

Appendix to ECEF submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

ECEF Disability Lighthouse Initiative

Purpose

The *Lighthouse Initiative* evolved from ECEF's work with the ANTA Disability Forum to address the under-representation of students with disabilities in the vocational education and training system, and particularly, in VET in School programs. Its strategy is to intervene at the upper secondary school level, providing the support needed and structured opportunities for VET and work placement so that pathways into VET (and employment) are created for students with disabilities. The Initiative has been designed to complement the ANTA Disability Forum's *Bridging Pathways Strategy* and the implementation of its accompanying Blueprint by the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council (ADTAC).

The key component of the *Lighthouse Initiative* has been the funding of three '*Lighthouse*' projects to trial models for this intervention, and to document lessons learned in the process. Expressions of interest were called for in May 2000 and the response was substantial (reflecting the need for an Initiative of this kind) with 87 proposals received from all States and Territories. The selection process was undertaken by the Lighthouse Initiative's Steering Committee, with representation from industry, education, government (DEST and DEWR), the CEPT network, the ANTA Disability Forum (now ADTAC) and The Brotherhood of St Laurence. A total of \$280,000 was provided by ECEF for the three projects. A further \$280,000 has been approved to continue the three projects to the end of December 2003.

The three *Lighthouse* projects are:

1. **Youth Connections "Work-Out"** on the NSW Central Coast
2. **Gateway to Awareness, Employment and Training (GATE)** in Launceston, Tasmania
3. **WAVES** in Western Adelaide, South Australia.

The *Lighthouse Initiative* has been an action research project designed to begin the process of building a knowledge base about the creation of pathways into VET (vocational education and training) for people with a disability. The *Lighthouse Initiative* as a whole was based on an understanding of 'disability' as applying to impairments which restrict a student's ability to function at school or in the workplace. However, definitions of disability vary from one educational jurisdiction to another so each Lighthouse project worked within the definition applied by its State education authority.

There were 2 key premises underpinning the *Lighthouse Initiative*: –

- 1 the under-representation of students with a disability in the VET system can be addressed by interventions targeting students while they are still in senior school
- 2 this intervention includes the building of partnerships between schools, employers and disability employment agencies because of the latter's disability expertise and links to employers.

It is generally acknowledged that an early intervention strategy which targets people with a disability during the school years by creating pathways to the VET system will improve their employment chances and bring a range of related personal and social development benefits. The *Lighthouse Initiative* was designed to explore different approaches to providing such early intervention and was guided by these 4 broad Aims:

- o increase awareness and commitment to Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) for students with a disability
- o develop a diverse range of transferable ‘first generation’ project models designed to increase participation rates of young people in SWL programs
- o capture on the ground knowledge and experience of the projects in the form of a Resource Kit targeting a wider audience to further promote SWL for students with a disability
- o through the Initiative assist ADTAC to achieve the goals of its Blueprint increasing opportunities for people with disabilities in vocational education and training.

At the end of two years’ implementation, formative and summative evaluation has identified that the Initiative has achieved all four of these aims.

The Lighthouse Projects have created and built on partnerships with different stakeholders who each play a critical role in career development for students with a disability. These have involved partnerships between –

- o schools and employers
- o schools and disability employment agencies (known as open or specialist employment agencies, and as Competitive Employment Placement Training agencies or CEPTs (and building on alliances between these stakeholders and employers)
- o two or more CEPT agencies
- o two or more schools in the same sector, and across the 3 education sectors
- o VET and Special Education Teachers within individual schools.

The Models Tried

The Lighthouse Projects have trialed various models of support to students with a disability, based on a 3 way partnership between schools, employers and CEPT agencies. It has been important to identify the support needed, the costs and other inputs involved, and the appropriateness of different approaches to providing this support.

The support inputs are designed to enable students to participate in VET in Schools programs, including structured work placement. They involve work preparation (for example, basic communication and social skills, independent travel to and from a work place, organising and attending interviews, orientation to a workplace) and career planning (familiarisation with available VET programs and alignment to personal interests). The third component of support relates to the student’s disability and the specific support required to address this (eg Auslan interpreter). Ideally, the three components should be brought together within an individualised transition planning process.

There are a number of alternatives to providing this support and the three specialist Lighthouse projects explored the following models:

- o providing work place support either with the presence of a trained support worker (a trained Teachers Aide, or a CEPT worker) *or*
- o training selected employees to provide support and tailored supervision (this is known as the Co-Worker model)
- o training Teacher Aides to provide disability support *or*
- o providing disability support through a CEPT agency *or*
- o training VET Coordinators in schools to provide disability support
- o providing work preparation to students through a CEPT agency or RTO *or*
- o training school teachers to provide work preparation through participation in an accredited program which also gives them RTO status.

The projects have trialed different combinations of these strategies, with varying input costs which include CEPT time, Teacher Release Time, and employee release time. However, the outcomes achieved (see below) have justified these initial costs, which are front-end rather than once-off expenses.

It is evident that the early intervention approach has created pathways to VET and ultimate employment which have not usually been identified as relevant to students with a disability. By providing the supports needed to allow them to pursue those pathways, the Projects have demonstrated the viability of those career choices and the outcomes which are possible when appropriate support is made available.

Impact of the Lighthouse Initiative

There is widespread agreement among all stakeholder groups surveyed, that the 3 Lighthouse Projects have made a significant impact in their localities. This impact is identified by them as being evident in the following ways:

- o establishment and/or further development of alliances, particularly between schools and CEPTs
- o structured workplace learning and vocational education opportunities achieved for participating students

All 158 participating students (82 at Work-Out, 45 at WAVES and 31 at GATE) have successfully undertaken SWL and some have completed additional accredited vocational education opportunities.

- o employment opportunities (full or part time work, school based apprenticeships or traineeships) were obtained for some students

WAVES has been particularly successful in linking 18 of its 45 students to employment. 4 of the 31 GATE students and 7 of the 82 Work-Out students have achieved employment.

- o the subsequent increase in self-confidence among students is seen as positively affecting their future study and work directions -

“... observing the changes in many students that I met at the initial stages of the Project, from shy and unsure to individuals with confidence, self-esteem and valuable workplace skills. It was rewarding to see so many of the students keen to develop

further skills in mainstream VET courses and to observe their optimism for the future.”
(GATE Project Co-ordinator)

“I wish I had videotaped students at the beginning and at graduation because the change and positive ‘glow’ about them was great! But they need support and encouragement to keep it there.” (WAVES, teacher)

“They [students] see themselves doing what so called ‘normal’ young people do. This has raised their self esteem, confidence and employment chances.” (WAVES, project management)

- o altering of the expectations held about career development possibilities for students with a disability (among teachers, parents, employers and students)

“The perception of students with disabilities held by others in the community was challenged and stretched. Extremely positive feedback was received from the RTO, the community centre hosting training and local council representatives. This has resulted in these people becoming strong advocates for students with disabilities” (WAVES Project Co-ordinator)

- o the development of a range of resources to assist in the support of students with a disability in vocational education and employment preparation.

The 3 Projects have provided a focus for those with a commitment to making positive changes for students with a disability. Many of these individuals have been battling for years without much support or encouragement. The Lighthouse Projects are demonstrating what is possible and often reaffirming the work of some of these pathfinding people. The absence of Initiatives like this, and of a planned approach to funding innovative approaches to the under-representation of people with a disability in vocational education and employment is apparent in the response to the Initiative. As one person said -

“Knowing that there is something out there to aim for, gives both teachers and students hope.” (WAVES, teacher)

The evaluation of the *Lighthouse Initiative*, from all stakeholder perceptions, has been very positive, and this, together with the outcomes achieved by the three Projects for participating students, more than justifies what is a relatively small financial outlay. This is significant given the reluctance apparent among State/Territory education authorities to provide the funding needed to support students with a disability in vocational education and career development. This has been one of the major barriers to these students’ future employment identified by the Initiative. *It is critical that funding to support students with a disability is regarded as a front-end cost – an investment - more than justified by the outcomes which can be achieved for those students and the subsequent return of that investment.*

Research by the Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (*Economic and social analysis of increasing opportunities for people with a disability in VET: 2001*, ANTA) estimated the potential net social gain from increasing increased participation in VET by people with a disability for two scenarios –

- a) 9.6% of working age people with a disability participating in VET with participation by age being equal to that for the wider population

- b) participation for people with a disability being increased so that they have equal overall representation (16.7%) within the VET population.

At a 5% per annum discount rate, the gross gain was estimated to be \$3.7 billion for the first scenario and \$5.9 billion for the second scenario. Using indicative estimates to deduct training and workplace accommodation and support costs, the net gains were then estimated at **\$2.5 billion** and **\$4.1 billion** respectively. Although only illustrative examples, these scenarios highlight the potential long term social and economic gains to be derived, their return far outweighing any input costs associated with disability support.

The importance of cross-sectoral and whole of government approaches

The *Lighthouse Initiative* has facilitated the development of new alliances and demonstrated the importance of linking students with a disability to VET in Schools programs – both to increase the future participation in the VET system and to reconfirm the need to develop career pathways for those students. It has also highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral and cross-government approaches to enterprise and career education for students with a disability in particular – and possibly, for all young people.

Within schools, the importance of linking VET teachers with special education/disability support teachers as part of individual transition planning has been highlighted. *However, the reality is that this is likely to be the exception rather than the rule.*

The importance of Transition Planning, tailored to the needs, disability issues and career interests of individual students, and developed collaboratively by VET teachers, special education/transition support teachers and disability employment specialists (such as, CEPT agencies) has emerged as a critical part of the process of developing viable career pathways. Furthermore, a case management approach wherein one of these contributors takes responsibility for coordination of the Transition Plan is also essential. Lighthouse Initiative learnings indicate that this is most effectively fulfilled by the contributor with the greatest investment in the student achieving a measurable employment-related outcome. Funding conditions indicate that this is most likely to be a CEPT agency. However, existing cross-sectoral collaboration does not yet make provision for such an approach to Transition Planning.

At the broader level of education policy, there is also scope to link VET in Schools programs, special education, transition planning and disability support into a wider and ‘seamless’ strategy of career development – as is reflected in the new MCEETYA Framework.

Across the education and community services sector, the Projects have built alliances between schools and CEPT agencies at the service delivery level, and have identified the need for collaboration at the policy level between the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) and the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST).

The involvement of CEPTs, while trialed as a model, has been endorsed as critical by *all* Project stakeholders. In the words of Project participants -

“It takes 2 to 3 years to prepare a student with a disability for work. Working with an employment agency during this time enables groups to work together towards similar goals. Expertise is also shared.” (WAVES, teacher)

“The agency provided the on the job support component not currently able to be provided by most schools. Without this a number of participants would not have been successful in achieving their structured work placement goals.” (Project Coordinator, WAVES)

“Agencies can provide invaluable input into a student’s vocational development given their close involvement with industry and their understanding of employer expectations.” (WAVES, MJP Employment Services)

In addition, the 3 Projects have built on cross-sector alliances, encouraged by the broader Lighthouse Initiative, between Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) – as funders of CEPT agencies - and education stakeholders, by inviting local participation by FaCS personnel in the Projects.

The Project has been most successful in demonstrating the value of the partnership and is indicative of how the model would be applied to the majority of CEPTs who have not seen schools as potential partners because their funding agreement with the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) limits their involvement (under the terms of the Commonwealth State Disability Agreement). *The CSDA provision limiting CEPT involvement in schools has been identified as a key barrier to enabling students with a disability to participate effectively in VET in Schools and work preparation programs.*

A major barrier to young people with a disability obtaining structured work placement and employment relates to employers’ negative expectations of their capacity to contribute effectively without specialist support. These challenges are identified by employers as relating to the need for more care and supervision and consequent implications for workplace time and productivity, and lack of skill in managing some disabilities. *These reinforce the importance of providing support to employers, particularly through agencies like CEPTs.*

The 3 Projects, through their involvement with CEPT agencies, were able to provide employers with information, advice, support and in some instances, co-worker training to ensure that employees were able to work effectively with students with disabilities. There was *unanimous* endorsement by employers of the provision of this specialised support.

“Having someone to talk to, to help us get our feet in the right direction to ensure everybody gets positives” (GATE, employer)

“... the perception that help is available if there’s a problem.” (Work-Out, employer)

Employers participating in the Lighthouse Projects have identified a number of rewards which balance the challenges faced in providing SWL opportunities to students with a disability:

- o an effective *recruitment* source whereby employers can assess at first hand, without commitment, the potential value as employees of SWL students
- o many students with disabilities have proven themselves reliable, enthusiastic and valuable employees

“Students with disabilities are so much more enthusiastic, motivated and willing than mainstream kids. It is a pleasure to have them around.” (Work-Out, employer)

- o the contributions made to producing a more *diverse* and therefore, interesting workforce

*“They are great people to work with and they bring great ideas to the workplace.”
(GATE, employer)*

Without the input of the Lighthouse Initiative and its enabling of CEPT involvement, it is unlikely that participating students would have been able to access the work placement opportunities provided.

The Lighthouse Initiative has emphasised the importance of cross-portfolio approaches to achieving real change for young people with a disability. The impact of this demonstration can only be sustained if a range of stakeholders, across government, take ownership for achieving these outcomes.

Cross departmental (Commonwealth) and cross jurisdiction (Commonwealth, State and Local government) work is needed to reduce fragmentation and duplication, to make more effective use of knowledge and resources, and to encourage a holistic approach.

The successful placement in employment of a young person with a disability is facilitated by the development of a long term relationship with a CEPT, and this means beginning that relationship before the young person leaves school. As the Lighthouse Initiative has shown, creating career pathways and career goals is critical to reversing the strong trend for students with a disability leaving school early, making the task of placement in open employment exceptionally difficult.

The importance of early intervention

The underpinning strategy of targeting young people with a disability while they are in senior school has been unanimously endorsed by *all* of those responding to the evaluation of the *Lighthouse* Initiative as essential to achieving effective enterprise and career education outcomes for them. In the words of Project participants -

“Reaching school students before they ‘fall out’ of the school system is ideal. The fact that they are young for junior traineeship awards is an attractive marketing point for employers.” (WAVES, Multiple Solutions)

*“Many students with learning disabilities have not had the chance to experience success. VET programs often provide this because assessment is competency based.”
(Work-Out, teacher)*

ECEF has played an important catalytic role in demonstrating that appropriately designed models of vocational education and career development can enable young people with a disability to achieve outcomes available to those without a disability.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

ADTAC	Australian Disability Training Advisory Council
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
CBF	Case Based Funding
CEPT	Competitive Employment Placement Training (also referred to as ‘Specialist Employment agency’ or ‘Open Employment agency’)
DEST	Department of Education Science and Technology
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DFaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
ECEF	Enterprise and Career Education Foundation
GATE	Gateway to Awareness in Training and Employment
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SWL	Structured Workplace Learning <i>(Students complete real tasks and learn skills, which are formally assessed. Successful participation in SWL is accredited towards industry qualifications and some senior school certificates.)</i>
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WAVES	Western Area Vocational and Enterprise Services