

**Recommendations -  
Discussion Paper: New Disability Employment Services from 2018**

**Amber's Story**



Amber is in year 11 at Brigidine College in St Ives. She attends a disability support unit. Amber has an intellectual disability and dyspraxia. Amber's dream is to work in the animal care industry. She has been obsessed with animals since she was 3 years old.

We have supported her dream. Amber volunteers with Riding for the Disabled on a Saturday, mucking out the stables and tending to the horses. We have a great relationship with our Vet and Amber will complete a work-placement there next year. We have encouraged her love of animal care.

## **Amber's Obstacle: Community Attitudes/Perceptions and misconceptions**

Despite Amber attending a progressive and wonderful school, all the students with disabilities seem to be stereotyped. It was assumed that Amber will take work experience at House with No Steps packing boxes. Amber protested about this assumption made about her. She refused to go to the House with No Steps placement. Amber now goes to a placement at St Ives Pet Shop and she loves her placement. They also really value her. She comes home with small gifts from the pet shop and talks and talks non-stop about her experience.

Amber's career assessment report stated that she would ideally suit an animal care role. However, the school has assumed she will work in hospitality. In fact she was offered a TVET hospitality subject at the Northern Beaches TAFE. I had to fight for her to go to business retail TVET at Hornsby TAFE. Attitudes start at school and continue through to employment. The work placements offered for students with disabilities tends to involve either packing shelves or boxes. It is one size fits all! She was also offered IGA – again packing shelves.

This attitude extends further to employment services. I was stunned to find out that the DES providers in Chatswood that I have spoken to have said the same thing....It is hard to find animal care related employment and the chances are minimal. Instead they can find Amber a meaningless job shredding paper or unpacking boxes. Why are people with disabilities still grouped as a homogenous group? Why can't we look at people as individuals?

Unfortunately this attitude also extends beyond to employers. Unless community attitudes change and there are greater financial incentives for employers to take on people with disabilities, nothing is going to change.

### **Obstacle 2: Access to Post School Education**

Amber currently attends business retail TVET at Hornsby TAFE. We had to fight for this as the school insisted she go into hospitality just like all the other students with disabilities. We think the business retail course is more relevant to her career aspiration to work in animal care.

So.....Amber's choice of education....It is not looking good. We contacted the Disability Consultant at Ultimo TAFE. There are limited supports for Amber to complete the Animal Care Cert 11 Course. We were told that due to funding cuts there is not much support for her in terms of a scribe in the class. Amber can only type at 4 words per minute due to her low muscle tone. Her TVET co-ordinator also agreed there is limited support and it is so disappointing.

We applied for NDIS and managed to get \$3,000 towards assistive technology that might help her purchase a program to help with TAFE so that she can participate in 'improved daily living'. It still does not solve our problem. How will Amber go to TAFE?

Ideally she needs a blend of going to TAFE and volunteering or working part-time. At this stage her dream is slipping away. She will be crushed, devastated and heart-broken to find she cannot pursue her life-long dream.

### **Obstacle 3: Access to DES to plan while still at school**

We don't have a crystal ball so we don't know what will happen next year. Other families have reported that they still don't have a plan in place even though their children have now finished year

12. This already creates anxiety. Why can't DES providers start to support students with disabilities earlier in year 12? Why do families need to wait until their children finish school to access services?

Why can't there be stronger relationships between DES providers and schools? There is a gap....most transition planning for education and employment does not go well. We have heard many horror stories from other families in relation to accessing DES. Many have terrible reputations and there are few services that are seen by families as to having ethics and values.

Even the schools have a bad view of DES providers. The other issue is the constant competition between providers. This was not highlighted at all in the report. DES providers simply will not collaborate and they will not work in partnership due to the funding environment that they operate in. It is cut throat!

Every step of the way, people with disabilities have to battle to be heard and to be seen. Why is it that in Australia we are so archaic in our attitudes? Generally speaking we have a current employment services system that does not see the person; that does not view the individual as unique and does not see people with disabilities as worthy human beings.

Sadly the system will still be broken when we embark on DES next year. I know we are going to have to constantly advocate and ensure Amber has a voice. It will be a constant battle!

**Recommendation 1:** There is a need to create better links between education and work, including allowing more students with disability to access DES. This includes accessing DES when students are planning to leave school.

I understand that transition is not really an area covered in the review, as it is probably seen that this fits with education. The issue is that the connection between the employment and education sectors is very disjointed. This was highlighted in a parliamentary enquiry which my daughter Amber and I were witnesses. I have attached a copy for your reference.

*Source: New South Wales. Parliament. Legislative Council. Standing Committee on Social Issues Transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families / Standing Committee on Social Issues. [Sydney, N.S.W.] : the Committee, 2012. – [170] p. ; 30 cm. (Report ; No. 45) "March 2012".*

The report outlines evidence to show that there are clearly problems with adequate transition planning for post school not occurring in many cases. The report has highlighted that one way to avoid the situation is to bridge the gap between work and school. DES providers should ideally start to engage with students with disabilities at families in year 12. It is often left until the very last minute and in some instances students with disabilities are leaving school with no plans in place. I know of students who have just finished school and there are still no plans in place for next year. I also know of students who are still in a Transition to Work program 4 years later and they have never progressed to a DES.

### **Recommendation 2:**

Why do we have a system that does not encourage and reward service innovation? It is reassuring to see the report has highlighted all of the systemic problems including the way that payments occur and the fact that there is no incentive for innovation.

In talking to many families, the current system provides a very tokenistic approach. There is little accountability in terms of achieving real employment outcomes. It is positive to see people with disabilities as active participants rather than recipients of a service that they have little control over. Many providers choose the 'cream of the crop' and the model needs to rightly account for supporting people with more complex needs.

### **Recommendation 3:**

Why isn't the Government providing greater education to employers as well as financial incentives. We need targeted education and awareness community campaigns. I have attached best practice examples from Europe. In some countries such as Serbia, employers are fined for not employing people with disabilities. I think this is extreme, however the Government needs to take a more deliberate approach.

