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# Inquiry into transition support for students with additional and/or complex needs and their families

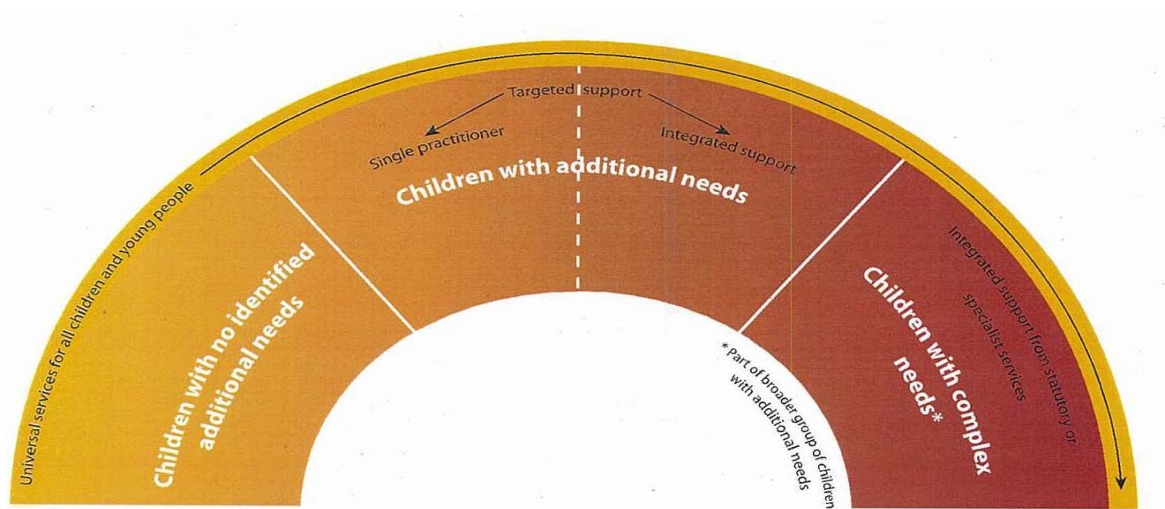
## Background

- The Committee adopted the terms of reference for the inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families on 21 June 2011. The inquiry arose from concerns regarding coordination between agencies, and variations in services provided to students and their families in different stages of education, leading to frustration for families.
- The inquiry will examine the adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for students and their families, and best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions.

## What are additional and complex needs?

- Despite the concepts being widely recognised, there are no agreed definitions of the terms "additional" or "complex" needs. Further, these terms may be used separately or together or in combination with others. For example, the Department of Education and Training uses the term "special learning needs" to describe students with "learning difficulties, a behaviour disorder and/or a disability."<sup>1</sup> However, in order to access funding for additional support, a student must have a confirmed disability which may include a physical or intellectual disability, hearing or vision impairment, language disorder, mental health condition or autism.<sup>2</sup>
- The needs of all students fall across a wide spectrum. Most students require limited or no additional support while others need extensive, on-going attention. The diagram below was produced by the UK Department of Children and Families and shows the continuum of student needs and services.

**Figure 1** Continuum of needs and services



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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/programs/disability.php>> accessed 7 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/programs/disability.php>> accessed 7 July 2011.

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- From the diagram it can be seen that students with additional needs can encompass a broad range of children and young people. These may include health-related needs such as disabilities or learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Alternatively, students may have additional needs arising from social factors such as homelessness or cultural background.
  - Students with complex needs appear to be those with significant additional needs. Preliminary investigations revealed that descriptions of students with complex needs often had a number of similar characteristics, with students described as:
    - having more than one impairment that limits their ability to participate in daily life
    - requiring significant extraordinary care due to the severity of their impairment(s)
    - requiring the services of more than one government ministry.
  - One of the key features of definitions of "complex needs" is that such needs often require the involvement of more than one agency or practitioner. For example, the Special Needs Group at National Health Services Scotland defines a child with multiple or complex disabilities as having "at least two different types of severe or profound impairment such that no one professional, agency or discipline has a monopoly in the assessment of their condition."
  - As part of its inquiry, the Committee will consider the various definitions of "additional" and "complex" needs currently in use, as well as inconsistencies in the use of these terms. The Committee encourages inquiry participants to raise issues affecting students with any kind of additional and/or complex needs.

## Transitions

- The Inquiry will consider four distinct transitions in education:
  - into early childhood education for the first time
  - from early childhood education to primary school
  - from primary to secondary school
  - from secondary school to employment, further education, or other post-school options.
- The Inquiry will consider transitions into and out of education, as well as between stages of formal education, as these may be key points of change in service delivery. Available research suggests that students with additional and/or complex needs face additional barriers to successful transitions. These barriers may include difficulties accessing information, variations in diagnostic and eligibility criteria, difficulties establishing new support networks, not feeling welcome in a new environment, as well as others. Similarly, research suggests that families also face additional stress and anxiety in regard to their children's transitions in education.

## The inquiry process

- The Committee is currently calling for submissions to the inquiry. The closing date for submissions is Friday 12 August 2011.
  - The Committee has resolved to hold three public hearings as part of the inquiry. The hearings will be held on 30 and 31 August and 20 September 2011. The report is to be tabled on 22 November 2011.
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