

Submission

No 82

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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14 May, 2008

Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By email: childrenscommittee@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW

Enclosed please find Vision Australia's submission to The Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Children and Young People's Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW.

Yours faithfully

Susan Thompson
Advocacy Officer

**VISION AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION
TO
THE PARLIAMENTARY JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE'S
INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 9-14 YEARS IN NSW**

1. INTRODUCTION

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide input to The Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Children and Young People's Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9 -14 Years in NSW.

Vision Australia was formed in 2004 through the merger of several leading Australian agencies that provided services to people who are blind or have low vision. We are now Australia's largest blindness and low vision agency, with a long history of professional service delivery. Our organisation's purpose is to provide assistance to people who are blind or have low vision so that they can access, and fully participate in, all facets of life. Vision Australia promotes awareness to government, government departments, community services and the general public about the barriers faced by people, who are blind or have low vision in a predominantly sight orientated society.

Vision Australia's children's services are provided to children and their families from birth to 18 years of age, and our adult services are available to adults throughout their lives.

We provide early intervention services to assist families in working with their children who are blind or have low vision to develop physically, psychologically and socially.

It is important to note, that there are many other services which should also function well throughout a child's life in order for a child who is blind or has low vision to develop into a competent and well adjusted teenager and to become a successful adult.

2. FUNDAMENTAL FOUNDINGS FOR CHILDREN

Vision Australia would like to draw the committee's attention to the development of the National Unified Life Skills Model (NULM). Information about the goals and aims of NULM can be found at www.nulm.org.

In particular, the goal of NULM, is "maximising the independence and potential of every child" who is blind or has low vision.

In order for a child who is blind or has low vision to reach this goal, they and their families must have access to, as expressed by NULM:

“appropriate interventions, which develop skills, strategies and social literacy throughout childhood and adolescence, with particular focus on key developmental and transitional milestones”.

For a child who is blind or has low vision these interventions often need to be direct interaction with the child in addition to supporting the family to re-enforce the strategies of professional therapists.

In the very early years, the focus is on such areas as muscle development through movement, awareness of body and surrounding environment, developing use of senses, self care, early literacy, and transition to school.

Once a child reaches school age, it is the education system which has one of the biggest impacts on whether a child who is blind or has low vision becomes a successful adult.

NULM sets out an ‘expanded core curriculum’ which covers the sorts of skills which a child should obtain in order to reach maximum potential in adult life. These skills should develop along a continuum, with skills mastered at each stage of their development contributing to learning new skills in the next stage.

These include:

- Print access skills – including competency in Braille, use of adaptive technology, use of magnifiers and Closed circuit television magnifiers, use of computers and touch typing;
- Independence skills – including self care and home based activities and community based activities;
- Academic skills – particularly literacy and numeracy;
- Social skills – including interpersonal skills, verbal and non verbal social skills;
- Orientation and Mobility skills;
- Leisure and recreation options.

Other elements which would be needed to maximize these skills and ensure they develop appropriately may include:

- Ongoing career education from an early age;

- High expectations and realistic feedback from adults; and
- Addressing of any emotional issues for the child and their family.

3. EMPLOYMENT FOR ADULTS WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE LOW VISION

In March 2007, Vision Australia completed research into the employment levels of adults who are blind or have low vision. The full text of the overview of this survey is provided as an attachment.

In broad terms, the results of this research indicated “63% of the potential labour force with a vision impairment are unemployed”.

While there are clearly many factors which contribute to this situation, Vision Australia believes that in adequately addressing the educational, psychological and social needs of young people and their families, this situation could be improved for people who are blind or have low vision as they become adults.

4. BARRIERS TO SUCCESS IN ADULT LIFE

Below we have identified a number of factors present for young people who are blind or have low vision, which often impact their success as adults

4.1 Poor understanding of vision impairment

There is a very poor understanding of the range of vision impairment in the community generally.

It is common for people to have difficulty accepting the idea of total blindness. Likewise, it is difficult to understand that if a child can perform such tasks as reading the black board from the front of the class with a magnification aid, why that child can't participate in a sport requiring tracking of a moving ball.

In addition, for children with low vision, it is difficult to understand the impact of differences in lighting conditions on the way they function with their level of vision.

At the other extreme, it is difficult for those who are sighted to understand that children, who are blind, are, with appropriate adjustments, able to participate in main stream activities with their peers.

Vision Australia has seen examples at one extreme where poor understanding and resulting unrealistic expectations by teachers has lead to unjustified disciplining of children. In one such example, a child with some useful vision was being disciplined for an accident which occurred because his low vision meant he was unable to see

another child's finger in a cupboard door before closing it.

At the other extreme, children who are totally blind are excluded from sport and other recreational activities, and side lined from their peers.

For children who are blind or have low vision, they may not have fully developed an understanding of how they are different to those who are normally sighted, and may not yet have the skills to convey to a sighted adult how this impacts them in a given setting such as in family life, at school, in community activities.

It can also be difficult for sighted peers to understand. This, particularly in the teenage years, leads to teasing, and often rejection of a young person with a vision impairment. For some children and teenagers, this can lead to long-term negative impacts on their self esteem.

Recommendation:

That strategies be developed to increase the level of awareness amongst educational personnel, parents of all children and those working with children, of:

- The range of vision impairments (from total blindness through to some functional low vision); and
- The differences in functional vision resulting from different eye conditions (such as Albinism, Retinitis Pigmentosa, Cataracts or Glaucoma);

4.2 Low levels of literacy amongst children who are blind or have low vision

Vision Australia Children's Services staff have observed that children who are blind or have low vision have much lower levels of literacy than that of their sighted peers.

There are disturbing trends currently apparent in the education of students who are blind or have low vision in relation to providing literacy through Braille.

We are aware of situations where Braille is taught for only a limited number of hours a week (possibly dependent on the visiting schedule of itinerant teachers). However sighted children are constantly immersed in reading and writing. Children who are blind are therefore not being exposed to the same standards of literacy skills development.

There are teachers charged with providing support to children who are blind or have low vision who are neither specialized in blindness and low vision, nor competent in Braille.

This suggests a lack of recognition of the importance of Braille as a key to literacy both for blind students and those whose vision is too low to efficiently read print.

There is research, such as that conducted by The Centre for Non-invasive Brain Stimulation in Boston Massachusetts, suggesting that for a blind person, the area of the brain utilized in processing visual information including print, is utilized in the process of reading and processing Braille. Further, these parts of the brain are not involved in processing auditory information.

Thus, Braille is the closest equivalent to reading print.

Further, arbitrary decisions are being made not to teach a child Braille, despite the possibility, if not the likelihood of their eye condition leading to further loss of vision. Such examples would include Glaucoma, Retinitis Pigmentosa and Ushers Syndrome (where an existing hearing impairment invariably is accompanied by later vision loss).

Recommendation:

That in conjunction with all stakeholders, a review of the Individual Education Plan development processes be conducted to ensure that the long term prognosis of the child's vision condition is taken into account, to avoid inappropriate decisions against teaching Braille and thus condemning a child to poor or no literacy.

Another contributing factor in the observed low levels of literacy amongst children who are blind or have low vision is that they are excluded from regular basic skills tests. Thus, these children are not being regularly assessed for literacy and numeracy, in order to institute remedial programs.

This continuation of poor literacy and numeracy ultimately has implications for employment. It also negatively impacts on self esteem, and leads to further alienation from peers who are at higher levels of competency.

Recommendation:

That appropriately adapted literacy and numeracy skill tests be developed and implemented to accurately measure the progress of a student who is blind or has low vision against sighted peers.

4.3 Insufficient specialised support

Vision Australia is aware of many examples where children are struggling in schools due to insufficient specialist support.

This is due in some instances to insufficient hours being provided to assist the child or the teacher where a child needs more ongoing intensive support. In some instances it is a lack of understanding by teachers that a child's difficulties are due to a vision impairment. In some instances it is due a lack of self advocacy on the part of a student who just wants to "fit in" invisibly, or a lack of advocacy support for parents.

In the case of students with dual hearing and vision impairments, there is a lack of acceptance within the education system that the communication and education challenges presented by both disabilities often need addressing by separate specialists.

In still other cases, the lack of specialist support is a result of blatant, sometimes hostile, opposition on the part of school personnel to accept their moral, legal and policy responsibility for the equal education of students with disabilities in main stream schools.

Vision Australia's Policy and Advocacy service is often called upon to assist families who are extremely frustrated with dealing with the education system to gain sufficient appropriate specialist support to achieve quality educational outcomes for their children, which is a basic right in our society.

4.4 Inequity for children from regional areas

Within the educational setting, the difficulties set out above, are exacerbated for children in regional and remote areas.

There is a lower incidence of children with vision impairments attending schools, and itinerant teachers are spread more thinly, and are less likely to develop expertise in supporting children who are blind or have low vision.

In these communities, generally, less access for children and families to services can put additional strain on families needing support to ensure opportunities for their child with a vision impairment. These services include such things as peer support programs for children and parents, additional professional support such as orientation and mobility instruction, after school activities, family counselling support, and access to eye care professionals.

Recommendation:

That increased resources be available to enable families of children who are blind or have low vision to be able to gain regular access to services to support their development.

This could take the form of:

- resourcing for more generalised disability service organisations to provide expertise in vision impairment;
- resourcing specialist organisations in blindness and low vision, to provide increased services into regional and remote areas; and
- providing resources to families to enable travel to bigger centres, when necessary, to access services.

4.5 Low academic expectations of children who are blind or have low vision

It is not uncommon, that children who are blind or have low vision are subject to lower expectations in relation to academic performance and required home work than that expected of their sighted peers.

Provided that these children have the necessary support services, equipment and reasonable adjustments to place them on an equal academic plain with their peers, they should be subject to the same standards and expectations from both parents and teachers.

Clearly, any child is unique in their response to the pressure of expectation and the challenge of achieving and competing academically; and in some cases needs a more delicate approach from parents and teachers or remedial attention. The same applies to children who are blind or have low vision. However, to subject any child to lower standards and expectations, based purely on their level of vision, is a gross disservice to them.

It should be noted however, that care is warranted to ensure that teachers and parents do not over-compensate, and consequently expect unreasonably more of a child than is expected of sighted peers. This can have equally damaging results to the development of self esteem, if the child is incapable of meeting the greater than normal expectations.

4.6 Unrealistic progress feedback leading to unrealistic expectations

In contrast to point 4.5 above, Vision Australia staff have noted instances of children being set up to fail long term by well meaning people not providing them with realistic feedback through their education years. In particular, we see students in middle and late high school with Kindergarten level literacy believing they will enter university.

It can only be assumed that children are being let down at a number of points. Firstly, in the absence of administration of the basic skills assessments, and appropriate remedial action leading to poor literacy; secondly, in the review of the Individual Education Plan process where children and parents along with educators should be reviewing the child's competence in academic and other life skills; and thirdly, the lack of appropriate career advice specific to the needs of people who are blind or have low vision.

Vision Australia's employment survey confirms the lack of appropriate career advice in that "35% of survey respondents aged under 25 years indicated that they did not receive career guidance at schools appropriate to their level of vision impairment".

Recommendation:

- That as part of the Individual Education Plan, as early as possible in the

primary school years, children receive career guidance at schools appropriate to their level of vision impairment.

- That a range of programs be instituted or accessed to facilitate the exploration of, and preparation for transition to, further education and employment.

4.7 Limited awareness by children of what is expected on finishing school

It is not uncommon, where children are in over-protective families, for them to grow up with poor domestic skills; low academic performance; no expectations of further education or a job; and no plan for independent living away from home.

This is possibly due to a lack of blind or low vision adult role models for both children and families which serve to raise expectations.

An unfortunate consequence of the move from specialist school to public school education has been less opportunity for the kind of peer support which aids in children mixing with others. This peer support serves to raise the general level of expectation by fostering a genuine sense of equality and healthy competition with peers who are blind or have low vision.

Recommendation:

- That more opportunities be available as part of school activities, after school programs, and during school breaks for children who are blind or have low vision to network, form binding friendships, gain confidence by participation in recreational activities on an equal bases, and learn a range of life skills with peers.

4.8 Exclusion of children who are blind or have low vision from sport, school excursions and other school activities

Vision Australia staff are aware of children who have experienced exclusion from excursions and other school activities based on their blindness or low vision. This is doing these children a disservice. It increases their sense of isolation from their peers, and if imposed by the school amounts to discrimination under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (the DDA).

This exclusion may be due to a misconception, either from school staff or parents, that the child is unable to participate in an activity due to their blindness or low vision. It may also be due to the child being scheduled for additional programs such as Orientation and Mobility training in those time slots.

However, given the critical role of physical activity on physical development and fitness, as well as on the sense of well being and achievement, it is unacceptable that a child who is blind or has low vision be deprived of the benefits of sport or physical activity.

School excursions also provide opportunities for extending experience of the world beyond school, and can provide opportunities for socialization equally important for children who are blind or have low vision. It is unacceptable that a child be excluded from these excursions based purely on their blindness or low vision.

Recommendation:

- That an Education Department policy be developed, to ensure that individual schools not be permitted to exclude children who are blind or have low vision from sporting and physical activities or school excursions and other activities except in the most extenuating circumstances. Further, where additional programs specific to a child's blindness or low vision are conducted, that resources be made available to enable these to occur at times which do not conflict with other activities beneficial to the child's physical or social education.

Recommendation:

- That in instances where a sporting activity is genuinely not accessible to a child, other parallel programs be provided for example organizing activities such as Goalball in which sighted peers can also participate.

4.9 Access to technology as required

Vision Australia's employment survey highlighted the following:

"There is a heavier concentration of employment for people who are blind or have low vision in non-manual or non-labour positions. Therefore, the need for this group to be computer-literate and/or to possess other technical skills is elevated. Further, it is clear that the higher the level of education possessed by a person who is blind or has low vision, the more likely they will be employed. Similarly, the more formats of material they can access, the higher their employment opportunities.

Schools should ensure skills taught to students who are blind or have low vision meet their future career needs. Vision Australia offers training in accessing alternative formats, in using computers with appropriate technologies and in using alternative technologies. Vision Australia already works with schools and other educational bodies to provide specialist knowledge where requested."

In order to equip children with these skills as early as possible, there is a need to address the inconsistency and lack of access to necessary assistive technology and equipment, across Australia and within states.

It is unacceptable that children are being expected to work with equipment, such as

Perkins Brailers, which are more than fifty years out of date. This equipment is noisy and cumbersome. Further, Vision Australia is aware of instances where children have been excluded from classrooms due to the noise of this equipment.

Recommendation:

- That in conjunction with state, territory and the commonwealth, a national equipment scheme (along the lines of the Workplace Modifications Scheme) be established, which streamlines assessment and supply of equipment to students at a national level; and ensures timely provision of up-to-date and educationally appropriate equipment.

4.10 Lack of access to sport and recreation options

Lack of access to recreational options is another barrier which exists for families and children who are blind or have low vision.

While there are some recreational options specifically for adults who are blind or have low vision, such as blind cricket, blind bowls and goalball, many of these (with the exception of goalball) would not have appeal for children.

Furthermore, adults are much better able to advocate for their inclusion in activities which are available for the general community.

An additional consideration is that often a child who is blind or has low vision requires one-on-one instruction by an adult skilled in the activity or experienced in working with this disability. This means that where sighted family members can pick up the necessary skills by visual example, for many activities, the blind or low vision child may need instruction before they can participate.

Recommendation:

- That the Department of Sport and Recreation, in conjunction with organisations providing services to people who are blind or have low vision and their families, develop recreational options including instruction, geared towards children.

4.11 Lack of information and support to enable Parents to advocate

Vision Australia staff provide advocacy support on a daily basis to assist parents with ensuring that the needs of their children who are blind or have low vision are met.

Often, parents lack information on available services, their rights when using the services, and the mechanisms available to address discrimination or poor service. This is particularly the case in education.

Recommendation:

- That the Department of Education establish a Family Advocacy Unit for children with disabilities, whose responsibility it is to advocate for the needs and rights of children and families to ensure the child is achieving the best possible educational outcomes; and that the advocates be authorised to consult with experts and professionals relevant to the particular disabilities of the child.

4.12 Accessibility in the community

Clearly the ability of a young person who is blind or has low vision to access goods and services, transport, premises and government programs as provided for by the DDA has an impact on the range of life experiences they gain in their childhood years. Thus, participation in community activities such as the Guides and Scouts, church activities, movies with audio description (the describing of action and other visual aspects of a movie) are important for a feeling of inclusion in family and community.

There is also a need for the provision of recreational facilities which are fun and accessible for children who are blind or have low vision. These need to incorporate safety features such as changes in surface textures, the use of tactile ground surface indicators (TGSIs) or barriers to indicate hazards such as bodies of water, swings or the underneath of slides which may not be detectable for a child who is blind or has low vision.

CONCLUSION

Vision Australia looks to this enquiry to address the issues raised above. We strongly believe that children and young people who are blind or have low vision have been disadvantaged through a lack of focus on meeting their disability needs, particularly in the education system.

Vision Australia would be happy to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission.

Susan Thompson
Advocacy Officer

14 May 2008



Results and Observations from Research into Employment Levels in Australia
Overview Document
Market Research and Development

March 2007



OUR VISION

Vision Australia is a living partnership between people who are blind, sighted or have low vision. We are united by our passion that in the future people who are blind or have low vision will have access to and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

Introduction

While, figures from the Australia Bureau of Statistics show that about 10% of people with a Vision Impairment are unemployed, other evidence suggests the actual proportion is far higher.

This survey was undertaken to establish an accurate level of employment nationally amongst people who are blind or have low vision, and to discover the reasons people are not working. Additional information about levels of underemployment, limitations in job functions and assistance used was also requested to help guide both Vision Australia's assistance to those that wish to work, as well as to influence local and national policy.

The survey was conducted with the assistance of Blind Citizens Australia and Royal Guide Dogs Association of Tasmania who supported the survey by promoting it to their members and soliciting participants.

Scope

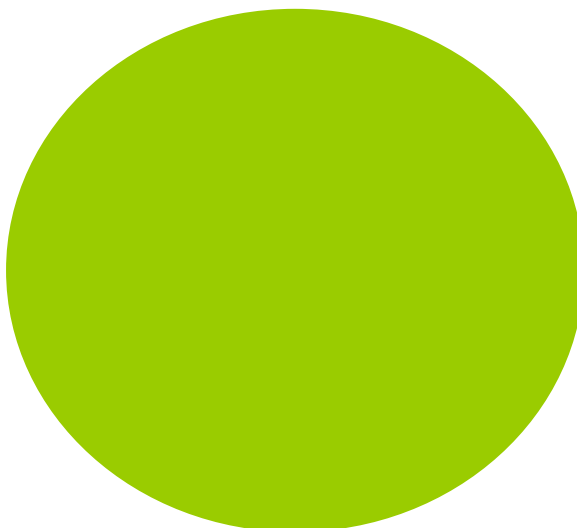
Between September 2006 and January 2007, nearly 2000 people were interviewed in relation to their employment status. The survey was conducted by telephone and was administered by trained consultants to participants across Australia.

This resulted in insights from 1864 respondents who were blind or have low vision (i.e. a vision impairment that cannot be corrected by glasses), aged between 15 and 64 years of age.

Key Findings

Unemployment levels are high

69% of people of working age who are blind or have low vision are not in paid employment. Even if those who are identified as unemployed for reasons of retirement, education, homemaking or as a lifestyle choice are excluded, those who are blind or have low vision are four and a half times more likely to be unemployed than the national average. That is, 63% of the potential labour force with a vision impairment are unemployed, compared to 14% for the population as a whole.



There are many “discouraged workers” who could potentially join the workforce

Four out of every ten people of working age who are blind or have low vision indicate they are unemployed not by their own choice, but are not actively looking for a job. By contrast, the proportion of the population in this “discouraged workers” category at a national level is only 8%.

In fact, only 13% of those who are unemployed not by choice and who are blind or have low vision are actively looking for work.

The proportion of long-term unemployed (those who are unemployed for more than a year) throughout Australia is 33%. This compares with 50% of respondents indicating they have been looking for work for over 12 months. Further, survey respondents indicated they spend fewer hours per week actively looking for work as the duration of their job hunting increases.

The levels of under-employment (time-based) is higher than national averages

46% of the employed population who are blind or have low vision are working part-time. Furthermore, 13% of those employed indicate they are working part-time because they are unable to find a full-time job. For the Australian population as a whole, the corresponding figures are 28% and 6% respectively. Hence, those who are blind or have low vision are twice as likely to be under-employed than the general population.

There is a higher need for technical skills amongst people who are blind or have low vision

There is a heavier concentration of employment for people who are blind or have low vision in non-manual or non-labour positions. Therefore, the need for this group to be computer-literate and/or to possess other technical skills is elevated. Further, it is clear that the higher the level of education possessed by a person who is blind or has low vision, the more likely they will be employed. Similarly, the more formats of material they can access, the higher their employment opportunities.

Whilst there is a positive relationship between education levels and employment rates, even among blind or low vision post-graduate degree holders, 34% do not have a job.

There are many barriers, albeit unintentional, that prevent equal access to the jobs

Nearly four in every ten job applicants who are blind or have low vision reported difficulties with one or more of their applications. The largest barriers reported included difficulties completing paper forms, problems accessing online applications through specialist technology, difficulties reading print material provided to them at interviews or in assessment centres, needing a drivers licence to comply with selection criteria, and encountering employers who had preconceived ideas about the capabilities (or disabilities) of the applicant.

Amongst the employed population who are blind or have low vision, nearly four out of ten believed that they were limited in their job functions because of their vision. The

majority felt they were limited by an inability to access information (such as reading print material or accessing software on computers). However, many indicated they were simply unable to do the job as well as they desired.

35% of survey respondents aged under 25 years indicated that they did not receive career guidance at schools appropriate to their level of vision impairment.

Access to services

Job seekers who are blind or have low vision are 64% more likely to be employed if they have used Vision Australia's Employment services or services of the Disability Employment Network (DEN) compared to those who do not use these services.

Approximately twice as many job seekers who are blind or have low vision use Job Network services compared to DEN, even though these services only lift the likelihood of employment by 24%. This difference is greatest amongst job seekers with low vision, where only 41% of those using Job Networks are employed compared to 64% of those having used DEN.

For a person who is blind or has low vision, the presence of a secondary disability impacts severely on the likelihood of being employed. Of those who reported a second disability, 82.4% stated that they were unemployed. This group was also less likely to be actively looking for work.

Opportunities

Sharing of knowledge about unemployment

The overall level of unemployment amongst those who are blind or have low vision is comparable to levels reported in international studies. Opportunities exist for Vision Australia to consult and cooperate with International Blindness agencies and other research teams to share information and determine a unified way forward.

Rediscovering discouraged workers

On the basis of the large proportion of "discouraged workers" amongst those who are blind or have low vision, the largest impact can be made by encouraging those who have stopped looking for work to return to the employment market, and to resource the capability to place them into suitable employment. Vision Australia operates a government funded employment service and, as a result of this research, the organisation will embark on an advertising campaign to encourage clients to rediscover employment opportunities.

Additional research could be undertaken to establish exactly what will re-motivate these discouraged workers to return to the workforce.

Addressing under-employment

Those using Vision Australia's Employment services are also less likely to be employed part-time than the rest of the population who are blind or have low vision. Vision Australia is working with employees and employers to overcome barriers to full participation in the workforce.

Opportunity exists for both government departments and employment service providers to promote their services to ensure that those who are blind or have low vision, even when employed, have access to appropriate services.

Increasing appropriate technical skills and ensuring fair job opportunities

Schools should ensure skills taught to students who are blind or have low vision meet their future career needs. Vision Australia offers training in accessing alternative formats, in using computers with appropriate technologies and in using alternative technologies. Vision Australia already works with schools and other educational bodies to provide specialist knowledge where requested.

Where students attend TAFE or university to gain higher educational qualifications, these establishments should ensure they continue to teach life skills that will assist in students realising future job opportunities.

Current human resource management practices often encourage multi-skilling of the workforce (Kim et al, 2003; Overell, 2005). However, these practices increase the entry barriers for many positions. Even process workers are required to be multi-skilled (Garg et al, 2002). Current HR policies need to be mindful that productivity of some employees may increase in mono-skilled positions. There is an opportunity to encourage flexibility in the approach to work duties to meet the needs of both employers and all employees.

Overcoming barriers

Vision Australia actively works with job applicants to overcome the unintentional obstacles that face them during the application and interview processes (such as unnecessary requests for driver's licences, or reading tests at interviews). They also extend this assistance to help employers faced with an applicant who is blind or has low vision to be able to accurately assess the person's skills over their disability. There is a real need for government to work with major employers and recruitment agencies to encourage fair job requirements (e.g. to require driving licences only where essentially needed as part of the position) and to let all employers know that assistance is available should they want to enjoy the benefits of employing someone with a disability.

Vision Australia already works with some schools and offers career guidance at key transition points. However, the survey results indicate that more can be done to ensure career guidance at school is more appropriate to vision. Based on a life-skills model, opportunities exist to support smoother transition from school to further education and onward to work.

Additional research could be undertaken to ascertain the attitudes and perceptions held by employers about job applicants and employees who are blind or have low vision. Outputs of this research would assist in driving appropriate education strategies and activities through clients, employers and governments.

Appropriate referrals and access to government services

The government should ensure that people who are blind or have low vision are made fully aware of the services that are best placed to assist them. Vision Australia,

in conjunction with other disability services, should work with government to ensure that job seekers are referred to the appropriate agencies for assistance.

Opportunities exist to work with the government to establish how potential job seekers with multiple disabilities can access the specialist services from multiple agencies necessary to ensure sustainable employment.

Conclusion

The survey has confirmed that the level of unemployment for people who are blind or have low vision in Australia is as high as previously estimated. It also reveals that there are many workers who are blind or have low vision who are under-employed, or who are discouraged from looking for work when they could potentially join the workforce.

There are several positive opportunities, such as building confidence amongst discouraged workers, promoting the employment assistance available and working with employers to overcome unintentional barriers to employment. Responsibility to follow through with these initiatives lies with Vision Australia, other blindness agencies and bodies, government, employers and the potential employees themselves. Only by working together to address the issues identified here can this socially and economically unacceptable situation be improved.

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The Vision Australia employment survey was undertaken with the support and cooperation of Blind Citizens Australia and Royal Guide Dogs for the Blind Association of Tasmania. Blind Citizens Australia is the peak advocacy organisation of and for people who are blind or have low vision.

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For further information on the survey, please contact Robert Spriggs, Market Research and Development at Vision Australia on (02) 9334 3147.

For further information about employment services offered by Vision Australia, please telephone 1300 84 74 67.

