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Education for all: Inclusion and lifelong learning

**Submission by
The Physical Disability Council of NSW**

To

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

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

April 2002

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1. Introduction

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on educational opportunity for students with disability. PDCN believes that all people with physical disability should be able to participate in society, as equal citizens, to the same extent as the rest of the community. This requires an effectively operating social contract between individuals and society. The contract has two elements:

- People with physical disability must be entitled to the rights and accept the responsibilities that attach to the power available to the population generally to exercise choice and personal autonomy;
- Society must accept and promote its essential role in creating an accessible social, cultural, political and economic infrastructure, which includes the school and post-school education systems through which we equip ourselves with skills and knowledge for life.

In summary the view of PDCN is simply this:

We believe that physical accessibility is a fundamental requirement of equality of educational opportunity. The built environment of learning institutions must be accessible to all.

Physical accessibility is a necessary but not sufficient indicator of equality of educational opportunity. Education must be delivered to all students within a context of inclusiveness.

The support that students need in areas such as transport, personal assistance, assistive technology, human assistance (note takers, readers, etc) must be regarded as essential contributions to ensuring equality of educational opportunity.

2. People with Physical Disability In NSW

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), people with disability in New South Wales make up 19.3% of the total population, the same as in the whole of Australia. The majority are people with physical disability.

PDCN, therefore, represents and advocates on behalf of the largest group of people with disability by "impairment type" in NSW and Australia.

The ABS noted that:

"Over half of all people with a disability had a physical impairment, (PDCN emphasis) either alone (30%) or in combination with another impairment (27%). More than one-third (37%) had a sensory impairment, around half of these (18%) having a sensory impairment only. Other types of impairment were less common, 18% with psychological and 9% with intellectual impairment."

PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY: IMPAIRMENT TYPES

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3. Context of the submission by the Physical Disability Council of NSW

PDCN has been actively involved in campaigning for the rights of adults and children with physical disability, most recently by its participation in the Action for McRae Report and the State Integration Reference Group with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). PDCN also refers the Inquiry to material on our web site, www.pdcnsw.org.au.

PDCN does not address every issue raised by the Terms of Reference for the Senate's Committee of Inquiry. We are confident that other bodies, particularly national bodies, will provide detailed responses. We commend, in this regard, the submission made by our own national body: The Physical Disability Council of Australia.

PDCN is keen, nevertheless, to emphasise key principles, which, in our view, must underpin any discussion about access to education and people with physical disability.

Through the State Integration Reference Group in NSW, it was unambiguously agreed that:

- **Equity and inclusion are fundamental principles of the NSW DET.**
- **All students should have full participation in the curriculum.**

The NSW State Integration Reference Group considered these issues so important that both were highlighted themes on the cover of group's Access Plan final report.

The Senate Inquiry must accept integration and inclusion as givens of the minimum standards that any and all education services and facilities must start from. To be less than committed to either principle would be to make compromises with the educationally and socially redundant ideas that students with disability are less a part of the community of learners than others.

The key issue is **no longer** whether or not education should be inclusive. Of course it must be inclusive.

The debate is not about whether students with disability should be integrated, but:

➤ **What are the best ways to achieve integration and inclusion of students with disability into the mainstream education system?**

PDCN does not wish to repeat well-researched and widely acknowledged work. We refer the Inquiry especially to the Submission to the Vinson Inquiry into Public Education by Family Advocacy of NSW, November 2001, entitled "**So Near and Yet So Far**".

Three quotations from that work give a flavour of its compelling arguments in favour of integration and inclusion.

"Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (page 4).

"...strategically, there simply does not exist a better long term safeguard for the welfare of individuals with disability than a large number of intimate relationships between them and other citizens. Very few people seem to realise that valued people are virtually never segregated. The only times that valued people are segregated is when they segregate themselves in order to increase their own status and value." (page 7)

"...it is impossible to teach positive attitudes about people with disability if they are not an integral part of our daily childhood experiences" (page 12)

4. Key comments to the Committee of Inquiry:

i. A long-term, lifelong approach to the education needs of students with disability is required.

A coordinated plan should be followed from two years before a child with disability enters the education system until completion to whatever standard fulfills the personal potential of that learner. Education service planners, providers and funding bodies must operate on the same set of assumptions for students with physical disability as they do with students with no disability: in short, a child with permanent physical disability at four years old has as much right to the best quality educational opportunity as every child.

Access to education must be founded on the principle of the right to education consistent with the learner's potential and attainment at any stage of their educational development. All new educational establishments must be physically accessible throughout to all stakeholders in the purposes and use of those facilities. Every existing facility must be required to submit to HREOC a Disability Action Plan consistent with achieving the highest degree of accessibility for all (mindful that, under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act, no provider would be required to effect changes that might result in unjustifiable hardship).

In addition to planning for an accessible physical environment, however, education planners, providers and funding authorities must accept their responsibility to ensure that if assistance is required by individual students to equalise educational opportunity that assistance should be made available throughout the learning career of the individual.

Students with physical disability are engaged with learning at every level of primary, secondary and tertiary education. Therefore, it ought never to come as a surprise to planners, providers and funding bodies of educational facilities and teaching resources that children with physical disability enter High School seven years after Primary

School, or (like the population as a whole) a significant and increasing proportion of students with physical disability enter university or other further education seven years later.

There should be no doubt about ongoing funding for teacher's aides nor uncertainty about modifications to schools. Transport subsidies should not be cut out simply because a student with physical disability leaves school and attends university. These types of support are essential investment in the possibility of achieving educational excellence. They are investments that must be made in the hope of better future for all.

Students' requirements should never be met only because parents or other supporters cajole or harangue education service systems until action is taken. Sadly, this remains the case in many people's experience. Not all parents can be strong advocates, nor should any parent be required to be because an education service system treats a child or adult learner with physical disability less favourably. That less favourable treatment is wrong, it unfairly discriminates against people with disability and it is bad education policy. No student should be denied educational opportunity because physical access is inadequate or because their support needs are easier to ignore or put in the 'too hard basket'.

ii. Equality of educational opportunity means more than physical access.

Recent improvements in funding for physical access to schools, work such as the NSW response to the McRae Report and broader acceptance of barrier-free design and construction principles, mean that choice for students with physical disability is improving (sometimes frustratingly slowly). However, improving access to the built environment of the education system is not the same as inclusion. Equality of access to education facilities is a necessary right but it is not sufficient on its own.

PDCN calls for a genuinely inclusive education service system at all stages throughout the lifelong learning career of all students.

Inclusion requires that people with physical disability can not only attend a school, college or university, but, also, that education services' planners, providers and funding agencies ensure that students with physical disability have fulfilling education experiences. We must be genuinely included, as contributing and benefiting members of any and all educational community of learners, some with disability, most with no disability.

Teachers and principals should become skilled in providing education services that bring the student with disability into the school, college or university community. No education policy, service system or ancillary activity should result in students with disability becoming isolated, on the margins of the community's activities, as a consequence of systemic inadequacy, inability or refusal to embrace the principles of inclusive education.

We require a wholesale shift in culture. We need to develop inclusive environments, educational skills and day-to-day practical techniques that meet the developing needs of current and future learners, some of whom have physical disability. We must move away from cultures and practices that are fixed in a past that was never desirable and is no longer sustainable or valuable. Many senior education practitioners have little or no personal experience of people with disability in education. This is not necessarily anyone's fault, as such, because, prior to 1990, students with disability were sent to 'special schools'. Times and attitudes have changed, however, and educators must change also. Inclusive practices must be employed by teachers and demonstrated to other students.

Inclusive services must include transport to sport, excursions and school events. For example, recent experiences by members of PDCN include:

- A requirement that the parents of a student with disability pay extra for their child to attend sport.

- School excursions are arranged without transport plans that meet the needs of children with physical disability, or which impose an extra levy on the parents or the school to act inclusively.
- Accessible transport buses are ordered but do not turn up, or the bus company cannot assure the school that a suitable bus will be available.
- Regular taxi providers are often inflexible about changing pick up times, or they demand significant extra payments.

iii. The transition from school to tertiary education needs particular attention.

The support system established for the state-based school system should not stop when students with physical disability make the transition to the federally funded university system. This is often a time when greater distances are involved, both in travelling to campuses and on campuses. For example, a student may require an electric wheelchair for the first time to cover large distances. It may be more complex to ensure access to an entire university or TAFE versus a relatively small school, and needs greater advance planning. Of course, the best solution is to design the campus and buildings according to good access principles in the first place.

Similarly, universities expect students to learn independently, including vast increased amounts of research. New learning requirements may change equipment and other support needs. It may be difficult for a student with physical disability to access a photocopier, for example, or some students may require the services of note takers for the first time in otherwise gifted and high-achieving academic careers. It would be tragic, would it not, for Australia to lose the potential of developing the intellectual potential of a new (Australian) Stephen Hawking, Albert Einstein or Franklin D Roosevelt because a class was up a flight of stairs and could not be relocated, the photocopier was not accessible or a note-taker was deemed to be too costly.

There is often a demarcation dispute about where a responsibility lies. Does it belong with a government department, an education institution, a personal support agency, or a charity? There should be better coordination of the overall needs between different service providers, and, perhaps, one department or programme to undertake or contract all services.

iv. Funding should attach to the individual, although some services can be shared.

PDCN believes that people with physical should not need to reapply for funding simply because they change schools or progress through the system. Funding ought to be linked to people and must be portable.

At the same time, however, there may be scope for some services to be shared between students learning at the same institution. Approximately 4% of the students in universities have a physical disability, which means that larger colleges and universities are likely to have hundreds of students with disability. Clearly, the addition of a lift into a hall or ramp into a room benefits everyone, not simply an individual who may be vocal enough to make an application. Some students with physical disability may need assistance with aspects such as personal assistance support. There could be some scope for co-ordinating campus-wide facilities and personal support services to meet the needs of a range of students throughout their participation in the life of the institution.

v. Educators and service providers need appropriate, non-intrusive, person-centred, holistic information about students with physical disability.

In consultation with the student, education providers must acquire relevant information about the needs of students with disability. Information gathering and (if necessary) assessment of aspects of

the disability related capabilities and/or requirements must be conducted within the context of a whole person approach to the student.

Students with physical disability must never be reduced, through assessment or information gathering, to diagnostic stereotypes or functional generalisations. Students must be viewed holistically, focusing on individual needs and circumstances. The 'default-value' of assessment and information gathering must be on maximising the potential of each student to achieve levels of academic achievement consistent with the student's educational ability and/or potential.

Educators should be required to improve their awareness of disability, disability rights and person-centred, inclusive practices of educational and personal development of students from historically disadvantaged and/or discriminated against backgrounds. Education facilities and support providers within education systems must become centers of excellence and maintain high standards in the possibilities of assistive technology (if needed), support systems for students with physical disability and teaching techniques for inclusive education.

Educators and education facility managers and staff must become conversant with and champions of the rights of people with disability who may wish to access their services. Teachers and support staff must have awareness of these types of responsibilities built into their professional development regimes.

Staff in education institutions should be supported with appropriate policies, procedures and clerical assistance to fit with current legislation relating to anti-discriminatory practice and to meet the needs of students with physical disability as fully participating, valued members of the community of lifelong learners.

vi. Access and adequacy of funding and support

The research referred to in The Devlin Discussion Paper '**Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: At Whose Cost and What Price?**' (August, 2000) outlines the inadequacy of public funding of universities to cover the costs of including students with disability. The report demonstrates that Australia lags behind most Commonwealth countries in respect of both dollar amounts and approach.

PDCN maintains that the major flaw in allocation of funding to cater for the needs of people with disability in education in Australia is the lack of focus on whole of life support to facilitate the person's entry to the education system. This must take place well before the student gets to the post compulsory education stage.

The problem originates with the significant differences in the value, breadth, depth and funding levels of support programmes at varying levels of the education sector (both public and private). Such inconsistencies exist in many programmes and systems intended to deliver improving quality of life and higher standards of living for population that includes many people with disability, i.e. Health, Transport, Social Security and, in this particular instance, Ageing, Disability and Community Services Sectors.

Programmes targeted at similar groups of people with disability, intended to meet the same fundamental objectives, can differ from State to State, within states or even in organisations operating in more than one location. There is little or no collaboration or co-operation between Federal and State bodies, across sectors or government departments to streamline service provision and thereby optimise processes, such as assessment, that are supposed to be supportive of students' needs

A clear example of the potential to waste time and resources is found in the provision of personal assistance to people with profound physical disability.

At 'special' schools, schools with integration units and schools where mainstreaming of individual students is being attempted, support

staff exist or are contracted to assist with personal assistance and support tasks such as feeding and toileting. (We are aware that toileting issues are currently subject to debate in school settings.)

If a student with a physical disability has had the determination to get to university or college, she or he may only get to attend if he or she can manage daily living tasks without assistance. We must also make an assumption (which is not always so) that the student will have physical access to toilets, cafeterias, etc. If, however, the individual has the determination and academic ability required for post-school learning but does not have the physical capability to carry out daily living tasks without assistance, there is a very strong possibility that such individuals will not realise post-school educational potential because universities and colleges do not or may not allocate funds to provide support that equalises educational opportunity.

The dominant view currently is that such tasks, which have to be dealt with prior to or after formal time spent learning and extraneous to that learning time, are not and should not be seen as matter for the education provider to consider. Education providers refer to this, generally, as whole of life support, which might be re-interpreted to mean 'nothing to do with us'. Providers see a distinct (we believe false) separation between home, recreation, education and work. This false distinction helps to explain why some students, who may have persisted against the odds to gain entry to post-school education rightly complain about

- 1) Lack of access or inclusion re student union activities such as sports clubs and social events; and
- 2) Field experience / student 'pracs' in industry from which they are excluded or inadequately accommodated.

Significant differences exist in the provision of personal assistance and support programmes (eligibility; methods of assessment; upper limits of available hours that can be approved; amount of involvement one can have in selecting, training and recruiting staff/attendants; etc, etc.). A key problem in NSW is that personal

assistance is almost always restricted to support in the home only, usually linked to activities assumed to be required at the beginning or end of any day. These variations and restrictions fail to recognise that people with disability have support needs throughout the day and not restricted to the home environment.

This situation must change. We need:

- A whole of life assessment,
- supported by adequate funding
- with reviews that allow for changing circumstances; and
- portability across settings and States.

Such a logical framework must link organically to needs for associated mobility aids, assistive technology or other support mechanism that allow students to realise fully their educational potential. We remind members of the Senate's Committee of Inquiry of the effective Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service Vocational Sponsorship Program. It is an example of innovative and worthwhile measures to support students with physical disability.

The programme was widely used in the 80's to provide an education and employment opportunity to people with disability, including those with congenital conditions and no compensation entitlement. The program sponsored individuals to attend short training programs, take programs and university courses for up to 3 years duration.

The following costs were provided:

- 1) Transport to and from training by taxi wheelchair users in Wheelchair Accessible Taxis;
- 2) University fees;
- 3) Textbooks;
- 4) Mobility aids e.g. wheelchair to use around campus;
- 5) Adaptive Technology;
- 6) Personal Assistants for note taking and toileting.

This programme is no longer available as it was in the 1980. There are many people with disability who are employed today, in professional and administrative careers, as a consequence of the assistance made available to students with disability. We believe that, in this instance, one way of progressing towards educational equality of opportunity would be to look 'back to the future'.

5. Conclusion

In summary, PDCN seeks a model that requires that the needs of all students, including students with physical disability, be planned and coordinated from their point of entry to the education system, until the time they leave it. In the case of Primary School children with disability, planning and co-ordination must commence as early as possible, before the child enters the first day of schooling. This is a critically important period.

The focus of all stakeholders must be directed at developing a culture of inclusive practices, including:

- Physical access, to both existing and proposed schools and tertiary institutions.
- Exactly the same freedom of choice as that offered to other students.
- Inclusion in the full curriculum, using techniques designed to involve students with disability and benefit the whole population of learners in a richly diverse community.
- Adequate resources for aides, personal assistance, equipment, assistive technology, etc.
- Timely planning, holistic assessment of need and coordination between service providers.

PDCN
April 2002