Reasonable Adjustment and Assessment:
strategies to implement the principles

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Reasonable Adjustment - Assessment

Introduction

What is reasonable adjustment in assessment for students with learning disabilities completing vocational modules that are aligned with national competency standards?

The Assessment Centre for Vocational Education within TAFE NSW is investigating how far it is possible to use the principles of reasonable adjustment and still maintain the validity and rigour of the assessment process. This paper focuses on the recently accredited TAFE NSW Certificate in Employment Access that has a target group of people with a learning disability who are seeking employment. The curriculum has been based on the premise that it must be flexible enough to adjust to meeting the varied learning needs of people with a specific educational disadvantage or learning disability. In this paper interim reports are given on two case studies.

While the research for this project is focused on this course, it is assumed that the outcomes will inform the assessment process more generally. The outcomes could form the basis for developing implementation guidelines for other vocational modules that may require reasonable adjustment.

Strategies that are already being used by teachers to incorporate reasonable adjustment are being collated from pilot programs conducted across the state of NSW. These will then be evaluated and used to develop guidelines and good practice strategies to assist teachers to deliver programs that incorporate reasonable adjustment in assessment.

The project began in June 1996 and the final report which is due in January 1997 will include implementation guidelines, good practice teaching strategies and recommendations for professional development for teachers.

Background to the project

In 1994, the NSW TAFE Commission identified the need for a nationally developed and recognised course for people with a learning disability. The course needed to be aligned with the industry competency standards within nominated industries where there were employment opportunities. The three industry areas involved in the development of this course were Hospitality, Farming and Horticulture.

Consultation with the relevant Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABS) was carried out by the developers of the course, the Certificate in Employment Access. The results of this consultation and research supported the need for students with learning disabilities to be able to undertake vocational training that provided direct employment opportunities and/or articulated to further training. To achieve this, the curriculum needed to be customised to meet both the learning needs of the student and
the requirements of entry level training. The vocational modules were supplemented by core modules which focused on developing employment and job seeking skills.

In 1996 the Certificate in Employment Access (CAE) was accredited and is in the first year of its implementation. Its national target group is people with a specific educational disadvantage. For TAFE NSW this target group has been interpreted as people with a learning disability.

The course syllabus states (page 5) that ‘for learners with a particular learning difficulty, reasonable adjustment may be needed’. Reasonable adjustment refers to an adjustment of assessment approaches, not of learning outcomes. It has been defined as

"the principle of ensuring equal opportunity in the community for people with a disability by making any adjustments that can be made without causing 'undue' hardship to the person or body concerned, eg. an employer, a training provider."

OHT 1

The essential purpose of incorporating reasonable adjustment in assessment procedures is to give the person being assessed an alternative method of demonstrating competence.¹

OHT 2

One of the main issues involved maintaining national standards while offering reasonable adjustment in assessment. The Assessment Centre within TAFE NSW was asked to research strategies used to enable reasonable adjustment. It is assumed that outcomes from this project will inform the assessment process more generally, and other modules, not in the Certificate in Employment Access, that may require some reasonable adjustment.

Aims and Overview of the Methodology

The purpose of the research project was to investigate how to use the principles of reasonable adjustment within vocational modules while maintaining the validity and rigour of the assessment process.

- A representative Reference group was formed which endorsed the project brief and confirmed that the target group enrolled in the CEA would be students identified with an intellectual disability
- The relevant current policies were reviewed and a literature search undertaken

¹ Disability Services NSW TAFE Commission, 1994, Competency Assessment Mechanisms and Reasonable Adjustment, DEET.
An initial meeting was conducted with teachers and coordinators from the hospitality industry experienced in working with the special needs of the target group. The data collected provided a framework for the areas to research and some strategies considered necessary to achieve effective outcomes.

Questions for interviews were developed from this data and focused on:
- administration
- curriculum
- delivery
- assessment

Interviews were conducted at four locations - two colleges delivering the Certificate in Employment Access and two colleges with other vocational courses for students with intellectual disabilities.

Implementation guidelines and strategies were collated from each of the case studies.

At the moment educational staff are reviewing the outcomes of the interviews. A Research Report, due in January 1997 will describe the outcomes which will include:
- a literature review.
- guidelines for implementing reasonable adjustment in assessment for students with a learning disability.
- sample assessment strategies and events for selected farming, horticulture and hospitality modules.
- identification of training needs of teachers in relation to reasonable adjustment.

I will now describe two cases studies and the interim findings from these.

1. Interim findings from the Case Study of the Certificate in Employment Access - with Rural Electives

Administration

This was a group of school leavers from years 10 and 11 with a range of special learning needs. The course was funded from three different sources within a large country Institute. With no external funding available to TAFE, the resources, including teaching hours, were kept to a minimum. The course was a one year full-time program of approximately 25 hours per week allocated over 4 days.

Students were referred by staff from the local schools and interviewed by a TAFE NSW teacher/consultant for students with intellectual disabilities. An Individual
Education Plan was negotiated, and parental involvement was recommended and encouraged to support each student throughout the course.

One of the immediate issues was that teachers were not trained in special education strategies and needed access to staff development activities or resources to support the new program. They felt they would have benefited from training in developing strategies to:

- integrate modules, especially theory with the practice.
- monitor and support all part time staff working with the students
- develop a range of delivery/assessment strategies to meet individual learner's needs

Curriculum Implementation

Some of the results so far are listed.

- Teachers did not feel confident in integrating theory and practical modules. An issue in the Problem Solving module was how to interpret the theory so the practical steps would be relevant to the students. How can theory be transferred into delivery strategies to be used by all the teachers across all the modules? This led to issues such as how would the integrated subjects be assessed.

- The overlap of subject areas needed to be monitored by mapping and integrating modules to reinforce skills to the students. Communication networks were difficult to establish and very informal as coordination hours were limited and the part time staff were at the college for only short periods.

- Project work such as erecting a farm building, enabled about 6 vocational modules to be integrated for delivery/assessment. The project, undertaken by the students as a group, simulated on the job training, established benchmarks for appropriate workplace behaviour and social skills and integrated key competencies such as team work.

- Industry confirmed that the level of competence was appropriate when the student successfully completed the work placement module.

- The subject Farm Chemical Use is compulsory in the course, but requires high levels of literacy that most students would have difficulty achieving. Students not competent in this one module, but competent in the other modules will not successfully complete the course.

Delivery and Reasonable Adjustment

- The sequencing of the modules and the daily timetable was determined by the needs of the group, such as their level of 'work ready' skills or their age to sit for a driver's licence.
- A delivery pattern was established to provide routine and stability. Attendance times at the college reflected the times students were rostered in the workplace.
Assessment Centre for Vocational Education

Holiday breaks impacted on the pattern of student performance and were taken into consideration when introducing new material or setting assessment events.

- When modules are integrated, the time taken to complete each module is extended over a period and this allows students more time if required to become competent.

- To provide reasonable adjustment, students usually required more hours of face to face teaching than was recommended in the curriculum document for the vocational module.

- A wide range of teaching strategies was used to accommodate the individual needs within the group. As these students came to TAFE directly from year 10 or 11 in school, at the start of the course they were given very clear guidelines on acceptable adult learning behaviour. The Individual Education Plan and their home support was constantly reviewed. The teachers needed to change student behaviour to introduce more acceptable attitudes when in the college, classroom or workplace.

- The students needed to learn how to become adult learners. Each teacher negotiated their own class rules. Some teachers, more accustomed to working with adults, wanted advice on how to discipline young students when they did not demonstrate adult behaviour.

Assessment and Reasonable Adjustment

The students on this course did not have positive experiences on assessment from school. They had progressed through school with very limited assessment success and did not see the need to be ‘tested’ in TAFE. They avoided assessment events. Some students had the ability to learn vocational skills but needed clear strategies to change their behaviour to develop a more acceptable attitude when in the workplace environment, following a set of instructions.

Students, and teachers needed to learn how to use a variety of ways to demonstrate competence using a range of evidence.

Some of the strategies that were used successfully are listed.

- Assessment tasks were made flexible and written work was kept to a minimum.

- Assessment events were able to be completed at different stages of the course, to compensate for the different times taken to become competent.

- Assessment methods were kept consistent throughout the course.

- Students developed their own skills inventory sheets and these were used to determine readiness for work. Workplace skills were reinforced early in the course to enable students to start work at different points in the course, depending on their level of readiness. Each student developed 4 or 5 skills sheets during the year. These sheets were used for self assessment, peer assessment and by the employer.
to confirm that the student had demonstrated industry competence while in the workplace.

- Students responded well to 'rewards' and immediate positive feedback for small tasks successfully achieved. At the start of the course, students were not willing to be assessed in their log book for fear of failing.

- written assessment was kept to a minimum to compensate for low levels of literacy.

- The Communication module was used for developing log books for each student. This provided positive reinforcement and allowed students to assess each other in the group. Within the group, each student was encouraged to discuss the assessment result and to understand why it was made.

- teachers negotiated flexible assessment with the student by assessing the module (or integrated modules) over a period of time to provide opportunities to practice until the student was confident and competent.

- task sheets signed off by the employer demonstrated workplace competence to industry standards. Students not yet workplace competent could return to TAFE to gain further skills or knowledge

2. **Interim findings from the Case study of the Certificate in Employment Access - with Cookery electives**

**Administration**

Students had prior knowledge of TAFE and vocational training as they had been initially enrolled in an access program that articulated into the CEA. The students attended full time with a similar timetable as the previous group.

This CEA course was well resourced. It was funded as an ANTA initiative and supplemented by resources from Adult Basic Education and the Disabilities Services Unit.

The set up period was considered crucial as it consolidated support from all the educational staff involved, the parents/friends and the students and established the ground rules for negotiating expectations, behaviour and outcomes.

- The resources required could not be predicted when planning the course. The individual needs of the students were difficult to meet with limited coordination hours and students would not use the services of the counsellor.

- As the students progressed in the course, the staff determined that the funded CEA was not providing enough challenges for the students and gave them limited job options. Further modules were added to the training to provide opportunities for students to achieve all the competencies in level 1 of Commercial Cookery. The six students who completed all the modules did achieve this vocational outcome.
The level of tutorial support for specific learning needs could not be gauged when enrolling the students. Further one to one tutorial support was negotiated for 2 students to raise their literacy levels to achieve competency. For practical modules it was determined to have 2 teachers in the kitchen to maintain appropriate levels of safety.

Staff had no access to professional development in this area of special education. Some had worked together previously as a team and had high levels of enthusiasm to motivate the students and other staff. The teachers from the hospitality area were highly committed to the course and the team operated informally but effectively to keep up to date with any issues regarding the students' progress.

The areas where teachers requested training and implementation strategies were similar to the other group. As the hospitality teacher had a background in media production, technology had been used effectively to develop resources customised to the needs of each student. Staff requested further training in this area, together with strategies to overcome negative learning attitudes and to promote an interactive classroom.

To improve the work placement module, teachers suggested resources or guidelines were needed for developing a skills analysis to design task sheets and for chef/supervisors to understand their role and responsibilities to the student.

Curriculum Implementation

As the students were more interested and motivated in the practical subject areas, the theory content conducted in a classroom was kept to a minimum. From the start, the students were introduced to workplace skills and behaviour, even in the theory classes. The course timetable (hours), chef's uniform, kitchen behaviour and attitudes were set to reflect the workplace. The needs of the students and the teachers together determined the sequencing and integration of the modules.

The Adult Basic Education teacher customised the vocational lesson material and dressed in the chef's uniform to teach with the hospitality teacher in the kitchen. The extra teacher in the kitchen also provided a higher level of safety for the students.

Delivery incorporating Reasonable Adjustment

The first few weeks of the course, the students were constantly immersed in the course content both at the college and with the support of the parent/friends outside the course hours. The students worked in the college canteen to learn initial work skills. Having completed the first practical cookery module, the students undertook some on the job training. On returning to TAFE they had increased kitchen skills within the context of understanding the workplace behaviour and culture. One student would often come late to class but was always punctual for work.
• Students were constantly practising skills. To master cutting vegetables with a chef's knife, the student may need to practice over 15 sessions. The student could be encouraged to master part of the task before moving to the whole task. An example may be to used pre-sliced potatoes to cut into smaller specified shapes.

• Each student was given encouragement to learn within their own level of skill. Students first to finish the set task, could be extended by assisting the teacher to prepare for the next task or cook the final menu item.

• One cookery teacher was programmed to work with the students on all the practical modules, so competencies were extended or practised in consecutive modules.

• The electronic whiteboard was used to sketch the steps within the task and copies made for each student to follow and to keep on file.

• Self speech was not successful with this group and they did not want the video camera used until their level of skills and confidence had increased. Learning materials were customised and developed to meet the needs of each student.

Assessment including Reasonable Adjustment

Many issues in assessment were similar to the other group. The students had negative experiences from school and had to learn about assessment. As trust and acceptance was established in the group, they became more interactive and able to accept feedback.

• Students were introduced to assessment concepts by using group assessment and writing results on butchers paper. Videos were initially used to film informal activities to encourage feedback and discussion.

• As the students gained self-confidence they used the video to replay, copy and self-assess. Videos were taken in the workplace to allow the students to see each other working in the commercial kitchens.

• Written tests were kept to a minimum. Multiple choice questions were adapted using graphics for the summative assessment.

• Theory tests about practical topics or tasks were held in the kitchen as some students had difficulty transferring their practical knowledge out of the kitchen context.

• Final practical assessment also incorporated graphics and was trialed beforehand.

• Restaurant functions prepared by the students at the college demonstrated holistic competencies within a working environment and gave the students and staff feedback on their competence.
• Reports returned from industry confirmed that students had reached the acceptable level of industry competence, as in the previous case study.

Conclusion

Both case studies indicate that teachers are using similar strategies to implement the principles of reasonable adjustment. The core modules allow the teachers to deliver the social skills and workplace behaviour practice essential for the students to achieve workplace competence.

The work placement module provides students with the opportunity to practice on the job and develop workplace performance skills and work within the workplace culture while being supported by the teacher. This important aspect of the course confirms to the students, educational staff and industry that the vocational competencies have been achieved to meet the industry standards.

The interim findings verify that reasonable adjustment can be provided to students with an intellectual disability using a variety of strategies. Issues affecting administration, curriculum, and delivery will all impact on good practice in reasonable adjustment in assessment. Delivery and assessment resources and training would benefit and support the educational staff, who provide social and workplace skills to take young students through a transition period into vocational training. For teachers to provide reasonable adjustment in assessment, they need to consider the individual learning needs, use flexible delivery strategies and integrate on and off the job training to ensure industry competence.