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Inclusion: Practical Ideas for Adapting the VET Environment for Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

TAFE NSW Hunter Institute of Technology (HIT) is committed to enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities in vocational education and training. HIT Disabilities Services continues to develop and benchmark new directions regarding inclusive strategies and practices to realise this commitment. The paper discusses a range of methods and issues relevant for the inclusion of students with psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. The paper provides practical ideas that help VET staff to maximise inclusion for students with disabilities by adapting the VET environment. Practical delivery ideas include provision of appropriate, effective organisational structures, student support staff, customised educational pathways, customised curricula, experiential supports and assistive technology.

1. BACKGROUND

TAFE NSW is committed to enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. The principles underpinning this commitment are those of quality customer service, inclusiveness and meeting legislative requirements including the Commonwealth Disability Services Act (1986), Disability Discrimination Act (1992), NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1977 amended 1994), and the NSW Disability Services Act (1993). The challenge has been to develop policies, procedures, and strategies that will facilitate inclusion by adherence to access and equity principles. TAFE NSW Hunter Institute of Technology (HIT) has been proactive in developing and benchmarking new directions regarding strategies and practices to enhance opportunities for people with disabilities.

HIT Disabilities Services facilitate the provision of adequate, appropriate and empowering reasonable adjustments to maximise the inclusion of students with disabilities in the VET sector. This is especially important in light of increasing numbers of students and increasingly limited budgets. Maximising inclusion often means adapting the environment in some way to meet the needs of the student. This paper will present ideas to assist VET staff to ensure an inclusive learning environment. This paper provides practical ideas that help VET staff to maximise inclusion for students with disabilities by adapting the VET environment. This paper provides practical ideas that help VET teachers to maximise inclusion for students with disabilities by adapting the VET curriculum. Adapting the VET environment may involve changing organisational procedures and practices, provision of support services, provision of assistive technology or education of staff working with students with disabilities.

Over a number of years the Hunter Institute of Technology (HIT) has trialed a number of innovative strategies and practices to ensure an inclusive learning environment for students with psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. These strategies and practices have involved establishing effective organisational structures, unique student support roles, establishing partnerships between sections to facilitate customise educational pathways, initiating flexible, layered curriculum delivery provisions and utilising state of the art assistive technology. This paper will help VET staff to realise the need to make necessary policy and organisational changes and customer service adaptations in order to demonstrate NSW TAFE's commitment to inclusion across the learning environment.

2. PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR ADAPTING THE VET ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Educational Delivery Ideas: Organisational Structures

The HIT has established effective organisational structures that allow direct service provision for students with disabilities.

2.1.1. Qualified Teacher/Consultant Positions for All Disability Groups

The HIT has established substantive teacher/consultant positions for each disability area. Teacher/consultants are experts qualified in their respective disability areas as well as being qualified teachers. They offer entry level training and other customised courses that either provide an entry point or map onto any other TAFE course. They directly recruit and employ specialist disability teachers. They are able to adapt curricula to meet the needs of students. This means that students with disabilities are now offered discrete services targeted for their specific needs. Teacher/Consultants directly allocate funding and resources for these students. This has meant that inclusion of students with disabilities with psychiatric, neurological or specific learning disabilities can be more precisely considered and provided.

2.1.2. Self Managing Disability Services Team

The HIT has established a unique model of disability services provision. In the HIT teacher/consultants operate as a self managing team. This change in the organisational structure has had a number of direct benefits to the provision of disability services. There is now a direct line of communication to upper management; the team is empowered to make policy and procedural decisions; tasks such as research, business development and staff development are designed and conducted by team members and help to maximise inclusiveness to meet the needs of relevant stakeholders. Overall, it has meant a more coordinated provision of services as well as more awareness of and commitment to inclusion at all levels and across all aspects of the HIT business.

2.1.3. Merge of various student services/teaching sections into one faculty

The HIT has established the Access and General Education (AGE) Faculty. This faculty model allows direct faculty interface across a range of student services and sections. The AGE Faculty comprises Disabilities Services, Outreach, Basic and Prevocational Education and Adult Basic Education Units. This model allows partnerships to result and a more seamless educational pathway. This model allows a very flexible modular approach to meeting the particular needs of each student.

2.2 Educational Delivery Ideas: Specialist Student Support Staff

The HIT has trialed unique support roles. This has been in response to the unique needs of students with disabilities from emerging populations such as psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. These students may experience memory, concentration, planning, sequencing, behavioural and motivational difficulties in the VET environment.

2.2.1. Mentors

In-classroom *mentors* are provided for students who require prompting for tasks or whose behaviour might otherwise exclude them from the classroom environment. The mentor typically uses behaviour management strategies to empower the student to manage their behaviours or to control impulses in order to maximise their inclusion.

2.2.2. Organisers

Outside-classroom *organisers* are provided for students who have difficulty organising their work due to memory or focusing problems. The organiser helps the student to sequence activities and facilitates memory and attention and focusing strategies.

2.3 Educational Delivery Ideas: Customised Educational Pathways

TAFE NSW offers a range of access and entry level courses to build necessary skills, provide skills gap training or to facilitate entry into advanced courses. The HIT has trialed unique customised pathways support strategies to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities such as psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. These students may require extra time to complete a course due to a ranges of problems which may be associated with their disability or may experience knowledge gaps due to acquired disabilities.

2.3.1. Pre-course training

Pre-course training is appropriate for students who require repetition or skills practice over a long period of time to develop competencies. For this reason the student may be offered a chance to enroll in a module via the disabilities service prior to it's offering by the faculty. This enables an adequate time to develop the competencies of the module.

2.3.2. Complimentary modules

Complimentary modules are appropriate for students who need to extend the duration or intensity of a module offered in their chosen mainstream course.

2.3.3. Customised, access courses

Customised, access courses are appropriate for students who need prerequisite skills necessary for enrolment or success in higher level courses. These courses can include modules that build communication skills, literacy and numeracy skills, study skills or other skills necessary to gain entry in higher level courses.

2.3.4. Gap training

Gap training is appropriate for students who may experience gaps in their skills due to their disability or disadvantage. Gap training targets 'holes' in knowledge that inhibit the students' success in their mainstream course.

2.4 Educational Delivery Ideas: Customised Curricula

The HIT is committed to providing customised curricula. This has been in response to the unique needs of students with disabilities from emerging populations such as psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. These students may experience fatigue, information input limitations, long learning curves or shortened learning curves, structuring and planning difficulties or need for alternative presentation of information.

2.4.1. Accessible formats

The Teacher/Consultant negotiates for module materials to be available in plain English or other *varied formats* such as audio, video or print/font sizes or types.

2.4.2. Accessible, Layered curriculum

Some students may have difficulty with sequencing, structuring and abstracting information. *Layered curriculum* is developed by the Teacher/Consultant for students with these difficulties. This involves designing comprehensive task analysis of course objectives. Layering also involves designing highly detailed worksheets that students can choose to use to reach learning outcomes. This allows and provides increased structure, direction and context rather than varying content or assessments. In this way, all students have the best chance of meeting the learning outcomes without compromising educational standards.

2.4.3. Flexible delivery of mainstream curricula

Flexible delivery is suitable for students with intermittent or variable disability characteristics or for students who experience fatigue, information overload or focusing difficulties. The Teacher/Consultant can arrange for students to enrol in a flexible pathway. This may involve negotiating dual enrolment, multi year enrolment, mixed mode enrolment, reduced paced delivery, self paced learning, recognition of prior learning, reduced attendance requirements, learning contracts, individual projects, attendance at more than one session of the same module or accelerated, double paced delivery. It can also involve audio/videotaping classes/sessions for later review.

2.5 Educational Delivery Ideas: Experiential Supports

Students may feel isolated from other students or need to discuss their unique experience of disability with other people in like situations or may need to withdraw for a time to recoup their energies. HIT offers support for these students.

2.5.1. Student Networks

Students have the opportunity to *network with other students* with similar interests and experiences. Students are invited to include their names and contact details on a distribution list. Students also receive a bi-monthly newsletter that offers the opportunity for students to contribute items and share information. A chat room is planned for 2003 which will hopefully facilitate student networking.

2.5.2. Quiet Space

At each HIT campus a room has been identified for use by students who need to have access to peace, *quiet* or privacy. The *room* provides the opportunity for the student to practice calming techniques in private.

2.6 Educational Delivery Ideas: Assistive Technology Support

A range of supports are available to help empower students during their TAFE course. These supports not only obviate the need for specialist support staff and reduce recurrent costs but also aim to empower students with strategies to deal with difficulties in their working lives.

2.6.1. Electronic Whiteboards

Electronic whiteboards are used with students who are not able to take notes because of literacy, focusing or memory problems. The electronic whiteboards are suitable for theory based subjects and some practical subjects. The teacher simply uses the whiteboard for any spontaneous notes which are then copied for all the students. (Copies of prepared notes are also made available to students).

2.6.2. Computers for Communication

Portable computers with voice to text and text to voice hardware and software are available to address certain communication difficulties. This technology helps to address literacy difficulties and certain other communication problems.

2.6.3. JAWS Reading Software

All HIT Library computers available for student use have *JAWS* installed on them. This allows the student to have the screen information read to them.

2.6.4. Electronic Organisers

Electronic organisers are available for students who experience memory problems and may have difficulty remembering appointments, class times, tasks or other information. The organisers allow the student to make a pre-recorded message and set the time for which they want to hear the message. The device is carried with the student and the voiced message reminds the student of the appointment, etc.

2.6.5. Video Recorders

The use of *video recorders* is appropriate for students who require support with practical tasks because of their need for visual repetition to become competent. The student video tapes the task being performed and can then view the task repeatedly to facilitate skill development.

2.6.6. Audio Recorders

Tape recorders are allocated to students who are unable to take notes during class.

2.7 Educational Delivery Ideas: Staff Training and Development

HIT offers comprehensive staff training in facilitating inclusion in the VET sector.

2.7.1. ResponseAbility

ResponseAbility is offered as workshops for VET staff who would like to gain basic awareness of a range of disability issues and strategies for working with people with disabilities. The workshop outlines legal obligations, communication strategies, customer service strategies and provides strategies for adapting the VET environment.

2.7.2. Certificate 4 VET Disabilities

Certificate 4 VET Disabilities is an 80 hour nationally accredited course designed to provide VET staff with advanced skills in working with people with disabilities. The course enables staff to identify their legal responsibilities, provide appropriate customer services and to adapt the VET environment to maximise inclusion.

3. SUMMARY

It is likely that the number of students with disabilities in the VET sector will increase, especially the numbers of students from emerging populations such as psychiatric, neurological and specific learning disabilities. It is important, then to continue to develop and benchmark the most appropriate and successful strategies and practices for maximising inclusive learning environments. This will allow cost effective empowering service provision for the most number of students.