

QUEENSLAND PARENTS FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY INCORPORATED (QPPD)

Response to

Review of Disability Employment Network and Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Discussion Paper 2008

Contact Persons:

Michelle O'Flynn (President)

Jan Steffan (Advocacy Coordinator)

QPPD Inc
P.O. Box 470
PADDINGTON QLD 4064

Tel: (07) 3368 3055
1800 805 184
Fax: (07) 3368 3004
Email: qppd@qppd.org

FOREWORD

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (QPPD) is a parent based, state-wide, advocacy organisation advocating for people with disabilities, by parents, against abuse and exclusion, for justice and rights. Its Mission:

QPPD vigorously defends justice and rights for people with disabilities by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disabilities as respected, valued and participating members of society.

For 27 years QPPD has been an organisation that is extremely well regarded throughout the general community and seen as *the* advocacy organisation for parents in Queensland. It is an organisation that has been loved and nurtured since inception by parents who found it to be a place where they are heard and understood and their concerns addressed through a united voice.

QPPD welcomes this opportunity to have input into the *Review of Disability Employment Network and Vocational Rehabilitation Services* representing the views of parents.

As President of the Committee of Management of QPPD I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Transition Sub-Committee who have been advocating, in various ways, for a vision for young people with a disability leaving school and participating in the same range of opportunities and choices as all young people, so that they can pursue their chosen goals through work, further education and an independent lifestyle.

Michelle O'Flynn
President
QPPD Committee of Management

RESPONSE

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability has pleasure in submitting its response to the Discussion Paper on the *Review of Disability Employment Network and Vocational Rehabilitation Services*. This response does not follow the format set out in the Discussion Paper, i.e. addressing the questions raised after discussion of each of the 8 proposed Principles. Rather, the submission sets out the issues which parents and their sons and daughters with disability encounter and makes recommendations to address those issues.

Introduction

“...for the vast majority of children with disability, it is the lack of schooling and not their disability that limits their opportunities.” Reference – World Bank Education Notes, author Susan Peters.

For many young people with disability the issues regarding employment and/or further education begin while they are still at school. While it is understood that this Discussion Paper is focussed on DEN and VRS, it is important to parents that the issues that their sons and daughters with disability face in the primary education system, is seen as being part of problem. We are advocating that the reviewers undertake a holistic view when reading our submission to this Review.

Despite all the rhetoric about ‘inclusion’, there still exists an education system that supports a dual service of both ‘mainstream’ and ‘special’, does not deliver teaching and learning opportunities to accommodate individual learning styles and separates students with disabilities from their peers. This system generates an ethos of low expectations for these students which in turn results in inadequate educational outcomes, illiteracy, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

With this general malaise on exiting school, it is no wonder that many young people with disability come to Disability Employment Network (DEN) services or further education institutions well ‘behind the eight ball’ in terms of moving easily into employment or to access further education.

At School – Issues and Recommendations

Many parents are unaware that they need to - or are not encouraged to - begin transition planning as early as year 9. At around this time, students with disability need to start sampling both post school options and trial work experiences with Disability Employment Network (DEN) services providing support.

The range of school-based traineeships and apprenticeships needs to be expanded for students with disabilities, with appropriate support for students to access TAFE subjects and courses, as well as university. For those who have been neglected in the education system, there should be literacy and numeracy courses that are not created on the premise that students have basic literacy skills in place already - which is the case at this point in time.

The capping of DEN services must be lifted so that all people with disabilities can access the supports required to obtain and maintain employment. The quality of DEN service provision varies. The best service providers work with employers to create niche roles for people with disabilities: not only do they provide job support to clients, but also both physical and emotional support, and work with employers and other staff, which very often determines if a job is going to be successful and

sustainable or not. This is the optimal model of service provision; other DEN services do little to find employment for people with significant disabilities. Standards need to be raised.

Post school services, disability employment agencies and employers should be engaged with the schools in providing a range of work experience and skill development training for students with disability as a means of sampling work and service options. More opportunities and range of apprenticeships/traineeships should be available to all students regardless of where they live/go to school. Reinstate a transition to work program in schools.

Work Experience – Issues for Parents

- Lack of valid, real, work experience both at school and post school.
- Lack of goal setting at school to incorporate work experience/work testing

Recommendations

- Cross-government co-ordination of programs, supports and funding is required to effectively manage work trials as many will lead to engagement in traineeships/apprenticeships or further education.
- People with disabilities who want to engage in work experience/volunteer work should be offered funding incentives.

Post School – Issues for Parents

The following dot points are a summary of the feedback QPPD received from parents when their son or daughter leaves school. Some parents have described the feeling as one of *stepping into the void* or *falling off the edge of the cliff*. This is a very real issue for parents and while some of the comments below may not be accurate, they have been included as they demonstrate the perception that parents hold. If this is the case then this perception needs to be addressed.

- The maze of choices is confusing – which program, what are the best access times, is there flexibility and appropriate support? Families have difficulty in knowing where to start
- Programs are driven by the service, rather than by the client
- Employment agencies lack expertise and understanding and are often driven by ‘funding guidelines’
- There is a perception that some employment services are ‘creaming’ (i.e. not taking on clients who may be seen as high support) in order to retain/gain funding
- Employment services seen as ‘non-productive, non-creative and inflexible’
- There are some examples of good practice by some DEN services. This should not be limited to the ‘lucky few’; there should be an expectation of a right to the same level of quality service response and delivery by all employment services
- Reluctance of employers to employ people with disability, including governments
- Lack of awareness of employers of government benefits and incentives for employing people with disability
- Huge disincentives to attempt anything beyond welfare is threatened by the potential loss of the Disability Support Pension, healthcare card, Disability Employment Network support and post school funding.
- Lack of roles for people with disability within the workplace.
- When working for award wages, this starts a review of the Disability Support Pension (DSP), and in many cases means the loss of the pension. If the job is lost, then often only Newstart is available as reapplying for the DSP may not be an option.
- Under the DEIR funding for ‘skills employability programs’, Disability Employment Networks (DENs) may be inundated with referrals for clients with very minimal support needs who have

been assessed for job suitability. There is a concern that DENs will be overwhelmed with these clients, and not be able to service the clients with higher support needs.

- Respite services deliver post school services that are the same as respite
- Lack of opportunities offered by services for people with disability to engage in work experience/volunteer/unpaid work
- When students with disability apply to Centrelink for DEN referrals, and undergo Job Capacity Assessments (JCA), this starts a review of the DSP. In fear of losing this, many people with disability are not taking the risk and are not applying to DEN's or seeking work. This is a huge disincentive.
- There is a lack of supports for apprenticeships. People who are eligible for Disability Support Pension who wish to undertake apprenticeships must undergo the onerous task of once again providing medical evidence as proof of disability in order to be eligible for the New Apprenticeship Wage Support scheme. This program provides the additional funds for extra learning supports for undertaking apprenticeships. This additional assessment may mean up to 10 weeks delay for the additional study support funding.
- Access to DEN services is restrictive because the program is capped. Many school leavers are finding themselves with nowhere to go.

Recommendations

- Support and smoother access to services/ supports/ work experiences etc. needs to be put in place so students with disabilities will have better understanding of options and less confusion about the process of leaving school.
- DSQ and the Commonwealth investigate ways to provide incentives for people with disabilities to engage in unpaid work/work experience. As they are supported to do the job and gain expertise the employer receives a huge benefit by the unpaid work that costs the employer neither time, money or human resources. Employers are offered incentives to employ people with disability and there are productivity-based rates of pay, but there are no incentives for the people with disability to do unpaid work. If they undertake unpaid work, they are forced to use their post school funding in order to learn in 1:1 situations.
- There is a great need for safeguarding funding for people with disability who attempt work, work experience or volunteering. As a person who receives supported wages must also be receiving the DSP, then those who undertake unpaid work or work experience/training should not be in fear of losing funding. Those who attempt award wage open employment should be able to return to post school funding, support from a DEN and the DSP, should a job be lost. Those who have been in employment will surely want to return to work and this would be a means of support or alternative training in the interim.
- People with disability and their families should be able to direct what activities they want the service to provide. Currently, service providers (both post school and employment) manage clients according to staffing availability and the programs they offer.
- People eligible for the Disability Support Pension should be immediately eligible for programs such as the New Apprenticeship Wage Support scheme, and any other programs or services that they may wish to access. Repeat assessments of a person with a disability is a waste of time, money, resources that could be better directed, and is extremely prohibitive and stressful for the person with a disability and their family.
- Disability employment agencies need to address the perception of families and others that the only clients they will support are "the easy ones". Employment agencies need to demonstrate that they are seeking and finding employment for all their clients, not just the "cream" of the clientele. Ideally employment agencies would be funded by how many people with significant disabilities are employed successfully and how they maintain their jobs.
Employment services need to engage with employers and find niche roles for their clients, not

just find a job that a person may do. Employers and employment service staff must work together to ensure that the person with disability is accepted and valued by other staff members for the role to be successful. (see Jobsupport Inc. Sydney)

- Eliminate the ‘cap’ on DEN services so that school leavers can access the services and the pathways to work.
- The Special Employment Placement Officer role should be reviewed and enhanced.
- Employers should be responsible for the education and training of staff, policies and practices in relation to the employment of people with disability.
- Employers could be encouraged to adopt “affirmative action” policies to employ people with disability, especially if there were more Special Employment Placement Officers in workplaces. While these roles exist in some workplaces, and have worked well in the past, there is a prospect for this role to be advantageous across the workforce. A review and expansion of the role of these Officers is much needed.

Unpaid/Voluntary Work

People with disability want to contribute to the community in which they live. This increases self-worth and confidence. For many people with significant disability, the opportunity to engage in voluntary or unpaid work/work experience is how they can contribute. Currently, the opportunities are few as this usually requires support from a post school service and few services can afford this option.

Recommendations

- Funding incentives should be available for people who contribute to society through unpaid work. This could be done by funding their support requirements from an alternative source other than post school funding. Opportunities for unpaid work often require one-to-one support and this results in overtaxing the meagre amount of post-school funding available to clients.
- There is an incentive for employers to allow people with disability to undertake work experience/training as they gain skills, and the employer receives the benefit from the unpaid work. Cross-government cooperation to promote this would mean more employers would afford these chances to people with disability. There is the prospect for both state and federal government to support this venture by providing funding for support for people with disabilities to do this unpaid work. Eventually, many people will either be employed in the same workplace, or will gain skills to be employed elsewhere.

Tertiary Education

- Limited access to TAFE courses, especially in rural/remote areas
- Limited support to attend courses, especially for people with high support needs or sensory or physical impairments – people often required to provide their own support
- Courses for literacy and numeracy are targeted at people who already possess literacy and numeracy skills. There are no bridging courses available for literacy and numeracy for students who leave school without these basic skill
- Centralisation of skills-based courses/apprenticeships to only two campuses will exclude many people with disability who cannot drive, as public transport is not in the vicinity of the campuses.
- When a person using a DEN service enrolls at TAFE to do further study to enhance employability, they must be suspended from the DEN service. Students at TAFE require additional support for the work experience practical component of their course. Without it 80% fail their course.

Recommendations

- TAFE needs to deliver a broad range of course material for people with disabilities and support from DETA is needed to enable students to attend from rural/remote areas.
- While a teacher, mentor and tutor is available at TAFE, people with high support needs should have access to personal support where required. If every person came with their own support it makes for a very crowded classroom!
- Courses for literacy and numeracy, horticulture etc should have a practical component that services a local business or community centre rather than simply simulated situations. This will establish some connections to possible future employers.
- Literacy and numeracy bridging courses need to be available for students with disability who enrol without those skills despite their numerous years of schooling.
- Skills-based courses/apprenticeships need to be retained in community campuses as this will provide ease of access for students with disability as well as establishing links to local prospective employers.
- Additional supports need to be in place for students accessing TAFE for practical work experience components of the course. This could be provided by the DEN if the clients were retained rather than suspended from the service for the duration of the course.

CONCLUSION

In summary QPPD believe that successful, sustainable employment for people with disability begins at school. If young people with disability are leaving school illiterate (and many are), with inadequate planning in place and insufficient information about 'what is out there' for them, then their chances of gaining purposeful employment are extremely limited. As has been stated in this document, there is a great need for work experience or 'tasting' of various employment options while at school. There needs to be clear, easy to understand information available about courses so that students can choose to pursue their goals for further education. Employers need to be encouraged, through incentives, to include people with disability in their workforce.

While there have been significant commitments by both state and commonwealth governments in the past to improve training and employment outcomes for young people with a disability, as well as numerous research projects, there still remain significant challenges and barriers to be overcome. QPPD advocates for a greater commitment and 'will' to establish cooperative and collaborative mechanisms between the many government departments involved as well as employers so that there is greater participation of young people with disability in the workforce. QPPD is hopeful that this Review will go a long way to realising this vision.