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# **YOUNG VET LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES: ACQUIRING 'LEARNING SKILLS' FOR LIFE AND WORK**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Young people are being prepared for employment through VET studies both at School and in TAFE. Students with disabilities are actively encouraged to access VET studies delivered by either provider.

Within VET, the "employability" skills are recognised to be of increasing significance, particularly by employers. 'Learning' is identified as one of these generic skills – that is, students need to acquire the skills for learning, particularly for work. Lifelong learning skills are recognised as essential in preparation for a vocation, and should be addressed within VET in Schools modules.

This paper reports on a 5-week overseas study tour to investigate various approaches to developing the 'learning skills' component of generic (employability) skills in young VET students – especially those who have a disability. People who are specialists in equity, integration, diversity, vocational learning in schools/polytechnics/institutes, lifelong learning and generic skills – including students – were interviewed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and France.

The findings of this study, and the resultant recommendations to the NSW Department of Education & Training, will be discussed.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY TOUR**

The purpose of this study was to identify issues which overseas countries have experienced in introducing “learning skills” education to young vocational students with disabilities, in order to inform the approach to be used within Australian vocational education and training (VET).

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

There is a wide range of channels which might be explored regarding the study tour topic. These include:

- VET as it is delivered in schools and in TAFE
- 'employability skills' as they are proposed to be introduced within Australia
- 'key', 'core' or generic skills as they are in place in other countries
- definitions of lifelong learning
- education and employment issues for students with disabilities
- 'learning' as a skill

The literature reviewed for this study was limited by the timeframe involved. The most relevant themes which were identified are discussed below.

### **1 Employability Skills**

It is being increasingly recognised that in order to be “employable”, potential workers need to have not only the technical knowledge and skills, but also significant cognitive understanding and attitudes and behavioural skills.

Within Australia, these generic skills have been identified as

- Communication
- Team work
- Problem solving
- Self Management
- Planning and organising
- Technology
- Learning
- Initiative and enterprise

(DEST, 2002)

Riddell et al (2001:103) draw attention to the necessity of a “renewed emphasis on enhancing disabled workers’ employability”. Within the context of this study, it will be necessary to recognise how this might be best achieved. Callan (2003:29) recognised the need for “a student-focussed approach to learning, delivered by highly skilled teachers” if generic skills are to be advanced within any VET learner.

## 2 Vocational education and training – in Schools and TAFE-delivered

Some VET policy and delivery programs attempt to address fairness for students with disabilities. Within Australia, the objectives of the national strategy for VET from 2004-2010 recognise the need for both strong technical skills as well as the employability skills in individuals; and the need to strengthen communities socially through learning and employment (Karmel, 2004). At this point, it is unclear whether VET is significant as an equity measure, although Knight (2004) believes the limited data to date appears positive. However, Connell & Crump (2003) warn of the potential that School and TAFE delivered VET may in fact increase social segregation rather than reduce it, and VET in Schools needs to be aligned to broader equity agendas in order for the longer-term goal of employment for these students.

Young VET learners at school self-report as having “learnt key competencies, such as organising themselves better, meeting deadlines and working under pressure” (Polesel et al, 2004:18). Likewise, school students who undertake *paid* work also mention generic skills more often in relation to this paid work than they do to work experience (Smith & Wilson, 2002).

It would appear that gaining *paid* employment may be a significant factor in improving employability skills. Students with Disabilities must have an equitable opportunity to experience this.

## 3 Lifelong Learning

When they attempt to enter further or higher education, or when they attempt to gain employment, young people also need to have an understanding of the elements of lifelong learning. The current Australian employability skills recognise ‘learning’ as a skill, and emphasise these as “learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes” (Training Packages @ Work, 2004). The employee element might translate as lifelong learning skills. It will be essential that these are not be overlooked for the organisational outcomes.

Writers such as Bolhuis (2003) draw attention to the executive skills required in lifelong learning such as goal setting, preparation for learning, executing learning activities, evaluation the process and results achieved, monitoring, decision-making and disengaging. Students with certain disabilities may have difficulty gaining or improving these skills at school or VET, with further education and training perhaps having an unstated pre-requisite level of skill which will disadvantage some.

Riddell et al (2001) considered the learning society specifically as it relates to people with disabilities, particularly from the perspective of lifelong learning. They discuss three approaches: lifelong learning as a generator of human capital; lifelong learning as a generator of social capital; and lifelong learning as personal and social transformation or as social control. In many countries, lifelong learning is seen as an important factor in creating and maintaining

social paradigms (Green, 2002). However, Riddell et al (2001:207) are categorical that “lifelong learning has failed to deliver social inclusion”.

Lifelong learning has a role in shaping decisions about future learning and work opportunities. The pre-VET experiences of some people with disabilities will be vastly different to the majority of non-disabled VET students. There is, as yet, only a small portion of the literature which recognises the role of informal learning – and more particularly as relevant to this study, the role of informal learning in the workplace as part of lifelong learning. Therefore there is little understanding of the particular requirements of workers with disabilities of any age, and how prior formal education and training, fortuitous or intentional informal learning, and workplace learning influence their overall personal and professional growth.

If the employability skill of “learning” is to have meaning and applicability for young VET learners with disabilities, then more research conducted into the intrinsic subtleties of living and learning as a person with a disability, is needed.

#### **4 Learning as a Skill**

It is steadily being understood that the acquisition of generic skills and knowledge is required throughout life. Therefore it is important to individuals to know *how* to continually gain, or review and change, these skills and knowledge together with the related social competencies and attitudes.

The personal characteristics required of a learner include skills such as literacy and numeracy, appropriate attitude, confidence, ability and willingness to engage, and motivation to learn (Watson, 2003). Also important are: being able to recognise different teaching styles and personally how to learn regardless of style, having the ability to monitor and evaluate progress, and knowing how and when to disengage from learning (Adams & Boote, 2004). These skills do not come automatically to most students, and will be particularly difficult for some students, unless they are approached appropriately (Boote & Adams, 2004).

#### **5 Employment of Young People with Disabilities**

The social model of disability reflected within the Australian VET field recognises that employment is a major facet of anyone’s life. Therefore, it is equally important within the lives of young people with disabilities. In recent years, the emphasis around the world has been on enhancing the employability of people with disabilities. This has been balanced to some degree in attempts to adjust the labour market by offering incentives to employers to increase the number of workers with disabilities (Riddell et al, 2001, p 103). Nonetheless, there appears to be evidence that approaches have not yet reached the balance that reflects the number of people with disabilities in the general community being in employment (ADTAC, 2004)

There is a global recognition that young people with disabilities require additional support and/or specific programs in order to gain the skills which are essential for obtaining a job. While some segregated facilities and programs may be appropriate, frequently the policy or legislation driven approach of mainstream programs can also have limitations. There are new demands being made on future workers who have disabilities, in response to global and technological changes. Therefore “training systems must change and become sufficiently flexible to meet skill demands and lifelong learning needs” (Perry, 2003:7). VET has an obligation to prepare young people with disabilities for today’s and tomorrow’s labour market.

## **6 Perspectives on Disability**

Within Australia, there is a recognised deficiency of a consistent national definition of disability (Barnett, 2004). Riddell et al (2001) warn of the European experience of a “definitional drift” in the provision of support for people with “special needs”. In recent times, those young people who have a social disadvantage have been targeted, at the expense of young people with cognitive disabilities. There is a concern that those in most need may miss out on the support services they require. Such a trend takes away the opportunities of young people with severe disabilities to be exposed to the same range of lifelong learning skills as their non-disabled counterparts.

If the ‘learning skills’ in Australia’s definition of employability skills are to be addressed, then caution should be taken with the approach; particularly, if ‘learning skills’ are to enhance an individual’s employability or lifelong learning, and/or challenge their social exclusion.

## **7 Young VET Learners with Disabilities**

The VET national strategy incorporates learning throughout life, with the role of VET being to “stimulate interest in learning” (Karmel, 2004:5). As in other countries, Australian VET providers have a requirement to consider the needs of people with a variety of learning differences, and to provide appropriate adjustments within the formal learning environment towards this end.

The number of people with learning difficulties around the world is increasing due to greater survival rates at birth and trauma. Riddell et al (2001, p 14) argued that there is an increased incidence of learning difficulties “due to high levels of structural unemployment in the Western world”. The category of ‘disability’ is expanded, and is a significant proportion of the general population. These people are less likely to have successful integrated school and other education experiences, or be segregated in initial and later training and employment.

A significant number of young people who leave school early will attend a VET training provider within their next few years. There are a range of initiatives to encourage young VET learners to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for work and life (Teese, 2004). Within Australia, it has been recognised that young people, particularly those who are 19 years or less (John, 2004a), and

people who have a disability (Dumbrell et al, 2004), are among the student cohorts who will have reduced chances of successful outcomes in VET modules. A combination of these categories has an exponential effect (John, 2004b), ie *young* people with *disabilities* will have a significantly lower chance of passing modules they study.

Commitment to equity can be gauged by the extent to which VET providers integrate equity and diversity into their full range of curricula offerings. Training packages and delivery strategies must accommodate the specific learning needs related to employability skills – and in particular, ‘learning as a skill’ - of all young VET learners who have a disability. Some of these will need to be intrinsic within the syllabus, but others might need to be added on. While much has already been achieved, “the gains are not pervasive and the approaches are not self-sustainable without a truly integrative model which meets the needs of all parties as part of normal practice” (Bean, 2004). There is an identified need for “more effective transition planning and pathway development for students with disabilities” (Barnett, 2004:90). Specifically, the House of Representatives’ Standing Committee on Education and Training (2004:252) identified the need for further attention to the “necessary modifications to learning materials, programs and equipment” towards this end. This reflects experiences in the UK and Europe (Corbett et al, 1999; Russell, undated).

It is apparent that the Australian approach to teaching ‘learning skills’ in a VET situation will need to be fully investigated.

## **8 Conclusion**

If all young people with disabilities are to be catered for within ‘learning skills’ training, then a considered strategy will need to be developed. Failure to take a measured, equitable approach may result in this group of young learners being disadvantaged within their education, with this extending into their attempts to gain and maintain employment. Such an oversight may well exacerbate the chances of young VET learners with disabilities gaining a rounded education and equal opportunity in employment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The issues raised from the literature review informed the research questions, as follows:

1. What factors can be identified in different approaches to the acquisition of ‘learning skills’ in young VET students?
2. How effective have these been for students with disabilities?
3. How might teaching practice in VET in Schools and TAFE-delivered VET be improved, based on these international experiences?

A total of 80 people were interviewed for this study. A copy of the interview protocol was provided in the final report. This was used very loosely in order

to capture the individual's understanding of the implications from *their* perspective of practice.

Following is a breakdown of the locations and roles of the individuals involved. It encompassed researchers, academics, educators, management, disability peak bodies, support providers in organisations dealing specifically with people with disabilities and within educational institutions, and students, tutors, and learning support staff.

One-to-one and/or group interviews were conducted with the participant representation summarised in Table 1 below.

<b>Country</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Academic/ Policy</b>	<b>Disability Organisation</b>	<b>Education/ Training</b>	<b>Student</b>
England	London	1	1	1	
	Oxford	1		1	
	Birmingham			7	3
	Sheffield	3	4	4	16
Scotland	Edinburgh	4		2	
	Ayrshire		2	3	
Northern Ireland	Belfast	1		1	
Republic of Ireland	Dublin		2	2	
Netherlands	Tilburg	4			
	Hoensbroeck	2	2	2	
Switzerland		2			
France	Lyon		2	2	
	Paris		2	3	
n = 80		18	15	28	19

TABLE 1: Breakdown of participants

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The United Kingdom has had key skills in place for at least two years now. At the time of the study, there had just been an announcement that a review of the qualifications structure for schools is being proposed. This will involve changes which more or less reflect the current structures up to the A level, but will allow acquisition of a diploma as the top school qualification. It is believed that through this structure, there will be an indication of levels of skill development at school.

An analysis was being undertaken of public reaction to this proposal. At the time of the study, indications were that the change is perceived in a negative way. However, this was considered to be the case because there is no accurate understanding of the current system, its implications and applications.

Within Europe, general schooling and vocational training understanding and praxis varied greatly between those interviewed. No clear picture was gained of a cohesive approach to 'learning skills' training within VET, although it is understood progress is occurring in other European countries unable to be included in this limited study.

## **LIMITATIONS**

While this report attempts to identify and analyse experiences in various countries, it would be presumptuous to consider it a comparative study. Locations and participants were dependent upon invitations received in response to various email broadcasts. A list of participant organisations was included in the final report.

The report does, however, reflect the experiences of a variety of professionals as well as students, in a number of different countries. From this we can gain an understanding of the pragmatics involved, at least from the perspective of the various participants – all of which might provide some direction for our movements within Australia.

## **FINDINGS**

There are several themes arising from discussions with the various international participants involved in this study tour:

### **1 Approach to teaching 'learning skills'**

'Learning skills' need to be approached in two ways. Both approaches must be addressed concurrently:

#### **1.1 *'Learning skills' as part of the vocational curriculum***

'Learning skills' should be incorporated within all vocational curricula for all students. It is essential that an understanding of learning itself is incorporated in any vocational module being offered to any student. This metacognitive approach should draw to the attention of students the 'how, what, where, when and why' of the individual's specific learning experiences in that particular vocational situation. Students will need to be assisted to reflect in order to recognise, review and re-use 'learning skills'.

With an integrated approach, students with disabilities undertaking mainstream programs will receive opportunities to consider their own previous and current learning experiences within this vocational field. As well, by inclusion within these programs, they will also be exposed to the experiences of other, non-disabled students. Through self-reflection, similarities and differences in learning experiences may become apparent. All should benefit

from the understanding of each other about learning a particular vocational topic.

The most important aspect of this finding is the need for teachers to *model* their knowledge and understanding of 'learning skills'. This is addressed in more detail later.

### **1.2 'Learning skills' as a separate module**

While 'learning skills' must be addressed within all modules, there will be specific times, specific students, or specific disabilities which will necessitate additional training regarding learning skills. This might be approached as a short module, or as tutorial support, and should include students across vocational disciplines.

This will give students an opportunity to reflect on the different approaches to learning taken by different teachers or students in different situations. It will allow the 'meta' approach required to expose students to the wide variety of implications of learning situations. What is considered critical in these interactions, is the skill of the teacher in facilitating each student in

- Identifying their own personal level of responsibility for learning
- Recognising what personal, educational or other aspects are influencing them at a particular point of their learning
- Being able to analyse these influences and determine patterns (such as personal attribution, teaching techniques, or pain management/level), and
- Being able to recognise the impact of these on their learning.

## **2 Integrated or segregated provision for people with disabilities**

Within the Australian VET system, support services exist to provide specialised approaches for individuals with disabilities. Funding and resources are available in the major public VET provider for specific disability groups. An argument might be given for teaching 'learning skills' to segregated groups of young people with disabilities. This contention might be based on meeting the specific needs of that specific target group.

The other side of this debate should also be considered, that such separate provision exacerbates the already existing limitations of choice and opportunities that young people with disabilities have in a wide range of fields. As well, such segregation undermines one of the major considerations in employability skills: the context of social interaction.

Overseas experience raises concern that at whatever stage people with disabilities are directed into a "special" route, they frequently find themselves on a treadmill from which they cannot exit. The participants cited instances which reflect experiences in Australia, of students who are involved repeatedly in training, often at the same level of study, without the opportunity to progress

to high level studies or to successfully gain employment. It was expressed by participants that such “recycling” (a term used by several participants) served neither the student nor the training provider.

Studies cited during interviews identified that the employment opportunities of those students who had gone through a special segregated program, were declining over the past three decades. One participant, in particular, was concerned that the current approach taken to the provision of training for lifelong learning might, of itself, be a segregating factor. If the special needs of people with particular disabilities are not addressed within the way lifelong learning is approached, then those students may in fact be excluded from many aspects of lifelong learning, and consequently be kept out of the labour market.

### **3 Demonstrating 'learning skills'**

Staff need to have a professional - as well as a personal - understanding of 'learning skills'. This applies regardless of the delivery strategy employed.

It was a significant response that teachers needed to be able to act as a role model within topics they were teaching, taking advantage of potential learning moments. As many students learn best by demonstration, this teaching strategy was considered by all to be an important skill for all teachers to have and use.

### **4 Preparation of staff**

The most consistent theme arising is the need for the development of staff to cope with the change in philosophy required for the implementation of the key skills. It is considered that, in many instances, current staff in many countries have not made the most of the opportunities which should arise from the core skills strategy, because of a lack of understanding and a lack of experience on their part, of being exposed to the concept and underlying philosophies of the core skills strategy.

It was unanimously expressed that staff who are working with students with disabilities, whether they are in mainstream or special programs, need to have both an understanding of disability-related issues as well as a comprehensive knowledge of learning as a skill.

It was suggested that teachers need a more organic and higher level approach to prepare students to understand and apply 'learning skills'. Some expressed that the reflection strategies which are an integral component of Special Education set up staff in that field as the models of best practice for mainstream approaches.

## 5 Access to resources

While it was evidenced at one college that tutors are able to use resources available on the internet, it was expressed that these resources are intended for assessment, but were actually used as a teaching tool.

There was a specific example given where the assessment tools were not accessible to students with vision impairment. This created a great difficulty for the student and effort on the part of teachers, time-wise; and this of course influenced the students as well. Other students who could undertake assessment tasks on the internet had immediate responses as to results; where for those students who required reasonable adjustment in the form of different formats of the test, this required a two-month preparatory period and a two-month delay in receiving results.

In whatever delivery and assessment strategies are used in employment skills training in Australia, it will be essential that accessibility for all is planned.

## DISCUSSION

Within England, skills for life are being promoted by the Government. This has caused complications for organisations who were trying to adjust add-ons to an ever-changing or slowly changing generic framework. Concern was expressed by participants that legislation, policy and agendas can distort curriculum, and also have often been ineffective in sufficiently increasing employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Comments were strong that employability skills, especially for the workplace, are important personal competencies and tacit skills. At the same time, it was noted that young learners have more experiences than they are often given credit for. It is essential that staff are prepared to assist these young learners to recognise their own skills. Peer learning might also be an apt strategy. These young learners might then be given recognition for prior learning where this is appropriate. Those students who can identify their existing skills should be assisted to advance further. Another approach suggested was getting people with disabilities into the workplace, *first* – then supporting them to gain the employability skills in that workplace. This was one of the responses which raised the issue of workplace trainers requiring disability awareness training in order to provide the work-based support programs.

The experiences discussed within Scotland are similar in many ways to those in England. However, Scotland is working independently. It is governed by the same UK Disability Discrimination Act, but has its own educational legislation. Discussions indicated that the Scottish approach to inclusion may well reflect some of the best practice observed in England. Nonetheless, the preparation of teachers or tutors at schools and in FE (Further Education) colleges is of the same concern in Scotland as it was in England.

Peripherally to this study, an English Project observed has taken training to its next level. They have developed businesses, and train people with disabilities for those positions. A similar situation was found in Scotland, with the Learning Enterprise Companies (LEC), supported by the Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. There are some 22 of these local LECs in Scotland. To a varying degree, this approach is reflected in Northern Ireland.

A major role for the LEC is to fund and manage a major part of the post-16 year old training programs, which are known as Skill Seekers; as well as funding a range of training programs for adults. There is also a special needs skill seekers program, which varies greatly across the country, but tends to be delivered mainly by private training organisations or by voluntary organisations and by some FE colleges.

Discussions in Northern Ireland revealed the similarities between the social position of people with disabilities in Australia and that country, but also showed a difference between England and Scotland, and Northern Ireland in the progression towards inclusion of people with disabilities in their society and particularly within education.

The topic of preparation of teachers, both in their disability awareness and in a greater awareness of learning theory, and again, how this applied to students with disabilities, was significant. While FE colleges in Northern Ireland have a role, it is apparent that day services (similar to those visited in England) also have increasingly a responsibility particularly for people with higher support needs and greater learning difficulties. As with England and Scotland, it appears that preparation for the essential or core skills (as they are called in Northern Ireland) is done in an integrated way within existing syllabuses. The concern again is that the status quo remains - that is, teachers are teaching in the way that they learnt, where what is required for the core skills to be productive in future life – particularly for students with disabilities – is that, while they are approached in an integrated way, it is in such a way that the *focus* is given to them as being *on-going* skills that people will require for the next stage of their learning, for work, etc.

Approaches within the disability field, particularly within the day services in Northern Ireland, bear similarities to what was observed at Sheffield, although it was expressed by Irish staff that, while they are moving towards a similar sort of model to the English Project mentioned, they are not yet as far along as that. Issues were also raised about the applicability broadly across the whole of the Northern Ireland areas of this style, because of the differences in localised areas within Northern Ireland. From an academic perspective, it was again expressed that learning skills are not understood as well as they might be for the general student population, and there is a further flow-on effect in the application of these learning skills and teaching strategies towards that, for people with disabilities.

Discussions with participants in the European zone (Republic of Ireland, Netherlands, Switzerland and France) revealed a repeat of the pattern of

different approaches and success in preparing students with disabilities for the learning skills required for lifelong learning. The points of agreement were again the need to approach 'learning skills' specifically for students with particular disabilities, both directly as a separate module within school and college, and at the same time integrating the application of learning skills to each and every module. Again there were concerns expressed about the ability (from the perspective of their own prior experiences and training) of teachers to reasonably understand and model this lifelong learning journey for their students.

Lastly, it will be essential that whatever resources and assessment strategies are put in place are immediately accessible and non-discriminatory in the preparation and feedback components.

It is apparent that the findings of this study substantiate issues as raised in the literature review.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation 1:**

Overall caution is required in the introduction of learning skills training to be inclusive of students with all types of disabilities, as it appears from overseas experience that it could be very easy to marginalise or overlook this cohort. If learning skills training is not inclusive, then young people with disabilities may be unintentionally disadvantaged in gaining, maintaining and progressing in employment.

### **Recommendation 2:**

"Learning skills" should be incorporated into all facets of vocational education and training curricula for all students. Learning experiences, both formal and informal, should be analysed regularly. Many students, and particularly those with certain disabilities, will – initially at least – require instruction then guidance in doing this.

### **Recommendation 3:**

One particular teaching strategy which should be incorporated is teachers as 'role models of learning', presenting and evaluating a variety of their own formal and informal learning experiences.

### **Recommendation 4:**

In order to achieve this, it appears that many VET staff will need specialised training themselves, as their own prior learning experiences may have been limited.

### **Recommendation 5:**

Teaching 'learning skills' as a free-standing module should be approached with caution, or its *on-going* relevance is easily overlooked or dismissed by students.

**Recommendation 6:**

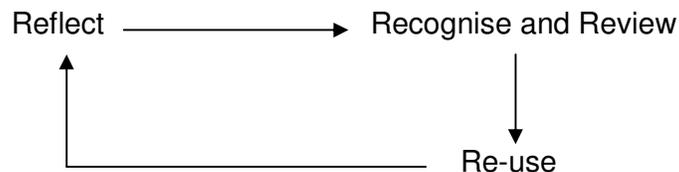
A short-term segregated approach may be required for students with some disabilities (particularly those with cognition-related implications) in order to provide the additional training necessary for equity.

**Recommendation 7:**

In order to appropriately and efficiently support students with particular disabilities in the mainstream classroom to gain 'learning skills', it will be necessary for all staff to have a requisite level of "disability awareness", as well as "learning awareness". The optimum balance of both these skills needs to be investigated.

**A suggested model: the 4-R's of learning skills**

A preliminary model is suggested for conceptualising the approach to training young VET learners with disabilities: "the 4-R's of acquiring learning skills". The basic element is reflection of prior and current learning, which incorporates recognising the approach applied in learning, reviewing its success or otherwise and appropriateness in other learning situations, and re-using that learning skill. The model is cyclical.



**Model: The 4 R's of Acquiring Learning Skills**

Students may need to be trained in any or all four of the facets, using a variety of teaching styles. For example, they may need to be shown how to reflect by demonstration (ie teachers and/or other students modelling this). Recognising how they learnt previously may involve a level of direct instruction in learning theory. Reviewing might occur as part of a group session. Re-using these recognised learning skills might involve task analysis and mentoring by the teacher or peers.

Teachers must have the professional skills to analyse the learning which is occurring or the potential within students and teaching moments, for this training to be effective for any VET student. Some young students with disabilities may require support both in and out of the mainstream classroom.

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