

The attitudes of people with a disability to undertaking VET training

*Lisa Nechvoglod
Tabatha Griffin*

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About the research

The attitudes of people with a disability to undertaking VET training

Lisa Nechvoglod and Tabatha Griffin, NCVET

This paper used a small survey to investigate the attitudes of people with a disability towards undertaking training. Such insights are helpful when there are clear policy imperatives to assist more people with a disability into the workforce. The recognition that working supports the resilience and builds the social capital of both the individual and the community underlies these policies.

Key messages

- The attitudes of participants in the study towards training are overall very positive.
- Characteristics such as prior education level and having a single disability or multiple disabilities did not seem to significantly affect the attitude of the survey participants towards undertaking training, but it was difficult to explore this adequately given the limitations of the data.
- For all qualification levels the three most important reasons people gave for undertaking training were to help them get a job, to gain work skills and to help increase confidence.

The ability to generalise these findings to the wider population is limited due to the small size of the survey, but one thing is clear – generally people with a disability consider VET a good option to assist them in finding employment and they are willing to undertake VET. They do, though, note that many people with a disability will need support to undertake the training.

Tom Karmel
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VET outcomes for people with a disability

Background

The disadvantage that people with a disability suffer in relation to the labour market and education is well known and well researched. Generally, people with a disability have lower levels of educational achievement than those without a disability, and this in turn tends to lead to poorer employment outcomes (Griffin & Nechvoglod 2008).

Statistics suggest that people with a disability are increasingly seeing vocational education and training (VET) as an option for them, with an annual growth of people in VET with a disability of 1.6% from 2003 to 2009 (NCVER 2010). This is positive as VET enables people to gain the skills needed for employment. However, people with a disability are less likely to complete a VET qualification compared with students without a disability, especially at the higher qualification levels. In addition, data from the Student Outcomes Survey show that people with a disability are much less likely to be employed after their training than people without a disability (Griffin & Beddie 2011).

Some recent research by Polidano and Mavromaras (2010) is slightly more encouraging and finds some significant positive employment benefits for people with a disability who complete a VET qualification. This research, based on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, finds that, for people who are not working, completing a VET qualification significantly increases the likelihood of subsequent employment – more so for people with a disability than without. The findings show that, in the first year after completing a VET course, a person with a disability increased their chances of gaining employment from 9% to 29%. For people without a disability there was only an estimated 10% increase in their chances of employment.

Despite the ongoing interest in the participation rates and benefits of VET for people with a disability, one piece of the jigsaw is largely missing: the attitudes of people with a disability towards VET. This paper addresses this gap.

Research questions

In order to explore the attitudes of people with a disability towards VET as a pathway to employment, the questions that this report seeks to answer are:

- Do people with a disability think VET will help them to find a job?
- Do people with a disability actively pursue information about training?
- How do attitudes towards VET differ depending on type of disability?
- How does the level of prior educational achievement affect attitude towards VET?
- Is VET accessible to people with a disability? Do people with a disability think there will be adequate support available to them if they undertake VET?

Research participants

In order to better understand these questions we selected as the target group people with a disability who were looking for employment. The research team undertook a national survey of people with a disability looking for work with the support of Disability Employment Service providers (DES providers). This paper analyses the results of that national survey. In total there were 104 respondents, with slightly more male participants (58.7%) than female participants (41.3%).

Limitations

Sourcing the participants from Disability Employment Service providers raises several issues. The first is that most of the participants are using the services of the Disability Employment Service provider because Centrelink requirements mean that they need to seek employment. This may produce a selection bias but it is difficult to say whether it would necessarily skew their attitude towards training – it could still be either negative or positive, despite the link to income support. Secondly, people self-selected to participate in the survey and this may have created some bias in the results, especially if they were particularly interested in undertaking training. A third consideration is that people with a profound or severe disability are not subject to the same requirements to participate in the workforce as those with less severe disabilities and therefore they are excluded from this survey.

Another limitation of the findings reported in this paper is due to the small size of the survey. Despite the good will displayed by Disability Employment Service providers in administering the survey, recruitment of suitable participants was extremely difficult and the number of survey respondents was small (n = 104). The limited number of respondents means that we can only look at broad trends in the data and the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population.

Role of Disability Employment Service providers and types of training

Disability Employment Service providers work in the employment market to support clients with a disability into open employment.¹ Clients are usually referred from Centrelink but some do volunteer to go to the Disability Employment Service providers as they are interested in finding employment. The majority of clients receive a payment such as the Disability Support Pension, Newstart, Parenting Payment or Youth Allowance.

The Disability Employment Service providers assess the training and employment needs of their clients, based on the job-capacity assessment from Centrelink. From this assessment a plan is worked out with the client, one that takes into account their current skills and aspirations, and can include training either in the form of job skills, learning and ‘life skills development’, OHS (occupational health and safety) requirements, or tickets to work (for example, safe food handling, forklift driving), although not all of these training options would be considered VET. Life skills training tends to focus more on preparing the person to cope with the routine of work (rather than providing the work skills required on the job). Examples of this are learning to manage finances, getting the confidence to catch the bus to and from work, or managing time. Various other supports such as on-the-job support and information for employers, other employees and clients, may also be offered. If clients need support when undertaking study the Disability Employment Service can provide extra support to increase the chances of success; this can include help with homework, note-taking and attending lectures with the client.

¹ Open employment is different from a sheltered work environment, where people with a disability are mainly employed.

Findings from the survey

Attributes of survey participants

Table 1 presents the age groups and gender of the participants. The majority of participants were aged from 45 to 64 years, with the second highest age group being 25 to 44 years. These two groups together account for 58.6% of the total participants and are considered to be within the prime working age in Australia. The percentages of males and females in the 25 to 64 years age group were 57.4% and 60.5% respectively.

Table 1 Age group by sex as a proportion of the total (%)

Age group	Male (n = 61)	Female (n = 43)	% of total
15–19 years	18.0	9.3	14.4
20–24 years	21.3	16.3	19.2
25–44 years	29.5	23.3	26.9
45–64 years	27.9	37.2	31.7
65 years and over	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rather not say	3.3	14.0	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2 shows the types of disabilities reported by participants. Overall the two most common types reported are mental illness and physical disability (22.1% and 18.3% respectively). As a comparison, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2009) reports that the incidence of disability caused by physical conditions was 15% in 2009, with 3% caused by mental or behavioural disorders. Participants reported intellectual disability as the third highest disability overall (12.5%), followed by learning disabilities (11.5%).

There are some differences between the reported disabilities of males and females. For male participants, physical disabilities account for 23.0%, mental illness accounts for 18.0% and intellectual, learning and other disabilities are equal third at 11.5%. Women participants vary slightly from this, with mental illness being the most frequently reported disability at 27.9%, followed by those with an intellectual disability (14.0%). Learning, physical and hearing disabilities account for 11.6% each of the reported female disabilities.

Table 2 Type of disability by sex as a proportion of the total (%)

Type of disability	Males (n = 61)	Females (n = 43)	% of total
Hearing/deaf	9.8	11.6	10.6
Physical	23.0	11.6	18.3
Intellectual	11.5	14.0	12.5
Learning	11.5	11.6	11.5
Mental illness	18.0	27.9	22.1
Acquired brain impairment	1.6	0.0	1.0
Vision	0.0	0.0	0.0
Medical condition	4.9	7.0	5.8
Other	11.5	7.0	9.6
Rather not say	8.2	9.3	8.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

While most participants reported a single disability (55.8%), just over a third (35.6%) of people reported multiple disabilities (table 3). Having multiple disabilities possibly adds complexity when trying to accommodate any special needs for people with a disability in training and employment.

Table 3 Reported single or multiple disability by sex as a proportion of the total (%)

	Male (n = 61)	Female (n = 43)	% of total
Single disability	54.1	58.1	55.8
Multiple disability	37.7	32.6	35.6
Rather not say	8.2	9.3	8.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Attitudes towards training

Table 4 ranks people with a disability into their highest level of school education completed, and shows if they had considered undertaking job-related training during the previous six months. The results illustrate that people with a disability whose highest level of completed schooling was Year 11 had thought about doing training, or thought about ‘maybe’ doing training, more than any other group (75.0%). The second highest group who had thought about training (or maybe doing training) are those who had completed Year 10 (totalling 72.9%). Those who had completed Year 12 had thought least about doing training (65.7%). As a general observation, no matter what the highest level of school participants had completed, a majority had thought about undertaking training during the past six months.

Table 4 Thought about training by highest level of school completed as a percentage of the total (%)

Highest level of school completed	Thought about job-related training			Total
	Yes	Maybe	No	
Year 10 (n = 45)	62.5	10.4	27.1	100.0
Year 11 (n = 20)	75.0	0.0	25.0	100.0
Year 12 (n = 35)	54.3	11.4	34.3	100.0

Following on from these results we explore the relationship between highest qualification level completed and attitude towards undertaking training in the future. People with lower qualification levels tend to have poorer employment outcomes and so it is of interest to look at whether those people are thinking about undertaking further training.

The results show that the majority of the survey participants were open to the idea of undertaking training now or in the future (table 5). Of the 96 people who answered the question, only three (7.0%) indicated that they would not consider training now or in the future. The highest qualification level completed by the participants did not seem to affect the attitude towards training.

Table 5 Highest qualification level completed by attitude to training now and in the future (%)

Highest level of qualification finished	Would undertake training now or in the future			Total
	Yes	Maybe	No	
Have not finished a qualification (n = 43)	60.5	32.6	7.0	100.0
Certificate I & II (n = 19)	73.7	21.1	5.3	100.0
Certificate III & IV (n = 16)	50.0	43.8	6.3	100.0
Diploma & bachelor degree (n = 9)	44.4	33.3	22.2	100.0
Other certificates (n = 9)	66.7	33.3	0.0	100.0

Note: 1 Where people indicated more than one qualification completed, only the highest level was counted.
2 5.8% of people did not answer this question.

Table 6 presents data on the effect of multiple disabilities and how having multiple disabilities may influence people's attitudes. Overall, the attitude towards undertaking training is positive, whether people report either single or multiple disabilities. The majority of participants said they would or would maybe undertake training in the near future (next six months). Only seven of the 90 participants who answered the question indicated that they would not consider training.

Table 6 Single or multiple disability and attitude to training now or in the near future as a proportion of the total (%)

Single or multiple disability	Would undertake training now or in the near future			Total
	Yes	Maybe	No	
Single disability (n = 53)	64.2	28.3	7.5	100.0
Multiple disability (n = 37)	59.5	32.4	8.1	100.0

Note: Excludes 13.5% participants who did not answer this question or did not provide an answer to type of disability.

To think about undertaking training is one thing but to actively pursue information about training demonstrates some level of commitment to the idea. Table 7 shows the results of those who had actively pursued information about training and where they had looked.

Just under half of all the participants (43.3%) had looked for information on job-related training. The most common place participants looked for information was in employment service providers (28.2%) and then in Disability Employment Service providers (16.5%), followed by other places (9.7%) such as community education centres and newspapers and through contact with employers, either by phone or directly. Of those who looked for information, 20.4% said they had looked in more than one place. It is not surprising that employment service providers rated highly as a place to look for information, considering that the survey sample was sourced through these providers.

Seeking the advice of career advisors for information related to training was not commonly pursued by participants (1%). These findings indicate a gap in suitable career advice or that people with a disability do not know where to find career advice.

Table 7 Where participants looked for information on training as a proportion of the total who looked for training (%)

Source of information related to training	%
Employment service provider	28.2
Training provider	7.8
Disability Employment Service provider	16.5
Career advisor	1.0
Family	5.8
Friends	6.8
Internet	3.9
Other	9.7
Looked for information in more than one place	20.4
Total	100.0

Difficulties arise when suitable information for people with a disability about training options is not available (Barnett 2004). For young people with a disability, pathways into VET need to be developed before they leave school. Case studies have demonstrated the benefits of engaging young people with VET in Schools programs (Barnett & Ryan 2005). Different pathways into VET, however, are needed for people who acquire a disability later in life, and information on this needs to be easily available and accessible.

These survey results show that, not only do people with a disability have a positive attitude towards training and are willing to undertake training, they have also sought information on training. We now move to an examination of the expected outcomes that people with a disability think training will help them to achieve.

Expected outcomes from training

To establish participants' expected outcomes from training we look at their highest completed qualification level and their reasons for considering training. The basis for looking at qualification level completed is that this can have a significant effect on employment outcomes.

For all qualification levels the three most important reasons for undertaking training were: to help them get a job, to gain work skills, and to help increase confidence and self-esteem. As some of the survey participants indicated:

To further my knowledge of an ever-changing workforce. (Male, Year 11)

To give me qualifications; to give to a 'would-be employer' and widen horizons, as my skills are limited. (Male, Year 10 or below)

It would help update my skills and help network within the industry. Training courses look great on résumés and show enthusiasm for work in the industry. (Male, Year 11 and certificate III)

Helping in gaining experience and confidence required to go back to the workforce. (Female, Year 10 or below)

That participants anticipate that training will help them to gain the necessary skills, experience and confidence to assist them find employment is not unexpected, especially as the participants were sourced from Disability Employment Service providers and so were required to seek employment.

When individual qualification level is examined some interesting points emerge. For those who have completed a certificate IV or below, the main reason for undertaking training was to get a job. For those who have a diploma or higher, the emphasis changes slightly from getting a job to gaining work skills (26.3%):

I want to work in [the] internet field and the relevant web-based courses would really improve my skills. (Male, Bachelor degree)

The training course will help to improve my skills and give me more experience. (Female, Diploma)

This point may reflect that participants think they have the required education but need to develop their practical work skills.

Table 8 Main reason for undertaking training by highest qualification level completed (%)

Main reason for doing job-related training	Highest qualification level completed			
	Certificate I & II (n = 33)	Certificate III & IV (n = 24)	Diploma & bachelor degree (n = 19)	Have not finished a qualification (n = 58)
To help me get a job	45.5	37.5	10.5	51.7
To start my own business	6.1	8.3	5.3	3.4
To help me find a different career	6.1	4.2	15.8	3.4
To gain work skills	18.2	29.2	26.3	13.8
To get into further study	9.1	8.3	15.8	3.4
To increase confidence/self esteem	12.1	4.2	15.8	13.8
Other	3.0	4.2	5.3	3.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: 1 16.3% of participants did not provide their reason for undertaking training and are not included in this table.
 2 Some participants gave more than one reason for this question, so the total is greater than the sample size.

Table 9 further investigates the differences between people with a single disability or multiple disabilities in terms of their thinking about whether training will help them get a job. For those reporting a single disability, 91.4% think that training will help them, or will maybe help them get a job. For participants reporting multiple disabilities, 84.0% think that training will, or maybe will help them get a job.

Table 9 Participants who think training will help them get a job by disability status (%)

Disability	Yes (n = 56.7)	Maybe (n = 24)	No (n = 5.7)	Don't know (n = 4.8)	Total
Single disability	62.1	29.3	3.4	5.2	100.0
Multiple disability	62.3	21.7	10.7	5.4	100.0

Support required for training

The literature suggests that, for some people with a disability, access to good support can help increase the chances of successful completion of training. This depends on the type and severity of the disability, with some people not requiring any support and others needing tailored support. This section examines participants' perceptions on support.

Two-thirds (70.2 %) of the participants in this survey indicated they would need or would maybe need support, while 22.1% indicated they would not. Table 10 shows those participants who indicated they would need or would maybe need extra support to undertake training and if they thought it would be available. As shown, the majority of those who answered this question felt the extra support would be available (56.2%). There was a very small number who thought support for training would not be available (1.4%). Nearly 43% indicated that they were not sure if support would be available or not, perhaps indicating that information about what support is available is not as accessible as it could be.

Table 10 Participants who indicated that they would need extra support for study and if they think this will be available (%)

Think support will be available	%
Yes	56.2
No	1.4
Maybe/ Don't know	42.5
Total	100.0

Note: 31 participants did not answer this question or thought they would not need extra support to undertake training.

The availability of support raises an issue related to the disclosure of disability. There are many reasons why individuals choose not to disclose their disability; this applies particularly to those with mental illness. In a forthcoming report, Venville and Sweet report that, for students with mental illness, the decision to disclose their illness to their VET provider is very difficult. The students in that research reported having to constantly weigh up the possible risks of disclosing their mental illness against the risks of not disclosing it. In turn, non-disclosure has consequences in terms of access to support (Miller & Nguyen 2008). So, although over half of the participants in this study believe that support will be available, it is not known whether or not they would be prepared to disclose their disability to the VET provider in order to access it.

Summary

Overall, the survey participants – who were unemployed job-seekers with a disability – showed positive attitudes towards training. Characteristics such as prior education level and having a single disability or multiple disabilities did not seem to significantly affect the attitude of the survey participants towards undertaking training, but it was difficult to explore this adequately, given the limitations of the data. The reasons for undertaking training were consistent amongst the participants, with the main reasons given to get a job, to gain work skills and to gain the confidence or raise the self-esteem of the individual.

Based on the results from this survey, and the steadily increasing participation rates of people in VET with a disability, it appears that people with a disability have a positive attitude towards training. The survey participants' reasons for undertaking training also support this statement. Given that there seems to be motivation to undertake training, an ongoing concern is the lower course-completion rates for people with a disability. Lower completion rates are likely to be due to a number of issues, but a big factor may be access to adequate support. This study indicated that almost half of the participants do not know whether study support will be available, demonstrating the importance of having information about this readily accessible.

Research in the area of disability is difficult to undertake. Access to people with a disability and their experiences can be limited and requires careful consideration of informed consent and adequate support for the participants. The diversity of disability type and severity is also a complicating factor, as is the prevalence of multiple disabilities. The relationships between the different characteristics are complex and it is therefore difficult to accurately assess the attitudes of people with a disability in a small survey. The timing of disability onset and how this interacts with previous education and the attitudes towards further training would be a valuable future investigation.

In summary, a clear trend from this survey is that people with a disability generally consider VET a good option to assist them to gain employment. Given that recent research has found that 'for unemployed people with a disability who do undertake VET the employment benefits from completing appear to be greater for people with a disability than for people without a disability' (Polidano & Mavromaras 2010), for those who do choose to follow this path there is an increased chance of a positive employment outcome, especially if adequate support is provided.

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