

AUSTRALIA

Educational Practice in Australian Schools to Ensure Participation in Employment for Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

This paper provides brief information on the broad structural features of the Australian school education system, with a particular focus on their role in supporting students with disabilities to ensure participation in future employment. The paper begins with an outline of the Australian school system, the educational participation and state of employment in relation to children with disabilities and the educational activities carried out at schools to prepare such children for employment.

Overview of Australia's school education system

Australia's government is a parliamentary democracy with three levels: Australian, State/Territory and Local. Australian governments at all levels strive to continually improve education and training, to ensure the sector is responsive to changing social and economic needs. The Australian education and training system broadly comprises four major sectors: government and non-government pre-school, primary and secondary schools; public and private vocational education and training (VET) providers; public and private higher education institutions; and, adult and community education providers.

In relation to Australia's school education system, it is important to understand that the Australian Government works with State and Territory governments, non-government school authorities, parents, educators and other organisations to seek the best possible outcomes for young Australians. Strategic policy development and delivery of programmes and services at the national level are coordinated through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

School Education

School education has a central role in preparing young people for the challenges of the future. In particular, those students who complete Year 12 (upper secondary school or equivalent) will be more likely to undertake further education and training during their working lives, and more able to cope in a dynamic labour market. There is a continuing focus in Australia on quality of the schooling, including more support for teachers and principals, more national consistency and increased feedback to parents. This focus on quality aims to ensure that the high performance of Australian students – as shown in the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is maintained in the future. Despite the overall high level of school performance, there is continued concern about those students who perform less well (Indigenous students, boys, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds). In addition, improving the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged school students, including students with disabilities, is a major Australian Government priority.

Structural features

In 2004, there were 9615 schools in Australia of which 6938 were government schools and 2677 were non-government schools. Primary schools comprised 68.8 per cent of schools while 15.2 per cent were secondary schools. A further 11.9 percent were combined primary and secondary school and 4.1 per cent were special schools. In 2004, there were 3,331,964 full-time students attending school. In 2004 there were approximately 129,135 students reported with disabilities in Australian schools, of which 104,922 (or 81.2 per cent were in the government sector and 24,213 (or 18.8 per cent) were in the non-government sector.

Starting Age and school year

Pre-school and school education has a similar structure across Australia but with variations in the starting age and the number of years after which students move from primary to secondary education. Children usually start pre-school between the ages of four and five. Primary schooling is six or seven years and secondary schooling is five or six years. School education is compulsory until the age of 15 except in two States (Tasmania and South Australia) where it is compulsory until the age of 16. The final two years of secondary schooling, Years 11 and 12, are necessary for those wishing to proceed to higher education (mainly university). The Year 12 qualification is competitive and recognised by all Australian tertiary institutions, regardless of the State in which the qualification was obtained. Private school education exists in parallel with the State system at all levels of schooling. Many private schools have been established in association with religious groups, ethnic communities or particular pedagogical orientation.

Students with special education needs

Special education is provided by government and non-government authorities in special classes or units in regular schools, by withdrawal from regular classes for periods of intensive assistance by special staff, or in specialist schools. Special schools provide education for students with disabilities who require intensive support. More commonly, with the move toward inclusive schooling, children with disabilities in Australia are attending regular schools, with the assistance of special support services. Services that may be available to support students in school include advisory visiting teachers in impairment areas, early special education advisory teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, nurses, school transition officers, guidance officers and orientation and mobility teachers. Teacher aides have come to occupy a significant place in the overall approach to service provision for students with special and/or additional education needs.

With the move toward inclusive schooling and increasing opportunities for students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream classrooms, particularly in the primary years, a new role for special schools seems to be emerging in Australia. This new role involves acting as a “centre of expertise” for primary and secondary schools in their area who have students with disabilities enrolled. In this role, the special school is seen as a provider of support and advice to the school, and in some cases a visiting teacher service. This is of particular value for special schools located in smaller country towns. The *2002 Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities* highlighted that “special schools have become ‘lighthouse’ schools of best practice in some States and Territories, and a source of concentrated knowledge and experience” (Australian Senate, 2002, p40).

Primary and secondary schooling

In early primary education, the main emphasis is on the development of basic language and literacy skills, simple arithmetic, moral and social education, health training and some creative activities. In the upper primary years the focus is on development of the skills learned in earlier years.

In some systems the first one or two years of secondary school consist of a general program which is undertaken by all students, although there may be some electives. In later years, a basic core of subjects is retained, with students able to select additional optional subjects. In senior secondary years, a wider range of options is available in the larger schools and there is an increasing trend towards encouraging individual schools to develop courses suited to the needs and interests of their students, subject to accreditation and moderation procedures. There is also an increasing emphasis on the incorporation of vocational programs into the senior secondary curriculum. School students may New Apprenticeships in the VET sector as part of their senior school study and undertake some parts of their programs in the workplace.

Students reaching the minimum school leaving age may leave school and seek employment, or enrol in a vocational course with a VET institution, such as a technical and further education (TAFE) institution or a private business college. For many VET courses, completion of Year 10 of secondary school is a minimum entry requirement. For those continuing to the end of secondary school (Year 12), opportunities for further study are available at higher education institutions, VET institutions and other educational institutions. For students continuing to higher education, eligibility to undertake university courses is almost always based on completion (at a satisfactory level) of a senior secondary school certificate.

Relevant National Frameworks

National Goals for Schooling

The National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCCETYA 1999) developed and agreed by MCEETYA provide a common and agreed framework for the development of outcomes-based curriculum in the compulsory years of schooling. While each State and Territory has its own curriculum framework, they all share a number of common principles. The National Goals have a strong equity dimension as they call for schooling to be free of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion and disability, and of differences arising from a student's socioeconomic background or geographic location. They also provide that the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students, including students with disabilities, should improve over time to match those of other students. For more information, please refer to:

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/national_goals_for_schooling_in_the_twenty_first_century.htm

Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation

In Australia, legislation has provided the community with an imperative that children and students with disabilities will not be discriminated against so that they can access educational services and expect educational outcomes from educational services. One of the aims of the current legislation is to establish a national framework of consistent, reasonable, fair and transparent services for the education of children and students with disabilities. The Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) seeks to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people with disabilities. Under this Act, it is unlawful for an educational authority to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person's disability or a disability of any associates of that person.

The Disability Standards for Education are subordinate legislation which came into effect on 18 August 2005. The Standards clarify and make more explicit the obligations of education and training service providers under the DDA, and the rights of people with disabilities in relation to education while, at the

same time, balancing the needs of students with the interests of all parties affected, including providers. The Standards seek to ensure that students with disabilities can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. Put briefly, the standards cover the areas of enrolment, participation, curriculum development, accreditation and delivery, student support services, and the elimination of harassment and victimisation.

More information is at: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/dda_guide/dda_guide.htm. The Standards, accompanying Guidance Notes and the Regulation Impact Statement on the Standards are available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/research/publications/disability_standards/default.htm.

Educational Participation and State of Employment for Students with a Disability

Year 12 Completion

Research based on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) shows that having a disability is a factor contributing to lower retention rates to the end of secondary schooling ⁽¹⁾. Having a disability also continues to have a separate influence on educational participation beyond the school years, additional to whether or not Year 12 or an equivalent qualification was completed ⁽²⁾.

Participation in Education

In VET, the participation and outcomes of various equity groups, such as students with disabilities, are monitored and reported. Students with a disability are under-represented in the Australian VET system. However, the proportion of students with a disability in VET has been increasing from 3.5 per cent of all students in 1998 to 4.8 per cent in 2002. In higher education, people with disabilities are identified as targets for equity planning on the basis of their history of their relative disadvantage in accessing higher education. The number and proportion of students with disabilities has increased markedly over recent years, with a 50 per cent increase over 1996 to 2003.

Participation in Employment

There are a number of different employment service providers in Australia that work with job seekers with a disability to help them get a job. The type of assistance provided to people with a disability will depend on to what extent they need ongoing support or rehabilitation to find or keep a job. Many employment service providers specialise in assistance for those with intellectual disabilities, for example, NOVA Employment & Training Inc which supports regions in New South Wales. Refer to <http://www.novaemployment.com.au>. Over 2004-05, a total of over 8,500 job placements were recorded by job placement organisations for job seekers receiving the Disability Support Pension which is an increase of more than double the previous financial year. Wilkins ⁽³⁾ has recently studied the effects of disability on labour market outcomes in Australia and has found that disability has substantial effects on labour force status, on average acting to decrease the probability of labour force participation by one-quarter for males and one-fifth for females. Analysis of disability characteristics shows that adverse effects on labour force status increase with severity of the disability and are also worse for those with more than one type of impairment.

Role of Schools in Preparing Students with Disabilities for Employment

School administrators and teachers use a whole-schooling approach to cater for the individual needs of all children in their schools, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other differences. Schools play a key role in equipping children who enter education with basic literacy and numeracy skills. It is in the first years of school that all children can be helped to acquire the foundational skills which will set them on the path of success in reading and writing. Preparation

of students for participation in the world of work is another essential element of the education mission of a school.

Enrolment of Students with Disabilities

Parental choice underlies where a student will be enrolled, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. As a matter of practice, State and Territory education authorities prefer to negotiate the most appropriate placement for students who have special and/or additional educational needs, involving the parents, school and departmental representatives in working out which school setting best addresses the need of the student.

Individual Education Programs and Curriculum Focus

In all States and Territories, there have been extensive reviews of policies and practices, with detailed guidelines developed relating to the education of students with disabilities. In particular, guidelines relating to the identification and ascertainment of student needs and the development of individual education programs or negotiated curriculum plans have been drawn up. Early identification of disability and early intervention are seen as critical aspects of educational provision for students with disabilities.

Schools use individual education programs to ensure that an appropriate curriculum is provided for each student. The general nature of a curriculum being followed by a student with a disability will depend on a range of factors such as the age of the student, the rate of development, the need for modified teaching techniques, the extent to which the curriculum needs to help with the acquisition of self-help and daily living skills and development of communication skills, in cases of severe or profound disability. However, this does not necessarily equate to the provision of alternative curricula to meet the needs of individual students. High-performing schools in Australia tend to achieve right across all student ability levels, including students with special educational needs. Therefore, the ongoing challenge in planning for individual needs is good teaching and curriculum practices that produce good educational outcomes across all student ability levels, including students with special educational needs.

Ongoing monitoring is essential for the continued implementation of the appropriate curriculum. In the case of students with disabilities, communication between the school and the parent is seen as of particular importance in monitoring students' progress and in identifying any problems that the student may be experiencing, either in learning or in social adjustment.

At the school level, Australian schools are also implementing systems to identify and respond to the educational needs of students with disabilities, for example, through the use of educational adjustment programs. Teachers need to be sure that the education adjustments they are making are appropriate to the child's needs and they may also need specialist advice on the type of education adjustment they should make for particular disabilities. These practices ensure that teaching adjustments are identified as early as possible and are made in a class/school program to provide an inclusive education for students with a verified diagnosis. For an example, refer to:

<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/disabilities/adjustment/index.html>.

Students experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties

Australian surveys have indicated that 10 to 16 per cent of students are perceived by their teachers to have learning difficulties and have support needs, particularly in literacy, that go beyond those normally addressed by class teachers⁽⁴⁾. Within the population of students with learning difficulties,

there is a smaller sub-set of students who show persistent and long lasting impairments and these are better identified as students with specific learning disabilities. Approximately 4 per cent of Australian students have a specific learning disability ⁽⁵⁾. The incidence of numeracy difficulties may be even higher than those reported for literacy ⁽⁶⁾. In terms of percentages of disability by type, any national comparisons need to be interpreted with caution due to the different classifications used by the States and Territories. However, the *2002 Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities* highlighted that intellectual disabilities accounted for over half the disabilities that receive funded support.

Attainment of Literacy and Numeracy

Improving literacy and numeracy levels in schools is a key equity issue as early diagnosis of a disability and early intervention will facilitate the educational prospects for a student who is experiencing difficulty in acquiring these skills. At the national level, the Australian Government has worked closely with its State and Territory colleagues to develop the Government's national goal of improved literacy and numeracy standards through implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan (the National Plan). The National Plan was developed in 1997 and includes the following key and interrelated elements:

- *assessment of all students* by their teachers as early as possible in the first years of schooling;
- *early intervention strategies* for those students identified as having difficulty;
- *the development of agreed benchmarks* (Years 3, 5 and 7), against which all children's achievement in these years can be measured;
- *professional development for teachers* to support the key elements of the Plan. The focus of professional development is support for teachers to effectively address the needs of all students.

In each State and Territory substantial programmes, concentrating particularly on the early years, have been put in place to support the National Plan. The Australian Government, through its targeted programmes for schools, will provide significant support of some \$2 billion over the 2005-08 quadrennium for the most educationally disadvantaged students, to assist them in developing their literacy and numeracy skills.

The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) recently published a "Schooling Issues Digest" which summarised national and international research in relation to students with learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy. A key finding was that students experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties require explicit teaching of how, when and why to use reading and numeracy strategies. Another important finding was that students with literacy and numeracy difficulties require appropriate programmes of intervention to begin as soon as memory, organisation and language difficulties become apparent ⁽⁴⁾. A copy of the Digest can be found at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/schooling_issues_digest.

At the national level, late last year the Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson announced a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australian schools. The Inquiry is conducting an independent examination of the way reading is taught and assessed in classrooms as well as the adequacy of teacher training courses in preparing teachers for reading instruction. The Inquiry will be informed by a review of national and international research on reading methods, including those used to help students with reading difficulties. It will, therefore, provide much needed evidence as to the most effective ways to teach reading in schools and will comment on the adequacy of teacher training courses in preparing our teachers for reading instruction.

Information about the Inquiry is at www.dest.gov.au/schools/literacyinquiry. The Inquiry is due to report its findings to the Minister by the end of this year.

Transfers

In addition to the vertical progression, students with disabilities may also experience horizontal transfers if students move from one school or from one form of provision to another. Transferring from one school to another may pose a particular problem for students with disabilities, both in terms of having their special needs met, and in terms of adjusting to a new situation. Schools play an important role in information sharing to ensure that adequate communication of information between schools to ensure that relevant information is passed on and that continuity in the educational program and provision of specialist support services is maintained.

Preparation for post-school activities - Vocational Learning and VET in Schools

Preparation for post-school activities is one of the long-term objectives of educational provision for students with disabilities. Schools also have a responsibility for the development of individualised transition plans for all students, to the integration of careers development activities into their curriculum as part of the development of transition or 'exit' plans and to the provision of access to relevant curriculum in the senior years which reflects the career aspirations of the students.

Since 1996, VET programs have been available to senior secondary students as part of their senior secondary studies. VET in Schools refers to subjects or programs taken as part of a senior secondary certificate that on completion provides credit towards a nationally recognised VET qualification. Some VET in Schools count towards entry to university courses, while all such programme provide credit for particular TAFE courses and lead into traineeships and apprenticeships. A main goal of VET in Schools is to increase access to vocational pathways and in doing so, aid the development of skills and attributes of young Australians that will enable their full and ongoing participation in learning and work. Further growth is anticipated as more students recognise that VET in Schools programmes increase the range of post-school pathways available to them.

School-based New Apprenticeships provide the opportunity for young people to undertake paid training in the New Apprenticeship system whilst still remaining at school. Completion of a School-based New Apprenticeship is recorded on the Senior Secondary Certificate.

Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) is a component of a VET in Schools programme/course that is situated within a workplace and offers students the opportunity to experience workplace life first hand, exposing them to more information about career choices. Businesses provide on-the-job training and mentoring to develop both the technical and generic employability skills. This knowledge helps students to make more informed choices about the type of learning and life-skills development they require for future education and employment. The programme is administered at a local level by Local Community Partnerships (LCPs) right across Australia. These partnerships bring together schools, employers and community groups to work together to provide students in Year 11 and 12 with real opportunities in workplaces to assist them in making the right educational and vocational choices. Further information about these initiatives can be found at:

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/programmes_funding/programme_categories/key_priorities/vocational_education_in_schools/vocational_education_in_schools_initiative/vocational_learning_and_vet_in_schools.htm

Brief Overview of Training in Australia for People with a Disability

Under the national training arrangements, State and Territory Training Authorities have responsibility for the delivery of training and other initiatives for people with a disability. Australian Government, State and Territory Ministers of training have agreed to *Bridging Pathways: a National Strategy and Blueprint for increasing opportunities for people with a disability in vocational education and training (VET)*. The Blueprint sets out the future priorities for improving outcomes for people with a disability in the national training system. The Blueprint recognises the need to improve pathways for people with a disability while still in school. The Australian Government also funds a number of programmes which assist people with a disability to access VET and improve employment outcomes for these people. These include the Disability Coordination Officer (DCO) Programme to assist people with a disability with transitional arrangements between school, post-secondary education and training and employment and the Disabled New Apprentice Wage Support (DNAWS) Programme which provides assistance for New Apprentices with a disability. These initiatives have contributed to a nearly 50% increase in the participation of people with a disability in training from 61,541 (3.6%) in 2000 to 90,200 (5.7%) in 2004.

Conclusion

Schools play an important role in preparing all students, including students with disabilities, for work and for life in general. An important principle is that students with disabilities will experience a curriculum and high quality school education which is responsive to their needs and which actively promotes independence, self esteem, social skills and academic achievement. All level of government in Australia recognise the national, social and economic benefits from ensuring that all young people, including students with disabilities, can experience smooth transitions through school and from school into further education, training or employment. In order to ensure that this is an important outcome for students with a disability rather than a vague possibility that may follow, the Australian Government will continue to focus on improving pathways for people with a disability through their transitions in and beyond school.

ENDNOTES

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- (5) National Health and Medical Research Council (1990). Learning difficulties in children and adolescents. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.