



Research and Innovation 2021

TOGETHER WE ARE ABLE

Able Australia
National Office
413 Canterbury Road
Surrey Hills
VIC 3127

T: 1300 225 369

info@ableaustralia.org.au
ableaustralia.org.au



Able Australia acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of country throughout Australia and acknowledges their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to the people, the cultures and the elders past and present.



Able Australia Services
ABN 83 024 339 234
ACN 005 783 175

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Preface



Kate MacRae
CEO

Thomas Edison once said, *“the value of an idea lies in the using of it”*. Never has this been more true than at Able Australia. Able supports quality improvement and innovation projects which enhance the lives of people with a disability within our organisation and the sector more broadly.

Our focus is on:

1. Using research and knowledge to improve practice and thus the experience of people with a disability
2. Supporting staff to improve their skills and approaches
3. Responding to changes in our regulatory environment, and
4. Developing partnerships with experts and industry.

A key driver for innovation in 2020-21 has been the COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic challenged us to:

- Support clients differently
- Train and support our staff with a new skill and knowledge set, and
- Manage our physical spaces with a focus on risk reduction.

Equally the work being undertaken by the Centre of Excellence for Deafblind seeks to find solutions that enhance the lives of those with dual sensory loss. While its primary focus is those who are deafblind, much of the work done here can and is being applied across the disability community.

Able Australia is much more than a disability service provider. We see ourselves as agents of change, working with like-minded people and organisations to create better days for people with disability. This year’s Research and Innovation report offers a snapshot into the work that has been undertaken and we will continue to build on this knowledge in the years to come.

About Able Australia

Able Australia is a leading provider of disability services for adults and community supports for seniors, enabling our clients to live the life they choose. Established over 50 years ago to provide support to the deafblind community, we are now a diverse not-for-profit organisation. We continue to build on our heritage and empower the individuals we support to reach their potential by living our values of trust, respect, excellence and kindness every day.



Research and Education Projects

Some say research is about creating ‘new knowledge’. In 2020-21, Able Australia has sought to create new knowledge together with our clients and partners. The calibre of our work has been acknowledged by the funding success enjoyed by the Centre of Excellence for Deafblind team, led by Dr Meredith Prain.

Deafblind Information Australia

Evaluating mainstream technology use and outcomes for adults with deafblindness (3-year Victorian project).

Partner organisation: Swinburne University

Funding source: NDIS ILC Grant

The aim of this project is to inform people with deafblindness about technologies that can benefit them and evaluate the utility and adaptability of mainstream technologies to support people who are deafblind. It includes annual funding allocation to purchase mainstream technologies that support the adaptation and use of these devices by people who are deafblind.

To date, several clients with deafblindness have been assessed for their technology needs and a range of technologies have been explored, including Apple watch, Google Mini, and robotic lawn mower.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- Face-to-face training sessions on the use of mainstream technologies for those who are deafblind and content on the Deafblind Information Australia website – the pre-eminent information portal for those who are deafblind.
- A better understanding of which mainstream technologies facilitate communications – the giving and receiving of information – best for those with deafblindness.

Individualised Supported Living (ISL) Tool

Researching how best to train staff facilitating Individual Supported Living evaluations.

Partner organisation: University of Melbourne, Araluen

The research group will establish online modules that could be delivered in a COVID-19 environment or used as an adjunct to face-to-face professional development post-COVID. The professional development module will give students the tools to develop a comprehensive Individual Support Living plan for a person with a disability.

The training has been developed and six Able staff will complete the training during October and November 2021.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- A training methodology that can be used to educate staff on how to deliver independent supported living evaluations.

Deafblind Communication: Building Professional Competence

Researching best practice in tactile communication for adults with deafblindness

Partner organisations: Monash University, National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters

Funding source: Australian Research Council

Many deafblind people use a modified form of Auslan (Australian Sign Language) to communicate, yet little is known about how interpreters or support workers should adapt their signing when working with deafblind clients to ensure effective communication. This project aims to analyse the communication strategies used by deafblind sign language users.

A survey has been developed to gain better understanding of current training of interpreters and support workers internationally. This information will help guide the project.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- **Improve the quality of interpreting/support services provided to deafblind Australians**
- **Evidence-based training and resources for interpreting/support professionals**
- **Enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of support services provided for deafblind people.**

My Assistive Technology Outcomes Framework

Researching the validity of using the “My Assistive Technology Framework” tools for people with deafblindness living in Southern African countries.

Partner organisations: Monash University, Cape Town University of Technology

Funding source: Deafblind International

Able’s Dr Meredith Prain, Dr Diane Bell and Dr Natasha Layton were successful in receiving a Deafblind International African Research Initiative grant to undertake research in Africa.

This project is a partnership involving researchers from Monash University and the University of Cape Town, South Africa. The group is researching the outcomes of using the “My Rights Tool” for a person with deafblindness. The tool was developed for people with disabilities in Australia.

This project was completed in March 2021 and a peer-reviewed journal article has been submitted for publication.

Project outcomes:

- **Validate the My Assistive Technology Outcomes Framework for people with deafblindness in Southern Africa.**

Research and Education Projects / Continued

Inclusive Health Communication in Specialist Disability Accommodation

Investigating how public health information is communicated to people living in Supported Disability Accommodation (SDA).

Partner organisations: Deakin University, Northcott, AGOSCI and others.

Funding source: Medical Research Futures Fund

Three concurrent study arms have been established to meet the aims of this project.

- **Arm 1:** Sensitising interviews with residents and SDA support workers to establish current practice concerns
- **Arm 2:** Observational case studies of SDA facilities, examining resident and support worker engagement with COVID-19 public health information, and the communication strategies used to relay this information to residents.
- **Arm 3:** A modified e-Delphi study with a sample of key stakeholders, including representatives from SDA service providers and relevant consumer advocacy organisations, to establish a consensus around key communication priorities and recommended practices.

Able clients and staff will participate on the project advisory committee and Able staff have participated in interviews.

Anticipated outcomes:

- **Guidelines on best practice in communicating public health information to SDA residents**
- **Development of resources to support communication with SDA residents**

Effectiveness of Tailored COVID-19 Messages for Vulnerable Australians

Investigating the effectiveness of COVID-19 messaging for vulnerable populations, including those who are Deaf and those with disability

Partner organisations: Monash University, Wallara, Yooralla, Expression Australia and others.

Funding source: Medical Research Futures Fund

COVID-19 is likely to be the worst public health crisis in Australia since 1919. At the end of June 2021 there were more than 30,000 COVID cases and over 900 deaths in Australia. Effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics in Australia requires significant and sustained population-wide behaviour change. This can only be achieved through an effective public health mass media campaign that delivers well-designed and relevant and accessible messages to all communities in Australia.

This project aims to:

1. Identify COVID-19 information gathering sources and information needs of vulnerable populations and understand the relative impact of current “general” communication strategies used by government.
2. Create a tailored communication approach to address “common needs” across vulnerable subgroups, and also “subgroup-specific” approaches based upon our understanding of their information needs.
3. Compare the effectiveness of existing “general” communication approaches used by government to a “common needs” approach across the vulnerable subgroups and also to a “subgroup-specific” approach for improving knowledge of and attitudes towards performing specific behaviours that will help limit the impact of the COVID-19 virus in our community.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- **Improved access to tailored COVID-19 messaging by vulnerable groups**

International Communication Right Alliance

Project exploring how to operationalise the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD) for people with communication disabilities.

Partner organisations: ISAAC, Deafblind International, International Council on Education of the Vision Impaired, International Communication Project

The International Communication Rights Alliance (ICRA) is a group of organisations and individuals with an interest in operationalising the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD) for people with communication disabilities. The ICRA, co-chaired by Able Australia's Head of Research and Centre of Excellence for Deafblind, Dr Meredith Prain, is examining what work is currently happening in this area to see if there are existing resources or campaigns that could be shared or adapted for this purpose.

Anticipated project outcomes:

- A community of practice for information and resource sharing, including ways in which the UNCRPD is being operationalised in different regions.
- Resources to support individuals, groups and organisations to facilitate the uptake of processes and strategies that operationalise the UNCRPD for people with comprehensive communication needs.
- Establishment of systems, processes and resources to ensure sustainable outcomes

Deafblind Employability Project

Training people with deafblindness in South Australia and Queensland to conduct Deafblind Awareness training.

Funding source: NDIS ILC Grant

This project, funded by a National Disability Insurance Agency, Information, Linkages and Capacity building grant was completed in April 2021.

Project officers, Elisa Lydiard (QLD) and Anne Ruwoldt (SA) worked together with project manager, Meredith Prain to run week long training sessions during April 2021 in Adelaide and Brisbane.

Four trainees attended the session in South Australia and thirteen trainees attended in Queensland.

Project outcomes:

- Capacity building of deafblind people to deliver training by giving them the knowledge, skills, experience and confidence they need to deliver deafblind awareness training
- Development of skills to use in employment
- Increased deafblind awareness in the community and with potential employers.

Other Projects

The Centre of Excellence for Deafblind team participates in external research and also supports people with deafblindness to participate in external research, to raise awareness of the unique and specific needs of people with deafblindness.

Projects external to Able which we have participated in over the last year include:

- Enhancing Consumer Awareness of Privacy and the Internet of Things – Deakin University
- Media literacy in Australia – University of Canberra
- Tactile Markings in train stations – NSW government
- Assistive Technology Use – Intopia
- Qualitative supervision research project currently recruiting participants for focus groups – Monash University

Innovation Projects

COVID-19's ongoing impact on Able Australia drove much of our innovation in 2020-21. The tools and methodologies pioneered by Able as a result of the pandemic, have since been taken up by the sector or repurposed by partners and peers alike.

COVID innovations

Incident Command Centre Approach

Able Australia took the traditional emergency management approach followed by government and other industries, and applied it to our organisational setting. The methodology was repurposed and refined to suite Able's needs. This was key in achieving a calm, consistent and comprehensive approach to risk management and operational continuity when issues arose.

Site Support Team

In order to mitigate the challenges the organisation would face in the event of a COVID positive client or worker, a site support team – a team of staff willing to work in a COVID-positive service – was established at Able. Site Support staff were given intensive training in a range of areas including advanced infection control management and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) protocols. They were also given scenario-based training – stepping through what would be required in a 'live' event. The outcome of this effort was tested in 2020 when Able had a COVID-positive client. As a result of the training, the Site Support Team was able to step up and successfully work through the situation.

CEO Collaboration

As a result of the pandemic a CEO Collaboration was established and chaired by Able Australia's CEO. This group brought together disability sector CEOs and executives representing organisations of all sizes, allowing participating members to share information, support one another and most importantly, take a consistent and organised approach when managing the sector's pandemic response. With over 85 participants and more participating each month, the group continues to this day tackling a range of salient issues.

Communities of Practice

Able has supported the development of several Communities of Practice. These are cross-sector peer groups, working together to find solutions to common challenges. The Centre of Excellence - Deafblind coordinates several groups, namely:

- National Deafblind Children's working group
- National Deafblind Training working group
- National Allied Health Community of Practice - Sensory.

Supervision Framework

Able's Better Days, Every Day framework seeks to bring a range of smaller projects together under a single banner that answers a simple question "what can we do to make this day a better day for clients and staff?". In 2020-21, much of the focus has been on building a foundational base which will support this change. This required a focus on models of staff supervision and support.

As such, Able Australia are working with Monash University on a study which aims to explore supervision from the perspective of both frontline staff and those in management roles supporting them. The hope is that this research will identify the factors that support or hinder staff supervision and offer forth a supervision methodology that is practical, effective and reflects contemporary best-practice.

Client Risk Assessment Framework

Able Australia's Client Risk Assessment framework is another innovation developed in 2020-21. The policy and accompanying documentation was lauded as a mature risk management approach for clients by the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission and is now being shared more broadly within the sector. It is a framework that Able continues to develop and refine.

Submissions and Sector Representation

Submissions

Submission in response to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Issues Paper – Emergency Planning and Response

This paper, developed by Able Australia with over 30 signatories, outlined the sector's experience of the pandemic and its recommendations to the Royal Commission.

Submission to the parliamentary inquiry into Independent Assessments – for the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme

This paper was developed in response to the Government's proposed introduction of Independent Assessments. The paper outlined its strong opposition to the proposal, citing its concerns about the scheme and how it would adversely impact people with deafblindness.

Submission to Review of NDIS Support Coordination

This paper outlined the importance of having Support Coordinators with specific understanding of deafblindness due to the complexity and variability of the condition.

Sector Representation

Deafblind International

K MacRae, Dr M Prain, Board Members

World Health Organisation

International Classification of Functioning, Deafblind – Dr M Prain, Researcher

National Roadmap for Improving the Health of People with Intellectual Disability

K MacRae, Provider Advisor

CEO Collaboration Group

K MacRae, Group Chair

Deafblind Australia

Dr M Prain, Board Member

Victorian Allied Health Assistance Workforce Plan

K MacRae, Steering Committee Industry Advisor

Victorian NDS State Committee

K MacRae, Committee member

NDS Safer Strong Committee

K MacRae, Committee member



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