

Supporting students with additional needs in a TAFE library

The role of librarians in tertiary settings is constantly evolving. There is an increasing focus upon technology, and a need to support library users to engage with content and information via a range of media. But not all students arrive in TAFE with the same skills and background experiences. The TAFE librarian plays a vital role in supporting many young people who may have only minimal experience in using a library, and lack the skills and confidence to access resources and information effectively. Left to their own devices, many of these students would simply give up, or be forced to deal with academic failure once again.

Some of these young people have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and may require quite specific support. They may have a specific learning disability such as dyslexia (reading, spelling, and processing written information) or dyscalculia (difficulties with using number and numerical processes). They may have issues with other important areas of learning, such as personal organisation or using memory skills to retain and draw upon previously learned information. Some may have conditions such as ADHD, and find it difficult to maintain attention, concentrate on tasks for long periods, and listen effectively to others in a group situation. Some may have come to a TAFE after negative and sometimes quite damaging experiences in other educational settings.

There are a number of courses which may suit this cohort of students in their initial introduction to adult education. Certificate 1 in Work Education or Transition Education and Certificate 2 in General and Vocational Education provide a good foundation, and are an excellent opportunity to build independent learning skills in the library. The focus of these courses is often on providing core learning, literacy, and numeracy skills, alongside modules aimed at preparing students for a workplace environment and more specific vocational modules to build skills in particular work areas.

A librarian who is skilled at working with young people with additional learning needs is an important resource in a TAFE. This can be as simple as a warm, friendly smile and a personal greeting to ensure a student feels welcome in the library space. Some students may never have felt welcome in a library before, so the ability to build personal relationships and encourage confidence and

independence in the library is critical. Sometimes it can appear to a student that everyone in a library knows exactly what they are doing already, and that no one but them ever needs help. A librarian who makes it clear that providing assistance is an important part of their job can help a student feel confident in asking for help, and doing so repeatedly if they need to. A librarian may also provide support by working with young people individually or in groups to help them build important lifelong learning skills. They may show them how to use library systems, or how technology tools can make it easier to complete some learning tasks.

Using technology can be very supportive for students with learning difficulties or other disabilities. Programs such as ghotit and Ginger can assist with spelling and grammar checking, while speech-to-text tools such as Dragon Naturally Speaking can help reduce hand writing demands and be a valuable aid in inputting text without using a keyboard. There are also programs such as TextHelp Read and Write Gold, Write Help, and Textease which provide text-to-speech and literacy support functions. These programs are designed to increase independence while also building literacy skills, and are useful in supporting students with physical disabilities as well as those with additional learning needs.

By mastering the technology tools which can provide important support and learning about the particular needs of young people with specific learning disabilities or other learning issues, a librarian in a TAFE setting can offer the vital support to ensure our most vulnerable young people don't slip through the cracks once again. Access to the information, resources, and learning opportunities should be available to all students, not just those who enter TAFE already highly literate, numerate, and equipped to learn.

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