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WAS IT WORTH IT?

**EVALUATING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WHO
UNDERTOOK THE DIPLOMA IN SUPPORTED
EMPLOYMENT.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment for the degree of
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John Taylor

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WAS IT WORTH IT? EVALUATING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WHO UNDERTOOK THE DIPLOMA IN SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT.

ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates self-reported outcomes from 12 students who enrolled in the Diploma in Supported Employment during the three intakes funded by the Ministry of Social Development (2001-2002). It explores how the content and delivery of the diploma have met student needs and expectations, and assisted them in their practice as supported employment practitioners. The research is conducted within the environment of disability and the vocational rehabilitation sector of New Zealand, where the focus of endeavour is assisting disabled people with their employment aspirations. The sector is predominantly funded through contribution from central government and is in the process of a paradigm shift.

Research indicates that the vocational sector has traditionally operated on the individual or medical understanding of disability, which equates disability with impairment and characterises it as some unfortunate or catastrophic, chance occurrence that has befallen the individual. The emerging paradigm is that disability is socially constructed, having its roots in critical social theory. Supported employment is in keeping with the new paradigm shift and has become a major government strategy in supporting disabled people.

The Diploma in Supported Employment was originally conceived as a way to provide the necessary skills to a largely untrained workforce. Its delivery was the first ever attempt at coordinated training across this sector. The Ministry of Social Development, to further their policy objectives, supported existing vocational sector staff to enrol. The thesis therefore represents a timely and pertinent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Diploma in Supported Employment and will assist future planning for work force development in the vocational sector. A qualitative methodology is employed to explore students' lived reality through six individual interviews and a focus group of an additional six past students. The analysis privileges the student voice and key factors that support the student to complete the qualification and to apply their new knowledge in their work are identified. This project has potential public policy implications and makes recommendations for future practice and research.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Human service provision requires a workforce that has a range of skills and capabilities to perform the many and varied functions now required and this is particularly true of those who work to assist disabled people find employment (Kendrick, 2000; Reid & Bray, 1997; Rogan & Held, 1999). This introductory chapter introduces the concept of supported employment and positions it within the disability support sector of the broader category of endeavour known as human services. It provides a brief framing and background to the study to contextualise it. The chapter then describes the significance of the study and enumerates the aims and objectives of the research. It finishes by providing an outline of the ensuing chapters of the thesis.

Within the broad field of human services, which ranges from care of the elderly, to deaf interpreters, to respite provision, resides a small grouping of organisations that focus on supporting disabled people into 'regular' employment. The work they do is so alien to the normal work of human services that in the above sentence the word 'regular' had to be added to avoid potential misunderstanding from any who read this and who have a history in human services. What this small grouping of organisations engages in is a service known as supported employment. The reason their work is so alien to traditional service provision is that it intersects with the very genesis of the concept of disability (Connors, 1985; Oliver, 1990; Jolly, 2000). The service challenges many long held views about the inclusion of disabled people into full participation in their communities by assuming disabled people have the ability for direct entry into the labour market (Bennie, 1991). Staff involved in the delivery of supported employment need to develop a whole skill set foreign to typical human service workers. Instead of providing 'care' in generally segregated and very regulated environments, these staff have to deal with business people and translate social objectives into commercial outcomes. To assist in the required staff development, in 1999 the Association for Supported Employment in New Zealand (ASENZ) initiated the development of the Diploma in Supported Employment.

Background to Study

Supported employment sits within a sector known as the 'vocational sector' of disability support. The vocational sector is in the process of a paradigm change where disabled

people themselves are challenging the traditional definition of disability. The traditional view of disability is known as the individual model or medical model and essentially equates disability and any disadvantage relating to it, to the impairment the individual has (Sullivan, 1998; Bennie, 1998; Mercer, 2002). The model of disability that is challenging this previously held view is commonly known as the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Finkelstein, 2001b). The social model essentially claims disabled people are disadvantaged by the way society is constructed and are therefore an oppressed minority (Finkelstein, 2001; NZDS, 2001). The potential paradigm shift has resulted in a contested definition of disability where both operate as competing explanations (Hedlund, 2000). The reason the definition of disability is important is that each explanation provides a different analysis about what the 'problem' is and indicates different solutions.

The vocational sector has grown up, like many other forms of voluntary service provision, with some limited support from the state (Harrison, 1998). Over the years, despite the state becoming more prescriptive in what it wanted, the sector has had very little government investment made in it. In particular there has been no coordinated policy developed for training and developing staff. What training that has occurred has been at the instigation of the sector and funded out of the little resources available. This changed in 2001 when the Department of Work and Income decided to respond to the sector demands by offering 200 people free places on the Diploma in Supported Employment over three intakes. This thesis explores the outcome for students who were sponsored to enrol in the diploma. It considers how the delivery of the diploma met student learning expectations, how it affected their practice and what policy implication arise.

The author writes from the perspective of 19 years association with supported employment. During that time I have been part of the small group of people who established ASENZ, who lobbied for changes to government policy, assisted with the development of the Diploma in Supported Employment, and most recently have been employed as the course coordinator for that qualification. It was this involvement in supported employment and in training new staff that prompted the current Master's study as a means of professional development and as a way to evaluate and develop the Diploma in Supported Employment.

Significance of the Study

Supported employment, as with other human services endeavours, is labour intensive. It is through people that services are provided. Therefore whatever core beliefs, understandings,

theories and assumptions these people have, and whatever skills they bring to the job, will significantly determine the character and quality of service produced (Kendrick, 2000). Inside many bureaucracies this view may not be accepted. A more technocratic viewpoint will often see people in human service roles are largely interchangeable. However the consistent reports from people who receive services is that the person they deal with directly is the most important person to them (Fratangelo, Olney & Lehr, 2001; Kendrick, 2000; Milner et al, 2004). The creation of a real relationship with support staff has been noted as one of the most powerful ways disabled people can ensure quality of service and ensure they have a voice (MacArthur, 2003). If one accepts this argument then staff training and development is critical to service quality. Yet there is still no public policy on workforce development in the vocational sector.

This thesis provides an evaluation of the first coordinated training undertaken within the vocational sector and as such represents a significant step towards providing information that may inform future policy development. Not only is the content of the Diploma in Supported Employment and the efficacy of that information considered, but also the process of delivering the diploma through a supported distance education model is reviewed. The notion of using distance education within human services is not new but extensive searches of the literature failed to find any prior studies of the medium in relation to supported employment. As such this current research begins a line of enquiry in the critical area of staff development within supported employment.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The intention of this study is to explore the experiences of students who were funded by the Department of Work and Income, latterly within the Ministry of Social Development, to enrol in the Diploma in Supported Employment. The study considers how the content and delivery mechanisms met the students' needs and expectations. It examines how studying the diploma affects their practice within supported employment. By using student experience the policy context within which the diploma is delivered, is investigated to review areas that support student learning and areas of conflict. The purpose of the study is to consider if the effort of committing to this formal qualification was indeed worth it and suggest possible ways forward for staff development in the sector, and specifically within supported employment.

To accomplish the above tasks the first step was to review the broader context of the training in the areas of disability, vocational policy, learning theory and distance education. The thesis requires a broad range of topics to be reviewed as it explores the intersection between staff distance education and current vocational arrangements for disabled people. To cover this range, the material is divided into two chapters with related information reviewed included in each. The first - chapter two - begins this task with a discussion of disability, supported employment and government policy for vocational services. The debate surrounding the definition of disability is outlined and the position adopted by this research is framed. Subsequently there is a review of supported employment, its development and a definition that will inform further analysis. After the review on supported employment is a survey of government policy as it relates to the disability support services known as vocational services in New Zealand. Finally there is a brief discussion about the importance of staff development for supported employment.

Chapter three reviews literature relating to distance education and learning theory. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the delivery methodology used for the Diploma in Supported Employment and to provide a theoretical platform to consider how students learn. This chapter considers the development of distance education, reviews some of the major theories and notes the debate about delivery methods. Within the discussion on learning theory, processes are explored that assist people to learn and, particularly those that assist distance learners.

The research methodology and the methods used in this study are outlined in chapter four. This chapter considers the efficacy of the techniques used, the ethical framework and summarises the approach to analysis. Chapter five, the theory chapter, draws out some of the theoretical position touched upon in the literature review. These theories form a theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis. The subsequent three chapters provide a discussion and analysis of the results of the study. The first of these three chapters, chapter six, considers those themes that came from the research that related to factors external to the Diploma in Supported Employment. Chapter seven considers themes that participants identified that directly related to the content and delivery of the diploma. The final chapter in this section, chapter eight, considers some of the outcomes participants reported from studying the Diploma in Supported Employment. It also examines policy implications raised by the study. When participants were relating the benefit of the Diploma in Supported Employment for them, most of them used a positive story about a person whom they assisted into employment. These positive stories were too large to use in the main text,

but have been included in an appendix as they provide a useful record of the application of learning.

Finally the thesis closes with conclusions and recommendations regarding the delivery of the Diploma in Supported Employment and for future supported employment workforce development. Suggestions are made about future investments in this area and also for future research.

Summary

This research provides a timely and unique evaluation of the only current sector-specific training offered for those engaged in vocational support of disabled people. The study highlights specific areas that relate to the content, delivery methodology, and the study contexts within which students operate. Recommendations for future training and policy development are made that assist to move the sector into a closer alignment with the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

