Vision Australia
Blindness. Low Vision. Opportunity.

Vision Australia submission

Royal Commission into violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability

Submission to: Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Education Issues Paper

Submitted to: DRCenquiries@royalcommission.gov.au

Date: 20 December 2019

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Summary

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commission's review into Violence, Neglect, Abuse or Exploitation of People with Disability: Education Paper.

Australia's education system is failing to meet the needs of people who are blind or have low vision. Over the past few years, Vision Australia staff have received multiple cases from university students experiencing accessibility barriers when using online learning environments.

As a result, we completed a small scale research study into the barriers to online learning experienced by university students who are blind or have low vision. This was essential to understand the breadth of the issue, particularly in the absence of research in this area.

Vision Australia's Online but Off Track report records the experiences of 35 participants, who used a range of assistive technologies, and studied at 24 of Australia's 37 public universities. With few exceptions, participants reported that they had encountered significant accessibility barriers when using online learning environments. In some cases, these barriers resulted in participants abandoning their studies, while many others found studying extremely stressful, difficult and unrewarding.
Vision Australia is also submitting anecdotal feedback for the Commission's review on:

- Inconsistent braille instruction in schools, despite braille being key to literacy for people who are blind and for those whose level of vision is insufficient for them to use print effectively.
- The lack of qualified braille teachers for school students.
- Inconsistent access to braille technology as a student progresses through the education system.
- The exclusion of students who are blind or have low vision from benchmarked skills tests.

In our submission to the Royal Commission, it is important to note that Vision Australia is only sharing some of the systemic barriers in education. There are multiple other barriers such as the lack of professional placement opportunities for university students studying subjects like social work or the general lack of curricular material in accessible formats that have not been covered in our submission.

Even though we are highlighting just some of the barriers preventing students who are blind or have low vision from obtaining equal access to education, just based on these significant barriers alone, it is evident that major changes in the education system and associated government policies are required to develop a more inclusive education system.

Based on our findings, our recommendations to improve the education experience for students who are blind or have low vision include:

- Amendments to the Disability Standards for Education to protect the rights of students who are blind or have low vision.
- Universities must adopt and enforce the Australian Standards AS EN301.549:2016 Accessibility Requirements Suitable for Public Procurement of ICT Products and Services.

- Adequate training and resources to meet the needs of students who are blind or have low vision and support staff.

Creating an inclusive education experience will have a significant positive impact on the lives of people who are blind or have low vision. Following the evidence based "social determinants of health and wellbeing", Vision Australia believes that if a person who is blind or has low vision achieves in education at a level comparable to their sighted peers, then;

- there is a greater likelihood that employment will follow and if employment is achieved, and lifelong education continues, that person will succeed in a career;
- that leads to that individual having the opportunity to be an independent contributor to their community; and
- through this independence gain a higher level of social inclusion.

Please note, the individuals who shared their experiences did so anonymously and are uncontactable. Names have been changed for privacy reasons.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia provides services to more than 26,000 people who are blind or have low vision every year. In particular, we provide:

- Early childhood and children's services for those aged 0 to 18 years including paediatric services, counselling, occupational therapy and speech therapy
- Adaptive technology advice and training
- Orientation and mobility instruction
- Information in a range of formats that are accessible to people who are blind or have low vision, including braille, DAISY audio and large print
- Library services
- Employment services.

Our services lead to outcomes in the areas of:

- Education
- Employment
- Independence
- Social inclusion.

What are some of the underlying causes of issues and barriers (outlined in section 2)? How do these issues and barriers link to or influence the experiences of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation by people with disability in education and learning environments?

Online learning

The study conducted by Vision Australia revealed there are multiple systemic barriers linked to students who are blind or have low vision being deprived from experiencing equal access to education, as summarised below.

Inaccessible online learning platforms at universities

Online learning environments have not been designed to include all students and accessibility is a growing concern. The research found that accessibility barriers students experience occur across the Australian university sector and exist in most online learning platforms.

They are equally present for students who use synthetic speech and/or braille assistive technology as for those who use screen magnification software. Some barriers are "built in" to the environment itself, while others are the result of poor design choices and the use of inaccessible content.

A recurring theme in the conversations we have had with university students who are blind is the difficulty in obtaining braille materials. Often this is due to a belief among university staff that braille is obsolete and optional, instead of the primary literacy medium that it is.

Students with vision impairment will access the curriculum through a variety of different mediums that they have been taught throughout their education to date. Adaptive technology; technology used to provide access for those with a disability is essential for many students with vision impairment.

Forty-one percent of participants used adaptive technology related to screen enlargement, such as ZoomText and Windows Magnifier. The remaining participants used synthetic speech or braille-based technology such as Jaws for Windows, NVDA (both screen-reading software) and the Braillenote Touch (a refreshable braille notetaker based on the Android operating system). A small number of participants relied solely on the Mac and its built-in accessibility features (Voiceover and Zoom).

An important implication of this finding is that universities must consider the range of technologies current and potential students use, and avoid the assumption that all students who have low vision will use, say, ZoomText, or that all people who are blind will use Jaws.

Inadequate support from staff

The accessibility barriers that are presented by online learning platforms themselves are exacerbated by the inconsistent provision of disability support services.

In some cases these services are provided by staff who lack a detailed understanding of the needs of, and the technologies available for, students who are blind or have low vision. The lack of support also extends to the unwillingness of lecturers to make changes to course delivery formats to improve accessibility.

The following representative quotes from research participants illustrate the extent, severity and impact of the barriers to online learning.

Feedback from participants included:

> "Although the university has a disability office, they are of little use other than special exam provisions."

And,

> "When I email them [the Disability Services staff] about some assistance I need, I generally just get an automated out-of-office reply and it sometimes takes weeks before I actually get to speak with someone. In that time things have generally become more difficult for me because I haven't received the assistance."

Another participant provided this comment:

> "I have had quite a bit of difficulty accessing online books as I cannot copy and paste them to view them in a larger font. I have found the disability support department are not very understanding of low vision and I am often required to provide medical certificates for assignment extensions. I am feeling like I am not helped much and it is only my determination that will help me complete my degree."

In order to access disability support services provided by universities, students are almost always required to provide medical evidence of their disability, as well as advice from medical practitioners about the specific supports that they may require. In conversations, a number of participants expressed their surprise and frustration that the support services they needed to use during their university studies were all predicated and administered according to a medical model of disability, when the social model is widely accepted in other areas of social policy is widely accepted and preferred. One participant explained:

> "I go to my doctor when I'm sick, or need a flu shot. She knows what my blood pressure and cholesterol are, but, honestly, she wouldn't have a clue about what assistance I need at uni. And yet she's the one they listen to, rather than me. How can that be person-centred?"

Insufficient Disability Standards for Education

The Disability Standards for Education require education providers to make reasonable adjustments in all aspect of service provision, to the extent that such adjustments do not impose "unjustifiable hardship".

However the Disability Standards for Education lack specificity, and as a result, have been applied inconsistently across the various education sectors. For example, a student may find that one university considers a particular adjustment as "reasonable" whereas another university may refuse to provide exactly the same adjustment, even though both universities believe they are following the Standards.

From our experience, most students are extremely unlikely to challenge a university unless they have some way of knowing that a particular adjustment that they are seeking is reasonable within the context of the Standards. In addition, the Standards do not include a single reference to the importance of braille. This reinforces the erroneous belief that braille is no longer relevant.

Challenges of progressing change across universities

When *Online but Off Track* was released publically in 2018, Vision Australia reviewed opportunities to collaborate with the sector to understand the pathways to help create accessible online learning platforms.

Since releasing the report, we had a number of high level discussions with Higher Education Group, Australian Government Department of Education and have welcomed their feedback on the report and suggestions to move forward.

However, without real investment from governing bodies, including the enforcement of the Australian Standards AS EN301.549:2016 Accessibility Requirements Suitable for Public Procurement of ICT Products and Services, the systemic neglect that university students who are blind or have low endure will remain.

If the university sector remains reluctant to develop a collective approach to addressing this systemic neglect, then the Commonwealth Government must use its influence as a provider of significant amounts of sector funding to mandate the required changes, including the adoption of the Australian Standard AS EN301:549:2016.

We also believe the existing funding model for tertiary students with a disability needs to be reformed. In our experience with people who are blind or have low vision, the implementation of the current funding does not meet the needs of students.

There are examples of students who are blind or have low vision receiving inconsistent and inadequate support under the existing funding arrangements, which in many instances, deeply affects their tertiary experience. It is simply not possible for a student to undertake their studies without the right supports and resources.

The opportunity for government is to implement a funding model that is truly person-centred, and provides adequate flexibility and choice for students to access the supports they require to complete their course at the same level of their peers.

TAFE

We are aware that many of the online learning platforms used by universities are also used by other higher education providers, and are deployed in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, especially the government-run system of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges throughout Australia.[i]

It is therefore very likely that any barriers identified in the university sector are also present at least to the same degree in the VET sector in general, and the TAFE system in particular. Two participants in the research had studied at institutions in the VET sector and their negative experiences did mirror those of participants studying in the university sector. However, the TAFE system is considerably dispersed both in terms of location and administrative responsibility, and we felt that it would be difficult to conduct effective initial research with that system.

We believe that the current research has laid a foundation that could inform future research into the experiences of TAFE students who are blind or have low vision, and that any progress achieved in the university sector in addressing barriers to online learning could lead to similar progress in the TAFE system.

Braille

We believe access to braille skills development, braille reading and writing tools and braille materials is a fundamental right of people who are blind, deafblind, or whose vision is insufficient for them to use print effectively.

Yet students who are blind or have low vision continue to encounter instances where the teaching of braille is either delayed, or not taught at all, despite the potential degenerative nature of the student's eye condition, or in the mistaken belief that the student appears to be 'managing' by using large print text.

In addition, while audio can be a useful tool for accessing information, it is not a replacement for braille since it does not provide direct access to the core elements of literacy and numeracy. Braille and audio are complementary, not competing, ways of accessing information.

Braille will remain essential for people who are blind, deafblind or people whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively, for as long as print is essential to sighted people, and cannot be easily replaced by other technologies. Developments in technology have also made it possible for individual braille users to read and write braille using electronic "refreshable" braille displays and notetaking devices, and to access computers, smartphones and the internet using braille.

Lack of research

We must note that understanding the full extent of the barriers to braille is extremely challenging as there has been no large scale research into the usage of braille since 1986.

Despite this, the anecdotal data collected over the years from the extensive experience of Vision Australia children services and advocacy staff confirms a lack of structure and support to adequately provide this medium of core literacy.

Tricia d'Apice, who is a very experienced and respected educator in the blindness and low vision sector, was awarded a NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarship for her proposal to study the braille literacy skills of children who are braille or dual media users across Australia and New Zealand, and how this compares with sighted peers. She presented the key findings from this study at the 2018 Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities.

We believe her research supports our anecdotal evidence that the lack of an immersive environment around braille is a significant factor in creating the gap between braille and sighted readers. Specifically, if children are not exposed to braille early on and in a consistent manner, like sighted children are to print material, then their proficiency in braille will not develop.

Lack of braille instructors

Access to braille is affected by access to qualified braille instructors – the frequency of their visits to the students and the student's location.

In July 2014, Vision Australia conducted a consultation with 42 braille users, teachers and parents of children who are blind.

Some participants spoke about being taught braille by unqualified and inexperienced teachers when they were at school, while some parents in regional areas mentioned that they were seriously considering moving to a capital city because their child who is blind was not receiving adequate braille instruction at their local school.

Experiences such as this support the general anecdotal knowledge we have developed over the years that students who are blind are generally not provided with the same access to braille teaching that their sighted peers are to print.

Our experience tells us there is a distinct lack of access to appropriately qualified and skilled braille teachers for students who are blind or have low vision across Australia, most notably for students living in regional and remote areas. Case study below:

> Harry is blind and was enrolled into prep at a local school with the intention of becoming a braille user. However, Harry was assigned a visiting teacher who was not fluent in braille. When Harry's parents complained, they were assigned a braille literate visiting teacher who had been supporting a year three student learning to use braille. The year three student was then assigned a visiting teacher who was not braille literate.

Lack of tertiary options for teachers

School students who use braille are further disadvantaged by the lack of effective and comprehensive requirements for tertiary students studying to become special education teachers to

learn and become proficient in the teaching of braille in advanced subject areas such as mathematics, music, science and technology.

Moreover, there does not appear to be adequate mechanisms in place to ensure that specialist braille knowledge is preserved and developed among support teachers once they have completed their initial training, or for balancing the number of specialist braille teachers with reference to the anticipated demand for braille teaching resources.

Inconsistent access to braille technology

Across Australia, there is inconsistent access to braille technology as a student progresses through the education system.

Students are not being given access to the various braille-related technologies that have been developed to meet the needs of students being educated in a digital age. In some instances, they are being required to use an equivalent of a typewriter when the rest of the class is using iPads, even though it is possible to use an iPad and other mainstream devices via braille.

Furthermore, Vision Australia is aware of instances of primary school students having been excluded from classrooms (sent out on the veranda) due to the noise of their braille equipment. In addition to being demoralising for a child, they are being socially excluded from their peers.

As a student progresses through school, the technology should be keeping pace with their needs, the technological progress of the curriculum and with current demands for technology skills.

Vision Australia staff noted that young children are increasingly using netbook computers as early as four or five often for school related activities. However children who are blind or have low vision are not provided with the necessary software and hardware to access these devices, and are thus often behind their peers from a very early age.

Furthermore, when a student who is blind or has low vision reaches high school and has attained braille or print literacy, the adaptive equipment such as braille computerised notetakers, laptops with screen reading or magnification software, need to be provided to cater for the higher volume of material to be accessed, and the way information is accessed. Some barriers result from non-compliance of the core software with accessibility guidelines and standards, while others are the result of poor design choices made by universities when customising the platform, and others result from a lack of awareness or unwillingness from academic staff to provide accessible content.

Exclusion of students from benchmarked skills tests

Another contributing factor in the observed low levels of literacy amongst children who are blind or have low vision is that they are all-too-often excluded from the regular benchmark skills tests such as the NAPLAN test. The school may reach this decision if, for example, the NAPLAN test is not available in the format the student uses in the regular classroom situation.

It is our understanding that for a child not to sit these benchmark tests, the schools must have parents' permission. Yet we see instances where schools have decided there is no need for a student

who is blind or has low vision to sit the tests for such reasons as 'it'll be too hard for them', or 'it'll be demoralising.'

Often the school has effectively decided not to have a student sit the test and the parent and the student are simply advised, rather than consulted as part of the decision-making process. Thus, these children are not being regularly assessed for literacy and numeracy, in order to institute and additional support they may need. Furthermore, data is not being collected about where resources need to be allocated to assist students, or which schools are showing better competency skills for students who are blind or have low vision.

We are also aware of instances where students who are blind or have low vision have been denied access to their preferred equipment or methods of accessing text when sitting their NAPLAN test. It also negatively impacts on students' self-esteem, and leads to further alienation from peers who are at higher levels of competency.

We have also seen instances where teachers when asked about the results of a student's NAPLAN test were unaware of the information, showing a lack of monitoring of students' progress.

Furthermore, we received anecdotal feedback of a year 11 student who is totally blind exhibiting poor levels of comprehension whose parents had been strenuously attempting without success, to have this addressed with teachers. It transpired that the student had not sat the year nine NAPLAN test, and consequently did not have the option of a literacy plan, and the funds for additional support to implement a literacy plan.

What measures and mechanisms prevent violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of students with disability in education and learning environments?

Disability Standards for Education

The Disability Standards for Education were introduced in 2005, and have been subject to two periodic reviews.

Our overwhelming impression from interacting with clients is that little has changed for students who are blind or have low vision as a result of the introduction of the Standards. Deficiencies in the Standards have been well-documented as part of the two reviews, but little, if anything, appears to have been done to address them. The Standards need to be amended as to clarify the meaning of "accessible" and "accessibility" in the context of curricular material and online.

The Standards must require education providers to take a proactive approach to ensuring that curriculum materials and technical equipment are accessible to students with disability. In addition, the Standards need to be amended to include specific assertion of the importance of braille as a primary literacy, communications and learning medium for people who are blind or have a significant vision impairment.

Australian Standards AS EN301.549:2016

In regards to improving the online experience for university students who are blind or have low vision, it is important that accessibility is incorporated into systems in a consistent and

comprehensive way, and that accessibility testing, using various combinations of assistive technology, is undertaken during the deployment of such systems.

Universities must adopt and enforce the Australian Standards AS EN301.549:2016 Accessibility Requirements Suitable for Public Procurement of ICT Products and Services. The Standard is comprehensive, and should be universally adopted by the university sector as a way of ensuring the accessibility of online learning systems and other ICT products and services.

In addition, if online learning systems are designed from the outset to meet inclusive design and accessibility benchmarks, there is less likelihood a university will need to provide students with an adjustment.

Staff training

It is critical disability liaison staff and lecturers involved in providing services to students with a disability, and especially those who rely heavily on adaptive technology, receive the required ongoing training, and are monitored in their delivery of their support to students.

A further consequence of the lack of specific training resources is that universities often do not have a good understanding of the accessibility of the software that they require their students to use. They are thus unable to engage in any systematic approaches with software developers to have accessibility barriers fixed.

Access to training resources for students

We suggest providing students with training for them to learn how to use their adaptive technology with the specialised software at universities. If universities are expecting students to use online platforms, in addition to ensuring they are accessible, institutions should provide training modules, ensuring students who are blind or have low vision understand how and where these tools can be applied.

Universities and advocacy organisations should develop resources for students to become acculturated to a rights-based model of disability service provision, at the same time recognising that the assertion of rights cannot occur if large institutional bureaucracies fail to embed a rights-based, student-centric, culture among all staff.

What role does or could inclusive education play in preventing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation in society?

One important reason that full and independent access to online learning and support from staff is so important for students who are blind or have low vision is the strong link between university education and employment.

A report conducted by Vision Australia in 2012 confirmed that over 58% of the blind and low vision community were not working. Furthermore, a 2018 research study conducted by the CNIB Foundation (Canada), Vision Australia and the Blind Foundation of New Zealand found that people with sight loss are significantly less likely to be employed full time compared to their sighted counterparts in Australia.

That same study confirmed that Australia had the lowest full time employment rate among people who are blind or have low vision at 24%. The full time employment rate among the general public in Australia is exactly double that of people with sight loss.

Our research also revealed that 75% of people who are blind or have low vision who also have tertiary education are employed. This connection emphasises the strong positive impact of higher education in improving job opportunities for people who are blind or have low vision. It is instructive and encouraging to observe that this figure of 75% compares favourably with the 70.9% of university graduates who were in full time employment four months after completing their degree.

In 2016, Vision Australia conducted supplementary research with a specific focus on employer attitudes to the employment of people who are blind or have low vision.

An employer attitudes survey was distributed to a cross-section of Australian businesses. The findings indicate that although there may be a willingness to consider someone who is blind or has low vision for employment, employer attitudes are often negatively impacted by many factors. These include things such as:

- the actual or perceived cost and effort of making reasonable workplace adjustments
- incompatibility between IT systems and adaptive technology; and,
- the lack of awareness of and difficulty using government funding options that are available.

Therefore it is critical the barriers to obtaining a tertiary education for blind and low vision people are eliminated, as those who have obtained tertiary qualifications have a much greater chance of being socially included via employment than those who have not.

Experiences that illustrate the issue

As part of the research into the experience of barriers to online learning for university students, participants were invited to outline their views. The following quotes from research participants illustrate the extent, severity and impact of the barriers to online learning:

Anecdote 1

"I felt humiliated and belittled because I could not check my own assignment grades like everyone else because that particular function of the online software is inaccessible to people who use screen-reading software", and, "I was told that the online discussion board was accessible, but I found that there were 200 links on the page and I couldn't actually find anything I needed because of all the clutter", and "some of my lecturers were really good and helped me with those online activities that were inaccessible, but others made no effort at all and told me it was my problem", and, "I asked the disability services people for assistance with the online stuff, but it took them six weeks to get back to me and by then I was too far behind in my course to continue with it".

Anecdote 2

"As a student I'm just one of thousands, and the admin people see me as just another small brick in the wall. If I can't access a lecture, they still sleep comfortably at night – it's just a job for them, but it's my life that is affected."

Anecdote 3

"I find so many barriers at university that I don't know where to start when I try to write about them. One barrier kind of leads to another, and you can't write about one without linking all of them in. When I can't access one particular component online, it means that I don't have the time or energy to persevere with trying to access others. It's a cascade of barriers that never stops and never gives me any respite. It often feels like that every time I press the power button on my laptop I'm going to find barriers that will steal my time and sap my strength. There aren't any barriers for me when talking on the phone."

Anecdote 4

"I spent years at university constantly trying to overcome barriers – online, offline, you name it - and constantly battling discriminatory prejudicial and hurtful attitudes and behaviour from support staff who were employed in roles where they should have known better. I'm finished now, and I never want to set foot inside a university again as long as I live. I'm totally repulsed by the idea of further study – it was a deeply traumatic experience for me and I have emotional scars that may never fully heal."

Anecdote 5

"AWFUL. The uni website is very difficult to see. Also I spend so much TIME LOOKING FOR THINGS - that makes for frustration and exhaustion. Can't find things and then I can't do what I need with the information. Many online modules and forms are not able to be made accessible because of the great number of choices and pathways depending on your answers. Also there is a mismatch between assistive devices and software and being able to use them to do the uni work...."

Anecdote 6

"I can't use the discussion boards at all: I email comments to my lecturers and they post them for me. I can't complete online tasks like other students."

What barriers or impediments are there to identifying, disclosing and reporting violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation in education and learning settings?

The Disability Standards for Education is not an effective advocacy tool to achieve a timely or equitable outcome for students who are blind or have low vision and their families.

Many students feel they may jeopardise their relationship with an education institution or become victimised by their education provider if they refer to the Standards in negotiating adjustments or progress a Disability Discrimination Act complaint using the Standards to the Australian Human

Rights Commission; the stress, time and potential high costs are significant barriers. This is complicated by the fact that the student/family 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 complaint beyond conciliation to the Federal Court of Australia if a resolution is not found. 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."

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 a medical certificate to justify their need for each individual adjustment.

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