INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS

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**Submission to NSW Legislative Council
General Purpose Standing Committee No.2:**

*The provision of education to students
with a disability or special needs*

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1. **About Media Access Australia**

Media Access Australia (MAA) is a not-for-profit, public benevolent institution and Australia's primary media access organisation. Our role is to be a catalyst for the provision of access to media for disadvantaged people through the use of technological solutions.

MAA was originally a captioning and audio description supplier known as the Australian Caption Centre (ACC), which was founded in 1982. The access service delivery component of the organisation was divested in 2006. As the ACC, we provided captioning services for all the Australian television networks, as well as the captioning of television commercials, live theatre, videos and DVDs, and pioneered the audio description of DVDs in Australia in 2005. MAA no longer has any interest in commercial access services.

MAA is a national organisation based in Sydney and works in collaboration with consumer organisations, Government and industry across the country and internationally. We also provide a comprehensive free information service (including three websites: www.mediaaccess.org.au , www.audiodescription.com.au and www.yourlocalcinema.com.au) and assist thousands of people with everyday access issues, as well as helping organisations provide more access. We also publish the quarterly *Media Access Report*, providing factual, topical information on media access issues from around the world.

2. **MAA's objects**

The objects of Media Access Australia, from its Constitution, are:

- to establish and maintain an organisation for the provision and promotion of information services principally but not exclusively for the benefit of people who suffer disability for health, education, social, financial or similar reasons; and
- to establish and maintain an organisation for the provision and promotion of media access services for the benefit of individuals with impaired capacity to access such services.

3. **How does MAA operate?**

MAA brings a unique perspective to the world of access. MAA operates as a catalyst for change. We want to see more access to media in Australia and the world. Therefore our starting point is how do you make more access possible? We frame this approach in the context of considering consumer desires, costs, distribution channels, supply techniques, equipment, convergence and regulation.

The question of what the most appropriate level of access should be at a particular time should be answered by the consumers. Our role is to help achieve the appropriate level of access, especially looking at implementation issues, cost-effective approaches and drawing on demonstrated successes.

4. **MAA Education Program**

MAA manages a targeted education program looking at the access needs of students in the classroom, both those attending specialist schools (such as the Royal Institute of Deaf and Blind Children's Thomas Pattison School) and those embedded in mainstream classroom settings. MAA is based in Sydney, but its programs have a national focus.

Whilst MAA in its other media access work covers a full range of disabilities (particularly vision and hearing impairment), the education program is concentrating at present on access for Deaf and hearing impaired students. There are other organisations that are examining and developing the education needs of students in these settings. MAA concentrates on the support areas, especially access to audiovisual materials in the classroom.

The approach of MAA is to identify barriers to the use of captioned AV materials in a classroom, looking at all elements of the supply chain. We start with the range of materials used and the role and involvement of distributors, then move down to the classroom level, examining equipment use and teacher education requirements.

5. MAA's experienced education team

MAA's Education Manager is Anne McGrath, who has combined an extensive teaching career, including working as an itinerant teacher of the deaf – supporting students embedded in the mainstream DET, Catholic and independent school sectors – with developing and championing access to audio-visual media. Anne brings a practical, hands-on approach based on real classroom settings, and is able to champion the inclusion of caption access in the context of the overall approach to teaching Deaf and hearing impaired students.

Yasodai Selvakumaran is a fifth year student at Sydney University studying to become a teacher, and supports Anne on a part-time basis whilst completing her studies.

6. Grant for captioned education DVDs and downloads

MAA receives a specialist grant from the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHSCIA) each year to provide captioned access to education DVDs and downloads. This grant of approximately $135,000 per annum provides access to over 150 hours of material each year. The content captioned under the grant is balanced across a range of subject areas and ages. The grant deliberately targets non-entertainment content (for example students studying *Pride and Prejudice* have a range of DVD versions to choose from mainstream entertainment releases, most of which are provided with captions).

The grant is managed by MAA which sources appropriate titles and then organises for them to be captioned prior to release. The captioning is undertaken by a number of access suppliers. The entire grant budget is spent on captioning. MAA covers all administration and promotion costs associated with the grant.

7. Classroom Access Project

The project seeks to demonstrate best practice in relation to accessibility to electronic media for students who are Deaf or hearing impaired in the mainstream educational setting. This is being explored by establishing 'model classrooms' in some colleges for a duration of 10 weeks (effectively a school term) and monitoring the efficacy of the model. This includes the use of captioned resources (DVD, television, ClickView downloads) as part of the classroom presentation (as opposed to a hearing impaired student viewing captioned resources separately or at home) and providing the range of technologies in the classroom (including via television, DVD, 'smartboards' and audio support).

The project commenced in February 2010.

8. Education Database

In response to the enquiries of teachers and students about the availability and range of captioned classroom media, MAA recently launched its Accessible Education Database, which is an online resource of captioned content (http://www.accessibleeducationdvds.mediaaccess.org.au/). The database is interactive, in that it allows teachers and students to search for titles, subject areas and by keyword. There is also the opportunity for users to add their own keywords and submit titles to the database for inclusion. The ultimate purpose is to create a comprehensive, searchable resource outlining captioned content that is available in Australia.

9. Accessible new media

Whilst not under the education program at MAA, the New Media area has direct relevance to initiatives such as the one laptop per student program. Our new media area provides detailed information on mainstream solutions to disability issues and accessing the Internet and computers. For example, students with vision impairments can reconfigure their computers to different colour/display arrangements that better suit them. Similarly, developments such as Google voice search allows students with low motor coordination to use a search engine more easily. Examples of tools and solutions can be found at:
http://www.mediaaccess.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=416&Itemid=10 .

10. Other resources

As well as providing direct support to teachers and students, MAA also engages with and monitors developments around the world. For example, the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) is a successful, national education access program in the USA that provides audio described and captioned audiovisual resources (in most cases free of charge) across the USA. It also runs the "Read Captions Across America" day on 2 March. For more information about the DCMP go to: www.dcmp.org

Another example of a successful national program is the UK National Schools Film Week program which runs in October/November each year. The program provides free screenings of movies in mainstream cinemas. Teachers book their classes and select the movies around age and topic area. In the last few years, both captioned and audio described screenings have been included in the program. For more information about National Schools Film Week go to: http://www.nsfw.org/ .

11. Approach to education for students with a disability

The range of education projects that MAA undertakes clearly demonstrates that the provision of appropriate services and resources to individual students cannot be classified in simple 'centralise everything' or 'local level' terms. Whilst individual students have specific needs and circumstances that are best delivered at the local level, many of the resources need to be coordinated in a more centralised way.

For example, teachers engaging with a hearing impaired student need training and familiarisation with equipment, specific needs, the availability of captioned resources and how to properly use them. This is more effectively delivered at a local or regional level. MAA's Classroom Access Project is identifying the issues around the provision of these services and refining approaches and solutions.

This can be contrasted with the provision of captioned audiovisual materials which is

best organised and delivered at a central point. The basic need is for material to be captioned and used across the country. The captioning grant is helping to provide this captioned material, while MAA's Accessible Education Database is a centralised resource for all teachers and students to use, whatever their location.

12. **Further information**

MAA would be pleased to provide any additional information on access to captions in the school setting to the Committee, either through further written material or via the public hearings.