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Collaborative Approaches to Increasing the Participation and Outcomes** of **People with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training
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Words such as "collaboration", "partnerships", and "social capital" are

increasingly common in the VET and Disability Sectors. Today I am going to share with you two examples of collaboration between the VET and Disability Sectors, and outline the key features of successful collaborative partnerships between the sectors. I will also outline some of the national strategic directions in this area as a result of the endorsement of the *Bridging Pathways Blueprint for Implementation.* Finally I will provide you with some concrete strategies for developing collaborative partnerships at a practitioner level.

What are the characteristics of collaboration?

Collaboration occurs when a group of people forms a network to work towards a common goal. Shared needs and values underpin a successful collaborative effort. Collaboration can occur at the systems, service provider or individual level.

Why collaborate?

Increasingly organisations from the community, government and private sectors are being encouraged to change the way they do business. This is for a number of reasons - governments have recognised that services are often duplicated and fragmented. This is particularly true in the disability and VET sectors, where the complex web of services provided is often difficult to navigate. Welfare Reform has emerged as a policy direction not only as a result of ideology, but also in recognition of this disjointed service provision.

Another factor, which we are all too aware of, is that the bucket of money is not growing, and in some cases is "shrinking". We are therefore challenged to work together to find ways to make our dollars stretch further, and maximise our resources. Collaboration provides a vehicle for this and assists to identify and overcome gaps in service provision.

The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act has also been a major force in facilitating collaboration between the sectors. VET providers are finding it increasingly necessary to seek expertise from the disability sector in order to remove barriers to accessing VET programs.

Thus we have government policy, complexity of systems, resourcing practices and legislative requirements all driving the need for changes in the way we do business.

A collaborative approach allows need to be addressed in a more holistic manner, particularly in the case of people with a disability. I will discuss this in more detail later, when I will present you with an overview of a collaborative network formed in South Australia which is working towards increasing participation and outcomes in VET and employment for people with a disability.

Collaboration also provides the opportunity to develop local solutions for local needs. Whilst successful collaborations will have a number of shared, replicable characteristics, the actual approach taken to achieving goals will be different as circumstances and contexts vary.

Finally, collaboration provides the opportunity to identify innovative approaches and best practice by "stretching" the range of experience and knowledge of the collaborating partners.

What are the characteristics of successful collaboration?

Collaboration generally starts with the efforts of a few committed individuals, and is often based on goodwill. However, a research project undertaken in 1996 ("The Key To Better Outcomes") identified that, unfortunately, goodwill alone is not enough to sustain those efforts in the long term. The project recommended that stakeholders commit to a Memorandum of Understanding or Heads of Agreement as an effective way to ensure the sustainability of collaborative efforts.

Such Memorandum of Understanding should include details of roles and responsibilities, document the commitment to work together collaboratively, and establish a process to review progress. The key to this is that management at a systems level should ratify the memorandum, so that efforts can continue long after the departure of individuals. In addition, the presence of an agreement to work together at a systems level also promotes collaboration from the policy and planning level.

Other lessons learned from various collaborative projects include the need for open, honest lines of communication, and clearly identified conflict resolution strategies. Benefits for all stakeholders must be articulated and transparent to all partners.

The role of leaders in the collaboration process must not be overlooked. Essentially the leader is an "enabler', and must have the skills to develop trust between stakeholders, and maintain the communication of the network once developed. Leadership in this process must *not* be approached from a position of "I know the best way to do this".

Benefits of Collaboration

I have already mentioned some of the benefits of collaboration at a service provider and systems level- resource sharing, increased efficiencies and identification of gaps in service provision. The benefits provided through training providers using collaboration to more effectively meet their obligations under the DDA, and more recently in the implementation of *Bridging Pathways,* cannot be overlooked.

There are also a number of benefits at the individual level - individuals

involved in collaborative projects report an increase in skills and knowledge as a result of participation. Individual clients of these collaborative Agencies are more likely to receive a higher quality service that has greater currency, with many benefits in

terms of improved outcomes and access to a wider range of physical and human resources. Organisations obviously benefit in achieving their Mission through this broadening of resources and the increased knowledge and expertise of staff involved.

Collaboration between the VET and Disability Sectors

In 1999 the ANTA Disability Forum traveled around Australia to consult with people from both the VET and Disability Sectors during the development of the *Bridging Pathways* National Strategy. One thing that really stood out from the consultations was that stakeholders from each sector knew little about the roles of agencies in the other sector. Until recently there has been a distinct lack of collaborative efforts between the two sectors.

People from the VET sector often feel overwhelmed by the array of services provided by the disability sector, which makes it difficult to know where to start when forming collaborative networks. Conversely, people from the disability sector find the range of programs within the VET sector confusing.

From a client perspective, a number of reports within the VET sector, and more broadly across the disability services sector, have acknowledged the difficulties faced by people with a disability in trying to coordinate and navigate these services in order to undertake a VET activity. System statistics reinforce the extent of these difficulties with participation rates and outcomes achieved by people with disabilities in the VET system being significantly below the broader community.

Best Practice in Collaboration - The WAVES Project in SA

During 1999/2000 the Australian Traineeship Foundation (ASTF) has been working with the ANTA Disability Forum on a project to support the extension and consolidation of school-industry partnerships which include Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) for young people with disabilities. Three 'lighthouse" projects that aim to strengthen partnerships between schools, employers, RTOs, generic employment services and disability employment services have been funded by the ASTF. I would like to outline to you some of the key features of one of these projects – WAVES (Western Adelaide Vocational and Enterprise Services), which is already known in SA for providing quality SWL for students.

Structured Workplace Learning for Students with Disabilities ASTF Light House Project

Project Summary

Thirty students (30) within the western cluster of schools will be involved in a structured workplace learning and job placement program.

All students participating in the project will need to have completed the Centrelink Workability tables and have a score over 50 points. This indicates that they are eligible to receive a service from Specialist Employment Providers funded by the Department of Family and Community Services (DfaCS).

Work preparation will be provided to the participating   students.
- Personnel Employment will deliver the 'Employability Skills: Becoming a Worker" course in partnership with Minda Job Placement.
- State Education teachers will have professional development time allocated to enable   observation and evaluation of the employment preparation program.

Structured work place learning will be provided in manufacturing and retail.
- Email Training Services to deliver a Certificate I in Metals and Engineering.
- Retail training to be provided by Maxima Training with support from the City of Charles Sturt.

Job Placement and support to be provided by DFaCS Specialist Employment Providers, such as Personnel Employment, with assistance from the Business Enterprise Centres- Disability Recruitment Coordination Service.

Auspicing organisations:
- Western Adelaide Vocational and Enterprise Services (WAVES) and Email Training

Partners:
- WAVES,
- EMAIL Training Services,
- Business Enterprise Centres,
- Department of Education, Training and Employment (State),
- Department of Family and Community Services (Federal),
- City of Charles Sturt (local Government),
- Personnel Employment,
- Minda Job Placement,
- South Australian Centre for Manufacturing

In examining this collaboration, it can be seen that:
- Three levels of Government are involved, with each providing direct funding and/or other resource support.
- Industry is an active participant at both the program level and in assisting with coordination.
- Two Disability Employment services have committed to the process.

Queensland Training Authority/ACROD Project.

In 1996, ACROD (Qld.) approached the State Training Authority on behalf of the disability employment services in that state to seek support for an industry approach to a professional development initiative. As a result, over 150 frontline employment support staff were provided with a nationally recognised training program, funded by the state Training Authority and specific to their role as workplace trainers and assessors.

As a result, a range of community based organisations were assisted financially in their staff development requirements, VET knowledge and skills were gained by the disability sector and the clients of these services now have the opportunity to have mainstream recognition of their work related skills and competencies.

Collaboration and the Bridging Pathways Blueprint for Implementation

Finally, I wanted to outline to you some of the current national strategic directions in terms of collaboration between the VET and disability sectors.

In June this year, Australia's education and training ministers made a five-year commitment to improving opportunities for people with a disability in Vocational Education and Training. They agreed to a national strategy and blueprint, called *Bridging Pathways,* which spells out a practical road ahead to achieving better outcomes. For the first time, *Bridging Pathways* describes a VET system which recognises the diverse needs of individuals, enables training providers to accommodate these needs and supports collaboration between the VET and disability sectors.

An implementation taskforce was established to formulate an implementation plan for *Bridging Pathways.* The taskforce included representatives from all the groups that would be instrumental in implementing a national vocational education and training strategy. A cross-sectoral approach was taken because we realised that some solutions may be found beyond the vocational education and training sector. Vocational education and training is intrinsically linked with employment and the lives of people with a disability are intrinsically linked with their support services. It was clear that a whole-of-

government approach was needed to improve education and training opportunities for people with a disability.

The final document developed by the taskforce has been termed a *Blueprint* because it outlines a detailed plan of action for all of the players involved. The Blueprint is principally designed to overcome or remove structural inequities, whether they are legislative, administrative or resourcing practices.

The real challenge for collaboration at a systems level will lie in the implementation of the *Bridging Pathways* strategy. In order to achieve the outcomes outlined in the blueprint, four Commonwealth Departments, every State and Territory Training Authority, industry, training providers and the disability sector will need to work together. In recognition of the challenges that this may pose, ANTA has formed the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council (ADTAC) to take the lead role in getting things going and overseeing the implementation of the Blueprint. The Council will include representatives from all the stakeholders identified in the Blueprint. This is because no one group or sector has either the capacity or responsibility for implementing everything in the Blueprint. Members will include representatives from State and Territory Training Authorities, Commonwealth Departments (employment, training and disability), RTOs, industry and representatives from the disability sector.

A major issue to be addressed by the Blueprint is that of the coordination between the disability and VET sectors in the area of learning supports. There is currently a lack of coordination across services and many people with a disability find it difficult to access information, coordinate services and manage their personal needs as well as study demands. Responsibility for providing supports is often not clearly defined across agencies. Five pilot projects will be undertaken to examine and develop co-ordination mechanisms across Australia. These projects will tie together a range of the services required for people with a disability to successfully participate in training and employment. For example, disability employment services, transport services, and vocational education and training organisations will be supported to enter collaborative arrangements.

Checklist for Collaboration

Some of the key issues to identify when embarking on a collaborative project include:

- The level of knowledge, skills and values present in stakeholders for the task at hand?

- Identification of internal and external networks

- Capacity for building shared experiences and identity

- What are the protocols to facilitate communication?

- Who will have responsibility for maintaining the network? How will this be

achieved?

- What are the benefits for all stakeholders?

- How will ownership by all stakeholders be facilitated?

- What are the strategies for resolving conflict?