

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee**

**Inquiry into the Education of Students with  
Disabilities**

**Terms of Reference**

*(1) Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:*

*(a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:*

*i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap.*

The criteria to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap have been adequate as the impairment was profound and was found to be at ascertainment level 6 (Department of Education, Queensland).

*ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,*

The accuracy of the assessed needs has been adequate as the impairment was profound and was found to be at ascertainment level 6 (Department of Education, Queensland).

*iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,*  
Not addressed.

*iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,*

At the stage of development when these programs were required (19 years ago) there were no early intervention programs and little information and no support for parents of disabled children particularly visually impaired children.

*v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,*

The provision of access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors is considered to be grossly inadequate. They would appear to be in breach of International obligations. While a majority of people in the system are commendable in their approach and commitment to the education of children with a disability, the failure lies in a systemic failure to provide access to and a provision of an adequate funding base.

In the Queensland State education system, text books are bought for the visually impaired student by the parents, taken to the Low Incidence Support Centre, that then takes them to Braille House where volunteers, typically aged women, transcribe them and return them to the Low Incidence Support Centre. The State Government stamp is then emblazoned on the front of the book and it is marked out to the student.

The transcription services are funded through a grant of \$25,000 from the State Government (over the past few years) and a grant from the Federal Government for the Braille paper.

The Integration Policy of the Queensland Department of Education has not been implemented particularly successfully because the necessary resources have not been allocated. Resources including funding for teachers, teacher aides, therapists and equipment.

There is also a fundamental confusion in the Department over the needs of vision impaired students e.g. whether they should be taught Braille or not. The policymaking does not include parents in a meaningful sense and does not recognise that parents bear the ultimate responsibility for their disabled students and must live with the legacy of under-funded and poorly targeted education programs.

This lack of funding carries over into the private education sector where short-cuts are taken and material is provided late and in an inappropriate format. For example, when my daughter was doing Shakespeare in English, the play was provided after the assignment and was produced in 1905. This meant that there were no capital letters or punctuation.

We also provided a scanner with an automatic document feed to the school to assist with the production of Braille and repeated enquiries as to its whereabouts have been ignored (we suspect that the particular piece of equipment was donated by the school to someone else). Also, the software for vision-impaired students is very expensive as is the equipment.

The cost of screen reading software (JAWS) is in the order of \$1,200 and the scanning software (Openbook) around \$1,700. Updates for the software are also very expensive. The manufacturers only provide 3 copies of the software and one copy was loaded on the school's computer. This computer was traded in over the Christmas break and necessitated applying for additional copies of the software. Our personal laptop went missing over the same period. Again the private school was disinterested.

The development of the Independent Education Program in both the public and private systems was a joke and not worthy of comment.

In 1990, we were successful in obtaining a Commonwealth grant for the purchase of a Robotron Eureka Braille computer. The total cost was \$4500 including the printer. This lasted for 11 years and the manufacturers ceased supporting and making the product. This necessitated the search for a new Braille Notetaker/computer. There were a couple of products on the market but after discussions and advice, it was decided that the Braille Note was the superior product on the market at that time. The cost of the Unit was \$10,500 and with other parts such as a super disk drive the total cost was \$11,649.

The search was on for funding for this equipment. We noted that in the USA there were a lot of organisations that funded this piece of equipment for vision impaired people and in Australia there had been funding programs to allow people to access education and training.

We tried local community service organisations with no success, the Federal Government Departments and the State Government.

There were no programs available in the Federal Government for the provision of equipment for education and training only for rehabilitation. In the State Government there is the Adult Lifestyle Support (ALS) program administered by the Disability Services Queensland (DSQ). We put in an application under this program and after the DSQ losing the first one there were discussions with a departmental officer with respect to the second lodged application.

We were told that for my daughter to be successful, that she should represent her circumstance as "being suicidal". Needless to say the application was unsuccessful and was assessed at being Level 4.

The University had no equipment such as a notetaker but the Student's Union disability officer managed to interest the Alumni in purchasing one. This it did and the equipment was loaned to my daughter until May 2001. The best part of this equipment is that it has a refreshable Braille display so that my daughter can read notes, books and Word documents. Just before the end of semester exams, the Disability Services told my daughter that the BrailleNote had to be returned. This caused her quite a bit of stress as all her notes were on the BrailleNote and she still had assignment to do etc. A letter was written to the Vice Chancellor and a reprieve was granted until the end of the year. In the meantime, the University was working on an equipment lending policy.

We emailed the Prime Minister and advised him of the situation and a couple of weeks later received a reply from a department to the effect that it was the University's responsibility and they were provided funds for this situation. We passed on a copy of that letter to the President of the University's Academic Board.

This Semester the University has provided the texts on CD ROM with some files in Word and some in PDF. We must send the pdf files over to Adobe in the States to have it converted to text so that my daughter may access it. We are still in the process of doing this and have this morning received files back but they were empty. Also, some of the pdf files have errors in them and when citing case law with errors misinforms the lecturers and leads to a lower mark in assessments. The time resource in accessing the material in these forms is enormous and disadvantages vision impaired students.

*vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,*

Not addressed.

*vii) teacher training and professional development, and*

Some teachers do not have the skills in Braille and this should be addressed before they commence teaching in a classroom. The technology is changing so rapidly that teachers in this special education field need a comprehensive and targeted professional development to ensure that they are up-to-date and have access to the latest technology.

*viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation; and*

The legislation is largely ineffective and is "window-dressing" .

The UK Government is currently holding an inquiry into the copyright restrictions that apply and whether these restrictions should be relaxed for students with a disability. This subject should also be investigated in Australia.

*(b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.*

The role of the Commonwealth and States is to ensure that students realise their full potential. This will not be achieved through the "smoke and mirrors" policy development process. There has to be a clear line of responsibility and accountability for this outcome through all tiers of the education system.

Funding needs to be delivered to the students not to a self-serving bureaucracy. Appropriated funds need to be allocated to special programs and the evaluation of the success of the program needs to be summative and formative and involve all stakeholders including the student and the parents.

The education of students particularly those with a disability is a partnership between the educationalists, the student and the parents. It is of little comfort to hear the rhetoric of jobs, skills, employability etc from politicians when the reality is that the policies that they are responsible for shortchange everyone and reinforces the public's cynicism and lack of respect for them.

An integrated, comprehensive approach is needed that transcends the particular tiers of government and that is accompanied by a communication strategy that enables those targeted with the information in a timely manner.

*(2) That the Committee report to the Senate by the last sitting day in October 2002.*

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