

Passive, responsive or pro-active: Australian TAFE approaches to inclusiveness in VET

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Abstract

This paper examines technical and further education (TAFE) institute approaches to inclusiveness in vocational education and training (VET), drawing on findings from a national survey of fifty-eight TAFE institutes conducted as part of the recent NCVER funded consortium project, *A Well Skilled Future: tailoring VET to the emerging labour market*. There was a high level of diversity in the inclusiveness practice described by the surveyed TAFEs and the issue of inclusion of disadvantaged learners in effective training was of varying significance within each institution. The descriptions provided by the surveyed TAFEs revealed three broad types of TAFE inclusiveness.

The first group of TAFEs identified through the research were those that reported a passive commitment to inclusiveness practice and while these organisations complied with the specific demands of equity policy, they did little more to identify or respond to individual and community needs and expectations. The second group of TAFEs were those that had evolved and were being responsive to the diverse needs of their existing cohorts, but had stopped short of creating new pathways or opportunities for disadvantaged groups outside their student population. The final group were those breaking the mold, revolutionising and enhancing the accessibility of their training by proactively creating learning opportunities and striving to achieve effective and sustainable outcomes for their broader communities. Through their proactive approach to inclusiveness, these TAFEs were positioning themselves to respond quickly and effectively to changes in economic and social contexts.

Effective inclusiveness practice requires the exchange of knowledge about learner disadvantage and TAFEs to pursue collaborative relationships with other educational, government and support agencies, particularly in the context of diversifying populations and industries. What emerged from this study was that while there was a small minority of TAFEs that were being highly innovative in their strategies and approaches to social inclusion and actively embracing the challenges of engaging with and generating diverse learning opportunities for their communities, there were still some TAFEs that had not yet recognised the need for inclusiveness. While these TAFEs lag behind in their strategies for social inclusion, they maintain a chronic systemic barrier for their learners and communities seeking skills and their industries seeking skilled labour.

Introduction

A key and well-established responsibility of TAFE is meeting the future skills needs of the workforce. While social justice imperatives for equitable access to and provision of VET are well documented, within the context of skills shortages, optimising the skill levels of disadvantaged people to maximise the stock of available skills is also a critical component of the VET sector's economic responsibilities. This paper examines TAFE approaches to inclusiveness in VET, drawing on findings from

a national survey of fifty-eight TAFE institutes and case studies conducted as part of the recent NCVET funded consortium project, *A Well Skilled Future: tailoring VET to the emerging labour market* (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2007; Clarke & Walstab 2007), to highlight some significant differences in TAFE inclusiveness practice. While a small minority of TAFEs are leading the way and revolutionising their practice, there are some TAFEs that appear to maintain a passive approach to TAFE inclusiveness. There is a risk that this lack of action on their part will seriously disadvantage their communities in terms of development of an appropriately skilled and sustainable labour force, and ultimately, social inclusion.

TAFEs face the challenges of responding to policy shifts and changing skills demands from both individuals and industry and implementing effective inclusiveness strategies within changing and sometimes volatile local and regional landscapes. In recent years, TAFEs have also been faced with shifts in VET participation rates. With these changing internal and external contexts in mind, is a VET provider that simply meets central funding body participation targets or responds to a knock on the door doing enough, or is there a need for more TAFEs to be actively engaging with their communities: seeking input, sharing knowledge, leading change and paving the way for improved access to VET? This paper outlines three different types of TAFE inclusiveness – passive, responsive and proactive – that were identified through the research project. It also highlights some key variations in TAFE practice between the three types and explores potential impacts of these different approaches.

Background and Literature Review

During the last decade, TAFE institutes have been required to respond to a diversity of drivers for inclusiveness, including the equitable building of individual human capital outcomes, the need for community strengthening and the demand for industry skills (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2007). In the last decade, policy positions with regard to the VET ‘client’ have shifted several times and continue to be contested (Anderson 2006). With VET program success still mainly measured in terms of labour market outcomes, providers and training authorities still struggle to balance economic priorities with the social and community obligations of VET (Considine, Watson & Hall, 2005). This study, while cognisant of the contested nature of the VET ‘client’, took the approach that industry, community and individual learner outcomes were ideally balanced imperatives in VET business. VET providers and training authorities are also identifying and conceptualising designated equity and targeted groups in increasingly broad terms. There is no single, comprehensive list of equity or targeted groups that is adopted by VET systems across Australia. In addition to the key groups identified by the Commonwealth (ANTA 2003), various jurisdictions have identified and prioritised non-traditional target groups (e.g. carers, mature aged men, refugees, young mothers). Given the national scope of this study and the focus on TAFE practice, the researchers adopted a broad definition of disadvantaged learners rather than a list of particular learner groups. Disadvantaged learners were defined as those facing barriers to accessing, effectively participating in and successfully completing TAFE study due to individual, environmental and/or systemic factors.

Thus, TAFE inclusiveness in the context of this research project was considered to embrace the full gamut of strategies, programs, mechanisms, policies and approaches that TAFEs use to address barriers to learning and achieving desired outcomes of learning, experienced by their existing cohorts and catchment communities. These

barriers include not only impediments to accessing VET, but also successfully participating in and completing qualifications and realising the potential outcomes of the skills and qualifications gained. The need to focus beyond access to training and for equity strategies to address access, quality participation and successful outcomes has been a constant theme in equity policy since ANTA's *Equity 2001* (ANTA 1996). Since then, there have also been several shifts in emphasis away from solely focussing on equity target groups towards a 'whole of system response' to diverse client needs (ANTA 1998). Hence, an 'integrated diversity management' approach was promoted in *Shaping our future: Australia's National Strategy for VET, 2004-2010* (ANTA 2003).

In recent years, TAFEs have had to respond to fluctuations in overall VET participation and adapt provision for increased participation by particular learner groups. TAFEs also face the challenge of catering to learners who experience multiple and cumulative disadvantages, through membership of a number of different disadvantaged groups (John 2005, Volkoff 2005, Golding & Volkoff 1999). Cohorts of differently disadvantaged learners and learners experiencing multiple disadvantages have an impact on TAFE resources and capacity for effective inclusion. TAFEs catering to large cohorts across different equity target groups are likely to be faced with a greater complexity of disadvantage than those catering to more homogenous or advantaged cohorts. This research used an analysis of 2004 Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) data to illustrate both the density and complexity of disadvantage within TAFE cohorts.

This research study was conducted during a time of flux with various state/territory systems adopting different strategic, philosophical and procedural frameworks, each with clear limitations for shaping policy (Considine et al, 2005) and promoting inclusiveness in VET. South Australian VET was still adjusting to the recent amalgamation of eight TAFE institutes into three following recommendations from the 2002 *Kirby Review of TAFE Governance in South Australia* (Kirby et al, 2002); Queensland was about to embark on a similar amalgamation of several metropolitan TAFEs and the establishment of a new Trade and Technician Skills Institute (DET Queensland, 2006); and in Victoria the *Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training* (DET Victoria, 2006), released in February 2006, included recommendations that registration conditions require that every provider make available comparable performance information and that there be a review of resource funding for recognition of prior learning (RPL). Recent research has highlighted the role of community partnerships between providers and other stakeholders in establishing inclusive programs and delivery (Stokes et al 2006; Allison et al 2006). In addition to the importance of central and state/territory support, there has been increased recognition of the potential for local government involvement in supporting and facilitating inclusive VET provision (Waterhouse et al, 2006).

While there have been, as mentioned above, systemic milestones in VET equity policy and a growth in common strategies for promoting social inclusion in training, there remains a great diversity of approaches to implementing inclusiveness strategies across the national TAFE sector.

Methodology

The methodology of this research project involved a national survey of TAFE providers and state/territory training authorities, detailed analysis of 2004 AVETMISS student participation data and ABS regional demographic data, and a review of recent literature and policy documentation.

A student profile was created for each TAFE, using 2004 student level AVETMISS data (NCVER 2004), that included proportions of members of equity and targeted groups within each TAFE, participation at different Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels and delivery location. This research also sought to examine the ‘Complexity of Disadvantage’ within each TAFE: the extent to which TAFEs were experiencing not only densities, or large cohorts, of individual equity groups, but a diversity of disadvantage within their cohorts. To facilitate analysis of the level of complexity of disadvantage within each TAFE, all TAFEs were ranked, according to their relative densities of students (cohort sizes) across a set of key disadvantaged and/or targeted groups (people with a disability, Indigenous peoples, people from a language background other than English [LBOTE], early school leavers who have not completed year 10, those from the lowest decile socio-economic status, 15-19 year olds and people aged 45 years and over). A median rank was then calculated to develop a Complexity of Disadvantage index.

The main component of this research was a national telephone survey of TAFE institutes and TAFE divisions of dual sector universities. All TAFEs were invited to participate, with sixty to ninety minute interviews conducted with representatives from fifty-eight TAFEs across diverse metropolitan, regional and remote locations (see Table 1). As shown in Table 2, more than two-thirds of TAFEs provided two or more interviewees to participate. Respondents ranged from TAFE directors and associate directors to equity managers and targeted support staff. More than half of all interviewees were employed at associate director level or above (see Table 3). Interviews were also conducted with representatives from state/territory training authorities, to establish a policy context for examining the practices of each TAFE.

Table 1 Locations of surveyed TAFEs

	<i>Capital city/ Major city</i>	<i>Inner regional</i>	<i>Outer regional</i>	<i>Remote</i>	<i>Very remote</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
Number of TAFEs	31	16	8	2	1	58*

*It is important to note that there have been a number of amalgamations and TAFE sector restructures in several jurisdictions in recent years. At the time of interviewing, there were sixty identifiable TAFEs. With fifty-eight TAFEs participating in the survey, a 96 per cent response rate was achieved.

Table 2 Interviewee sample size

	<i>1 interviewee</i>	<i>2 interviewees</i>	<i>3 interviewees</i>	<i>4 interviewees</i>	<i>5 or more interviewees</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
Number of TAFEs	17	20	11	6	4	58

Table 3 Types of interviewees as a proportion of total respondents.

	<i>TAFE Directors</i>	<i>Associate Directors</i>	<i>Heads of Department</i>	<i>Equity Managers</i>	<i>Equity Officers & Support Staff</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
% of total respondents	10	47	17	15	11	100

The interviews focussed on seven themes or dimensions: approach to inclusiveness; TAFE management of inclusiveness; community engagement; strategies for identifying disadvantage; strategies for facilitating access, supporting progression and completion; strategies for providing literacy and numeracy support; and promoting

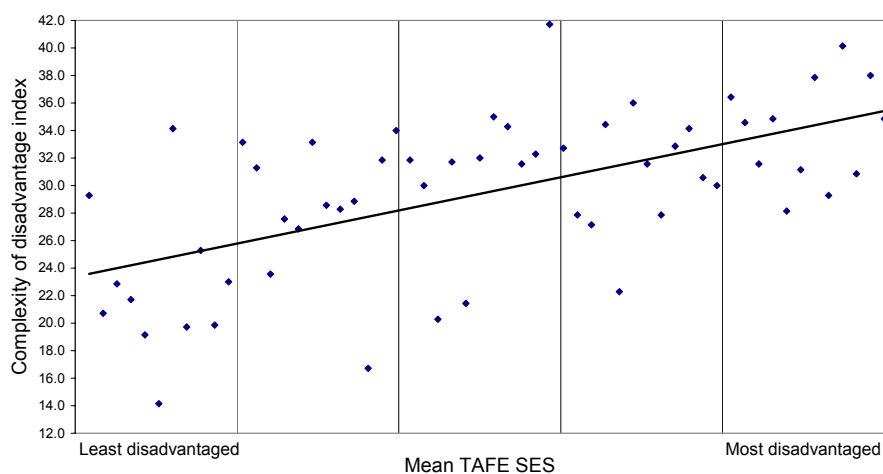
post-completion outcomes. To facilitate analysis, a series of typologies were developed (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2007) and a score representing the level of development of inclusiveness strategies was determined for each TAFE on the basis of self-reported data provided in response to the survey. TAFEs were allocated a value of 1 to 3 across the seven dimensions, with the higher values indicating more highly developed strategies. The maximum total score possible for a TAFE was 21, though the scores ranged from a low of 8 to a high of 19. TAFEs were thus able to be ranked according to the researcher assessed level of development and sophistication of their self-reported inclusiveness approaches and strategies.

Findings and discussion

During the decade 1995 to 2004, there were strong increases in participation in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia with an overall national rise in participation of almost 26 per cent (NCVER 2005). However, this increase was not consistent across states/territories nor student groups and TAFEs have experienced changing densities of specific disadvantaged learners. Analysis of the 2004 AVETMISS data indicated that the level of complexity of disadvantage within TAFEs had strong correlations with some other indicators of disadvantage. For example, in most jurisdictions, TAFEs outside the metropolitan areas were experiencing greater complexity of disadvantage than metropolitan TAFEs. There was also a consistent relationship between the density of socio-economic disadvantage within a TAFE student population and the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level at which students were participating with a clear trend towards lower AQF level participation at TAFEs experiencing greater density of socio-economic disadvantage.

TAFEs experiencing a high complexity of disadvantage were also found to have more socio-economically disadvantaged cohorts overall. Figure 1 below uses mean TAFE socio-economic status (SES), calculated using student home postcodes and the ABS Socio-economic Index for Areas (SEIFA). The vertical panels indicate the five socio-economic quintiles (bands of 20%) with the least disadvantaged quintile on the left and the most disadvantaged on the right. The vertical axis indicates the level of complexity of disadvantage, with a higher value indicating a greater degree of complexity. As the trend line in Figure 1 shows, TAFEs with the most socio-economically disadvantaged students were more likely to be required to address higher levels of complexity of disadvantage than those with the least disadvantaged students.

Figure 1 Complexity of disadvantage by mean TAFE socio-economic status



Data source: AVETMISS, NCVET 2004, ABS 2001 (SEIFA).

There was a high level of diversity in TAFE inclusiveness practice described by the interviewees. It was evident that the issue of inclusion of disadvantaged learners in effective training, and the commitment of resources to addressing the barriers faced by those learners, was of varying significance within each institution. A diversity of specific inclusiveness strategies is inevitable, given the many different social and economic landscapes in which Australian TAFEs operate. However, what emerged from this study was that there were vast differences in recognition of the need for and approach to inclusiveness. There was a gap between those TAFEs that demonstrated a lack of commitment to or even awareness of the need for inclusiveness and those TAFEs that described an obligation to inclusiveness and a detailed understanding of local social as well as economic trends. Within the survey responses, there was a strong trend evident: those TAFEs that scored poorly on the ‘approach to inclusiveness’ dimension also scored poorly on most of the other dimensions; and those that scored well on this dimension, also scored consistently well across the seven dimensions. This trend suggests that, once adopted, a TAFE’s approach to inclusiveness influences its organisational structures, resources and strategies for inclusiveness. Analysis of the descriptions provided by each surveyed TAFE, in relation to all seven dimensions, revealed three broad types of TAFE inclusiveness - passive, responsive and proactive.

Passive

The first group of TAFEs (17 TAFEs) identified through the research were those that reported a passive commitment to inclusiveness practice. When asked about the significance of inclusiveness within their organisations, a common response from interviewees at these TAFEs was “*whatever they measure, that’s where our effort goes*” and that inclusiveness was “*not a priority*” for them. These TAFEs were described as relying on mainstream or generic methods of engagement and communication with their industry clients and their catchment communities, such as marketing and publicity. Amongst the TAFEs in this category, there was a trend towards facing towards industry and business as their main clients and limited collaboration with community or local government. In terms of the size and scope of their targeted equity support, these organisations complied with the specific demands of equity policy within their jurisdiction, but did little more to identify or respond to individual and community needs and expectations. Where targeted support did occur,

it was likely to be in addition to and separate from provision, rather than integrated with delivery or as a customised program.

Responsive

The second group of TAFEs (27 TAFEs) were those that have evolved and been inevitably shaped by the changes within their training delivery landscapes. Respondents from these TAFEs described a broad range of internal strategies for responding to the support needs of different equity and targeted learner groups within their student populations. Inclusiveness strategies were predominantly responsive to the needs of existing cohorts rather than broader community disadvantage and barriers. While the lines of communication between these TAFEs and individuals and groups in their catchments may have improved over time, a “*this is what we offer, come and get it*” mentality still prevailed. Representatives of TAFEs in this category spoke about promoting their capacity for equity support and inclusiveness to learners and the community to attract them to the TAFE, but stopped short of actively engaging with other stakeholders and agencies to facilitate pathways and access to TAFE. While inclusiveness strategies and mechanisms at these TAFEs were often well developed, they were commonly reported to be operating in isolation from the other functions of the TAFE and to be hindered in their effectiveness by this lack of integration. In relation to providing access to holistic, non-educational support mechanisms within the TAFE, several interviewees from TAFEs in this category suggested “*There’s not a great deal [we do] because [local] community groups do that*”.

Proactive

The third group (14 TAFEs) were those breaking the mold, revolutionising and enhancing the accessibility of their training by proactively creating learning opportunities and striving to achieve effective and sustainable outcomes for their broader communities. This group of TAFEs reported that they had embedded themselves in industry, sought current knowledge of their local communities from diverse sources, were working with training ‘solutions’ rather than training packages, acting as brokers to align the needs of individuals and community with the employment opportunities and skills needs of industry and were striving to develop effective and sustainable partnerships to address disadvantaged learners’ needs. Through their proactive approach to inclusiveness, these TAFEs were positioning themselves to respond quickly and effectively to changes in economic and social contexts.

The proactive approach of these TAFEs contrasts with the approach of the responsive group of TAFEs in that they were not only promoting their support capacity but were venturing into the community and drawing individual learners and other organisations into the TAFE. In addition to collecting student data on the enrolment form and responding to the needs of existing learners, these TAFEs were using multiple strategies for identifying disadvantage, such as enrolment interviews, literacy and numeracy testing and knowledge sharing with community support agencies, to generate a comprehensive picture of the types and degrees of disadvantage being experienced both within and outside the TAFE. This data collection was often specifically resourced and the information disseminated across the organisation.

Interviewees from these TAFEs described specific approaches characterised by an emphasis on partnerships, collaboration and knowledge sharing as key strategies for enhancing access to their programs, expanding targeted delivery and integrating their economic and social obligations. In this way, the proactive approach to TAFE inclusiveness was not confined to inclusion of disadvantaged learners in VET, but encompassed more broadly, strategies for bringing community and industry into the VET landscape in a way that was mutually beneficial and generated opportunities for industry exposure for all learners. One TAFE respondent suggested their approach to inclusiveness was about *“relationship in a broader sense, about the institute developing productive and effective relationships with other groups in the community that are providing services to people”*. Another interviewee, expressing an opinion shared by many respondents, argued that effective inclusiveness was *“...all about partnerships – we can’t provide for everyone alone. We need to identify the needs and then get expertise and support from outside the TAFE.”* Respondents emphasised the need to *“cater to the range”* of learner needs, *“address the needs of individuals”* and the importance of *“seeing beyond disadvantage”* to identify the capacity for learning of each student. These TAFEs described proactively positioning themselves as both learning and community service brokers.

Comparative analysis

These three types of TAFE inclusiveness have the potential for diverse outcomes for individual learners and significantly different impacts on communities. Community engagement was one area of clear divergence. TAFEs, as community organisations and providers of training for disadvantaged learners, do not operate in isolation and effective relationships with community agencies and local stakeholders were described as being a vital component in forward planning for population, industry and social change. How a TAFE is viewed and perceived has an impact on its capacity for effecting positive change in the educational attainment and educational aspirations of its community. A lack of connectedness or sense of community ownership was reported to adversely impact on both participation rates and also provision for some equity and targeted groups. Respondents from TAFEs identified as having a proactive approach to inclusiveness, highlighted the importance of regular and sustained interaction with a wide variety of community stakeholders and the need to maintain credibility in the eyes of their communities through consistent responsiveness to feedback and criticism. These TAFEs commonly had formalised processes for community engagement, dedicated staff positions for liaising with key regional stakeholders and mechanisms for disseminating that information across their organisation. Respondents from these TAFEs reported marrying TAFE resources with community resources to make the most of what was available and having a greater capacity to provide timely and appropriate non-educational support. TAFEs identified as having a responsive approach were reported as maintaining inward lines of communication for enhancing support mechanisms, but were not seeking two-way dialogues or partnered program development. Respondents from TAFEs identified as having a passive type of inclusiveness commonly reported limited to no community engagement and no targeted resourcing for data collection or community liaison.

Integration and connectivity between inclusiveness measures and provision also differed greatly between TAFEs. Effective inclusiveness practice was perceived to be that which strives to achieve successful outcomes for learners, transitions to post-completion employment destinations or further study, while at the same time

providing a skilled workforce for local industry and building community capacity. Respondents from several TAFEs with a proactive type of inclusiveness emphasised that effective inclusiveness is not distinct or separate from effective skills provision. One TAFE respondent, arguing the importance of addressing the non-educational issues for some learners before they progressed to mainstream vocational learning, emphasised that, *“some of these students barely have enough money to feed themselves and they don’t know what it is to succeed at something”*. Interviewees from proactive TAFEs reported a preference for newly developed and fully customised programs, commonly constructed in consultation with community agencies and industry and regularly incorporating embedded holistic support, extended timelines, and additional exposure to different forms of literacy and numeracy support and job preparation skills. Interviewees from TAFEs with a responsive type of inclusiveness were operating some flexible and blended delivery for existing cohorts, but were not actively generating new pathways to learning. TAFEs with a passive type of inclusiveness were described as relying on mainstream provision with separate support mechanisms, having limited identification of support needs and little to no community input into program development.

A vast majority of respondents spoke about the challenges that equity practitioners face within the mainstream TAFE environment. This was reported to be particularly pronounced in those institutes where there was a lack of strategic leadership or support for inclusiveness at a senior level and minimal integration between inclusiveness mechanisms and provision. The lack of well developed or effective TAFE management for inclusiveness was reported to lead to a marginalisation of inclusiveness issues within a single unit or area of the TAFE. One respondent attributed this potential segregation of targeted and mainstream delivery to *“a constant tension in the VET sector as to who is the client - industry needs, skill requirements for industry or the individual”*. The significant difference between the proactive and passive or responsive approaches to inclusiveness is that TAFEs adopting a proactive type of inclusiveness described an institute philosophy/strategy that integrated and aligned the needs of these different ‘clients’ or agendas. Such an integrated approach, where the needs of industry, community and individuals were continually disseminated, discussed and addressed throughout the organisation, allowed these TAFEs to capitalise on opportunities and support regional change. Programs for targeted groups were often linked with skills needs for regional enterprises. Interviewees from TAFEs with passive and responsive types of inclusiveness were more likely to describe conflicting internal agendas and the competing demands of industry, individuals and communities.

Impact

The different approaches to inclusiveness that are adopted by TAFEs impact upon the capacity of each TAFE for promoting social inclusion and offering opportunities for disadvantaged learners, within the catchments of each TAFE, to access and participate in VET. One way of exploring the impact of well developed and less developed inclusiveness strategies, as assessed in this study, is to examine the proportions of disadvantaged and targeted learners across TAFE cohorts.

Table 4 Comparison of student characteristics across TAFEs with least and most developed inclusiveness strategies

Level of development of inclusiveness strategies	Female	With disability	Indigenous	LBOTE	Lowest decile SES	Un-employed	Below Yr 10 Ed.
Least developed inclusiveness strategies (quartile)	% 44.1	% 5.4	% 8.3	% 9.5	% 9.5	% 16.0	% 8.7
Most developed inclusiveness strategies (quartile)	47.7	8.7	9.3	17.5	15.1	25.3	9.8

Figure source: Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2007 forthcoming. Data source: AVETMISS, NCVET 2004

Table 4 above details the proportions of selected disadvantaged and targeted learners within TAFE cohorts for the quartiles of TAFEs with the least and most well developed inclusiveness strategies, determined through analysis of self reported data from the interviews. For every disadvantaged/targeted group, those TAFEs with the most developed inclusiveness strategies (i.e. scaled the highest against the seven dimensions) were also experiencing higher proportions of key disadvantaged groups within their cohorts than those TAFEs with the least developed inclusiveness strategies.

In most regional areas of Australia, learners, particularly those most disadvantaged, are often restricted by their choice of TAFE provider. In the capital cities, there is a greater capacity for learners to vote with their feet, that is, to travel beyond their own residential region to access TAFE, as Volkoff and Walstab (2007 forthcoming, Table 7, p.53) have shown in relation to Victorian TAFEs. Table 5 presents similar data to Table 4, but restricted to capital city TAFEs. As before, for all groups except Indigenous learners, the capital city TAFEs with the most developed inclusiveness strategies were attracting higher proportions of key disadvantaged/targeted groups than TAFEs with the least developed inclusiveness strategies.

Table 5 Comparison of student characteristics across capital city TAFEs with least and most developed inclusiveness strategies

Level of development of inclusiveness strategies	Female	With disability	Indigenous	LBOTE	Lowest decile SES	Un-employed	Below Yr 10 Ed.
Least developed inclusiveness strategies (quartile)	% 42.2	% 5.2	% 1.6	% 15.3	% 7.1	% 17.3	% 5.6
Most developed inclusiveness strategies (quartile)	46.3	7.2	0.9	34.2	22.3	24.9	7.8

Figure source: Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2007 forthcoming. Data source: AVETMISS, NCVET 2004

Other trends were evident among the group of TAFEs identified as having the most developed inclusiveness strategies. They tended to be located in capital city, major city or inner regional locations and were mostly larger than the national average. They also experienced higher than median levels of complexity of disadvantage amongst their cohorts and tended to have the most socio-economically disadvantaged cohorts overall. As well as attracting higher proportions of the groups illustrated above, they also tended to have lower proportions of full-time employed students.

Conclusions

Enhancing TAFE inclusiveness practice, and making mechanisms for social inclusion sustainable, requires not only an awareness of the needs of existing learners, but also reliable processes for identifying, anticipating and adapting to the needs of evolving catchment communities. Effective inclusiveness practice requires the exchange of knowledge about learner disadvantage and for TAFEs to pursue collaborative relationships with other educational, government and support agencies, particularly in

the context of diversifying populations and industries. Evidence from the national survey suggests that TAFEs proactively seeking and building processes for reliable and effective exchange of information, resources and expertise are enhancing their own capacity for social inclusion.

Despite extensive evidence of a small number of TAFEs that are moving to align the needs of industry, communities and individuals, there was also evidence of a prevailing view of disadvantaged learner needs ‘competing’ with the core training business of TAFEs. TAFEs need to position themselves to view and respond to the needs of individual learners, communities and industry not as competing demands, but as equally valued and interconnected obligations within their training provision. This interconnected view of the various functions of TAFEs is vital in the capacity of TAFEs to identify, anticipate and adapt to changing economic and social demands.

What emerged from this study was that while there is a small minority of TAFEs who are being highly innovative in their strategies and approaches to social inclusion and really embracing the challenge of generating diverse learning opportunities for their communities, there are still some TAFEs that have not yet recognised the need for inclusiveness. While these TAFEs lag behind in their strategies for social inclusion, they maintain a chronic systemic barrier for their learners and communities seeking skills and their industries seeking skilled labour.

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