Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into E-PET-078-25 and PET-041-26: Make career guidance a right for every ACT Year 7–10 public school student

Submission number: 005

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Submission: Career Education and Post-School Transition Support for Students with Significant Disability in the ACT

I am writing to provide a perspective on career education and post-school transition support for students with significant disability in the ACT, particularly students attending specialist settings such as Woden School and Black Mountain School, as well as students with significant disability attending ACT high schools and colleges.

I currently work with senior secondary students in Years 11 and 12 and have identified what I believe is a significant gap in the career and transition services available to students with moderate to severe intellectual disability.

Career education needs to look different for students with significant disability

For many students in mainstream education, career guidance understandably focuses on employment, further education, vocational training, apprenticeships and university pathways.

For students with significant intellectual disability, however, the concept of a successful "career pathway" or post-school transition is often considerably broader.

For these students, post-school planning may involve identifying appropriate capacity-building and community participation programs, supported employment opportunities, volunteering, social and recreational opportunities, transport arrangements and other supports that enable the young person to participate meaningfully in adult life.

Career education for this cohort should therefore not be viewed as being less important because a student may not be progressing directly to open employment or tertiary education. If anything, their transition can be considerably more complex and require much earlier and more intensive planning.

Years 11 and 12 are a critical transition period

The final two years of schooling are particularly important for students with significant disability and their families.

Parents and carers can find themselves simultaneously needing to:

- understand the post-school options available to their young person;
- identify and investigate appropriate service providers;
- navigate the NDIS and understand how their young person's changing circumstances and support requirements may need to be reflected in their planning;
- obtain appropriate assessments and evidence regarding the young person's

functional needs;

- investigate capacity-building, community participation, volunteering and employment programs;
- consider transport and community access;
- consider future decision-making arrangements and guardianship where relevant;
- visit potential post-school services;
- coordinate information between families, schools, allied health professionals and providers; and
- prepare the student themselves for one of the most significant transitions of their life.

For families already caring for a young person with complex needs, navigating these processes can be overwhelming. There can also be considerable differences between families in their available time, knowledge of disability systems, confidence in navigating complex processes and capacity to advocate.

Consequently, the quality of a young person's post-school transition should not depend upon how knowledgeable, confident or well-resourced their parents happen to be.

Transition requires considerably more than choosing a provider

Over the past two years, I have worked with students and families to support this transition process. This has included assisting families to understand relevant NDIS processes, obtaining appropriate functional assessments, seeking information and quotations from prospective providers, facilitating parent visits and tours of services, assisting the school to provide letters and supporting information, and developing individual transition plans.

Importantly, the transition does not finish once a post-school provider has been identified. Students with moderate to severe intellectual disability can require extended and carefully planned transitions into unfamiliar environments. A successful transition may involve repeated visits, gradual increases in attendance, familiarisation with staff and routines, and the careful communication of information about a student's communication, behaviour support, health, sensory and personal-care requirements.

This process benefits everyone involved.

The student has time to develop familiarity and trust. The family gains confidence in the new setting. The receiving organisation has an opportunity to understand the student's communication, interests, routines, strengths and individual support requirements before they leave school.

For some students, this process may need to occur over months rather than weeks. Transition planning therefore needs to begin well before a student's final days of schooling.

A specialist area requiring specialist expertise

A central issue is that this work requires expertise extending beyond traditional career counselling.

Career practitioners and Disability Education Coordination Officers (DECOs) undertake important work within ACT schools. However, supporting a young person with significant intellectual disability into adult services requires specialised understanding of disability, transition planning, family engagement, post-school service systems and the needs of students with complex communication, behavioural, medical or personal-care

requirements.
This can be particularly challenging in mainstream high schools and colleges. Career practitioners are already required to maintain knowledge across university, vocational education, apprenticeships, employment and other mainstream pathways. Students with significant disability can require a markedly different and considerably more intensive model of transition planning.
It is unreasonable to expect every individual career practitioner or DECO to independently develop specialist expertise in this complex area.
Instead, schools should have access to specialist practitioners who can build the capability of existing school staff while also providing direct assistance with complex transitions.

Proposed ACT-wide specialist transition service
I have previously suggested to the ACT Education Directorate that consideration be given to establishing two specialist career and post-school transition positions for students with significant disability, ideally staffed by practitioners with substantial experience working with students in specialist education settings.
I would propose that these positions operate according to a Northside/Southside model:

- One specialist practitioner would have primary responsibility for schools in North Canberra.
- One specialist practitioner would have primary responsibility for schools in South Canberra.
- Both practitioners would work collaboratively as an ACT-wide specialist team, jointly developing resources, delivering professional learning, coordinating parent education programs, maintaining relationships with post-school providers and supporting particularly complex cases where appropriate.

This structure would provide each ACT school with a clearly identified specialist contact, enabling the practitioner to build ongoing relationships with career practitioners, DECOs, teachers, students and families in their geographical area.
At the same time, operating as a two-person team would help ensure consistency across Canberra and reduce duplication. The two practitioners could jointly develop resources, maintain current knowledge of services and collectively deliver larger programs that would not be efficient for individual schools to organise independently.
The positions should not replace the work of school career practitioners, DECOs, teachers or transition staff. Rather, they would provide a specialist tier of expertise and coordination that schools could access when students' transition needs require it.

Responsibilities could include
1. Professional learning and capacity building
Provide professional learning for career practitioners, DECOs, teachers and other relevant school staff on post-school transition planning for students with significant disability.
This could include practical guidance on transition timelines, gathering evidence, engaging families, identifying post-school options and establishing structured transition programs.
2. Individual transition support
Provide specialist assistance to schools and families in particularly complex cases,

beginning in Year 11 or earlier where the circumstances of the student indicate that additional preparation time will be required.

3. Parent information and education

Coordinate regular parent information sessions covering topics such as:

- preparing for life after school;
- post-school capacity-building programs;
- community access and participation;
- supported employment and volunteering;
- navigating relevant aspects of the NDIS;
- evidence and assessments that may be required during transition;
- transport and community access;
- supported decision-making and guardianship; and
- preparing a young person for the transition from school.

These sessions could be offered across Northside and Southside locations and, where appropriate, delivered jointly by the two specialist practitioners.

4. Individual family consultations

Provide opportunities for families to discuss their young person's individual circumstances and better understand what should occur during Years 11 and 12.

This could be particularly valuable for families who are unfamiliar with disability systems or who may otherwise struggle to navigate the transition process independently.

5. Provider engagement

Develop relationships between ACT schools and post-school disability providers and maintain current knowledge of programs and opportunities available to school leavers.

Having two practitioners undertake this work across the ACT would also avoid each individual school needing to independently establish the same networks and gather the same information.

6. Service provider tours and information events

Coordinate Northside, Southside and ACT-wide opportunities for students and families to investigate potential post-school services.

For example, the two specialist practitioners could jointly coordinate an annual or twice-yearly Post-School Options Program, involving provider presentations, information sessions, service tours and opportunities for families to ask questions.

7. Individual student transition plans

Support schools to develop comprehensive transition plans capturing each student's:

- communication methods;
- strengths and interests;
- routines;
- sensory needs;
- behavioural and emotional regulation strategies;
- health and personal-care requirements;
- environmental considerations;
- successful support strategies; and
- transition schedule.

These plans could then support a structured and gradual introduction to the student's

future environment.

8. Decision-making and guardianship information

Facilitate access to appropriate information sessions for families about supported decision-making, decision-making arrangements and guardianship where relevant.

The specialist role would not provide legal advice, but would ensure families know where they can obtain appropriate information and assistance.

9. NDIS interface support

Help families and schools understand how educational transition planning interfaces with the NDIS and connect families with appropriate NDIS contacts and services where required.

The role would not be responsible for making NDIS decisions or guaranteeing funding outcomes. Rather, it would help ensure families understand the importance of beginning relevant processes sufficiently early and gathering appropriate information and evidence.

10. ACT-wide resources and consistency

The two practitioners could jointly develop common transition resources, timelines, templates and checklists so that families receive consistent guidance regardless of which ACT school their child attends.

This could include a **Year 11 and 12 Post-School Transition Timeline** clearly identifying what families and schools should consider at different stages.

A "no student leaves without a transition plan" principle

I would also encourage the Review to consider establishing an ACT-wide expectation that **no student with significant or complex disability support needs leaves school without an individual post-school transition plan.**

For students identified as having significant or complex disability support needs, every student should leave ACT schooling with an individual post-school transition plan developed collaboratively with the student wherever possible, their family or carers, school staff and, where appropriate and with appropriate consent, relevant external services and prospective post-school providers.

Importantly, the development of this plan should **not commence in the final weeks or months of Year 12**. Formal planning should begin sufficiently early to enable families to understand their options, gather relevant information and evidence, investigate services and enable the student to undertake a meaningful, gradual transition.

For many students, Year 11 would provide an appropriate point at which formal transition planning should commence. For students with particularly complex needs, planning may need to begin earlier.

This would help shift the system away from a reactive approach towards a planned two-year transition pathway, with clear milestones through Years 11 and 12.

Equity should be the underlying principle

Students with significant intellectual disability represent a relatively small cohort, but their transition needs can be amongst the most complex within our education system.

Providing specialist transition support should therefore not be viewed as an additional or peripheral service. It is an issue of equitable access to career education and preparation for adult life.

Equality would mean offering these students the same career service offered to every other

student.
Equity means recognising that students with significant disability may require a different type, intensity and duration of career and transition support in order to achieve a successful post-school outcome.
The transition from school to adult life is a major milestone for every young person. For students with significant intellectual disability, a poorly coordinated transition can have significant consequences for the student and their family. Conversely, when planning commences early, families are informed, prospective providers are engaged and the young person is gradually introduced to their new environment, there is a much greater opportunity to establish a successful and sustainable transition.
I therefore encourage the Review to consider the establishment of two dedicated specialist career and post-school transition positions for students with significant disability within the ACT education system, operating through a coordinated Northside/Southside model. Such positions would not replace the important work undertaken by school career practitioners, DECOs, teachers or families. Instead, they would provide the specialist expertise, coordination, professional learning and direct transition support necessary to ensure students with significant disability are afforded the same opportunity as their peers to leave school with a meaningful, well-planned and sustainable pathway into adult life.

Regards

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