# Vision Australia submission in response to the Queensland Policy Review – Students with disability (2016)

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## Introduction

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review to guide future directions for the education of students with disability in Queensland State Schools.

Although Vision Australia does not provide direct teaching support to students, our extensive contact with students and education providers means that we have had ample opportunity to assess the effectiveness of current education policies.

In Queensland, we currently have 575 children of school age with a vision impairment registered as Vision Australia clients. Through the Non-Schools Organisations (NSO) funding, we provide occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, technology support and orientation and mobility services.

## Responses to the areas for discussion

* Inclusive education - *Ideas relating to how school can be a place where everyone can learn with high expectations, be included and enjoy school. How principals, teachers and support staff can ensure students feel included in their classroom and school free from discrimination.*

In order for students to be included and fully engaged in learning, educators and support staff must be trained in inclusive teaching practices that adjust to the individual needs of students to increase their meaningful participation. Such practices relevant to the needs of students who are blind or have low vision include reasonable adjustments such as reducing background noise, supplying verbal instructions for visual cues and materials, adjusting classroom lighting to reduce glare and producing information in accessible formats.

Administrators and regulators responsible for implementing policy and disability support systems in schools should also be aware of the issues facing students who are blind or have low vision in their educational setting in order for these students to be included more broadly at school and for consistent transition, between levels, teaching modes, subjects and environments.

Beyond the classroom and curriculum, access to social participation, through playground interaction and recreational activities, is vital for children’s social and emotional development.

Meaningful social participation is often seriously hindered by overuse of aides in the playground, which leaves students who are blind or have low vision isolated from their peers. For example, students who are blind or have low vision often do not fully participate in sports activities and clubs within schools. Where they do participate, students are often included by being the “Scorer” with the assistance of a teacher or aide, when simple adjustments, such as a yellow football rather than a brown one would allow the student to fully participate in the activity. Such over protectionist and inflexible attitudes to students who are blind or have low vision often make them a target for bullying and victimisation from other students.

Another innovative approach would be to include sporting activities that are popular and accessible to students who are blind or have low vision in physical education classes, sports such as goalball or swish.

* DDA awareness **–** *Compliance of Queensland state schools with obligations under the DDA, how principals, teachers and other school staff can translate this requirement into everyday practice and how improvement can be achieved.*

There continues to be very little awareness of the obligations of education providers under the DDA and the associated Disability Standards for Education (the Standards) amongst educators, educational institutions and training facilities for educators. In Vision Australia’s experience, those who work in the special education sector are more likely to be aware of the Standards than those in the mainstream education sector, as they work solely with students with disabilities. Small, private, specialised education providers are most likely to be unaware of their obligations under the Standards and how to provide access for students who are blind or have low vision.

Developing an awareness of the Standards and creating positive attitudes towards supporting students with disabilities across the education sector need to start with teacher training. This can only be achieved through the development of mandatory training modules and materials on the DDA, the Standards and other relevant legislation, and what they mean for students with disabilities and educators alike.

Given the various demands made on teachers across the sector, it is unrealistic to expect that educators will take it upon themselves to become familiar with their obligations under the DDA. Ongoing professional development should be provided to ensure that teachers are aware. A sense of accountability amongst educators towards students with disabilities must also be embedded into practice and be common knowledge before a problem arises.

Clear guidance is needed around what “accessible” and “accessibility” mean in the context of curricular materials and equipment in order to further inform educators and educational institutions about what constitutes a reasonable adjustment.

Furthermore, the lack of clarity and specificity in the definitions and phrases used within the DDA and the Standards makes it difficult to apply them and then measure their effectiveness. For example, the Standards talk about “not discriminating” rather than inclusiveness, which is a more descriptive term with a clearer definition and measurable outcomes. Legal concepts of discrimination be considered as educational inclusion.

* Aspirations and motivations for students with disability ***–*** *The key objectives of disability policy, and the aspirational outcomes for students with disability.*

The aspirations of students who are blind or have low vision must be prioritised and considered with respect. Systemic discrimination can influence individuals within an educational setting and their beliefs in terms of what students who are blind or have low vision can, and cannot achieve. Development of creative ‘outside the box” thinking and capabilities may reveal pathways to a student's aspirations that were not previously considered or thought possible.

In order to realise these aspirations, students who are blind or have low vision must have equal access to a range of educational settings and the supports they require, irrespective of educational setting and geographic location.

* Other policy areas **–** *How provision of education for students with disability interact with other areas of public policy, including health, community services, and the NDIS. How advocacy, and networking between agencies, could be improved to assist students with disability.*

#### **NDIS and education**

#### The Commonwealth Government should work with the States and territoriesto ensure students who are blind or have low vision have equitable access, equipment and supports to achieve the best possible learning outcomes.

#### Greater clarification and consistent funding is needed to address the gaps between the NDIS and education portfolios. For example, funding is provided individually to help children transition into and between schools, however, the ongoing learning needs of students who are blind or have low vision are not being met through the NDIS, and disability support is under-funded through the State and Federal education portfolios.

#### This patchwork approach is not a sufficient, appropriate or beneficial solution for students requiring specialist education disability services.

#### To identify and address the critical gaps in delivering quality education for students with disability, government should:

#### Implement the recommendations outlined in the 2015 Review of the Disability Standards for Education and in the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling, and create an appropriately funded student with disability entitlement to significantly reduce overall costs.

#### Routinely collect, collate and publicly report on the progress of students with disability in achieving their learning outcomes, disaggregated according to disability type, and in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### Dedicate more resources to the teaching and learning of braille, especially in early intervention and primary school programs; so all children who are blind, deafblind or who have a severe vision impairment can acquire vital literacy skills.

#### Work with the States and territories to address resource gaps for students with disability, facilitating timely access to personalised supports including: properly trained teachers and braille teachers, curricular materials in preferred formats, aids and equipment, and addressing supplementary curriculum needs such as adaptive technology training, compensatory skills training, orientation and mobility, career counselling, peer support and social skills support.

Advocacy assistance for students with disability

Schools should seek to fulfil their obligations under the DDA and the Standards and create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. However, while barriers remain to inclusive education in schools, advocacy is an important tool in ensuring students who are blind or have low vision can achieve success in education.

However, both formal and informal advocacy approaches do not always lead to a timely or equitable outcome for students who are blind or have low vision and their families. Many feel that they may jeopardise their relationship with or become victimised by their education provider if they refer to their rights in negotiating adjustments or progress a DDA complaint to the AHRC. This is complicated by the fact that the student often remains engaged in the educational institution while their complaint is being investigated.

Students who are blind or have low vision and their families may also not have the time and resources needed to progress a DDA complaint beyond conciliation to the Federal Court if a resolution is not found through voluntary conciliation. In such circumstances, students with disabilities and their families must balance the emotional and psychological impact of a long and potentially bitter fight against their school with the need to “get on with life” even it this means that the student's education will be adversely affected.

Some students who are blind or have low vision and their families may ultimately be excluded from the complaints process altogether. This is particularly so for families in regional and remote areas, who may only have access to one or two local schools within a reasonable travelling distance

Achieving a timely resolution is often made more difficult by the need for independent expert assessments, as defined in the Standards, to be undertaken to determine what adjustments are necessary for a student. While one report may provide a sufficient explanation to justify the need for a range of necessary supports, students are often asked to get medical certification to justify their need for each individual adjustment. Medical professionals often have little understanding of what is required in classroom situations, and may provide incomplete or inaccurate advice which is nevertheless interpreted as informed and authoritative.

The length of time taken to provide reasonable adjustments may result in the student falling behind in their studies or even withdrawing their enrolment.

* Resourcing and workforce capability *–Requirements (e.g. capability) of a school level workforce to effectively support improved outcomes for students with a disability, and how to support this workforce.*

As well as developing the workforce capability to enable inclusive education and meet their obligations under the DDA and the Standards, public schools need to be adequately resourced to build and strengthen a child’s literacy, numeracy and life skills to better equip them to handle the transition from education to employment. The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling (2012) noted an overall lack of consistency in the existing resources provided to students with disability at government and non-government schools. The review recommends that a student with disability entitlement be provided in addition to the existing per student allowance and set according to the level of educational adjustment required for the student to participate equally in schooling. However, the recommendations from the Gonski review have yet to be implemented.

* Key practices that have an impact **–** *Those adjustments in the classroom that will have the biggest impact on student learning (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy) that can be made to positively influence outcomes for students with disability, and how broader school practices can influence outcomes for students with disability.*

## **Core and Expanded Core Curriculum**

Students who are blind or have low vision must have access to the same core curriculum areas learnt by sighted peers. General core curricula have set learning outcomes and/or core competencies for each subject area, and students must have the opportunity to achieve both the standard benchmarks and attain the level of merit based outcome desired. This may be facilitated through a range of inclusive support measures and alternate assessments.

In addition to core curriculum subjects, students who are blind or have low vision also require access to expanded core curriculum areas that address the specialised needs associated with their vision impairment. These include, but are not limited to: Braille literacy; adaptive technology training; compensatory skills training; orientation and mobility; independent living skills; social skills; and career counselling. Given the specialised nature of expanded core curriculum areas, they should be taught by specialist teachers in vision impairment with an appropriate level of knowledge in the specific area.

Access to visiting teachers

There are concepts, skills and knowledge that students who are sighted learn “incidentally” or "casually" in the classroom or playground, but which must be taught sequentially and systematically to students who are blind or have low vision. These include orientation and mobility, independent living skills, social and interpersonal skills and career counselling.

Given the specialised nature of these curriculum areas, qualified visiting support teachers are best placed to assist students who are blind or have low vision to learn on the same basis as other students. But in practice, the amount and quality of visiting teacher support that a student who is blind or has low vision receives depends more on where they live and the amount of resources available in that region than on a genuine recognition of the importance of this support.

Visiting teachers are also vital for teaching concepts, skills and knowledge that a student who is blind or has low vision is unlikely to acquire in the same manner as their sighted peers. For example, mathematics is a difficult subject for students who are blind or have low vision to master without additional support, as it involves concepts of 3-dimensional geometry that are usually taught visually.

Once students who are blind or have low vision are enrolled into school, access to literacy and numeracy skills through braille training is the next hurdle they encounter in participating in education on the same basis as others. There is a distinct lack of access to appropriately qualified and skilled braille teachers available to students who are blind or have low vision across Australia.

Access to qualified braille teachers is a particular problem for students who are blind living in regional and remote areas, who encounter discrimination due to the inability of the system to meet their needs.

Visiting teachers often have to cover large areas to support students with a variety of vision conditions and are often unable to access the professional development they need to inform their practice. Video link technology has somewhat improved access to qualified visiting teachers for students who are blind or have low vision living in regional and remote areas. However, it is difficult to provide support with some services via video link ups, such as orientation and mobility training to navigate the school environment.

Accessible learning environments

In addition to support from visiting teachers, curricular materials are also not being made available to students who are blind or have low vision on the same basis as other students and in the students chosen format. Rather than providing curriculum materials in an alternate format, such as braille or accessible word documents, teachers and aides are often called on to verbally describe a task to students who are blind or have low vision. This removes the cognitive challenge of following a task and problem solving on the same basis as their peers.

Even with access to accessible resources and appropriate adaptive technology, students who are blind or have low vision require additional support to access the learning environment. Without adjustments to the school environment and support from visiting teachers and orientation and mobility specialists, students cannot find their way around the learning environment independently and on the same basis as their sighted peers.

* Infrastructure and environment **–** *Physical, ICT and other infrastructure supports necessary to create engaging and positive learning environments for students with disability.*

Access to the Physical Environment

Any educational funding agreements should include provisions to facilitate access to and between buildings in educational institutions for persons with disability. Increased access could be achieved for people who are blind or have low vision through marking trip hazards, tactile ground surface indicators, braille signage and hand rails.

Access to Adaptive Technology

Access to adaptive technology is also vital in allowing students who are blind or have low vision to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. This equipment provides access to activities, processes and materials that would otherwise be inaccessible to students who are blind or have low vision.

For example, screen reader software provides access to computer functionality via synthetic speech, refreshable braille displays, or enlarged onscreen text. Without a screen reader, a person who is blind or has low vision cannot access a computer or participate in any activities that require the use of a computer.

Other examples of adaptive technology include closed-circuit televisions (CCTV) for real-time magnification of printed material and braille embossers for producing hardcopy braille by means of computerised braille translation software. Portable audio book players also give students who are blind or have low vision access to DAISY books, which have been produced in a structured audio format that allows users to navigate text by section, paragraph, and page, unlike standard audio books.

Access to adaptive technology is often hampered by the complex funding environment for the compulsory education system, where schools often have to rely on funding from several sources. The inequities, inconsistencies and discriminatory impacts of this patchwork funding system become particularly apparent at major transition points in the education process.

For example, when a child who is blind or has low vision moves from preschool to primary school, they come under a different funding regime, which changes again when they transition into high school. A student who may have had access to appropriate adaptive technology in one funding environment is not guaranteed to have the same access in another, and may not be able to keep the equipment as they transition. This often results in delays, increased stress for students and families and a detrimental impact on a student’s education.

Adaptive technology is limited by the design of online learning environments and resources. If websites and learning software are not designed to comply with accessibility best practices and guidelines and standards, then adaptive technology such as screen-reading software will not be able to provide access to them for students who are blind or have low vision. Decision at the school, regional and statewide level about the procurement or development of software and online resources must be made with accessibility at the centre.

**About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the leading national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision. We provide services to approximately 27 000 Australians each year across 28 offices and outreach locations through a mix of charitable donations and Government funding.

Vision Australia’s mission is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly be able to live the life they choose by participating fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the blindness and low vision community in areas, such as:

* early childhood
* orientation and mobility
* employment
* accessible information (including library services)
* recreation
* independent living
* Seeing Eye Dogs
* Advocacy

We have gained a vast knowledge of the experiences and concerns of students who are blind or have low vision and their families in navigating the education system.

Vision Australia staff provide a range of education-related services to children, adolescents and adults involved in formal education, from primary and secondary school to TAFE and tertiary studies. These include:

* Orthoptic vision assessments
* Technology assessments for students from pre-school to TAFE and university levels from our adaptive technology consultants
* Advice and support to children and their families from our children’s services staff
* Support transitioning into and between schools
* A range of library and information services for students either directly or through arrangements with education institutions
* Advocacy advisors who work with students who are blind or have low vision, educators and Disability Liaison Officers in universities and TAFE colleges throughout Australia to help find an equitable support solution