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Open Learning Options for Adults with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of learning materials and mechanisms for the delivery of Employment Access courses through OTEN and some case studies of students who have found them useful. Future directions are also discussed.

Joanna's job at the TAB was in jeopardy because she had inadequate reading skills to sort the mail and deal with other basic clerical tasks, and her supported jobs agency did not have the resources to teach literacy. Frank was struggling with his computer assignments because due to specific learning disabilities, he had not developed the necessary preskills to cope with this mainstream course.

Both of these people were able to enrol in the "umbrella" course *Employment Skills* at OTEN and successfully achieve their individual goals. "Umbrella" courses at TAFE NSW have been developed for adults who have a disability and who need a specialised mix of modules to enable them to access further TAFE courses, get a job, or maintain or enhance employment options. In face-to-face colleges these courses are usually offered for small groups of people with similar needs, when sufficient resources are available.

Advantages of studying through OTEN are that individuals can enrol at almost any time of the year, study at their own pace, and importantly, the course can be tailored to help them achieve their specific goals. For those with reading difficulties, the learning materials can be put on audiotape or CD Rom with text reading software. Tutorial support and other forms of reasonable adjustment can be arranged by Teacher/Consultants to ensure high levels of success.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era when mainstream education is embracing the exciting possibilities of pathways and flexible delivery, it is a timely challenge to special educationalists at a systems level, to put in place strategies so that people who have a disability may learn exactly **what** they need to learn specifically **when, where** and **how** they need to learn it. The options developed at the Open Training Education Network of TAFE NSW in response to the learning needs of this population are examples of best practice in both extending educational access, and ensuring optimal outcomes for this population.

These options are very much in line with the general move towards competency based training. That is they:

- look at exactly what people need to do, know and think in order to be considered competent in their jobs, and
- put greater emphasis on gathering evidence of skills rather than relying heavily on formal, contrived assessments such as exams.

These options provide flexibility of delivery in response to training needs by:

- anticipating and adapting to changing business conditions and customer need,
- encouraging self directed learning, and
- authorising team members dealing directly with customers to make decisions to satisfy customer needs.
- Learning may occur in and across environments as necessary, on/off TAFE campus, on/off the job through open learning provision.

These options are also in keeping with VET policy to encourage industry to play a greater role in determining:

- what competencies should be,
- what learning needs to take place to achieve these competencies, and
- what assessments are required to verify a person's level of competence.

2. DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES IN TAFE NSW - THE EVOLUTION OF ACCESS COURSES

In TAFE NSW we have a network of approximately 120 full-time, and numerous part-time Teacher/Consultants throughout the state whose job it is to assist students who have a disability gain access to TAFE and provide the necessary reasonable adjustment for students to achieve their desired outcomes.

The main challenge is to create the necessary flexibility in the system to enable students to pursue and reach their educational goals. This may entail providing support in mainstream courses, running modified mainstream courses where course content is presented in smaller steps over a longer period of time, or the development of special courses which are designed specifically to cater for students who have a disability and more recently developing on-line courses which are accessible.

2.1 Mainstream Courses with Support

In face-to-face colleges, enabling a student to attend and participate adequately in the class may involve anything from providing physical access, technical aides and scribes, to the assistance of a specially trained support teacher. Students who have an intellectual disability often need to attend special courses to gain the necessary competencies to enter mainstream courses.

At Randwick Campus for example, Hospitality students complete Certificate 1 in their first year and then if they are able, go on to join the mainstream course which is Certificate 2. Students will gain credit for the subjects they completed in year 1 (Mise en place, Basic Food Preparation, Cleaning, Hygiene), and may take the whole of the year to complete the rest of the subjects, or alternatively, work intensively on half the number of subjects in first semester and the other half in second semester. A support teacher works with them in the mainstream classroom as necessary.

2.2 Modified Mainstream Courses

Teacher/Consultants may accommodate student learning needs by doubling class hours for a mainstream course. At Hornsby college, Practical Retail, Practical Office and computing courses, and automotive are taught in this way. As well as the Hospitality Certificate 1, Randwick offers a basic Childcare course, Carpentry and Joinery, and Office Practice or Office Skills all of which are statement courses. Usually such courses will also include on site training using work placement subject hours. Practical training varies from course to course, but for Hospitality for example, students spend 3 x 4 hour days on work placement for a total of 17 weeks.

Another support option for students in mainstream courses is to build in extra support subjects like Job Seeking Skills and tutorial support which are available in *Workskills* versions of mainstream courses. These courses also include a mandatory work experience component to enhance the transfer of skills learned in class to the workplace.

2.3 Special Courses

As stated above, special courses are particularly needed for students who may not have the entry skills to get into mainstream courses and for whom mainstream courses do not provide relevant skills training in any case. Special courses have been devised to create access to skills training mainly for people who have an intellectual or a specific learning disability.¹

In the early 80s the emphasis was on teaching life skills: basic literacy and numeracy, banking, cooking, etc. With the general TAFE shift to a vocational emphasis however, special courses became focused on training for jobs. We now teach workplace literacy and communication, commercial cookery and other vocational skills such as job seeking, interview skills etc.

An on going problem for us administratively has always been that of formalising special courses so that they are acceptable to the TAFE system. This has led to development of the so called "umbrella" course *Employment Skills*, comprising some 800 plus subjects. In this course any subject may be offered as a stand alone option; or students may enrol in any combination of subjects as needed to gain the desired set of skills. *Employment Skills* is an accredited TAFE course in NSW and when a student completes any subject/s in it they receive a Statement of Attainment with the subjects passed and/or skills attained, listed on it.

2.4 Skills For Local Need

Most of the subjects listed under *Employment Skills* have formal content. However the set of subjects labelled "*Skills for local need*", may be utilised by the Teacher/Consultant to teach any skills that a student needs to learn, up to a maximum number of hours.

If a student is assessed as having insufficient skills to attempt the desired mainstream course, a modified version of the subjects or subjects, may be developed (resources permitting), usually incorporating extra literacy. The student will then be enrolled in one or more of the Skills for Local Need subjects. In some cases students will gain sufficient skills and knowledge to then enrol in the mainstream version of the course.

1 A special Employment Access Certificate course for deaf students has been running for some years at Granville Campus of TAFE NSW.

For example in the Northern Sydney Institute, Garden Landscaping is offered under a ***Skills for Local Need*** subject with a semester of carpentry, brick laying and gardening fundamentals. Also a mix of Adult Basic Education subjects - literacy and numeracy for work for example, and job skills such as - job seeking, interviews etc are offered under ***Skills for Local Need***.

In the South Western Institute students are enrolled in ***Skills for local Need*** to:

- complete the Driver's Licence Permit Theory course
- obtain tutorial support for courses in which technically you can't use tutorial support
- complete some computer subjects

If enrolled in the ***Skills for Local Need*** subjects, students who don't complete can still get a college statement with their competencies listed.

2.5 Umbrella Enrolments in Mainstream Subjects

Sometimes students who are assessed as being at risk of failing in a mainstream course are enrolled in all or some of the subjects under the umbrella course. They will then gain a college statement in the subjects they pass. If the students are performing very well, they may be transferred back into the mainstream course and receive the appropriate accreditation. Similarly if students are enrolled in a mainstream course but are in danger of failing some or all subjects, they may be given an enrolment adjustment into the umbrella course.

Other reasons for enrolling students who have a disability in mainstream subjects under the umbrella course are:

- to enable the student to study a combination of subjects selected from different courses to meet their training requirements
- to enable them to try out in a course to see if they can cope with it, or to gain confidence in it before committing themselves to the mainstream course
- to enable them to enrol in the subjects of a course which is closed so they can begin study immediately rather than wait till next semester or next year to enrol (only possible through OTEN)

2.6 Some Disadvantages of TAFE NSW Campus Delivery

Availability and accessibility of course and subject options (for people with intellectual disabilities in particular), is still a barrier for students at local TAFE colleges, especially if they live in the country. There is always the problem with having to have sufficient students to run a class, and even in small classes the range and type of skills of the students may make it very difficult for them to work and learn together as a group. While some students may face the situation of not being able to study the subjects they want to study locally, others may not be able to gain the specific skills that they need within those subjects of choice.

For some students, quite often those with learning disabilities, the classroom does not provide the ideal learning situation for them, either because they can't keep up with the pace, and/or they are distracted by the presence of so many other people. Some people lack confidence in themselves generally, or in their ability to do the subject - (commonly people with learning disabilities have low self esteem); and therefore feel uncomfortable in the group situation.

For some students attendance times are inconvenient or impossible. Others just prefer to study independently, and when and where they choose, at their own pace.

Fixed enrolment dates which come around only once or at best twice a year make it difficult to meet incidental training needs which arise frequently on an ad hoc basis. For a person with an intellectual disability for example, a job opportunity, or their maintenance in a job, may hinge critically upon the immediate availability of specific skills training. Similarly to meet the learning readiness of some people enrolments need to be flexible. A person may discover they need certain pre requisite skills, for a course they will commence in 2 months time, or they may have failed a subject and need to re do it over the long vacation.

For these reasons and many others, students may choose to study by distance through OTEN. They may choose a co-enrolment option and so study just one or some subjects at OTEN and others at their local college. Or they may study all their subjects by distance.

3. LEARNING OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE AN INTELLECTUAL OR LEARNING DISABILITY AT THE OPEN TRAINING AND EDUCATION NETWORK OF TAFE NSW

OTEN has a strong commitment to flexibility and accessibility. It is in keeping with this policy, that students who have an intellectual or a learning disability, who do not have a suitable face-to-face option, have their learning needs met through OTEN.

Advantages to enrolling in *Employment Skills* at OTEN are:

- that people can enrol at almost any time of the year
- they may study at their own pace, and importantly,
- the course can be individually tailored to help them achieve their specific goals.

3.1 Types of Support Available for Students Studying through OTEN

People sometimes unwittingly dismiss OTEN options for people who have a disability because they imagine that distance education will be too difficult, in particular for students who have an intellectual or a learning disability, but in fact there are many ways in which we can offer more appropriate support than can be provided at a face-to-face college. Support may be provided for mainstream students or students in special courses. Examples of support utilised for students studying at OTEN are:

- assistance with time-tabling and planning work completion
- the loan of technical aides such as computers, Franklin Language Master, text reading software
- paid tutors (paid by us or another college)
- Adult Basic Education tutors
- volunteer tutors (trained)
- social educators in accommodation services
- delivery may be at another college, or at a work site, or at home
- for some students, specially tailored learning materials

3.2 Modified Mainstream Courses

In face-to-face colleges, as mentioned above, Teacher/Consultants may accommodate student learning needs by doubling class hours for a mainstream course. As students proceed at their own rate while studying at OTEN slow progress is not such a critical issue. However there

are maximum time frames for finishing subjects and courses, but these may be extended if necessary through negotiation.

Since 1997 we have also been offering *Workskills* versions of mainstream courses tailored specifically for students who have a disability featuring flexible enrolment periods, extended time for completion, intensive tutorial support and on site job training as required, and the special support subject Individual Education Plan which is discussed below.

Figure 1. Case Study -Judy

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
JUDY Mild intellectual disability	Work Skills – Office Practice	Tutorial support at face-to-face college	Work in the area of Office Clerical support	Successful work experience placement, has been accepted into mainstream Office Clerical course at her local TAFE college

3.3 Umbrella Enrolments in Mainstream Subjects

As with face-to-face, students may be enrolled in a mainstream subject/(s) for a number of reasons:

- to enable the student to study a combination of subjects selected from different courses to meet their training requirements
- to enable them to try out in a course to see if they can cope with it, or to gain confidence in it before committing themselves to the mainstream course
- to enable enrolment in a course which is closed so they can begin study immediately rather than wait till next semester or next year to enrol (possible through OTEN).

In Harold's case for example, we were able to enrol him in the mainstream course *Urban Horticulture* half way through Semester 2 by enrolling him in the subjects under the umbrella course. In this way, Harold could "road test" the course to see if he could manage it, and also if he really wanted to do it. As it turned out, Harold did well, and was able to transfer into the mainstream course for the next year.

Figure 2. Case Study – Harold

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
HAROLD Brain injury due to car accident, co-enrolled with Goulburn College of TAFE NSW	Mainstream horticulture subjects under umbrella course, mainstream computer subjects at Goulburn	Tutorial support at face-to-face college	Enrolment in mainstream horticulture course	Successful in horticulture subjects so enrolled in Urban Horticulture course for one year and then moved to Canberra and now in face-to-face horticulture course

3.4 Co-enrolment

It is also possible for students to be enrolled both at OTEN and at a mainstream college. In this way a student may be able to study a subject that is not offered at their local college and vice versa. While Harold was enrolled in a horticulture course with OTEN for example, he was also enrolled in some computer subjects at his local TAFE college in Goulburn.

3.5 Skills for Local Need

If a student is assessed as having insufficient skills to attempt the desired mainstream course, a modified version of a subject may be developed (resources permitting), which usually

incorporates extra literacy. The student will then be enrolled in one of the Skills for Local Need subjects, which at OTEN is called *Vocational Literacy*. In some cases students will gain sufficient skills and knowledge to then enrol in the mainstream version of the course. This was the case with Fred for example, for whom we developed some modified units of the OTEN *Bee Keeping* course. Fred initially enrolled in the special course and has since gone on to successfully attempt the mainstream course which he completed at the end of 1997, (i.e. after 2 years of study at OTEN).

Figure 3. Case Study – Fred

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
FRED mild intellectual disability	Modified materials from mainstream Bee Keeping course with focus on literacy	Tutor at face-to-face college	To complete mainstream bee-keeping course	Completed two units of work in special course and then enrolled in mainstream course the following year

The main OTEN options that have been developed under *Skills for Local Need* and in response to student and industry request, are *Using a Computer*, *Using the Internet (basics)*, and *Vocational Literacy*. Since 1999 the commercial course *Social, Occupational Communication Skills (SOCS)* has also been run on request for specific Boarding House Projects in inner Sydney.

Using a Computer focuses on very basic computer skills and entails literacy development as required. Students usually choose to learn Word 2000, and/or databases, or perhaps Word 2001.

Figure 4. Case Studies – Nina & Jess

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
NINA specific learning disability and schizophrenia	A) Basic computer skills (Works 3) and spelling focus. Also attending basic pottery course at face-to-face college B) Spelling	A) Independent B) home tutor	A) Computer literacy and confidence B) Literacy skills to succeed in Pottery Certificate course at face-to-face TAFE campus	A) Finished course and transferred into spelling subject, also now in mainstream computer course B) Spelling in progress
JESS Moderate intellectual disability full-time high school student enrolled in special vocational program	Computer literacy (Works 3) co-enrollment with Department of School through special transition programme	Mother assisted	Computer literacy preparatory skills to be able to succeed in modified mainstream office course at face-to-face college	Completed course and school and enrolled in mainstream Office course through Post School Options. Had tutorial support and did very well in the course

3.5.1. Using the Internet (basics)

Using the Internet (Basics) focuses on using the Internet and gives student practice using it. Students learn what the Internet is, how to connect to it, how to browse the World Wide Web, how to use email and how to use a search engine.

3.5.2. Vocational Literacy

Vocational Literacy teaching materials are individually tailored to meet the literacy and numeracy needs of the students based on their background and their vocational goals.

Figure 5. Case Studies - Tom and Paul

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
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PAUL specific learning disability	Spelling and grammar	Home Tutor	Be able to run his company without secretarial support	Is now running his own company from home.
TOM mild intellectual disability, is in Special Unit in Corrective Services	Literacy in context of exploring issues of social justice and learn to write letters	Education Officer in gaol system	Improve basic literacy so he can read about social justice and write formal letters	Has written letters of complaint, in progress

3.5.3. SOCS

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
Cynthia – long-term institutionalised client	SOCS special community access course – delivered at a community facility	Face-to-face delivery by OTEN teacher with volunteer tutor assistance	Increased access to community facilities	Successful completion of an adult education course. Now more confident, with increased opportunities. Now a regular library user.

SOCS is actually offered face-to-face over a period of 18 weeks. It comprises 3 modules: *Individual Education Plan* (discussed below), *Communication Skills* and *Social and Work Environment*. Other modules may be included as required.

3.6 The Individual Education Plan (IEP) Subject

This subject has been designed to help students develop appropriate goals and expectations of their studies. In 1998 this subject became a mandatory introduction for students enrolled in either *Using a Computer* or *Vocational Literacy* and *Work Skills* courses and is also a compulsory part of *SOCS*. Data collected over a 12 month period demonstrated that IEP has a positive effect on working and completion rates. The latest version of IEP was designed to be inclusive of Aboriginal students and has been made available to prisoners, particularly those in remand centres to help them develop planning skills and to sensibly determine a course of study which will help them achieve their goals and subgoals.

Figure 6 - Other Case Studies

STUDENT	SUBJECT DETAILS	SUPPORT	GOAL	OUTCOME
MANDY mild intellectual disability	Dental Assisting Course	Tutorial support at face-to-face college	Works as a Dental Assistant	Completed the course and received an award at the 1999 OTEN student Awards nights sponsored by the NSW Council for Intellectual Disability. Has enrolled in Dental Assisting Radiography to enhance her job skills
PETER Specific Learning Disability	Co-enrolment Electrical Trades course through OTEN and face-to-face college	Tutorial support at face-to-face college including extra support at Maths	To become a qualified electrician and improve his job prospects	Completed the course successfully. employed by a small electronics company and has become a partner in the business. Received an award at the 1999 OTEN Student Awards night sponsored by the Learning Disabilities Coalition

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In line with OTEN mainstream course materials, "off the shelf" special courses are now being produced. To date *Using a Computer* and *Using the Internet (basics)* are available for

purchase, and **IEP** will be available in 2003. This will enable Teacher/Consultants from other colleges to offer these special subjects locally.

Other plans for the future are briefly to:

- develop more formal partnerships with industry to provide on-the-job training in supported job sites, or in traineeships, or in other businesses employing people who
- have a disability
- continue development of suitable learning material which may be utilised by others
- develop a wider selection of special courses and experiment with on line formats
- advertise available Transition Vocation and Education Training (TVET) options