• The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems The National Disability Coordinator Officer (NDCO) works strategically to assist people with a disability to access and participate in Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training (‘Tertiary Education’) and employment. This assistance is provided through a national network of regionally based NDCOs. The NDCOs work with stakeholders at the local level to reduce systemic barriers, facilitate smooth transitions, build links, and coordinate services between the education, training and employment sectors. A key objective of education and training is to secure appropriate employment however, statistics show people with disability struggle in the classroom and are underrepresented in the national workforce. Data from the VET student outcomes (NCVER, 2019) found Vocational Education and Training (VET) graduates with disability were: • less likely (45%) to report ‘improved employment status after training’ than those without disability (68%) • less likely (53%) to be employed after training than those without disability (79%) • as likely (86%) to report being ‘satisfied with overall quality of training’ as those without disability (88%) • less likely (75%) to report having ‘achieved main reason for doing the training’ as those without disability (85%). Almost 1 in 3 (30%) graduates with disability who were not employed at the start of training reported being employed after training, compared with 50% without disability (Source: NCVER 2019 and People with disability in Australia, Educational attainment & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare). Research has shown that some staff in the VET sector were not sure of their boundaries around supporting students with disabilities (Griffin and Beddie, 2011) and that “poor disability confidence amongst VET staff and employers is a significant barrier for cultures of inclusion and employer commitment to employing people with disability.” (Smith-Merry, 2018). Some VET staff do not understand what constitutes a disability, the needs of people with disability, what supports are available, what can be offered through their roles, and the benefits of providing support (Price Waterhouse and Cooper, 2018). Limited experiences of working with people with disability and limited knowledge of disability in general has an impact on a successful learning experience. For Example: Barrier 1. Bias and misconceptions about people with disability, their capabilities, the value they offer organisations, and the benefits of inclusion. Barrier 2. Difficulties in identifying and implementing reasonable adjustments, including making use of assistive technologies. Barrier 3. Individual practitioners are unsure of the role they personally play in fostering inclusion and implementing accessibility. Barrier 4. People with disability are not made aware of the full scope of opportunities available to them and are not supported to make fully informed decisions regarding the right education and career options for themselves. There is a need to ensure that students are advised of the supports they can receive, and that those supports are appropriate and equitable. Students should not be discouraged from enrolling in courses that are their preferred pathway to employment. There have been examples of where this has happened, and it may be due to a lack of resources, inability, or lack of training around how to implement reasonable adjustments. This is key to inclusive teaching practices which requires ongoing investment in teacher training. Inclusive teaching practices are an important aspect for engendering involvement of people with disability in classroom interactions (Ferrier and Smith, 2010). Staff need to be actively trained in inclusive practices to provide the necessary supports to meet the needs of students with disability (Flannery et al, 2008; Fossey et al, 2015). What is working well in the VET Sector? • Well structured, relevant, and purposeful work placements. • VET offers courses that covers a wide range of industry areas and provides students with hands on experience. • The 2015 Student Success article Navigating VET to university: Students’ perceptions of their transition to university study identified that a VET pathway had “generally prepared them (students) well for university across a number of areas: their VET experience gave them the encouragement, motivation and confidence to continue studying, a sense of direction for their future, provided familiarity with the university course content, and the necessary skills including time management, academic writing, independent learning, communication and presentation skills.” (Barber et al, 2015). • Fee subsidies for disadvantaged students. • School-Based Apprenticeships & Traineeships (SBATs) and other Apprenticeships and Traineeships. • The range and scope of available training packages with clear links to industry is desirable, however, a substantial clean-up of packages with significant duplication of content is warranted. • • Ensure the resourcing of Disability Advisors in the TAFE system, so learners with disability, medical conditions or mental health issues have access to equitable learning. Disability Advisors need to have the skills and knowledge to create Learning Action Plans (LAP) specifying any adjustments or accommodations needed by a particular student. The students with a LAP have a greater chance of not only completing their qualification but succeeding. • • What are the key challenges in the VET sector? • Engaging young people in a region where there is a high level of youth unemployment and a culture of welfare dependence. • Student attendance is low and inconsistent in remote areas. This creates a cycle of training providers not providing a wide variety of courses due to the cost of delivery and students not enrolling because of the limited courses being offered. • Lack of motivation and consequences to attend training: students who pay for services are more likely to attend over non-fee-paying students. • Costs involved and lack of courses on offer in rural, regional, and remote regions. • Getting support for innovative opportunities e.g., development of new industries related to indigenous products, producing, marketing, and exporting local products. • The recognition of VET as a valid pathway for students as an entry to higher education and or employment. This need to be recognised and validated by Career Advisors, Transition Support Teachers, Parents and Employers. • Ensuring Accredited Career Counselors have the skills and knowledge around specific cohorts i.e., disabilities, medical conditions, and mental health issues. • Engaging all staff delivering training to undertake Disability Awareness training. • Fostering better relationships between VET, Secondary Schools, and industry to ensure the VET system delivery is relevant to/with both National, State, and local skill requirements. • Provision of the right support to/for people with disabilities, medial conditions, and mental health issues within the parameters of the education standards. • To diversify and be more flexible in delivery with regards to reasonable adjustments in meeting individual needs. • Creating seamless transition from school to VET, ensuring better outcomes are achieved. • Very limited access to lower qualifications that can be used as steppingstones into higher education. • Funding cuts to the TAFE system. It was estimated that the TAFE budget was cut by $300million and impacted 597,000 Vet Students. • Funding that supports particular learning activities, such as TAFE courses. • Decline of student numbers regional and rural areas due to failure to recognise their specific needs, lack of public transport to campuses, the continued cutting of popular face-to-face courses, and poor student information; this also contributed to the redundancy of Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) in the sector. • Across Australia, the responsibilities of Disability Liaison Officers differ between sectors (Universities/TAFEs) and from TAFE to TAFE within the same state. This not only creates concerns around the capacity and effectiveness of the role, but also makes it difficult for students who move to a new learning environment being given the same level of support. • VET in schools is again run and structured differently across states with some states giving little or no support to students with disability undertaking a VET qualification. Transportability and Transferability of Nationally Recognised Qualifications: Lack of transparency by educational providers when it comes to informing students which qualifications fall under the Nationally Recognised Qualification Framework or a State Recognised framework. Students should be informed that a state-based qualification may not be accepted in another state or territory, before starting a course. Recommendations Flexibility of skills acquisition: o Greater support for School Based Traineeships and Work Based Training. o Incorporating on the job work experience while completing training and gaining qualifications. o Improved support for the Ticket to work program. o Better utilisation of blended learning delivery methods (face to face, online), and of technology and assistive technology. o o Creating opportunities for micro-credentials; certification-style qualifications that individuals choose to study to improve a skill found in a particular industry area. They are short, low-cost online courses that provide learners with a digital certification, allowing for ‘bite-sized’ chunks learning, illustrating the proficiency in a particular skill. Micro-credentials are developed with its particular industry in mind, ensuring that the qualification meets industry-specific needs, is relevant and is recognised by future employers. Allowing to better facilitate articulated pathways: Stronger partnerships between VET and higher education sectors, especially the creation of real pathways to higher education rather the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) course credits that transfer across sectors) o Reinstatement of policy and funding support for scaffolded learning pathways e.g., Certificate I &gt; Certificate IV. o Increased VET sector influence to drive the overhaul of school’s education career curriculum to ensure viable VET pathways for students who are not interested in higher education. Providing appropriate support to students with disability in the classroom to build skills and successfully complete their studies; being work ready will assist to position VET as the key workforce transformation to shape the future. “For us to stay innovative and forward-thinking and cutting edge, we need to have as many brains as possible and this is a great talent source of people who think differently (Source: Belinda Sheehan Neurodiversity Program Manager, IBM) Investment in tools and techniques has proven to be successful in assisting, motivating, and inspiring students to achieve their best outcome. “While educators in the VET sector are experts in their field, they may receive less training in teaching practices to effectively support students with disability. As such, they have less opportunity to formally develop pedagogical capability and an understanding of students’ diverse needs.” (Source: Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2020 Review). Research has shown that people with disability will often choose a Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathway to prepare themselves for employment.