Blind Citizens Australia

Submission to the

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

By the

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Submitted 26 April 2002

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1. Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia is the united voice of blind and vision impaired Australians. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. We have over 3,000 individual members and fifteen organisational members. In addition, we have a strong affiliation with parent groups and the professional association of teachers of blind and vision impaired children.

This submission draws on our experiences as blind students in primary, secondary and tertiary education and as parents of children who are blind. Our Policy Statement on Education for People Who Are Blind or Vision Impaired forms part of this submission and is attached at Appendix A.

2. Terminology

In this submission, unless otherwise indicated, the word "blind" is used to include both people who are totally blind and people who are vision impaired.

Unless otherwise stated, references to "the Department", are to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.

3. Overview

While pre-tertiary education is primarily a state/territory responsibility, it is incumbent on the Commonwealth Government to exercise leadership in this area to ensure that a minimum standard of education is available to all people who are blind, irrespective of where they live or their choice of either public or private education. Evidence available to Blind Citizens Australia suggests we are far from achieving this equality - services and programs for people who are blind vary markedly from state to state. This submission addresses these differences wherever possible and we would be pleased to provide more information on these differences if asked to do so.

Blind Citizens Australia believes that the Commonwealth, through its policy setting, national co-ordination and funding roles has the potential to act strategically to make a real difference to access to education for people who are blind. We hope through this submission to have an opportunity to appear before the Committee in person to explain our education concerns and how Commonwealth action can ensure full participation in education for blind people.

Rather than address the needs of indigenous people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and people who live in rural and remote areas separately, we have integrated these into the body of our submission.

4. Key Points

- Improved support for braille literacy for children and adults who are blind is urgently required
- Staff supporting students who are blind need greater training
- More needs to be done to assist students who are blind to make the transition from education to work
- Students who are blind require greater assistance to participate equally in extra curricular activities at school
- Services for children who are blind living in rural and remote areas are particularly inadequate
- The equipment and training needs of students who are blind are not being met
- Visiting and specialist teacher services provided for children who are blind are generally insufficient to address need
- There is a critical shortage of teachers trained in the needs of children with disabilities, particularly teachers with specialised knowledge of vision impairment
- Minimum standards for the training of visiting and specialist teachers should be introduced
- Commonwealth legislation to reform copyright laws and facilitate the access of blind students to instructional material is urgently needed
- Primary and secondary students in the private sector are not receiving the same standard of assistance as students in the public sector
- Funding for the provision of materials in alternative formats to students needs to be urgently increased

- The needs of students enrolled in tafe or private post-compulsory education are not adequately addressed
- The introduction of the DDA Standard for Education should be expedited

Each item of the terms of reference is addressed in detail below.

5. Criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

Each state and territory has a different process for determining types and levels of disability. This makes it difficult to gain a national perspective on the quality of education received by children who are blind.

Consultations with our members indicate that while disability-related needs are generally being identified successfully, the various education systems, for a variety of reasons, are unable to adequately address the needs.

Blind Citizens Australia would make two broad comments about the types of assessment systems that are being used in the primary, secondary and tertiary education systems and their impact on the education of people who are blind. The first relates to the tendency for students' needs to be over or under-estimated, and the second to the usefulness of severity of disability as a measure of need.

We would also bring to the Committee's attention the inadequate recognition of the differences between blindness and print disability in statistical collection and recording.

5.1. Assessing capacity

Whenever assistance is provided on a targeted rather than universal basis, inefficiencies and injustices occur because people must fall on one side of an artificially created cut off point or another. By using a child's level of incapacity as the determiner of whether or not additional support is provided, people are encouraged to under-emphasise their child's capacity.

For example, the Queensland education system uses a process known as "ascertainment" to assess a child's level of disability, which determines how much and what type of support is provided. This process may involve interviews with Guidance Officers, psychometric testing and interviews with parents, teachers, or the student. Only students ascertained at level 5 or 6 receive significant levels of support. Predictably, the desire to have students ascertained at a high level leads to the student's lack of capacity being emphasised, rather than the student's ability. Such a system discourages children from learning to be independent because doing so may put their support at risk.

A targeted system also means that students whose level of functional impairment is assessed as low will obtain only minimal support, for example, a fortnightly/monthly visit from an advisory visiting teacher. The general lack of resources available for students with disabilities means that students who are not assessed as having a high need for support receive far less than they require.

5.2. Disability and support needs

Research suggests that severity of disability is not a useful indicator of support and resource needs. The Department of Education, Science and Training recently commissioned the development of a funding model for the support of students with disabilities in tertiary education. The consultant reviewed research on the relationship between severity of disability and the cost of supporting a student in the tertiary education environment (refer Andrews and Smith (1992) and Jones (1994) reviewed in Pearson (2001)). The research found that "the types of support required by students with disabilities cannot be determined solely by the nature or severity of their disability" (Andrews and Smith (1992) referred in Pearson 2001: 4). Pearson identified that assessing the functional impact of disability provides a more useful indicator than the severity of disability (2001: 39).

The Committee recognised this in the terms of reference for this inquiry by seeking to review the effectiveness of attempts to differentiate between levels of handicap. It is our experience that it is very difficult to develop simple, universal measures that adequately assess the impact of different types of disabilities.

5.2.1.   Recommendation

That the relevant Commonwealth agencies work with the blindness sector to develop measures to assess the support needs of students with disabilities that take adequate account of the impact of blindness and which focus on a child's abilities and potential.

Further that the Commonwealth use its leadership role in education to have such measures adopted and implemented by States and Territories.

5.3. Separating print disability and vision impairment

A final point about defining disability is that the distinction between vision impairment and print disability is rarely acknowledged. Print disability is defined as

- people who are blind or have severe vision impairments;
- people with physical disabilities who cannot hold or manipulate printed materials in standard form;
- people who are deaf or have intellectual disabilities which impair their capacity to learn language;
- people who have lost an understanding of language owing to brain damage; or
- people with a combination of two or more of the above disabilities (Astbrink 1996: http://www.bca.org.au/ebmain.htm)

The lack of accurate data about the number of people who are blind and the number of people with a print disability needs to be addressed as it affects the capacity of government and the community to plan services effectively.

5.3.1.   Recommendation

That Government work with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to obtain accurate data on the incidence of blindness and vision impairment and print disability in the community.

6. The accuracy with which students' disability-related needs are being assessed

From our experience as blind people and as parents of blind children, it is clear that the educational needs of blind children are:

- literacy and numeracy through instruction in braille
- curriculum and instructional materials in accessible formats, that is, braille, large print, electronic and audio
- assistance from itinerant special needs teachers
- training in blindness specific skills, including effective vision use, braille literacy, orientation and mobility, use of assistive technology, daily living skills, study skills and interpersonal skills

In particular, braille is the key to literacy and central to numeracy for many blind people, including children who have lost their sight early in life, and adults who have become blind later in life.

6.1. Braille literacy in primary and secondary school

We refer the Committee to Paragraph 3.9 of our Education Policy Statement and to our submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties Inquiry into Australia's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (attached at Appendix B).

Children learn words, spelling, syntax, grammar punctuation and language through reading. A blind child who is properly instructed in braille and who has braille materials available to him or her can use reading by braille in the same way as a sighted child will use reading by print to acquire knowledge, skills and literacy. A child who is not given adequate braille instruction cannot develop the same competency in literacy as a sighted child. As a result, the child is disadvantaged later in life when he or she has to function in a print literate world competing for educational places and jobs and educating his/her own children. It is not an exaggeration to say that a blind person who does not have sound braille reading and writing skills is functionally illiterate.

It is not possible to acquire a knowledge of words, spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar from reading a book on a audio cassette or by reading by a computer with voice output. Generally, a child who reads by audio cassette or by computer with voice output does not comprehend the material as well as a child who is able to read and write braille competently.

It can be said, generally, that until the 1970s, most blind children would receive quality braille instruction. This could be reasonably assured in an era where blind children did their primary education in special schools for the blind and braille instruction was a valued and crucial component of the curriculum. Today, most blind children go to integrated schools. This is a development which Blind Citizens Australia welcomes and support. However, blind children have paid an educational price for the benefits of social integration. In an integrated setting, there has been a serious decline in the value placed on and the priority given to imbuing a blind child with blindness specific skills such as braille literacy. The result is that blind children today do not have the same opportunities that previous generations had to acquire sound braille skills and literacy.

We are aware, through the involvement of our members in the education of children both as professionals and as parents, that instruction in braille is not always available to children who need it, that children are discouraged from learning braille and are directed to reading by cassette or computer, that teachers are not receiving adequate training in braille and that students are not acquiring proficiency in braille and literacy. We are concerned by the decline in braille literacy we observe among younger blind people and its implications for them in education, employment and daily life.

We are aware of situations in which children attending integrated schools are denied instruction in braille notwithstanding the requests of their parents. Parents are told that their child can learn to read by using audio tapes or a computer with voice output. As outlined above, this is clearly not adequate.

Even where parents have requested braille instruction for their child, the child is often denied instruction in braille because he or she has some useable vision. This is often done on the basis that the child is not blind and the view of medical and educational professionals, including some staff of blindness agencies, is that the child should learn to use his existing vision to the maximum. We do not disagree with the view that a vision

impaired child should be instructed to maximise the benefit of his or her remaining vision. However, we believe that as a general proposition, the child's parents are best placed to know his or her needs. Accordingly, if the parents of a child with some useable vision want him or her to learn braille, the child should have that opportunity. As a mother of a vision impaired child put it, "having my child taught braille is not taking away his sight, it is giving him an extra option".

Blind Citizens Australia argues that braille should be taught to the majority of vision impaired children. Most eye conditions deteriorate with age and it is not uncommon for children with reasonably functional vision to move into adolescence and early-mid adult life and find themselves with no useful vision and with no literacy skills.

The provision of quality braille instruction to blind children in schools should be seen as part of the implementation of the agreed **National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century**. The provision of quality braille instruction to blind children in schools will contribute to the achievement of the goals including:

Goal 1   Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. In particular, when students leave schools they should:

1.1   have the capacity for, and skills in, analysis and problem solving and the ability to communicate ideas and information, to plan and organise activities and to collaborate with others

Goal 2   In terms of curriculum, students should have:

2.1   attained high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum in the compulsory years of schooling encompassing the agreed eight key learning areas:
- the arts;
- English;
- health and physical education;
- languages other than English;
- mathematics;
- science;

- studies of society and environment;
- technology;

and the interrelationships between them

2.2   attained the skills of numeracy and English literacy; such that, every student should be numerate, able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level

Goal 3   Schooling should be socially just, so that:

3.1   students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location

The World Blind Union Committee on Joint Organisational Effort Guidelines for planning the education of a blind child should be implemented:

- if reading or writing are to be taught and if the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school want the child to be taught braille, this should be done;

- if reading and writing are to be taught and if the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school want print to be taught, this should be done;

- If the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school cannot agree, then both braille and print should be taught.

6.1.1.   Recommendation:

The Commonwealth work with Blind Citizens Australia, blindness agencies and State and Territory authorities to develop strategies to create more positive attitudes towards braille instruction in schools, to improve training in braille and the support to visiting teachers and to find ways of funding these initiatives.

6.2. Adult braille literacy

People who have lost their sight as adults, as the majority have, and can no longer read print are effectively illiterate. Braille returns literacy skills to these people. Issues of literacy are particularly pertinent for blind people from non-English speaking backgrounds. People struggling with English as a second language do not feel confident to study the language in an alternative format.

Unfortunately, most Australians who become blind as adults do not have the opportunity to learn braille. There are few adult braille instructors in Australia and no services available to people in rural and remote Australia.

In addition, people studying a non-print based form of literacy education are not eligible for the Literacy and Numeracy Training Supplement which was announced in the 2001-2002 Federal budget because these courses are not accredited by the Department of Education, Science and Training.

6.2.1.   Recommendation:
The Government work with Blind Citizens Australia and blindness agencies to increase the availability of braille instruction for adults.

6.2.2.   Recommendation:
Non-print based literacy education providers should be assisted to develop accredited courses and thereby make students eligible for the Literacy and Numeracy Training Supplement.

6.2.3.   Recommendation:
Non-print based literacy education providers should be assisted to develop accredited courses specifically targeted at people from non-English speaking backgrounds. A person studying these courses should qualify for the relevant educational allowances.

6.3. Accurate assessment of the needs of tertiary students

Disability support staff in universities are regularly increasing the burden on students who are blind through poor assessment and planning. (Funding of the provision of study materials in alternative formats is addressed in greater detail in Section 8.5.)

A key role of disability support staff in relation to students who are blind is arranging for the provision of educational materials in alternative formats. The formats that are best for a student will depend on a number of factors including the student's eye condition, their expertise with and access to technology, the nature and complexity of the material to be read (for example, background reading for a history subject versus complex mathematical formulas) and original material's format (for example newspaper articles do not scan easily).

In some cases, formats may be unsuitable for a student, irrespective of the type of material being studied. For example, many people who are blind suffer from eye fatigue, a condition which makes reading for an extended period extremely painful. A student with this condition may be able to read large print, however, would not be able to read lengthy or multiple documents produced in that format without experiencing fatigue and risking damage to their eyes. To maximise their learning, a student might make use of three different formats.

In first semester 2002, Blind Citizens Australia has supported several students who have received inadequate support from their university disability units. The main problems experienced by the students are:

- poor understanding of the impact of vision impairment and print disability on format choice - staff are producing all of the student's material in the same format, without reference to the student's needs or the appropriateness of the format
- a lack of understanding of the time it takes a student to produce and read study material for themselves. One student was expected to scan and read via synthetic voice technology an entire textbook. The student spent every moment that she was not in class scanning text, which lead to fatigue and limited her ability to study.
- universities seeking to use electronic formatting, irrespective of its appropriateness, because it is the least expensive option
- staff expecting students to contact publishers to ascertain if a text is available in an alternative format. This is properly the responsibility of the staff member.

To meet students' needs, careful planning and assessment is required. Ideally, a student's needs for an upcoming semester should be determined

by the end of the previous semester. There may be some cases where this cannot be achieved; when, for example, a subject is new. In the majority of cases however the general format, if not the exact content, of the materials a student will be expected to have for a subject will remain the same each semester.

6.3.1.   Recommendation

Disability support staff should receive greater training in the skills required to assess the needs of students who are blind, including formatting.

6.3.2.   Recommendation

The Department should work with Blind Citizens Australia and other disability organisations to develop national standard core competencies for tertiary disability support staff.

6.4. Making the transition between education and work

People who are blind are under-employed and unemployed at a rate far higher than their peers. This is particularly evident in relation to graduates, with the rate of employment for graduates with disabilities far greater than that of the general population (37% compared to 9% in 1996) (Mungovan and O'Day 1996 cited in Boardman 2001: 2).

Boardman has identified several factors contributing to this including:
- the lack of work skills and related experience
- the lack of skills for career planning
- the lack of strategies for managing the disclosure of disability
- low self confidence
- discrimination in the workplace
- the poor level of assistance from graduate career services
- the low rate of access to career services (2001: 3-8).

Our consultations also identified that school guidance counsellors are not well equipped to assist blind students make career choices. Advice is too often informed by prejudice and made in ignorance of what blind people are able to do with the benefit of training and equipment. Strategies to improve the transition from study to work will need to address each of these factors.

In his report **An Investigation of Effective Practice in Assisting Students with Disabilities' Transition into their Post Graduate Careers**, Boardman (2001) reviewed international practice in the area of support to students with disabilities and recommended a range of measures to improve the skills of career counsellors and to increase the accessibility of the labour market.

Blind Citizens Australia used to run an Employment Information Service - a national mentoring program that matched people who are blind with skills and work experience in particular areas, with people who are blind seeking to gain skills or employment in that area. The program was highly successful but unfortunately, it did not receive ongoing funding and had to be abandoned.

6.4.1.   Recommendation

Blind Citizens Australia receive ongoing funding to re-establish its Employment Information Service.

6.4.2.   Recommendation

The Department review the provision of career guidance to students with disabilities in consultation with people with disabilities and industry representatives.

6.5. Students who are blind and work experience

While not strictly within the terms of reference of this inquiry, Blind Citizens Australia would bring to the Committee's attention the obstacles that prevent students who are blind acquiring work experience, either through short term, part time or unpaid work, or through school sponsored work trials. Many blind people complete their education without obtaining any experience in employment. This greatly disadvantages blind graduates in the labour market. Access to opportunities for work experience is even more restricted for people living in rural and remote areas.

People who are blind often require a degree of workplace modifications to perform a job, for example, the installation of screen reading software. The Department of Family and Community Services funds the Workplace Modifications Program which provides funds for modifications for people in paid work, however it does not extend to unpaid work. Furthermore,

employers are unlikely to consider an employee who requires modifications for positions that are unskilled and/or casual, or are short term.

6.5.1.   Recommendation

The Workplace Modifications Program be expanded to cover people with a disability engaged in short term, part-time and unpaid work. Any equipment or software purchased through the Program should remain with the person should they find full-time paid work. Technical support and training for the equipment should be provided to agencies and individuals.

7. Effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

7.1. Availability of early intervention programs

Early intervention programs are particularly important for young blind children. This is a time for the beginning of concept development and parents need to be supported to help their child learn about the world. In addition, many blind preschoolers are tactile defensive, that is, in the absence of the reassurance of sight, the child is easily frightened when his/her hands come into contact with unfamiliar surfaces such as gravel. In these cases the child needs encouragement and assistance to explore their environment safely. As 80% of what we learn is through our vision, the absence of vision means that many skills, concepts and behaviours that a sighted child would learn incidentally, need to be specifically taught to a blind child. Exposure to a range of early experiences is critical.   Early and pre-Braille skills enhance a child's readiness to learn Braille and need to be specifically taught prior to the child attending school.

Early intervention programs have been shown to be effective and are readily available in capital cities and regional areas of most states. However, in rural and remote areas, families would rarely see an early intervention specialist. In addition, the majority of families rely on ophthalmologists to put them in touch with appropriate facilities to obtain support for their blind child. While this works well in some cases, there are many situations where the ophthalmologist visits rarely and little is known of available services. This may mean that some time elapses before families

are put in touch with appropriate support at a period when the family is in need of extra support, for example, counselling for the parents or support to address behavioural concerns of the child.

7.1.1.   Recommendation

That the Department work with State and Territory Governments and blindness agencies to ensure that early intervention programs are available to all children who are blind who require them.

7.2. Accommodating the needs of students who are blind in curriculum development

We refer the Committee to paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6 of our Education Policy Statement.

Learning braille takes time and perseverance and it can be challenging for children to learn this complex skill in a mainstream environment when their sighted peers are learning print. Teachers trained in vision impairment have reasonably regular contact with blind students, but it is not the same as having a teacher who can read and write braille present all the time. Many children learning braille have withdrawal time built into their curriculum to address these literacy needs.

There are also a number of important life skills for a blind/vision impaired child to learn. These include orientation and mobility skills, braille music, daily living skills, technology skills, numeracy skills using tools such as the abacus and map-reading skills. These are all in addition to the regular school curriculum. It is difficult for special educators to balance these needs with those of the regular curriculum. In most states, some periods of withdrawal from the regular classroom will be used to learn these skills. However, it is clear that there is simply not enough time for a child to become proficient in all areas of the regular school curriculum as well as blindness specific skills. The availability of teachers and teachers aids who have even a basic knowledge of braille is addressed later in the submission.

7.2.1.   Recommendation

That the Department and Commonwealth State and Territory curriculum development agencies work together to ensure that blind children have

non-discriminatory access to the core curriculum and to extra curricular activities, including work experience and sport and recreation activities and receive the necessary support services to make this possible.

7.2.2.   Recommendation

In addition to the core curriculum, students who are blind have access to instruction in the blindness specific skills they require to participate in education.

8. Access and adequacy of funding and support in both public and private sectors

8.1. Overview

We refer the Committee to paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3 of our Education Policy statement.

The funding and support available to students with vision impairment across the country varies dramatically, but for all it is far from satisfactory. Victoria and NSW are significantly better resourced than other states, nevertheless, even in these states there is a high level of unmet need. In all states, the services and support a student receives depends greatly on where they live and which school they attend.

Most students who are blind have extremely limited access to teacher aide time. With increased school-based management, principals can allocate money for the blind child as he or she wishes. Teacher or teacher aide time may not be seen as a priority. Many private schools just do not have the funding to meet the needs of blind students. In the public sector, there is also inconsistent access to specialist teacher assistance. In both public and private sectors, parents increasingly feel that they have to provide more and more support and frequently they feel incapable of doing so.

Our consultations revealed a strong sense that students with strong advocates receive the best support and that choice of school and state of residence dramatically affect provision of support services.

Arrangements for who provides support vary from state to state. The state departments of education provide the majority of assistance, with blindness agencies such as the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and the Royal Blind Society of NSW supporting some students. The number of service providers is problematic, with the quality of the assistance students receive being determined by which provider their school has an arrangement with.

Students who choose to attend private schools receive some funding and support, but usually parents and the individual school are expected to provide significant resources to ensure the child's educational needs are met. Blind Citizens Australia is aware of instances in Victoria where parents have been expected to meet the shortfall between the funding the school receives to provide visiting teacher services and the amount charged by the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind.

It is our strong argument that governments should bear the primary responsibility for meeting the needs of students with disabilities irrespective of which sector the student is enrolled in. It is not acceptable for this important area of need to be left to charitable organisations to meet as they see fit, and as best they can. It is also unacceptable to expect students who are blind and their parents to rely on the Disability Discrimination Act to achieve equity. The adequacy of the DDA as a complaint mechanism is addressed later.

8.2. Access of school students to technology and training

We refer the Committee to paragraph 3.10 of our Education Policy statement.

Access to equipment and training is a critical issue for school students who are blind. The most basic machine for writing braille is a Perkins Brailler. A new Perkins Brailler costs approximately $1,500. Many parents simply do not have the resources to purchase a Perkins so that their child can do their homework. In some situations, there may be a policy whereby a student can have a machine on loan, but this most certainly is not always the case.

Students then begin to use more advanced technology such as computers or Mount Batten Braillers. Few students have access to such equipment at home and often they have to share the equipment with a number of other

students. In Victoria some students can apply for funds to purchase equipment which is returned to a general equipment pool when the student no longer requires it. More often, when a student enters school they are assessed for a level of funding which is then used to pay for equipment and teaching aide time over a three year period. However, it may take the full three years before the student has accrued sufficient funds to purchase an item such as a Perkins Brailler.

The provision of technology to students in rural and remote areas needs to be carefully planned to account for environmental factors including extreme heat, cold and dust, and for factors such as electricity or generator interruptions and the quality of the telecommunications infrastructure.

If students do not have access to adaptive equipment and the necessary training to use it effectively they are placed at a significant disadvantage when they go on to university, where it is assumed that they are skilled users of the equipment and provided with assistance accordingly.

8.2.1.   Recommendation

That the Commonwealth investigate options, including specific purpose grants, to enable students who are blind to have access to assistive technology and relevant training to improve their participate in education.

8.3. Access to instructional materials for blind students

We refer the Committee to paragraphs 3.5.3 to 3.5.6 and other references to the availability of materials in accessible formats contained in our Education Policy Statement.

Timely access to materials in an appropriate format is a crucial issue for primary and secondary students. Small children who are blind do not have access to the same range of materials as their sighted peers; there is a significant shortage of books in braille and large print that are suitable for beginning readers. In the class room, work sheets that other students are asked to complete are not available for the blind student and they have to be re-directed to other work until they are available either later that day or sometimes days later. Senior students routinely experience delays receiving material that is integral to their Higher School Certificate studies in alternative formats.

8.4. Tertiary students' access to materials

Blind Citizens Australia has raised its concerns about recent changes to the way in which universities are charged for the cost of transcribing materials for students with the Minister for Education, Dr Nelson, and his predecessor Dr Kemp, on several occasions. We also brought this important issue to the attention of the Senate last year in our submission to the Universities in Crisis inquiry (copy attached at Appendix C).

The problem was identified in the recent report on funding for students with disabilities which was prepared for the Department of Education, Science and Training last year:

> Several respondents expressed concerns regarding the reported plan of the Royal Blind Society and Royal [Victorian] Institute for the Blind to implement charges based on full cost recovery in 2002 for brailling and other alternative format services provided to higher education students by the National Information Library Service (NILS). One university expected that the current cost of about $600 per student would increase to $25 000 next year. Another institution quoted a projected rise from $600 to $24 000 per student. Yet another cited a fee of $687.50 for one student's brailling work provided by NILS in Semester 2, 2000 that had an actual cost noted on the invoice of over $90 000.

> This is an important issue as the cost impact and potential drain on the funding programme resources will be significant if this cost recovery plan proceeds as has been suggested. There is the potential for a number of detrimental effects if the forecast cost increases are applied, including the possibility of other service providers following suit. (Pearson 2001: 42-43)

The change to full-cost recovery was introduced on 1 January 2002 and the impact has been great. Students have been told that they will not get their materials in their preferred formats, or, in some cases, at all. The following case study is illustrative:

Case Study

Christina studies Occupational Therapy at the University of Sydney. Christina is vision impaired. She is currently studying Second Year and has requested that her course manuals be provided to her on audio cassette. The previous year, Christina's mother used to read out the materials to Christina in the evening. Christina is experiencing real difficulties because although audio is her preferred format, the University would prefer her to use large print or disk with speech output. The University has expressed concern that the cost of producing the course manuals in audio would be approximately $1600.00. Christina has tried to explain that reading print causes her extreme eye fatigue and blurred vision and that electronic voice is far inferior to audio cassette. Christina has used an advocate to argue her case for audio cassette. The primary barrier remains the cost. In any event, it has taken so long for materials to be obtained from course lecturers and for a budget to be approved, that if audio is approved, Christina will not receive her manuals until well into first semester. Christina has experienced significant stress which her contemporaries would not be experiencing and an awareness that her study is likely to be adversely affected.

On May 29, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission is holding a forum to investigate ways that the provision of materials to tertiary students can be improved. More information can be provided to the Senate Inquiry after this forum has taken place. However, the need for some reform is already clear.

As the figures provided by Universities and quoted above demonstrate, the change to pricing will have a significant impact on the capacity of universities to meet the transcription needs of their students. Last year the Federal Government announced funding to universities of $8 million over three years, commencing July 2002, to support 1,500 high-need students, including but not limited to, students with a print disability. Given the magnitude of the price increases, it is doubtful that the funding can be sufficient.

We are aware that several universities produce alternative materials in-house. The production of materials in alternative formats is a skilled trade.

We are concerned that institutions will not have access to the skill level required to produce materials at the quality required for academic purposes.

It is clear that some form of national body that is responsible for the production of tertiary materials is required to prevent costly duplication, achieve efficiencies of scale and protect standards.

8.5. Proposed model for funding tertiary students with disabilities

The Department of Education, Science and Training has developed a model for funding tertiary students with a disability's additional costs (Pearson 2001). BCA supports the model with some qualifications. In addition to our concerns about the total level of funding allocated, outlined above, we consider the model should include greater recognition of the equipment needs of students who are blind.

The model currently lists adaptive software and equipment peripherals as items that universities can apply to be reimbursed for. The list should be extended to include items such as laptop computers, braille and audio note taking machines and scanners. The shift to the creation, distribution and storage of texts in digital format will make this equipment increasingly essential for students. This technology will also ultimately allow for more efficient sharing of resources between institutions. However, the items are too expensive for students to purchase themselves ($7,000-$9,000 for a note taking machine with a braille display).

One way in which the Commonwealth might usefully act to reduce the cost of alternative format materials and increase the timeliness of their provision to students is by establishing a legal framework which minimises the legal and practical barriers to the transcription of printed material into alternative formats. A possible model for such a legal framework is the Instructional Materials Bill. The Bill, which was developed by blindness organisations in consultation with publishers, is being considered by the US Federal Congress (copy attached at Appendix D).

8.5.1.   Recommendation

That funding arrangements for universities to meet the needs of students with disabilities be revised to reference and make financial provision for the equipment and alternative format needs of students who are blind.

8.5.2.   Recommendation

That the Commonwealth consider the appropriateness of adopting legislation modelled on the proposed U.S. Instructional Materials Bill.

8.6. Students in the private post-compulsory education sector

Blind Citizens Australia is also concerned about the inequitable position of students studying courses at institutions that are not publicly funded, including full fee paying adult education courses. There appears to be little support available to these students to meet the cost of transcription. We are aware of students who have applied to study at tafe being told they will not receive any of their materials in an alternative format because of the full cost recovery decision taken by the National Information and Library Service. We also know of people who have been refused entry to private colleges for the same reason. This is preventing people who are blind enjoying equal access to the wide range of educational opportunities offered to other Australians, and having a direct impact on the career opportunities available to many people.

8.6.1.   Recommendation

That the Department, the Australian National Training Authority and the Department of Family and Community Services work with the blindness sector to overcome the barriers to post compulsory education experienced by people who are blind.

9. Nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students

9.1. Overview

Most blind students in Australia that do not have other disabilities are educated in the mainstream education system. How this is done differs by state, but students are taught alongside their non-disabled peers. In some states, students are placed in their local school and a visiting teacher service comes to the school regularly. In other states, this is an option, but

there is also an option of travelling to a school where a special education unit for blind children is located. The children attend regular classes and may receive Teacher Aide time or assistance from a trained teacher of the vision impaired in the regular classroom. In addition, the students are withdrawn for sessions in the Special Education Unit during the week to work on blindness specific skills. In other states, students attend regular classes in their local school and then are taken to a more segregated setting for short periods of time, for example, one day a week or one week per term.

9.2. Access to extra curricular activities

It is our opinion that the opportunities for blind students to learn with their peers are generally adequate. However, students who are blind do not have equal opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities, or core activities undertaken outside the school, for example, sporting events and work experience. There is also very little support for students' out of school needs, for example, tutoring.

9.2.1.   Recommendation

That the Government work with Blind Citizens Australia and other organisations representing parents of children who are blind to identify ways to improve the children's access to extra-curricular activities and core activities that take place outside the school grounds.

10.   Teacher training and professional development

10.1. Current situation

Many blind children do not have adequate access to a visiting teacher. A child needs tuition in braille on a regular basis to build his/her braille reading and writing skills. As one mother of a vision impaired child explained, "a sighted child receives instruction in literacy each day. A blind child, who uses braille, only receives effective instruction in literacy when the visiting teacher visits once a week".   Our members have expressed concern about

the student/teacher ratio of visiting teachers who are qualified to teach braille in rural and remote areas.

In some States and Territories, students in non-government schools do not have the same access to visiting teachers as students in Government schools. In the ACT for example, a blind child in a government school can receive braille instruction from a visiting teacher. However, if the child attends a non-government school, the non-Government school has to purchase the visiting teacher service from the Department of Education. If the non-government school is not prepared to pay for the service, the child cannot attend the parent's school of choice. In Victoria, the Association of Independent Schools does not have its own Visiting Teacher Service. Parents have expressed their concern that some private schools are not prepared to purchase this service from the Department of Education or the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind.

There also appears to be a perception amongst some educators that Teacher Aide time, where it is available, will meet all of a student's needs and can be a substitute for a trained teacher of the vision impaired. Whilst Teacher Aide time is significantly cheaper than Teacher time, Teacher Aides are not trained teachers and should not be expected to do the job of a trained teacher. Where students do have access to a specialist teacher, they may not be trained in vision impairment. In some cases, the school is not serviced by a teacher at all but by another professional, for example, a social worker.

10.2. The future

Blind Citizens Australia holds grave concerns for the future of teaching students who are blind. In the past, there were a number of specialist pre-service programs specifically for teachers interested in teaching blind children. This is no longer the case. We are aware of only one remaining specialist pre-service program, which is only offered every second year.

Non-specialist teachers will receive at best a couple of lectures during their pre-service university course about the learning needs of blind students. There is also a dearth of post-graduate opportunities for teachers to specialise in teaching blind children. What courses exist are largely delivered via distance learning.

This means that newly graduated regular classroom teachers have little knowledge of blind students and their needs. Of more concern is the decline in the number of teachers with skills in blindness specific areas, including an understanding of braille and the techniques for teaching the reading and writing of braille. The Australian Braille Authority has advised that less than forty per cent of Visiting Teachers possess basic Grade 2 literary braille skills. Moreover, skills in Math and Music Braille are exceedingly rare. As we clearly stated earlier, braille is an essential skill for blind students. With our universities not providing appropriate courses for teachers who wish to work with blind students, it is highly likely that future generations of children who will not have access to teachers with the requisite skills to teach them basic literacy.

The above comments on training of visiting teachers and access of children to their assistance are not to be taken as criticism of individual visiting teachers or the work they do for blind children. Many visiting teachers make extraordinary efforts to ensure that the educational needs of their students are met. It is the inadequacy of training and the lack of resources that prevent visiting teachers providing blind children with quality braille instruction and braille literacy.

10.2.1. Recommendation

Blind Citizens Australia urgently requests that the critical shortage of teachers of the vision impaired be addressed. We would be pleased to work with the Committee to develop and implement strategies to this end.

10.2.2. Recommendation

At least one teaching course specialising in vision impairment be available in each state. The courses should teach a common curriculum to ensure that graduates have the same minimum level of core skills.

10.2.3. Recommendation

Sufficient funding be made available so that students attending Catholic and independent schools are provided with the same standard of disability support as students in government schools.

10.2.4. Recommendation

Benchmarks be developed to establish minimum service standards for providing support to students in primary and secondary schools across Australia.

11. Legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation

The development of a guaranteed minimum level of education services for students who are blind in the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors is needed. It is unacceptable that the service and support a student is eligible for and likely to receive is often based on geography and the school you attend.

11.1. Limits to the use of the Disability Discrimination Act

While Blind Citizens Australia supports the Disability Discrimination Act (Cth) 1992, its value in the education sector is limited. Decisions about complaints are not broadly applicable, students have to be prepared to complain, at the risk of possible victimisation and certain exhaustion and some institutions, particularly private education facilities, can successfully use the unjustifiable hardship defence, arguing that they legitimately cannot afford to make accommodations for students who are blind.

In the case of education in particular, the lag between a complaint being made and it being resolved is problematic. Even with priority, it can take 2 months for a case to begin to be addressed - or even longer if an education provider will not respond definitively to a student's request for accommodations or support. It is also difficult to determine what is less favourable treatment. The DDA has to be used cautiously by advocacy organisations such as Blind Citizens Australia because it is as important not to set precedents by losing as it is to set precedents by winning.

Our members have experienced similar barriers in attempting to use state-based equal opportunity legislation.

Blind Citizens Australia is also frustrated at the rate of progress towards the adoption of the Disability Discrimination Act Education Standard.

11.1.1. Recommendation

The adoption of the DDA Education Standard be expedited.

12. References

Astbrink, G. (1996), **Everybody's Business: Consumer Information Access for People who are Blind**, Blind Citizens Australia: http://www.bca.org.au/ebmain.htm

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Pearson, J. (2001), **Development of a Funding Model for the Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Programme: Final Report**, Department of Education, Science and Training