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A Marriage Made in Heaven – Inclusive Partnerships in Action

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how positive outcomes can be enhanced for students, practitioners and institutions through the building of productive partnerships between disability support staff and Regional Disability Liaison Officers/Disability Coordinators. This is illustrated through the presentation of a number of case studies which also highlight how initiatives at a regional level can have broader impact at a state or national level. Examples of processes used in establishing effective networks with community and government agencies are also discussed.

A range of opportunities for partnerships between disability support staff RDLOs/DCOs are identified with examples of current practices drawn from a number of states and across the Higher Education and VET sectors demonstrating the value of inclusive working partnerships. The emphasis of this paper is on how communication, collaboration and commitment to working in partnership has and can continue to achieve significant progress.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) initiative was established by the Commonwealth Government in 1995 as one of several measures to provide more help to students with disabilities. Ten of the fifteen original regional positions remain today. The Disability Co-ordination Officer (DCO) Programme commenced in 2002 placing fifteen positions throughout the country in a number of regions not currently covered by RDLOs. This Programme essentially complements the RDLO initiative in its role and function.

Whilst the Commonwealth Government's 1999 evaluation of the RDLO initiative indicated that it has had a positive impact on the provision of services and information to students and disability practitioners across the education sectors, it found that there remained some confusion regarding the role of the RDLO and limited understanding of this initiative by the rest of the sector (Kable & Heath, 1999).

In summary, the RDLO/DCO programme seeks to:

- improve transitions for people with a disability between schools, post-secondary education and training, and employment;
- increase awareness of post-school options, supports and services available for people with a disability, their families, support networks and relevant stakeholders; and

- increase the successful participation of students with disabilities in post-secondary education by facilitating coordination of services for people with a disability in education and training within a region and improving linkages between schools, VET providers, higher education providers and providers of disability assistance programmes.

Whilst both the RDLO and DCO initiatives operate within a standard set of guidelines and program objectives, the initiatives maintain the flexibility to respond to regional needs. Subsequently, there exists, a great degree of diversity in the way that RDLOs/DCOs operate throughout Australia.

The term dss is used in this paper to refer to (Disability Liaison Officers (DLO'S)/Advisers, Teacher Consultants, Disability Support Officers). Liaison with existing disability support staff working within education and training institutions across a region is critical in ensuring that the RDLO/DCO resource operates in an efficient and effective manner and avoids any perceived potential for duplication of services. Such collaboration, together with liaison with student advocacy groups, government and community agencies, helps in the process of identifying service gaps and needs within a region, fosters the development of productive networks across sectors and facilitates a clearer understanding of one another's roles. This paper highlights areas where working partnerships are achieving progress.

2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS

There are many opportunities for RDLOs/DCOs and disability support staff to work together either directly or in a complimentary manner, the results of which enhance services that may benefit students, practitioners and institutions alike. The following information lists just some of the range of possibilities and highlights examples of current practice. In many circumstances, work undertaken at a regional level has in turn provided significant benefits at a state and national level.

2.1 Establishing and Supporting Networks

This function enhances communication and provides opportunities for development, support and collaborative projects:

- In the Hunter/Central Coast Region of NSW the RDLO supports the Disability Education Network (DEN) and maintains the DEN website and listserv which has been established to support the development of the Network.
- In WA the RDLO facilitates networking meetings for support staff working in remote outlying regions.
- In Tasmania the RDLO provides executive support for the Tasmanian Tertiary Education Disability Advisory Committee and represents the DLOs on this committee.
- A number of RDLOs co-ordinate opportunities for combined professional development meetings, seminars, workshops, production and dissemination of newsletters for disability support staff and their networks.

2.2 Provision of Cross Sector Co-ordination

RDLOs/DCOs work with staff and key stakeholders across sectors thus enabling:

sharing of information;

- provision of a central point for information and referral for prospective students, families, schools and support staff;
- the development of support networks between TAFE, University & other disability support staff;
- the facilitation of joint staff development opportunities; and
- the identification of gaps across sectors

2.3 Liaison with Institutions

Disability support staff in some regions effectively utilise the RDLO position as an “ally” to assist in lobbying for change within their institutions. In some instances the RDLO has been engaged to raise issues with management in situations where support staff have felt compromised in their ability to do so. In collaboration with disability support staff, RDLOs in some regions have also been requested to assist with the development of Institution policies, plans and procedures.

2.4 Transition

RDLOs work with disability support staff to provide a range of transition related services including:

- linkage with support services within institutions;
- assistance in facilitating external support services;
- identification of participation trends and preparation of statistics to identify for institutions, future student support needs;
- identification of pre-training needs and facilitation of services to address such needs;
- conduct of “taster programs” (examples include NT, Central Qld and SA transition programs/courses and the NSW “Setting Directions” Seminar Series);
- support for the “Willing & Able Mentoring” (WAM) and other graduate employment programs/initiatives;
- presentations at careers Expos: and
- facilitation of networks with careers staff in Universities and TAFE Institutes and with specialist employment agencies

2.5 Research & Resource Production & Research

There have been many useful resources produced and research undertaken by practitioners within the sector over the years with some the result of collaborative efforts between DLOs, RDLOs, students and specialist contributors. A small sample of such resources include:

- “Opening All Options” Learning Disability resource (NSW)
- “Making it Happen” transition planning resource (Vic)
- “Inclusive Practice is Good Practice” resource for staff (Tas)
- “GATEWAYS” (Tas) and “DEN” (NSW) Websites
- Examples of recent research project include:
- “Education to Employment” (NSW) research survey and resultant resource.

- “Universal design in teaching and learning” (WA) research survey, web resource and staff development package.
- “Investigation of Transcription Services” (Tas)
- ME/CFS Survey (NSW)

2.6 Working with Government & Community Agencies

The RDLO/DCO positions have the capacity to provide a cross sector view of what is happening in a region. Such views are generally informed through a process of research and consultation with disability support staff and students. In many regions, DLOs have raised issues of concern and the RDLO has subsequently undertaken the work to follow through on such issues in seeking a resolution. The positions have the ability to work consistently in building rapport and facilitating communication and productive working relationships with government and community agencies. The range of tasks will vary considerably from region to region but may include policy input, undertaking short and long term development projects, cross sector co-ordination of information input regarding current and future support issues, facilitation of interagency projects and formal committee representation at regional or state level. Some examples of work that has been undertaken to engender positive change has included submissions to state and federal government Inquiries, lobbying for changes to the Commonwealth Government’s Disabled Apprentice Wage Scheme, lobbying for changes to the “Workplace Training and Assessment” Training Package, and representation on “Bridging Pathways” state implementation committees and working parties.

2.7 Assistive Technology

RDLOs/DCOs can assist prospective students, support staff and others by:

- creating awareness of the existence, uses and distributors of assistive technology (AT);
- referring people to reliable information sources and personnel for assistance;
- providing opportunities for people to trial software;
- organising or facilitating the development of AT training workshops; and
- participating in trials of software and equipment.

2.8 Staff Development

There have been many examples of DLOs and RDLOs working together to provide disability awareness sessions, regional seminars or workshops and state conferences. The RDLO undertakes a facilitation role and may co-ordinate some such activities as a cross sector rather than institution specific opportunity.

3. CASE STUDIES

The following three case studies highlight the benefits to be gained through collaborative efforts between disability support staff and RDLOs.

3.1 “Opening All Options” Learning Disability Resource (NSW)

The issue of Learning Disability had been a long standing item on the agenda of UDAN, the network of the NSW University sector DLOs. Whilst some useful work had been undertaken already by DLOs in NSW and other states, it was considered that there was not enough information available to practitioners. Working with the DLOs and the University Learning Skills Advisers, the RDLO for Western Sydney initiated a two phase project which incorporated a research survey to identify the information needs across the sector and the subsequent production of a resource. The results of the survey were used to attract funding to enable the project to proceed to phase two with RDLO funds used to assist its completion. All NSW RDLOs combined forces with a contracted Research Officer to write the resource the draft of which was disseminated to DLOs and a vast number of relevant government and community sector agencies for comment. DLOs and Learning Skills Advisers played an integral role from the beginning of the process and were represented on the management committee overseeing the project. A website for the resultant resource "Opening All Options" was established together with published hard copies. An official launch drew state and national attention to this resource, the success of which saw it used as the central information source on the Australian Learning Disability Website.

3.2 "TechFest 2001" Assistive Technology Expo in Tasmania

Ongoing discussions with students and DLOs revealed a general lack of awareness of assistive technology and its potential benefits. The RDLO approached TechAssist Online, a project set up to assist people with disabilities to access the Internet in Tasmania to seek their support in jointly facilitating a major state assistive technology Expo. Twelve statewide agencies and regional disability services joined the DLO representative and RDLO to form the project team. TechFest was developed and conducted with great success. Major corporate sponsorship was secured together with media support for the event. Twenty companies/organisations paid to come to Tasmania to exhibit their products and run a series of demonstrations in both the north and south of the state. A major web accessibility workshop attracting over 100 Information Technology personnel was organised to run concurrently. The event attracted more than 5000 people including a number who had traveled from interstate to attend. The positive outcomes of this event were numerous and continue to be witnessed. Most significantly increased participation rates by people with disabilities in education and training options have been a direct result as has improved networking and co-ordination amongst the services involved.

3.3 Facilitating a Community Cooperative Approach to Support in Remote Areas (NT)

In regional locations, where there is no Disability Liaison Officer, it is the responsibility of the educational environment to maintain the support needs or resources for the individual student. The RDLO ensures that appropriate community networks are available to monitor & assist the students' progress. When a prospective student enrolls and ticks the box indicating they have a disability and wish to be contacted, their details are forwarded to the disability facilitator/officer, a staff member assigned the role of co-ordinating support for students. The facilitator contacts the student and clarifies support requirements. The facilitator in turn contacts the Course Co-ordinator to discuss the academic requirements and negotiate reasonable accommodations. The RDLO liaises with the facilitator and other disability contacts at all post secondary and tertiary environments. These practitioners refer the student to the RDLO when the RDLO is visiting the area. The RDLO is available to directly review the support arrangements with the student. The RDLO then reports back to the disability facilitator.

4. DISCUSSION

Cross sector co-ordination improves linkages between schools, VET providers, Higher Education institutions and providers of disability support programmes. Co-ordination at this level can most successfully be achieved through the establishment of effective networks, both formal and informal. This process has involved the identification of key organizations/individuals who share common needs or interests, mapping (existing) networks to determine potential for collaborative work with and also the identification of existing networking resources, for example, committees, list serves, newsletters or regularly held forums.

An approach which has worked well in forming a new network or revitalising a dormant one has involved focussing on a specific issue/project of mutual interest as a means of bringing people together to work towards a common goal. Once established it is important that networks are supported and nourished. This requires the development of tools or methods which can be used to keep people involved, communicating and collaborating with one another. The provision of feedback and of acknowledging the work of others is important and opportunities for social interaction and having some fun together along the way certainly help many networks to operate more productively.

RDLOs/DCOs rely heavily on networking in order to achieve the objectives of the position. Benefits to be gained from working in partnership with disability support staff within their respective regions and with each other include improved communication, elimination of duplication of effort, opportunities for mutual support, sharing of information and maximising the use of scarce human and financial resources. The RDLO/DCO initiatives do not seek to duplicate or intrude upon the work of disability support staff in the sector but rather to support it. Most importantly, as this paper demonstrates, collective efforts through working in partnership do progress and enhance opportunities for people with disabilities to enter into and succeed in post secondary education, training and employment.

5. CONCLUSION

We are told that key elements of a good marriage include honest communication, mutual respect, an understanding of roles and willingness to listen, cooperation, flexibility, adaptability to change and a commitment to making it work. We know that partners won't agree on everything all the time. RDLOs/DCOs in working across sectors have many masters and know that it is not always possible to meet all demands and expectations nor please everyone at once. The same experience and sentiment is no doubt experienced by disability support staff working within institutions. With this in mind it seems both logical and sensible to form productive partnerships and assist each other for the benefit of students present and future.

Let us not contribute to the rising divorce statistic. The recent Census tells us that the number of defacto relationships are on the rise. If not a marriage then at least a good solid relationship built on respect and understanding, without the formal licence, should be our goal.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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7. REFERENCES

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