

# Staying on Track: Supporting a healthy jump from study to purposeful work

# Submitted to: Vic Health innovation@vichealth.vic.gov.au

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## Introduction

Vision Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to provide recommendations towards the deliberative forum for young adults: Staying on Track.

**Young adults, mental wellbeing & work**

**How can we support young adults on their journey to purposeful** **work?**

Breaking into the workforce is challenging for young people as they are very often still building experience and confidence. For young people who are blind or have low vision, the challenges are compounded by having little or no vision.

We believe major changes must occur within schools, universities and workplaces to help young people who are blind or have low vision, make the transition from school to work faster, easier and less stressful.

We would be very interested to know what suggestions young adults attending the Vic Health forum, have on how people who are blind or have low vision can be better supported to gain meaningful employment.

**Key Changes:**

- Provide individualised career counselling to young people who are blind or have low vision

- Families of students who are blind or have low vision should be included in career counselling conversations

- Make sure all students are given the opportunity to participate in meaningful work experience during high school

- Provide role models with lived experience of blindness or low vision, who can speak with students about how they completed their education and found work

- Provide problem solving counselling which is tailored to the specific challenges people who are blind or have low vision face - to help decrease the risk of depression and loneliness

- Educate teachers, students and employers about the lives of people who are blind or have low vision to provide insights, understanding and break down common misconceptions and bias.

- Remove systemic accessibility barriers such as inaccessible information and communications technology (ICT), inaccessible websites and Apps from education institutions and workplaces

**Career counselling**

The challenge when providing information and career counselling to students who are blind or have low vision, is balancing dreams and aspirations with realistic goals. Counsellors must provide accurate and realistic information to students while maintaining the student’s sense of ambition and their right to pursue career goals that are not typical for people with vision impairments and which may harbour challenges.

Historically, people who are blind or have low vision have received career advice suggesting that they consider working in occupations like call centre jobs, social work or therapeutic massage. Such career advice for people who are blind is limiting and we recommend an individualised approach that deals with each person on a case by case basis.

People who are blind or have low vision, have variety of interests, hobbies and skills and can acquire a variety of qualifications. While the abilities of people who are blind can be vast and varied, they require great drive, ambition and support to achieve these things as the societal barriers that exist in terms of access to information, access to mainstream technologies and access to public spaces can sometimes make students and job seekers give up.

Blindness is a low incidence disability. For this reason, it is unlikely that career counsellors within secondary schools will have knowledge of blindness or low vision. We urge education departments to direct schools to seek expert advice from service providers, like Vision Australia, when counselling students who are blind or have low vision.

**Communicating with families**

The families of students who are blind or have low vision should be included in career counselling conversations. The family of a student who is blind or has low vision, in many cases is a major influence and support to the student. To create an environment for the student where they have the greatest opportunity to reach their education and employment goals, the people closest to them need the right information and advice as well

**Work experience**

Students who are blind or have low vision often miss out on work experience opportunities. This is because workplaces are very often not accessible to people who are blind or have low vision, and the expense and effort involved in securing equipment or adjustments for a one week work experience placement, is often deemed too great to be worthwhile. The lack of work experience opportunities for students who are blind or have low vision greatly inhibits their transition from school to meaningful employment. We believe work experience is vitally important and that students who are blind or have low vision must be adequately accommodated in meaningful work placements in their teenage years.

**Role models**

Opportunities for young blind students and their families to interact with adult blind role models who are working in various jobs, living independently and achieving things, must be created. These interactions will build confidence and embed strategies for living and working independently. Engaging people who are blind or have low vision to act as mentors or who will share their story with students and their families will provide the motivation needed to persist with study and seeking ongoing work.

**The link between depression and blindness or low vision**

People who are blind or have low vision are more likely to experience depressive symptoms than the general population - 43% compared to 16%.

This higher rate of depression among people who are blind or have low vision is thought to be because of the chronic and permanent nature of blindness or low vision. Additionally some eye conditions get worse over time which can cause ongoing destress for the person as their eyesight continues to diminish.

Research tells us that acceptance of disability is the key to reducing depressive symptoms. People who struggle to accept that they will never be fully sighted again very often experience depressive symptoms. Also contributing to the increased depressive symptoms experience by some people who are blind or have low vision, are factors like, social isolation due to decreased mobility and independence, not being able to drive a car which limits freedom and independence, less chance of finding employment (there is a 50% unemployment rate among the blindness and low vision community) which limits economic participation, and lack of access to information because of inaccessible websites, apps and other technology.

To prevent or combat depressive symptoms we think students should have access to Problem Solving Therapies (PST) which can give people the skills and self-awareness to be stronger in the face of the many challenges in front of them.,

We know too that depression and loneliness can inhibit successful school to work transition so it is very important that the mental; health of people who are blind or have low vision is attended too early in the schooling process.

**Accessibility**

All information offered to students who are blind or have low vision must be in accessible formats, like large print, audio, electronic or braille.

Students should also be provided with information about post school education that goes into detail about whether a course is accessible to someone who is blind or has low vision and whether the employment outcome of the qualification is likely to be realistically attainable by someone who is blind or has low vision.

**Accessibility of online learning platforms**

Many of the online learning platforms used by Universities and Tertiary institutions are inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision, because they do not comply with international standards and guidelines, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0.

These platforms include:

• Enrolment, registration and course selection

• Curriculum including essential modules

• Lectures and meeting notes that are provided to all students as part of weekly course activity

• Access to portals

• Essential reading materials that other students take for granted and which educators and examiners expect students to have read and be knowledgeable about.

This limits the ability of people who are blind or have low vision from achieving their education goals

# About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include:

* Allied Health and Therapy services, and registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care
* Aids and Equipment, and Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support
* Seeing Eye Dogs
* National Library Services
* Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds
* Employment services, including national Disability Employment Services provider
* Accessible information, and Alternate Format Production
* Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped
* Spectacles Program for the NSW Government
* Advocacy and Engagement, working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has gained unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation. Vision Australia is therefore well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the Organisation to the Board and Management. Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment.

Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), to strengthen the voice of the blind community. We also operate Memorandums of Understanding with Australian Hearing, and the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service.