

## **Why TAFE needs government support to maintain high quality disability services for students!**

For over 30 years TAFE NSW has engaged the services of specialist Teacher Consultants to service the needs of students who have a broad range of disabilities. The success of these Teacher Consultants in supporting students to undertake and complete courses set international benchmarks in the 1980s and is regarded as best practice throughout the world.

Unfortunately, it is now evident that the support services available to students with disabilities are being compromised even though “Smart and Skilled”, the NSW Government’s VET reforms, will not be implemented until July 2014.

Budgets provided to disability units, in most TAFE Institutes, have been cut which means that there is less support available to meet the needs of students who have disabilities who are undertaking mainstream vocational courses.

In some Institutes courses tailored to the needs of people who have disabilities can only be offered on a user pays basis. One example of this is a TAFE NSW Institute where students who have an intellectual disability are required to pay over \$1,000 to undertake an access course, (3 hours per week for 18 weeks).

As an alternative, in some TAFE NSW Institutes, Teacher Consultants are being told, by management, to ask teaching sections to provide the funds to run courses for students who have disabilities. However, many of these sections have already had to cut hours from trade courses due to cuts to their budgets.

The reality is, if TAFE is not able to provide special courses to accommodate for the needs of people who have disabilities many individuals will simply not gain access to vocational programs or they will be forced to enrol in courses that they will not be able to complete.

In another TAFE NSW Institute Teacher Consultants for students who have disabilities have been told that, to save on costs, they can no longer travel to interview students and have to use the phone or VC instead. While Teacher Consultants do communicate on an on-going basis with students via the phone and/or VC, it is essential that they have the opportunity to meet students, preferably before they enrol, to guide them into appropriate courses, to determine their level of need, to discuss support options and to train them in the use of inclusive technologies as a means of maximising potential for independent study.

The questions raised by the examples above are firstly who is making and enforcing these decisions and how well informed are these individuals. The National Vocational Equity Advisory Council, NVEAC, determined in 2012 that the cost of providing social benefits to support one person with a disability, from the time of leaving school until age 65 is currently in excess of \$1M. Surely, if their calculations are correct, even the socially and morally deprived economic rationalists in our midst would understand the cost benefits of assisting people who have disabilities to make informed career choices and the need to provide courses and pathways that will assist them to develop the skills needed to gain vocational skills and employment.