

**Submission to the Senate**

**Employment, Workplace Relations**  
**and Education References Committee**

**Inquiry into the Education of Students**  
**with Disabilities**



AUSTRALIAN  
NATIONAL TRAINING  
AUTHORITY

## BACKGROUND

Vocational education and training in Australia is a national system developed within the Australian Federation through cooperation between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments, industry and the community.

Governance arrangements for the national vocational education and training system are laid out in the *Australian National Training Authority Act 1992* (ANTA Act) and the ANTA agreement endorsed by Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for vocational education and training (ANTA MINCO) in August 2001.

The ANTA Act and the ANTA Agreement also create the basis for a range of partnerships between governments and industry for the development and refinement of the vocational education and training system.

The ANTA Act describes ANTA MINCO as the peak national decision making body for vocational education and training. The Council consists of the Ministers from each State and Territory and the Commonwealth who are responsible for vocational education and training and is chaired by the Commonwealth.

The ANTA Board supports ANTA MINCO in all of its functions and gives effect to industry led vocational education and training arrangements identified in the ANTA Act. The Board operates with a strategic focus and recommends national policies and strategies.

ANTA was established out of an agreement (known as the ANTA Agreement) by Heads of Government in 1992 to develop a national system of vocational education and training in cooperation with State and Territory governments, the Commonwealth government and industry.

State and Territory Training Authorities operate within the framework of the national policies and strategies agreed by ANTA MINCO to address the training needs and priorities of industry and the community within their jurisdiction. The responsibility for the provision of training and assessment services rests with the States and Territories.

In May 1998, ANTA Ministerial Council endorsed *A Bridge to the Future: National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training* for the period 1998-2003. One of the key objectives of that Strategy is to achieve equitable outcomes in Vocational Education and Training for all Australians, including people with disabilities.

In June 2000, ANTA MINCO endorsed ANTA's five year National Strategy for increasing opportunities in Vocational Education and Training for people with a disability - *Bridging Pathways* (provided at Attachment A). *Bridging Pathways* was developed after extensive consultation with people with disabilities, professionals, providers and industry groups throughout Australia to determine the key challenges facing people with a disability in, and wanting to access vocational education and training.

*Bridging Pathways* is underpinned by a Blueprint which sets out strategies and actions to achieve the vision of the Strategy (provided at *Attachment B*). *Bridging Pathways* and its Blueprint have the support of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Training Authorities, the ANTA Board and ANTA MINCO.

The implementation of the Blueprint is overseen by the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council (ADTAC), an advisory Committee to the ANTA Board, established in October 2000. ADTAC also provides advice on emerging issues affecting access, participation and outcomes for people with a disability in vocational education and training.

ADTAC members are drawn from those stakeholder groups who play a role in implementing the Blueprint - State and Territory training authorities, the Commonwealth, people with a disability, training providers, industry and ANTA. Collaboration between all stakeholder groups is critical to the successful implementation of the Blueprint.

Research undertaken by ANTA<sup>1</sup> indicates that there is a potential \$2.7b net return per year to Australian society from increasing the participation of people with a disability in VET, hence the implementation of the Blueprint continues to be a high priority for ANTA.

ANTA welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities, and has prepared this submission in consultation with ADTAC.

Against the above background of the various responsibilities for the provision of vocational education and training for people with a disability, this submission addresses each of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

## **Participation of Students with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training**

Data on the participation of people with a disability in vocational education and training are collected nationally by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research using the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS)<sup>1</sup>.

VET students with disabilities are under-represented in VET and more often enrolled in general education courses than courses with a clear vocational focus such as New Apprenticeships.

In 1998, nearly three quarters of disabled persons of working age, (71%) had a schooling or employment restriction, and they were also more likely to have left school before they

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<sup>1</sup> The AVETMIS Standard classifies a disability to be both significant and permanent. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines a disability more broadly to encompass restrictions or impairments which had lasted, or are likely to last, for six months or more. Work has been undertaken to more closely align the two definitions in future.

turned 15 years of age than people without a disability (19.1% compared with 6.8%) of the population without a disability.<sup>i</sup>

Of those persons with a schooling or employment restriction almost all (96%) received either informal or formal assistance for an activity restriction.

It has been estimated that, in 2000, persons with a disability comprised 14.4% of the total working age population. Of these persons of working age with a disability, 3.3% participated in vocational education and training compared with 15.3% of the working age population without a disability<sup>iii</sup>.

Students reporting a disability comprised 3.6% of all students participating in vocational education and training. This proportion has remained fairly stable over recent years with the 2000 figure being slightly below the 1999 level (3.9%)<sup>iv</sup> but this was the same as that recorded in 1998<sup>2</sup>.

People with a disability account for 1.8% of people undertaking a New Apprenticeship. The number of persons with a disability participating has increased moderately over recent years in keeping with the overall growth in these arrangements. (Refer Appendix 1, Table 2.)

Consequently, the proportion of New Apprentices who have a disability has been stable over recent years (refer Appendix 1, Table 2), but it is still low in comparison with participation by disabled persons in vocational education and training overall.

People with a disability are more likely to undertake lower-skill-level courses than those who do not report having a disability. In 2000, more than a third (36.1%) of course enrolments of VET students reporting a disability were in AQF Certificate I and II compared with 27.9% of course enrolments for students not reporting a disability. Around one-third (33.7%) of course enrolments of students reporting a disability were in multi-field education programs, compared with 14.8% of course enrolments for students not reporting a disability. Such programs are more generic or preparatory in nature and mostly include generic rather than specific occupational skills<sup>v</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note however, that assumptions have been made that the actual figures are likely to be higher, given that a large number of students do not identify whether or not they have a disability.

## RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

- (a) Whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:
- i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,
  - ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,
  - iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,
  - iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,
  - v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,
  - vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,
  - vii) teacher training and professional development, and
  - viii) ~~the legal implications and resource demands of~~ current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation; and

### **The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap**

Consistency of definitions of disability is an important factor in successful policy development and the planning of programs to address the needs of students with disabilities in, or wishing to access, the VET sector.

The National Strategy for increasing opportunities for people with a disability in vocational education and training- *Bridging Pathways* and its Blueprint (hereafter referred to as The Strategy) identifies that a seamless transition between sectors is essential in addressing the issues faced by people with a disability throughout their life. Anecdotal evidence gathered from consultations held during the development of The Strategy suggests that differences in the definitions of disability across the school, vocational education and training, adult and community education and higher education and employment sectors could potentially result in variations in eligibility for support services. This could result in variations in the levels of support services for the same person.

In the VET sector the identification of students with a disability is based on self-identification and reporting at enrolment times. The enrolment forms used by training providers contain a question that asks students to identify whether they have a disability and the type of disability. This data is collated by the State and Territory Training Authorities and sent to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) which is contracted by ANTA as clearinghouse for national VET data.

Consultations held during the development of The Strategy also identified that training providers and policy makers have concerns that data collection processes may under-represent the number of students with a disability in VET. The basis for this concern is the high number of students who fail to indicate on their enrolment form if they had a disability or not.

This assumption that the numbers of students with a disability in VET are under-represented means that it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the outcomes for individual students with a disability in VET, and the performance of the VET sector in addressing the needs for this group. This can make it difficult for comprehensive planning to occur around the needs of students with a disability.

Analysis of the information reported by stakeholders with responsibility for implementing The Strategy highlights the need for further work to occur to reduce the high rate of non-disclosure of disability status and improve data availability and quality. The most likely strategy to be successful is an education campaign to promote the value of disclosing disability status on enrolment forms. This will require collaboration between all stakeholders who have a role to play in the national VET statistics collection, however implementation of any campaign would most likely need to occur at a State and Territory level, as this is the point at which data collection occurs.

Another issue associated with the process of identifying students with a disability in the VET sector is that until recently, the definitions of disability that are used by the VET sector and by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) have differed. This has made meaningful comparison between VET data and general population data difficult.

As part of the implementation of the Blueprint, work has been undertaken by the National Training Statistics Committee (a committee of the ANTA Board that provides advice on data issues in the VET sector) to strengthen the consistency and coverage of data of students with a disability. As a result of this work, the enrolment forms

used in 2002 ask students with a disability to identify their type of disability, using the following categories:

- Hearing / Deaf
- Physical
- Intellectual
- Learning
- Mental Illness
- Acquired Brain Impairment
- Vision
- Medical Condition
- Other
- Unspecified

These classifications are intended to be consistent with the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps as published by the World Health Organisation (Geneva 1980). The classifications are also designed to align with the ABS definition of disability and to facilitate national consistency of data interpretation for policy and planning purposes in VET.

Action 8.1 of The Strategy aims to establish consistent data collection across the VET sector and the broader education system to ensure that outcomes for students with a disability are accurately measured. While the issue of consistency between the VET and Higher Education system data collection has not yet been investigated, as part of the implementation of this action, a project *VET in Schools for Students with a Disability* is currently being undertaken on behalf of ANTA by the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs Transition from School Taskforce. Once the findings of this project are available it is important that an implementation strategy is developed, and successful collaborative partnerships across States and Territories and training providers are established.

### **The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed.**

In the VET sector, students with a disability may be provided with access to learning supports to assist them to successfully complete training. These may include a range of on-the-job or off-the-job supports such as tutoring, sign language interpreters, note taking, specialist advisers or coordinators. The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed determines the appropriateness of the allocation of support services and hence an individual's ability to achieve successful VET outcomes.

The provision of learning supports to students with a disability is related to delivery of training. As a result, under the current arrangements and division of responsibilities between the Commonwealth, ANTA and the States and Territories, the funding and subsequent provision of these supports is at the discretion of each State and Territory Training Authority, and individual training providers. This means that the assessment and provision of supports for students with a disability varies across each State and Territory. Consultations held during the development of The Strategy suggest that as a result it is possible for students with a similar level and type of disability to receive different levels of support and hence potentially have different VET outcomes.

This variation in differing levels of support to students with a disability in VET is exacerbated as the assessment of a student's support needs often relies on the individual student identifying their needs to a disability support officer, a counsellor or a teacher. In some cases, training providers have quality assurance procedures in place which result in students who have identified as having a disability, being provided with further information regarding the availability of support services. Some training providers have a blanket policy of assessing the needs of all students, regardless of whether they have identified as having a disability, while others such as training providers who specialise in the provision of training to students with a disability have developed formal assessment tools.

The learning support needs of students with a disability can also vary as a result of location, and the resources available in the local community.

There is no requirement placed on registered training providers to use the same assessment tool or procedure, and a national assessment tool for determining the disability-related needs of students does not exist. This issue is the subject of ongoing discussions between ADTAC members, and is a complex one, given that any national assessment tool would need to be flexible enough to take into account local resources and issues.

A project which will be undertaken as part of implementation of The Strategy will attempt to identify the types and costs of learning supports required by students with a disability. This project will also aim to develop models for increasing the availability of learning supports to students with a disability. It will also consider ways to establish eligibility criteria and assessment processes to determine access to support services (*refer to Action 11.1 of The Strategy*).

Once the findings of this project are available, they will be reviewed by ANTA to ascertain the implications for their implementation.

**The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas.**

Limited research has been undertaken to examine the adequacy and availability of policies and programs to meet the particular needs of students with disabilities in VET from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas. However, the effects of the disadvantage experienced by students with a disability in VET can be expected to be exacerbated if the students are from low-socio-economic, non-English speaking, or Indigenous backgrounds and/or from rural and remote areas.

The Strategy contains actions (*Refer to Actions 11.1 & 12.1*) to increase the availability and co-ordination of learning supports for people with a disability. While implementation of these actions will consider any issues of multiple disadvantage, further research to explore these issues is required.

## **The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs**

The ANTA Board endorsed a discussion stimulus paper developed by ADTAC titled: *Whole of Life, All of Life (This paper is currently in draft form, and will be forwarded to the Senate Inquiry as soon as possible)*. This paper identifies the importance of early intervention as one strategy for successfully addressing the needs of people with a disability. It notes that if there is a failure in or lack of support structures in one phase of an individual's life, this can cause a crisis for a person with a disability and affect their ability to participate in future life experiences. For example if a person does not receive the right mix of supports while they are at school, they may not have the skills and motivation to progress to further education or employment. It is also important to ensure that the supports available to students in one educational sector are, where appropriate, also available in another sector.

Research<sup>vi</sup> shows that almost one-fifth of the working age population with a disability left school before they turned 15. To address the low level of school retention rates The Strategy advocates as the key type of early intervention, the provision of appropriate vocational education and training in schools. The VET in schools program is seen to be an important development that can encourage individuals who might otherwise leave school early, to take up further training options.

The project mentioned previously in this paper, *VET in Schools for Students with a Disability* will review the VET in Schools programs to assess the current performance and future priorities of this program with regard to achieving outcomes for young people with a disability (Refer to Action 8.1 of The Strategy). This project, which is expected to commence in late May 2002, will investigate issues such as the provision of equal access to opportunities for work-based experience and skills development, and the availability of specialist on-the-job supports for students.

ANTA will review the findings of this project to ascertain the implications of their implementation to address any identified issues.

## **Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors**

Research<sup>vii</sup> undertaken by the NCVER indicates that:

*for students with disabilities to succeed in training and education, it must be recognised that they have complex needs ... diverse services such as transport, housing, personal care and support must all be considered if students with disabilities are to succeed in education and training.*

Buys, Kendall and Ramsden (1999)

In recognition of the diverse needs of students with a disability, a focus on research analysing models of purchasing training to ascertain their inclusiveness of the needs of students with a disability, and a focus on improving the availability of learning supports for this student group continues to be a high priority for ANTA.

Under the current arrangements and division of responsibilities in the VET sector between the Commonwealth, ANTA and States and Territories, the purchase of training and provision of learning supports for students with a disability is the responsibility of each State and Territory training authority.

The Strategy (*refer to Action 3.1*) identifies that purchasing arrangements for training and provision of learning supports influence the extent to which training providers can and do respond to the training needs of people with a disability and the degree to which training options are appropriate, accessible and appealing to individuals with a disability. The Strategy also identifies that the way in which training is currently purchased does not effectively support the inclusion of people with a disability.

Large public providers such as TAFE Institutes often have coordination and advisory services that can assist teachers and students to access specific supports, where these exist. In some States and Territories, these services are provided by TAFE Institutes out of Institute budgets, rather than from a central pool of funding for this purpose. There is often a community expectation that these services will be provided by TAFE Institutes, as part of the community service obligations of public training providers. Private training providers and employers delivering workplace-based training may be at a significant disadvantage in not having the same infrastructure as public training providers to provide these services.

In addition, the supports required by students with a disability are often scarce. An example of this is in the area of sign language interpreters for the Deaf. The provision of sign language interpreters is generally at a high cost, placing a significant strain on the resources of both public and private registered training providers. In addition, there is a shortage of qualified sign language interpreters, particularly interpreters who have received training in specialised areas e.g. engineering or legal studies. This shortage is partly due to a lack of job security for interpreters, as the workforce is highly casualised. These issues are compounded in rural and remote areas where difficulties in accessing appropriately qualified staff are commonplace. Anecdotal evidence suggests that training providers in these areas who provide interpreter services for students who are deaf often have to rely on family members and friends of the students to interpret. This can be problematic, particularly in situations where the language and content of a training course is quite specialised and complex.

Two national projects will inform future thinking in this area - the learning supports project (mentioned previously in this paper) and another project, currently underway,

*Training for People with a Disability – Current Funding Arrangements and Possible Future Funding Models*). This second project aims to:

- Document the current funding arrangements which exist to facilitate the participation in VET by people with disabilities and successful outcomes;
- Identify and develop other possible models of funding for VET students with a disability
- Compare the strengths and weaknesses of each existing or proposed funding approach from the viewpoint of various key stakeholders; and
- Develop suggestions for changes to current policies and practices.

Once the findings of this project are available (expected in approximately August 2002), ANTA will review these to assess their implications for implementation needs to be developed to ensure the issues are addressed.

### **The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students**

Little information is available to adequately assess the extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students. The *Australians Working Together* package announced in the 2001/2002 Commonwealth Budget provides for additional Commonwealth funding for vocational education and training over four years commencing from July 2002.

\$24.4 million is available to contribute to State and Territory efforts to assist people with a disability to enter and complete a VET course. These funds will be distributed by ANTA to States and Territories in the same way as overall VET funds, namely according to the most recently available ABS population data for 15 – 64 year olds.

Recent reporting by agencies with responsibility for implementing the Strategy, and the 'Mapping of support services project' undertaken by ADTAC (*provided at Attachment C*) indicates that across States and Territories resources are applied to ensure the availability of support to enhance participation of students with a disability in mainstream training. These can range from the provision of Disability Support or Student Services Officers at TAFE Institutes, to models which calculate a ratio of teachers/support staff to the number of students with a disability. However, there is a wide range of differences in the provision of services. This may result in differential impact of people with a similar type and level of disability depending on the State or Territory they live in.

This issue requires further research. The two Strategy projects previously mentioned in this paper (learning supports and funding arrangements for students with a disability) will inform future directions in this area.

### **Teacher training and professional development**

The role of teachers and others involved with the provision of VET to students with a disability is important in identifying the need for and provision of support. Furthermore, the stimulus discussion paper *Whole of Life, All of Life* notes that if a person does not receive the right mix of supports while they are at school, they may not have the skills and motivation to progress to further education or employment. Hence the models of professional training for new teachers and VET professionals (e.g. workplace assessors and trainers, workplace supervisors, teaching, training and assessment staff of TAFE Institutes and private training providers, and staff in schools) need to incorporate the provision of skills in inclusive practices for people with a disability.

The Strategy also recognises that there is considerable benefit to be gained by increasing the level of expertise with regard to inclusive practices across the spectrum of existing VET staff, including teachers, trainers, administration and management professionals. Professional development aimed at providing VET professionals with this specialist knowledge is a high priority in the Strategy.

As part of implementation of the Strategy, Commonwealth funding of \$1 million will be made available in 2002/2003 for professional development that will assist training delivery staff with skills that assist the inclusion of people with a disability including:

- Methods of making reasonable adjustments in teaching practices to meet the individual needs of individuals with a disability;
- Flexible assessment methods for students with various types of disability;
- Methods of recognising prior learning or current competency;
- Inclusion and anti-bias teaching practices; and
- Access and coordination of additional supports when appropriate.

Work is also underway to ensure that individuals in positions such as workplace supervisors and managers can acquire skills in inclusive workforce practices when undertaking relevant vocational education and training programs such as Frontline Management (*refer to Actions 15.1, 15.2 & 15.3 of The Strategy*).

### **The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation**

VET providers in Australia must comply with the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The AQTF is a set of nationally agreed standards to ensure the quality of vocational education and training services throughout Australia. The AQTF includes two sets of standards:

- Standards for Registered Training Organisations; and
- Standards for State and Territory Registering/Course Accrediting Bodies.

Standard 6 of the Standards for Registered Training Organisations sets out the access & equity requirements that must be met by training providers (*refer Attachment D*).

The current process of development of Education Standards under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* will have implications for training providers in Australia. Currently State & Territory Training Authorities are preparing regulatory impact statements which outline the costs and impact of compliance with the proposed Education Standards.

Information on the additional resource implications to assist training providers to meet their obligations under the proposed Education Standards is not available, however should the Education Standards be adopted, ANTA will undertake a review of the implications of the standards for registered training providers.

**b) What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

As mentioned, The Strategy and, the discussion stimulus paper: *Whole of Life, All of Life* identify the importance of early intervention as one strategy for successfully addressing the needs of people with a disability. It also notes that if there is a failure in or lack of support structures in one phase this can cause a crisis for a person with a disability and affect their ability to participate in future life experiences.

This is supported by an extensive mapping of the programs and policies in the VET, employment and disability sectors at a State, Territory and Commonwealth level, funded by ANTA. This mapping process made it apparent that changes to systems in one life domain cannot be fully effective unless supported by changes to systems in other areas of life.

As a result, to achieve positive outcomes for students with disabilities the provision of services should be client focussed. This requires greater collaboration and building of partnerships across all levels of government and agencies involved with the provision of services. With respect to the VET sector, The Strategy identifies and contains a large number of actions that require effective collaborative partnerships between ANTA, industry and other government and non-government agencies. These include key groups such as government agencies and advisory bodies in the VET, disability, school, employment, and related sectors; those areas of industry with responsibility for providing employment, creating infrastructure and providing technology solutions; and people with a disability.

The VET sector is currently undertaking significant activity and applying resources to implementing The Strategy. However, ANTA believes that this work and other reforms that impact on people with a disability will not be fully successful unless it is recognised that disability has an impact on individuals in every aspect of their lives. ANTA and ADTAC will take a leadership role in facilitating implementation of The Strategy by working to progress the development of collaborative partnerships.

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<sup>i</sup> Institute for Research into International Competitiveness (IRIC) (2001), *The Economic and Social Analysis of Increasing Opportunities for People with a Disability in VET*, ANTA, Brisbane.

<sup>ii</sup> ABS (1999) *Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings 1998*

<sup>iii</sup> NCVER Vocational Education and Training Statistics in Detail, 1998, 1999, 2000 and ANTA Annual National Reports Volume 3, 1998, 1999 and 2000

<sup>iv</sup> NCVER Vocational Education and Training Statistics in Detail, 1998, 1999, 2000 and ANTA Annual National Reports Volume 3, 1998, 1999 and 2000

<sup>v</sup> ANTA (2001) *Annual National Report 2000*

<sup>vi</sup> ABS (1999) *Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings 1998*

<sup>vii</sup> Buys, N., Kendall, E. & Ramsden J., 1999, *Vocational Education and Training for People with a Disability, Review of Research*, NCVER.