



Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training; Inquiry into school to work transition

Submitted to: Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training PO Box 6021, Parliament House, CANBERRA, ACT 2600

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Introduction

Vision Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into school to work transition.

As you know, there is a clear correlation between education and increased employment opportunities. According to the 2016 Australian census, people with higher levels of education were much more likely to be employed. 80% of people who had acquired a Bachelor degree or above were in employment, of people with Advanced Diplomas or Diplomas 75% were in employment and of people who had gained a Certificate III or IV 76% were employed.

Vision Australia's own research into employment of people, who are blind or have low vision, the Client Employment survey 2012 showed that 75% of respondents with a tertiary qualification were employed, highlighting the impact of education in enhancing job opportunities for our clients.

While we all understand that education increases employment opportunities, there is still a very high rate of unemployment among the blindness and low vision community. The rate of unemployment among people who are blind or have low vision is almost ten times higher than the general population and the highest of all disability groups. Vision Australia's Client Employment survey 2012 revealed a 58% unemployment rate in the blindness and low vision community.

To decrease the unemployment rate of people who are blind or have low vision, major changes must occur within schools, universities and workplaces. Including; systemic accessibility barriers like inaccessible information and communications technology, inaccessible websites and applications, the lack of disability confidence among teachers, students and employers and the lack of regulation to mandate accessibility in new and emerging technologies such as touchscreen interfaces and lift destination control systems that are increasingly used in office buildings.

A 2015 report '*Post School Transition: The Experiences of Students with Disability*', by Children with Disability Australia, noted that:

- 30% of people with a disability do not go beyond Year 10, compared to 20% of people without a disability
- 36% of people aged 15 to 64 years with reported disability had completed Year 12 compared to 60% of people without a disability;
- 15% of people aged 15 to 64 years with disability had completed a bachelor degree or higher compared to 26% of people without disability.

In this submission we will address the terms of reference in relation to the school to work transition of students who are blind or have low vision and we make the following recommendations

1. That measurements of gain within schools, such as *Naplan*, are made accessible to students who are blind or have low vision.
2. That students who are blind or have low vision are offered specialist career counselling that both encourages ambition and creates realistic expectations.
3. That all information offered to students who are blind or have low vision, about further education, training and employment outcomes is in accessible formats.
4. That departments of education must connect career counsellors to blindness and low vision specialists, like Vision Australia, to ensure students with vision impairments are receiving appropriate advice.
5. That career counsellors in schools make contact with the families of students who are blind or have low vision to include the family in the sharing of advice and knowledge.
6. That mentors and positive case studies are provided as examples of successful education and employment outcomes for people who are blind or who have low vision.
7. That programs and services are developed to support students who are blind or have low vision to gain work experience, graduate positions and employment.
8. That online learning platforms in post school education institutions are required to be accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.
9. That given the NDIS is continuing to evolve, it should not yet be relied upon as the solution to successful school to work transition for people who are blind or have low vision.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 1. Measurements of gain in school and how this contributes to supporting students to prepare for post-school education and training;*

Measuring gain

Students who are blind or have low vision are often left behind when measuring gain within schools. This is because the measurement methods have not been designed to be accessible. Without accurate student measurements, policy cannot be developed that genuinely accounts for the needs of students who are blind or have low vision. The lack of accessible measurements of gain also sends a message to students with disability that they are not a priority. Students flourish when supported and encouraged but exclusion is likely to increase a sense of isolation among students with disability.

Recommendation:

That measurements of gain within schools, such as Naplan are made accessible to students who are blind or have low vision.

- 2. Opportunities to better inform and support students in relation to post-school education and training, including use of employment outcomes of students who undertake school-based vocational education or post-school tertiary pathways;*

Career counselling

The challenge when providing information and career counselling to students who are blind or have low vision, is balancing aspirational goals with realistic goals. Counsellors must provide accurate and realistic information to students while maintaining the student's sense of ambition and their right to pursue career goals that are not typical for people with vision impairments and which may harbour challenges.

Historically, people who are blind or have low vision have received career advice suggesting that they consider working in occupations like call centre jobs, social work or therapeutic massage. Such career advice for people who are blind is limiting and we recommend an approach that deals with each individual on a case by case basis. People who are blind work in a variety of disciplines and can acquire a variety of qualifications. While the abilities of people who are blind can be vast and varied, they require great drive, ambition and support to achieve these things as the societal barriers that exist in terms of access to information, access to mainstream technologies and access to public spaces can sometimes make students and job seekers give up.

Blindness is a low incidence disability. For this reason, it is unlikely that career counsellors within secondary schools will have knowledge of blindness or low vision. We urge the education department to direct schools to seek expert advice from service providers, like Vision Australia, when counselling students who are blind or have low vision.

Recommendations:

That students who are blind or have low vision are offered specialist career counselling that both encourages ambition and creates realistic expectations.

That departments of education connect career counsellors to blindness specialists, like Vision Australia, to ensure students with vision impairments are receiving appropriate advice.

Accessibility

All information offered to students who are blind or have low vision must be in accessible formats, like large print, audio, electronic or braille.

Students should also be provided with information about post school education that goes into detail about whether a course is accessible to someone who is blind or has low vision and whether the employment outcome of the qualification is likely to be realistically attainable by someone who is blind or has low vision. There are clear education and vocational training employment pathways that should be highlighted and explained in detail to students and their families.

Recommendations:

That all information offered to students who are blind or have low vision, about further education, training and employment outcomes is in accessible formats.

That education and employment pathways are highlighted by career counsellors to students who are blind or have low vision.

Communicating with families and interacting with role models

The families of students who are blind or have low vision should be included in career counselling conversations. The family of a student who is blind or has low vision, in many cases is a major influence and support to the student. To create an environment for the student where they have the greatest opportunity to reach their education and employment goals, the people closest to them need the right information and advice as well.

Opportunities for young blind students and their families to interact with adult blind role models who are working in various jobs, living independently and achieving things, must be created. These interactions will build confidence and embed strategies for living and working independently. Engaging people who are blind or have low vision to act as mentors or who will share their story with students and their families will provide the motivation needed to persist with study and seeking ongoing work.

Recommendations:

That career counsellors in schools make contact with the families of students who are blind or have low vision to include the family in the sharing of advice and knowledge.

That mentors and positive case studies are provided as examples of successful education and employment outcomes for people who are blind or who have low vision.

Specialist education and employment programs

Vision Australia offer a number of programs and services to our clients to assist them with gaining a qualification and finding a job or pursuing a career. We have developed these programs and services based on our specialist knowledge of blindness and low vision.

While these programs and services are helping to create employment opportunities and access to higher education for people who are blind or have low vision, they are currently being underwritten by philanthropy rather than through public funding.

Below are some of Vision Australia's current employment and education programs.

Further Education Bursary Award

Each year Vision Australia awards Bursaries to tertiary students who are blind or have low vision. Successful bursary applicants are awarded eight thousand dollars to purchase specialist technology which enables their access to course materials and to complete assignments.

From 1996 to 2016, 326 Bursaries have been awarded by Vision Australia to students studying a broad range of disciplines – from Arts and Music to IT and Business.

Career Start Graduate Program

Once a Vision Australia client has completed a higher education qualification, they are eligible to apply for our Graduate Program. Vision Australia employ graduates who are blind or have low vision, for one year, within a department that aligns with their studies.

Building Stronger Futures – Empowering Youth

Building Stronger Futures is a program targeting blind and low vision school leavers between 15 and 25. The program comprises of a three week intensive pre-employment group program (PEP), followed by Problem Solving Treatment (PST) which comprises of up to 10 individual sessions. Each participant will also gain up to 6 months of job seeker support to support them in getting a job. Vision Australia will deliver 12 sessions across Australia over the next 21 months.

Careers in Focus

The aim of this initiative is to bring people together utilising LinkedIn so they can assist and mentor each other on how to take that next step in their career.

The Careers in Focus group will encourage the sharing of knowledge by people with workplace experience.

Recommendation:

That government funded programs are developed to support students who are blind or have low vision to gain work experience, graduate positions and employment.

3. Other related matters that the Committee considers relevant.

Accessibility of online learning platforms

Many of the online learning platforms used by Universities and Tertiary institutions are inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision, because they do not comply with international standards and guidelines, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0.

These platforms include:

- Enrolment, registration and course selection
- Curriculum including essential modules
- Lectures and meeting notes that are provided to all students as part of weekly course activity
- Access to portals
- Essential reading materials that other students take for granted and which educators and examiners expect students to have read and be knowledgeable about.

This situation limits the ability of people who are blind or have low vision from commencing, and continuing to achieve their education goals

Recommendation:

That online learning platforms in post school education institutions are accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.

The NDIS and school to work transition

It is too early to tell whether the NDIS will lead to the economic participation benefits that were predicted.

There are a number of reasons why increased economic participation flowing on from the NDIS may take some time.

- NDIS-funded initiatives to engage community and businesses to improve employment outcomes for people with disability have not occurred yet.
- The NDIS will have a greater effect as time goes on.

Recommendation:

Vision Australia recommends that given the NDIS is continuing to evolve, it should not yet be relied upon as the solution to successful school to work transition for people who are blind or have low vision.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include:

- Allied Health and Therapy services, and registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care
- Aids and Equipment, and Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support
- Seeing Eye Dogs
- National Library Services
- Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds
- Employment services, including national Disability Employment Services provider
- Accessible information, and Alternate Format Production
- Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped
- Spectacles Program for the NSW Government
- Advocacy and Engagement, working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has gained unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation. Vision Australia is therefore well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the Organisation to the Board and Management. Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment.

Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), to strengthen the voice of the blind community. We also operate Memorandums of Understanding with Australian Hearing, and the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service.