

# Pathways 5 Conference

8 December 2000

## People with Disabilities and Education - An Economic Imperative

Mark Bagshaw

Joint Chair

AUSTRALIAN DISABILITY TRAINING ADVISORY COUNCIL

Today we're going to be talking, about the largest social problem that Australia faces. Let's not misunderstand just how significant the lack of integration with people with disabilities as an issue that Australia and the world faces. Let's not misunderstand or not fully understand the magnitude of the issue. This is by far the largest social problem that any country in the world faces.

From an economic and business perspective, the raw statistics should be enough to make even the most cynical us stop and think. Let me just take you through some of the statistics. Some of you will already know these statistics, but let's start from a common base. Nineteen percent of Australians live with a disability. That's over 3 million people. But do we realise that there are over one billion people in the world with a disability. One billion people. Three hundred million in the OECD countries alone.

Let's look at participation rate of people with a disability in the labour force. The majority of people with disabilities don't show up as unemployed because they're on pensions. That is, as most of you would know, a measure of the people who basically consider themselves to be in the workforce. While eighty percent of the population overall participate in the workforce, only 50 percent of people with disabilities are currently part of our economic system. Just over *half a million* extra people with a disability would need to participate in Australia's workforce in order to match the participation rate of those without.

Currently the Australian government pays a staggering \$5 billion per annum to recipients on the Disability Support Pension. I recently came across a sobering statistic in an article in the Sun Herald in July this year. The article stated that "the number of people on Newstart benefits in the previous month was 589, 911, compared to an estimated **610,342** on the disability support pension ... (the DSP) has exceeded the number on unemployment benefits for the first time." The article went on to say that "Unlike Britain and Canada ... the number in Australia has continued to soar despite strong economic growth". (Sun Herald, 20 July 2000) This signifies to me that our current approaches simply are not working, and that we are reaching a crisis point in terms of needing to take urgent action.

And that's just the cost side of the equation. If business of all sizes and governments at all levels worked harder to provide better access to the community and the workforce for people with disabilities I have calculated that we'd be adding at least **six billion dollars** to Australia's Gross Domestic Product. I don't sell many laptops to people on pensions, but I do to people in decent jobs.

This shouldn't be seen as a problem that we just have to bear. It's an **opportunity** that makes sound business sense to recognise and harness.

I know from personal experience that Australia can do so much better.

I travel all the time in my job. In fact, I spend several months every year overseas where I see real progress being made in the areas of premises, employment, transport and tourism.

We are not making effective use of the people that are out there who face the challenges of disability. We have all got to take a much more active role in making the changes that we think are required.

The link between education and employment is well known. We know that vocational education and training can have a significant impact on the employment rate and income of graduates with a disability. 50% of TAFE graduates with a disability find employment upon completing their course, compared to 74% of all graduates. Of these TAFE graduates with a disability, 33% of were unemployed *before* their training and found work after training. The average weekly wage of TAFE graduates with a disability is \$466.

Yet, the most disturbing statistics are the participation rates in vocational education and training.

11% of all Australians aged between 15 and 64 currently participate in VET, yet only 2.4% of people with a disability of the same age group participate in VET.

Even more concerning is that participation rate of people with a disability in New Apprenticeships.

It is well known that New Apprenticeships (formerly traditional apprenticeships and traineeships) enhance employment outcomes through flexible work-based training. However, people with a disability are not participating in these programs as readily as other Australians. In fact, people with a disability account for only 2% of people undertaking New Apprenticeships.

Current approaches to marketing, funding, training and supporting VET students with a disability have not reduced the size of the shortfall group. If the current vocational education and training system were to continue unchanged, it is clear that inequities will remain. It is estimated that the shortfall in the participation rate of people with a disability in VET was nearly 178,500 people in year 1998 and without changes to the system will reach more than 215,000 people by year 2005.

Many of you will be aware that for the last couple of years, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Disability Forum, together with ANTA have been working to develop the *Bridging Pathways National Strategy for Increasing opportunities for people with a disability in vocational education and training*. I am pleased to announce that this strategy, along with a blueprint to guide the implementation of Bridging Pathways was endorsed by the ANTA Ministerial Council on 30 June this year. The Blueprint calls for a new national VET Disability Taskforce to facilitate and monitor implementation of the blueprint. This new Taskforce will assume the role of providing advice to the ANTA Board on emerging issues in VET for people with a disability, and will therefore replace the ANTA Disability Forum.

Of course there is a great deal of work yet to be done. We have all recognised from the beginning it won't be until we see practical, systemic change at the grassroots level that we will know that we have achieved our goals. However, whilst I am convinced that Australia is on the right path to creating a vocational education and training system that leads world's best practice in achieving equitable outcomes for people with disabilities, I am also concerned.... Concerned that the true spirit of Bridging Pathways may not be realised, unless we as a country are proactive and work collaboratively to address issues

in other areas such as transport and building access. It is no use ensuring that we people with a disability are attaining educational goals if they still face difficulty accessing their place of work because of inaccessible transport systems and buildings. I will discuss this in more detail shortly.

Attitudes towards people with a disability, and their own attitudes towards work and social integration are tightly bound up in expectations. The community at large expects less from people with physical or intellectual disabilities, and does them a disservice in the process. People with a disability conversely come to expect that the workforce is not a place in which they can readily participate, and so build increasingly lower expectations of their ability to contribute. It's a huge generalisation, peppered by notable exceptions, but it's a phenomenon which is costing a substantial amount of money. We need to demonstrate to the general population that they should expect as much from people with disabilities as anyone else, and teach them to celebrate such successes rather than regarding disabled people who do not contribute as the status quo.

Recent social research undertaken by ANTA as part of the ANTA National Marketing Strategy confirms that people with a disability appear to have low expectations of themselves in terms of their employability. We need to work together to "create the vision" for this group.

I would like to share some of the other findings from the social research. When the research was undertaken, results from a community survey were analysed, and as a result the general community were broken down in to eight segments. People with a disability were over-represented in three of these segments. The first segment, called "Almost there" is a group that faces considerable personal barriers to learning (technophobia, fear of failure) but is determined to overcome them. They like learning and what it means to them personally ... not work wise. This is interesting, and leads us to wonder why this group don't respond to messages connected to work - as I mentioned earlier, we suspect it is tied up with many people with a disability not actually having visions of themselves as "workers".

The "Almost there" group responds to personal messages about growth and achieving one's potential combined with support from their families.

The next segment - "I'm Done With It" feel above all groups that learning is only valued if it leads to a job or a qualification. Place of learning (location, time of day, accessibility and frequency) is very important to this group - they have not taken up learning due to place issues, however indicate that if we address place issues, this will encourage further learning.

The "Only if YOU Make it Easier" segment love learning, however the real and perceived barriers (especially Place) have limited both their exposure to learning in the past and their future learning plans. For this group, engaging in new learning is currently all too hard.

This group tell us that place issues are the worst part of learning. They say that nothing will encourage their learning, and that they have not thought about, or prepared for, the impact of new technology or about the number of times they may have to change jobs or about the casualisation of the workforce. This is of great concern to me. We have all heard murmurs about the new economy - one built on the acquisition of knowledge, the transfer of information and a trade in services. This is called the knowledge economy. There are great opportunities in the new economy, but the major issue we need to confront is the widening divide between the 'knowledge rich' and the 'knowledge poor'. I believe that there is a growing realisation that these divisions carry enormous human and

economic costs. Unless we work together to ensure that people with a disability are part of the 'knowledge rich', we will find that people with a disability are increasingly marginalised from economic and social life.

The actions contained in Bridging Pathways will go a long way towards addressing many of the issues I have outlined above, however one of the major challenges in implementing the strategy lie in the need for the disability and VET sectors to work collaboratively to achieve results. There is traditionally a lack of history of collaborative efforts in this area, particularly at a systems level. I believe that the best results are going to be achieved if we can take an holistic approach by looking at *all* of the supports that a person with a disability needs to participate in VET.

The next challenge is placing a greater emphasis on collaboration between the VET sector and the employment sector. If we think back to the fact that only 50% of VET graduates with a disability obtain employment following their course as opposed to 74% of all graduates, then we need to be seriously focussing on what happens after VET. I believe that we need to place a strong emphasis on ensuring that the transition from VET to employment is a smooth one. We need to expend a lot of energy in marketing the value of VET graduates with a disability to employers, and getting to the heart of addressing employers concerns about hiring people with a disability. We need to ensure that we link people with a disability to appropriate employment supports on completion of their course.

However, how can we even begin to think about issues such as the knowledge economy when we have still got so much at the "other end" - the nuts and bolts end to address? Issues such as transport and access that are still precluding people from participating in education and employment.

Let me give you an example. I can be as productive as any of my colleagues can in London because Ninety percent of the taxis there are wheelchair accessible. It's a different story in any Australian city where I spend more time on my mobile phone chasing nonexistent taxis than I do conducting my business.

Transport is a major bugbear, but precedents all over the world are beginning to filter through, and may change the way we all travel, and the people we meet on the bus or the train. These days every bus in New York city - some 4500 vehicles - is wheelchair accessible. A platform extending from the rear door of the bus lowers to ground level and allows the wheelchair to roll on, and then lifts back up to floor level so that the passenger can enter the bus. We can no longer justify going around saying "Yes, it's a great idea, BUT..." - when in fact it works perfectly well in practice.

I'm fortunate because at my level I can pay to travel first class and stay in expensive hotels. But for the majority of people with disabilities, it's either an enormous extra expense... or a long wait for an accessible taxi or bus.

However, there are some good case studies in Australia where businesses have been designed with the needs of people with a disability in mind.

My office at IBM has been designed so I can move around the building and visit the adjoining cafes to partake in life's essentials without much difficulty.

On the way back though, I am struck how *simple* things - like the height of buttons in the office lifts - have been overlooked. Better planning would have saved the building owners tens of thousands of dollars in getting the problem fixed.

Creating better access is not hard. And it doesn't have to be expensive. It is difficult and expensive though if businesses don't plan for access, and have to retro-fit further down the track.

But it isn't just about buttons, ramps and transport. People with sight and hearing impairments need access to information and communication systems.

People with intellectual disabilities find some of the systems and structures we have created - like the legal system, for example - to be confusing.

Consultations undertaken by the ANTA Disability Forum during the development of Bridging Pathways confirmed that a major barrier to participation in VET for people with a disability is the difficulty in navigating the complex web of services and systems. Bridging Pathways will go a long way towards addressing this, but we need to be mindful of these issues in our every day practice.

Australia leads the world in some very important areas, and we can remove the barriers that people with disabilities face if we do three things.

Firstly, we need to raise the awareness of Australia's influential business leaders that although there's a huge problem, market share opportunities exist if businesses devise innovative ways to remove the barriers. And as it does to sell to any other market segment, businesses must understand what it needs to deliver to people with disabilities to make them want to buy.

Secondly, we need to encourage dialogue between all of the sectors that play a major role in the lives of people with a disability - the education, VET, health, transport, employment and accommodation sector. We need to make sure that these systems are transparent, and that pathways between sectors such as the education, VET and employment sectors are seamless.

Finally, we **must** see the money that needs to be spent in providing better access to services and systems as an investment in Australia's future... not just a cost that has to be borne.

When we put our collective minds to it, we can solve these problems.

We have before us a multi-billion-dollar opportunity... not just for business or people with disabilities, but the nation as a whole.

Our efforts will be well rewarded, and Australia will be a better place.