



# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (PWD)

Examples of international best practice

An International Specialised Skills Institute Fellowship.

**LOLA NICOLOULEAS**

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# 1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Fellow would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who kindly gave their time and expertise to assist, advise and lead her throughout her Fellowship.

The Fellow is grateful to the Department of Education (DET) and the International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) who made this Fellowship possible, particularly Wendy Draayers and Nick Johns.

## Awarding Body – International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute)

The ISS Institute plays a pivotal role in creating value and opportunity, encouraging new thinking and early adoption of ideas and practice by investing in individuals.

The overarching aim of the ISS Institute is to support the development of a 'Better Skilled Australia'. The Institute does this via the provision of Fellowships that provide the opportunity for Australians to undertake international skills development and applied research that will have a positive impact on Australian industry and the broader community.

The International Specialised Skills Institute was founded 29 years ago, by a small group of innovators including Sir James Gobbo AC, CVO, QC, and former Governor of Victoria, who had a vision of building a community of industry specialists who would lead the up-skilling of the Australian workforce. The Fellowship program builds shared learning, leadership and innovation across the broad range of industry sectors worked with. Fellows are supported to disseminate learning's

and ideas, facilitate change and advocate for best practice through the sharing of their Fellowship learnings with peers, colleagues, government, industry and community. Since its establishment, ISS Institute has supported over 450 Fellows to undertake skill and knowledge enhancement across a wide range of sectors which has led to positive change, the adoption of best practice approaches and new ways of working in Australia.

The Fellowship programs are led by our partners and designed in a manner which ensures that the needs and goals desired by the partners are achieved. ISS Institute works closely to develop a Fellowship program that meets key industry priorities, thus ensuring that the investment made will have lasting impact.

For further information on ISS Institute Fellows, refer to [www.issinstitute.org.au](http://www.issinstitute.org.au)



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## Fellowship Sponsor - Higher Education and Skills

The Victorian Government, through Higher Education and Skills (HES) of the Department of Education and Training, is responsible for the administration and coordination of programs for the provision of training and further education, adult education and employment services in Victoria and is a valued sponsor of the ISS Institute. The Fellow would like to thank them for providing funding for this Fellowship.

The Fellow also thanks her colleagues at RMIT University for supporting her throughout this Fellowship. Sally Thompson and David Hayward believed in her work and encouraged the Fellow to apply while Michelle McCann and Louise Bugeja, took on extra work while she travelled internationally on the site visits. Thanks also to Paul Ramcharan, for his mentoring and advice throughout this process.

Several organisations and individuals were generous in hosting the Fellows visits. Thanks to Severine Maillet and Claire Bouillet from INSHEA, Declan Traynor from Trinity College in Ireland, Rick Bryck at Landmark College Vermont and Antoniella Mangiaracini from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Brussels.

On a personal note, thanks to Danny; sharing this experience with him was one of the best decisions of the Fellow's life. Lastly to the Fellow's husband Mike, "your belief in me is what drives me. Without you, none of this (or anything else) is possible. Thank you for making life easier for me."



## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Social Services, including Disability Support Services are the fastest growing sector of the Australian workforce, providing significant employment opportunities for disadvantaged cohorts to enter the labour market and build meaningful careers. There is a unique opportunity for people with disability (PWD) to become workers within the growing disability support field.

The Fellow has been a disability support worker for the past fifteen (15 years) and a teacher in disability studies for seven (7) years. The Fellow's underpinning objective when undertaking this Fellowship was to create positive change for people with disabilities through the examination of international best practice and its potential for application in an Australian context.

Specifically, the Fellow wanted to investigate examples of international best practice in integrated vocational education for people with disabilities focussing on the following key elements:

- » the classroom environment, and how the physical dimensions of space create inclusivity
- » the additional support provided to individuals with disabilities to participate in mainstream VET
- » pedagogical considerations; and
- » pre-service training and ongoing professional development undertaken by educators.

The Fellow chose to focus on training which allows people with disabilities to work in the disability sector. The second element the Fellow researched was the

employment offered to these students once they have completed their course of study. The Fellow was keen to discover the types of supports offered to them from recruitment into vocational education, throughout the length of the course, during the transition to employment and once in the workforce.

The Fellowship was undertaken over a 7-week period in mid-2019 and included visits to several countries to meet with educators, researchers, and a peak body.

The key learnings of the Fellowship included; the level of importance placed on the teachers education specifically in disability, prior to working in the field, the self-education offered to students to learn more about their own disability, the impacts of this on how they learn and what they can do to address these impacts, the deliberate differences in learning environments and how small changes can make huge impacts on learning and classroom productivity and the importance of the government setting minimum participation numbers for people with disability engagement in higher education.

The Fellow believes in an inclusive society for all people, including those with disabilities. The current NDIS funding model for people with disabilities has created a revolutionary change in the lives of PWD. With these changes to funding there have been many employment opportunities created within the disability sector, in fact, it is anticipated that the disability industry will face a shortfall of 100,000 staff in the next couple of years. The Fellow wishes to create a more inclusive education environment for PWD and to educate the broader community on the importance of supporting people with disabilities to enter the workforce in order to provide them with the opportunity to become active, contributing members of the community.



The Fellow has identified several key recommendations that have been broken down by applicability to the principal stakeholder groups and in addition, has included the actions that she is committed to implementing going forward.



# 3. FELLOWSHIP BACKGROUND

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## Fellowship context

Currently in Australia people with disabilities are often discouraged from studying the Certificate IV in disability due to not being able to undertake the placement (120 hours in a support worker role). This may prevent a person with a disability from being able to work within their industry, particularly in NDIS roles.

People with disabilities are committed to the notion of “Nothing about us, without us” and yet, roles within the NDIS are still being given to able-bodied people over people with disabilities due to a lack of education or work experience. It seems having a disability and lived experience is simply not enough. Understanding what other countries are doing to support the education of people with disabilities was the key objective of this Fellowship. To observe how changes, have and are being made that provide more inclusive educational opportunities for people with disability. The Fellow then intended to return to Australia to advocate for, and where possible, lead change in the Victorian and Australian VET sector.

## Fellowship methodology

The Fellow was fortunate to be able to immerse herself in two world-renowned institutions offering education to PWD and was invited to spend one week at each of these institutions. In addition, the Fellow met a researcher and advocate in France who generously offered to escort her on visits to several French educational institutions covering all levels of education; primary, secondary, and tertiary. The Fellow also visited the European Agency for Special Needs in Education which is in Brussels, Belgium. It is the peak body for the EU in relation to advocacy,

reform and policy advice around laws and inclusivity related to special education. On all visits the Fellow conducted formal and informal interviews with education managers and leaders, educators, people in support service roles and with students.

## Fellowship Period

The Fellowship period was from April 25 to June 12, 2019

## Fellow biography

The Fellow has fifteen (15) years’ experience working within the disability Industry as a disability support worker, working across areas including recreation, employment, and personal support. Five (5) years’ experience working as a disability employment consultant / marketing coordinator for a disability employment service provider and seven (7) years teaching within disability studies at TAFE. The Fellow holds an Advanced Diploma in Community Sector Management specialising in Disability as well as several certificates within the disability industry. Lola has served on the Board of the Maribyrnong councils Disability Advocacy Committee, The Brimbank City Councils Community Wellbeing Committee and the South Kingsville Community Centre. She is the founder of Assist Ability Australia which was established in 2019 and is a boutique agency focused on quality service delivery for people with disabilities.



## Abbreviations / Acronyms / Definitions

**PWD** People with Disabilities

**TDS** Trinity Disability Service

**FSSI** Future Social Service Institute



## 4. FELLOWSHIP LEARNINGS

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The key learnings of the Fellowship included:

- » the importance placed on teacher's education specifically in disability
- » the education offered to students that supports them to learn more about their own disability, the ways in which their disability impacts their learning and what they can do to address these impacts
- » the deliberate design and ambience created in learning environments
- » that small changes can make huge impacts on learning and classroom productivity
- » the importance of the government setting minimum participation numbers for people with disability in higher education

The immersion experience at both Landmark College and Trinity College provided the Fellow with rich experiences and significant learnings.

### Stop 1- Landmark college, Putney, Vermont, USA



Landmark College in Putney, Vermont is one of the worlds few universities which is exclusive to people with learning disabilities.



Landmark College opened in 1985 and is a pioneer in postsecondary education for people with learning disabilities. Since its inception, Landmark College has also grown to include individuals who are on the Autism spectrum and those who live with ADHD/ADD. Landmark College currently has a cohort of around 489 students, its average student yearly fees are \$59,100 and it is ranked #25 in the Regional Colleges North. To attend Landmark College, students must have an official diagnosis or a learning disability, dyslexia, autism or ADD/ADHD. Individuals with other disabilities are not serviced at Landmark college.

In the Initial meeting with Dr Rick Bryck the Fellow discovered that Landmark College is a very proud College with a very positive culture. Both staff and students were very happy to be a part of the school and this became more evident as the days went on. Dr Bryck reported that to attend Landmark, a student must have an official diagnosis. and that in the USA getting this diagnosis can cost around \$10,000 USD. This amount made the Fellow question access and equity, and that individuals with disabilities from low socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged by the US post-secondary education system.

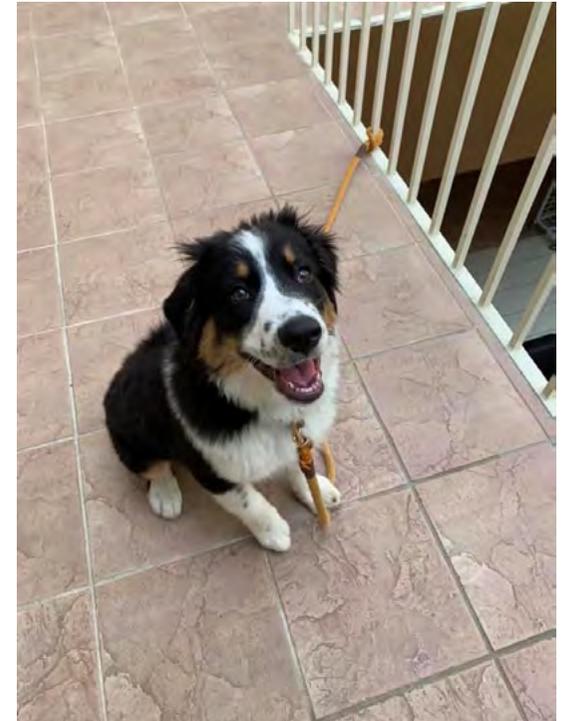
On the Fellow's first day at Landmark College she was able to sit in on a class in skills development and self-management. In this class, students are taught key areas of communication skills, writing and reading but most importantly, are taught about their disability, the laws that focus on their disability and how-to self-advocate. This was an incredibly enlightening experience as it demonstrated that not all individuals with disabilities proactively seek out information about their disability. Many of the students had not previously investigated their disability as thoroughly as they had once enrolled in the class. It was empowering to see the students talk about their disability in detail and feel confident when discussing their abilities. This took away the stigma in the classroom. It allowed the students to not be ashamed of their disability when talking to each other, but also taught them the skill of being confident in their abilities when talking to future employers. On the day that the Fellow sat in class, the students were writing cover letters to prospective employers and were sharing what they had written in class. It was

great to see the students focusing on their skills whilst still acknowledging their disability.

Whilst sitting in the classroom the Fellow observed how the space had been altered to suit the students and create the best learning environment possible. There were regular classroom chairs as well as yoga balls that the students could sit on, students were also able to sit on the floor if they chose to. Large windows looked onto the wide-open spaces outside. Lighting was minimal, and not too bright. Students were provided with sensory items to play with whilst in class. The walls were kept basic with minimal distractions inside the classroom (this changed outside of the class where it reflected the look of any other university).

The teacher also demonstrated a very different style of teaching. She allowed the students to interrupt her at any time and interject with their opinion on what was being discussed. This caused the Fellow to consider our style of adult education; where people are taught that you must wait for the teacher to permit you to talk in class and that interrupting is considered rude. The students expressed how they felt in the moment, they were able to talk about the subject in real time. This allowed the students to be more engaged in the classroom and created a vibe in the class that the students were really a part of each other's learning journey. It showed the students that they are equals, that there was no power and control relationship in the classroom with the teacher. This style of education really resonated with the Fellow and created a memorable impact long after the visit to Landmark College ended.





## Stop 2- Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland



Trinity College, Ireland's oldest and most respected college opened in 1952 to serve Ireland's most elite, much has changed since then. Upon entering the College, the Fellow could not help but notice the grand nature of it all, from its unique architecture to the pristine gardens, Trinity College felt like a really special place.

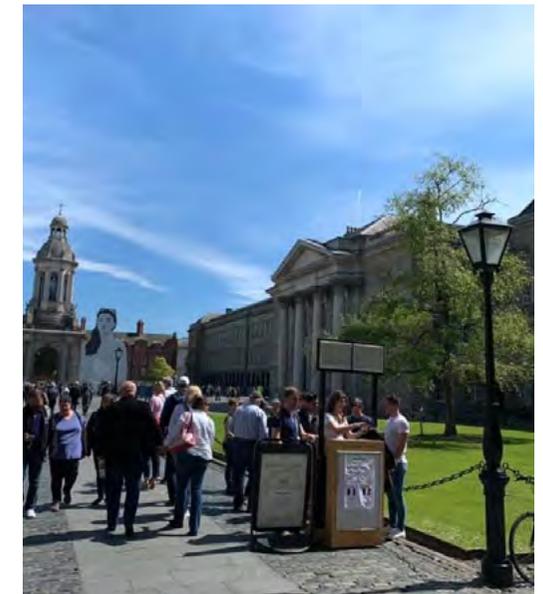
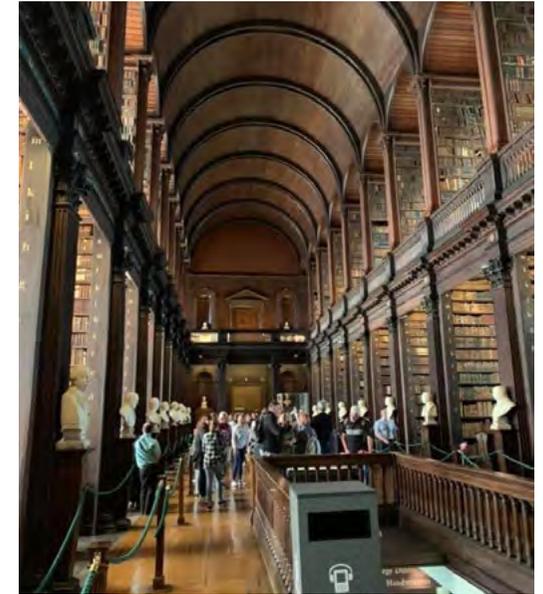
The Fellow was greeted by Ian Lynam on arrival and Ian proceeded to tell her that it was his first day at Trinity and that he is a comedian. He then went on to disclose that he has autism. The Fellow was excited to know that Trinity practices the message of inclusion which they are renowned for. The Fellow then met with

Declan Traynor. Declan is the Disability Service Director at Trinity Disability Service, a service offered to students with disabilities to make their learning experience a more inclusive one.

In speaking to Declan, the importance of the Disability Service quickly became apparent. The service provides support to students in a range of areas, not just reasonable adjustments to assessment. TDS offered students with disabilities, academic support, assistive technology, reasonable accommodations, deaf support, dyslexia support, case coordination, communication support, educational support, occupational therapists and mental health workers on site, and career and placement support.

Meeting with the occupational therapist team at Trinity College was very enlightening, the Fellow learned that they work closely with students to ensure they are engaging in not just their curriculum but any work placement requirements that needed to be met and assisting students to understand their disability and how it may impact on their learning experience.





### Stop 3- The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education head office- Brussels Belgium

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive education is an independent organisation which provides a “collaboration for the ministries of education” in their member countries. The work of the agency is focused on the development of inclusive education systems in order to provide equitable learning opportunities and rights to inclusive education.

The Fellow met with the team to discuss the role that they played in supporting inclusive education for people with disabilities. The team there shared their experiences working on supporting changes to legislation surrounding education within Europe to encourage the participation in educational activities for PWD.

The team discussed how they have supported various European countries to take a deeper look at their legislation and policy and the various ways they have offered their support.



## Stop 4- INSHEA-Suresnes, France



INSHEA is the first of its kind, organisation based in Suresnes, France which is dedicated to special education needs and people with disabilities.

INSHEA has three main focuses in their work within the disability education sector and they are:

- » Develop interdisciplinary research
- » Offer training to all stakeholders in the field of inclusive education
- » Develop a resource centre of reference

During the Fellows time at INSHEA, she first visited the head office in Suresnes and met with Severine Maillet and Claire Bouillet who showed her around the campus. The physical building where INSHEA's head office is based, is a historical building which was used in the 1960's as a special school mostly for children with serious illness. The building was incredibly unique in both its architecture and its environment and was said to be very avant-garde. The school has now become somewhat dilapidated but is still used as INSHEA's head office in their attempt to save the historical site.

The staff at INSHEA then took the Fellow to a series of primary, secondary schools and universities in order to view the educational system in France from the start to the end.

The first stop was a primary school in Suresnes which has a special education program for students with disabilities. What the Fellow mainly took away from this particular visit, was that from a very young age, the children with disabilities, although in the mainstream school, were allowed to focus on what they were good at. For example, if a student is exceptionally good in one particular area, they could move up into the higher levels. If the student struggles in a particular area, they were welcomed into a lower class. This allowed for the children's education to meet their level of knowledge and understanding rather than forcing the child with the disability to meet the expected level of education based on their age. It was also noted by the Fellow that the children in the school were almost oblivious to the differences of the children with disabilities when it came to play time. There was an extraordinary level of acceptance from the children in this primary school.

The Fellow was then taken to a secondary school where she was able to meet with the disability department. In this department the teachers would assist students who were blind by translating all of their work into brail. Images were also turned into "touchable prints" where students could feel the image.



The Fellow noted the most interesting part of this visit was seeing one of the teachers working in the disability department whom was turning famous art works into touchable art works for the students with sight impairments to be able to feel art.

The Fellow was very moved by this as it was a labour of love by the teacher, not only her love of art, but the love she had for her students.

The Fellow was then supported by the INSHEA staff to visit Sorbonne University in Paris, where she was able to meet with the university's disability department. In this department the Fellow was able to discuss the supports that the university provides to its students with disability. The staff discussed their educational supports such as reasonable adjustments made to examinations to allow students with disability a fair playing field when completing their studies. The staff also discussed the importance of supporting students with disabilities into the social life of the university. The university takes the social experience of the student quite seriously and really wanted to ensure that the students with disability were given equal opportunities to participate in social activities.

Since returning from her Fellowship Lola has made significant changes to the way she teaches so that it is more inclusive to PWD. The most notable shifts have occurred in relation to the 'power balance' in the classroom. The Fellow has taken a step back in the classroom and is now allowing students to contribute freely to classroom discussion rather than waiting for 'question time'. The rationale behind this is that students with a disability have lived experience and know better than her. Lola was willing to acknowledge this and alter her classroom environment accordingly after observing the success of this approach in international classrooms.

Another important change in the classroom has been around the physical classroom space. The Fellow is now allowing students freedom of movement in the classroom and focussing less on the constraints imposed in standard learning environments.

The Fellow has also approached the FSSI and RMIT University to discuss embedding changes to course delivery to make them far more inclusive to PWD and hopes that these organisations will support her advocacy work going forward. Recommended modifications include a change to placement expectations and that PWD be able to participate in alternative placement types rather than as direct workers where their disability inhibits this. A more robust approach to modification of assessment is also recommended

The Fellow will continue to monitor changes made to the content of accredited courses and where opportunity presents or can be created will make suggestions on changes that will positively impact the lives of PWD.

The Fellow has been working on advocacy to raise awareness amongst the community and PWD by discussion and sharing strategies raising awareness of the factors that can impact outcomes when people with disabilities apply for a job.

These factors include:

- » a negative attitude of the employer towards the person with disabilities.
- » physical barriers and how to address these in the workplace
- » miscommunication
- » lack of knowledge of how best to interview people with disabilities.

It is a priority for the Fellow to implement her learnings in the classroom here. Along with her colleagues at RMIT university, she is encouraging PWD to apply for their Cert III Individual Support (Aging & Disability) and the Cert IV in Disability programs. Upon disclosure of a disability, both Lola and her colleagues at RMIT University are, and will continue to work, to ensure a safe and proactive physical environment is provided for all students. They will ensure the assessment process is adjusted to allow for learning to be undertaken that meets the needs of each student, not just to meet the requirements of the law.







# 5. PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL AND SECTORAL IMPACT

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## Personal impact-

This Fellowship opportunity has had a huge impact on the Fellow. The Fellow was able to acknowledge the hard work of Australians with disabilities who pushed for changes to legislation which made the NDIS possible. The Fellow also realised how proud she is of her country and those who have been fighting for the rights of people with disabilities for so long.

The Fellow has grown in confidence as her personal values and beliefs around education and employment pathways for PWD were validated by what she saw during her international research.

However, the Fellow feels that the greatest personal impact came in the form of the Fellow's brother in law, Danny who is a person with a disability. When Danny found out that the Fellow was travelling overseas, he asked to come, well, he insisted. In the beginning, the Fellow had reservations about taking him away for such a long period of time, but all the Fellow's worries were totally unfounded. Danny was fun, engaging and so keen to learn something new in every place they visited. This really taught her about the value of people with disabilities experiencing travel and how sometimes, some of the best education happens outside of the classroom.

## Professional impact-

By undertaking this Fellowship, the Fellow feels able to advise on international best practice in education around inclusivity for people with disabilities. She is now recognised as an expert who has conducted research in a field that that she has been passionate about her entire working career.

The Fellowship has impacted and altered the Fellows classroom practice in a number of ways including her expectations around student communication, the types of support she is now providing to students with a disability and her cultivation of a more 'casual' classroom environment.

Through sharing her Fellowship experiences and learnings with colleagues she has seen a positive change in others classroom practice. To date she has presented her Fellowship findings at RMIT University, at The Future Social Service Institute, at the VDC and to newly appointed Fellows at the International Specialised Skills Institute.

## Sectoral impact-

The Fellow is confident that this Fellowship will have a positive impact on her sector. Already she has been contacted by teachers from three (3) separate VET providers who have heard about her Fellowship research and asked for further details. The Fellow has met with a 2019 VET Fellow and shared her learnings and discussed the implementation to date.



# 6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

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These recommendations have been written for each of the relevant key stakeholder groups that have capacity to implement the Fellowship learnings, innovate and create long lasting impact.

## The Department of Education and Training

- » DET provide funding to people with disabilities to undertake the Cert IV in Disability course and reasonably adjust the placement requirements suit the needs of the person with the disability and their interest in pursuing the course in consideration of their lived experience and the value this will add in a support / carer context
- » DET provide funding to people with a disability to undertake the TAE workplace training and assessment Cert IV so that people with a disability can teach the Cert IV in disability.
- » Review and adjust the requirements around vocational currency so that people with a disability can teach Cert IV in Disability based on their lived experience rather than workplace currency
- » Funding be made available to TAFEs to adjust their classrooms to suit the needs of people with a disability. This will ensure that the physical space to ensure is both a welcoming and appropriate learning environment for students with a disability
- » The government should allow people with disability to have access to workers through their NDIS package to support them in ALL aspects of education (especially now with online learning)

## VET sector

- » Curriculum and assessments to be developed in consultation with people with a disability to ensure that it is relevant, current and inclusive
- » Organisations must encourage and support teachers to invite guest speakers with a disability into community services classrooms to ensure that their lived experience is heard and understood. Payment to these guests would both assist the individual and validate the value of their input.
- » Review timetabling to accommodate PWD. Consider support workers, assistance with transport, later start times, reduced hrs of learning accompanied by an increase in the number of days that courses are delivered across

## Individual teachers

- » Modify and adjust the way they teach – give ‘power’ back to students and allow students to have a voice in the classroom, encourage discussion and respect lived experiences
- » Adopt a more flexible classroom environment that works around the need of students and allows student to move when they need to

The Fellow is committed to the following actions

- » The Fellow will advocate for a more positive profile and greater respect for disability support workers and create opportunities to promote this work as a viable and valuable career to young people. The NDIS provides extraordinary opportunities to create career paths and progression for the first time in this sector



- » The Fellow plans to seek ways to be part of the push to make services responsible and keep PWD front and centre. The NDIS provides wonderful opportunities to enrich the lives of PWD
- » The Fellow will continue to disseminate her Fellowship learnings and advocate for change within the VET context



# 7. REFERENCES

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<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/landmark-college-666986>

<https://www.tcd.ie/disability/services/index.php>





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