



Submission to Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy Review

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services (NDS) is the peak body in Victoria and Australia for non-government disability service providers. NDS has more than 260 members in Victoria and over 1,100 members nationally. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Commonwealth governments. We have a diverse and vibrant membership, comprised of small, medium and larger service providers, supporting thousands of people with disability. Our members collectively provide the full range of disability services, from supported independent living and specialist disability accommodation, respite and therapy to community access and employment.

NDS is committed to improving the disability service system to ensure it better supports people with disability and their families and carers, and to building a more inclusive community.

Introduction

National Disability Services (NDS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Macklin Review of Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy. The disability sector is growing rapidly, and is reliant on the state's post-secondary education and training system to produce workers with appropriate skills and knowledge to enable them to provide quality services to people with disabilities.

The Issues Paper provides a broad outline of some of the challenges facing the VET system, and acknowledges the perspectives of the varying stakeholders in the system. It is pleasing to see recognition of the disability sector and its rapid workforce growth within the paper.

This submission will discuss four issues relevant to the VET system and the disability sector:

- Need for greater coordination of training initiatives
- Removal of disincentives to people wanting to switch to disability work
- Training quality
- Supporting people with disabilities to gain employment

Need for greater coordination of training initiatives

NDS would like to see greater coordination of training initiatives between the state and federal government, and between the Department of Education and Victorian Skills Commission. Over recent years, NDS has contributed to various initiatives relating to updating courses related to disability, but has identified a disconnection between such work undertaken across the different Australian states, and between the Federal Government and State Governments. There also appears to be limited coordination with some of the Victorian specific initiatives.

The NDIS funded disability system continues to develop. The newly introduced National NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Commission (from 1 July 2019 in Victoria) has established NDIS Practice Standards which must be adhered to by all registered disability service providers, and a Code of Conduct which applies to everyone working in the system. The Federal government is currently funding the development of a Capability Framework for the disability workforce. NDS would like to see much greater alignment of the content of Victorian disability related training with the requirements set out in these national initiatives.

There is also great scope to improve connections and alignment at the regional and local levels. Our regionally based DHHS funded Workforce Connectors¹ have contributed to some positive outcomes by bringing local service providers and TAFEs together, and we believe this points to great scope to facilitate such local regional connections.

¹ <https://www.nds.org.au/disability-workforce-innovation-project>

Removal of disincentives to people wanting to switch to disability work

The existing eligibility criteria prevents students accessing subsidised training where they already hold a qualification at the same or higher level. This rule acts as a disincentive for people who may want to transition to a career in the disability sector but are ineligible for funding due to previous qualifications acquired in other unrelated sectors. In the disability sector, this is common. This rule may also lead a student to undertake a higher-level training qualification to meet subsidy eligibility. However, this higher-level qualification may misalign with job role requirements and have organisational wage pressure effects, reducing the chance of someone obtaining employment due to over-qualification.

Many people employed to work in the disability sector do not have optimal skills at the point of employment. The need for additional training to increase employee capability requires greater flexibility in subsidised funding rules for such workers who may have existing qualifications in unrelated fields, or have the need to improve knowledge in specific areas who are denied subsidised places under current arrangements. This issue is particularly pertinent now in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many workers with qualifications, in unrelated fields, who may be interested in joining the disability sector responding to workforce shortages; however, high fees deter them.

NDS recommends this disincentive be removed as a way to improve pathways to work in the disability sector for people considering a career change.

Training Quality

NDS believes that the government needs to continue addressing and improving the quality of training offered by public and private training providers. There is a perception across much of the disability sector in Victoria that there is variable quality in courses in disability, many that are not fit for purpose as pathways to employment in the disability sector.

Anecdotal feedback from disability service providers indicates very mixed experience of the VET system. Some services have strong positive relationships with local VET providers, TAFEs or RTOs, and source many of their workers from certificate level training. Other services tend to employ staff using a values based recruitment focus, and then undertake a mix of induction and on the job training, sometimes supplemented with support for formal qualifications training. Many NDS members highlight the value of on the job supervision and shadowing or buddy programs that place inexperienced workers alongside experienced workers as an effective means of developing skilled workers.

There are ongoing issues with some of the content in certificate level courses being ill suited to contemporary disability services. There are reports of people graduating with Certificate III in Individual Support without expertise in personal care supports or understanding that this is a key aspect of individual support roles. Additionally, the introduction of the NDIS has seen the growth of demand for Allied Health Assistants, however they graduate with minimal understanding of their role in a disability context. The training does not currently address workforce needs in both the disability and aged care sectors.

NDS has welcomed the development of 'course ins' by the Victorian Department of Education to better align with NDIS practice. However, we note there is currently a long list of electives that the VET sector may choose to include in the disability related certificate courses. The choice of electives offered often seems to bear little relationship to the needs of the sector, and may reflect personal choice of the teacher or the cost to the service of delivery. Priority electives for the sector include working with people with complex communication needs, implementing behaviour support plans, medication administration, and zero tolerance of abuse framework.

Having workers with the right skills and strong values alignment is critical to ensuring the human rights of people with disability receiving services are protected and promoted, and the risk of abuse and neglect is reduced.

Supporting people with disability to gain employment

NDS believes that Victorian VET funding needs to be modified to better support people with disability to gain employment through education and training, which is critical to improving social and economic outcomes for people with disability. The following part of this submission discusses the NDS Ticket to Work initiative, which focuses on improving school to work pathways for young people with disability through a coordinated approach. This initiative advocates for systemic change and works to improve open employment participation in Australia by working collectively at a local level, and providing an architecture for optimal employment and career achievement for young people with disability. This sector of the paper has been informed by the experience, research and evaluations of Ticket to Work.

We believe this holds key insights for the Skills for Victoria Review.

The impact of VET participation upon young people with disability

Multiple sources indicate access to the open employment market is problematic for young people with disability in Australia. Strenuous efforts have gone into the development of public policy to increase the social and economic participation of people with disability without success. However, participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a proven method of enhancing their employment opportunities.

Amongst the key findings of Polidano and Mavromaras (2010), VET completion significantly improves the likelihood of people with disability both obtaining and retaining employment. These authors claim unemployed people with disability increase their likelihood of obtaining employment from 9% to 29% upon completion of a VET Certificate III level or above course. In comparison, those unemployed without a disability, completion of comparable training increases their likelihood of employment from 52% to 62%.

Work based learning encompassing both formal qualifications and work experience is a beneficial strategy for people with disability gaining access to employment (Lewis, Thoresen, & Cocks, 2011a, 2011b). A three year longitudinal study undertaken by Thoresen, Cocks, and Parsons (2019) demonstrates substantial benefits of VET traineeships and apprenticeships. These researchers found over time the gap in outcomes reduced between graduates with and without disabilities. Apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities experienced improved employment and related outcomes such as income and hours of work.

The low participation of people with disability in VET

Despite these clear benefits from participation in VET, people with disability have low rates of participation, only 4% in 2008 (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016). Cavallaro, Foley, Saunders, and Bowman (2005) found this cohort of students are more likely to undertake Cert I or II level courses and not go on to the higher qualifications that are more likely to lead to employment outcomes (Karmel, 2019). The measurement of completion rates is complex and depends upon a range of variables which include the type of disability and intersects with other variables such as low socioeconomic status (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016). Karmel (2019) indicates the overall data shows low completion rates and questionable

employment outcomes for those completing these courses, including students with disability.

McVicar and Tabasso (2016) highlight two gaps for disadvantaged students, including those with disability. The first is the VET completion gap and the second is in labour market outcomes. They identify completion rates in VET are low but are even lower for disadvantaged students. In a summary of McVicar and Tabasso's findings, Buddelmeyer and Polidano (2016) noted:

Arguably, the most important finding from the study was that the completion gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students only explain a very small part of the post-training employment gaps. McVicar and Tabasso instead find that post-training employment gaps are explained more by differences in observed student characteristics, particularly the lower engagement in work prior to study by disadvantaged students.

These results suggest that improving the completion rates among disadvantaged students is not likely to bridge the employment gaps that appear soon after completion and that efforts may be better directed at early career preparation (p. 6).

These authors call for policy interventions that support, '... the course choices of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as career counselling and the provision of labour market information, may help to close the gap in post-study employment (McVicar & Tabasso, 2016 p. 9). Consequently, improving completion rates alone is unlikely to improve employment outcomes. Instead early intervention and career guidance prior to VET participation, ideally during secondary schooling may reduce completion and employment gaps.

The Ticket to Work model

Based on the need to prepare young people with disability during secondary school for employment, similar to the thinking of McVicar and Tabasso (2016), the Ticket to Work Initiative was established in response to poor and falling school to work transitions for young Australian with disability. Ticket to Work scoped evidence based practice internationally to develop a model that incorporates 'what works'.

In the Ticket to Work model, community networks develop and leverage the power of cross-sectoral partnerships to provide individualised support. These networks facilitate the

blending of existing resources provide coordination and scaffolding of the relevant employment supports for young people with disability. Participants are on the Department of Education and Training Victoria Program for Students with Disability (PSD) and the majority have a cognitive disability.

A local intermediary undertakes the coordination of networks, supporting the development of truly local community partnerships. The network partners include schools, families, employment services, training organisations, post school providers, NDIS supports and employers.

Specifically, the Ticket to Work model:

- brings together disability-specific and mainstream representatives from a variety of sectors to work strategically and collaboratively
- supports young people to gain access to early experiences that positively influence their views of themselves as workers
- prepares young people with disability for the workplace and gives them an employment pathway that is typical of other young adults
- meets the needs of employers, with enhanced staff retention and profitability for employers

Ticket to Work outcomes

Ticket to Work's connected approach (34 local networks; 205 schools; 145 local organisations; 2,436 employers) has delivered 1,649 jobs for students with disability. Recent evaluations of elements of the Ticket to Work model indicate:

- The Ticket to Work model has a number of social and fiscal benefits. (See SVA 2020)
- Ticket to Work participants post-school are substantially more likely than a similar comparison group to:
 - work in open employment
 - complete year 12
 - participate in the labour force
 - be involved in community and social activities (ARTD 2019)

- Ticket to Work’s approach is working for key stakeholders according to an evaluation involving employers, parents and network members) and is in line with international good practice and research (Wakeford, 2019, Kellock 2020, ARTD 2018).
- There is a need to focus on how the different sectors working can work in concert to improve employment outcomes and raise expectations for young people with disability (Meadows, 2020).
- Ticket to Work assists with the effective integration of mainstream and disability support, and it has been shown this approach reduces duplication (ARTD, 2019).

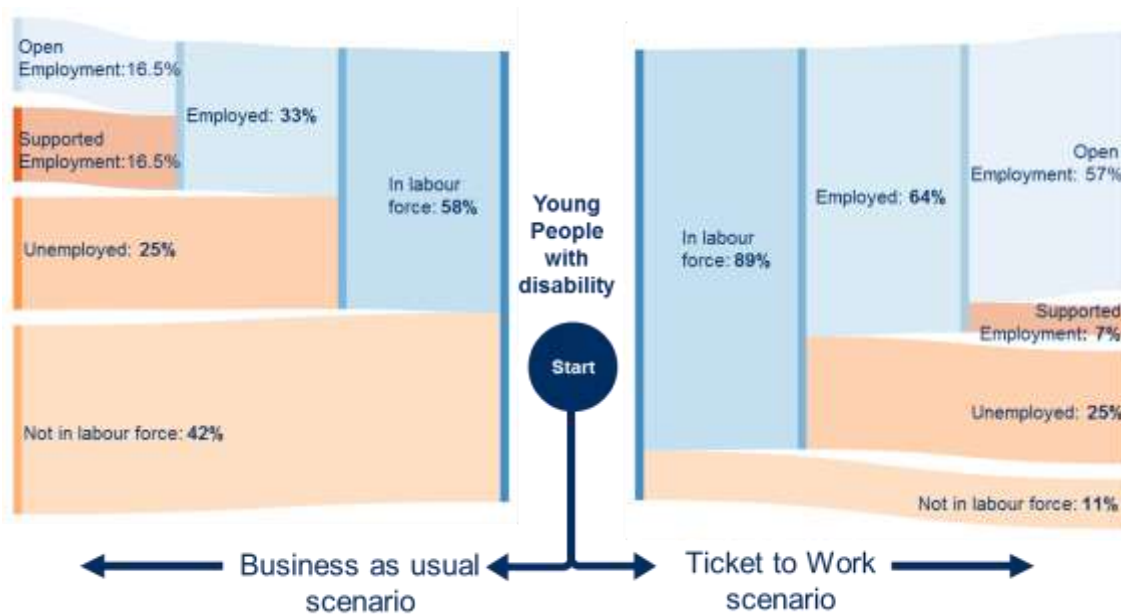


Figure 1 indicates the findings of a comparison study. Ticket to Work participants showed improved outcomes compared to young people that did not have Ticket to Work support (Business as usual)

Ticket to Work participants are:

- Nearly 50 % more likely to complete year 12
- More likely to be studying post school (31% to 23 %)
- Much more likely to have obtained further qualifications (32% to 15%)
- Over three times more likely to be in open employment
- Experience higher levels of social activities.

Conclusion

While not under-estimating the challenges, Ticket to Work has demonstrated in significant numbers of young people can thrive in open employment when prepared and supported while at school through a coordinated approach. Many young people in Ticket to Work participate in School Based Apprenticeships or Traineeships (ASbAT). An ASbAT offers students the option of combining a senior secondary program with part-time employment and is a clear example of work based learning effective for young people with disability.

Work based learning is a critical component of both Ticket to Work and VET which Thoresen et al. (2019) argued will lead to greater employment outcomes for young people with disability. Consequently, there are tremendous opportunities for greater collaboration and learning between VET and Ticket to Work which will enhance employment opportunities for people with disability.

The Ticket to Work model is tested and its success verified. It represents a relatively simple and highly cost-effective means of significantly increasing the numbers of young Australians with disability in open employment.

An assessment of Ticket to Work also found significant savings to government based on the *financial* value of the fiscal and social impacts of the Ticket to Work outcomes. (SVA: 2019)

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our findings in more detail and to answer any questions you might have.

Supporting Documentation

NDS have commissioned and conducted a significant body of research to explore the effectiveness of the Ticket to Work Model and the literature around effective school to work transition for students with disability. We are able to provide our research and independent evaluations on request. See appendix 1.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. For further information on any issues raised in this submission, I can be contacted at Fiona.Still@nds.org.au or ph. 03 8341 4300.

Queries regarding the Ticket to Work initiative can be directed to:

Michelle Wakeford,
National Ticket to Work Manager
Michelle@tickettowork.org.au
Mob: 0413 750 745

Dr William Crisp
Policy and Project Officer
william.crisp@nds.org.au
Mob: 0426 521 614

Queries regarding the Disability Workforce training can be directed to:

Sarah Fordyce
Policy Manager
Sarah.Fordyce@nds.org.au
Mob: 0447 441 505



Fiona Still
NDS State Manager, NDS Victoria
Fiona.Still@nds.org.au
03 8341 4300.

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Appendix 1

Social Ventures Australia Consulting (2020) Ticket to Work Valuation of key outcomes SVA (Melbourne)

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