't know."**

Autistic students in the DHS study focus groups did not proactively disclose their diagnosis. Autistic students did not want to feel judged, so they did not disclose.

> **"For me on that form it was - I didn't want to write it down. I thought that I would be judged for that, and I didn't want to be judged for that so I didn't write it down on the form."**

Often disclosure occurred through parents contacting the equity and diversity teams (with or without the student present) or parents, school teachers, or tertiary teaching staff prompting the student to disclose. The survey responses indicated that most autistic students who disclosed their diagnosis had a family member present.

Recommendations

10. Utilise existing resources available such as the Neurodiversity HUB (https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/) that offer resources to students, teachers and tertiary education staff free of charge.

11. Improve communication between TAFE Victoria and Victorian schools to ensure transitioning autistic students are receiving the information and supports required to access a TAFE education.

12. Ensure that TAFE Victoria disability support policies acknowledge the difficulties in obtaining an autism diagnosis and offer flexibility in evidence provision requirements to access supports.

13. Ensure TAFE Victoria disability services consider the high levels of co-occurring conditions that an autistic student may also be experiencing when providing supports.

14. Create opportunities for safe and supported disclosure for autistic students inclusive of an accessible website containing information for students, email and phone contact details to suit an individual's chosen communication method.

15. All diagnosis disclosure is followed up with student equity and a Learning Adjustment Plan is discussed and developed with the student and significant person if nominated.

16. Create opportunities for prospective students to see what TAFE is like, such as a 'soft test' (like a soft opening) to explore what TAFE has to offer and to reduce transition shock.

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

Tertiary education staff who participated in the DHS study felt that the challenges facing autistic students were substantial and that staff needed specialised training and institutional support for working effectively with autistic students. Staff members talking about challenges of autistic students:

> **"But he was always anxious, always very literal. I said that I thought he should dictate the work to me and he was horrified and he said, "I would never presume to dictate to you."**
>
> **"It was made very clear at the start that he works to quite a rigid framework, that he needs structure. That became apparent in the first class when he advised me that at five past 10 it was five past 10 and I said there would be a break at 10 o'clock."**
>
> **"No matter how aware you are of autism, sometimes you can make the mistake yourself and think oh-oh, damn, that's why his behaviour has changed, because you've ruined his or her routine. That's why he's arcing up. We've stuffed up something. If you're not aware of autism, as an employer or as a teacher, yeah you really can cause a lot of disruption to their lives and not be aware of it."**

The majority of our SASLA autistic and autistic with co-occurring intellectual disability youth samples (>80%) reported that they got on well with their teachers, indicating excellent accord which is comparable to our non-autistic participants (87%). This is a strong position for TAFE Victoria to work from in building an open and supportive learning space for autistic Victorians through training and institutional support for teaching staff to improve their capability and confidence in working with autistic students.

Recommendations

17. Provide autism-specific training for TAFE Equity and Diversity staff who support autistic students.

18. Provide accessible resources about autism for all TAFE staff to ensure they are well educated and confident in communicating with and supporting autistic students.

19. Provide accessible resources about teaching autistic students and implementing individualised learning adjustment plans for all TAFE teaching staff.

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