

Social and economic outcomes from VET in schools for people with disabilities: initial findings from an Australian national longitudinal study

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Abstract

Low workforce participation contributes to social and economic exclusion of people with disabilities. The lack of vocational opportunities and pathways in the transition from school can trap people with disabilities into non-vocational alternatives to employment with poor employment prospects. VET and VET in schools (VETiS) are strong vocational pathways with good employment outcomes, particularly VET or VETiS which includes some form of work-based training such as apprenticeships and traineeships. This paper presents initial findings from a three-year national longitudinal study into social and economic outcomes for apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities funded by NCVET. The paper will account for social and economic outcomes reported among the subset of research participants who undertook their training as part of VETiS (n=56). Initial findings suggest strong social and economic graduate outcomes. Australian policy encourages people with disabilities actively to participate in the workforce to the full extent of their abilities although available supports to initiate and sustain a vocational pathway such as VETiS can be improved. Increasing the evidence base of graduate outcomes can also encourage more people with disabilities to embark on a vocational pathway in the transition from school.

Introduction

Many people with disabilities experience social and economic exclusion related to low workforce participation, high unemployment, poverty, high welfare dependency, discrimination, and poor physical and mental health (ABS 2009; AIHW 2009; OECD 2007; Australian Government 2009b; National People with Disabilities and Carers Council and FaHCSIA 2009). National policies to improve social and economic outcomes include strategies to support people with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools (VETiS) is a crucial strategy which provides a vocational pathway for young people with disabilities in their transition from school. For some, it is an introduction to the possibility of post-school employment while for others it provides an opportunity to enter their industry or profession of choice with the support of their school and possibly other agencies such as Disability Employment Services (DES) which are funded by the Australian Government to support people with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. Following the *Lighthouse Initiative* a decade ago, which consisted of three VETiS pilot projects for people with disabilities (Barnett 2002a, 2002b, 2002c;

McGregor Tan Research & Associates 2003), research and programs have focused more broadly on VET, apprenticeships, traineeships, and work experience for people with disabilities.

Background

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2012) defined disability as ‘one or more of 17 limitations, restrictions or impairments which have lasted or are likely to last, for a period of six months or more, and which restrict a person’s everyday activities’. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2010), four million Australians (18.5% of the population) had a disability in 2009 of whom 2.2 million were working-aged (14.8% of working-age Australians). The workforce participation rate (in employment or looking for work) was 54% for people with disabilities compared to 83% for people without disability (ABS 2010). Working-aged Australians with disabilities whose impairments inhibit employment may be eligible for the Disability Support Pension (DSP). In June 2011, 818,850 DSP recipients were registered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA 2012). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2010) view the DSP and other government supports for people with disabilities as insufficient to ensure a high standard of living as well as costly to the government. Supporting people with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment as well as facilitating pathways into employment are important strategies to improve social and economic inclusion. It can also be cost-effective as economic modelling has identified supporting equity groups to undertake and complete VET, including people with disabilities, leading to substantial government savings (National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011).

Employment can mitigate social and economic exclusion of people with disabilities (Bagshaw and Fowler 2008; Australian Government 2009b). VET and work-based training such as apprenticeships and traineeships are valuable employment pathways for people with disabilities (Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011b; National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011; Bagshaw and Fowler 2008; Luftig and Muthert 2005). Work-based or work-related VET will lead to better outcomes as some VET courses and lower level certificates in particular are used as alternatives to employment for people with disabilities (National VET Equity Advisory Council 2011; Cocks and Harvey 2008; Cavallaro et al. 2005). Vocational development in the transition from school for young people with disabilities will raise subsequent employment expectations. This is crucial as there are low vocational expectations for people with disabilities (Grigal, Hart, and Migliore 2011). The Australian government is committed to support vocational pathways for young people with disabilities through the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) program (Australian Government 2009a). The NDCO program provides opportunities for high school students with disabilities to participate in work-experience, VETiS, and school-based apprenticeships or traineeships.

VETiS facilitates school completion and transition from school to employment (Clarke 2012). Research to date on VETiS for people with disabilities has focused on facilitating participation with a high emphasis on ‘work-readiness’ although subsequent employment has also been documented (Barnett 2002a, 2002b; McGregor Tan Research & Associates 2003). The *readiness* model can exclude people with disabilities from many areas of everyday life

that people without disabilities take for granted: where and how to live, what work or other daily activities to undertake, and how and with whom to spend leisure time. It can *trap* people with disabilities in Australian Disability Enterprises (previously referred to as sheltered workshops) where workers with disabilities may spend their whole life without *qualifying* for open employment (Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011b). Proponents of the readiness model emphasise developing sufficient levels of skills and confidence before embarking on employment. The *place-then-train* model, on the other hand, rejects preconceived requirements of readiness and emphasises learning on-the-job and on-the-job support (ibid). VETiS is advantageous for young people with disabilities as support can be provided by the school, as well as other involved stakeholders which may include the employer, DES, Group Training Organisations (GTOs), Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) including technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, as well as family, friends, and work colleagues.

While the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) publishes VET data, including the proportion of students and graduates with disabilities, the proportions of VETiS students and graduates with disabilities are not publicly available. In 2011 there were 249,400 VETiS students of which 7.4% were school-based apprentices and trainees. In 2010, 98,800 VETiS students graduated (NCVER 2012). Apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities are as likely to be employed as their peers without disability (Ball and John 2005) although VET graduates with disabilities are less likely to be employed than their peers (NCVER 2011a). A contributing factor to better graduate employment outcomes for apprentices and trainees compared to VET graduates with disabilities may be that a proportion of VET students with disabilities undertake lower level VET that are non-vocation or preparatory courses (Cocks and Harvey 2008; Cocks and Thoresen 2013; Griffin and Beddie 2011). A retrospective matched-pair employment analysis for apprenticeships and traineeship graduates and non-completers with disabilities found significantly better employment and income outcomes for apprenticeship graduates, traineeship graduates, and participants who did not complete their apprenticeships compared with other workers and job-seekers with disabilities. The outcomes for participants who did not complete their traineeships were not statistically significant compared to their matched pairs (Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a). Ball and John (2005) found equal graduate employment rates among apprentices and trainees with and without disability. Despite this outcome, people with disabilities are less likely to undertake or complete apprenticeship, traineeships, and VET than their peers without disability (Australian National Training Authority 2000; Ball 2004; Ball and John 2005; Bagshaw and Fowler 2008; Cavallaro et al. 2005; Griffin and Beddie 2011; Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a, 2011b; NCVER 2011b).

Methods

This paper draws on a larger three-year national longitudinal cohort study into social and economic outcomes achieved by apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities funded by NCVER. The research project was granted ethical approval by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2011. Apprenticeship and traineeship graduates from 2009 through 2011 with disabilities were recruited through DES, GTOs, RTOs including TAFE institutes, and State Training Authorities. A total of 404 graduates

with disabilities were recruited in the latter half of 2011 and a comparison group of 85 graduates without disabilities (matched to the broad socio-demographic characteristics of the disability group) were recruited in late 2011 and early 2012. NCVET (2011a) reports some graduate outcomes for apprentices and trainees. However, these are limited to a single point in time and do not include any indications of the sustainability of outcomes. The comparison group enables the researchers to compare graduate outcomes of the apprentices and trainees with disabilities to peers without disability and how these change over time.

Potential participants were invited to complete a postal survey consisting of a number of closed questions around socio-demographic variables, training, employment and related economic outcomes, social outcomes, and future prospects. The survey also included three open-ended questions around facilitators and barriers for course completion, and goals for the future. All participants received a \$60 gift voucher when a completed survey was returned to the researchers. The focus of this paper is the social and economic outcomes among the subgroup of participants who undertook their training as VETiS. This includes participants who completed a mix of VETiS and work-based training. Additional information on the methodology of the larger research project is included in Cocks and Thoresen (2013).

Findings and discussion

Participants

A total of 56 participants completed their apprenticeship or traineeship as part of VETiS. Of these, 21 (37.5%) had undertaken their training as a mix of VETiS and work-based training. Table 1 presents a broad overview of the participants' socio-demographic characteristics. The proportion of males and females is similar to that of all apprenticeship and traineeship commencements (NCVER 2010). The proportion of research participants with intellectual or learning disabilities (61.1%) is almost three times higher than that reported among all VET graduates with disabilities in 2009 (21.5%) (NCVER 2011b). The proportion of participants with intellectual or learning disabilities in the larger study this paper draws upon was double that reported for 2009 VET graduates with disabilities. It may be that apprentices and trainees with intellectual or learning disabilities are more likely to undertake their training as part of VETiS, that disability classifications collated by NCVER are inaccurate, or that a higher proportion of graduates with intellectual and learning disabilities chose to participate in the current study.

While the mean age of participants is higher than what may be expected by VETiS students, it should be noted this reflects participants' age when completing the survey, which was up to three years following graduating. It should also be noted that previous research has found VETiS students with disabilities take more time to complete their courses than their peers without disability (Barnett 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). Other socio-demographic characteristics of research participants and all apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities were similar except a lower proportion of participants from Victoria. The underrepresentation of

Victorians in the study reflects the recruitment methodology. The Victorian State Training Authority was not approached to assist with participant recruitment due to time and cost constraints.

Table 1: Research participants

Apprentice or trainee	n = 56
Apprentices	17 (30.4%)
Trainees	39 (69.6%)
Gender	n = 56
Males	34 (60.7%)
Females	22 (39.3%)
Mean age	22.80 years
Main disability	n = 54
Intellectual or learning	33 (61.1%)
Sensory	8 (14.8%)
Medical condition	6 (10.7%)
Physical	4 (7.4%)
Other disabilities	3 (5.6%)

Employment and related economic outcomes

Three-quarters of the research participants were employed as illustrated in Table 2. The workforce participation rate, defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2012b) as people in employment and people seeking paid employment, is 86%. This is substantially higher than the workforce participation rate reported for all working-aged Australians with disabilities (54%) and comparable to the workforce participation rate for Australians without disability in 2009 (83%) (ABS 2010). The unemployment rate (proportion of people without a job in the workforce) of research participants (12.5%) is higher than the reported unemployment rate for all Australians with disabilities (7.8%), and also for the unemployment rate for people without disability (5.1%) (ABS 2010). This can largely be attributed to the higher youth unemployment rate among all 15-19 year olds in September 2012 (17.9%) (ABS 2012b). It should also be noted that over a third of participants (33.9%) were undertaking further studies. Many combined further studies with work and included work-based training such as additional apprenticeships, traineeships, or work-related VET certificates. Commitment to further studies, especially related to employment, is a positive vocational outcome.

Table 2: Current employment status

	n = 56
Employed	42 (75.0%)
Looking for work	6 (10.7%)
Not looking for work	8 (14.3%)

Note: 19 (33.9%) participants indicated that they were undertaking further education

More than two-thirds of research participants (67.9%) indicated that their main source of income was from wages, as illustrated in Table 3. Four additional participants (7.1%) indicated that they had supplementary income from paid work. A quarter of participants reported their main source of income was the DSP (16.1%), which is based on assessment of their work capacity as limited, or other government allowances (8.9%). High and increasing dependence on welfare payments by people with disabilities has been identified as unsustainable in OECD countries, including Australia (2010).

Table 3: Main source of income

	n = 56
DSP	9 (16.1%)
Government allowance	5 (8.9%)
Family support	2 (3.6%)
Wage	38 (67.9%)
Other	1 (1.8%)
None	1 (1.8%)

Table 4 presents the mean weekly hours, hourly rate, and weekly wage for all research participants in paid employment. The average annual wage for all 15-24 year old Australians in 2009-2010 was \$24,042 (ABS 2012a) or \$462 per week. The mean weekly wage of \$557 among research participants is more than 20% higher than for all 15-24 year old Australians. When excluding participants who received the DSP in the study, the mean weekly wage increase to \$628. The mean weekly wage for research participants who worked full-time was \$759 (75% higher than all 15-24 year old Australians). In comparison, the average income (from all sources) for working aged Australians with disabilities in 2009 was \$344 per week compared to \$671 for people without disabilities (ABS 2010).

Table 4: Hours of work and wages (standard deviation)

	n = 40
Mean weekly hours	30.52 (12.80)
Mean hourly rate	17.49 (6.22)
Mean weekly wage	557 (339)

Previous research has found apprenticeships and traineeships serve to equalise employment and related economic outcomes for people with disabilities (Lewis, Thoresen, and Cocks 2011a). The baseline findings from this three-year longitudinal study suggest that apprenticeships and traineeships as part of VETiS provided a strong vocational pathway in the transition from school for people with disabilities. The associated employment and related economic outcomes are also strong. The Student Outcome Survey suggested that other apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with and without disabilities achieve higher incomes than those reported by the study participants (NCVER 2011a). Those findings reflect outcomes for all graduates. The lower wages for junior employees under the age of 21 and the high proportion of younger graduates in the study may broadly account for the higher wages reported in the Student Outcome Survey. Incomes among all apprenticeship and

traineeship graduates with disabilities in the larger study from which the VETiS participants were drawn were comparable (i.e., not statistically significantly different) with those reported in the Student Outcome Survey.

Social outcomes

This study also surveyed social outcomes including both formal and informal community and social participation. Sixty-one per cent of VETiS graduates reported being members of at least one community group or club (such as a church, sports club, or social group), an average of 1.2 groups or clubs. On average, participants reported attending six community group or club meetings in the preceding month (s.d. 5.76). Sixty-three per cent of Australians aged 18 years and older reported being members of at least one social group over a year (Australian Government 2009b). As the current survey only captured community group and club membership in the preceding month, it is likely to be an underestimate of the proportion of participants who were members of a community group or club in the preceding year. In comparison, 56% of all graduates with disabilities and 49% of all graduates without disability in the larger study reported being members of at least one group or club (with an average of 5.3 and 4.0 meetings in the preceding month respectively).

Social connections made through work contribute substantially to social and community participation for people who have left school. Thirty-nine per cent of participants reported attending at least one social event at work in the preceding month and 64% reported social meetings outside the work context with people they knew through work in the preceding month. As illustrated in Table 5, research participants reported general satisfaction with their work situation, social life, and life overall. Just over one-quarter of participants indicated that they were not satisfied with their working situation, while around ninety per cent of participants indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their social life and life overall. Participants unhappy with working situation included six unemployed persons looking for work. These social outcomes reported by research participants support the established view of employment facilitating increased social inclusion and quality of life for people with disabilities (Australian Government 2009b; Bagshaw and Fowler; Cocks and Thoresen In Press).

Table 5: Satisfaction with working situation, social life and life overall

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Happy with working situation, n = 56	17 (30.4%)	24 (42.9%)	11 (19.6%)	4 (7.1%)
Happy with social life, n = 55	20 (36.4%)	30 (54.5%)	3 (5.5%)	2 (3.6%)
Happy with life overall, n = 56	19 (33.9%)	30 (53.6%)	5 (9.1%)	2 (3.6%)

Limitations

The following limitations of the study should be noted. As outlined in the methodology section, the cohort study is a non-representative sample of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates who undertook their training as VETiS or a mix of VETiS and work-based training. While the gender distribution and mix of apprentices and are similar to the proportions reported by NCVET, there is a much higher proportion of research participants with an intellectual or learning disability. Outcomes identified in this study may not be representative of all apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disabilities who undertook their training as VETiS. It should also be noted that the study relied upon self-reporting, including disability status and VETiS status. Previous research has identified some confusion, even among schools and RTOs with regard to which courses are included as VETiS (McGregor Tan Research & Associates 2003). It is probable that school-based apprenticeships and traineeships are more readily identifiable. Bias from self-reporting may also related to reported social and economic outcomes among participants.

Conclusions

The outcomes reported among the cohort of apprenticeship and traineeship graduates with disability who completed their courses as VETiS outline strong social and economic outcomes. This suggests that VETiS can be a successful vocational pathway in the transition from school for young people with disabilities. Social outcomes included formal memberships of community groups and clubs as well as informal relationships with friends and acquaintances in the workplace. Economic outcomes included high workforce participation and employment rates and income, comparable to similarly aged Australians without disability. Although reported wages for apprenticeship and traineeship graduates are higher than among the research participants, this is largely due to the high proportion of younger participants. Research in the second and third wave of this three-year longitudinal study will provide further insight into the sustainability of social and economic outcomes and track the wage-gap as research participants graduate from junior wages. Further investigation into the facilitators and barriers, both practical and at the policy level, for young people with disabilities to undertake and complete VETiS is also warranted.

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