

Chapter 1

Overview

Conduct of the inquiry

1.1 The Senate referred this inquiry to the Senate, Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee on 13 March 2002. A sub committee was given the responsibility for undertaking the inquiry.

1.2 The inquiry was advertised nationally and the committee wrote to state and territory educational authorities, universities, union and parent groups, as well as peak disability groups, seeking submissions. The committee received 247 submissions, and heard from 122 witnesses in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, Brisbane, and Canberra. As part of the inquiry the sub committee visited schools and a centre for hearing impaired students. The committee thanks the staff and students of Western Autistic School and Sunshine North Primary School in Melbourne, the Sunedin Special School and the Cora Barclay Centre in Adelaide, and all those who made submissions or gave evidence.

Object of the inquiry

1.3 The inquiry was established in response to concerns about the effectiveness of Commonwealth programs targeted at students with disabilities and whether the needs of students with disabilities were being met in the school sector and in post-secondary education. The inquiry follows the committee's 2001 inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students which made recommendations remarkably similar to those made in this report. This is the second of two reports which has found that schools do not adequately provide for difference. In both cases, the committee has identified deficiencies in the preparation and continuing training and education of teachers.

1.4 The terms of reference for the inquiry are to be found at the beginning of this report. In summary, they require the committee to examine current policies and programs to determine if they are adequate to meet the education needs of students with disabilities, and to recommend changes to the way the Commonwealth and states and territories discharge their responsibilities to these students.

Overview of submissions

1.5 The main sources of submissions were:

- state and non-government school educational authorities and universities;
- parents and parent groups;
- peak disability groups;

- teachers and individual schools, teacher unions and university academics; and
- students and student organisations.

1.6 Education systems and authorities provided the committee with valuable information about policies and programs supporting students with disabilities. Not surprisingly, these institutions described in broad terms how the needs of students with disabilities are being met, or more commonly, the difficulties they had experienced in having their needs met. Many were also concerned about the cost of meeting legislative obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the proposed education standards. The high cost of providing support for students to ensure equity of access has had consequences for the provision of education services more generally. The number and content of submissions from the non-government school sector suggested a coordinated approach to secure increased Commonwealth funding over and above the current appropriation.

1.7 Submissions from parents and students expressed different views. Parents were interested in securing a good education for their children, and a happy schooling experience for them. Reading their submissions gave the committee a sense of the frustration and stress that parents must feel when forced to constantly advocate on behalf of their children. The committee received insight into the need for parents to put much extra time and effort toward the care of their children, representing a large investment overall. A similar sense of frustration was revealed in those few submissions received from students with disabilities in the post-secondary sector. Students with disabilities have to invest considerable time and energy to negotiate their requirements with staff and teachers.

1.8 Many submissions from parents were concerned about the level and quality of support provided; others were concerned about the availability of education options for their child. Submissions revealed that there were significant shortages in specialists in a number of areas, including Auslan interpreters and some therapists. Shortages were greatest outside the major metropolitan cities. The committee has taken seriously the advice of school administrators and academics that with the imminent retirement of a generation of specialists trained in the 'boom' years, the country is facing a serious shortage of skilled practitioners in the area of special education. It will not be easy to replace them.

1.9 Submissions from teachers and their representatives showed similar concerns about the ability of teachers to manage the full range of disabilities that may meet in the classroom. This may result from a lack of training in the management and education of students with disabilities, a lack of time to prepare appropriate curricula or a lack of funded support for affected children. Some teachers were concerned about the challenging and complex behaviours exhibited by some students, particularly those with autism, where afflicted children are now identified at increasing rates.

1.10 A large number of interest groups are represented in submissions. A disproportionately high number of submissions were received from those raising issues about education of the deaf. By comparison, submissions dealing with the

education of students with intellectual disabilities were far less numerous. This is despite a significantly greater number of enrolments in schools of intellectually impaired students compared to students with hearing impairments (refer figure 1. 6). This does not surprise the committee. Community organisations representing those with sensory disabilities have long traditions of effective activism, whereas those with intellectual disabilities have few really effective advocacy groups to champion their cause.

1.11 While issues raised by the various disability groups were often specific to the particular disability, a number of common themes emerged. These included the particular difficulties faced by those students, or parents of students, who come from a low socio-economic or non-English speaking background. The interests of indigenous students are raised in some submissions, but the committee received few submissions from indigenous parents or interest groups. Submissions were received highlighting the limited range of services available in rural areas, and the critical shortages of skilled specialists and trained teachers outside metropolitan areas.

1.12 Specific issues raised in submissions included: needs of those students with disabilities who did not qualify for specific funding support; shortages of skilled teachers of the deaf; problems with transcription services for those with a sight disability; a lack of integration for students with intellectual disabilities; and the mismanagement of students with learning disabilities and autism. A number of submissions aimed to raise the profile of a particular disability in an effort to secure funded support, as in the instance of learning disabilities.

1.13 Other issues included the lack of a nationally agreed definition for disability, the inappropriateness of some funding models, the failure to reach agreement about the education standards, and the poor employment and income outcomes for students with disabilities who had been through the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Crucial links: parents, principals and teachers

1.14 In this overview chapter the committee has included an introduction to one of the most important concerns raised by parents and interest groups. The importance of an agreeable school culture was stressed in many submissions. In a welcoming school environment parents and teachers collaborate in the education of children, each party bringing insight and experience to a joint task; and in the case of teachers specialised knowledge of appropriate learning programs. Submissions indicate the value placed by parents on competent first-rate teachers, and they also indicate a degree of anger and frustration with teachers who either lack specialised skills and knowledge, or who avoid collaboration by withdrawing behind a veneer of professionalism. Such parents are also frustrated by principals who erect bureaucratic impediments to initiatives which they have full discretion to implement.

1.15 This inquiry has made a number of strong impressions on the committee. One is the dedication of a number of principals with whom it had contact, and teachers and support workers who were providing outstanding educational and social opportunities

for students in their care. Another impression is the disappointment and frustration of those parents who have been unsuccessful in securing what they regard as appropriate opportunities for their child. Some preliminary comments about the role of principals, teachers and teacher aides can be made at this point.

1.16 The quality of teaching is perhaps the most fundamental concern of parents of children with disabilities. It can be a 'make or break' factor in the learning process. It can have lasting influence on the extent to which a child or adolescent overcomes a disability to the extent of enjoying a fulfilling life. The majority of submissions from parents did not tell a positive story. Submissions from disability groups also pointed to glaring deficiencies in the ability of teachers to manage a range of disabilities. The committee, however, was pleased to hear about instances of good practice, and teacher commitment. It saw such practices and commitment first hand when it visited schools and learning centres as part of the inquiry.

1.17 According to Disability Action, the principal source of discrimination in the education system is 'attitude'. Most commentators agree that the role of the school principal appears to be crucial to the establishment and maintenance of a climate of well-being and achievement in relation to inclusive education. No amount of funding can overcome a lack of commitment to inclusive education and a lack of understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. Disability Action claims that the school principal is critical to this process not only because the principal is generally in control of the inclusion processes but because the principal has a significant effect on the culture and value base of the school.¹ Other submissions recounted instances of where sympathetic principals have left schools and whose replacements have been less inclined to encourage inclusive routines, or have had other priorities in the expenditure of special education funding. Similarly, the transfer or departure for other reasons of a particularly gifted teacher can have a significant effect on the total school program. Schools often lack a 'critical mass' of confident and dedicated teachers committed to quality education of children with disabilities, and therefore influential in school policy on inclusive education.

1.18 School principals are ultimately responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of program delivery. They must be able to reassure parents, after due consultation with them, that the school will do its best to see that learning outcomes are achieved. There is far more likelihood, in the case of students with disabilities, that parents and teachers will work to develop a rapport in their shared task of educating a child, than would be the case if the child did not have a disability. For this reason, gifted teachers and enlightened school principals are prized by parents. On the other hand, when these conditions do not prevail, the resulting relationship can be correspondingly bitter. The committee has had evidence from parents describing both aspects of the relationships outlined above.

1.19 Where authority and responsibility have been devolved to schools, principals have much more discretion about the allocation of resources: the challenge of this

1 Submission No. 201, Disability Action, p. 8

responsibility being to ensure that the principal can discern the value of competing claims on the school budget. It was argued that this was not always in the best interest of the students:

At present, school principals have too much power and autonomy and are not sufficiently accountable to any independent authority. As a result students and parents are disempowered and there is a lack of consistency in the way in which students with disabilities, learning difficulties and challenging behaviours are treated and the services provided from school to school. Internal dispute resolution mechanisms are so slow and cumbersome that students and parents who need to access such mechanisms are inevitably disadvantaged. In one case that Southwest Advocacy is aware of it took four months to have a principal's decision to expel a student overturned by DET [Department of Education and Training, Victoria] under the *Student Discipline Procedures*. Southwest Advocacy believes that the existing rules and procedures should be reviewed with a view to expediting the resolution of disputes.²

1.20 Regardless of this viewpoint, studies have shown that in all states there is now a high proportion of school principals sympathetic to inclusive policies, who are able and willing to promote these policies.³ The relationship between parents of children with disabilities and school staff, however, can still be difficult to manage. Principals may have an underdeveloped consciousness about education for disabilities and the anxieties of parents. Teachers may have a similar problem, exacerbated by lack of knowledge and skills in how to deal with such students. Parents can demand more than a school is capable of delivering even though the principal and other staff are sympathetic and competent.

1.21 The submission from Southwest Advocacy called upon the Victorian Department of Education to fund an independent advocacy service for students with disabilities. The committee is conscious of the need for informal dispute resolving mechanisms at the school level, believing that conciliation is the only way to preserve trust and quickly heal wounds that result, more often than not, from a failure to recognise the need for schools to negotiate and manage their expenditure priorities.

1.22 As will be illustrated in later chapters, the relationship that develops between parents and a school makes all the difference for students with disabilities. There has to be a strong element of trust in this relationship. Professor Trevor Parmenter, Director of the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Sydney, argued for increased training in collaborative processes:

One way to ameliorate this situation is to provide specific training for professional groups in how to collaborate with families in providing educational programs. In the final analysis it is usually families who have

2 Submission No. 5, Southwest Advocacy Association, p. 4

3 Jenkinson, J., *Special Education: A Matter of Choice*, Australian Education Review No. 46, Australian Council Education R, p. 97

the most precise knowledge of their disabled child, and it is ultimately families who provide one of the basic life-long supports for their son / daughter. The excellent examples of collaborative partnerships evidenced in early intervention programs are seldom found once the child enters the more formal primary and secondary school programs. There is simply not the same culture of co-operation and sharing in the educational processes.⁴

1.23 Contrary to the claims in some submissions, the committee does not take the view that in all cases parents will be in the best position to assess the educational needs of their child, even though they are in a strong position to assist that process. One principal of a special school spoke to the committee about the challenge of meeting the reasonable needs of parents, and of being sympathetic to their concerns, while at the same time recognising that their professional responsibilities often required them to make hard decisions. This tension sometimes arose when parents were told that their child's needs could not be met in a mainstream school. Some parents appeared to believe that in a mainstream school, 'one size could be made to fit all'. Not only was this not true, but it undervalued the importance of life experience outside school, which was equally important in the overall learning process:

...There is a lot of emotion around it, and there is a lot of angst about the fact that, if a student goes to a regular school, they are somehow normal and, if they go anywhere else, they are not. In education generally, we are at pains to say that in the regular environment there is a range required within that system. So the fundamental rethinking of what is schooling as opposed to what is education has to go on apace. Schooling has not got the prerogative of total education. It is one place where students learn parts of things. That is, unless we totally rethink the patterns and the partnerships. We have to get parents on board and have them support that. I have no problem with parents saying, 'I need better quality outcomes for my students.' As a profession, we would endorse that 100 per cent. We have not engaged in good dialogue with parents, and we have allowed the emotive, political, headline grabbing stuff to rule. We will suffer if we continue down that track. We do need genuine partnerships; we need to talk to parents and get them on board. They have an educational responsibility, as we have. But a one size fits all approach will never work.⁵

1.24 The demands on teachers of students who have one or more disabilities are considerable. In the mainstream classroom, where most of these students are to be found, the skill levels required to manage students with disabilities amidst the demands of those who have none, are very considerable. It is safe to assume, on the basis of evidence received by the committee, that such onerous demands are met only with difficulty, except in the case where teachers are highly experienced and have specialised skills.

4 Submission No. 240, Professor Parmenter, p. 7

5 Dr John Enchelmaier, Vice President, Australian Federation of Special Education Administrators, *Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 September 2002, p. 437

1.25 Teacher aides have become so closely identified with integrated learning that it is hard to see how inclusive education would function without them. A significant amount of assistance given to students with disabilities is provided by teacher aides as they are increasingly used in the classroom as a substitute for withdrawal of students for period of time for specialised assistance. Teacher aides have a very broadly defined role in a classroom, which may range from the preparation of work materials and implementation of programs through to more basic tasks as assisting children to manage their toileting. A small number of students may share an aide. If there are a number in the school, they may be rotated to ensure that individual children do not become over-dependent on a particular aide.⁶

1.26 Most teacher aides have no specialist training in teaching for disabilities, and a great many may lack even basic training. The New South Wales Department of Education has developed a workplace training program leading to the Certificate 3 in Education Support, an intensive two year course with a wide range of core and elective courses.⁷ It occurs to the committee that a person with such a qualification would have done far more formal study related to teaching for disabilities than the average graduate teacher, and would have undertaken the study at a time when its relevance was strongly evident.

1.27 While academic literature on the role of teacher aides describes their important role in the education of children with disabilities, as do submissions from the Australian Education Union and some employing agencies, there were some submissions which questioned the value of the assistance provided by teacher aides. The following description was given by a parent representative who appeared before the committee in Hobart:

In terms of teachers' aides, quite often in a classroom of 25 or 28 children there will be the teacher and maybe one teachers' aide. The usual content of the class would possibly include a child with severe disabilities and several children that have learning difficulties. In that class there would be problems with behaviour management and those sorts of things. In this situation, the main thing that parents have found is that there does seem to be a tendency for the teacher's aide to be given the task of taking specific children away and sitting in a corner with them rather than being part of the whole classroom situation. The instances that I know of where the teacher's aide in the classroom have worked best involve a combined program between the teacher and the teacher's aide, so that they are in charge of the classroom as a whole rather than one taking a specific child away and sitting in the corner with them.⁸

6 Jenkinson, J., *Special Education: A Matter of Choice*, Australian Education Review No. 46, ACER, 2000, p. 111

7 *ibid.*, p. 112

8 Ms Yulia Onsmann, Media Liaison Officer Tasmanian Council of State School Parents and Friends Association, *Hansard*, Hobart, 3 September 2002, p. 326

1.28 In some instance teacher aides have come to be seen as a substitute for trained teachers, who are either unavailable or expensive for schools and systems to employ. As one submission pointed out:

Many educational sectors are trying to replace trained teachers of the vision impaired with Teacher Aides for economic and human resourcing needs. Whilst Teacher Aides are a valuable and necessary part of educational support, they are not trained teachers and should not be used as such. They lack the underlying knowledge to develop appropriate strategies and techniques to ensure successful integration and learning.⁹

1.29 The limited number of submissions received describing the role of teacher aides may account for the committee noting little evidence that teacher aides engaged in anything other than basic learning assistance or as a companion to supervise work when the teacher was otherwise occupied on interaction with other students. There is an impression given in some submissions that while teacher aides become devoted to their charges they do not extend their learning. If some evidence is to be believed, they may be an impediment to the independent learning of their charges. The committee believes that they are as likely as not to be a reassuring presence for many teachers, but this may be for the wrong reasons.

1.30 While the committee notes evidence in some submissions that a first priority should be to ensure the appointment of teachers trained to teach students with disabilities and to make effective use of teacher aides, the committee believes there is an assured place for teachers aides who have qualifications in special education.

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that, within a reasonable period, all teacher aides working with students with disabilities should be qualified in special education from an accredited teacher aide training course, and that this should be a condition of additional Commonwealth funding for disability education.

Data and trends: at a glance

1.31 The remainder of this chapter provides a summary of the numbers of students with disabilities in each sector, as well as the types of disabilities found within each sector. This data provides background to the discussion that follows. In particular it shows that the number of students requiring support at schools, vocational training institutions and universities is increasing. Not included in this data are a range of disabilities, for which no accurate data is held. This would include conditions such as ADHD, some forms of Autism and learning disabilities.

1.32 The terminology and definitions used to define disability vary significantly across education sectors and between states and territories. The definitions of disability used by state and territory education authorities, as well as the

9 Submission No. 89, South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) Qld, p. 12

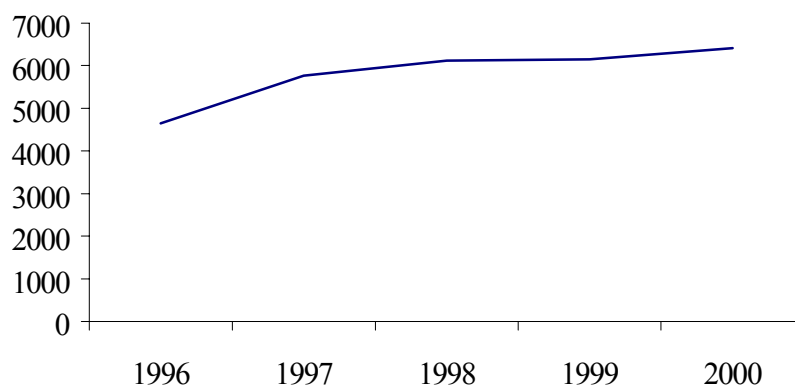
Commonwealth definition of disability for the purposes of additional per capita funding, are narrower than the definition of disability under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. Variations also exist between state and territory education departments, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), and the Department of Education, Science and Training. These inconsistencies are reflected in collected data and published statistics. While the following data provides an overview of the disability sector, cross sector or national comparisons can be problematic.

1.33 Post-secondary sector students with disabilities are expected to self-identify at the time of enrolment. Students are asked to respond to the following question: Do you consider yourself to have a permanent or significant disability? Reported disabilities include physical disabilities, learning disabilities, psychiatric and various medical conditions. There is likely to be an underestimation of the true numbers of students with disabilities in this sector: many students choose not to report their disability.

1.34 The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) collects data on the number of students with disabilities who are eligible for funding under its *Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes* (SAISO) program. This data reflects the number of students with disabilities requiring high support and does not include students with disabilities such as learning disabilities, medical conditions or behavioural problems. State education departments also hold data about the number of students belonging to the various categories of disability. Criteria that define categories of definitions vary between the states and territories and this means that making comparisons between them can result in doubtful conclusions. Many students included in the data relating to the post-secondary sector would not be included in the data for schools.

Higher education

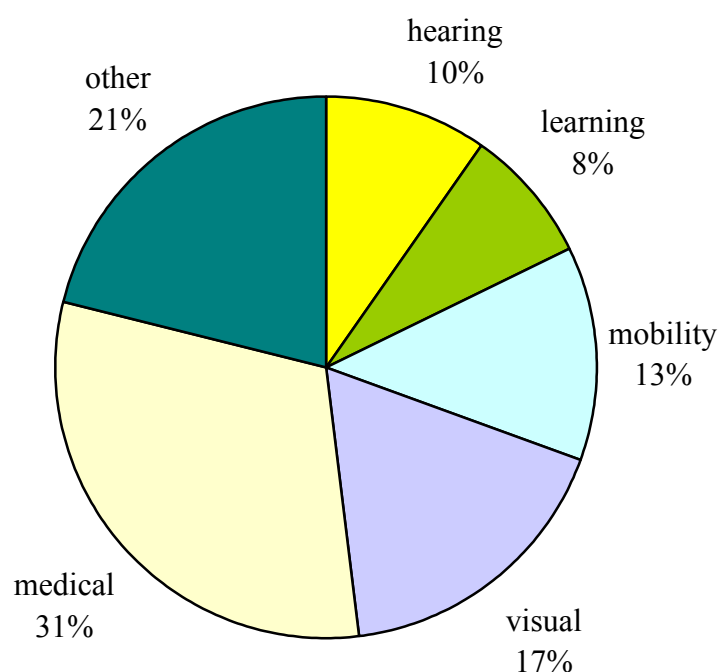
Figure 1.1 Domestic university students with a disability, 1996-2000



Data source: Submission No. 178, Department of Education Science and Training, p. 22

1.35 Demographic information about the participation of students with disabilities enrolled in universities has only been collected since 1996 and relies on the self-identification of a disability at the time of enrolment. Figure 1.1 shows that the number of students with disabilities enrolled in universities has increased significantly since 1996. For the same period the proportion of students with disabilities compared to the total number of students has also increased from 1.9 per cent in 1996 to 3.0 per cent in 2000. Students with disabilities show a slightly different age profile to all other domestic students with smaller proportion of students with disabilities under 25 and a larger proportion over 40. Almost 60 per cent of students with disabilities identify as belonging to another equity group.¹⁰ This group includes those from a low socio-economic status background, students who speak a language other than English and have arrived in Australia within the previous ten years, indigenous Australians, and women studying non-traditional courses such as engineering and architecture. The committee acknowledges that this group is very broad, but recognises the double disadvantage that may be suffered by many students with a disability in this sector.

Figure 1.2 University students with a disability by type, 2000



Data source: Submission No. 178, Department of Education Science and Training, p. 22

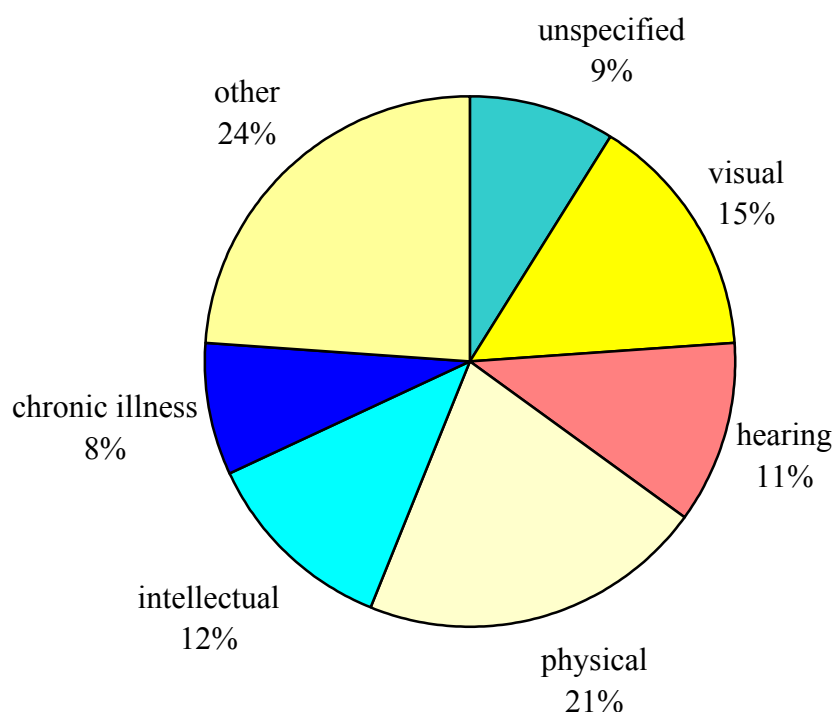
1.36 Figure 1.2 shows the proportion of university students with a disability by type. Medical and other disabilities account for over half of the disabilities reported by university students. For obvious reasons, when compared to the school sector there is a much higher proportion of students with physical disabilities.

Vocational education and training sector

1.37 Figure 1.3 shows the proportion of disabilities reported by VET students in 2000. These figures, like those of the higher education sector, rely on self-identification at the time of enrolment. The total number of students reporting a disability increased from 47,310 in 1996, to 62,080 in 2000.¹¹ Students with disabilities tend to be older than VET students overall, with 38 per cent aged over 40 years.¹²

1.38 The VET system is able to accept, to a limited extent, students with intellectual disabilities, and the data suggests, that a significant number of students with intellectual disabilities do proceed to vocational education and training.

Figure 1.3 VET students with disability by types, 2000



Data Source: NCVER, Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics, 2000, Students with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training, p. 4

1.39 The numbers of students reporting a disability increased from 1995 to 2000, however, as a proportion of the total VET population the percentage of students reporting a disability increased from 2.9 per cent to 3.6 percent.¹³

11 Submission No. 124, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, p. 2

12 *Australian Vocational Education and training Statistics, 2000, Students with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, p. 4

13 Submission No. 178, op cit, p17; submission 191, Australian National Training Authority, p. 15

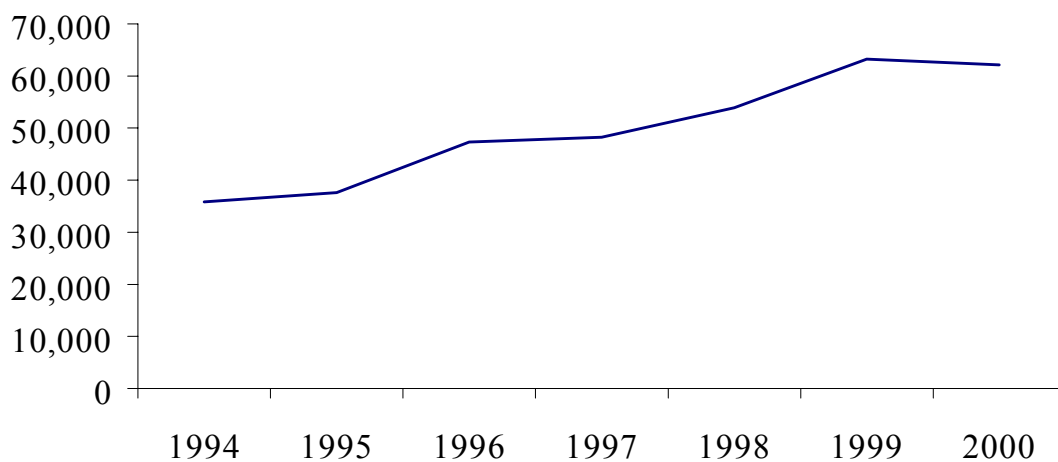
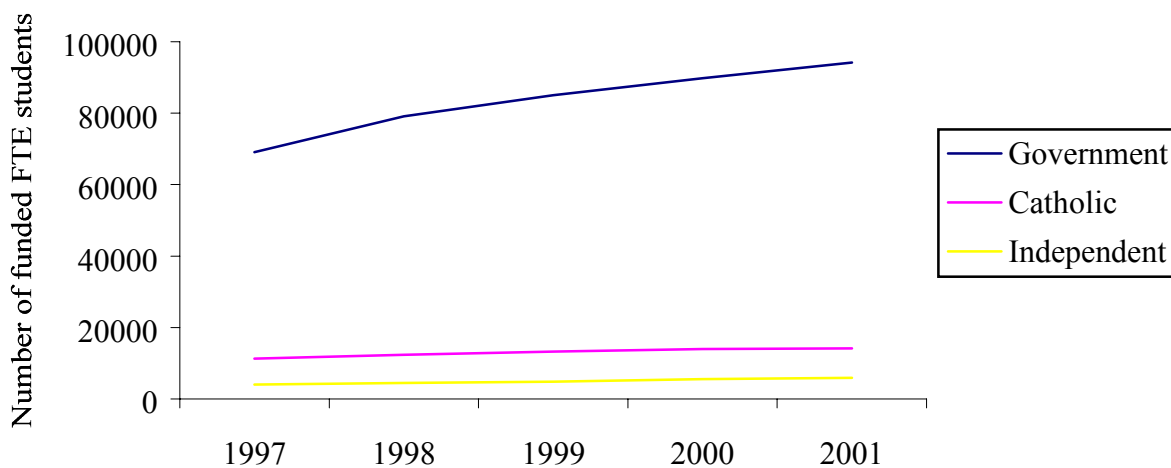
Figure 1.4 VET students reporting with a disability, 1994-2000¹⁴

Figure 1.5 School students with a disability, 1997-2001



Data source: Submission 178, Department of Education Science and Training, p.4

The school sector

1.40 Figure 1.5 shows the comparative increases in number of students with disabilities across the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. While all sectors show an increase in the number of students with disabilities, the increase in

absolute numbers has been greatest in government schools. This data is collected by the Department of Education, Science and Training and, as previously explained, does not include students with ‘less traditional’ disabilities.

1.41 Figure 1.6 shows the percentages of disability by type in government schools.¹⁵ The figures clearly illustrate the different classifications used by states. Note in particular ‘communications–language’. The discrepancy in figures for physical impairment are also due to the different ways in which states define this condition. Although national comparisons based on this data need to be accepted with caution, a number of broad observations can be made. With the exception of South Australia, intellectual disabilities account for over half the disabilities that receive funded support¹⁶. Accepting that many students with intellectual disabilities will also have a visual, physical or hearing impairment, the data also shows the relatively low incidence of students with visual or hearing impairments. No data is available about the extent of less traditional disabilities, such as learning disabilities, Aspergers Syndrome or ADHD.

Figure 1.6: Disability by type in government schools to nearest per cent

	NSW	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	QLD
Intellectual impairment	63	54	48	19	53	48
Physical impairment	6	5	11	5	14	20
Visual impairment	1	1	5	2	7	9
Hearing impairment	4	3	8	4	9	18
Communication–language	8	29		70	11	
Autism	5	3	7		6	5
Mental health	11		1			
Severe behavioural		5				
Early learning	1					
Intensive reading	1					
Multiple disabilities			15			
Physical disability/medical			5			

Data source: compiled from data provided by state government education authorities.

15 Data is not provided for those categories not recognised by a state.

16 In South Australia many students that are classified as having a communication–language disorder would be classified as having an intellectual disability in other states.

