

Pathways 5 Conference

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Bridging Pathways...the way forward for people with a disability in VET

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Today we are going to tell you about an important development that has the potential to bring about enormous benefits for people with a disability. 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, and supports collaboration between education and training and disability sectors.

We will start by giving you a brief background to the strategy and blueprint – how and why they were developed, and an overview of what is contained in the documents. Then we're going to talk more specifically about what Bridging Pathways means for you – the people at the delivery end of training.

Bridging Pathways was developed by the Australian National Training Authority, with the support of its advisory group on disability issues, the ANTA Disability Forum, and in consultation with many, many stakeholders. For those that don't know, ANTA's role is to collaboratively work with the Federal Government Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, with all State and Territory governments, and with industry to build and maintain a national VET system with agreed objectives, strategies and planning mechanisms.

One of the agreed objectives of the national system is achieving equitable outcomes. As we all know, people with a disability often face some of the biggest and most complex barriers education and training. The figures show this:

- The proportion of the Australian population aged between 15 and 64 who have a disability is currently 16.7% yet the proportion of the VET population who have a disability is currently 3.6%.
- The proportion of the Australian population with a disability aged between 15 and 64 who currently participate in vocational education and training is

estimated at less than 2.5%, yet the proportion of all Australians aged between 15 and 64 who currently participate in VET was 11% in 1998 .

- 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.
- VET students with a disability are 100% more likely to be enrolled in lower level VET multi-field programs (pre-employment, pre-vocational, language and literacy) than other students
- 74% of all TAFE graduates were employed after their training. This compares with only 46% of TAFE graduates with a disability who were employed after their training

The Board of ANTA recognised this some time ago and established the ANTA Disability Forum to advise on ways to increase participation and outcomes for people with a disability in vocational education and training.

To assist in achieving the national objective of 'achieving equitable outcomes' the Board asked the Disability Forum to develop a national strategy for people with disabilities in VET. This was completed early last year after extensive consultation with the constituent groups. The Disability Forum traveled to each State and Territory to talk to people with a disability and people involved in training and supporting people with a disability. The final strategy identified a range of areas where action is needed to open the door to VET, to improve the learning experience, to assist people achieve employment and lifelong learning outcomes and to create a more accountable system.

When the ANTA Board received the Bridging Pathways strategy, they decided what we really needed was plan to show how the strategy could work in practice. We needed to set clear actions, timelines and responsibilities around the goals of Bridging Pathways to ensure that it would be implemented by each of the relevant players.

An implementation taskforce was established that 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 taskforce met a number of times during the development of the Blueprint. At each meeting, members raised and considered issues, research and other information, which eventually found its way into the document. All views were

considered and particular consideration was given to linking programs and processes to get a more responsive outcome for the client.

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 be legislative, administrative or resourcing practices.

The Disability Blueprint has 20 strategies with component actions. Each action has a timeframe and accountability requirements and each strategy is linked to the overall VET system through a listing of current practice, references and work in progress.

The strategies are grouped in focus areas that relate the business processes of the VET sector. It has seven areas of focus with corresponding strategies and actions. I'll explain briefly what each area is about and then we'll look in more detail at some of those areas that are particularly relevant to you.

The first focus area is *Planning and Representation*

People with a disability must have genuine opportunities to represent their interests at a political and administrative level to guide policies, practices and services.

The actions in this area relate to making planning and decision making mechanisms with governments and industry more inclusive of people with a disability.

The second area is *Purchasing systems*

Purchasing arrangements influence the extent to which training providers can and do respond to the training needs of disability.

This focus area is about establishing more equitable purchasing arrangements that improve the effectiveness of public investment in vocational education and training for people with a disability.

Pathways

As we pointed out earlier, the proportion of people with a disability in vocational education and training is far lower than the proportion for the wider population and fewer graduates with a disability find employment on completing their courses.

People with a disability need increased access to preparatory training courses (ie pre-vocational, Certificate I and II, VET in Schools). They also need to be encouraged to participate at all qualification levels.

In addition, links between agencies such as training providers and employment assistance services need to be improved to facilitate transitions between school education, training, employment and other types of social participation.

The actions in this focus area relate the systems which assist people to enter and proceed through training to employment, if that is their goal, or other kinds of community participation.

Learning supports

As you know, learning supports are services provided to students in vocational education and training to allow them to successfully complete training. They include services like tutoring, interpreters, specialist advisors and equipment.

ANTA has recently conducted a very thorough social marketing research activity which looks at people's attitudes to learning. This research highlighted that for people with a disability often face considerable personal barriers to undertaking vocational education and training and many more people with a disability would like to participate in training, but only if it is made easier to do so.

The actions in this focus area are about increasing the availability of support services and improving coordination of services to assist in overcoming personal barriers to learning.

Capacity building

In order to provide equitable and effective training, providers and industry need to have the capacity and the motivation to support the inclusion of people with a disability.

These strategies are about providing professional development to training provider staff, providing additional guidance for RTOs in meeting access and equity standards and providing appropriate training on disability issues into generic workforce training and development programs.

Marketing

Potential students and their formal and informal advisors require accessible information about training and the supports available.

There are three priorities for marketing activities that will increase opportunities for people with a disability in VET.

- Marketing the value of training to people with a disability to their advice and support networks
- Marketing the value of graduates with a disability to employers, and also
- Marketing people with a disability as a valuable market segment to training providers

The last focus area is *performance measurement*

This is about improving our capacity to measure change in the system. Currently, there are inherent barriers in the process of collecting data and inconsistencies between definitions used in national population data and VET data.

Improved data collection processes will ensure that improvements in performance are captured and that baseline data is available for comparison.

That's a general overview of what's been agreed to. Now we're in the process of putting these strategies into action.

ANTA has formed a Council – the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council (ADTAC) to take the lead role in getting things going. The Council will include representatives from all the stakeholders in the Blueprint. This is because no one group or sector has responsibility for implementing everything in the blueprint. Members will include representatives from State and Territory Training Authorities, Commonwealth Departments from the employment, training and disability sectors, RTOs, industry and individuals in the disability community.

So what does the blueprint mean for you at the delivery side of training?

There are three areas which are particularly significant for you, as RTO staff. These are Learning Supports, Capacity Building and Data collection.

One of the most important projects in the Blueprint is designed to increase the availability of learning supports for people with a disability. Learning supports are defined in the blueprint as things that assist students to successfully complete training such as tutoring, sign language interpreters, equipment etc.

The project will identify types of learning supports that people with a disability may require, the costs associated with these supports and cost effective practices in providing the supports. It will identify gaps in current provision and responsibilities across different agencies. This will give us the information we need to ensure that supports are provided to students that are individually tailored, appropriate and adequate.

A number of years ago a similar project was undertaken, known as the Andrew's Report. But since then, things have changed. Advances in technology, the emergence of 'new' disabilities and new ways of delivering training has meant that we no longer have accurate information about what learning supports are required. This project will give us that. We are planning to have this project completed within 6 months.

Following on from this project, a series of pilots will be conducted which will look at the best method for coordinating supports across government agencies. We are all aware of how complex the vocational education and training system is, and the range and diversity of disability services available. We have found that one of the biggest barriers to participation of people with a disability in training is that people are not aware of opportunities and supports

available. I am sure you will agree that there is a need for better coordination across services and more consistent provision of information.

The project will examine issues such as, the relative roles of Disability Employment Assistance Services, RTOs and other government organisations and will identify best practice. The project will also ensure that the web of services provided are adequately linked, result in positive changes and that money is not wasted on isolated services.

The second area which will have a direct positive impact on RTOs is the actions in blueprint under VET sector capacity building. There is considerable benefit to be gained by increasing the level of expertise with regard to inclusive practices across the spectrum of VET staff, including teachers, trainers, administration and management professionals. Our consultations showed that an institute's professional development funds often do not stretch to the provision of training in inclusive practices. The blueprint calls for specific professional development funding to be made available to improve the capacity of VET providers in improving opportunities for people with a disability.

A major focus will be ensuring that sufficient numbers of specialist learning support staff, such as sign language interpreters, are available, particularly in rural and remote areas. This will mean looking at how to improve career pathways, professional development opportunities and valuing the status of these roles.

We will also be reviewing the quality guidelines for RTOs so that training providers will be required to meet more stringent standards in regards to access and equity. Additional guidance will be provided to institutes on meeting standards for accessible information, teacher competencies, physical access and policies, procedures and practices.

You might also be interested to know that we will be increasing the focus on EEO issues in training for the general workforce. So that people that work alongside people with a disability will be more knowledgeable about how to be inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds.

The last major strategy we would like to talk about is improving data collection processes. You are all probably aware of the issues surrounding students with a disability disclosing their disability on enrolment forms and the challenges that this poses in terms of planning. As a result of the blueprint, we will be looking at ways to strengthen the reliability and coverage of data by reviewing the compulsory questions on the enrolment forms.

Whilst learning supports, capacity building and data collection are the three major areas of focus in the Blueprint that will have a direct effect on how training is delivered to people with a disability, we would like to also briefly draw your attention to some other areas within the Blueprint which may impact on providers.

The first area is planning and representation - we have already mentioned this briefly. This strategy requires state training authorities and industry training advisory bodies to ensure that the interests of people with a disability are represented at *all* levels of planning processes. These actions also require providers to ensure that they have appropriate networks and advisory mechanisms in place.

The second area is marketing. This will require providers to market VET to people with a disability and their key support networks. People with a disability need to be seen as a valuable market by providers, if numbers in training are to increase.

You can see that there is a common theme emerging here, with a number of references to the word "networks". Throughout the blueprint collaboration and networks are a major focus. Whilst much of the success of the Blueprint hinges on the formalisation of networks and cross-sectoral initiatives at a departmental level, in many cases actions in the blueprint will require providers to expand and / or formalise existing networks.

Providers may find the task of navigating the web of services within the disability field daunting. We feel it is important to mention these areas to you today because, as experts in the disability field, you may be called upon to provide advice to your organisation when it is time to implement these actions at a local level.

Unfortunately we cannot provide you with a step by step guide, as the actions in the Blueprint will need to be implemented in a manner that complements local systems and meets local needs. The role of disability support officers in implementing the Blueprint will vary from State to State. It is important to remember that where possible actions contained in the Blueprint are intended to fit within mainstream processes.

Each State, will seek out examples of best practice from within their own State, and nationally to guide them in implementing the Blueprint. Today, we would like to provide you with an opportunity as a group to identify some practical solutions to assist in the implementation of *Bridging Pathways*.

Workshop