

National Disability Services

A sector-led initiative has successfully developed ongoing collaboration between training providers and disability service providers in regional Victoria to deliver hundreds of student work placements.

The Workforce Connector model, which was developed through the National Disability Services (NDS) Disability Workforce Innovation Project, employed four regionally based connectors in Victoria to engage with stakeholders to identify and solve local workforce issues.

NDS is Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing more than 1200 non-government service providers. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS provides leadership on workforce issues in Victoria and contributes to national disability workforce issues.

The project was funded by the Victorian Government in recognition of the complex disability services ecosystem and the need to tackle issues through collaborative place-based arrangements, to find innovative solutions and to initiate and spread good practice.

The model used Workforce Connectors to create, consolidate and build on existing, trusting relationships with local people and to operate in a manner that brings about positive place-based solutions.

Collaboration

The connector project found there was a need to improve the range and frequency of contact between training providers and employers. For example, some training providers were connected with only a small number of employers, while others kept infrequent contact.

In 2020, the Workforce Connector located in northeast regional Victoria identified there was a disconnect between training providers and employers, leading to insufficient student placements being offered to meet the area's workforce needs, which was also creating a barrier to students completing their training. The Connector worked with three local RTOs – Wodonga TAFE, GoTAFE and The Centre for Continuing Education – to document the local demand, and identified that 350 students needed to undertake work placements to complete their training. Working closely with the three RTOs, the Connector emailed employers in the region seeking support to help students graduate.

Through connections with NDS providers in the area, 270 placements were filled in less than four weeks.



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The workforce connector started when COVID-19 was hitting hard, achieving such a fantastic shift in work placements that proves it is possible to overcome barriers.

The RTOs reported receiving requests from employers they had not engaged with in the past and that it opened opportunities for new relationships.

Fostering these closer working relationships is ensuring that training keeps up with changing needs. Staff from the sector are now being involved in the training, placements are easier to organise, and some providers are sourcing new employees before they qualify – producing great outcomes for students, employers and training providers alike.

Continuous improvement

The Workforce Connector model was built on learnings from other projects, demonstrating successful regional change projects can occur in complex disability ecosystems with place-based solutions.

The model provided the extra energy and focus to bring local disability service providers, RTOs and other stakeholders together. The Workforce Connectors recognised when there was a promising idea with enough support and were able to foster development on a local solution.

The two-way communication role of Connectors also proved very valuable when emergencies arose. They were trusted with frank and specific local information that they could quickly feedback through their networks. Regional stakeholders reported that because of this they felt included and not forgotten during especially challenging times of COVID-19.

The partnership with the three RTOs demonstrated that a co-ordinated place-based approach works well in regional areas.

The four Workforce Connectors had a broad range of workforce knowledge, skills and networks that were considered important to the success of the project. They were recruited due to their existing local networks and connection to regional areas. To be effective in their roles, they were required to have relevant disability workforce expertise, great relationship skills, exceptional written and verbal communication skills, and project management and facilitation expertise.

Because they worked from home, the connectors also needed to be self-motivated, curious, organised, quick to adapt and practical team players.

The combination of connectors (with the necessary skill set) and management support ensured the model delivered great value.

“It is a flexible, organic and adaptive model that can take advantage of opportunities, providing a powerful way to bring about change.”

For one of the RTOs, the experience has resulted in a change in approach to work placement scheduling, moving away from block placements that were not working well for their students.

The new approach involves students spending two days a week in first term learning core subjects such as workplace health and safety and participating in skill set workshops in manual handling which prepares them for the workplace. When they are considered job ready, in the second term the students spend one day a week in class and one or more days a week on work placement.

This allows the RTO to check in with the students weekly in class while they are on work placement. The RTO also conducts site visits every three weeks during the student’s work placement.

“We find this approach allows us to take the student through the whole learning journey. It helps enrich and deepen their learning, so they are confident when they finish their training.”

