

Quick facts

- The 2011 Samoa Census reported that 4,061 people (in a population of 187,820) were living with a disability.
- Posenai Patu was left a paraplegic in 2009 after falling from a coconut tree. He graduated from the Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC) with a Certificate III in Disability in 2013.
- In 2013, Posenai Patu was awarded a scholarship to study Advanced Diploma in Orthotics and Prosthetics in Cambodia over three years. When he has successfully completed the course, Posenai will work in the Orthotic unit at the Samoa National Health Services.
- Posenai never stopped volunteering for the Samoa Spinal Network (SSN) until he boarded the plane for Cambodia to start his scholarship.

- The Samoa Disability Program was launched in November 2013 following a funding commitment by the Australian Government of approximately AU\$4 million (approximately \$9 million Samoan tala) to the Samoan Government for a 4-year program. The new initiative aims to support the Samoan Government to achieve disability-inclusive policy and implementation across government, disabled people and service provider organisations.
- The Australian Government aims to support the long-term development goal of Samoa, which is to contribute to a human-rights based, inclusive and barrier-free society that advocates for and empowers people with a disability.
- The Australian Government has also been funding a Samoa Inclusive Education Demonstration program (in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture) over the past 3 years (approximately AU\$9 million) and is again committing to continue funding for another 3 years.



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

CREATING SKILLS FOR LIFE

IMPACT Case Study

Disability action in the Pacific



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Opening new doors

Posenai Patu - volunteer, college graduate and now international student is proof that people with disabilities can achieve anything they set out to do.



Posenai visiting Senese Vaitele School



Graduation dinner



Posenai in Cambodia

Posenai Patu was an energetic young man who, like many in Samoa, climbed coconut trees to get a drink when he was thirsty. Unfortunately, in 2009 Posenai fell from a tree and was left paralysed from the waist down.

Posenai had studied at the National University Samoa (NUS) School of Maritime Training, but after the accident he dismissed his dream to be a sailor or to follow any other career, as he “did not know I would be useful in the future”.

However, in 2013 Posenai turned his life around and graduated from the Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC) with a Certificate III in Disability. As a result of his APTC studies, he is now receiving an international scholarship to complete an Advanced Diploma in Orthotics and Prosthetics in Cambodia.

“Coming to this class and this school [APTC] there is a bright future ahead of me and that is why it has changed my life,” says Posenai. Part of his inspiration for returning to study was the time he spent in a New Zealand hospital after his accident. It was here that Posenai saw how other people with spinal problems could be independent and have a job.

When he returned home - just after the 2009 tsunami - he realised just how difficult it was in Samoa for people in a wheelchair. There are few footpaths and ramps and, apart from initiatives such as the new Samoa Disability Program that aims to improve services, there is limited disability support.

“People with a disability are facing a lot of barriers now and I experienced that,” says Posenai. “I want to stand out and fight for people with a disability.”

In 2011, while living at home with his mother, Posenai was contacted by the Samoa Spinal Network (SSN), who invited him to become a volunteer.

SSN President and physiotherapist, Asomua Epenesa (Epe), saw “great potential” in Posenai and urged him to be more involved in the Network.

“[He] can influence other members with spinal cord injuries as well as encourage people with disabilities in general to be able to stand up for themselves and become more productive members of the community,” Epe says.

A turning point for Posenai was his participation in Samoa’s 50th Anniversary Independence March in mid-2012.

“This is the first time people with wheelchairs are doing the march, and I was on the TV and on the news and the newspaper!” says Posenai, who was surprised by the unexpected, positive reception from the public.

It was then, with assistance from SSN, that Posenai applied and was accepted to study Certificate III in Disability at APTC.

Posenai’s APTC teacher, John Bosnich, describes Posenai as “one of the most inspiring students” he has seen in over 30 years of teaching in the fields of disability and allied health.

“His accident moved him from a high academic achiever to the depths of depression and grief, from which he fought his way back to a positive and forward looking outlook,” says John. “And he has proceeded to pass this ‘can do’ attitude on to other members of the disability community.”

Local APTC tutor, Naomi Asi from Vaoala, Apia, also agrees that Posenai is an “outstanding student”.

“His ability shows me that he can do anything [and be a] role model to our people with a disability,” she says.

During his studies at APTC, Posenai continued volunteering with SSN, mainly visiting members in the community to support and motivate them.

It was this selfless dedication to others that contributed to him being awarded a scholarship by the Australian Government to study an Advanced Diploma in Orthotics and Prosthetics over three years in Cambodia.

Now Posenai can further his studies and follow his life’s new ambition to help others with a disability.

“Now I have graduated [from APTC] and I also got accepted to go to Cambodia to go to school,” says Posenai. “I am about to close a door and open another door.”

When he has successfully completed the course in Cambodia, Posenai will work in the Orthotic unit at the Samoa National Health Services.

“Posenai is such a young man of courage. We are all so very proud of him!” says Epe, adding that he is also “the first paraplegic to represent Samoa in tertiary education”.

“He has certainly got a big heart to drive on and he is such a wonderful role model for all the [people with] spinal cord injuries in Samoa,” she says.

Posenai is very thankful to APTC “for putting people with disability in their mind” and not neglecting them.

“I had no career because of my disability now here I am.”

People with ability

Posenai Patu, an APTC graduate, international student and paraplegic, is on a mission to dedicate his life to helping the 4,000-plus Samoans living with a disability and to change local perceptions and improve accessibility to public services.

“For people with a disability out there I just wanted to tell them if I can do it then they can also do it!” says Posenai. “For people without a disability I just want to encourage them and advise them to keep in mind ‘do not talk about what we can’t do but what people with a disability can do’.”

APTC tutor, Naomi Asi from Vaoala, Apia, agrees that a bit of extra support will significantly help people with a disability to fulfil their potential.

“There are a lot of people in Samoa with a disability who are brilliant and very smart and can do things in their own way, but it is just that we don’t have the services to help them be the people they want to be,” Naomi says.

There are local organisations, such as the Samoa Spinal Network, leading the way to a brighter future for people with a disability, bolstered by a recent groundswell in government and other support to improve local services.

For example, the Australian Government is providing significant support to assist disability services in Samoa, including the launch in November 2013 of the Samoa Disability Program and a funding commitment of approximately AU\$4 million over four years. This program aims to improve levels of education and understanding, as well as improve services and develop employment opportunities for people with a disability.

It also funds the Samoa Inclusive Education Demonstration program in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture.

“The level of support by Australia to disability development not only in Samoa, but also in the Pacific is quite extensive and a significant program that is becoming more prominent nationally, regionally and internationally,” says Ronicera Fuimaono. Ronicera is the Disability Inclusive Development Program Manager, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Samoa.

Much of the work to improve services and perceptions needs to start at the local level, according to Posenai, to make sure homes and communities are made more accessible for people with a disability.

“If their environment is not accessible then people with a disability can’t come into the community,” he says. “That is the main thing here in Samoa.”

International scholarship

After graduating from APTC with a Certificate III in Disability, Posenai Patu received a scholarship co-funded by the Latter Day Saints and the Australian Government to study an Advanced Diploma in orthotics and Prosthetics in Cambodia.

Applying for the scholarship was not a simple process. Towards the end of his APTC studies, Posenai applied to participate in the Leadership Program for People with Disabilities in Japan.

He was one of the first two Samoan people to be considered in the program’s 15 years.

A panel of three people travelled from Japan to Samoa for the interview process, but unfortunately Posenai was unsuccessful.

Posenai then persisted and applied for a scholarship from the Australian Government to study in Cambodia.

His application highlighted his tireless work as a volunteer at the Samoa Spinal Network for two years where he excelled at developing client rapport, assisting clients through the depressive stage of their injury cycle, conducting wheelchair repair clinics in remote locations, and passing on his inspirational and enduring attitude.

His efforts were rewarded when he received the scholarship.

Ronicera Fuimaono, Disability Inclusive Development Program Manager for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Samoa, says Posenai was awarded the scholarship in recognition of his dedication to study and contribution to the community in the area of disability support.

“Posenai met all the scholarship requirements and this is a well-deserved opportunity for him to take up further formal education,” Ronicera says.

“To top it off, Posenai has secured employment with the Samoa National Health Services within the Orthotic unit upon successful completion of his three year course.”

Posenai is excited about his new studies and career prospects which are “what I really want to do”.

“It is not a hard working job like maintenance but it is something I can do according to my ability and to help people with a disability.”

Samoa’s 2011 census found 4,061 people living with disabilities of the 187,820 population (about 2.2 per cent), though this figure may be an underestimation.