



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL *good works*

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Submission on Children with Disability in the School System

The St Vincent de Paul Society (the Society) is a respected lay Catholic charitable organisation operating in 149 countries around the world. Our work in Australia covers every state and territory, and is carried out by more than 65,000 members, volunteers, and employees. Our people are deeply committed to social assistance and social justice, and our mission is to provide help for those who are marginalised by structures of exclusion. Our programs assist millions of Australians each year, including people living with mental illness and physical disability, people who are homeless and insecurely housed, migrants and refugees, and people experiencing poverty.

On 02 July 2015, the Society was invited to make a submission to the present inquiry. The Society has consulted nationally, and we welcome the opportunity to make this contribution. We are happy to provide more written or oral evidence on any point.

Sadly, in Australia today, people with disability continue to face high levels of exclusion and structural disadvantage. For example, people with a disability are less likely to participate in the labour force, and more likely to be unemployed.¹ If employed, on average, those living with disability earn less than those without a disability.² People with disability are also far more likely to experience abuse, including sexual abuse,³ and also face worse housing outcomes.⁴

Disability intersects with other indicators of vulnerability, such as gender (especially for women affected by domestic violence) and indigeneity. For example, women with disabilities are less likely than their male counterparts to receive a senior secondary or tertiary education, and over 51% of women with a disability earn less than \$200 per week compared to 36% of men with a disability.⁵ Similarly, one in three Indigenous Australians is likely to experience discrimination in any year, compared with one in five members of the general population.⁶

To build the capacity and capability of people living with disability, the Society strongly believes that access to proper education is a fundamental human right.⁷ However, compounding the complex intersectional disadvantage they already experience, those with disability also face significant hurdles accessing education. For example, eight out of ten school principals believed they did not have enough resources to educate the growing number of students with a disability.⁸

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability and Labour Force Participation - 4433.0.55.006*, (2012), at www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/productsbytopic/C7C72D7706E9BED0CA257DE2000BDC60.

² Ibid.

³ French, P., Dardel, J., & Price-Kelly, S., *Rights denied: Towards a national policy agenda about abuse, neglect and exploitation of persons with cognitive impairment*, People with Disability Australia, 2009.

⁴ See, eg, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples - 4704.0*, (October, 2010), at www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter525Oct+2010.

⁵ Sue Salthouse and Carolyn Frohmader. 'Double the Odds' – Domestic Violence and Women with Disabilities' (2004) Women with Disabilities Australia, at wwda.org.au/issues/viol/viol2001/odds/.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples - 4704.0*, (October, 2010), at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter525Oct+2010>

⁷ See, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13, at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

⁸ Australian Education Union, *AEU State of our Schools 2015 Report*, at <http://www.schoolgovernance.net.au/2015/03/26/schools-lack-resources-to-teach-disabled-students/>.

Case study: more funding for equipment makes a big difference

The St Vincent de Paul Society offers a Student Disability Grant, which has supported students whose disabilities make it difficult to undertake their studies. Melissa, who has a disability, found it hard to use a mouse, a keyboard, or to spend long periods of time sitting at a desk. This caused her great anxiety, which aggravated other health conditions. Assistive technology was prohibitively expensive for Melissa, but with the Society's Student Disability Grant she was able to obtain a voice recognition program and microphone that she could use instead of the keyboard or mouse. These technologies also meant she could change her posture, or work standing up. They have made Melissa's studies far more accessible, by allowing her to take notes, write assignments and search for information on the internet. With the appropriate support, students like Melissa are now on track to complete their courses and achieve great results.

The above case study demonstrates the significant difference that the right resources can make in the life of a student with a disability. The reality is, however, that these students should not need to rely on charity. Rather they should be able to count on government as the chief means by which equity and justice are delivered.

For these reasons, we strongly encourage the Committee to recommend full needs-based funding for students with disabilities as per the government's pre-election commitment to implement the recommendations of the Gonski Review of education funding.