How well do Australian schools enable sustainable employment opportunities for students with disabilities?

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Australia’s employment rate for people with disabilities was ranked 13th of 19 OECD member countries surveyed (OECD 2007). It was also the lowest of 16 countries for employment of people on a disability-related benefit, and the highest of the 16 countries for failing to engage people on a disability-related benefit in paid work.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 requires that students with a disability are treated ‘on the same basis’ as other students and that ‘reasonable adjustments’ be made to provide these students with the opportunities and choices comparable to those available to students without disabilities. However, a national inquiry into employment and disability found that in 2003 only 53% of people with a disability participated in the workforce (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2005). Of particular concern are the findings that people with a disability were under-represented in vocational training and training systems, and that there were poor links between school and post-school programs.

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) and the Principals’ Association of Specialist Schools Victoria (PASS) addressed these issues at the nation’s major special education conference, Transitions: facilitating change for students with special needs, held in Melbourne earlier this year. The conference provided educators and policy makers with high quality research to drive best practice in student transitions from early childhood to adult and post-school options, not only in Victoria but across Australia.
Dr Denis Meadows examined the Australian transitions in the Des English Memorial Lecture entitled *Where did all our students go?: post-school outcomes for students with a disability* (Meadows 2009). He discussed his report to the Queensland Government looking at outcomes for students who had left Queensland schools from 2000–05. He found a gap in the research literature on this subject for Australia, and while there were some project reports, they were mostly descriptive with little outcome data.

*Making your way in a cold world – promoting the school-to-community transition success of adolescents with emotional or behavioural disabilities* was the keynote presentation by Professor Michael Bullis, Dean of the College of Education and Sommerville-Knight Professor of Education, Secondary Special Education and Transitions Research at the University of Oregon, USA. Professor Bullis highlighted the current research relating to vocational transitions and employment for adolescents with disabilities and emotional and behavioural disorders. He advocated a developmental approach for school-to-community transition with five vocational phases: learning, responsibility, transition, independence, and employability.

The key components in the final school year, for a successful transition to post-school options, are: year-round services, consistent routines, high expectations, academic learning, competitive work, a realistic focus and real-life decision making. Professor Bullis argued for a well planned approach, wide ranging educational strategies that encompass key program structures and components, educators who specialise in transition, community partnerships, administrative challenges, multi-agency collaboration and staff training (Bullis 2009).

The workshop, *Should you always agree with the boss?: job-related social skills training for adolescents*, addressed the essential elements of work: social skills, communication, body language, interaction with supervisors and co-workers, and problem solving, within a framework of Working at Gaining Employment Skills (WAGES). Professor Bullis maintains the importance of Foundation Skills and Attitudes: locus of control, teamwork, communication, problem solving, enthusiasm, dependability and honesty as the essentials in building social skills and resilience for the workplace. This, coupled with instruction and ‘on-the-job training’, is the hallmark of successful transition to work.

The 1960 initiative of Montague Special School in South Melbourne to create the first work experience program in a Victorian school established a model and process for all schools. Heatherwood School in Donvale is just one of many schools using this model. The school has 250 secondary school age students with a mild intellectual disability, many of them having another underlying disability such as emotional or behavioural disorders.

Heatherwood offers in-situ training models in the community (for example, at Waverley Industries and Boronia Gym) covering work experience, work placement, traineeships, and apprenticeships. Mark Walker, the Transition Work Placement Co-ordinator and author of the Learn to Work program, has developed a range of employment opportunities for more than 40 senior students in Years 11 and 12. The strength of the program is its emphasis on individual students’ aspirations, the strong collaborations with students, families, employers and agencies, the intensive training and negotiations with all stakeholders, as well as targeted skills instruction in the classroom. Heatherwood collaborates with a broad range of employers, providers and agencies so that all students experience a range of work experience as they progress through the school.
In preparing all adolescents for a future life, it is important to provide the vital pathways and transitions that young people need in order to grow into well-rounded adults. Work provides opportunities for practising friendship skills, community and lifelong learning. Both the research and experience show that by improving preparation and planning, the outcomes are improved. The emphasis on emotional and social learning and interpersonal development, not only in the latter years, but from an early age, is central to positive student outcomes in all areas of learning. A systematic approach in training for work and life, where practice is research based, where standards and opportunities formulated under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 are embedded, provides the ingredients for young people with a disability to live ‘an ordinary life’.

**Bibliography**


