# Vision Australia

# Access to Education Position Statement

**June 2020**

# Position statement summary

Education empowers people who are blind, or have low vision with opportunity and choice. It is a life-long endeavour through which individual’s transition at different life stages: from early childhood development, compulsory and non-compulsory schooling through to post-secondary, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), tertiary education and professional development.

Students who are blind or have low vision often require a range of alternate support mechanisms in order to participate equally in education. These include materials in alternative formats, literacy tools and teaching aids. Given the critical importance of education, governments, educational institutions and educators alike must ensure that students who are blind or have low vision have equitable access to learning and the equipment and supports they require.

**Further information**

If you would like this position statement in an alternative format or wish to discuss it with Vision Australia’s Government Relations and Advocacy team, please contact us:

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# Background

## *The right to education*

This position statement is founded on the principles outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which Australia is a ratified signatory. The Convention is the most complete expression of the human rights enjoyed by persons with disabilities. Article 24 of the Convention recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity across all levels, from primary school to high school, TAFE and tertiary education. Governments, educational institutions, training institutions of educators and the broader community must be guided by the articles of the Convention in developing education policy and programs.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the associated Disability Standards for Education 2005 stipulate that educational institutions are lawfully obliged to consider the needs of students with disabilities. The standards cover rights and entitlements in the following areas: enrolment, participation, curriculum development, accreditation and delivery, student support services and elimination of harassment and victimisation.

## *The benefits of education*

Education enables Australians who are blind or have low vision to participate in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural spheres of society just as any other member of the community. Without equitable access to education, students who are blind or have low vision experience difficulty transitioning into employment. Vision Australia’s employment research shows a strong correlation between education and employment. In 2012, 66% of people who are blind or have low vision in paid work identifying as having post graduate qualifications. More generally, it is necessary for people who are blind or have low vision to achieve higher levels of academic learning because there are more opportunities for employment in white collar sectors[[1]](#footnote-1)

Education also increases access to a variety of different life opportunities through its relationship to employment and is pivotal for the enjoyment of a broad range of human rights including: the right to work; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to participate in cultural life, leisure and sport activities and in civic and political processes.

In order for all Australian students who are blind or have low vision to exercise their right to education, a range of proactive measures must be put in place to increase equitable access to education.

## *Needs associated with different levels of education*

Early intervention methods are the building blocks to learning and formal education for children who are blind or have low vision. These early intervention methods may include support from early childhood educators, pediatric occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech pathologists, in addition to information, accessible resources and support for families.

It is fundamentally important that braille skills training is incorporated into early intervention and primary school programs for all children who are blind or have low vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. Braille training should also be offered to children whose vision is likely to further deteriorate in the future, as well as parents and family members, to help foster an understanding of how words are structured both at school and home.

Once securing placement in the educational institution of their choice, students who are blind or have low vision may require a range of alternative support mechanisms in order to facilitate learning outcomes. Given that some people are born with vision impairment, while others acquire vision impairment later in life, support measures must be person-centred and adapted to their level of education.

For example, primary and secondary school children benefit from the assistance of visiting teachers, who ensure that students with vision impairment can access the curriculum and provide advice to teachers on necessary syllabus adjustments.

Visiting teachers also implement the expanded core curriculum training in areas such as Braille literacy, assistive technology, orientation and mobility and social skills, which are necessary to advance learning outcomes and equitable access to education for children and adolescents.

Alternatively, students in TAFE and tertiary education may require support from disability liaison officers in obtaining fair consideration in assessments and examinations, obtaining documents in accessible formats and accessing volunteer note-takers and assistive technology.

Students who are blind or have low vision need support to transition into school and between schools as they progress through different stages in their education. For children and adolescents entering primary and secondary school, multidisciplinary support is needed to integrate the child into the classroom environment. Support should focus on increasing the social, emotional, language and cognitive development of the student. Establishing peer support and mentoring networks can also be useful, in addition to providing orientation to the school environment and advice to teachers on how best to support the needs of the student.

When transitioning into higher education, adults who are blind or have low vision require support to navigate both the physical and online environment, as many students now choose to study off campus. Orientation to online learning platforms and administrative processes are just as important as orientation to the school environment.

Education aids, such as electronic magnifiers, braille notetakers and refreshable braille displays, are vital in assisting students who are blind or have low vision to meet learning outcomes at all levels of education. While the cost of such equipment is often prohibitive without the availability of government funding, it is necessary that students who are blind or have low vision have access to computer skills training and screen reading software. Proficiency in this area would increase access to online education courses, which are now widely available through most tertiary and TAFE institutions. However, the accompanying online resources and websites must also be accessible to ensure equitable learning outcomes.

## *Funding for education*

Public and private schools need to be adequately resourced to build and strengthen a child’s literacy, numeracy and life skills to better equip them to handle the transition from education to employment. The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling (2012) noted an overall lack of consistency in the existing resources provided to students with disability at government and non-government schools. The review recommends that a student with disability entitlement be provided in addition to the existing per student allowance and set according to the level of educational adjustment required for the student to participate equally in schooling. However, the recommendations from the Gonski review have yet to be implemented.

Any educational funding agreements should include provisions to facilitate access to and between buildings in educational institutions for persons with disability. Increased access could be achieved for people who are blind or have low vision through marking trip hazards, tactile ground surface indicators, braille signage and hand rails.

# Position statement

1. Students who are blind or have low vision must have access to education at the educational facility of their choice and be given equal opportunity to achieve standard benchmarks and merit based grades.
2. Access to braille skills development, braille reading and writing tools and materials is a fundamental right of all children and adults who are blind or have low vision or whose vision is insufficient to allow them to use print effectively. The development of braille skills is particularly important for blind or have low vision children, as braille is a foundational key to literacy and numeracy that is essential for maximizing participation in education and all other aspects of life.
3. Individualised support is critical for the achievement of standard learning outcomes and core competencies. All students with disability should have substantive access to personalised supports that improve their educational achievement. Access to personalised supports should also be provided irrespective of the student’s family and financial circumstances, geographic location, educational setting, or symptomatic nature of impairment.
4. Educational institutions must engage with specialist service providers, such as Vision Australia, to gain advice on how to build an inclusive learning environment that achieves the best outcomes for blind or have low vision students.
5. The following key principles to achieving equitable access to education for people who are blind or have low vision have been adapted from the principles and standards set out by the South Pacific Educators of the Vision Impaired (SPEVI):

## *Needs Assessment*

Students who are blind or have low vision must be referred to a medical or allied health professional to accurately assess their visual function and the potential impact on their educational engagement in the immediate, short and long terms. Such assessments should focus on the functional impact of their vision impairment and not just a purely clinical approach.

A comprehensive and personalised assessment of each student’s educational needs is also necessary and should be carried out at regular intervals by a qualified educational psychologist. This is particularly important in the case of children and adolescents, who may need to provide up-to-date information on their support needs to their educational service provider and relevant funding body.

## *Partnerships*

A genuine partnership of full and equal participation between the student and educator must be the cornerstone of education provision. This requires an ongoing dialogue is needed between students, their parent or guardian, where appropriate, and educators. Communication should focus on the students needs within their specific educational environment, the monitoring of measures against desired outcomes, and reviewing systems and support needs.

Professional collaboration is also crucial for bridging the communication and attitudinal divide that has traditionally hindered successful educational outcomes on an individual and systemic level. The educational performance of students who are blind or have low vision hinges on strong relationships between students, health professionals, educators, administrators, regulators and government.

## *Personalised Support*

Educational facilities must ensure that the direct and indirect support needs of a student who is blind or have low vision are met to facilitate their equal access to education. Personalised support services may include:

* Alternative format resource materials made available in the students preferred format and at the same time as these materials are made available to other students. This includes both core reading material, online resources and in class materials, such as overheads and assessment papers. Alternative format materials should conform to standards adopted by the Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities and includes: Braille; large print; electronic text; Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY);
* Access to adaptive and assistive technologies to facilitate literacy, such as screen readers, magnifiers, and refreshable braille displays;
* Physical adjustments to the educational environment, such as lower lighting to reduce glare.
* Itinerant or visiting teacher services; and;
* Other support services to assist with the development and preservation of physical, psychological and social wellbeing, such as Educational psychology, respite care, palliative care and peer support.

These support mechanisms must meet quality assurance and/or accreditation standards and must be engaged following a needs assessment by a relevant professional and/or the informed consideration of the student. Information on the available support measures must be clearly communicated to the student in their preferred format. Any changes in circumstances or curricular requirements should also trigger a review of the existing support measures as a matter of due course.

## *Choice*

Students who are blind or have low vision must have equal access to a range of educational settings and the supports they require, irrespective of educational setting and geographic location. However, many educators and institutions fail to deliver on the needs of students with disability, especially those with multiple needs. In order to mitigate this systemic deficiency, students should have a range of institutional placement options available to them in order to maximize their learning potential. These choices include: mainstream public and private educational institutions; specialist units within mainstream educational institutions; and educational facilities specifically established for particular needs.

## *Training of educators and staff*

Educators and support staff working with students who are blind or have low vision must have accredited qualifications aligned to their role and/or necessary professional development training in the area of vision impairment. It is particularly important that visiting teachers are braille literate and can effectively teach braille to blind or have low vision students.

In order for students to be included and fully engaged in learning, educators and support staff must be trained in inclusive teaching practices that adjust to the individual needs of students to increase their meaningful participation. Such practices include reducing background noise, supplying verbal instructions for visual cues and materials, adjusting classroom lighting to reduce glare and producing information in accessible formats.

Inclusive teaching practices need to be included into educator training programs, in addition to professional development opportunities in the area of vision impairment.

Administrators and regulators responsible for implementing policy and disability support systems must also be aware of the issues facing students who are blind or have low vision in their educational setting.

## *Core and Expanded Core Curriculum*

Students who are blind or have low vision must have access to the same core curriculum areas learnt by sighted peers. General core curricular have set learning outcomes and/or core competencies for each subject area, and students must have the opportunity to achieve both the standard benchmarks and attain the level of merit based outcome desired. This may be facilitated through a range of inclusive support measures and alternate assessments.

In addition to core curriculum subjects, students who are blind or have low vision also require access to expanded core curriculum areas that address the specialized needs associated with their vision impairment. These include, but are not limited to: Braille literacy; adaptive technology training; compensatory skills training; orientation and mobility; independent living skills; social skills; and career counselling. Given the specialized nature of expanded core curriculum areas, they should be taught by specialist teachers in vision impairment.

## *Adequate Funding*

Governments and educational institutions must allocate adequate funding to facilitate the educational aspirations of students who are blind or have low vision and minimise systemic inefficiencies.

In establishing educational funding policy and benchmarks for students with disability, Government must be informed of the real costs required to meet individual need. Furthermore, funding needs to be flexible and portable in order for funded supports to follow the student as required.

Government funding of capital works, infrastructure, and administrative and operational services for specific educational institutions must also take into account the needs of students with disability.

Educational institutions must be diligent in allocating generic and disability specific funds appropriately to cater for individual needs. Policies and procedures must also promote inclusive education practices by upskilling staff, upgrading and maintaining the physical access to spaces and buildings, the investment of technological and pedagogic support measures.

## About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind 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 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 or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support,

Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Feelix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and a national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, NSW Spectacles Program and Government Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and including fully exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has 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 our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision as well as they support they require to fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, comprising of people with lived experience who are representing the voice and needs of clients of our 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, to strengthen the voice of the blind community.

Position Statement Ends

1. Spriggs, R., (2007), ‘Results and Observations from Research into Employment Levels in Australia’, Vision Australia, available online at http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/info.aspx?page=1651. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)