



Women in Adult & Vocational Education
Submission to the
Senate Standing Committee on Education & Employment Inquiry

*Current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system,
and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.*

About WAVE

WAVE is a national network of women involved in Vocational Education and Training (VET), adult education and the broad field of work-related education and training. WAVE provides seminars & workshops, research, policy advocacy and advice, as well as networking on an international, national and state/territory basis. WAVE is supported within each state/territory by local representation that in turn contributes collaboratively to national events and governance.

Initially known as the Network of Women in Further Education (NOW in FE), WAVE was formed in 1987, the first and only national, autonomous, non-government organisation for Australian women in the adult, community and vocational education and training sector.

Access & Attainment for Students with disability in the school system

For the purposes of this submission, WAVE includes comment on tertiary education to Certificate II at TAFE colleges and VET within secondary schools.

a. current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support;

Students in the education system continue to be subject to the ‘soft bigotry of low expectation’¹ which is singling them out for special treatment, preventing their proper integration, isolating them within the school system and preventing them realising their full potential.

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities forms an underpinning basis in consideration of the right of every child to education on a free and equal basis with others. General and vocational education *should be available and accessible to every child*, including offering financial assistance where this is needed. Higher education is included to be available according to capacity. The Articles of the CRPD are reflected in the National Disability Strategy which has ‘Learning and Skills’ as one of its 6 outcome areas.

In addition, the CRPD includes a specific article (Article 6: Women) which draws attention to the multiple discriminations experienced by women with disabilities. Gender is therefore a cross-cutting issue in every Article of the CRPD, and this should be reflected in policy and research design. At present it is not.

Despite these obligations and those outlined in the Disability Standards for Education under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1991*, women and girls with disabilities do not have equal access to education. Only 9% of students who attain Year 12 level are students with disabilities, whereas 20% of all students obtaining a Year 10 certificate are students with disabilities. This latter percentage approximately parallels the % of young people with disabilities in the population². The attrition rates between Year 10 and Year 12 indicate that levels of support in the final two years of school are grossly inadequate.

¹ Michael Gerson, speechwriter to George W Bush in speech to the NAACP, 2000: giving extraordinary consideration to individuals or groups that are considered lacking in some way is ‘soft bigotry’ because it prejudices them as less capable than the norm and thus unable to perform without special assistance.

² ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2013. Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: summary of findings, 2012. ABS cat. no. 4430.0. Canberra: ABS.

The Disability Standards for Education have not resulted in major gains for students with disabilities, with 10% of students still in special schools, one quarter attending special classes with mainstream school and almost one quarter have been refused enrolment at some time.³

b. the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;

There are multi-faceted benefits for improving the educational outcomes for women with disabilities. At present women with disabilities are over represented in the lowest income quintiles. Although greater in number than men with disabilities, only 40% are on the DSP. In addition only 40% of people accessing disability supports under the National Disability Agreement are women. The areas of unmet need are greater for women with disabilities than for men, and women experience disproportionate levels of social isolation within the community.⁴ Power imbalances associated with their marked disadvantage means that the incidence and prevalence of violence, assault and abuse against women with disabilities is amongst the highest of any group in Australia.

Although their post year 10 educational attainment is generally higher than for men with disabilities, their labour force participation rate is markedly lower (49% compared to 60%)⁵ and their unemployment rates are nearly twice that for men with disabilities (8.9% compared to 5.3%).⁶ There is a strong link between environmental factors, social disadvantage and comorbidity with drug and alcohol abuse and mental health issues.⁷ The social and economic cost to individuals and to the community is extremely large.

Gender and disability discrimination combine to mean that employment opportunities for women with disabilities are lower than for men with disabilities. All these factors point to the need for greater access to postyear-10 employment-ready courses for women with disabilities.

³ Children with Disabilities Australia, 2015 *Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*, Submission June 2015

⁴ Review of Government Services 2012 & ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2013. Disability, ageing and Carers, Australia: summary of findings, 2012. ABS cat. no. 4430.0. Canberra: ABS.

⁵ Unemployment figures

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Cat. No. 4326.0; and

Degenhardt, L et al; *What is comorbidity and Why does it occur?* Chap. 2 in Comorbid mental disorders and substance use disorders: epidemiology, prevention and treatment, Department of Health 2013

There are approximately 830,000 women with mild to moderate disabilities (SDAC 2012). These women need minimal assistance and will most likely not be eligible for Individual (Support) Packages through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). They may be able to access occasional supports under the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building funding framework currently under development. Women with disabilities in this group are also most likely to have the capacity to participate in the labour market. As outlined above, current participation rates are extremely low, and their need for targeted education-to-employment programs.

By using special measures that target improving the educational outcomes for women and girls with disabilities, especially in the final two years of schooling and in promoting their access to TAFE, there will ultimately be improvement in their employment and economic status.

Considering those students with profound and severe levels of disability, at present many of those with Intellectual Disability leave school with low levels of literacy and numeracy. There are limited pathways for them to continue lifelong learning which is afforded to non-disabled adults. In the immediate post school years places need to be made available for TAFE courses in which teaching is done by qualified practitioners. In contrast, many Disability or Vocational Education and Training Registered Training Organisations provide ‘Life Skills’ programs which are quite likely to be taught by people without literacy/numeracy teaching expertise. Having been inadequately prepared for the labour market in secondary school, education discrimination continues post school and further limits the students’ ability to acquire job-ready proficiency.

Ongoing education in literacy/numeracy is not a funded item under the NDIS, and needs to be provided through the Education/TAFE system.

The cost to the individual and to society is significant, with people with cognitive impairment being locked out of the labour market, therefore impoverished, dependent and where not appropriately supported, being over-represented in the criminal justice system.

c. the impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students;

Training for teachers delivered through e-learning self-paced modules had an overall positive effect on the understanding and standard of teaching provided by mainstream staff in

integrated classroom settings. However, there was no gender component to the content of the training.

In the rollout of the programs, there were technical issues encountered which were barriers to the uptake and effectiveness of this form of training, so that its maximum effectiveness was not achieved during the 2012-2014 timeframe.⁸ Funding is needed for updating of the modules and continuation of the program. Moreover there is anecdotal evidence is that funding for individual students and/or for assistive technologies did not ‘follow the student’ as proposed, so that the best outcomes were still only obtained where parents had capacity to maintain vigilance.

In effect best practice inclusive teaching should be available for all students with disabilities in Australia. As well as collaboration and cooperation with parents, students, teachers, staff and community and a well-designed curriculum it also shows the benefits of professionally trained staff and the ability to cater to each student with student-centred learning⁹.

For sustained improvement there needs to be changes to the teacher training curriculum to include more stringent and more comprehensive training in adaptive curriculum design and delivery (rather than “special Education”) because ultimately success in an integrated classroom is dependent on the teachers’ ability to manage diverse learning styles and levels of need. Success is also dependent on funding for Learning Support Assistants.

All types of training should contain information on gender, and the intersection of gender and disability, and on respectful relationships and sexuality for students with disabilities.

d. the future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government’s decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017;

Under the Review of Funding for Schooling (2010), Gonski identified that changes were needed to develop a fair, effective and sustainable system which catered for all children regardless of ability. A boost to funding through a targeted loading for students with disabilities was

⁸ ACT Government, More Support for Students with Disabilities Program report, viewed online at: <https://education.gov.au/more-support-students-disabilities>

⁹ Butler, E., Elaine Butler & Associates, European Masters in Lifelong Learning, Policy & Management, Senior Lecturer in Education, Uni SA 1984-2008, Personal Communication,

proposed, and is still under development. The design of this scheme must be continued, with parents of students with disabilities included in the consultations.¹⁰

There are a number of other indexations in use in the states and territories. It is essential that the development of this loading is not disadvantaged by indexing to CPI.

e. the progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;

Implementation of the needs-based funding system must have particular focus on the situation for students with disabilities in regional, rural and remote (RRR) settings. Currently, gaining access to support hinges on having a needs assessment undertaken by an accredited person. In many RRR areas suitably accredited assessors are not readily available. Anecdotal evidence is that in RRR settings, there is over-use of medication with some students. In addition, transport remains a problem for students to access medical and counselling appointments.¹¹

f. The progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability;

and

g. how possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability;

Some progress is being made with the collection and reporting of gender disaggregated data. This needs to be publicly available. Commissioning of targeted research into the educational achievements of women and girls with disabilities is needed. It is important that researchers are able to gain access to raw numbers as well as published charts in areas relating to gender, disabilities, multicultural background and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

The collection of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) remains problematic despite the systemisation of the collection of a national data set. There are sufficient differences across different systems and between different schools to make the database collection method unreliable in terms of its usability for policy and program design. An

¹⁰ D Gonski et al. 2011, *Review of funding for schooling: Final report*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.xii, quoted in Children with Disabilities Australia, Submission to the Review of Education Standards.

¹¹Blackwell, C., Teacher Community Services Lismore TAFE, Personal Communication

underlying problem is that there is no single nationally accepted definition of inclusive education.

Many parents have not heard of the NCCD, and the majority of those that have heard of it report that their child/ren had not been included in the data collection.¹².

Consideration could be given to setting up two data linkage programs, one which would combine the NCCD data set with that of child care, and a second to combine NCCD with youth justice data set. This would enable better understanding of the pre-school and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities, similar to information already gained or under way in Children's Services data projects undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).¹³

h. what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools;

At present we are not good at tracking the academic progress of students with Intellectual Disabilities or who use AADs. The very existence of the individual learning plans for students, whilst commendable for the individual, make comparisons across the system difficult and impractical.

Segregation of students within schools does not constitute inclusive education. The mere presence of a child in a mainstream classroom does not constitute inclusion. Rather inclusive education means that each child is supported according to their needs, and that achievements are recognized and valued as part of the whole class learning environment.

i. the early education of children with disability; and

Parents report feeling rejected and excluded by schools, and that principals and teachers project the idea that the school holds all the relevant expertise. Yet there are many examples where parents do have the expertise to maximise their child's learning without physical, chemical or other interventions. Instead, within the school system there are records of children being placed in sensory rooms, and of a doctor advising that a certain level of medication would be needed in order for a child to be able to 'stay in the classroom with others'. (The parents withdrew their child in response to this advice.)

¹² Children with Disabilities Australia, *2015 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*, Submission June 2015

¹³ Australian government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare AIHW, *Australia's Welfare 2015*

j. any other related matters.

Career advice in schools needs improvement. Girls and women with disabilities lack good advice to enable them to explore different careers and pathways while at school. Opportunities for work experience for girls with disabilities are limited and limiting. There are low expectations about their abilities and they do not get encouragement to think about careers. Thus they tend to gravitate to low paid part time short term casual jobs.

Evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics is that the number of *special schools* across Australia has increased by 17% between 1999 and 2013, whilst at the same time the total number of schools has increased by only 3%. In contrast, the international trend is to improve all aspects of mainstream schooling. Access to mainstream schooling is a human rights issue with Article 24 outlining the obligations of States Parties to provide reasonable accommodation within the general education system for students with disabilities.¹⁴ Further, Paragraph 5 makes special mention of the provision of tertiary education: *States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.*

Bibliography

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¹⁴ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities , Article 24. Para. 2(d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;