Report on Student Vocational Placements

NDIS Practice Framework for

Self-Managing Participants

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NDIS Practice Framework for Self-Managing Participants

Contents

Introduction

This research forms part of the Growing the NDIS Workforce Strategy in the program area of Vocational Placements, which is an initiative of the NDIS Training Skills Support Strategy (NTSSS). The Student Vocational Placement - Practice Framework for Self-Managing Participants Project focused on developing a framework that would support the involvement of *people with lived experience of disability*[1] in student assessments, and particularly their involvement in vocational placements.

The project sought to address a gap in the quantity, relevance and quality of vocational placements by designing a model to facilitate vocational placements for students undertaking training to work with people with disability. The potential for vocational placements to be supervised by people with lived experience of disability, and conducted in their homes, was explored.

The development of a practice framework was planned as a targeted initiative that would complement the learnings of an action research project led by TAFE Queensland that is also exploring vocational placements with a focus on human service organisations. The Student Vocational Placement - Practice Framework for Self-Managing Participants project was intended as an initial research phase, with the potential to test the practice framework during a second pilot phase.

One limitation to this project is that it addresses only one area of vocational education quality, namely, vocational placements. While this is important work, the project is limited in its scope to address the broader issues and concerns with the quality of vocational education outcomes in the disability sector.

The recommended practice framework developed and presented in this report will provide an opportunity for people with lived experience of disability to be engaged in key roles related to vocational training and assessment, which would improve the quality of vocational outcomes.

Methodology

The project involved conducting desktop research and consulting with industry representatives, including representatives from the Human Services Skills Organisation (HSSO) Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA), TAFE Queensland, Horizon 2, and ARC Disability Services.

Key to the project was the engagement of a focus group comprised of eight people with lived experience of disability who are self-managing their NDIS funding. The focus group co-designed the framework that will be outlined in this report.

Focus group co-design meetings were held on three occasions across the life of the project:

- 28th May, 2021
- 11th June, 2021
- 12th October, 2021

A small group of students currently enrolled in CHC33015 Certificate III Individual Support were engaged in an experiential learning opportunity during which they met with focus group members. This was an opportunity to broaden the student's understanding of self-managed models of support.

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[1] The phrase 'people with lived experience of disability' is used to include both people with disability themselves, as well as family members of people with disability.

During the course of the research project, Community Resource Unit (CRU) project officers continually evaluated and reviewed the practice framework that was emerging. The focus group members, students and project officers from TAFE Queensland also provided feedback on the practice framework and the fact sheets that were developed.

Finally, the involvement of CRU project staff on the TAFE Queensland Vocational Placements Steering Committee also provided further insight and informed the development of the practice framework.

Issues with VET Quality and Student Outcomes

Broad Issues with VET Outcomes in the Disability Sector

Many employers and people with disability do not place value on accredited qualifications, instead preferring to focus on employing workers with the right values and personal attributes that make the worker a 'good fit' for the sector (NTSSS Technical Advice, 2019). This finding was echoed by the focus group participants who explained that while they think it is necessary that their support workers receive training, they did not seek out workers with vocational qualifications because of concerns about the quality of those graduates. Instead, the focus group participants were more likely to invest in non-accredited values-based training and spend time in inducting and training their own workers.

Some of the particular issues identified with vocational outcomes were:

- The curriculum is outdated – current training packages do not prepare workers for work within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS; NTSSS Technical Advice, 2019[2]). N.B. Community Services training packages are currently undergoing review.
- There is a perception that Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) enrol as many students as possible and seek to progress students through the course due to the financial incentives linked to the student completing their qualification. RTOs are perceived to 'take anyone', regardless of their aptitude for disability support work or their willingness to work in the industry.
- Graduates often do not have the skills necessary to take on the role and the employer would still need to engage their usual induction and on-the-job training strategies.
- People with a Certificate III Individual Support qualification can sometimes think they are more qualified than they are and therefore may over-reach on their skills and responsibilities or may try to negotiate higher wages.

It is acknowledged that the disability support and vocational education sectors are aware of these issues and are seeking to address them in a range of ways. Vocational placements are just one component of the broader vocational education ecosystem so seeking to address vocational placement quantity and quality in isolation does have some limitations. The recommendations in this report are intended to complement other initiatives to address issues with vocational placements (including the project being led by TAFE Queensland), as well as initiatives that seek to address VET quality more broadly.

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[2] NTSSS Advice Project: Technical Advice Report (2019). Retrieved from
https://workabilityqld.org.au/resource/technical-advice-report/

Issues with Work Placements Specifically

The NTSSS RTO Quality and Benchmarks Report (2019)[3] identified that it is a challenge for RTOs and students to source high quality work placements. Indeed, during this research project we heard stories of students enrolled in the Certificate III Individual Support – Disability Specialisation completing placements in aged care settings. Placements undertaken in aged care support or in 'traditional' disability services that congregate and segregate people with disability are not a good match with the principles of contemporary disability support and therefore result in poorer training outcomes for the student.

It can also be a challenge for service providers to offer student placements and provide adequate supervision[3]. Participants in the focus group and industry consultations reiterated these points, particularly emphasising the workload involved with thoughtfully matching the student with the placement location and supervisor, in order to achieve meet their placement goals.

The introduction of the NDIS has created a large increase in workforce demand, which, in turn, has led to a new issue for RTOs in that students can easily find employment. While this eliminates the need to find a suitable placement, it can create difficulties in trying to ensure that the student completes their placement documentation to finalise their course. Existing agreements between large service providers and training organisations can also create blocks to sourcing work placements as no other RTOs can place their students in those services. It was also observed that students studying university-level qualifications in allied health are completing their placements in direct support settings that would be better suited to vocational level qualifications.

It is clear that there is a need to increase the number of vocational placements as well as address the relevance and quality of the available placements.

Addressing the Issues with Vocational Placements
Vocational Placements Taking Place in the Homes of People with Disability

This research explored the possibility of vocational placements being undertaken in the homes of people with disability. Feedback received during the industry consultations and focus groups was very positive; there was a lot of enthusiasm for this model as a way to increase the quantity and quality of placement experiences through expanding the range of opportunities available.

The focus group members reported several benefits of hosting students, including the likelihood of recruiting potential new employees and getting to 'try before you buy'. There was also a sense that being involved in supervising placement students would be a way to 'give back' and to do something for the greater good of the sector. That is, being involved in the training of support workers offers the potential to influence students and introduce them to contemporary ways of providing support. A further benefit is the probable increase in skills and knowledge for the people with lived experience of disability who would be providing the supervision.

Throughout the course of the research, a number of considerations were raised which we will address next. Observations are noted throughout the report, which are then incorporated into a final recommended practice framework.

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[3] NTSSS Advice Project: RTO Quality and Benchmarks Report (2019). Retrieved from
https://workabilityqld.org.au/resource/rto-quality-and-benchmarks-report/

Placement Duration and Frequency

Students undertaking a Certificate III in Individual Support are required to complete 120 hours of placement. The focus group participants were asked what would suit them in terms of placement duration and frequency. The overwhelming response was that this placement arrangement would be best suited to shorter hours / shifts spread out over a longer period of time. For example, attending placement for one day a week for 15 weeks would be preferable to working 30 hours a week for 4 weeks. For this reason alone, this placement framework will not suit all students. The other factor to consider is that the performance evidence for the unit includes the requirement to "safely support at least three people to enhance independence and well-being." Therefore, the student may need to spread their placement hours across several different people's homes, which may introduce logistical issues.

> ***Observation One:*** *Students and placement supervisors are likely to require assistance to manage the logistics of completing vocational placement hours in the homes of people with disability.*

Setting up Placements

One barrier to this type of placement arrangement is the lack of connections between RTOs or students with people with lived experience of disability who are willing to take on students on placement. The framework to facilitate this model of placements would need to include some method of linking the parties with one another, as well as facilitating and sustaining the placement arrangement over time.

The focus group members were clear that they would want to 'vet' any potential placement students before opening their homes to them. This would ideally involve meeting the student prior to the commencement of the placement to ensure they would be a good fit with the person with disability being supported. It is also important to people with lived experience of disability that the student on placement has (as much as possible) the 'right' attributes and values. The sorts of attributes, skills and values that people with lived experience of disability are looking for include:

- Being a team player and working collaboratively with the person, family and other workers
- Understanding that the role is not just about assisting someone with personal care, nutrition, hygiene, health etc. Rather, it is about supporting people to live their lives.
- Understanding that the support work role is purposeful and not just filling in time
- Communication skills
- Humble and takes a reflective approach to the work
- Flexible
- Problem solving abilities
- Proactive, shows initiative, responsible
- Warm and personable
- Honest
- Conscious of working with vulnerable people – confidentiality, privacy, safety etc.
- People who turn up, are reliable and committed
- Developmental mindset – believing that all people, including people with disability, continue to grow and learn throughout their lives

> ***Observation Two:*** *There would be benefit in increasing awareness of the potential for placements to be conducted in the homes of people with disability; the practice framework could be promoted with the vocational education sector.*

Observation Three: RTOs and students will need to be linked with people with lived experience of disability willing to take students on placement.

Observation Four: People with disability taking on placement students should be provided with opportunities to meet and 'vet' potential students prior to the commencement of a placement agreement.

Managing Issues during Placements

The focus group participants and industry representatives were keen to ensure there was a clear process for managing conflicts or disputes, or managing times when either party wanted to discontinue the placement. While this is something that needs attention in all placements, it can be more personal in a home environment so consideration should be given to how this is managed appropriately.

Observation Five: Ongoing support and conflict resolution should be available to all parties during the course of placements.

People with Lived Experience of Disability in Various Roles Related to Training and Assessment

Training and Assessment

This framework presents an opportunity for people with lived experience of disability to be engaged in the full range of roles related to vocational training and assessment. This cohort is uniquely placed to understand contemporary disability practice. It would be beneficial to see an increase in the number of RTOs that include people with lived experience of disability as guest speakers during training. For example, a guest speaker could share with students what they expect from support workers to assist them in working towards their own personal goals. Establishing pathways for more people with lived experience of disability to obtain relevant qualifications in training and assessment would also be a worthwhile endeavour as it is likely to improve the quality of vocational education outcomes.

Observation Six: Specific pathways could be developed to encourage and support people with lived experience of disability to gain formal trainer and assessor qualifications.

Workplace Supervision

The notion of people with lived experience of disability taking on the role of workplace supervisor appears to be largely untested. There are also no clear guidelines on the requirements of being a workplace supervisor (unlike the requirements for being a qualified trainer and assessor).

When industry representatives were asked what skills and competencies a workplace supervisor requires, there was mixed responses. One disability organisation stated they did not have specific requirements of their placement supervisors but rather took the broad approach of ensuring the organisation meets its usual risk obligations. Another industry representative indicated that two to three years of experience in a similar role, or holding the same qualification that the student is studying (or higher), would qualify someone to be a workplace supervisor.

As one example of the lack of clarity, some RTO representatives had indicated they would need to feel assured their responsibility to meet regulatory requirements would not be affected by placing students in these placement settings. Conversely, disability sector professionals were not concerned about regulatory or legal requirements and could envision this placement model being

viable for all parties. RTO concerns about the suitability of this placement model may stem from lack of familiarity with, or exposure to, people with lived experience of disability that are self-managing their own funding and engaging their own workers. That is, if RTOs do not have relationships with people who are self-managing, then they may not have an awareness of their skills and capabilities that would equip this cohort for the workplace supervisor role.

It is clear that many self-managers are experienced in directly employing and supervising their staff; these same skills could be applied to supervising students on placements. People with lived experience of disability would need to be supported to understand their role in assessment (as would any workplace supervisor). It is also conceivable that a person with disability may delegate the role of workplace supervisor to their paid employees; i.e. the student on placement may be accompanied on shifts by existing employees who could contribute towards the requirements of workplace supervision, or assist with documenting evidence for the student's assessment portfolio.

> *Observation Seven: People with lived experience of disability should be equipped to fulfil the role of workplace supervisor. A pool of skilled and available workplace supervisors could be recruited and supported to understand their responsibilities. Opportunities to develop workplace supervisor skills could be provided, where required.*

The people with lived experience of disability in the focus groups had some reservations about adding to an already large (and unpaid) workload that comes with self-managing NDIS funding. There was a strong indication that a payment incentive for taking on the workplace supervisor role would be of great appeal. The NTSSS RTO Quality and Benchmarks Report (2021) also recommended investigating the feasibility of a paid placement system as an initiative for increasing the quality of vocational outcomes.

> *Observation Eight: Providing a payment for self-managing workplace supervisor is an incentive that would encourage people with lived experience to take on this role. The payment would acknowledge that the self-managing supervisors are not otherwise being paid for their time in supervising students and this is not an addition to an existing wage.*

Considerations for Students and Workplace Supervisors Involved in this Placement Model

Hosting students on vocational placements inevitably increases the number of formal supporters in the life and home of a person with disability. Receiving support on a 2:1 basis (during buddy shifts, for example), creates issues such as the workers talking to one another rather than talking to the person with disability. Another issue with additional workers is that it can be harder for the person with disability to connect with community because of a perception that the person requires a high degree of paid support. Additional considerations include the need to maintain privacy, confidentiality and the safety of people with disability. These issues are particularly pronounced when support takes place in people's homes and therefore may mean that some people with lived experience of disability would be unwilling to take on placement students.

> *Observation Nine: RTOs and Students need to understand the unique issues that may arise when undertaking placements in the homes of people with disability (as opposed to in facilities or services).*

>> *Fact Sheet One: Things to be aware of when supporting people with disability in their own home (see Appendix 1).*

A related consideration comes about when people with lived experience of disability are in dual roles. For example, the person with disability as the receiver of support as well as the workplace

supervisor. Alternatively, a family member might be in the parent role at the same time as the workplace supervisor role. People who are self-managing are very familiar with this dynamic as they are commonly in the role of both employer and receiver of supports (or employer and family member of the person being supported). The focus group participants acknowledged that managing these boundaries can sometimes be difficult but also described many strategies that they use to manage the dynamic. These recommendations will be included in a resource developed as part of this project.

Observation Ten: *People with lived experience of disability taking on the workplace supervisor role should be mindful of managing dual roles.*

Fact Sheet Two: *Workplace Supervision When you're Also the Person Receiving Support (see Appendix 2).*

Overview of the Recommended Practice Framework: A Placement Agency Model

With the above observations in mind, CRU proposes the following framework to support the completion of vocational placements in the homes of people with disability (see diagram one)
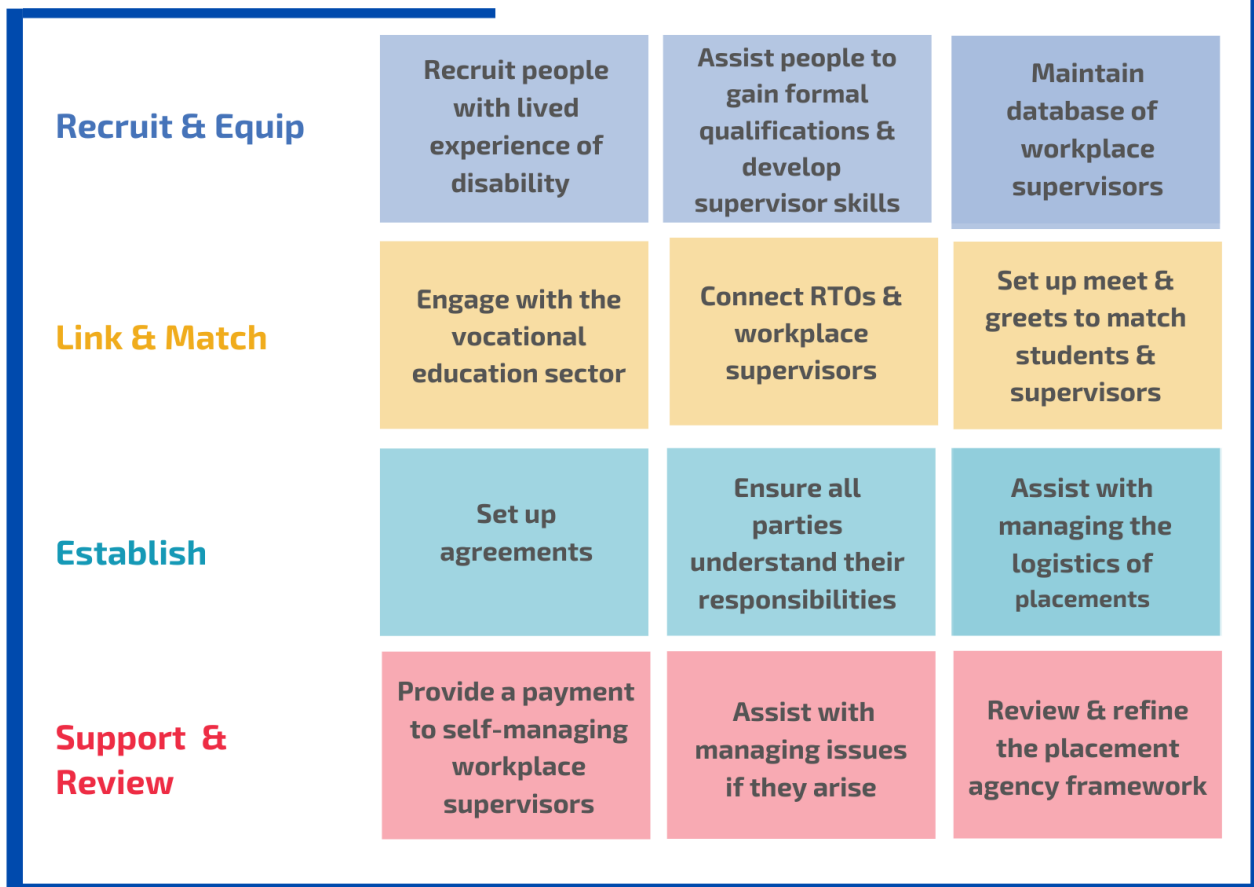
CRU recommends piloting the establishment of a Placement Agency whose role would include the following:

1. Recruiting and equipping people with lived experience of disability
   - Recruit people with lived experience of disability to take on roles such as workplace supervisor, trainers and assessors
   - Provide pathways for people with lived experience of disability to gain formal trainer and assessor qualifications
   - Develop workplace supervisor skills, as required
   - Maintain a database of skilled and available workplace supervisors
2. Link and match students with workplace supervisors
   - Engage with the vocational education sector to develop relationships with RTOs to promote the practice framework
   - Develop pathways for students to connect with potential workplace supervisors
   - Provide opportunities for people with disability to meet with, and vet students prior to placement.
3. Establish placements
   - Set up agreements between parties
   - Ensure all parties understand their responsibilities
   - Assist with managing the logistics of students completing placement hours across multiple locations
4. Provide ongoing support to all parties and review the framework
   - Administer the proposed payment for workplace supervisors
   - Assisting with managing if or when issues arise
   - Review the framework during a pilot stage

Diagram One: Practice Framework – Placement Agency Model

Placement Agency

Recruit & Equip	Recruit people with lived experience of disability	Assist people to gain formal qualifications & develop supervisor skills	Maintain database of workplace supervisors
Link & Match	Engage with the vocational education sector	Connect RTOs & workplace supervisors	Set up meet & greets to match students & supervisors
Establish	Set up agreements	Ensure all parties understand their responsibilities	Assist with managing the logistics of placements
Support & Review	Provide a payment to self-managing workplace supervisors	Assist with managing issues if they arise	Review & refine the placement agency framework

Piloting the Placement Agency Model

Feedback about the placement agency model was sought from the focus group of people with lived experience of disability, RTO industry professionals and students. Overall, the feedback was very positive; participants indicated that the model would be an effective way to increase the quantity and quality of vocational placements.

Some further points to consider were raised about the proposed framework:

- Ensure risks for all parties are attended to. For example, there is a need to research insurance and legal obligations to protect the students, workplace supervisors and RTOs.
- Consider how the placement agency will remain impartial and represent all parties
- Ensure there are avenues for people with disability to provide feedback on the student's placement.
- Consider where funding would come from and how the placement agency will be funded into the future

There would need to be a development phase for the potential placement agency so that these and other concerns could be worked through systematically. Piloting the framework would also offer the opportunity to review and refine the model.

> *Recommendation: The framework and Placement Agency model should be piloted to demonstrate that this is a viable model for students completing Vocational Placements*

Appendix 1: Fact Sheet - Things to be aware of when supporting people with disability in their own home

Community Resource Unit Ltd.
Expanding Ideas; Creating Change

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Building Tomorrow's NDIS Workforce

Things to be Aware of When Supporting a Person with Disability in Their Own Home

A fact sheet for students completing vocational placements

Homes are places of rest, relaxation and comfort; they are a place to express your personality, a place to spend time by yourself or with loved ones. Homes are private, safe and intimate spaces that we use for socialising, recharging or a place to pursue our interests.

When homes also become workplaces because people with disability are being supported there, the boundaries of home can become blurred. This fact sheet seeks to provide some tips about maintaining the sanctity of home while support is taking place. There is no one right answer so it will be important to be guided by the person with disability.

Potential issues may arise when there is excess formality in the home. On the flipside, there can also be a problem when workers become over-familiar.

Each person with disability will have their own preferences about how formal they would like the relationship to be between workers and themselves. There is likely to be a fine balance – increasing formality could lead to sterile interactions. Too informal and the interactions may become overfamiliar and intrusive.

Over-Familiarity

When work takes place in the home of a person with disability, it can sometimes create dynamics where a support worker oversteps the usual boundaries of a paid worker. This may occur because homes do not have the same cues as a workplace (which is a good thing!) The informal nature of the home may lead to over-familiar interactions between workers and the people they support.

As a support worker, you could make a difference by:
- Being aware of these dynamics
- Be willing to be guided by the person with disability or their family
- Have open conversations about how the support should be provided and how you should conduct yourself in the person's home
- Keeping private information you have learnt about people confidential
- Remembering that you are at work!
  - Don't take personal phone calls or check your social media
  - Be mindful of your standard of dress to reflect you are there in a paid role
  - Don't do your own shopping when shopping with the person
  - During down times, ask if there is anything else that needs to be done rather than moving into relaxation mode
  - Bring your own meals for break times

Things to be aware of when supporting a person with disability in their own home

Excess Formality in the Home

Support provided in the home of people with disability should be provided in the least invasive way possible. There is a risk that service provision can take away from the usual activities that occur in a home. Service may also seep into the way that a home looks and feels, which takes away from the unique expression of the person who lives there.

As a support worker, you could make a difference by:
- Remembering this is the person's home first and your workplace second.
- Monitoring your involvement as the support worker in the setting
  - Consider when you need to have an active role or when you might move into the background. For example, if the person with disability is hosting guests, consider how you provide support to allow the person to stay in the host role.
  - Maintain awareness of being in a paid worker role. You are not the person's friend, guest or visitor.
- Be willing to be flexible – people's lives change and therefore what's needed from the support worker on any given day can also change.
- Consider who needs to be present. Having more workers than necessary shifts the balance towards 'workplace' and away from 'home'.
- Keep administrative practices out of the home. For example;
  - Supervision meetings might take place elsewhere or in a designated location in the home.
  - Consider the 'right time' to raise conversations about your needs as the support worker. For example, if you need to make a change to your hours, asking about this while providing support is probably not the right time.
  - Minimise workplace signs (like rosters, notices & communication) being posted publicly.

Appendix 2: Workplace Supervision When you're Also the Person Receiving Support

Workplace Supervision When You're Also the Person Receiving Support

If vocational placements take place in the homes of people with disability, there could be boundary issues that arise from people being in dual roles. Because they are the receiver of support as well as acting as a workplace supervisor. When family members of people with disability act as workplace supervisors, similar boundary issues could arise.

The most common concern of people with lived experience of disability supervising their staff is considering how to provide feedback without impacting on the relationship. Anticipating that issues will arise means that you can get prepared and set up the arrangement well from the beginning.

Setting up well from the Beginning

- Outline your expectations to the student. That way, if you need to speak to them about their performance, you can refer back to the agreements. Writing down the expectations can be helpful to be clear yourself before the student arrives.
- Explain that you are in dual roles and be clear about when you are in those different roles. For example, supervision meetings could happen outside of direct support times.
- Choose the 'buddy' support workers carefully – your existing workers will set the tone for the students on placement.
- Involving a key worker or a third party may be helpful for the supervision of staff and students.

Review

- Take time to reflect on how your supervision of the student is going. Consider what worked well or what you will do differently next time.

Communication and Providing Feedback

- Avoid staff communicating with the student separate to the person with disability.
- Make supervision meetings and times routine so that the conversation is ongoing rather than raising issues only.
- Maintain objectivity while in your workplace supervisor role. Use the mindset "I'm helping someone to learn."
- Provide handouts and information to read rather than all of the information or feedback coming from you.
- Use regular team meetings as an opportunity to work collaboratively and discuss important topics.
- Consider opening up the meeting to the team and ask what the support workers/student think is helpful or not working well. This way, it isn't always you raising issues.

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