This paper details a summary of the multiple factors impacting people with disability in respect of their education, training, and skills development.

The paper contains a number of actions to guide VET providers to deliver a best practice learning and development model for students with a disability

National Disability Coordination Officer Program

**Vocational Education and Training and Disability: The Way Forward**

# **Acknowledgement**

This report was developed on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. In spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and the connection to land, sea, and community.  We also recognise all lived experience, embrace diversity and support equality for all.

This paper has been prepared by National Disability Coordination Officers from regions across Australia

**Introduction**

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.

The NDCO Program objectives are to improve:

* linkages between schools, tertiary education providers, employment service providers and providers of disability programs and assistance at all government levels
* transitions for people with disability between school / community and tertiary education and subsequent employment and
* participation by people with disability in tertiary education and employment

The NDCO program aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of people with disability regarding post-school options and supports to enhance participation in education and employment.

Over 4 million people in Australia have disability, or around 18% of the population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that people with disability are more likely than people without disability to leave school early and to have a lower level of education. As education is linked to better employment outcomes it is not unexpected that people with a disability of a working age have both lower participation and higher unemployment rates than those without a disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020).

Evidence outlined in a recent report entitled “Looking to the Future: report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training” outlines the many systemic barriers faced by young people with disability in completing their education. Key statistics identify that:

* 64 per cent of people with disability aged 20 to 24, had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 81 per cent of those without disability
* 19 per cent of people with disability aged 15 to 64 left school before 16 years of age, compared with 11 per cent of people without disability
* 15 per cent of people with disability aged 20 and over have a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 31 per cent of people without disability (Education Council, 2020)

The report also highlights that most students choose university as their transition pathway, however evidence suggests that disadvantaged students, such as regional, rural and remote students, students from low socio-economic status, Indigenous students and students with disability are more inclined to choose the vocational education and training pathway (Education Council, 2020).

In the 2019 Strengthening Skills Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System the Honourable Steven Joyce, recognised that Vocational Education and Training (VET) could be an effective and efficient work based learning model that is well positioned to support the workforce as it moves towards a more technology driven environment (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

**Knowledge Review**

The purpose of this review is to summarise the existing knowledge of education, training, and skills development to outline the multiple factors impacting on people with disability and the choice of a post school pathway.

This review offers direction for VET educators, providing food for thought about future developments. The review will assist providers to deliver a best practice learning and development model that ensures that people with disability have access to education and employment on the same basis as their able peers.

**Background**

**Vocational Education**

Education is not solely focused on academic engagement and achievement. It plays a central role in a young person’s social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. It is a safe space to develop connection and belonging. Vocational Education, in particular, develops confidence, education, and employability skills, enhancing a smooth transition into work and independence. This fact is important in the life of a person with disability (Drane, Vernon, & O'Shea, 2020) .

Vocational Education is designed to increase the engagement of young people in education and training and to provide transition opportunities to further studies and employment. The complexity of the VET Sector and ongoing negative community attitudes contribute to VET not being taken up as a valuable post school pathway (Education Council, 2020).

The Australian Federal, State and Territory governments are conducting the Skills Reform with the intention to improve efficiency, transparency and confidence in the sector and to ensure that Australians have access to high quality and relevant training. It is considered that an improved VET sector will upskill Australians to meet the emerging priorities within the workforce. It is critical this reform enhances the opportunities of Vocational Education as a pathway to higher education and employment. Participation in VET will support students with disability to build work readiness skills and encourage them to make informed decisions about their future (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021)

**The changing direction of disability**

For people with disability access to healthcare, transport, public infrastructure and education and employment are the key factors that support active participation in community life. Although significant positive change has occurred in the development of disability policy in recent times questions remain today as to how successful this change has been.

Australia is grappling with achieving ongoing social and economic participation for people with disability in what is a complex policy arena. In recent times policy development has had a major focus on improving the rights of people with disability addressing the many systemic barriers including the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The Australia Disability Strategy 2021 - 2030focuses on removing barriers for people with disability. Through national leadership and an inclusive public policy response the strategy aims to promote mainstream services to improve outcomes for people with disability. The strategy takes a whole of community focus to achieve an inclusive society to ensure people with a disability live as equal members of the community (Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services), 2021).

The strategy acknowledges that people with disability experience more difficulties in the classroom and are underrepresented in the national workforce identifying a significant gap in the attainment of Year 12 or an alternative vocational education and training qualification. As a result, people with disability have specifically identified employment security and education and learning as key outcome areas for continued improvement.

The key policy priorities outlined below will assist mainstream services to improve the outcomes for people with disability. The priorities are to:

* Improve transition of young people with disability from education to employment
* Build capability in the delivery of inclusive education
* Improve pathways and accessibility to further education and training for people with disability
* Increase opportunities for participation in lifelong learning

Similarly, the Inclusive Victoria State Disability Plan 2022 – 2026 outlines Education and Employment as priority areas for Victoria to create a safe and inclusive community for people with disability. The plan identifies that fewer than five out of ten Victorians with disability are employed and that to improve this ratio the following outcomes need to be achieved. The outcomes are:

* Increased education achievement and engagement of students with disability
* Increased wellbeing of students with disability
* Increased employment and job quality
* Increased positive attitudes towards people with disability in the workplace
* Increased job flexibility

As participation and access to education and employment are the foundation of opportunity for people with disability it is evident that greater value must be placed on Vocational Education and Training in order to achieve the objectives outlined in the current Federal and State Disability strategies.

**Vocational Education for people with disability**

Much has been written about the status and purpose of Vocational Education and Training and that for many years it has been viewed as a lesser pathway than higher education, a pathway which is predominately encouraged for non-academic students. This lesser pathway focus has been important for students with disability as they have been historically disadvantaged during their learning.

Although many reviews have alerted government, stakeholders, providers, and students to the concerns within the sector it must be acknowledged that VET will continue to play a significant role on the education field. The completion of VET by students with disability benefits the individual student, employers, and broader community. Student completion of VET increases the community participation of people with disability, reduces misconceptions about the employment of people with disability and has positive benefits for the Australian economy as it increases economic participation and reduces expenditure on welfare (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

Data presented by The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) highlights that 5% of those with a disability in Australia are enrolled in Vocational Education and Training, a total of 171,730 students. The evidence shows that the majority of students with disability are completing their VET course at a private training provider (56%) compared with 34% attending TAFE and 10% attending a Community Learning provider (National Centre Vocational Education Resarch, 2022).

The National Disability Coordination Officer reviewed several reports and submissions outlining the challenges within the VET sector for people with disability. These reports offer insight for VET providers to improve current service delivery and provide quality skills and training to enhance the learning environment and pathway opportunities for students with disability. The principles outlined in the following paragraphs detail the key themes outlined in the reports that were reviewed.

**Vocational Educators disability awareness**

Disability awareness increases both individuals and an organisations awareness and knowledge of disability delivering increased confidence and self-assurance when working and communicating with people with disability.

It is outlined in a report completed by PriceWaterhouse Cooper that many VET educators have limited understanding and general knowledge of disability. Evidence shows that VET educators and training providers lack disability confidence and awareness, in particular with hidden disabilities such as Mental Health and Chronic Illness.

VET educators receive limited professional development in relation to disability awareness and inclusive education. Consultations completed during the VET Skills Reform have highlighted the fact that the VET educator’s certification of Training and Assessment does not contain a unit on disability awareness, this oversight results in lack of knowledge about students learning needs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021).

VET educators also identified inadequate support and professional development to enhance their knowledge of inclusive pedagogical practices to benefit students with disability. VET educators have reported limited ongoing experience of working with students with disability lessening their opportunity to build awareness of supports, services, and resources available for students (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

**Disability disclosure**

Students are not required within the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and Disability Standards for Education to disclose disability. Students face many challenges when making the decision about disclosing their disability during their studies, including the risk of fear and discrimination impacting their learning (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Research has identified that some students may not be adequately informed of the benefits available through disclosing disability at the time of registration or enrolment in their studies, including the right to supports such as reasonable adjustments to their studies, for example extended timeframes to complete assessments. Research identifies that students may also be discouraged to disclose due to the complexity of the process and procedures required for disclosure of disability (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

Students with disability have a right to a variety of supports and services and they should be encouraged to disclose their disability to educators and employers in order to maximise these supports. However, some students are not satisfied with the supports and services provided once they disclose their disability, this is reflected in research completed by Price Waterhouse Cooper which describes the supports provided within VET sector to be inadequate.

The under reporting of student disclosure indicates a significant demand for promotion and education of student disclosure of disability. Non-disclosure of disability can impact on the implementation of appropriate reasonable adjustments to enhance inclusive learning environments for students with disability. It is therefore essential to build the awareness of students and educators within the VET sector about the support mechanisms to encourage the disclosure of disability (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

It is recognised that disability disclosure within the VET sector is used solely as a data collection method to identify student statistics. The identification of these students serves no other purpose than identifying a particular cohort. This is a significant barrier to student confidence and awareness about disclosing their disability as many just see it as a label. (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

**Reasonable adjustments and supports for students with disability**

VET educators have limited knowledge of the Disability Standards for Education, resulting in the limited awareness of and the consequent implementation of reasonable adjustments and supports for students with disability. This includes an educator’s ability to competently develop and implement student learning plans to include reasonable adjustments such as physical accessibility, learning materials, and assessment supports (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

Many VET educators experience difficulty implementing reasonable adjustments in practice due to limited professional knowledge of learning strategies for students with disability, in particular those with hidden disability such as Mental Health and Chronic Illness diagnoses.

Data collected during the consultations has also shown that there is limited understanding of the VET educators’ role. It is evident many VET educators believe they do not have the capacity within their workload and qualifications to adjust teaching methods to address the needs of students with disability (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). This highlights that there is a distinct need to improve the educator’s knowledge of reasonable adjustments, disability services and supports for students, including disability specific supports such as the NDIS.

**Pathways, Transition and Career Education**

VET enhances pathway opportunities and work readiness skills for disadvantaged learners and those who do not wish to initially transition to higher education. Evidence indicates that disadvantaged students, including those with disability are more inclined to complete a VET qualification, it is important that VET be recognised as a building block into their future (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

Evidence suggests that Careers Practitioners have limited knowledge of disability supports which restricts their ability to advocate for reasonable adjustments and course selection for students with a disability.  This limitation results in a lack of encouragement and recommendation of a VET qualification for students. In addition, Practitioners also lack sufficient links with industry bodies which limits their ability to provide reliable advice on VET pathways. This short coming restricts their ability to provide advice on opportunities for students to transition to higher education and employment (Education Council, 2020).

Students with disability continually face barriers finding their career paths within vocational education. For VET to be recognised as a valid pathway for students with disability further professional development must be provided to Careers Practitioners (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

There is a lack of collaboration between Registered Training Organisations and key stakeholders, including secondary school providers, higher education institutions, and employers’ resulting in a less successful transition outcome from school to VET. This failure to collaborate results in students having limited opportunities for suitable work placements. It also results in limited community promotion and marketing of the VET sector by RTO’s (PricewaterhouseCoopers: Skills for Australia, 2018).

**Recommendations**

This knowledge review gives direction for VET providers to develop a broad service delivery model for engaging with key stakeholders in progressing vocational education training as a suitable pathway for young people with a disability.

The following are key actions to consider that align closely with the Enablers of High-Quality Delivery of Vocational Education outlined in the paper entitled Delivering high quality VET: what matters to RTOs prepared by NCVER (Guthrie & Waters, 2022).

1. **Training and Education** 
   1. **Disability Awareness Training:** VET educators must be disability confident. Providing Disability Awareness Training to all VET staff facilitates an inclusive and strong student focused learning environment. The delivery of VET must be personalised, engaging and it must uphold the Disability Standards for Education.
   2. **Mentoring for Trainers:** The delivery of a VET educators mentor program will promote the sharing of knowledge, planning and good practice which will in turn assist in delivering a quality training model in line with student needs that results in improved learning outcomes.

The mentor program will enable VET educators to participate in ongoing reflective practice and peer support. VET providers must provide a supportive and collaborative workplace through facilitating a peer learning model focused on improving teaching strategies for students with disability.

* 1. **Professional Development:** VET educators must receive regular and ongoing professional development to ensure they remain abreast of current teaching and training practices, in particular how to engage students with disability. Professional Development offered to VET educators will assist in ensuring that training is flexible and delivered to meet student’s needs. Professional Development should also have a focus on providing greater understanding of the transition pathways for students at the completion of their studies.
  2. **Strong Commitment to Training:** Training must be challenging and provide a safe environment for students with disability, and it should focus on developing students skills for independence. A strengthened commitment to workplace education will enhance providers standing in the community and within the stakeholder cohort working in skill development, training, and employment of people with disability.

VET providers should embrace disability skill development beyond just developing specialised training for students with disability and consider developing a holistic program that enables students with disability to attend education with their peers.

Sufficient resources must be allocated to support students with a disability to participate in an education setting with their abled peers. Provision of learning support, staff professional development, student transition support and a range of course options will demonstrate that the organisation has a strong commitment to the education and employment of students with disability.

* 1. **Transition for Students:** Employment is a key goal of vocational education. VET providers must focus on the effectiveness and quality of student learning. Students’ participation in VET must not only prepare them for work or an alternative pathway it should also provide them with the opportunity to obtain work and social skills. The design and delivery of engaging industry tasters, discovery programs and disability tailored career education will enhance the work readiness of students with disability.

VET educators must also have a sound knowledge of disability transition supports and pathway options, including programs such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Disability Employment Services, Job Access and other relevant programs.

1. **Promotion and Development:** 
   1. **Promotion of VET:** VET providers have an obligation to encourage students with disability to participate in a VET course that aligns with their interests and that provides them with a pathway to ongoing employment. Students successfully completing programs will contribute to changing the community attitude towards VET. VET providers must develop a community engagement strategy to educate students, parents, career advisors and employers on the benefits of VET. The celebration of VET achievements will contribute to a change in community attitudes and highlight VET as a valuable education option for many students.
2. **Relationship Building**
   1. **Stronger Relationships with Industry:** VET providers must continue to improve their industry presence and deliver a training model that aligns with current industry standards. The training must be delivered by trainers who have a broad and current industry knowledge. This will be achieved by providers effectively collaborating with peak industry bodies and employers. Collaboration and strong relationships with industry will increase providers current awareness of employment opportunities and skill shortages, in turn, improving pathway opportunities for students with disability.
   2. **Enhance Relationships within Schools:** VET providers must develop a broad knowledge of secondary school providers. Regular engagement with VET Coordinators and Career Practitioners is important for delivering positive educational and career outcomes for students with disability. This can be achieved through VET providers building a strong Community of Practice model which connects educators with common goals and a focus on sharing best practice strategies for learning.

**The Way forward**

VET plays a significant role in providing students with disability competency-based skills and training. The key stakeholders must promote lifelong learning that enables young people to be ready for the workforce. Quality work placements and the development of strong targeted industry relationships will increase the understanding of the training opportunities and encourage a stronger uptake of vocational positions.

There is no one solution to removing the barriers to education and employment for students with disability. The problem is complex. The VET system requires a shake up to ensure all Australians can access education to develop skills relevant to the current workforce. VET providers can contribute to this reform, provide an inclusive learning environment, and change community attitude towards Vocational Education.

The NCVER suggests that Registered Training Organisations are critical in the success of VET and implementing the national reforms. The role of the VET sector is unfortunately constrained as it has limited resources available to support RTO’s in the delivery of good practice when supporting students with disability to participate in training on the same basis as their peers. This lack of resources continues to be an ongoing problem.

The delivery of high-quality teaching and learning is an important element that impacts the outcomes of all students, however the ability to identify and implement reasonable adjustments and supports for students with disability is critical to providing high quality educational outcomes.

Good quality learning is more that contact hours with students. The delivery of VET must facilitate both successful learning and the development of quality social and economic pathways for students with disability.

The completion of VET must promote students with disability self-worth, sense of purpose and achievement. Skilling a person with disability to be job-ready creates opportunities to social and economic participation and in turn reducing the ongoing systemic barriers faced by people with disability.

Learning motivates students to achieve their goals. The completion of a VET qualification is beneficial to students with disability and the community as students prepare for the workforce and pursue goals to contribute to their community. Learning empowers students with disability to develop an occupational identity, independence and to limit reliance on government supports in the future.

VETs key objective is to develop students’ foundations for life and work and to develop pathways to further education or employment. Critical to the success in meeting this objective is the need for the development of strong relationships between the students, educators, industry and employers. Evidence shows that people with disability have higher productivity, loyalty and work ethic and lower absenteeism than their peers. This indicates providing career education and transition supports during VET is crucial to enable students with disability achieve employment opportunities. Employing people with disability contributes to the bottom line opportunities for business and as such it is imperative that students with disability receive the appropriate support in order to take advantage of these opportunities.

The recommendations contained in the previous section will assist providers to deliver a significantly improved VET program which will in turn contribute to enhancing the social, community and economic participation of people with disability. It is important that VET providers seize the opportunity to play role in delivering training, education and human development programs that deliver a broad range of outcomes beyond those simply related to training and assessment.

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