

Submission
No 196

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

Organisation: Deaf Australia NSW

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Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

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From:
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To:
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Submission to the Inquiry into the Provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

Thank you for providing Deaf Australia (NSW) with the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into the Provision of education to students with a disability or special needs.

Background:

DA (NSW) is the state branch of Deaf Australia, the national peak organisation that represents the needs of Deaf people in Australia. DA (NSW) represents and lobbies for the rights and needs of deaf people in NSW whose principal method of communication is Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

We are in a position to comment because all of our board are deaf and have experienced the NSW education system personally. We also represent deaf people in NSW and through our lobbying work and advocacy work have listened to many stories of people's education and the quality of that education.

We wish to comment on the following Terms of Reference: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7 & 8.

1. The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability

We often hear stories from parents and teachers of the deaf of the frustration in working with limited allocated funding and the hours this provides for. We know of situations where deaf students only have access to a teacher of the deaf for 5 hours a week. We know of a situation where a student's interpreter

left the school and the student was left in a classroom for 6 months without a replacement interpreter.

At TAFE and universities students can expect to be provided with support for their face to face hours and classes. Why is this expectation not the same for primary and secondary school students? Good education at this level sets the tone for the rest of a person's life. We know of many deaf high school students who leave early because it is simply too hard to continue without proper access. Why are students provided with anything less than full time access to interpreters and/or note-takers?

The structure of funding is also inadequate. It appears that if a child moves schools, their parents have to begin the process all over again of applying for funding and ensuring their child has access. While this process is happening and their needs being ascertained, the child may not have any support or access to the curriculum at all.

Recommendations:

- a) Funding for support staff whether interpreters, teachers aides, or teachers of the deaf be always for the full classroom hours of all students who use Auslan to access the curriculum.
- b) Funding for interpreting staff and other support should be attached to the child, not the school.

3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system

We have grave concerns about the practice the department appears to have of closing hearing support units and encouraging students to be mainstreamed. Contact with the department says that this is not a department policy but that it is something parents choose for their children to be mainstreamed and that they are only acting on parent's wishes. The perception in the general public does not fit with this. We know of situations where parents do wish for their children to be in a hearing support unit but where they have been told the unit will be closed.

Parents need to know what their options are. Currently the department says it provides special schools, support units or mainstreaming. For deaf children there are no department special schools or schools for the deaf so this is no longer an option. There are less and less hearing support units and those that are functioning have no clear policy about what the language of instruction is. Mainstreaming appears to be the only real option. While mainstreaming is great for many other disabilities, it is not always the best option for deaf children.

If mainstreaming is to be provided and successful then adequate support must also be provided. At the moment children don't have full access to the curriculum, don't have access to appropriate staffing, don't have access to an appropriate language of instruction and don't have appropriate access to adequate social education in the form of deaf adults or role models.

The same can be said for hearing support units. If these are to continue to operate then there must be a clear policy about what the language of instruction is and there must be adequately trained staff who can deliver in the language of instruction (Auslan and/or English). If students go onto TAFE or University they will access instruction in either Auslan or English or both. In the primary and secondary education levels there are still outmoded systems of communication being used such as Signed English and Total Communication which are not languages of instruction as many people believe them to be.

Recommendations:

- a) That a policy on deaf education be created that clearly states the methods of communication to be used and the languages of instruction.
- b) That the policy nominate two languages of instruction: Auslan and English.
- c) That students are provided with both unless and until it is clear the child can fully access the curriculum in English
- d) That Signed English and Total Communication no longer be used as communication tools.
- e) That we avoid the current practice of a hearing support unit trying anything and everything but not doing anything properly and that hearing support units be established as centres of excellence.

4. The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings, such as school classrooms

The adequacy of support staff is of grave concern to us. Teachers of the deaf and teachers aides or learning support officers often are not fluent in Auslan. This is the language of the adult Deaf community and the language interpreters use at TAFE and university. It does not make sense for any other manual communication system to be used other than Auslan. Teacher's aides are often used as "interpreters" which is inappropriate. Interpreters need training in ethics, a code of conduct and facilitating communication between two languages. If you are not fluent in one language then you cannot perform the role of interpreter. You may at best perform the role of communication facilitator but that is quite different from interpreting. Staff who perform the role of interpreter need to be qualified and accredited and paid at the appropriate rate. None of this is happening.

One of the dangers with mainstreaming is that many deaf children grow up isolated from other deaf peers or deaf adults. As most deaf children (95%) are born to hearing parents they cannot learn how to navigate through the world from their parents. Only other deaf people can teach them how to live and learn as deaf people. Deaf children need access to deaf adults to learn this. Often their Auslan role model is their teacher or teacher's aide. Most of the time that person is not deaf. The isolation of mainstreaming can lead to loneliness, frustration (worsened if their access to language is not adequate), behavioural problems and mental health problems.

Recommendations:

- a) Introduce a requirement that all staff conveying information directly to any child who uses Auslan to access the curriculum have National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) accreditation at least to paraprofessional level.
- b) Introduce a requirement that all children who use Auslan to access the curriculum are provided with teachers who have NAATI paraprofessional level interpreter accreditation or with interpreters who have NAATI paraprofessional level interpreter accreditation at all times in the classroom.
- c) Ensure that deaf children are given regular access to deaf peers and deaf role models as part of their educational socialisation.
- d) Introduce a requirement that the school and staff undergo Deafness Awareness Training such as the program provided by The Deaf Society of NSW to reduce isolation and lack of awareness among the school community.

6. Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

In our experience support is biased towards helping children to speak and hear and be "normal". The advice provided is biased towards the medical model that seeks to "cure" the deafness through technology. The advice is an either/or approach. EITHER the children learn to speak and listen OR they learn to sign. Usually signing is considered only after everything else "fails" when much educational time and effort has been wasted. There is a fear people have about meeting or communicating with a deaf person. There is a fear about not being able to speak. There is fear about not being "normal" or like everyone else. We would like to see this change.

Recommendations:

- a) Create a policy that states this either/or option will not be used among health professionals that work with parents of deaf children and with deaf children themselves.
- b) Create clear documents that clearly have ALL the options.
- c) All health professionals that work with parents or children should have Deafness Awareness Training themselves to be able to work in the education department.
- d) Include deaf people and the deaf community as consultants and information providers to DET to help ensure a balanced view.
- e) Ensure that school principals or whoever the personnel is that is responsible for ensuring a deaf child has support in school and that this support is adequate have contact not just with a hearing and speech professional but also with a deafness professional (deaf people and the deaf community, the Deaf Society of NSW, Deaf Children Australia, Deaf Australia, Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association etc).

7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training

Teacher training offered through DET for teachers preparing to work with students who use Auslan to access the curriculum is inadequate. Although there is a signing stream in the teacher training program offered through the Renwick Centre, the course is not comprehensive enough to allow for Auslan skills to be taught and the stream is therefore under-utilised as an option for trainee teachers of the deaf.

Furthermore, ongoing professional training in Auslan skills is barely supported. For teachers to maintain their Auslan language skills they require ongoing access to training and development. Teachers are not expected to undertake training in Auslan once they are working as teachers of the deaf or as teacher's aides. Many teachers we know who are fluent in Auslan, are fluent because they are deaf themselves or they have undertaken training in Auslan off their own back because they can see it will help their work.

Note that there is no training in Signed English or any other manual system of communication. This is because there is no demand for it among the adult Deaf community and because you cannot train to become an interpreter in Signed English. Again this should be stated in DET's policy and is another reason why it should not be used in the school system.

Recommendations:

- a) That DET, in consultation with teacher training providers, fulfil its obligation to train and provide teachers of the deaf who are able to communicate fluently without impediment with students who use Auslan to access the curriculum. An appropriate benchmark for fluency would be NAATI paraprofessional accreditation.
- b) That DET support and encourage the ongoing professional development in Auslan for teaching staff working with deaf children.
- c) That DET clearly state what signed language is used in the education system and that this is in line with the training that is provided.

8. Any other related matter

We have concerns about the changes happening in TAFE and how they will restrict and limit options for people with disabilities who already have difficulty accessing school curriculum's and rely on TAFE for further education. Issues of concern are:

- many entry level programs and licensing courses are now only offered by TAFEPLUS: Students must pay a commercial fee and disability support must be 'negotiated' and costed
- increasing the number of courses offered in higher AQF levels (Certificate 3 and above) and a reduced offering in statement of attainment, Certificate 1 and 11: severely limiting access and pathways for people with disability

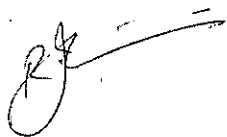
- increasing the delivery of employment based and on-line training: unemployment rates for people with disabilities are well above average so training based on employment (and increasingly delivered in the workplace) will seriously disadvantage people with disabilities
- increased trend to reduce nominated hours of delivery of units and courses to reduce costs and make TAFE more 'competitive': This increased pressure may result in exacerbating aspects of disability resulting in illness and absence and in some cases may render the units and subsequently the courses unachievable
- COAG and state government 'National Participation Requirements' and TAFE NSW decision to no longer offer the Year 10 (CGVE) equivalent course: For those students for whom learning in a school environment does not work TAFE alternative pathway to completing their basic education has been effectively closed
- reduced capacity to provide targeted access programs for people with disability; for many people with disabilities these access programs are an essential reasonable adjustment and the only pathway into VET
- downgrading of minimum qualification requirement for TAFE teachers and subsequently lower skill base and less capacity to promote and foster inclusive learning
- dismantling of Equity State Head Office units: including loss of Disability Programs Unit leading to less rigorous policy analysis, inadequate community consultation, and decreased support for Institute staff

Recommendations:

- a) Any adjustments and changes in the school system must also be considered for TAFE to ensure consistency and accessibility for students with disabilities.
- b) TAFE has previously been considered a model for schools to follow in terms of access for students who are deaf, we need to ensure that this is model is not dismantled.

Again, thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs and I trust that the above-mentioned issues will be given serious consideration. We look forward to hearing about solutions that show evidence of a paradigm shift in our thinking towards people with disabilities and not just evidence that they are second class citizens requiring only band-aid solutions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Ellis', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rachel Ellis
President
Deaf Australia (New South Wales)