



## The Supported Training Programme: Supporting Learners with Intellectual Disabilities



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The evolution of the “Supported Training Programme” is described, where IHC staff members act as tutorial assistants to support learners. The programmes have been designed with a high degree of flexibility to suit learners timetables, goals, and capabilities. A series of minicase studies describe the benefit of this approach to learners.

*“A society without disabilities is like a tapestry without the colour yellow”*  
– Mother of three Down Syndrome children

### Background

Nelson has a high percentage of residents identified as having an intellectual disability. This results from it being home to a number of institutions historically, and from the district health board choosing to maintain support for this population after deinstitutionalisation. Now all former residents of the institutions live in community homes.

Before 2005 the Supported Training Skills programme ran at NMIT along the lines of many such programmes throughout the country – a number of students enrolled each year for a selection of activities designed to fill as much of each week in the academic year as possible with learning activities ranging from computing skills to home maintenance. Early innovations focused on interactive music using computerised components and dramatic therapies led by talented and energetic staff members. These catered for the community of people with intellectual disabilities and were initially very well supported.

By 2004 this enterprise had lost much of its enthusiasm and was struggling to maintain momentum and numbers. The student population appeared to have dwindled substantially and enrolments were harder

to encourage. A joint venture was suggested and the area manager of IHC aimed to solve two problems: how to meet his imperative to have his service users occupied in meaningful community recreational, vocational and educational activities, and how to enhance the learning opportunities of people with disabilities at NMIT.

At the beginning of 2005 the new programme was born. It was renamed “Supported Training Programme” and offered two new certificates: the NMIT Certificate in Community Integration and the NMIT Certificate in Training for Work Skills. Each certificate consisted of 120 credits and contained a number of core compulsory courses. Perhaps the biggest innovation, however, was the involvement of IHC. This took the form of IHC staff members taking roles as tutorial assistants in the programme and IHC service users being given zero fees. Martin Anderson, the IHC area manger, summed up their involvement thus: “The age-appropriate place for adults to engage in education and training is a polytechnic”.

So began an arrangement that is unique to education in New Zealand.

## Today

A number of philosophies underpin the Supported Training programme at NMIT:

- everyone has the right to education and training.
- the most important thing people need to learn is that they can.
- the pathway to learning is often littered with obstacles and the task of facilitator is to remove as many as possible.

NMIT, as a learning institution, believes in equal opportunities for access to education for everyone, regardless of prior learning. This philosophy has led to policies and practices of inclusiveness, including the granting of a scholarship that removes as much of the tuition fee as possible for people unlikely to be able to afford tertiary education.

Today the joint venture agreement remains, as do the IHC (now IDEA Services) workers who act as tutorial assistants, but the fee discount for their service users in exchange for workers has gone. It has been realised that IDEA derives much of its funding from time spent with its service users and they are staffed to do just that. Accordingly, their staffing is allocated to accompany the service users who are participating in community activities. Induction and training is provided by NMIT.

People with intellectual disabilities are well catered for in Nelson with recreational, vocational and educational facilities available at varying costs. IDSS, the intellectual disability support arm of the DHB, provides therapeutic, recreational and vocational activities for clients but charges quite highly for these 3-hour sessions. IDEA runs a number of bases in the area that provide activities, some instructionally based. Community Art Works Trust, which until recently was supported by NMIT through the Supported Training Programme, offers art activities that are therapeutic in nature and it has a history of award winning creativity. But, to repeat the sentiment of Martin Anderson, “The age-appropriate place for adults to engage in education and training is a polytechnic”. In an age of integration, this is very appropriate.

Decisions on the formation of the programme and subsequent adjustments continue as they always have, through a consultative process. Stakeholders in the community were identified and an advisory committee was established. This group continues to guide and reflect community interest in decision

making with the chair of that committee being an active community person involved with national concerns for people with disabilities.

## How is it different?

The **first point of difference** that identifies NMIT's Supported Training programme is the "pick and mix" nature of uptake by students. Rather than students being required to commit to a whole year of full- or near fulltime study, the programme is set up so that students can enrol on the courses that suit their personal timetables and plans. Thus they build towards a qualification 15 or 30 credits at a time.

There are a variety of advantages of this method:

- Time and processing often go together and, as with many of us who require time to digest learning, people with intellectual or learning disabilities may take a little longer to process their learning.
- If students don't achieve all the necessary learning outcomes for one course it does not mean they have failed the whole year's work. It does mean that, when they enrol for a second time on a course, they can revisit the part they experienced difficulty with last time.
- Students can continue to enjoy a wide experiential lifestyle, of which tertiary learning is only a part.

This contrasts with the general practice of past programmes set up nationally in the past to cater to the needs of people with an intellectual disability. Most required students to enrol on full-time programmes that allowed little opportunity for students to have a life outside their study time.

Eight courses are prescribed for the **NMIT Certificate in Community Integration**: Beginners Computer Skills, Community Visual and Performing Arts, Cooking Skills, Craft Woodwork Skills, Drama Skills, Healthy Living, Singing and Music, and Lifestyle Skills. Each course is compulsory and each carries a credit value of 15.

The **NMIT Certificate in Training for Work Skills** has 12 courses, five of which are compulsory. Students may make up their required credit value from successful completion of courses from both certificates. The list of *Training for Work Skills* courses is growing each year, with new ones added as the need is identified. They include Advanced Computer Skills, Horticulture, Multimedia, Fundamentals of Literacy and Numeracy, Literacy and Mathematics, Interpersonal and Social Skills in the Workplace, Personal Safety in the Workplace, Introduction to Surface Design Art, Exploring Job Training Options, Food Service Skills, Outdoor Challenges, and Independent Living Skills.

NMIT has a commitment to the provision of this important niche educational opportunity under its charter and has declared it "core business" – a declaration that echoes the sentiments of the local DHB in continuing disability support long after other areas dropped it as financially unsustainable.

A **second point of difference** is the staffing regime, which allows for dual staffing throughout the programme. Course enrolments are usually capped at 12 although some courses may take more if there are no safety issues and where participation is part of the outcome to be measured. Music is an example where there may be up to 16 students because participation makes up part of the assessment. Each course is staffed by one tutor who leads the activities that facilitate learning and who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the course, including planning, implementation and assessment. In addition, an assistant is employed for each course to help the tutor and the learning of the students. This effectively creates a tutor/student ratio of 1:6.

Unlike other programmes in most tertiary institutions, the Supported Training Programme involves as many **volunteers** as possible and over the past 4 years a significant number have contributed to student learning. These volunteers assist through involvement in cooking, drama, transporting students to activities outside the classroom, listening to reading or testing sight word recognition, checking maths sheets . . . the list goes on. The programme is indebted to these dedicated people but, interestingly, they often report feelings and experiences of great satisfaction.

Staff members employed in the programme represent a further point of difference from other supported learning programmes throughout the country in that all are recruited for their suitability rather than their qualifications. Several have become

involved through volunteering and, like the volunteers, have become “hooked” by the atmosphere that exists and the satisfaction they derive from their involvement. Most have an education background so have qualifications and experience, but that is not the main criterion for suitability or involvement. All have a passion for assisting the learning of people with a disability and all undergo specialist training, regardless of previous experience or qualifications.

Yet another **point of difference** arises from the efforts made to guide students into the learning environment. Some come straight from school or life at home or from a support agency but the majority of younger learners come from secondary schools in the area. The most desirable pathway for people with a learning or intellectual disability is to begin their transition from secondary to tertiary training between the ages of 16 and 21, and this programme supports that process. Many start with one course enrolment in their first year and, by the time they are ready to study full time at a polytechnic, they may have achieved a number of course credits and be attending NMIT 3 or 4 days a week.

These outcomes were not achieved without considerable consultation and community involvement. Community linkages are vitally important and these are maintained by careful cultivation of relationships with people in a variety of organisations. The programme’s **advisory committee** meets regularly and is made up of representatives from secondary schools with assisted learning facilities, employment brokerages that cater for people with disabilities, the agencies that support the living and learning of disabled people, a student representative, and parents of people with disabilities. In addition, staff members of the Supported Training Programme maintain membership of such associations as the Transition Forum, Youth Connections Forum (set up by Celia Lashly with funding from the Mayor’s Taskforce) and attend as many ILP (Independent Living and Learning Plan) meetings as possible. These are valuable times when the learning aspirations of students can be assessed and guided to best effect.

There are many more signifiers that mark this programme as different from others but arguably the most remarkable is that of **outcomes** from student learning. While the success of the programme will be measured academically against numbers of graduates and hard evaluative data of that nature, there are many other measures of lasting validity.

## Programme Evaluation

Each year students are asked for feedback about the programme in general and the teaching in particular. Additionally, a formal self-review annual process is part of the institute’s audit programme and an external review is conducted of each programme every 4 years. Internal and external moderation processes are in place and internal audits of all programmes occur every few years.

## Learning Outcomes

All courses in the Supported Training Programme are assessed against prescribed learning outcomes. These may be informed by unit standards but are not driven by them. Students' learning is measured by their achievement of these learning outcomes, and certificates for satisfactory achievement are issued at the graduation ceremony that concludes each academic year.

One of the most rewarding experiences available to an educator is to be part of an award ceremony in which gratitude, delight, and success are clearly evident while inhibition is not! Success stories could fill these pages but let a few suffice.

### Minicase 1

A 60-year-old woman who was born in an institution is learning to read and with tears in her eyes relates that she was not allowed to go to school as a child. Her delight in achievement of a lifetime goal is very moving.

### Minicase 2

A young man of 26 began stuttering because of severe bullying while attending a single sex secondary school and, as a result, chose to remain silent, writing everything to communicate. He was encouraged to attend the Supported Training Programme and now has the confidence to volunteer answers and leads activities in class.

### Minicase 3

A woman in her early 40s became so depressed by her circumstances she withdrew from society and became morbidly obese. She now lives in a supported environment and, through education and a coordinated approach to supporting her everyday life, she is active, happy and well adjusted, attending social functions and educational classes freely.

### Minicase 4

A man in his 30s with a history of antisocial behaviour began attending the Supported Training Programme and, through consistent modelling of appropriate behaviour and encouragement to adhere to guidelines, is now a trustworthy member of the educational community.

### Minicase 5

A young man of 22 attended the Supported Training Programme for 5 years, achieving his NMIT Certificate in Training for Work Skills. He has Asperger Syndrome and can recite the entire script of a movie from memory. With acceptance and training he is now completing a National Certificate in Employment Skills and has been offered part time work in an appliance store.

### Minicase 6

A physically and intellectually disabled man in his late 40s is now almost entirely independent in his recreational activities, having undergone socialisation through his contact with agencies outside the home, including the Supported Training Programme. He travels independently, enjoys church and social activities and practises his photography hobby.

### Minicase 7

A young woman of 21 had so little confidence she would not cross a road, travel on a bus or attempt anything unfamiliar. Now in her fourth year and enrolled in the Certificate in Training for Work Skills courses she travels independently by bus, walks through busy city streets to and from the bus depot,

uses a computer for business applications, handles a sharp knife in the kitchen with confidence, holds down a part time job in a cafeteria, and maintains a relationship with a young man.

#### Minicase 8

Another young woman in her early 20s, who suffered abuse as a child because of her intellectual disability, is now in her third year in the programme and has undergone a personality change. From dour, snappy and untrusting, she is now a smiling and productive member of the student body who mixes confidently with other students.

#### Minicase 9

A young man with speech and cognitive disabilities had difficulties mixing with others and meeting domestic commitments like making meals and doing laundry. After several years training and meeting timeliness requirements as part of his Supported Training Programme courses he is now a model member of his household.

#### Minicase 10

A 40-year-old man with a propensity for eating anything and everything available lost approximately 10 kilos of weight with a coordinated effort between home and the Supported Training Programme. The supported living environment oversaw his calorific intake, while NMIT provided him with instruction and training in a Healthy Living course including gym workouts and nutritional guidelines.

#### Minicase 11

Another man in his early 40s arrived part way through a year when his family shifted from another centre. After enrolment his mother reported a huge change in his personal well-being and contentedness, saying she could not understand why there were not similar opportunities for him in the large city from whence they had come.

#### Minicase 12

A troubled teenager with learning difficulties arising mainly from having spent all his life in CYF care spent one year in the Supported Training Programme and was so moved by the outcomes of his training he organised donations from his classmates and bought a present for the tutor at the end of the year. He later returned for more training and has matured into a much more socialised and responsible person.

#### Minicase 13

Mr A came to the Supported Training Programme through the transition process operating with one of the local secondary schools. He was the product of a pregnancy through which his mother continued to drink heavily. His concentration and ability to retain were deeply affected and learning was a major undertaking for him, so much so that some people had given up on him. Through significant amounts of time and personal effort he was coached to the point where he achieved learning outcomes for enough courses to attain the Certificate in Training for Work Skills and went on to complete a pre-trade hospitality course.

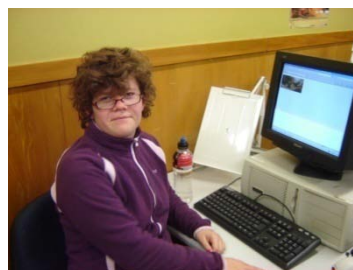
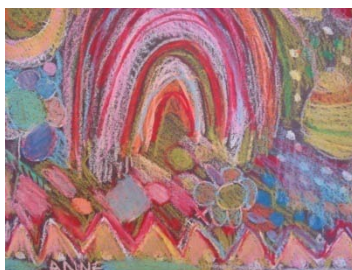
#### Minicase 14

Mr B is in his mid-40s and lives in a community home established to support people with high needs and challenging behaviour. Through successful completion of a number of courses his behaviour was deemed appropriate to allow his continued enrolment without support. During 2008 he took a leading role in a Multimedia course that produced a radio programme nominated and shortlisted for final judging in the national radio awards. (It may be a winner by now!)

In each of these cases significant coordination was required over a period of years and it took countless meetings, conversations, phone calls and emails in each case to achieve the outcomes. Education cannot take all the credit for these results but in most cases it was enrolment on the Supported Training Programme that began the path to success or contributed significantly to it.

## Conclusion

- The Supported Training Programme at NMIT provides students with flexible options that can be fitted into a busy lifestyle.
- It is driven by a realistic appreciation of ability, not held back by focus on disability.
- Students are encouraged to believe they can learn and that they have the right to learn – which is empowering.
- It is outward looking in its linkages with the community.
- It focuses on pathways for students for their next steps in learning.
- It is hugely time consuming because of all the consultation required.
- It is the most rewarding thing in the world.



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