

AMAZE SUBMISSION

**Submission to
Inquiry into Career Advice Activities
in Victorian Schools.**

December 2017

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Summary

- In Australia, the unemployment rate for autistic people is 31.6%. This is three times the rate of people with disability, and almost six times the rate of people without disability.
- An Amaze survey in 2016 found that only 50% of respondents had been able to find employment, with 94% reporting that they had not received enough support to help find a job
- Career advice activities in Victorian schools lack consistency and co-ordination, and often fail to meet the needs of autistic students.
- Inadequate career advice activities are contributing to poor post-school outcomes and experiences, including low employment rates among autistic people.
- Amaze recommends that the Victorian Government develop, implement and fund a Post-School Transitions Policy for autistic students (ideally as a component of an updated State Autism Plan).

Introduction

Amaze welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee's *Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools*. As the peak body for autistic people and their families in Victoria, we strongly support an examination of whether career advice activities in Victorian schools are meeting the needs of ALL school leavers, including autistic students.

Strengths based and evidence informed career advice activities, as part of comprehensive school to work transition programs in Victorian schools are essential to support autistic people to enter and stay in the labour market. A failure to prepare autistic students leaves them vulnerable to social exclusion and isolation. In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) identified post-school transition (along with a quality education) as a key area of reform for member states to assist school leavers to enter and stay in the labour market.¹

Background

Young autistic adults can bring a range of strengths, interests and skills to their careers and the workforce, often demonstrating exemplary characteristics in the areas of visual thinking, attention to detail, honesty, efficiency, precision, consistency, low absenteeism and disinterest in office politics.²

However, currently in Australia autistic people experience poorer school and post-school outcomes compared to people with other disabilities and those without disability. In 2015, the unemployment rate for autistic people was 31.6%. This was three times the rate of people with disability, and almost six times the rate of people without disability.³ A survey conducted by Amaze of the autism community in Victoria in 2016 found that only 50% of respondents had been able to find employment, with 94% reporting that they had not received enough support to help find a job.

The experiences of young autistic people in education attainment are also very poor, with autistic students being more likely to disengage from school and training than their neurotypical peers. Autistic students are less likely to complete Year 10, Year 12 and education qualifications beyond school than people without disabilities.⁴ Late commencement of career advice activities could

therefore mean that many autistic students have already left school before these activities have been available to them.

There is evidence that low employment rates among people with disabilities, including autistic people, are driven by poor career pathways, ad hoc and fragmented support, low expectations, limited career information and advice and inflexible employment services. They are also driven by poor education outcomes for autistic students, resulting from an education system that continually fails to meet their needs.⁵

There is evidence that post-school transition programs for students with disability can be poor due to:

- The absence of a mandated, co-ordinated and consistent approach across schools, and clear accountability for providing post-school transition support;
- Low expectations of students with disability's capacity, value, individuality and future;
- Teachers being inadequately trained in transition planning, a lack of resources and a lack of funding to support career planning for students with disability; and
- Students with disability being channelled into ADEs as opposed to open employment opportunities.⁶

Amaze's community survey

To inform its submission to this inquiry, Amaze sought to survey current autistic students and recent school leavers, and their families and carers, regarding their experiences of career transition activities in Victorian schools. This survey was only open for a short period (23 November to 6 December 2017), during the consultation period for this inquiry, and it received 10 valid responses.

Respondents

Responses were received from family members and carers of young autistic people, with four respondents identifying as autistic parents of a young autistic person. Unfortunately, we did not receive any responses from autistic students or recent school leavers. Half of respondents to the survey care for a young person leaving school in the next two years, and half care for a young person that left school in the past five years. Of their young people, eight attended or attend a mainstream public/government school and two attended or attend a special public/government school. No response were received from carers of students in private or independently owned school settings.

Access to career advice activities

The survey results demonstrated an inconsistent approach to career advice activities across Victorian schools, with five respondents reporting that the person they care for received career advice or participated in career activities at school and five reporting that the person they care for had not (with no difference between mainstream and special school settings). Furthermore, four respondents reported that the person they care for had participated in pathway planning at school, and six reported that the person they care for had not (with no significant difference between mainstream and setting school settings).

Work experience and structured workplace learning

Of the respondents that care for an autistic person that had participated in career activities at school, nine reported that the career activity involved work experience, with one of these

respondents reporting that the person they cared for had also participated in structured workplace learning. Qualitative feedback included:

It was so stressful he could not go to school for a week.

No work experience, even in the IT department of the school because there's no-one who will take him on, even with a privately provided carer to support behaviours.

I volunteer and many youth/adults state they are told to volunteer but either that's all they do or no one wants to offer anything to people with autism not a job or a career like everyone else

Work experience roles offered were reported to include roles at Coles, Woolworths, a council gardening service, and as a chef, teacher, tennis coach and video store attendant.

Only two respondents reported that the person they care for had any choice over the work experience option available to them. In response to whether it was difficult to find a work experience place, responses included:

No, but only because it was provided by family.

Yes no one would assist

No, it was our local video store we had been attending for years. The owner knew us and was happy to offer work experience

Yep, impossible, even through a disability employment support agency as they said he would end up packing eggs! He's an IT kinda guy.

These responses demonstrate the need to utilise family connections and networks to secure work experience opportunities.

Responses to whether the person cared for felt adequately challenged or supported in their work experience included:

He was adequately supported - not enough supervision. When he stopped stacking shelves at the supermarkets he did nothing, because no-one told him he needed to ask for more work. The Supermarket commented on this in their review at the end of the work experience. Who is responsible to tell him he needs to ask for another task when he has finished the first?

Yes. The experience was positive

They feel that no one was interested in helping them. They also feel because of others including teachers they aren't capable nor worthy.

No supports whatsoever. No career advice in any way shape or form.

My son really enjoyed the experience, it helped to boost his confidence and was surprised at how much he was paid.

This was frustrating, worrying, demoralizing and depressing for both of us

The value of career advice activities

Of the respondents that care for an autistic person that had participated in career activities, eight reported that the activity or advice received had not (a) helped the person they care for plan for a career after leaving school or (b) made the person feel more confident about looking for paid work. The remaining two respondents reported that the career activities participated in had helped the person they care for, by leading to apprenticeships.

Similarly, eight respondents reported that the career activities participated in did not support the person they care for to plan for a career in the industry they most want to work in, with two reporting that it did. Qualitative feedback included:

The person I care for wants to work in ADF but they won't accept people with autism.

Computing - no local jobs, no local TAFE, no prospect of university, no local mentors because there's so little local industry, no help to find a pathway as behaviours considered too hard to deal with. (Note: this respondent identified as living in a rural or remote area of Victoria)

Suggestions to improve career advice activities.

Respondents commented that schools could improve the effectiveness of career advice activities for school leavers as follows:

This is a very difficult question, the mini careers expos held at the special schools and at the TAFEs are a waste of time. The Transition Officers have a lot of kids on their books and not enough time. The Special Schools don't have Careers Advisers like Secondary Schools have, probably because of funding.

They could offer more support and advice for the work experience placements so as to make it easier for students with auditory processing and organisational issues (autism) to find a placement somewhere relevant to their interests.

They should assist the person with a strengths based approach after all they are supposed to be anyway but few practice it. Spend time with the person, help them decide, possibly career counselling, SLES, pathways program (which I have been told they are supposed to do but never happened).....but more importantly they should be held accountable really accountable lose funding if they do not assist

Have PROPER councillors, career advisors that are FULLY QUALIFIED in the disability sectors with the schools.

They could act as a go between for students on the spectrum and potential employers.

Perhaps, they could have supported my son to arrange work experience within the school, instead of saying "first in, first served" then giving the only possible option my son had to a neuro-typical who could have worked almost anywhere and had the executive functioning and social skills to go and see the IT guys at school without delay while my son hadn't realised that he would be required to do that. Also, when and (sic) online computer course looks like the only option then the school could have done MUCH more to find a mentor, previous student, tutor or interested carer to support my son to access and find his way through such a course.

Further comments from respondents included:

My son is 21 and has a Cert II in Horticulture, Cert II in Hospitality, Certificate I of Transition Education and Certificate I of Work Education, and no career prospects unless he gets involved with one of the Disability Work Providers. Many of his friends are in the same position.

It is difficult for kids on the spectrum to find work and a lot don't seem to qualify for any assistance from Centrelink. There are too many hoops to jump through it becomes a very stressful experience for them and for their parents.

I hope other stories you hear in this survey are more positive. I can't help thinking that if we lived in the city there would have been a computer course running at VCE level in the school and lots of businesses willing to offer a work experience placement to my son, and a functioning local TAFE which might segue his learning, eventually, into employable skills and/or university placement. As it is, he will probably end up living with me for the rest of his life, collecting a pension and sitting in the corner with Pokemon on his computer. His small but really lovely group of like-minded friends have had similar experiences and one of his friends is

planning to stay home next year with nothing productive to do, in the nightmare scenario which all parents I have met have feared ever since their children's diagnoses

What needs to be done?

Greater government support for career advice activities and transition programs in Victorian secondary schools is urgently needed to bridge the gap between the education environment and the workplace. There is evidence that internship programs, peer support networks, virtual reality and role play can teach valuable transition to work skills for autistic people. Age-specific and highly individualized programs are also essential to ensure that the diversity of skills and characteristics autistic people bring to the workforce are taken into account.⁷

In 2015, Children with Disability Australia released an Issues Paper, *Post school transition: The experiences of students with disability*. This Issues Paper reported consistent evidence that “best practice” for post-school transition requires the following elements:

1. **Student-focused planning with family involvement:** person centred and family centred planning that is strengths based and motivating has been found to increase self-determination; and improve post school outcomes.
2. **Student development:** schools that extend beyond life skills curriculum for students with disability, to include academic learning, experiential learning in work experience and/or vocation learning produce more positive outcomes for students;
3. **Program structure and Interagency collaboration:** students and their families need to be able to access evidence based, consistent and appropriately tailored information and program support, developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders (including students and their families, education and training, employment and welfare sectors) and regularly reviewed.⁸

The Issues Paper included several recommendations that should be considered in any further policy development to address the issue of career advice and transitions for people with disability.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training’s Strengthened Pathways Planning Initiative (2014) incorporates many aspects of best practice identified above, aiming to strengthen career and transition planning in schools for people with disabilities. The associated *Strengthened Pathways Planning – Preparing young people with disability for a successful future beyond school* resource also provides valuable advice and tools for school staff regarding careers and transition planning for young people with disabilities, and brings together information on the options available to young people with disabilities when they leave school⁹

However, we are concerned that this initiative provides guidance and options only. It does not appear to have resulted in Victorian schools taking a consistent, coordinated or accountable approach to career transition activities. Nor does it inform schools, students, parents or other stakeholders of the specific needs of autistic students. It is unclear whether the impacts of this initiative are subject to ongoing evaluation. We are also concerned that it also applies only to students supported under the Program for Students with Disabilities in Victorian secondary schools, which does not include all autistic students.

Given the high numbers of autistic students in Victorian schools, the current experiences identified through our survey and the unemployment rates currently experienced by autistic people, Amaze would urge the Victorian Government to fund, develop and implement a Post-School Transitions

Policy for autistic students (ideally as a component of an updated State Autism Plan). The policy should aim to mandate evidence informed career activities, support consistency and educate and school staff, employers, parents and other stakeholders involved in career transition activities about the specific needs of autistic students. It should also include best practice transition planning guidelines, including with respect to work experience, strengths based individual career planning, and ongoing support following school - focusing on achieving the person's full potential. Given the currently poor education attainment rates for autistic students, it should support career planning activities as early as possible in secondary school, ideally beginning in Year 7 and forming part of the curriculum every year thereafter.

References

- ¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2015, *OECD skills outlook 2015: Youth, skills and employability*, p. 16.
- ² See Hensel, W 2017. People with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Workplace: An Expanding Legal Frontier. Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, 52;73. Available at <http://harvardcrcl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hensel.pdf>
- ³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016. *Autism in Australia*. Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings. See <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4430.0Main%20Features752015>
- ⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *Autism in Australia*. Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings, available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4430.0Main%20Features752015>
- ⁵ Children with Disability Australia, 2015. Issues Paper - Post school transition: The experiences of students with disability. Available at <http://www.cyda.org.au/cda-issue-papers>.
- ⁶ Children with Disability Australia, 2015. Issues Paper - Post school transition: The experiences of students with disability. Available at <http://www.cyda.org.au/cda-issue-papers>.
- ⁷ See I CAN Network 2015. Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into services for people with ASD. Available at https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/58th/Autism/Submissions/S127_I_CAN_Network.pdf . See also, for example, the Project Search Model at <www.projectsearch.us> and the United States Vocational Rehabilitation state based programs, utilizing the TEACCH approach, see for example <http://www.access.nyed.gov/vr/>
- ⁸ Children with Disability Australia, 2015. Issues Paper - Post school transition: The experiences of students with disability. Available at <http://www.cyda.org.au/cda-issue-papers>
- ⁹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014, *The Strengthened Pathways Planning – Preparing young people with disability for a successful future beyond school*. Victorian Government. Available at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/Pages/disabilitypathways.aspx>