14 April 2005

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: National Inquiry into Teacher Education

I am writing on behalf of ADTAC, the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council[1], which is an advisory body to the Board of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)[2].

The purpose of the council is to monitor and drive the implementation of *Bridging Pathways*[3], the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system's national strategy to improve opportunities for people with a disability.

Aspects of the inquiry that are of particular relevance to ADTAC's work

7. Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:
   (vi) deal with children with special needs and/or disabilities

10. Examine the construction, delivery and resourcing of ongoing professional learning for teachers already in the workforce.

The main issues on which we base our comments

- Several important pieces of research were commissioned by ANTA between 2000 and 2003 to help inform the work of the council. Because of a direct link between the *Bridging Pathways*-related research and this inquiry, we believe that there is significant value in sharing the findings of our work.

- The third priority of the VET system's national strategy to improve opportunities for students with a disability, is 'delivering on the ground'. Research to support this priority identified the need to increase the availability and suitability of core products and services available to teachers and students, for a coordinated professional development strategy for teachers and trainers, and for better coordinated funding and purchasing models.

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[1] Australian Disability Training Advisory Council - http://www.anta.gov.au/vetADTAC.asp
[2] Australian National Training Authority - http://www.anta.gov.au
[3] *Bridging Pathways* national strategy - http://www.anta.gov.au/dapBridging.asp

- In October 2004, all Australian and state/territory Ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training endorsed the purpose and priorities outlined in the Australian VET system's revised blueprint to improve training and employment outcomes for VET clients with a disability. ADTAC ceases to exist on 30 June, but the *Bridging Pathways* priorities will continue.

- When the Disability Discrimination Act's Education Standards come into effect in mid-August, they will apply to functions such as enrolment; student participation; curriculum development, accreditation and delivery; and student support services. It is essential that all school staff, particularly teachers, are aware of the implications of this legislation.

Background

In 2000, the ANTA Ministerial Council (Australian and State and Territory Government Ministers for Vocational Education and Training) endorsed *Bridging Pathways*, the national strategy for Australia's VET system to improve opportunities for people with a disability. This strategy document was supplemented by a blueprint for implementation.

Four goals were identified for the national VET system, two of which are of particular relevance to this inquiry:

- improving the learning experience - to support people with a disability to achieve in all areas and levels of vocational education and training

- creating an accountable system - to provide the tools, supports and pathways to achieve meaningful outcomes for people with a disability.

In 2003, a mid-term review of the implementation of *Bridging Pathways* found that, although most of the initial activity had focused on putting the necessary structures in place, there was a stronger awareness of disability issues, both within and beyond the VET sector. It also found that more people were collaborating on disability issues and that many local projects and initiatives had sprung up as a result of state and territory governments using the blueprint to help plan their priorities.

National priorities

ADTAC used this opportunity to refocus the VET system, at the Australian, state/territory and local/delivery levels, on five priority areas:

1. Progressing a whole-of-life approach
   ADTAC recognises that we – the VET system - need to see the lives of people with a disability in a holistic sense to coordinate our policies, programs and services for better outcomes in all aspects of their lives.

2. Measuring what we are achieving
   Australian, state and territory governments need to keep honing the accuracy and reliability of measures that track progress, identify trends and help shape planning in this area.

3. Delivering on the ground
   Key players in the VET system must keep working together at the national

and state/territory levels to make sure that appropriate resources and supports are available at the point of delivery.

4. Engaging key players
   We must make sure that everyone who needs to be involved is involved, and in the most effective way.

5. Improving employment outcomes
   The VET system's goal is to help people with a disability gain meaningful jobs, so we need to keep working on initiatives that build school-to-work transitions and motivate businesses to employ people with a disability.

The third priority outlined above– delivering on the ground – identified the need to increase the availability and suitability of core products and services available to teachers and students. It also recommended a coordinated professional development strategy for teachers and trainers, and better coordinated funding and purchasing models.

The whole-of-life approach to disability reforms

The capacity of people with a disability to successfully participate in vocational education and training, or in school education, is strongly dependent on how well the range of challenges and barriers in their lives is met. The concept of a 'whole-of-life approach' captures this idea, and will increase in relevance as Australia's population ages and people stay longer in the workforce.

By advocating a whole-of-life approach to disability reform, ADTAC is saying let's get together and see how we can coordinate our policies, programs and services to deliver better outcomes for people with a disability. Let's build alliances so we can create flow, coordination and efficiency between our services. This will help people with a disability meet their challenges and increase their chances of success in education, training and employment.

Priorities endorsed by all VET Ministers

Last October, the five priorities of the revised blueprint were endorsed by all Australian and state/territory Ministers for VET, ensuring that the *Bridging Pathways* agenda will continue beyond ANTA's abolition on 30 June 2005.

On Thursday 14 April, two hard copies of the revised blueprint were express-posted to the inquiry, however it is also available online at http://www.anta.gov.au/publication.asp?qsID=685

Disability Discrimination Act

In 1992, this Act introduced an extensive range of measures to counter discrimination based on disability. Its original coverage included educational authorities and providers. When the DDA Education Standards come into effect in mid-August, coverage will be extended to the following functions:

- enrolment
- student participation
- curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
- student support services.

It is worth noting that the Act includes the concepts of 'reasonable adjustment' and 'unjustifiable hardship' to determine whether appropriate measures have been taken to accommodate the learning needs of students with a disability. These are necessarily fluid concepts, so it is important that managerial, administrative and delivery staff in schools and providers of training are aware of their obligations.

More detailed information about the implementation of the standards is available at http://www.dest.gov.au/research/publications/disability_standards/default.htm

Ongoing professional development

School administrative and enrolment staff, as well as teachers and trainers, need to have the awareness, skills and motivation to include people with a disability. This means being able to:

- quickly identify learners who might experience difficulties
- make reasonable adjustments for people with a disability
- offer flexible assessment methods
- recognise prior learning and existing competencies
- teach in a non-discriminatory and inclusive way
- access and coordinate additional support services when appropriate.

However, *Bridging Pathways*-related research found that students' experiences with getting assistance were ad hoc and inconsistent, and that students have to actively pursue teachers and training providers, as they are often reluctant to provide support, or have little understanding of the disability involved.

Training to teach students with a disability

The research also found that ongoing formal and informal professional development for teachers and VET staff is critical for achieving quality outcomes for students. Informal professional development may include involvement in networks, just-in-time training, and support for when teachers are confronted with a new situation/type of disability.

A consistent theme that emerged was the need for teacher training programs, in both schools and VET, to incorporate more information about teaching students with a disability.

The research calls for better information and education about disability and learning supports. One comment was that there is a lack of diverse and customised learning supports and assistive technologies in schools, Registered Training Organisations and workplaces, coupled with a lack of people trained in using and maintaining assistive technologies. This is seen to limit the capacity of both schools and the VET sector to effectively support people with a disability.

2002 Senate inquiry into the education of students with a disability

The 2002 Senate inquiry into the education of students with a disability recommended that all university teacher training courses include a mandatory unit on the education of 'atypical' (sic) students, including students with a disability, to familiarise trainee teachers with classroom methods appropriate for students across the spectrum of ability.

It also suggested that effective professional development in the area of disabilities requires programs to be properly structured and sustained over a period of time,

involving both theoretical material and active involvement in 'best practice' experiences.

Barriers to effective professional development

A key barrier to providing effective professional development in the area of inclusive teaching practices is its perceived irrelevance to general teaching and non-teaching staff. VET professionals and senior management tend to regard disability issues as 'add ons' and not a core area for skills development.

Other barriers include the time commitment required; staff release and cost constraints; a lack of interest in and commitment to professional development.

A proactive approach

Participating in relevant professional development is often a reactive strategy i.e. developing skills or acquiring knowledge in response to a specific problem. Blueprint-related research identified support amongst VET and teaching staff for a more proactive approach which develops base level skills such as identifying when a student requires additional assistance.

It is essential that all teachers and trainers have a broad knowledge of the strategies and approaches that provide an inclusive and responsive teaching, learning and assessment environment.

Immediate access to information

However, there is also a need for expert, 'just-in-time' knowledge in relation to types of disabilities, reasonable adjustment to curriculum, and appropriate support strategies within regional and state networks which staff can call on as and when required. This training has to be relevant to the specific types of disabilities staff have to deal with, rather than involving general disability and equity issues.

Access to an existing database of information, briefing kits and quick-response one-to-one liaison with experts are all important given that many disabilities are discovered rather than known about in advance. This latter form of professional development is considered a significant growth area, particularly with increasing numbers of students with a disability, and legislation being introduced that will increase expectations.

VET research findings of relevance to teacher education

While ADTAC's work and research focused on students with a disability within VET, the reported findings also have a real relevance to VET in Schools programs and education more broadly. Some of the more relevant recommendations include:

- ensuring that professional development content and examples are meaningful to the VET professional and other stakeholders

- developing lasting capacity-building strategies to improve resource efficiency e.g. ensuring an ongoing equity component in mainstream professional development activities

- devising 'just-in-time' professional development opportunities which provide information and expertise as the need arises

- forming regional networks to act as a forum for identifying professional development needs, and a mechanism for delivering short, sharp, relevant professional development sessions to meet local needs

- developing a business case to encourage VET and teaching professionals to participate in relevant professional development.

Conclusion

In summary, for students with a disability in education and training to have the best chance of successfully completing their studies, they require administrative, support and teaching staff who:

- have received initial training for working with students with a disability

- are encouraged to participate in ongoing professional development that helps them provide an inclusive and responsive learning environment.

Research shows how necessary this is, and now legislation has been introduced to make it more likely to happen.
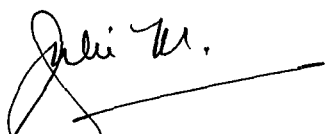
Further information

Please don't hesitate to call or e-mail if you would like additional information, contacts, or copies of publications. I will be available until 30 June however, from 1 July 2005, the Australian National Training Authority and the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council will be abolished.

I have included the contact details for the co-Chairs of ADTAC, in case you need to make contact after 30 June 2005:

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Attachment A

Findings cited in this response are based on analysis of the following pieces of research by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA):

Synthesis of Blueprint Research Projects - Reference List

Barnett, Kate and associates (2002a) *Mid-Term Review of Bridging Pathways Final Report*, ANTA

Eraclides, G, Achia, V (2000) *Teachers' Needs in Supporting Students with a Disability*, Box Hill Institute Research Forum, Victoria

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Queensland Government Department of Employment and Training (2002) *Fair go in training for people with a disability Meeting your Australian Quality Training Framework obligations*

Wilson, Deborah Consulting Services (2003a) *Final Report Survey of Professional Development Undertaken by VET Staff to Enhance the Capacity to Train People with a Disability*

Wilson, Deborah Consulting Services (2003b) *Strategic Professional Development Project Strategic Analysis of the Professional Development Needs of VET Professionals/Stakeholders in Queensland*, Queensland Department of Employment and Training