



# Inclusive technical and vocational education and training in Samoa

Lessons learned from a partnership between the Australia Pacific Training Coalition and Nuanua O Le Alofa

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**Inclusive technical and vocational education and training in Samoa**  
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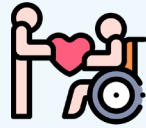


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# Key messages



Inclusion of persons with disabilities in post-secondary education and training (PSET) in Samoa is a significant challenge.



These challenges are linked to the barriers that children with disabilities face at the primary and secondary levels, including negative attitudes about disability, limited classroom support, and a lack of accessible school facilities.



Barriers to quality education at the primary and secondary level mean that many children with disabilities do not have the opportunity to develop the language, literacy and numeracy skills they need to succeed in further education and the workforce.



Provision of foundational language, literacy and numeracy skills and work skills provides multiple benefits for persons with disabilities, including self-confidence, development of critical life skills, and greater employability.



There are a range of ways that APTC and other PSET providers can make vocational education and training more inclusive. These include adjustments to facilities and classroom layout, curricula, course materials and teaching approach.



Partnerships with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities that are based on equity, openness, trust and respect can help make efforts to deliver inclusive technical and vocational education and training more impactful.

# Executive summary

In 2020, the Australia Pacific Training Coalition's (APTC) Samoa country office and Nuanua O Le Alofa (NOLA), a national disability advocacy organisation in Samoa, delivered two vocational skills programs for persons with disabilities: the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways and a foundational language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) course.

This report outlines the lessons that APTC and NOLA have learned from this experience and the impacts that these two courses had on participants. The research on which the report is based was undertaken through a collaboration between La Trobe University, APTC and NOLA. It involved in-depth individual interviews with APTC and NOLA staff, focus group discussions with training participants, and a select number of in-depth interviews with other Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in Samoa.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or, as it is known in Samoa, post-secondary education and training (PSET), provides an important pathway to employment and other livelihoods. The Government of Samoa has recognised the critical role of PSET in human development and economic growth in national policy. It has also made policy commitments to inclusion in education and employment.

In practice, however, inclusion of persons with disabilities in PSET is an ongoing challenge. This is linked to the broader challenges that many persons with disabilities face in accessing quality education. These challenges include negative attitudes about disability, limited classroom support, and a lack of accessible school infrastructure and facilities. As a result, many persons with disabilities do not complete secondary schooling. This means they are less likely to have developed the language, literacy, and numeracy skills, work skills or life skills they need to succeed in further education and the workforce, to live independently, and to participate in their communities.

APTC and NOLA's experience provides a range of practical lessons about delivering vocational skills training for persons with disabilities in the Samoan context. A key lesson is to make sure that the level of the course is suitable to the individual. Given the challenges persons with disabilities face in primary and secondary education, APTC and other PSET providers may need to consider adjusting their courses to accommodate different skill levels, providing additional support, or offering foundation language, literacy and numeracy courses to help bridge the gap. They may also need to incorporate other learning skills into courses, including skills in finding and evaluating information, or planning and organisational skills. Importantly, training providers need to understand that

**The Government of Samoa has recognised the critical role of PSET in human development and economic growth in national policy.**





disability impacts students' learning in different ways and that these individual needs need to be taken into account in training delivery. Training providers should also be sensitive to how students' previous educational experiences impact on their attitudes to learning and to being in a classroom environment and take steps to create a positive learning environment where students with disabilities feel comfortable and motivated to learn.

APTC and other PSET providers also need to understand what reasonable accommodations they need to provide to ensure that all students can fully engage in learning. Good inclusive education practice is to discuss students' needs directly with them at the beginning. However, trainers also need to be prepared to adapt 'on the go' as they observe how students respond to course materials and what teaching strategies best support their learning. Examples of reasonable accommodations include adapting physical facilities and classroom layout, providing materials in Braille or screen reader friendly formats, providing a sign language interpreter, determining individual learning goals, adjusting the curriculum and course materials, presenting course materials in a different way, and allowing more time to complete modules or courses.



**The findings of this research suggest a range of opportunities for APTC, the government of Samoa, other PSET providers to support more inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities.**

Both the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways and the language, literacy and numeracy course have had a range of benefits for the students. One of the most important has been the development of life skills that require language, literacy and numeracy skills. Participation in the courses has also improved students' self-confidence and given them a positive learning experience which can help motivate them to continue their learning. Importantly, participation in the courses has improved students' employability. A number of students have found new jobs since completing their course while others have continued in existing roles. All of the students reported that the skills they learned in the course have supported them in their workplaces.

Despite the challenges they encountered, both APTC and NOLA felt that delivery of the two courses was successful.

In reflecting on the factors that contributed to success, staff from both organisations identified the ability to be flexible, try out new things, and adapt; openness to discussing challenges and developing solutions together; and the skills, knowledge and attitudes of APTC and NOLA staff as key. These factors were linked to – and enabled by – the strength of the partnership between the two organisations, including their commitment to a shared goal, respect for each other's skills and contributions, and mutual trust.


The findings of this research suggest a range of opportunities for APTC, the government of Samoa, other PSET providers and international development partners

to support more inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities. There is a clear need to strengthen language, literacy and numeracy skills for children with disabilities at primary and secondary level. This is acknowledged in the Government of Samoa's plans for the education sector, which build on work undertaken to date by Samoan disability organisations, Samoan government agencies and international development partners. Training for teachers and teachers' aides in inclusive education approaches and improving the accessibility of schools will be key to achieving this and is already a priority for the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. However, given the existing gaps in language, literacy and numeracy skills, inclusive education stakeholders acknowledge the need for bridging courses which can support school leavers and adults with disabilities to learn these critical skills and for pathways to higher level courses which can facilitate transition into vocational or academic courses. Persons with disabilities should also be provided with greater opportunities to undertake vocational placements, internships or traineeships to help them further develop work skills and improve their employment prospects.

Fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities to technical and vocational education and training requires PSET providers to make some adaptations to course delivery. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture is already working on an inclusive TVET toolkit for vocational programs. This is an important first step in supporting PSET providers to adapt their courses. Further initiatives could include access to funding for reasonable accommodation and professional development for PSET trainers.

Negative perceptions about persons with disabilities and what they are capable of achieving at school and in their professional lives shapes their educational experiences, learning outcomes, and opportunities for meaningful employment. Proactive efforts to include persons with disabilities in family and community life and in classrooms and workplaces as well as greater visibility in the mainstream media – will help address the social stigma associated with disability.

There is much that APTC campuses in other Pacific countries and other PSET providers in Samoa and the region can learn from APTC and NOLA's approach to working with each other. Importantly, their partnership was based on equity, openness, trust and respect. By working in these kinds of partnerships with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, APTC and other PSET providers can be more effective in their efforts to deliver more inclusive technical and vocational education and training.



**Proactive efforts to include persons with disabilities in family and community life will help address the social stigma associated with disability.**



# INTRODUCTION

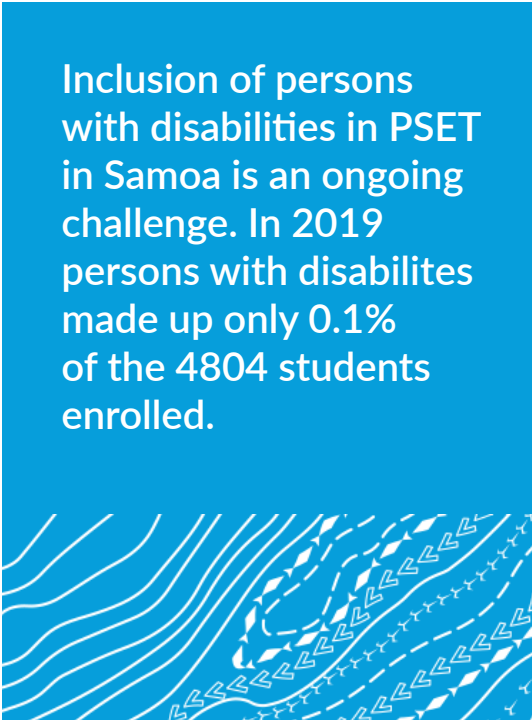
Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or, as it is known in Samoa, post-secondary education and training (PSET), provides an important pathway to employment and other livelihoods. The Government of Samoa has recognised the critical role of PSET in human development and economic growth in national policy. It has also made policy commitments to inclusion in education and employment (Samoa Qualifications Authority, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, and National University of Samoa, n.dd; Government of Samoa, 2018; Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour, 2016). However, in practice, inclusion of persons with disabilities in PSET in Samoa is an ongoing challenge. In 2019 only 5 of the 4804 (0.1%) students enrolled in all levels of PSET (which includes TVET and higher education) had a disability (Samoa Qualifications Authority, 2020).

In recognition of these challenges, in July 2020, the Australia Pacific Training Coalition's (APTC) Samoa country office and Nuanua O Le Alofa (NOLA), a national disability advocacy organisation in Samoa, formalised a partnership with the aim of working together to support greater access and participation in training for persons with disabilities. Part of this partnership involved delivering the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways for a group of NOLA members. In response to a gap identified early in the delivery of this course, APTC and NOLA also delivered a foundational language, literacy, and numeracy (LLN) course.

The aim of this research is to capture the key lessons that APTC and NOLA have learned from their experience in delivering this training, the challenges that they have

encountered, and the strategies they have used to ensure the initiative's success. It also aims to understand the impact of the training on participants, including on their education and employment outcomes. The findings of the research are intended to help inform future work under APTC and NOLA's partnership and support the sharing of lessons on inclusive training delivery with other APTC campuses, other PSET providers, Pacific governments, and development partners.

There is a small but growing literature on inclusive education in the Pacific (see for example Pillay et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2016; Sharma and Michael, 2017; Sharma et al., 2019; Stubbs and Tawake, 2009) and in Samoa (see for example McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013; Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010).



**Inclusion of persons with disabilities in PSET in Samoa is an ongoing challenge. In 2019 persons with disabilities made up only 0.1% of the 4804 students enrolled.**





However, there is limited data and research on inclusive education at the post-secondary level, including on the experiences of persons with disabilities themselves. This research therefore contributes to filling this important gap.

The research was undertaken through a collaboration between La Trobe University, APTC and NOLA. It involved in-depth individual interviews with 9 APTC and NOLA staff involved in the delivery of the training, focus group discussions with 15 people who participated in the training, and a select number of in-depth interviews and consultations with representatives from the inclusive education and TVET sections of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and other Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in Samoa. Draft findings were validated through an online workshop with APTC and NOLA staff, which helped develop recommendations to inform practice and policy.

The findings highlight the critical need for alternative education opportunities for persons with disabilities in Samoa. In particular, they draw attention to the need to bridge gaps in LLN skills, including for students who have some formal schooling. These skills are critical in supporting persons with disabilities in Samoa to participate in the workforce, be more independent, and contribute more fully to their communities.

[APTC Employability Skills cohort](#)



APTC Employability Skills cohort

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SAMOA

Inclusion of persons with disabilities in education in Samoa is a significant challenge. Samoa's 2016 Population and Housing Census revealed significant educational disparities between persons with disabilities and those without. According to the Census, persons with disabilities are 5 times more likely to have never attended school. Of those who do attend school, most only complete primary education, with a sharp decline in school attendance beginning at age 13 (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

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(Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018)

Persons with disabilities also face challenges in accessing employment and other economic opportunities. The 2016 Census data indicates that only one in 20 persons with disabilities are engaged in paid work compared to one in 4 people without disabilities. In addition, 58 per cent of persons with disabilities are not economically active compared to 17 per cent of people without disabilities (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018). These employment challenges are linked to challenges in education: because they have not attended or completed school, persons with disabilities may not meet the required level of education for many jobs. These findings have important implications for Samoa's efforts to fulfill the rights of persons with disabilities to quality education and decent work.

Recent research suggests that there are a range of barriers to education for persons with disabilities (see Box 1).

## Box One: Challenges for inclusive education in Samoa

### Attitudes

- Children with disabilities experience bullying or discrimination at school or in the community.
- Parents are concerned for their children's safety or wellbeing at school, particularly girls.
- Parents and communities underestimate the capabilities and potential of persons with disabilities.
- Parents cannot afford to send children to school or prioritise sending children without disabilities to school.
- Parents prioritise sending boys with disabilities to school, particularly secondary school.

### Identification and diagnosis

- There is limited access to services for diagnosis, early intervention, and rehabilitation, and to assistive devices, particularly in rural areas.

### School infrastructure and facilities

- There are only two special schools - Loto Taumafai and Aoga Fiamalamalama - both located in Apia. One organisation - SENESE Inclusive Education - provides support for children with disabilities who attend mainstream early learning, primary, and secondary schools.
- Limited infrastructure and transport make it difficult for children to travel to and from school.
- Mainstream schools are not designed in a way that is disability-inclusive, including for wheelchair users.

### Classroom adjustments and support

- There is limited pre-service and in-service training for teachers in inclusive education approaches, so teachers don't have the knowledge and skills they need to understand and meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- High student-teacher ratios and multi-grade classrooms mean that teachers have limited time to provide individualised attention.
- There are limited teaching and learning resources for students with disabilities.
- There are a limited number of teachers' aides available to work with children with disabilities in the classroom.
- The national curriculum and assessment processes don't support a more individualised approach to learning.

*Collated from: McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013; Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Sharma et al., 2016; Sharma and Michael, 2017; Sharma et al., 2019; SIEDP Project Evaluation Report, 2016; Stubbs and Tawake, 2009; Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010.*



These barriers mean that even when children with disabilities go to school, they may not have access to the support they need to learn effectively or to an environment where they feel welcome and included. As a result, many children with disabilities do not complete secondary schooling. This means they are less likely to have developed critical language, literacy, and numeracy skills, work skills or life skills.

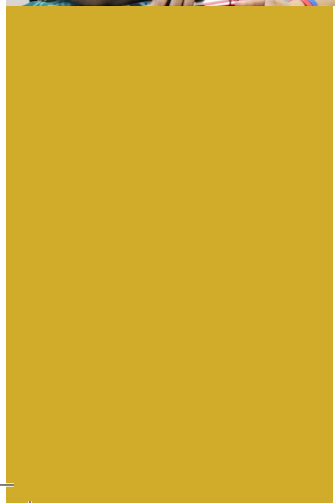
## A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

APTC and NOLA's partnership reflects growing recognition of the importance of taking a more structured and deliberate approach to partnerships among organisations working to achieve sustainable and transformative development. Over the last two decades, 'partnerships' – between governments, international and local NGOs, and the private sector – have become an increasingly important approach to delivering development assistance. However, many of these partnerships have been criticised as being transactional, lacking flexibility, and as reproducing unequal power relationships (Kelly and Roche, 2014).

In response to this, there have been growing calls for approaches that can support more transformational and sustainable change. The approach developed by the Partnership Brokers Association has been used extensively in the international development sector. It is based on five principles: diversity (understanding and appreciating each partners' differences), equity (genuinely respecting each partners' perspectives and contributions), transparency (being as open as possible), mutual benefit (understanding each partners' right to benefit from the partnership) and courage (being bold in tackling challenges and uncertainty). This approach frames partnership as a vehicle for working differently, drawing on the skills and capabilities that each partner brings to identify better solutions to development challenges. It takes a systematic and purposeful approach to developing partnerships using a process of 'partnership brokering'. Partnerships are also actively managed through regular 'health checks' (Mundy and Tennyson, 2019).

The design for the third phase of APTC explicitly recognised the need to work differently in order to achieve more transformational change in Pacific TVET systems (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017). This reflected the program's shift from

being primarily a training provider to playing a greater role in strengthening Pacific TVET institutions. A critical part of this was supporting a locally led agenda for TVET reform. This required APTC to build alignment with local TVET stakeholders, identify common objectives, and work collaboratively to achieve these. An intentional approach to partnerships was therefore central to the design for the third phase of the program.





## DESIGNING AND DELIVERING INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL TRAINING

APTC and NOLA's partnership builds on collaboration between the two organisations since 2017. This included NOLA's contribution to the design for the third phase of APTC, support for delivery of the Certificate IV in Disability, provision of work placement for APTC students, and disability awareness training for APTC students and staff. The formalisation of the partnership reflected APTC and NOLA's commitment to work together more strategically in support of their shared objectives. In 2020, a partnership agreement was developed through a collaborative and participatory process involving staff from APTC and NOLA, facilitated by a partnership broker.

A key shared objective for APTC and NOLA's partnership was improving access to PSET for persons with disabilities, with the aim of improving their employment opportunities. To this end, in late 2019 APTC and NOLA, with funding from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, worked together to identify a group of NOLA members who were interested in studying the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways in the first half of 2020. This course develops communication, language, literacy and numeracy skills to prepare students for entry into the workforce or further vocational training. It includes modules on topics such as writing workplace texts, interpersonal communication, using digital technology, and using maths for calculations and measurements at work.







As preparation for delivering the course, APTC and NOLA undertook an accessibility audit to ensure that buildings and classrooms were accessible. They also considered what accommodations students would need, including transportation to make sure participants could travel safely to and from classes, sign language interpreters, course materials in Braille, and screen-reader software.

Nineteen students registered for the course. As part of APTC's entry requirements, the students undertook a language, literacy and numeracy assessment, based on the Australian Core Skills Framework.<sup>1</sup> This aimed to assess whether students had the necessary level of LLN skills to cope with the demands of the course. Nine students achieved the required level and were admitted to the course. These students had a range of different disabilities, including physical, sensory (hearing and vision), neurological/cognitive and intellectual disabilities. The students also had different educational experiences. Some had very little formal education, while others had attended either a special school or mainstream school for their primary or secondary education.

Addressing the very different needs and skill levels of the students was a key challenge for the trainers. In addition, within the first few weeks it became clear that some of the students found the level of LLN skills required in the course challenging. This included students who had attended secondary schools. The students who were deaf and hard of hearing faced particular challenges (see Box 2). As one NOLA staff member reported:

Addressing the very different needs and skill levels of the students was a key challenge for the trainers. In addition, within the first few weeks it became clear that some of the students found the level of LLN skills required in the course challenging. This included students who had attended secondary schools. The students who were deaf and hard of hearing faced particular challenges (see Box 2). As one NOLA staff member reported:

*The deaf usually have the greatest challenge in terms of reading and writing because their family can't communicate with them, teachers can't communicate with them ... [and] we have a limited number of interpreters, so it's pretty complex.*

APTIC and NOLA staff also noted that educational experiences impacted on how students approached learning. They suggested that families and teachers often had low expectations about the capabilities of students with disabilities, which meant they were not challenged to push themselves further. In focus group discussions, multiple students said that their experience of formal schooling was of being taught manual skills, rather than academic skills. As one student commented:

*Back in those days, when I went to school the focus was mostly on hand-crafts and sewing. There was limited focus on subjects like mathematics or English ... I always felt insecure when I tried to speak English. I never knew if I was making sense.*

<sup>1</sup> The Australian Core Skills Framework outlines five core skills that are essential for individuals to participate effectively in personal, community, work, and education and training contexts. These are: learning, reading, writing, oral communication, and numeracy. It also describes five levels of performance in each of the core skills, ranging from 1 (low level performance) to 5 (high level performance) (McLean et al, 2012).

## Box Two: Challenges in language, literacy and numeracy for deaf and hard of hearing students

Despite efforts by Samoan organisations such as the Deaf Association of Samoa, NOLA, SENESE, and Loto Tamaufai, working in collaboration with Australian and New Zealand organisations, there is still limited access to medical and audiological services, particularly in rural areas. This means that many children may not have hearing difficulties identified until later in their development or may not have access to assistive technology (Sanders et al., 2015; Jenkin et al., 2019). In addition, many hearing parents and family members are not able to use sign language. This means that young children miss out on early language, literacy and numeracy experiences in the critical first five years. This has flow on effects for cognitive development (Jenkin et al., 2019; Hall, Hall and Caselli, 2019). Samoa also only has a small number of sign language interpreters who can work with children, either in special schools or in mainstream schools, to support them to access the curriculum.


Children who are deaf or hard of hearing can also find it more difficult to acquire reading and writing skills. This is because visual languages do not always 'map' directly on to written languages (Hermans et al., 2008; Rudner et al, 2014). APTC and NOLA staff explained that the deaf students in the class had difficulties with aspects of English grammar such as pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. Some also had difficulty understanding concepts such as questions. Although studies have found that a strong foundation in sign language supports children in acquiring written language and literacy skills (Hermans et al., 2008; Rudner et al, 2014; Hall, Hall and Caselli, 2019; Wolbers and Holcombe, 2020), the limited number of qualified sign language teachers means that many deaf and hard of hearing students may not acquire full literacy in Samoan Sign Language.

Another student said that the lack of academic engagement was the reason they withdrew from formal schooling: "I was sick of doing gardening, so I left."

Assumptions from teachers and families that students with disabilities had limited intellectual capacity impacted on students' perceptions of themselves. Interviewees also suggested that many teachers saw students with disabilities as being 'too difficult' to teach, resulting in students feeling alienated in the classroom or judged harshly for their individual learning difficulties. A student from the LLN stream reported, "I was always scared of being punished all the time by our teachers, even when I was trying my best to understand."

Another common approach from teachers to dealing with the learning challenges students with disabilities faced was to 'coddle' them or simply give such students the answers to tasks. This resulted in 'learned dependence', where students were reliant on others to help them.<sup>2</sup> These previous educational experiences meant that many students struggled with the greater expectations for independent learning placed on them at APTC.

<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with Tufue-Dolgoy's (2010) finding that some teachers see students living with disabilities as 'pampered' or 'spoiled'.



**“We realised that there is a huge difference between learning how to read and write and attending school. Going to school doesn't mean that you are able to read and write.”**

*NOLA staff member*

In the course of delivering the Certificate II, APTC and NOLA discovered that learned dependence was often the result of good intentions. The trainers were puzzled when, several weeks into the course, the students were not demonstrating the language, literacy and numeracy skills in the classroom that their pre-enrolment LLN assessment results had suggested. Reviewing their testing procedures, APTC and NOLA realised that during the assessment the interpreters had provided additional explanation of the tasks. While this was done out of a desire to ‘help’ the students, it had important consequences. As a NOLA staff member commented, “It meant we didn’t have a true picture [of their skills] when we first engaged them in the course.”

To better understand the students’ needs, APTC trainers asked them to re-sit the LLN assessment.

The results of this assessment indicated that the students’ levels of LLN were much lower than expected. To be able to complete the Certificate II, students needed to have an overall average score of 1 or 2, equivalent to the LLN skills that an early- to mid-primary school student would have. However, a small number of the students scored zero. This was a significant shock to both the APTC trainers and NOLA staff, who assumed that because these students had attended school, they had learned to read and write. As one NOLA staff member noted, “We realised that there is a huge difference between learning how to read and write and attending school. Going to school doesn't mean that you are able to read and write.” Similarly, an APTC staff member reflected:



*People tell you that they've had schooling up to year 10 and you think, 'Wow, that's awesome,' and then you delve a little bit deeper into their language, literacy and numeracy skills and you see that they've missed everything that happened past year one and they've been left to just ride along.*

The real, lower, levels of language, literacy and numeracy comprehension amongst some students was also a shock to the students and their parents. Three students – all of whom were deaf – were not able to continue with the Certificate II course. Senior management from both APTC and NOLA met with students and their families to deliver the news. All of those involved reported the conversations as being confronting and emotional. Staff involved in the discussions spoke of feeling like they were reinforcing the ‘deficit narrative’ about persons with disabilities, even though they were actually trying to address this.





APTC and NOLA felt strongly that they needed to offer these students an alternative that would support them to develop their LLN skills and enable them to transition back into the Certificate II course, or another course of their choosing. Both organisations were able to dedicate some staff time to provide LLN classes to the students, initially for two days per week. This quickly grew to include more NOLA members and classes 3 days per week. The classes also expanded from an initial 6 to 8 week program, to one that ran for just over 12 months.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of the LLN course recognises the critical need to provide students with the skills they need to engage in pre-vocational and vocational education.

In April 2021, the first cohort of nine students received their Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways and one student completed a number of units towards the Certificate II.

<sup>3</sup> Due to funding challenges, after the first 12 months the course was put on hold for 6 months. However, in early 2022 NOLA was able to secure funding to offer the course again.

**APTC and NOLA  
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APTC Graduation,  
25<sup>th</sup> March 2021,  
Certificate II in  
Skills for Work and  
Vocational Pathways  
graduate receiving  
award

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

Despite the challenges, both APTC and NOLA felt that the training was successful, both in terms of supporting the students to improve their language, literacy and numeracy and work readiness skills and in facilitating APTC and NOLA's learning about inclusive PSET delivery. In reflecting on the factors that contributed to success, staff from both organisations mentioned the ability to be flexible, try out new things, and adapt; the openness of both APTC and NOLA to discussing challenges and developing solutions together; and the skills, knowledge and attitudes of APTC and NOLA staff. These factors were linked to – and enabled by – the partnership between the two organisations.

Flexibility was key to enabling the trainers to extend the timeframe for completing the Certificate II course. It also supported the trainers to adjust the course curriculum and materials on the go. This was particularly important given the gaps in students' skills and knowledge, many of which only became clear during training. A NOLA staff member reflected that following a rigid curriculum that didn't fit with the students' needs would not only result in them failing to pass the course but would be a sign that APTC and NOLA had failed to deliver a truly inclusive approach to education. They remarked:



*Learning on the ground. Learning from their strengths, learning from their weaknesses, identifying their gaps, identifying their strengths. That's how the design or the planning changes, because there's no need for a big plan that does not fit the participants.*

””

Another NOLA staff member emphasised that such flexibility needs to be built into the design of inclusive education programs:

*If we lose this ability to pivot at a moment's notice, we lose the ability to address any challenges. We don't know what their needs are until we get there. Because they have missed so much, we cannot envision all of it. When we hit the road-block, we address it.*

””

Such flexibility requires an openness to uncertainty, a commitment to ongoing reflection and learning, and a shared understanding of the purpose of the initiative. In this case, the purpose was the provision of inclusive education rather than the realisation of pre-determined indicators of success. Interviewees from both organisations saw the partnership as being a key 'enabler' for the flexibility required to operate in situations of uncertainty. A NOLA staff member commented: "With APTC, the management, they're really, really open to changes. And I think that is of paramount importance to this partnership." An APTC staff member expanded on this:

*What that's going to look like and how that might play out is often unknown. And that's exactly the situation that happened with NOLA. Our initial intent was, 'Okay, we have to deliver a course to persons with disabilities. We've never done it before, there's going to be a learning curve for us.'*

””

The partnership also facilitated greater openness to trying out new things. This was important in taking forward the idea to offer LLN classes for the students who were not able to complete the Certificate II course. Reflecting on the process of deciding to create the new LLN course, a NOLA staff member commented,

*We had decided before then that we didn't just want to drop them [the students unable to continue in the Certificate II]. APTC had actually been really good about that. They said, 'We want a way forward. We want to do something.' So we knew that we wanted to provide extra support for them, but we didn't know what that was going to look like.*

””

Similarly, APTC staff commented on how the nature of the partnership with NOLA and a desire not to abandon their new students allowed for the emergence of the LLN stream:

*Because of the formalised partnership, because of this genuine intent, we said, 'Okay, we have this cohort here who can't continue with [the] Certificate II ... what can we do? Well, we have a language, literacy and numeracy staff member.*

””



*As part of our partnership, why don't we commit time for that trainer to meet with this cohort and maybe open it up to any other [NOLA] members that don't have really great language, literacy and numeracy, and we'll just support them over the next six months and see what happens?'*

APTC and NOLA's openness to discussing challenges and the collaborative approach they took to developing solutions was also a key factor in success. An APTC staff member remarked:



*I think the partnership between APTC and NOLA is pretty unique in many regards. The openness and the drive from both parties to come up with solutions, to talk through the challenges in such a constructive way is pretty inspirational. That comes from everyone being willing to listen to each other, to come up with ideas, solutions [and] problem solve...*

For example, when it became clear that some of the students would not be able to continue with the Certificate II course, APTC and NOLA were open with each other about the fact that there was an issue that needed to be addressed. They saw it as a joint challenge and worked together to talk through the issue and come up with an alternative which aligned with their shared goals. This helped transform a setback into an opportunity.

Staff from APTC and NOLA also talked about the different and complementary skills and knowledge that each organisation brought to the collaboration as being critical to its success. This included the APTC trainers' skills and experience in vocational training, language, literacy and numeracy, and strategies for teaching adult learners. NOLA staff brought an understanding of the educational context for persons with disabilities in Samoa, and the kinds of adjustments that would be needed to accommodate students' different needs. The skills of the sign language interpreters that NOLA engaged – together with their experience as teacher's aides – were an important asset in the classroom. Both APTC and NOLA staff also brought keen observational, problem-solving and creative thinking skills. These were important in monitoring students' understanding of the course material, generating new ideas about how to approach training delivery, and developing activities and teaching aids to support students' learning. This was supported by regular and open communication between APTC and NOLA staff. As an APTC staff member reported, "We were in constant contact. [NOLA staff member] would come and say, 'Okay, maybe we'll try this,' or 'I've brought this for you to try.' Everybody worked together really well."

In addition to these practical skills and knowledge, the attitudes of APTC and NOLA staff towards the collaboration were also key. This included a commitment to working together and to seeing the students succeed and enthusiasm for the collaboration. This enthusiasm extended to how the teaching staff presented in the classroom, modelling positivity to students even when delivering the courses was challenging. One NOLA



staff member commented, “We have to show up with incredible amounts of positivity, patience, and vulnerability, ... [because] we have no clue what the next day will bring.” Support from APTC and NOLA management for a flexible way of working also gave the trainers the authority to adapt what they were doing in response to challenges and opportunities that arose in the classroom.

Several key points emerge from this. The first is that being flexible and adaptable, open to discussing issues and challenges, and being courageous in tackling challenges and uncertainty requires partners to trust each other. APTC and NOLA were able to try out new things because the partnership agreement they had negotiated, and their experiences of working together in the past, had given them confidence that they were working towards the same goal. This meant that when things didn't go to plan, they were able to work together to come up with an alternative way to achieve that goal. The second is that both APTC and NOLA respected each other's skills and contributions to the partnership. This was reflected in their willingness to listen to each other's concerns and ideas. As a result, the partnership has had benefits beyond the training. As one APTC staff member commented:

*We get a lot from [the partnership]. We're learning to be better employers. We're more aware individuals... For example, we've created a 12 month internship targeted at graduates of the Certificate II. This would give them work experience but at the same time, it would teach us how to be better, more inclusive employers. We now have one of the graduates on board... It has made us very, very aware. And it places us in a position where we can better advocate to employers, and let them know that, yeah, you have to make a few accommodations, but it's actually an exciting journey, you learn so much...*





## IMPACTS OF THE TRAINING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Both the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways and the language, literacy and numeracy classes have had a range of benefits for the students. One of the most important of these has been the development of life skills that require language, literacy and numeracy skills. These skills enable persons with disabilities to manage their everyday lives more independently, contribute to their communities, and participate in society more broadly. As a NOLA staff member recounted:

*One of our students previously had no money management skills. She used to withdraw all her pay as soon as it was deposited and hide it under her bed. But because of the program, she now has the confidence to manage her finances. She now brings her friends to NOLA. She takes them to the bank and shows them how she navigates it. She takes them to the shops to show them how she processes purchase orders. Another student has registered to vote for the first time and has encouraged others to register.*

In focus group discussions, students also reported that engagement in the Certificate II and LLN courses has improved self-confidence and willingness to embrace new opportunities. One of the students from the Certificate II course shared: "I see [the Certificate II course] as a second chance. It not only supported my education but pushed me to work harder in my own life." APTC and NOLA see the students' increasing confidence and independence as having the potential to change attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Samoa. This begins in students' homes. An APTC staff member remarked:

*Their parents are seeing the difference in them and starting to get hope, realising their child can do something. Sadly, in Samoa, persons with disabilities are often seen as not being able to do anything, so [parents] don't bother trying. When family see the difference, that's really exciting.*

Students also spoke about how different their experience of learning had been. They reported feeling engaged, enthusiastic and motivated, where previously they had felt disengaged from school. These positive learning experiences are important in motivating students to continue their learning.







Certificate II in Skill for Work and Vocational Pathways cohort, APTC Graduation, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021

The training has also improved students' employability. Students who completed the Certificate II related that the course gave them the confidence to apply for work after graduation. While one of the students returned to their previous job, three found new full-time jobs. All of the students acknowledged that the skills they learned in the course supported them in undertaking their roles. Two students from the LLN course returned to their previous jobs while another two secured new jobs. All of these students said the LLN course had improved their skills and confidence in the workplace, including their ability to read and understand information, respond to emails and develop reports. One of these students has since been promoted from Project Assistant to Project Officer.

In addition to the impacts for students, APTC and NOLA staff also identified several other impacts of the training. This included mentoring and professional development of a NOLA staff member, who worked closely with the APTC trainer in delivering the LLN classes. APTC staff and trainers have also developed their understanding of delivering inclusive training in a Samoan context. The trainers also have a set of adult-centred teaching and learning resources developed specifically to meet the needs of Samoan persons with disabilities which can be used for additional cohorts.

**Students said the LLN course had improved their skills and confidence in the workplace, including their ability to read and understand information, respond to emails and develop reports.**





## LESSONS FOR APTC AND NOLA

APTC and NOLA's experience has provided a number of practical lessons about delivering training for persons with disabilities in the Samoan context.


A key lesson for both APTC and NOLA is to make sure that the level of the course is suitable for the students. For some students, a foundational course in basic language, literacy and numeracy may be needed to help bridge the gap between their current skill levels and what is required to complete a Certificate II level course. There may also be a need to adjust aspects of the Certificate II course to accommodate different students' skill levels. This requires trainers to have a clear understanding of students' strengths and any gaps in their skills and knowledge. While some of this information can be obtained from a pre-course LLN assessment, trainers also need to adjust teaching strategies and resources as they get to know the students individually and as a group.

In addition to students' LLN skills, trainers also need to understand how students' previous educational experiences impact on their attitudes to learning, their understanding of what is expected of them, and the learning skills they have. The Australian Core Skills Framework outlines two key aspects of learning as a core skill: i) awareness of the self as a learner, and ability to plan and manage learning, and ii) the acquisition and application of practical strategies that facilitate learning, including finding, evaluating and organising information, using prior knowledge and scaffolding, and learning with and from others (McLean et al., 2012). These are skills that students may not necessarily have acquired through their primary and secondary education and which may therefore need to be incorporated as part of the course.

Students' previous educational experiences may also impact on how they feel about learning or about being in a classroom environment. Negative experiences of school – including discrimination and bullying – can leave students fearful of 'getting it wrong' and lead them to disengage from learning. APTC and NOLA staff noted that at the beginning of the course there was some anxiety among the students, and that it took some time for them to become comfortable.

Inclusive teaching and learning means making reasonable accommodations to ensure that the needs and preferences of all students are accommodated. As an APTC staff member recalled, "With the classroom set up, we went through pictures of what it could look like and where it's best to seat people in wheelchairs or where to position the sign interpreter, having two sign interpreters so they get a break and weren't overloaded...". Good inclusive education practice is to discuss students' needs directly with them. As an APTC staff member recollected:

*When NOLA did the disability awareness training with us, I remember the General Manager said 'A lot of people make assumptions about what reasonable accommodations you need to make for persons with disabilities. But the best person to be able to tell you how you can help them is that person themselves'.*



Good inclusive education practice is to discuss students' needs directly with them.



However, trainers also need to be prepared to adapt 'on the go' as they observe how students respond to the built environment, course materials and what teaching strategies best support their learning. The impacts of these accommodations are difficult to overstate. As one of the Certificate II students reported, "The amendments to the environment and the teaching approach to be fully accessible made me feel at home."

Although APTC and NOLA had completed an accessibility audit and had identified adjustments that students would need before the course began, as they delivered the course, they found additional adjustments were needed. This included adjusting the pace of the course. APTC normally delivers the Certificate II course over 15 weeks. Although the trainers allowed 22 weeks for the NOLA cohort, students took 30 weeks to complete the course. The APTC trainers found that students needed more time to work through the modules, in part because of the range of different skill levels in the class and because students were not used to the pace of the APTC learning environment.


The trainers also made adjustments to the curriculum, course materials and teaching approaches. This included incorporating foundational literacy and numeracy as part of the curriculum and adjusting course materials, such as making sure that video material used in the classroom had audible narration and subtitles. It also included changes to how trainers presented course material, such as including more hands-on activities, using different teaching aids and breaking lessons and activities into smaller sections. APTC also utilised the skills of staff teaching in other areas to help develop new materials and contextualise learning. An APTC staff member remembered, "One of the plumbing teachers knocked together a counting box for us [to teach basic numeracy], which was fantastic." In teaching students about measurement, the trainers had students go to the welding workshop and use a measuring tape to measure objects. The trainers also adjusted the course materials to better fit with the Samoan context, including using common Samoan signs in modules on workplace communication.

Finally, APTC and NOLA staff emphasised the importance of ensuring that learning goals were individualised. This recognises that students have different reasons for wanting to improve their skills and different goals for their learning. This can be very challenging for trainers. As one APTC staff member noted, "[E]ach individual has varied needs and that's probably the most challenging thing for a trainer, to deliver to 12 students that have really different needs in the classroom." However, as a staff member from NOLA highlighted, supporting students to achieve their individual goals in ways that build on their existing skills and strengths is a key part of the trainer's role. They remarked: "Identify the individuals. Not the design. Focus on their ability and their capacity and what they have. Not to satisfy the plan or the design but to satisfy the participant".

**"The amendments to the environment and the teaching approach to be fully accessible made me feel at home."**

*Certificate II student*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. Strengthen the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills for children with disabilities in primary and secondary schools.
  2. Support school leavers and adults with disabilities to develop the skills they need to access further education and make the transition to the workforce.
  3. Adapt PSET programs to the needs of persons with disabilities.
  4. Address social stigma about disability.
  5. Invest in building genuine partnerships to pursue shared goals.

The findings of this study suggest a range of opportunities for APTC, the government of Samoa, other PSET providers and international development partners to support more inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities. In offering the following recommendations, we acknowledge the need for approaches to inclusive education and employment that 'fit' the Samoan context and are in line with Samoan values and ways of working (Forlin, 2013; McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy, 2013; Miles, Lene and Merumeru, 2014; Picton, Horsley and Knight, 2016).



## 1. Strengthen the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills for children with disabilities in primary and secondary schools

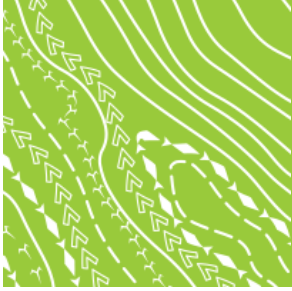
Providing children with disabilities in Samoa with the language, literacy and numeracy skills they need to participate in education, the workforce and community life is a significant challenge. Inclusive education stakeholders in Samoa, including those consulted for this research, are well aware of this challenge and plans are already in place to build on the work undertaken to date by disability organisations such as SENESE, Loto Tamaufai, Aoga Fiamalamalama and NOLA as well as by government agencies and international development partners (see Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2014; Samoa Qualifications Authority, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, and National University of Samoa, n.d). Samoa's most recent Education Sector Plan includes plans to train more teachers in inclusive education strategies and increase the number of qualified teachers' aides, including those with

sign language interpreting skills. These were identified as priorities by APTC and NOLA as well as by representatives from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities consulted as part of this research (see also Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016; Jenkin et al., 2019). However, it will take some time before these plans result in system-wide improvements in LLN skills for students with disabilities.

More broadly, the research has identified a need to focus on learning outcomes for students with disabilities, rather than school attendance, as a measure of success. The introduction of Individual Education Plans (IEP) for students with disabilities is a positive step, although there is more work to be done to ensure that these are used consistently, and that they reflect students' individual interests, abilities and potential (see Samoa Qualifications Authority, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, and National University of Samoa, n.d; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016).

## *Specific recommendations*

- The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture should ensure that funding for professional development of teachers and teachers' aides in inclusive education continues to be made available (see also Haggland, Catherwood and Aikman, 2018; Samoa Qualifications Authority, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, and National University of Samoa, n.d).
- Development partners should support professional development activities through funding or technical assistance for the delivery of training or the development of inclusive teaching and learning materials.
- Special and mainstream schools should be provided with sufficient funding and other resources to ensure they are able to meet the individual learning needs of children with disabilities. This should include education and career counselling to support students with disabilities to consider and plan for their future.
- The Samoa Qualifications Authority should support the professionalisation of Samoan sign language interpreters by working with the Deaf Association of Samoa to develop qualifications in Samoan sign language and Samoan sign language interpreting and supporting a register of qualified interpreters (see also Jenkin et al., 2019). Development partners could support this by facilitating access to sign language interpreter associations and interpreting and translating registration authorities in their own countries to share experience.
- APTC should continue to offer the Certificate III in Education Support and work with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and other PSET providers to strengthen and expand qualifications for teachers' aides. Stakeholder's consulted for this research reported that APTC's work in this area was valuable in expanding the pool of teachers' aides.



## 2. Support school leavers and adults with disabilities to develop the skills they need to access further education and make the transition to the workforce

This research has identified a cohort of students whose access to further education and employment is limited by their low LLN skills. Representatives from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities consulted as part of this research acknowledged that there is a strong case for the provision of bridging courses which can support students to develop these LLN skills. Such courses can also have broader benefits in improving the ability of persons with disabilities to live more independently and contribute to community life. As a NOLA staff member commented:

There are a lot of conversations in this country about establishing successful employment pathways for persons with disabilities... [T]he idea that NOLA is advocating is that literacy and numeracy is of paramount importance. That is the foundation. Unless you have literacy, you won't be able to do anything else. You will end up [in low skill] work or the informal sector where you work more, but you earn less. Because you don't have the basics.

However, course participants and inclusive education stakeholders also emphasised the need for persons with disabilities to have educational pathways beyond LLN, to enable them to access meaningful employment opportunities in line with their interests and abilities. They suggested that the LLN course and the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways could provide a pathway to enable students to transition into other Certificate II and higher courses. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of engaging with the private sector, include to establish opportunities for persons with disabilities to undertake vocational placements, internships or traineeships that would help them further develop work skills and improve their employment prospects.

### *Specific recommendations*

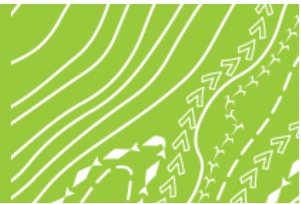
- Organisations of Persons with Disabilities should continue to promote the importance of LLN skills to persons with disabilities and their families.
- The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development should work with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and PSET providers to deliver bridging courses to enable school leavers and adults with disabilities to develop critical LLN skills. These should be tailored to the needs and goals of students and allow for staged progression to



higher levels. They should also facilitate transition into vocational or academic courses and into the workforce. Inclusive education stakeholders consulted for this research expressed a strong interest in scaling up LLN bridging courses and for further initiatives to support persons with disabilities to progress to further education or enter the workforce.

- APTC should consider offering the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways regularly to provide NOLA members and other persons with disabilities with opportunities to access vocational education. Inclusive education stakeholders consulted for this research expressed strong interest in this.
- APTC should continue to support persons with disabilities to undertake other vocational courses.
- Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and inclusive PSET providers should engage with the private sector and public sector employers to ensure that training for persons with disabilities aligns with the skills that employers need and to advocate for more employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.
- Public and private sector employers should support persons with disabilities to transition into the workforce - and model inclusive employment practices - by offering vocational placements, internships or traineeships. These can be developed through partnerships with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and PSET providers.

### 3. Adapt PSET programs to the needs of persons with disabilities



Fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities to technical and vocational education and training requires PSET providers to make some adaptations to course delivery. Some of these adaptations require additional costs, while others require professional development for TVET trainers in inclusive education approaches. APTC and NOLA's experience – and global good practice – suggests that the following are key:

- Ensuring that buildings and classrooms are accessible.
- Consulting with students to understand what reasonable accommodations they need and what their learning goals are.
- Understanding students' existing skills and knowledge, including through pre-course testing and assessment, and using this to ensure that students are placed in courses that are suitable for their learning needs.
- Reviewing and adapting teaching and learning material and assessment tasks to ensure these are accessible and appropriate for students with diverse learning

needs. This may require developing new material or translating material into other formats.

- Incorporating other core learning skills into course delivery, including skills in finding and evaluating information, and planning and organisational skills.
- Being sensitive to how negative past educational experiences impact on students' attitudes to learning and to being in a classroom environment and creating a positive learning environment where students feel safe, comfortable and motivated to learn.
- Embedding flexibility in course delivery, including adjusting time frames to accommodate the different paces at which students achieve learning objectives.
- Adapting teaching methods to ensure that all students are engaged and learning effectively.
- Using regular assessment to check students' progress and adapt approaches where necessary.

### *Specific recommendations*

- PSET providers should work with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture to determine the costs of reasonable accommodations and develop a mechanism by which PSET providers can access funding to provide these accommodations.
- PSET providers should review their policies to ensure that these support greater flexibility, for example, by allowing students longer time frames to complete courses.
- The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture should expand professional development for PSET trainers in inclusive education approaches. This could build on the inclusive TVET toolkit for vocational programs that the Ministry is currently developing.
- APTC should continue to reflect on its experience delivering inclusive TVET and adapt its practices to strengthen inclusion. This should include meaningful engagement with past, current and future students with disabilities (see Box 3).
- APTC and other PSET providers should share good practice in inclusive education with each other – and with other inclusive education stakeholders - to build understanding about approaches that are successful in both the Samoan context and in the wider regional context. Stakeholders expressed strong support for sharing of knowledge and experience and for greater collaboration during consultations.



## Box Three: Meaningful consultation with persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are the experts of their own lives. Government agencies, TVET providers and other organisations need to meaningfully engage persons with disabilities in developing, implementing and reviewing policies and programs for persons with disabilities.

Meaningful inclusion requires actively reaching out to persons with disabilities, including those with different disabilities, of different genders, and people from different geographical locations. To ensure effective two-way communication, engage sign language interpreters, provide written material in Braille or screen reader friendly formats, and ensure that information is in plain language. Consultations should provide a safe and comfortable space for persons with disabilities to communicate criticism of policies and programs, and to share when they do not understand or know the answers.

Ideally, consultations should be facilitated by persons with disabilities. It should be a goal of all organisations for whom working with persons with disabilities is part of their core business to train and employ persons with disabilities at sufficiently senior levels to be able to communicate with other persons with disabilities and with management to inform policy and programming decisions.

## 4. Address social stigma about disability

Stakeholders consulted for this research emphasised the importance of addressing social perceptions of disability in families, communities, schools and workplaces. As this study suggests, negative perceptions about persons with disabilities and what they are capable of achieving at school and in their professional lives shapes their educational experiences, learning outcomes, and opportunities for meaningful employment. However, this study also suggests that when persons with disabilities are given genuine opportunities to learn, the views of their families and employers can become more positive. These opportunities also help build persons with disabilities' self-confidence and their ability to live independently, support their families, and contribute to their communities. This has benefits for individual families as well as for Samoan society more broadly.



## Specific recommendations

- Families and communities should ensure that persons with disabilities are involved in discussions and decision-making.
- APTC and NOLA should promote the achievements of current and past students with disabilities in the mainstream media.
- Schools, PSET providers and employers should continue to support genuine inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream classes and workplaces.

The Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development should actively promote inclusion of persons with disabilities in Samoan society, including through mainstream media campaigns and disability role models.

## 5. Invest in building genuine partnerships to pursue shared goals

APTC and NOLA's partnership was critical to the success of the training initiative, particularly in overcoming challenges. Importantly, both organisations invested time in creating and nurturing the partnership and were genuinely committed to working through challenges productively and in a collaborative way. This contrasts with the transactional nature of many partnerships in the international development sector. While these kinds of relationships may have their place, this study has shown that partnerships based on equity, openness, trust and respect can bring added value to efforts to address development challenges.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities like NOLA have valuable knowledge and experience which can support government agencies and PSET providers to develop policies and programs which contribute to greater inclusion in education and employment. Inclusive education stakeholders consulted for this research acknowledged the importance of working collaboratively. However, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities often have small budgets and a limited number of staff. Resourcing issues should be discussed openly, so each partner is clear on what they will contribute and small organisations are not overburdened.

APTC campuses in other Pacific countries and other PSET providers in Samoa and the region can learn from APTC and NOLA's partnership. Importantly, the partnership developed over several years, with collaboration on small activities eventually leading to the formalisation of the partnership. This process helped APTC and NOLA build trust in each other and reinforced their commitment to a shared goal. Similarly, APTC campuses in other Pacific countries could 'start small' by identifying local Organisations of Persons with Disabilities and engaging with them on how to make courses more inclusive. If appropriate, some of these relationships may develop into formalised partnerships.

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