

Submission to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council

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This submission advocates for the ***expansion of allied health services in Tasmania*** to lead Tasmania's social recovery, which, in turn, will contribute significantly to Tasmania's economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19. More specifically, the Tasmanian Government should:

- 1) Substantially increasing investment in allied health in Tasmania. In particular, increase the number of allied health professionals employed in the state.
- 2) Develop, and implement, an allied health workforce development plan for the state
- 3) Establish a partnership with a tertiary education provider to provide allied health education and training in (or for) Tasmania
- 4) Support TasTAFE to provide the Certificate III and IV vocational qualifications for allied health therapy assistants and explore the opportunity to develop a Diploma or Advanced Diploma in Allied Health.
- 5) Develop an allied health career and education and training pathway map to guide career progression and inform entry level opportunities for workforce entrants and re-entrants.

The health care and social assistance sector is the largest employing sector in Tasmania and is also the greatest contributor to Gross State Product (GSP) of all sectors. However, as all Tasmanians should already know, we have the oldest, least healthy, highest proportion of the population living with a disability, lowest level of functional literacy and highest level of disadvantage than any other state, but our investment in jobs and education and training to support the social and health care needs of our population (and provide people with meaningful employment), is not matched to the demand.

Skill shortages in allied health professions were evident in Tasmania prior to COVID-19 and prior to the introduction of the NDIS. The impact of COVID-19, and the previous and ongoing roll out of the NDIS, has made these shortages more severe and more visible. With graduations from allied health professional tertiary courses projected to be considerably below demand for allied health professionals Australia-wide, these shortages are only going to worsen, and considerably more so for Tasmania with our ageing population, socio-demographic profile and lack of education and training in the state.

While the disability and aged care sectors provide workforce planning and development advice, including training priorities, through the Strategic Industry Partnerships and other stakeholder engagement frameworks facilitated by Skills Tasmania, this advice is limited to those specific sectors. As such this advice does not capture the whole health care and social assistance industry workforce development and training needs for Tasmania.

While a national disability workforce strategy is being developed, it is important to understand that allied health professionals are not isolated to the disability sector alone, and in fact, allied health professionals make up only 11% of the NDIS workforce and, of the total allied health workforce in Australia, less than 10% provided services under the NDIS.

To be more specific, only 11% of all speech and language therapists and audiologists work in the NDIS sub-sector, 9% of occupational therapists, 7% of physiotherapists, 2% of psychologists and 1% of registered nurses¹.

Most allied health professionals work outside of the NDIS sector and therefore any workforce development and training priorities for the health care and social assistance sector needs to look beyond the disability sub-sector. In Tasmania, while it is not possible to ascertain whether allied health professionals provide services to the NDIS sector or not, 41.6% of allied health professionals are employed in the allied health services sector, 23.0% in hospitals, 11.6% in state or federal government administration, 8.6% in social assistance services, 6.8% in education or childcare care, and 4.4% in residential aged care services².

In 2019, Western Australia released a Workforce Development Strategy for the Health Care and Social Assistance Sector in Western Australia and announced that allied health assistant qualifications is one of the 34 qualifications listed as a priority for 2020 and provided a 50% reduction in course fees, as well as other aged care, disability and health courses given the employment demand projected in that state. Western Australia clearly identifies that the health care and social assistance industry is forecast to have the largest employment growth of all industries in WA, and is investing accordingly in the skills it needs to support its people.

Tasmania needs to develop a workforce development strategy for the allied health workforce.

Previously, TasTAFE has trialled therapy assistant training for physiotherapists, however, apparently it was not continued due to challenges with placements and lack of mobility (turnover) of therapy assistants due to limited job opportunities. At the same time, allied health professionals express the need for, and value of, allied health therapy assistants in enabling services to be provided to more in need. Given the ever-increasing demand for allied health professionals, the employment of appropriately qualified therapy assistants has the potential to alleviate the pressures on the health care and social assistance sector and provide much needed preventative and rehabilitative allied health services to Tasmanians in need, as well as create meaningful jobs and career pathways for Tasmanians. While a diploma or advanced diploma in allied health is not currently accredited in Australia, it is a highly demanded, and successful, qualification in the United States of America and should be explored for Tasmania and Australia.

Below is a report from August 2019 which provides an overview of the allied health skill shortages in Tasmania, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and outlines the potential role Allied Health Therapy Assistants could contribute to alleviating the shortages in the absence of a tertiary education provider in Tasmania.

¹ Understanding Gaps in the NDIS workforce: Draft Report by AlphaBeta for the Australian Government, Department of Social Services, May/June 2019

² ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016

Allied Health Professional Skill Shortage in Tasmania

Summary and proposed solution

prepared by Lisa Denny, August 2019

Overview

There is a critical shortage of allied health professionals in Tasmania, exacerbated by the lack of education and training provided in the state for occupations such as speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists.

This skill shortage results from increasing demand for allied health services due to Tasmania's socio-demographic profile; our older population and higher prevalence of disability.

As our population continues to age at a faster rate than the rest of the country and as the NDIS continues to expand its services, the demand for allied health professionals will increase further. With the introduction of the Educational Adjustments funding model for students with disability, combined with the Literacy Plan for Action which explicitly links the role of speech and language pathologists to the State's aspirations for improved functional literacy, the demand for allied health professionals will only increase further.

This document presents a solution to these skill shortages in allied health professions by proposing that the State Government supports the introduction of, and provision of, Allied Health Assistant Certificate III and Certificate IV vocational education and training in Tasmania.

The Health Care and Social Assistance sector

The health care and social assistance sector, to which allied health professionals belong, is the largest contributor to the Tasmanian economy (13% of GSP) and employment (15.8% of the workforce). The Australian Department of Employment projects employment in the health care and social assistance sector to increase in Tasmania by 4,400 in the five years to May 2023, twice the growth of the next highest sector; construction (2,200 new jobs) and four times the next; education and training (1,100 new jobs). Given Tasmania's ageing population and socio-demographic profile, the health care and social assistance industry's contribution to the economy and society (including jobs) will continue to grow. The ability to fill these jobs is constrained by a severe lack of education and training for the occupations in demand.

Occupations in the health care and social assistance sector are highly skilled and offer numerous career pathways for Tasmanians. Further, occupations in the health care and social assistance sector are less at risk of replacement due to automation and artificial intelligence, thanks to the interpersonal and unpredictable nature of the work.

Demand for allied health professions is influenced by the growth and ageing of the population, increased expenditure on health, disability and aged care, and the increasing role of the profession in in-patient care and rehabilitation.

Skill Shortages in Tasmania

A skill shortage exists where employers are unable to fill, or have considerable difficulty filling, vacancies for an occupation at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment.

The determinants of skill shortages vary considerably depending on industry and occupation and can be attributable to any of the following, or a combination of the following:

- Competitive labour market
- Cyclical factors
- Participation rates
- Underemployment
- Demographic factors
- Generational replacement of labour
- Locational mismatch between the demand and supply of labour
- Education, training and skill development
- Changing skill needs within occupation
- The level of remuneration
- Organisational culture and employment conditions
- Industry image

Skill shortages can be further classified depending on the time taking to acquire the skills in demand and whether that education and training is provided in Tasmania. Skill shortages can also present as a 'conditions gap' whereby there are sufficient people qualified with the essential skill set but they are not willing to apply at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment, or an 'employability gap' whereby there are sufficiently qualified people with the essential skill set but applicants lack the employability requirements, rather than hold specific skill set deficiencies.

Skill shortages in allied health professions are classified as Level 1 – critical.

Level 1

- Few people available with the essential skill set
- Education and training **not** provided in Tasmania

Level 2

- Few people available with the essential skill set
- Long training time to develop skills
- Training is available in Tasmania or has the potential to be available in Tasmania

Level 3

- Few people available with the essential skill set
- Short training time to develop skills
- Training provision is available in Tasmania.

Further explanation of skill shortages and their causes is available in the [Occupational Skill Shortage Analysis – Tasmania Report](#).

Skill Shortages in Allied Health occupations in Tasmania

The Australian Government Department of Employment irregularly undertakes Labour Market Research to ascertain the state of the employment market by professions and occupational clusters.

The most recent Labour Market Research undertaken for health professions in Tasmania was in May 2018³, prior to the full implementation of the NDIS scheme, anticipated by the end of 2019.

Generally, employers received sufficient applicants and were able to fill most of their vacancies (71% of positions were filled). For specific occupations, the report identified that as undergraduate training is not available for many health professionals in Tasmania attracting applicants to Tasmania is difficult as graduates are 'enticed to stay in bigger cities'. The report identified a regional shortage for physiotherapists and could not rate the status for occupational therapists. The report also suggested that there was no shortage of speech pathologists but noted that this was assessed at a national level as the rating was not available for Tasmania. Evidence now suggests a severe shortage for all allied health professional given that public and private providers are now increasingly closing their books to new [referrals](#) and clients and that many are constantly [recruiting](#) and actively pursuing [skilled migration options](#).

Employers provided a range of reasons for the inability to attract and recruit allied health professions to Tasmania:

- Lack of undergraduate training in Tasmania
- Graduates prefer starting their careers stay in bigger cities to gain experience and build networks
- The fixed term and/or part-time nature of the advertised position
- applicants seeking stability are not attracted to relocate for short term contracts
- Perceptions regarding wages and/or the ability to build collegial networks and career opportunities
- Senior roles and specialty areas, such as aged care and rural community services, experienced greater difficulty to fill in both metropolitan and regional areas.
- overrepresentation of females in the industry and preference for part time working arrangements

The introduction of the NDIS has resulted in a growing range of supplier business types and service models and has also triggered growth for sole traders and Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

³ Older Labour Market Research reports include a June 2017 report for Occupational Therapists and a May 2018 report for Physiotherapists in Tasmania

Allied Health Assistants

An allied health assistant provides therapeutic and program related support to allied health professionals and conducts therapeutic and program related activities under the guidance of an allied health professional. Allied health assistants work in a specialty area or work generically across an organisation to deliver allied health assistance services.

Types of occupations:

- Community rehabilitation assistant
- Diversional therapy assistant
- Nutrition assistant
- Occupational therapy assistant
- Physiotherapy assistant
- Podiatry assistant
- Speech therapy assistant
- Therapy assistant

Types of workplaces

- Hospitals
- Aged care facilities
- Community care providers
- Disability care providers
- Department of Education
- Schools
- Early Childhood and Childcare Centres
- Hospices
- Private allied health practices – speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy podiatry, nutrition, rehabilitation

Type of work

Likely to have the opportunity to work with and assist

- Children and adults with speech and language development disorders and other speech and language challenges
- Rehabilitation of accident, stroke or other injury victims
- Children and adults with fine and gross motor skill challenges
- People living with disability
- People with dietary, swallowing and nutrition challenges

Education and Training in Tasmania for Allied Health Assistants

There is currently no provision of education or training in Tasmania for Allied Health Assistants. The [National College of Australia](#) offers an online course, however with no workplace component. The course is provided interstate by a mix of [public and private providers](#).

In Tasmania, TasTafe, and other providers, are listed as having the Allied Health Assistant training package in its [scope](#), however, currently do not offer the course.

Opportunities for Allied Health Assistants in Tasmania

The introduction of education and training for Allied Health Assistants in Tasmania provides numerous opportunities for Tasmania and Tasmanians

- Provide education and training with career pathways for Tasmanians
- Provide employment opportunities for Tasmanians
- Support allied health professionals deliver critical services
- Provide an alternative service delivery model option to public and private providers
- Enable public and private allied health services providers to take new referrals and offer services to new clients
- Provide schools with additional support to deliver speech and language development opportunities under the Literacy Action Plan
- Provide teachers aides with further training opportunities for specialisation
- Alleviate skill shortages in allied health professions
- Enable participants of the NDIS to receive their entitled services
- Improve the health and well-being of many Tasmanians

With all opportunities, there are challenges which may need to be overcome. The greatest foreseeable challenge to be mitigated will be the shortage of fully qualified professionals able to provide training and supervision during the course and obtaining work placement opportunities to gain the necessary experience. As such, the opportunity provided by the introduction of allied health assistant education and training will also need to have the support and commitment of the providers, public and private, in the state to increase their employment.