

‘Dumbed Down’: Experiences of disabled people in vocational training and employment in Australia.

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Abstract

This paper explores the social apartheid in the Australian vocational training and employment systems and provides evidence of such behaviour. Drawing on national and international reports, the failures of disability-related equity programmes is measured and some recommendations given.

The paper identifies a vicious cycle of economic, educational and cultural factors that affects: (a) post-school transitional, (b) vocational training, and (c) employment opportunities of people with a disability in Australia. It argues that the concerted effect of these three failures promotes a culture of mediocrity where people with a disability becoming 'dumbed down' – i.e., disadvantaged, discouraged, and demoralised in their vocational training or higher education experiences and in their attempts to gain skills within employment. In this cycle, a failure in any one of these transitional, training or employment programmes significantly limits successes in these other programmes.

The disability apartheid or *apart-ness* (Goggin & Newell, 2004) in our society is evident in the training and employment sectors and is denying many Australians the right to emancipation through education. In this paper, people with a disability are encouraged to raise their personal aspirations and also their expectations of the system while vocational training and employment programmes are encouraged to consider international best practise and explore synergies in our federal, state and commercial sectors.

Rather than asking policy makers to learn from experience, we can learn from the individual experiences of the disabled community. A thorough audit of the post-school experiences of people with an intellectual disability 1998-2007 would be a valuable source from which to mine some future strategies. From these stories we can develop more pro-active disability service agreements and standards similar to European models.

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Introduction

Many people with a disability are functioning well below their ability in training institutions and in the workplace. This situation is consistent with claims from a recent book, *Disability in Australia: Exposing a Social Apartheid* that identifies the oppressive treatment of people with a disability in Australia (Goggin & Newell, 2004), and that disabled people in Australia are facing, *The Discrimination of Low Expectations*, (Rosey, 2008).

This paper adds to this debate by identifying a vicious cycle of economic, educational and cultural factors that affects: (a) post-school transitional, (b) vocational training, and (c) employment opportunities of people with a disability in Australia. It argues that the concerted effect of these three failures promotes a cycle where people with a disability becoming ‘*dumbed down*’ – i.e., disadvantaged, discouraged, and demoralised in their vocational training or higher education experiences and in their attempts to gain skills within employment. In this cycle, a failure in any one of these post-school transitional, training or employment programmes significantly limits successes in these other programmes. Evidence is drawn from a range of quantitative data generated by the international observers such as the OECD, UNESCO, ILO, and our HREOC, NCVET and other sources

In 2004 a report by the International Labour Organisation was optimistic about such Australian programmes to improve vocational training and employment experiences of people with a disability (ILO, 2004). It highlighted the work of the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council (ADTAC) in bridging pathways between school, vocational training and employment and noted the imminent arrival of the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)*. This optimism was premature.

ADTAC ceased operation in July 2005 and the promise of its recommendations have failed to materialise – the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) acknowledges that, ‘The cause of equity appears to have lost ground during the past decade of vocational education and training reform’ (Figgis et al. 2007: 7). Furthermore, the 2007 OECD study, *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers* notes that, ‘Poor overall labour market outcomes of people with disability are partly a result of their lower average skill levels. In [Australia] educational attainment is, on average, substantially lower among persons with disability, both in employment and if unemployed.’ (OECD, 2007: 23). Pilot projects and environmental scans for Best Practice examples provide some optimism but such initiatives are rarely sustained (McDonald, Dickie, Figgis, 2005)

In 2007 a number of reports were commissioned to investigate the continued policy failures of disability training and employment in Australia. Most research considered the *supply side* of the problem such as the ability of training organisations and employment agencies to deliver outcomes (AIHW, 2007: Clark, 2007: Figgis et al, 2007: ILO, 2007: OECD, 2007). Much less research has been devoted to the *demand side* to investigate the low engagement rate of people with disabilities in formal pre-employment training, formal and informal on-the-job training, and their low reengagement rates with training and employment pathways.

Early in 2008, the new Labor government announced the terms of reference for National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy and implemented a new independent statutory body, Skills Australia.

Dumbing Down

Wikipedia (cited 2008) notes that it is a pejorative term that describes, a) over-simplification of issues b) decline in innovation, c) degradation of standards or aspirations and d) trivialisation of issues such learning. It was used in the title of a recent Australian book by Donnelly (2007) that attacks politically correctness, lack of diversity in the curriculum and the lowering of educational expectations of the population. Donnelly, incidentally, is critical of the overall effect on all students and teachers of inclusive classes in mainstream schools while acknowledging the need to treat students individually and support their individualised learning and career aspiration.

The three failures of a) post-school transitional programmes b) training and c) skilling within employment, have a concerted, or combined effect of *dumbing down* people with a disability. Consider, the lack of diversity and innovation in vocational training courses and pathways for people with a disability, the presence of artificial skill-based barriers that impacts on access to on-the-job training, traineeships and career development and the inadequate, and therefore demoralising, transition programmes from school to post-school study and work options.

Groups most affected

Within the commonly used categories of disability, it is those with an intellectual disability, mental health or complex learning needs that are most disadvantaged, discouraged, and demoralised in vocational training and employment experiences. The 2005 study, *People With A Disability In Vocational Education And Training* states:

Of all disability types, VET students with hearing or vision disabilities have the highest probability of passing assessed subjects, and the highest employment outcomes, whereas VET students with intellectual or learning disabilities have the lowest, and well below the average level for all VET students with a disability. Those with about the average levels include people with physical and medical disabilities. Those with just below the average include people with a mental illness and acquired brain impairments (Cavallaro, Foley, Saunders & Bowman, 2005:6) .

Their figures show that the participation rate in VET for students with an intellectual disability has remained almost unchanged from the years 1998 to 2003.

In terms of employment, the lack of qualifications for this population leads to further barriers in employment or precarious forms of employment in low paid and menial work. Studies note that workers with a disability who remain in manual work till middle age are also likely to become unemployment due to general reduction in stamina and other age-related factors (Wilkins.2004; ILO:2007)

Overall, the sad fact is that it is easy to talk a disabled student's ability and aspirations down. As Damien Andersen of NDS states, 'There's a culture of low expectation around these children from school teachers, parents, and just about everybody. It's easy to talk a kid's ability down.' (cited in Rosey, 2008:11)

Access to School to work pathways

CURRENT SITUATION: The OECD (2005) notes the difficulty in gathering statistics on students with a disability as they transition from school. Many students simply become discouraged, move from the pathway to employment or further training and are not tracked in national statistical systems. The problem, however, is still present, for example, in the more recent OECD study, *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers* it states, "Most worryingly, the education gap between people with and without disability is not closing for the younger age groups, but instead widening in all four countries [Spain, UK, Australia & Luxemburg]" (OECD:2007).

A 2006 study in Queensland on school transitions for disabled students noted the gulf between school and post school options. On one side, teachers were not skilled in this area, there were few school transition officers and interagency networks were difficult to set up and maintain. On the other side, post school services were not funded to work with the student while still at school and the Pension and Supported Wages System discouraged engagement of students with full time employment. (Meadows, et al, 2006). The development and maintenance of such networks, however, rests on the shoulders of school transition officers, TAFE equity officers, Disability Employment staff and New Apprenticeship staff who are all tied to their organisation's own agenda. In fact, across Australia, there are only 31 directly funded Disability Coordination Officers (DCOs) to work somewhat independently across the sectors to enhance interagency networks. The DCOs in turn are hosted by universities or other players and agendas to support or highlight the auspicing body taint the independence of the DCO's interagency efforts.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

- Research demonstrates that students are leaving the schools from Year 10 on and miss out on formal transition programmes that start after year 11. The final report of ADTAC noted that:

The statistics show that many students with a disability leave school before Year 11. This is because there have been limited transitional pathways and appropriate support systems in place between the school system, vocational education and training, and employment. (ADTAC, 2004:21)

- In the report *People With A Disability In Vocational Education And Training: A Statistical Compendium.*, it states:

As a whole, students with a disability in VET have prior schooling education levels strikingly far below those for all other VET students. About 55% of all people with a

disability had left school at or before the end of Year 10, compared with 40% for all VET students. This suggests that developing educational pathways before Year 10 for people with a disability is important as part of an early-intervention approach. (Considine et al, 2005:6)

- School leavers with a disability have atypical skills profiles. Unfortunately, such idiosyncratic profiles are not capitalised upon (Kearns, 2007). Students are dumbed down by ignoring particular strengths and focussing on skills deficits that will deny opportunities to many courses and work options.
- The transition of students with a disability from school to vocational training and employment crosses various jurisdictions. Therefore the funding of the transition is problematic. Federally funded universities, employment agencies, disability coordination offers are contrasted with state funded education, training and apprenticeships programs that all operate on different performance outcomes. These differing targets force the agencies to send conflicting messages to the families and school leavers with a disability.
- Support from the National Disability Coordination Officers commences at the Certificate III level. Therefore the scaffolding necessary to take a disabled student to this point is often absent due to lack of funded staff to build this scaffold from school through the Pre-vocational, then Certificate I & II levels of training.

Further problems are encountered if the student with a disability leaves school early. The OECD study *From Initial Education to Working Life: Making Transitions Work* notes that such students are more likely to be inactive and will find pathways difficult to navigate later. These school leavers are also likely to end up in 'job swirling' between a range of lowly paid casualised employment (2000).

RECOMMENDATIONS: The University of Canberra study states that, 'Transition issues for students with a disability need to be given a priority within education systems' (2007:92).

The OECD study *From Initial Education to Working Life: Making Transitions Work* recommends these features of successful transition systems. These are:

- A healthy economy.
- Well organised pathways that connect initial education with work and further study.
- Widespread opportunities to combine workplace experience with education.
- Tightly knit safety nets for those at risk.
- Good information and guidance; and
- Effective institutions and processes. (OECD, 2000:13)

Recommendations from HREOC report (2005) include:

- a) ongoing consultation and cooperation between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to ensure more coordinated work placement support when students with disability are transiting from secondary, tertiary and vocational education and training institutions to the workplace;

(c) provision of appropriate supports for work experience, traineeship and apprenticeship schemes (including the New Apprenticeship Access Program (NAAP) and the School-based New Apprenticeships Program (SNAP));

(d) availability of a case manager to ensure successful transition and assist with the planning, funding and organisation of any necessary supports and modifications;

(e) clearer pathways from secondary, tertiary and vocational education and training institutions to government-funded employment service providers;

Responding to disability issues is about responding to diversity - as noted in the 2007 *Project to Improve the Learning Outcomes of Students with Disabilities in the Early, Middle and Post Compulsory Years of Schooling*:

An over-arching conclusion of the project is that the education of 'students with disabilities in the mainstream' is more about catering for diversity than it is about specific disability or "special needs" issues (University of Canberra, 2007:27)

More effort can be directed to capitalising on the idiosyncratic skills profile of many school leavers with a disability. For example Kearns, (2007) encourages such students to compile a Customised Competency Portfolio in which modules and subjects from a range of courses are completed and that exposes their skills and strengths. This competency profile can be developed from a range of study options that can include:

1. Accredited Short Courses
2. Distance Education
3. Home schooling options & Correspondence School
4. Lecture Audits (including U3A)
5. On Line courses
6. Private Colleges
7. Recognition of Prior Learning or Recognition of Current Competencies
8. School based Traineeships and Apprenticeships:
9. TAFE or University (pre-tertiary study)
10. VET in school

Access to post school education and vocational training

CURRENT SITUATION: IN the 2006-07 7 budget review, it was recognised by DEST that:

People with a disability continue to be significantly under-represented in post-school education and training. While around 20% of the Australian population has a disability, only 5.8% of the total VET population and 3.2% of the higher education population self-identify at enrolment as having a disability.

(http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/robb/budget07/bud06_07.htm).

The national vocational strategy 2004-2010 notes, 'People with a disability are significantly underrepresented in the national system, and their training is not leading to jobs often enough.' (ANTA, 2003:13). In the report *People With A Disability In Vocational Education And Training: A Statistical Compendium* . Statistics are available to 2003 and the following key points are made:

Of the five recognised equity groups in vocational education and training (VET)—women, Indigenous people, people with a disability, people in regional/rural areas and people from non-English speaking backgrounds—people with a disability, as a whole, have the lowest levels of educational achievement and employment outcomes from VET.

As a whole, students with a disability in VET have prior schooling education levels strikingly far below those for all other VET students. About 55% of all people with a disability had left school at or before the end of Year 10, compared with 40% for all VET students. This suggests that developing educational pathways before Year 10 for people with a disability is important as part of an early-intervention approach.

As a whole, people with a disability are less likely to undertake/attain higher-level Australian Qualifications Framework qualifications (such as diplomas and certificate IIIs) and are more likely to undertake/achieve certificate I or II qualifications: their subject completion rates are lower than those of students with no declared disability.

However, type of disability does matter: educational achievements and outcomes from VET vary significantly between disability groups, suggesting that different improvement strategies may be necessary for different groups of people with a disability in VET.

Of all disability types, VET students with hearing or vision disabilities have the highest probability of passing assessed subjects, and the highest employment outcomes, whereas VET students with intellectual or learning disabilities have the lowest, and well below the average level for all VET students with a disability. Those with about the average levels include people with physical and medical disabilities. (Cavallaro et al, 2005:6)

The actual figures may be worse if self-reporting issues are considered. For example Cavallaro et al note:

...both the VET data on student numbers with a disability and the data on the total Australian population with a disability from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) rely on self-reporting. The self-reporting of disability status in the national VET data collection is problematic also because 280 913 students (16.4% of total) did not indicate their disability status. (Cavallaro et al, 2005:8-9)

Furthermore Considine et al (2005) note that across equity groups, it is the younger people with a disability that are most likely to miss out on VET opportunities and their probability of access to university courses is worse (2005)

Access for people with learning difficulties to university places continues to be embarrassing. University culture has not helped with this situation, where a study *Guidelines and Procedures to assist Universities to Examine the Inherent Requirements of their Courses (When Accommodating Students with Disabilities and/or Medical Conditions)* by Watts et al (2000) was followed by *Disability discrimination in education and the defence of unjustifiable hardship* (Waldeck & Guthrie, 2004).

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS :

- Our National training framework provides national training packages that have amalgamated the numerous courses offered previously. Certificate I & II courses within these packages, however, are not provided by many RTOs and this prevents many students with a disability from joining a skills pathways

- Fears of eroding standards discourages Training Package developers from encouraging RTOs to customise courses to capitalise on the skills of students with a disability and remove some of the underpinning knowledge and other prerequisites of access to the course.
- Universities may be swayed by advice from professional and trade associations on the suitability of some people with a disability and deny people with a disability to a course based on this advice (Watts et al, 2000).

RECOMMENDATIONS: Many players influence the national training framework in Australia. Training institutions and trade/industry associations have moulded many Training Packages without consideration of the equity reviews required by earlier legislation. Reinstatement of these reviews will open up more pathways and remove some of the barriers.

We can expand the range of electives in training courses so that the people with a disability can choose modules that fit with their idiosyncratic skill profile. Examine the core modules for artificially high levels of literacy or numeracy and trial training packages on selected equity groups.

Recommendations from HREOC report (2005):

(b) improvements to the Disability New Apprentice Wage Support (DNAWS) scheme, including increased funding;

(c) provision of appropriate supports for work experience, traineeship and apprenticeship schemes (including the New Apprenticeship Access Program (NAAP) and the School-based New Apprenticeships Program (SNAP));

(d) availability of a case manager to ensure successful transition and assist with the planning, funding and organisation of any necessary supports and modifications;

(f) public sector leadership in recruiting people with disability into work experience, traineeship and apprenticeship schemes.

Access to career pathways and on-the job training

CURRENT SITUATION: The OECD (2003:38) notes that “It is striking that for some countries such as Australia with above average overall employment rates – nevertheless have below average disability employment ratios”. In 2007 the International Labour Organisation similarly states:

In the world of work, persons with disabilities tend to experience high unemployment and have lower earnings than persons without disabilities. They are often relegated to low-level, low-paid jobs with little social and legal security, or segregated from the mainstream labour market. Many are underemployed. This affects their self confidence. Many become

discouraged and drop out. Yet experience shows that when they find jobs suited to their skills, abilities and interests, they can make significant contributions in the workplace (ILO:2007:38).

Many people with a disability are *dumbed down* because they cannot gain employment due to the rigors of recruitment and selection where artificially high prerequisites of skill are used to filter out such applicants. Indeed, such prerequisites are more effective at discriminating than other aspects of the recruitment process. These selection criteria are set by a number of players. Industry and trade associations encourage high levels of skill on entry to raise the status of their industry or trade. Unions and employee associations also promote similar skills levels to influence Awards and to set attractive pay scales.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

- There is an unmet demand for disability employment services. The recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) noted from 2003 data that, '6,100 people who said that they could work with special assistance and their main reason for not looking for a job is their own illness or disability..... the baseline estimate of unmet demand for employment services [for such a population] in 2005 is projected to be 2,200 people'. (2007:69).
- A large proportion of people with an intellectual disability are employed on the Supported Wage System. Their pay rates are calculated on a productivity measure alone and does not consider competencies. This discourages workers from improving skills.
- The Disability Service Standards are not proactive in this area. Employment Service providers are not encouraged to place their clients in learning-rich environments, to push for on-the job training or encourage their application for promotional positions once employed.
- 'Credential creep' works against disabled workers. It refers to the increasing tendency for hiring criteria, particularly those of education level and/or qualifications, to exceed those which are required to successfully perform the work (Livingstone 1999).

In Australia, credential creep has gone hand-in-hand with the increasing expectation among employers that workers be 'job ready' and has coincided with declining levels of employer-provided and -funded training. Whereas VET once provided training that complemented workplace skill formation, it is now responsible, in some respects, for *replacing* workplace training. Credential creep has not been restricted to high-paid or high-skilled jobs and is increasingly affecting low-paid, low-skilled and entry-level work (Considine, Watson, & Hall, 2005).
- The motivation of disabled workers to learn and to gain certificates and competencies is not considered enough when negotiating employment. Disabled people are seen as passive consumers of employment support and are criticised for showing a reluctance to jump from their pension to a job that is often precarious in its contractual tenure. Vocational training incentives can bridge this gap.

Other contributing factors include the enlargement of jobs where workers are required to have a broad range of set skills and the unfounded bias in the workplace where people with a disability are seen as a health & safety risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Disability employment services need more time to train and conduct skills assessments of their clients before and after placement into employment. (FACS:2003). Review the Supported Wage System to reward competencies as well as productivity and integrate these skills assessments into a strategy that builds the Customised Competency Portfolio) of each client. (Kearns, 2008).

People with 'skill spikes' (a narrow range of high skill in one area) can be placed in self-managing teams or semi-autonomous teams in the workplace where their particular skills can be capitalised on and their weaknesses covered by other team members (Kearns, 1995).

Self – employment is another outcome that can benefit people with idiosyncratic skills. For example, E-Bay offers opportunities for disabled people with cataloguing as a special skill to commercialise this interest.

Social firms that seek innovation in employment strategies are encouraged by the association representing disability employment services (Macali, 2006). The extension of the UK model in Australia via SoFA (Social Firms Australia) is worth some consideration. (<http://www.socialfirms.org.au/>)

Seek innovation and watch for synergies within the organisation. As an example, employees are required to complete reports when hazards are discovered in the workplace but literacy and handwriting concerns of many employees from disadvantaged backgrounds discourages them from attempting such tasks and this is a concern to management. The provision of photographic hazard forms where the employee can simply tick the appropriate type of hazard, the location, sign and hand to administration is an innovation that benefits the employer and all other employees with literacy barriers

A Concerted Impact

The failures of these: (a) post-school transitional, (b) vocational training, and (c) employment experiences, of people with a disability in Australia create a vicious cycle through the life journey of the disabled person in Australia. In this cycle, a failure in any one of these transitional, training or employment programmes significantly limits successes in these other programmes.

First, School Transition Officers and other educators are caught in a *Catch 22* situation. On one hand, they wish to encourage students to reach for high aspirations and yet on the other hand, due to the inadequate training and employment pathways, do not want to mislead or disappoint students and families and therefore may encourage a mediocre pathway that fits with the current reality. This culture of

mediocrity is conveyed to the VET and employment networks, who in turn, sustain a culture of mediocrity in their dealings with employers.

Second, Vocational trainers and RTOs are bound to deliver courses within the national training framework. This framework in turn relies on feedback from employers on skills and pathways in developing courses for people with learning barriers or other disabilities. As a result the vocational trainers are limited in the suite of courses that can be adequately customised to allow entry for people with learning disabilities, sensory disability or other disabilities affected by the common forms of training delivery. (Higher Education has broader options but the experience of universities to work creatively with disabled students is marginal when the statistics of inclusion in higher education are considered).

Third, employers have little experience in providing career pathways for disabled workers as such people are generally employed in marginal work such as unskilled, casual, part-time or short-term contracts. The Disabled New Apprentice Wage Support Scheme offers an opportunity to expose employers to disability issues in a positive way but unfortunately, the uptake in this programme is well below expectations. For example, statistics from 2003 show just 1.3% participation of people with disability in apprenticeships and traineeships (Cavallaro et al, 2005).

Broad policy implications

A number of Federal and state policies are relevant to the current situation where people with a disability are dumbed down in post-school transition, vocational training and employment. We can consider the CSTDA, the national disability service standards and the Disability Standards for Education.

The issues that needs to be addressed is not so much in meeting the needs of these people and more about addressing their aspirations. This is a subtle difference between needs and aspirations but unless the latter objective is considered explicitly in service standards the objective can be ignored.

Conclusion

The vicious cycle of 'dumbing down' people with a disability in school transition, vocational training and employment has been described and explored in this paper. The disability apartheid or *apart-ness* (Goggin & Newell, 2004) in our society is evident in the training and employment sectors and is denying many Australians the right to emancipation through education.

People with a disability are encouraged to raise their personal aspirations. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere wrote that oppressed people can be liberated through education. Such an education would not conform and mould people to fit into the roles expected by society, but it would prepare them to realize their own values and reality, reflect and study critically their world, and move into action to transform it. (1972). Likewise, George Bernard Shaw would talk about being unreasonable. In his opinion reasonable people accepted the status quo while unreasonable people were

unsatisfied and sought improvement and change. Therefore all progress relied on the *unreasonable person*. People with a disability and their families are also encouraged to become unreasonable and raise their expectations of the current Australian system of vocational training and employment support.

Turning to policy making and service delivery, Vocational training and employment programmes are encouraged to consider international best practise and explore synergies in our federal, state and commercial sectors. Experience has shown that when there is conjunction between disability and training/ employment, the response is either fear or innovation. Fear produces barriers and resentment on both sides, where as innovation produces clear benefits to the organisation and to other discouraged or disadvantaged groups in the vocational training and employment sectors.

Rather than asking policy makers to learn from experience, we can learn from the individual experiences of the disabled community. A thorough audit of the post-school experiences of people with an intellectual disability 1998-2007 would be a valuable source from which to mine some future strategies.

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