

## **Integrating Deaf Students – Mainstream Vocational Training and Education Programmes Adjust to Specific Needs in Australia**

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### **The Challenge**

The Commonwealth of Australia enacted strong anti-discrimination legislation in its Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 and has a progressive record of inclusive policies for integrating people with disabilities into its state-funded programmes. However, legislation and policies do not always translate into reality. Australia's vocational education and training system (VET) is the main vocational training system for graduates of secondary schools. All VET courses are available to students with disabilities, but participation rates remain low.

The situation poses particular difficulties for Deaf individuals (see box). Mainstream secondary schooling does not necessarily prepare Deaf graduates who speak their own language, known as Auslan, for university or even vocational education, which is taught in English. Deaf students can therefore be at a significant disadvantage when they seek higher educational or vocational opportunities.

The challenge facing the Australian VET system in 2000 was how to turn policy into reality or, stated another way, how to provide the necessary services to support students with disabilities within the mainstream system.

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### **Meeting the Challenge**

The Government responded with its Bridging Pathways National Strategy for People with a Disability in Vocational Education. Using that framework and the funding it provided, the Adelaide Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system developed a model support programme to address the specific obstacles facing Deaf students. In keeping with the goals of Bridging Pathways, the programme allows for the integration into mainstream vocational training of Deaf students and illustrates how a government initiative can have a practical impact on people at the community level.

**The Good Practice:** Disability-specific support services to integrate Deaf students into mainstream vocational training.



### • Background •

By offering education and skills training, the VET system provides the theoretical knowledge and skills needed for specific jobs. It delivers formal training that results in recognized qualifications at six different levels, from basic to more advanced. The system offers training in most industries, including mechanics, construction, horticulture and electronics. The most popular fields are business administration, economics, services, hospitality and transportation. In 2000, more than 37 per cent of VET students took coursework in these fields. More than 4,000 registered training organizations offered VET programmes, according to statistics gathered a year later. The training entities include Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, universities, adult education providers and others.

**Bridging Pathways.** In June 2000, the Government adopted the Bridging Pathways National Strategy for People with Disabilities in Vocational Education and its blueprint for action. The strategy is a five-year commitment to improving opportunities for people with disabilities in vocational education and training. At its heart is an attempt to bring together several relevant sectors – government, disability and private – to address the inequities in the vocational training system that pose barriers to the employment of people with disabilities.

The goals of the Bridging Pathways strategy are to:

- Increase access to and successful participation in all fields of study by people with disabilities;
- Focus on employment outcomes;
- Create an accountable system that yields equitable results;
- Promote lifelong learning; and
- Enable people with disabilities to make greater contributions to society in terms of their economic and social life participation.

Major initiatives at the national level include:

- Development of an equity advisory service to ensure that national training packages are inclusive of people with disabilities;
- Establishment of Regional Disability Coordination Officer programmes to provide greater coordination of services for people with disabilities in vocational education and training at the regional level;
- Emphasis on research that will identify new methods to enhance equitable access to training for people with disabilities;
- Development of frameworks and systems to identify and raise awareness about important issues; and
- Formation of strategic partnerships between training institutes and the disability and private sectors.

### The Deaf Community in Australia

The Australian Deaf community identifies itself as a specific cultural group and considers itself as “Deaf people” rather than as “being deaf”. The community uses its own language, which is known as Auslan. Auslan has its own grammar that does not translate into the written word. For people who have grown up using Auslan, English is essentially a second language.

According to Karen Lloyd, manager of the Australian Association of the Deaf, “Education is probably the single most important issue for Deaf people. Generations of Deaf children have been and continue to be ‘educated’ in a system controlled by people who are not deaf and who focus on deafness as a defect that needs to be ‘fixed’. The system attempts to educate them by using a language (English) that they do not know fluently and cannot fully access. ...[A]nd these generations of Deaf children have emerged with poor English skills, poor education, poor general knowledge, poor self-esteem and so on and so forth. Employment is probably the second most important issue for Deaf people. I say second because education is the key to appropriate and satisfying employment.”

### • How the Adelaide Institute of TAFE Supports Deaf Students in Vocational Education and Training •

TAFE institutes are a significant component of Australia’s vocational and education training system. The Adelaide Institute of TAFE (AIT) is based in the city centre of Adelaide and has an overall campus enrolment of 15,000 students. The number of new students each year who acknowledge a disability ranges between 500 and 600. Some 30 to 40 Deaf students are enrolled in AIT’s literacy and numeracy programmes.

Courses range from hospitality and catering to clerical and other office work to the visual and performing arts. The duration of study programmes extends from six months to four years. The AIT campus includes a job placement office open to all students. The placement team works with the business and industrial community and directs students with disabilities to job opportunities. In addition, the team organizes employment forums throughout the school year that bring together students with disabilities. Specialized government placement agencies for people with disabilities operate outside the TAFE system.

**Entering AIT.** Upon high school graduation, a Deaf student applies to a particular course at AIT. With student selection based on academic merit, a Deaf student competes on par with other students. At the time of enrolment, students are invited to disclose voluntarily whether they have a disability and whether they need special support services.

**Support services.** Once a Deaf student is enrolled, he or she is encouraged to visit the Disability Liaison Officer to discuss any support needs. Some of the support services available at AIT include:

- Interpreters who can translate lectures into Auslan, a relatively costly form of support (US\$25 per hour).
- Specialized government-funded study programmes to assist groups of Deaf students in addressing literacy and numeracy difficulties.
- Auslan classes, which are essential for Deaf students who experience a mature onset of deafness and/or for students who grew up in homes in which Auslan was not used.
- Two certificate-level courses in Auslan. Students who wish to become Auslan interpreters are required to pass both certificates before progressing to the AIT courses in interpreting. A series of training workshops in basic Auslan are also available to interested staff and for people in the broader community. General instructors have access to a range of written material on strategies for supporting Deaf students in their classes.
- Counsellors available to all students to discuss personal, academic or integration struggles. The counselling staff includes one person trained in Auslan, though an interpreter also may be used in sessions with a Deaf person.
- Individualized services. For example, some Deaf students seek assistance with class assignments. In addition, three Auslan lecturers are on staff, and a Deaf general staff member is available to communicate directly with Deaf students. Finally, AIT is one of the few public facilities in Adelaide that has public telephone typewriters (TTY) for student use on campus.

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## Accomplishments

The success of AIT's support services for Deaf students has yet to be measured quantitatively, at least based on employment measures. However, the following provides some insight into the accomplishments of AIT's success in supporting Deaf students:

- A visit to the AIT campus suggests that Auslan is relatively mainstream. Its use is not limited to Deaf students. Given the availability of workshops and certificate courses in Auslan and interpreting, a number of hearing students practise and communicate in Auslan on campus. Deaf students are also taking the initiative to develop a Deaf culture on campus and have organized charity functions and other events.
- Auslan courses at AIT are making an impact on a new generation of high school teachers. The South Australian Education Department recently made a number of scholarships available to high school teachers for Auslan training at AIT. A large number of teachers are now fluent in Auslan. Their fluency is beginning to have a positive impact on educational outcomes, particularly in terms of the literacy and numeracy of Deaf students.
- A new generation of Deaf high school students is being influenced not only by teachers but also by AIT's Deaf students who have produced a video to encourage students to consider future study and training in the TAFE system. Deaf AIT students make presentations at campus Come and Try Tertiary Study Forums.
- Government and NGO staff members regularly participate in AIT training programmes in basic Auslan.

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## Lessons Learned

Given AIT's experience with opening its campus and classrooms to encourage the inclusion of Deaf students, most of the lessons learned involve communication:

**An adequate number of staff members must be able to communicate in Auslan.** For students to communicate, feel comfortable and learn, a sufficient number of staff must be trained in sign language. AIT arranges a series of nine one-hour workshops for front-counter staff in the basics of Auslan.

**Training/educating the teaching staff is critical to winning their support.** Basic sign language, awareness-building sessions and specific instruction in strategies for supporting Deaf students all need to be part of the training programme. It is also important to educate teaching staff about the tendency to interpret any learning problem as related to a disability rather than to the inadequacy of the student's earlier education or some other factor.

**Budget limits for provision of interpreters are typically too low.** The cost of interpreters is relatively expensive, and Deaf students are concerned about budget limits on interpreting services. More funding resources are needed.

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### Looking Forward

Some Deaf students are now working with students studying video production to create an instructional video on how to lecture to and how to teach and work with Deaf students in the classroom. The production should be completed by the end of 2003.

The Auslan programme plans to continue with the existing level of support and to work collaboratively with other service providers to educate and train members of the Deaf community. AIT plans to offer additional short Auslan courses for staff within the TAFE system and for workers from community service agencies that deal with Deaf clients. The expectation is that such workers will grow increasingly sensitive to the needs of Deaf students such that the number of service consumers will increase.

New students continue to be accepted into the literacy and numeracy programmes targeted to the Deaf. Both programmes are likely entry points for awareness about deafness and the acceptance of Deaf persons into the AIT or other campuses of the TAFE system.

Plans call for a focus on evaluation. AIT is seeking to partner with a university to assess its services for students with a range of disabilities, including blindness, mobility impairments and mental health challenges in addition to deafness. Such a formal evaluation will also assess the cultural sensitivity of those who come in contact with Deaf students at AIT.

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### Replication

The integration of people with disabilities into mainstream training institutions requires the administration's commitment and investment, which is often mandated by national policy. However, a policy is not necessary for training programmes and institutions to include students with disabilities and provide them with the necessary supports to succeed. Vocational training institutes planning to replicate the services offered at AIT should consider the following factors, many of which will apply to integrating other disability groups as well:

- Involve the Deaf community. It is essential to engage the Deaf community in developing any services or system that affects them.
- Ensure the availability of technology enhancements. Web sites, mobile telephone short message services (SMS), facsimile machines (invented by a Deaf person) and the visual message capability of telephone typewriters (TTYs) expedite communication for all cultures. These visual information sources, as well as staff

trained in their use, are important strategies for welcoming and assisting Deaf students.

- Engage in special outreach to Deaf students and applicants. It is important to visit schools and organizations to encourage Deaf students to participate in vocational education and training. Interpreters should be available to participate in both outreach efforts and information sessions to address the needs of prospective students.
- Undertake staff training and awareness building. Staff should be trained in basic signing skills that include, at a minimum, greeting messages so that Deaf students feel welcome. A training programme in basic sign language should be developed for interested staff, including frontline staff (such as those involved in course information and enrolment). Interpreters should be available to assist Deaf students with their initial contacts.
- Appoint special disability officers. The office and role of the Disability Liaison Officer or Student Support Officer should be established to coordinate all support services. Such an individual is a vital point of contact for both staff and students in providing information and training and in assessing and arranging support services (such as interpreters, additional educational support, counselling and so forth).
- Provide a range of language support services. It is incorrect to assume that the provision of an interpreter will accommodate all the needs of a Deaf student. Many Deaf students have the same need for language support as a person from another language background.
- Adopt creative and wide-ranging teaching methods. Adult learning methods such as working in a circle or breaking into small groups not only accommodates Deaf students and interpreters but also facilitates a valuable interactive learning environment for all students. The use of subtitled videos, PowerPoint presentations, handouts of lecture notes and Web links on course material are some of the many strategies available to ensure the clarity and availability of course material for all students.
- Create support groups and activities. Support groups of deaf students and activities for Deaf students can provide support and minimize isolation. Deaf students should be included in mainstream student events and activities. Special learning groups for Deaf students can address any deficits in sign language or literacy or numeracy skills.
- Address issues related to occupational health and safety. Interpreters require at least a ten-minute break each hour because of the physical demands of their role. Similarly, Deaf students require occupational health and safety training, especially for how to handle emergencies. Centre staff should ensure that signs are appropriately posted and clearly indicate emergency exit routes. A visual emergency alert warning system is ideal.
- Engage in advocacy and lobbying. In view of the difficulty in securing needed financial resources for interpreting services, staff and student training in sign language and wide-ranging support services for Deaf students, programme administrators will likely have to engage in lobbying efforts to ensure that decision makers comply with current policies and mandates, such as Bridging Pathways.

For More Information

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