

# ***Country Reports***

# **AUSTRALIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Australian country report will provide an overview of the universal provision of primary and secondary education, including the national policy context for the implementation of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to enhance the educational outcomes for all students. The report will outline the political and regulatory context that has supported the development of a comprehensive approach to the provision of education for students with disabilities and look specifically at the policy behind, and the practical use of, ICT in this context.

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories, each with an elected government in addition to the Australian Government. The Constitution of Australia allocates responsibility for school education to State and Territory governments, all of whom provide and manage government schools as well as supporting non-government schools. Government schools, which cater for 69% of all students, operate under the direct responsibility of the relevant State or Territory Minister, while non-government schools (31%) are established and operate under conditions determined by State or Territory government registration authorities.

Within each State and Territory, ministers, departments, statutory authorities and individual schools (particularly in the case of non-government schools) determine policies and practices in areas including curriculum, course accreditation, student assessment and certification, resource allocation and utilization, teacher employment and professional development.

The Australian Government provides funding to both government and non-government school authorities to support agreed priorities and strategies. Specific funds are allocated to states and territories to support the additional needs of students with disabilities. The overall result is that government schools receive the majority of their government funding from State and Territory governments and less from the Commonwealth, while non-government schools receive the majority of their government funding from the Commonwealth, and less from the relevant State or Territory.

The main legislative protection for people with disabilities in Australia is provided by the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992). The provision of this legislation means that direct or indirect discrimination against people with disabilities is illegal. In addition, States and Territories have legislation which addresses discrimination against people on the grounds of their

sex, religion, ethnicity, age and disability. Matters not covered by State legislation are covered by the Federal Act.

*The Disability Discrimination Act requires schools, teachers, planners, and policy makers to develop non-discriminatory mainstream educational environments. It means that parents, students and their associates can begin to demand them. The offering of parallel segregated system will not be seen as sufficient.*

*All schools must, unless they can demonstrate unjustifiable hardship, provide a discrimination-free education to girls and boys who have a disability.*

*It would be quite difficult for the multi-million dollar State education systems to demonstrate that it would have an unjustifiable hardship to provide education to students who have disabilities if they were obliged to respond to a complaint under the DDA (Hastings, 1995).*

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling for the Twenty-First Century (1999) specifically addresses the commitment of the Australian Federal and State and Territory government commitment to equity of access and outcomes for students with disabilities. MCEETYA is currently negotiating Disability Standards for Education under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). A number of States and Territories have submitted Disability Action Plans to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC).

Test cases under the Disability Discrimination Act are exerting considerable influence on educational provision for students with disabilities. Multi-discipline teams work with parents and students to determine the appropriate educational environment and learning program. States and Territories provide a range of educational options students with disabilities including:

- inclusion of students in the local school;
- integration of students in the local school;
- specialist units in primary and secondary schools; and
- special schools.

Access to a mainstream education for students with disabilities continues to be a prominent issue for the Australian community. The Ministerial Advisory Committee Report Technology for Learning: Students with Disabilities (2000) and the Australian Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities (2002) have provided recommendations for deliberation by the Australian and State and Territory governments.

Adoption of ICT is transforming our fundamental understanding of education and how all students learn in a way that is much more significant than any other recent educational reform. States and Territories are harnessing the opportunities provided by the new technologies to increase

the breadth and richness of learning, support the development of higher-order thinking skills, increase motivation, and connect students to the realities of contemporary life.

The effective use of ICT is critical to the development of a comprehensive provision of education that increases access, participation, satisfaction and achievement for Australian students with learning disabilities, medical conditions and behavioural disorders and those living in remote areas. It is fundamental to maximising quality education experiences and outcomes for students with visual, hearing, cognitive, physical and multiple disabilities. Through case studies, the country report will highlight the pedagogical benefits of the use of ICT to support students with low incidence disabilities who receive funding through the Federal Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes program. The report will also describe how technology is being used to support improved health outcomes for indigenous students.

The provision of ICT hardware and support services for students with low incidence disabilities is generally managed through State and Territory specialist programs, with financial support from peak disability associations, charities, corporate sponsorship and community fundraising.

Assistive devices used by students with visual disability students include:

- text-to-speech converters
- screen readers and talking browsers
- larger monitors (19-inch, 21-inch)
- use of existing settings on computer systems
- screen magnifiers
- optical character recognition programs
- refreshable Braille displays
- Braille embossers
- personal data assistants (Braille display)

Students with a hearing impairment are often provided with headphones and devices that increase the volume of the teacher's voice to their ear (eg, RF Units). Other students have cochlea implants, or hearing aids with volume control. Students with cognitive disabilities are supported by a range of software programs and assistive devices including concept keyboards and intellikeys. Students with physical disabilities use computer systems with add-on assistive technologies tailored to the unique needs of the user. These technologies include:

- switches
- large mice or trackballs
- speech recognition software
- on-screen keyboards in combination with pointing devices

- word prediction software
- keyboard guards
- programmable keyboards or overlays, and compact keyboards.

The provision of computers, software and assistive technologies is not sufficient to maximise the learning opportunities for our students with disabilities. The delivery of quality educational programs requires:

- commitment to equity by principals and school leaders;
- highly skilled teachers, teacher aides, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and social workers;
- collaborative planning with multi-discipline teams;
- partnerships between the school and family or caregivers;
- quality curriculum and pedagogy;
- negotiated individual educational program;
- access to appropriate technologies and online content;
- school connectivity and infrastructure;
- technical support;
- adequate funding; and
- funding models that focus on meeting the educational needs of students.

Australian States and Territories have made significant progress in implementing policies and programs that address these issues, but much is still to be achieved. The country report will articulate challenges currently facing Australian State and Territory education systems as the demands for ICT to support students studying from home in remote areas, and students with low incidence disabilities, learning disabilities, medical conditions and behavioural problems continue to increase.

The Australian Federal and State and Territory governments are providing significant funding over five years to develop a pool of multi-media learning objects to support learners in the compulsory years of schooling to achieve curriculum outcomes. The building of an exchange to cache the curriculum content and to deploy it to each of the stakeholder education systems is an integral part of the project.

Standards for accessibility and educational soundness are central to ensuring that the curriculum materials are accessible to students with visual, hearing, physical and cognitive disabilities and that the curriculum materials meet the relevant provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

The Le@rning Federation is working to ensure that its three areas of output, content

procurement, information systems development, and market information are accessible to and useable by people with disabilities. In particular, the initiative is concerned that the curriculum content meets the needs of students with disabilities, their teachers and education assistants.

To achieve access, The Le@rning Federation has implemented a range of actions and quality assurance processes to ensure that:

- students with a disability can access the learning opportunities of the Initiative's online digital content
- the learning objects to work with students' assistive technologies
- the learning objects are perceivable or intelligible for students with various profiles
- multimedia developers understand the accessibility specification.

The Le@rning Federation Disability Action Plan has been provided to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) for registration.

A demonstration of the accessibility features of multi-media learning objects developed by The Le@rning Federation will be provided in the country report.