

Submission to the Productivity Commission by Kids With Ability

We wish to draw an issue to the attention of the Productivity Commission which we believe has to a significant extent been overlooked to date, and that is:

- the way in which Australia's disability care and support system as currently designed actively denies tens of thousands of people with disabilities any opportunity, chance or prospect to work and earn income after they leave school.

We contend that it is now far too often the case in Australia that people with disabilities are automatically labelled as "unemployable", in exactly the same way as young children with disabilities were for many generations labelled – indeed, treated by law - as "uneducable".

We contend that this is a fundamental and extremely serious flaw in the current disability support system; one that not only deeply damages many people with disabilities by automatically consigning them to the economic scrapheap for the whole of their lives from the age of 18 or 19 onwards, but which also makes little if any economic or social sense more generally.

At present, Australians with a disability have a very limited range of post-school options. They can be:

- assisted to train, and then apply, for "open employment". Given current employer attitudes and practices, this is an option available in practise only to the most "able disabled"
- assessed as eligible for a placement, subsidised by the federal government, in an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE)
- helped by singularly energetic and resourceful parents, other family members or friends, financially, physically and organisationally, to establish and operate their own small business
- assessed as eligible for State government funding to help cover the costs of placement in a non-work based, 9am-3pm (kindergarten hours, note) "Community Participation" or "Community Access" program, which currently can be either centre-based or, in some States now, individually self-managed. Only very occasionally does funding cover five days a week. Given limitations on funding and/or available places, many people with disabilities in this category therefore have no option but to stay at home with a parent or other family member (meaning that the carer's work and income-earning opportunities are also severely limited).

The 2010 FaHCSIA discussion paper, *"Inclusion of people with disability through sustainable supported employment"*, states that while there were 520,000 Australians with a profound or severe core activity limitation in 2004 (a number which has no doubt increased over the subsequent six years), fewer than 19,000 people currently have places in an ADE. The discussion paper is entirely silent on what the remaining 501,000 or so are doing.

The paper says that to achieve its goal of expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities, *"the Government proposes to develop a new vision for people needing supported*

employment over the next ten years. The Government wants to partner with people with disability and their families and carers, supported employment organisations and the wider community to deliver on a new vision. The new, ten-year vision will be positioned within a human rights framework where—

- *everyone has the right to work, where possible*
- *everyone has the right to work in an environment that is inclusive, supportive and accessible*
- *everyone has the right to fully participate and be included in Australian society.”*

This is all entirely admirable. Unfortunately, however, the “vision” that then goes on to be spelt out in some detail is a limited and ultimately unimaginative one, in that there is no mention whatsoever of any possibility of reshaping, rethinking, or re-envisaging ADEs themselves to take account of the vast technological changes that have occurred over the past 50 or 60 years, since ADEs were first established.

We would contend that these technological changes now offer work and income-earning opportunities for people with severe disabilities – particularly severe physical disabilities - that were unimaginable even 10 years ago, let alone 50 or 60.

The chart of p. 14 of the discussion paper – *Figure 2: Australian Disability Enterprises, by industry sector, March 2010 (Source: FaHCSIA 2010 -unpublished data)* - is an extremely telling one.

As will be noted, the industry-by-sector breakdown – such as packaging, light manufacturing, cleaning/recycling and so on – means that placements in ADEs are overwhelmingly (indeed probably solely) available only to people with some degree of manual dexterity.

This in turn means that ADEs are in reality open only to people with relatively minor physical disabilities, as evidenced by Figure 1 on p. 12 of the discussion paper, which reveals that 80% of ADE employees have an intellectual or psychiatric disability, while just 6% have a physical disability.

And this, in turn, means that many people with disability who are intellectually able and keen to work, but who are relatively severely physically disabled, **are and will continue to be entirely excluded** from any currently available government-supported workforce participation programs, even if a very significant amount of additional funding were to be made available to subsidise many more placements.

The only reference to this very significant flaw in the ADE system as currently conceptualised, however, is the one oblique statement on p. 25 of the discussion paper that:

Because of the concentration of industries with which Australian Disability Enterprises are affiliated, supported employees are also quite limited in the work roles and tasks available to them.

In which case - why is there no discussion whatsoever of the possibility of **expanding the range of industries with which ADEs are affiliated? And in particular, why no discussion of the possibilities opened up by the development of computer- and web-based industries over the past half-century?**

The only model of work now offered by ADES throughout Australia, as far as we are aware, remains an early 20th-century model of work; i.e. relatively simple, factory-based, production-line, manually oriented tasks, such as packaging, light manufacturing, cleaning/recycling and so on.

This model of work - this *concept* of “work” – almost certainly remains useful, appropriate and beneficial for many thousands of Australians, particularly those with marked intellectual disability. For **anyone** with a disability who finds this form of work satisfying and rewarding, it should clearly not only continue, but indeed be expanded to meet what is undoubtedly significant unmet demand for such work opportunities.

However: – **something else, some other, additional model of work**, needs to be developed and made available to and for those many thousands of Australians with physical but not intellectual disabilities who would and will continue to be rejected and excluded from supported work opportunities, however much expansion occurred in the ADE sector as currently conceptualised.

As far as we can ascertain, this does not seem to have as yet occurred to anyone in government, federal or State, nor to any disability service provider. To the parents and special needs teachers involved in setting up the organisation Kids With Ability last year, however, it’s clear one obvious answer is to establish supported employment opportunities revolving around the 21st-century’s IT and computer industries.

For many people with severe physical disabilities, internet access and many other programs available via computers represent their window on the world, an incredibly helpful and significant way of accessing information, communicating with others, expressing their creativity, demonstrating their talents, using their intellect - and potentially earning some income .

From an employment and income-earning perspective, numerous opportunities now exist for people with disabilities to develop small, “cottage industry” businesses for themselves and/or work in computer-based areas of ADE-type employment, such as designing, building and maintaining websites and running webinars.

Many people with severe physical disabilities may well need the help and support of an able-bodied person to manually input information via a keyboard, for instance. But the central difference between this suggested new, 21st-century model of supported work, versus older, factory-based, production line work, is that the central focus would be on a person’s cognitive and intellectual input, not their manual skills.

We will of course be putting all these points to FaHCSIA, in response to the invitation to comment on the discussion paper by mid-September 2010.

Our reasons for raising this matter with the Productivity Commission at this time are, however, as follows:

Promoting greater employment opportunities and workplace inclusion for Australians with disabilities – however “severe to profound” - is clearly and unambiguously desirable, both economically and socially. Everyone, including the federal government, acknowledges that fact, and everyone involved in the disability sector sincerely seeks that desirable outcome. No one’s sincerity is in question here.

However, for all the goodwill and good intentions and sincere adherence to the idea of giving “all Australians who wish to work the chance to do so”, to quote Bill Shorten, Australia’s current disability care and support system is clearly and obviously failing to give many thousands of people with a disability - who *desperately* wish to work - any opportunity whatsoever to do so. And without sweeping, fundamental reform, it will continue to do so.

Why is that so?

Because, we would contend, the disability support system as currently constituted in Australia is far too hidebound, in the final analysis, by bureaucratic, administrative, funding and service provider rigidities. The current concrete silos of government funding and service provision need to be swept away, and replaced by a system that is truly – not just nominally – “person-centred”.

The current, early-20th century model of supported “work” for people with disabilities, involving some form of directed physical labour, also needs to be updated to incorporate knowledge/information management using digital formats.

It also needs to be recognised that many people with disabilities are currently denied work opportunities because they have been denied post-school educational opportunities. Just as in the school system at present, people with disabilities are not guaranteed needs-based support to complete TAFE or a university degree, but only the level of support various State governments deem they will provide. Universities are responsible for hiring staff to act as note-takers, for example, but not for assisting with personal care needs. State governments are responsible for covering costs of personal care, but not responsible for ensuring buildings are accessible. The end result can too often be that a person with a disability is denied the chance of a tertiary education, literally because there is no wheelchair-accessible toilet!

The parents, teachers and other professionals involved in KWA have spent the past 12 months trying to work out who it is we would or could approach to make our particular vision for computer-based employment opportunities for one small group of young Australians with physical disabilities eager to work a reality. Through its own fund-raising efforts, KWA has proven that with support and a differentiated curriculum, young people with severe physical disabilities can achieve the skills necessary to obtain TAFE credentials and readiness for work in their chosen field of Information Technology.

But we cannot simply go on to do it all ourselves, because the amount of start-up funding required is beyond our means. We need some form of government financial assistance, from some department or other, to get us going.

But to date, this challenge has completely eluded us.

To whom do we turn? To whom do we appeal? The State Education Department? Post-school employment programs are not their area. The State Disability Department? Post-school employment programs are a federal responsibility. FaHCSIA? They suggest we apply for funding from DEEWR. DEEWR? They suggest we apply for funding from FaHCSIA. An ADE service provider? Struggling to keep even what they currently offer going, they’d laugh in our faces.

Yet all we are trying to do here is put well-intentioned government rhetoric into practice, and provide opportunities for a group of young Australians with physical disabilities eager to work the

chance to do more than sit around in a Community Participation program watching videos and going on “outings” to McDonalds for lunch for the rest of their lives.

In common with many other Australians who have made submissions to this current Inquiry by the Productivity Commission, we therefore urge you to recommend a transformed system of lifetime care and support for people with disabilities that will ensure it is they (and their families where appropriate) who get to decide in future the best use of funds ostensibly allocated for their benefit.

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