

ARC Disability Services

A student-centric approach to work placements has doubled the conversion rate to employment for a disability provider in regional and remote Queensland, providing a reliable pipeline of skilled workers.

ARC Disability Services (ARC) is a community-based organisation providing disability support services in Cairns and far north Queensland. Of its 350 staff, 300 are care workers. ARC offers a range of services, including centre-based programs, supported independent living within peoples' homes, home respite from its own 'holiday house' facility and social and community participation access.

ARC's student support approach evolved from the appointment of a former student to the role of student and volunteer facilitator in November 2019, who was encouraged by management to develop the role.

Student facilitators have hands-on experience and are invested in what the students are doing – not just doing the scheduling and collecting the paperwork.

As the designated person to guide students through the work placement process, the student facilitator provides continuity and a single point of contact for students throughout their four-week placements, as well as a deep understanding from their own experience as a student.

The student facilitator is also a support worker, which enables them to keep their skills up to date, and they have a Certificate IV in Teaching and Assessment (TAE). This means they can fulfil a workplace supervisory role if required. They are allocated 15-20 hours a fortnight to undertake the student facilitator role.

ARC believes it is important for its student facilitator to have a level of understanding of what it is like to be new to the industry and to be a student and a support worker. Hence the facilitator is very much a carer and mentor for students, rather than just an office-based supervisor.

The cost/benefit aligns with and demonstrates ARC's values in general regarding staff and participants. While the outcomes aren't measurable in dollars, it's about ARC being an employer of choice, a participant in the local community within the industry, and a recognised training location for student placements.

Reconciling service delivery with the extra cost of supervising students reflects ARC's value of investing in people in the industry.



“

We get good employees, and that pays back the investment in the facilitator's position.

ARC believes its facilitator model could be adapted for small service providers, for example, one day a week.

Between 50 and 60 per cent of students who undertake their work placements with ARC are successful in gaining jobs with ARC. The conversion rate has more than doubled as ARC has become better at engaging with the right Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and the right students for the job.

The students who get jobs are ARC's biggest champions – because they feel very valued that ARC gave them a head start and an opportunity to gain the hands-on experience required.

Partner selection

ARC maintains arrangements with a small number of RTOs, both public and private, who share a commitment to ethical practice and quality training outcomes. They are expected to be active partners in supporting work placements.

The diversity of ARC's client base is mirrored in the diversity of their workforce and hence partnerships are being explored with a local First Nations organisation and schools with similar ethics.

Pre-placement

ARC places immense importance on nurturing people into the industry/workforce, especially because many students have never worked before or never been in an environment with people with disabilities.

ARC conducts regular RTO talks to students about the industry, how to get a job, and what to expect on the job. Before they go on an agreed placement, students are invited to visit an ARC centre and participate in an interview to check expectations and ensure they are the right fit for a role.

For ARC it's important that someone's first impression of the industry or workplace is a positive experience because that will set the tone for where they eventually work – whether it is for ARC or someone else.

“We have a duty to the industry to [set the tone] for the workforce.”

Placement

Students are treated in a similar manner as new employees.

At the start of each placement, the student facilitator conducts a three hour on-site induction which covers the basics of being in a workplace, including safety practices (such as incident reporting). It also provides ARC with the opportunity to question the students about how they would approach certain circumstances and what behaviours would be acceptable.

As well as the RTO's student placement agreement, ARC has a placement agreement with each student. At induction, students are provided with a copy of ARC's code of conduct and other documents, including emergency contacts, and employment records.

Students observe personal care tasks and are given a list of duties they can undertake and the restrictions in ARC's workplace (see below). This clarifies ARC's expectations and helps to reduce student anxiety by giving them the confidence to work safely.



Duties and Restrictions	
Students can do these duties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assist with programs. - Interact with participants in a positive manner in programs or at mealtimes. - Set-up and pack down the room including gathering participants and resources. - Assist with being a second person. - Assist with filling out the program overview sheet and communications books.
Students cannot do these duties until they are trained and deemed competent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assist with personal care tasks. - Manual handling including hoist (2:1 ratio with staff who have experience with manual handling) - Assist to push a wheelchair.
Restrictions that students cannot do under any circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assistance or administration of medication. - Meal assistance. - Shaving and cutting nails. - Students cannot be left alone with participants during programs unless it is an emergency that staff need to assist with immediately.

Students always have a supervisor on-site and are encouraged to ask questions of other support workers. The majority of supervisors have qualifications toward individual support. The majority currently also have a Certificate IV in TAE, which is desirable and valued by ARC, although not proactively sought as a prerequisite.

When selecting supervisors or facilitators, ARC looks for prior supervisory or leadership experience, a background in support worker roles, knowledge of business practices and workplace health and safety, and an industry-specific, leadership, management or business qualification.

ARC takes the approach that a new person doesn't necessarily know what they are doing until ARC can verify that they are competent to do it. Feedback is provided either directly by supervisors or through the student facilitator.

Although students don't have the same responsibilities as employees, they are treated with the same duty of care as ARC's employees.

Post-placement

An informal feedback loop with students is currently used at the end of placements. A more formal feedback process occurs when a student applies for a position of support worker. This is when the student facilitator provides a written evaluation or recommendation to ARC's Human Resources department.

The facilitator also supports students who have undertaken their placements with ARC and are a good fit for the organisation as they progress through each step of the recruitment process.

