a i media

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support

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Executive Summary

Ai-Media welcomes the inquiry into current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support, and thanks the the Senate Education and Employment References Committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

Founded in 2003, Ai-Media is an independent for profit social enterprise dedicated to ending the experience of exclusion that people with disability face. Our innovative technology solutions are aimed improving access with accurate speech-to-text (captioning) services, audio description and related analytics.

Ai-Media acknowledges the support of the Australian Government through the Commercialisation Australia program to develop our education and online captioning product, Ai-Live, and our independent evaluation partner, the University of Melbourne.

Submission

In making this submission we note the significant opportunity presented by the rollout of the whole-of-life National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Extending this transformational approach to supporting students with disability is a critical component of the disability and education reform priorities. Reallocating and improving the effectiveness of existing resources should remain the top priority.

This submission focuses particularly on systemic changes that can support students with special needs and students with disability, and draws on our experience in seeking to secure sustainable funding for a technology-enabled solution directed to deaf and hearing impaired students in mainstream schools.

Terms of Reference: That the following matters be referred to the Education and Employment References Committee for inquiry and report by 3 November 2015:

a. *current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system, and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support;*

Prior to the recent disability reforms, Australia's disability system was a disgrace. The opportunity afforded by increased funding, and better allocation, to support better outcomes for people with disability will take time.

Consistent focus for several generations will be required.

b. *the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;*

Access Economics estimated the total costs of exclusion because of deafness in the Australian economy exceed **$12 billion per annum**.[1] The human costs of

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[1] Access Economics (2006) *Listen Hear – The Economic Impact and Cost of hearing loss in Australia*.

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excluding people from education, employment and social participation opportunities, simply because they cannot hear, are even more striking.

Early intervention and a genuine commitment to education access are both critical to delivering lifelong inclusion for people with hearing loss. As the National Disability Strategy Consultation Report, *Shut Out*, notes, the educational experience of people with disabilities are all too often characterised as "The Wasted Years". The report notes that while there is no way to measure the exact social and economic cost of failing to ensure young people with disabilities have every opportunity to learn, it is certain that failing to provide them with education limits their potential to lead productive, independent adult lives.[2]

We do know that deaf children are 2.4 times less likely to complete high school than their hearing counterparts and 160,000 people are out of work, and many of these are on the Disability Support Pension because we don't have a system that facilitates their inclusion in the workplace.[3]

c. *the impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students;*

Over the 3 years, 2011 to 2014, the $100m p.a **More Support for Students with Disability** (**MSSD**) National Partnership proved to be a valuable and effective funding channel for innovative disability services.

Under MSSD, dozens of classrooms across Australian systems piloted Ai-Live real-time captioning and transcription. In 2011, the Victorian Deaf Education Institute conducted an evaluated trial into the use of real-time captioning in classrooms with the aim of improving the access to learning materials for secondary deaf students.

There were unexpected, flow-on effects as noted by the independent evaluation conducted by the University of Melbourne. Not only beneficial for deaf students, the captioning was helpful for students with autism, dyslexia, and those for whom English was not their first language.

Furthermore, whilst evaluating the effectiveness of live captioning for students in this trial, the University of Melbourne team with noticed something interesting. They observed that the teachers in this trial began changing (and improving!) the way they taught. The catalyst for teacher change was a copy of a transcript from their lesson which teachers were reviewing and self-assessing.

Following this discovery, the concept of Visible Classroom[4] evolved as a partnership between the University of Melbourne and Ai-Media exploring the

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[2] Commonwealth of Australia (2009) *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia.*

[3] Access Economics (2006).

[4] VisibleClassroom.com

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potential of live captioning and transcription to facilitate the professional development of teachers, and students' engagement in learning.

Subsequently, the project team won a grant from the UK Education Endowment Foundation in 2013-14, which confirmed the broad benefits of captioning in the educational environment.[5]

Notwithstanding increased needs-based funding to schools, the cessation of the MSSD program in 2014 led to the cessation of captioning in Australian schools for the benefit of deaf and hearing impaired students.

Ai-Media supports the reintroduction of a similar fund to implement system-wide innovations that are not practical at a school level.

d. *the future impact on students with disability as a result of the Government's decision to index funding for schools at the consumer price index after 2017;*

In relation to improving outcomes for students with special needs and students with disability, Ai-Media believes that the biggest hurdles to improving educational outcomes is that current funding arrangements are too complex, fragmented and not easily understood.

e. *the progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;*

The biggest challenge of the needs-based funding system is how to support evidence-informed decision making at a system level. While devolving choice to individual schools increases flexibility and improves decision making in some settings, in others (especially those utilising new technology), economies of scale in knowledge, purchasing power, and evaluation are being lost – to the detriment of students.

f. *the progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability;*

Ai-Media makes no submission on this point.

g. *how possible changes as a result of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability will be informed by evidence-based best practice of inclusion of students with disability;*

Evidence-based best practice requires coordination at a system-level. In a devolved funding model, this requires the creation and support of networks of schools. This is a key policy priority.

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[5] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/university-of-melbourne-making-teaching-and-learning-visible/

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h. ***what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools;***

The journey to close the gap in educational attainment for students with disability will be a long one, and priorities will change.

Ai-Media sees current priorities as being:

1. **Teacher training**: ensure all teachers are equipped with the skills and resources to best support students with disability in mainstream schools. Training for teachers in disability support should be mandatory within teacher education, and continuing education programs.

2. **Evidence informed decision support**: Principals are currently overwhelmed by choice. As the management literature clearly demonstrates, better decisions are made when choices are constrained to a few (rather than unlimited) options.[6] In an environment of decentralised funding, system-wide decision support is critical.

i. ***the early education of children with disability; and***

Evidence continues to demonstrate one key fact: Early intervention delivers the best return on investment for students with disability. Many interventions can be delivered without any additional cost. For example, switching the captions on TV at home benefit access and boost children's literacy. Captions are freely available, but many people do not know about the service.

j. ***any other related matters.***

Ai-Media urges the Senate to continue to focus on this issue in the years ahead. There are few priorities more pressing than ensuring all our young people are best equipped for the skills of the twenty-first century. There is enormous scope for improvement in outcomes for students with disability. Continued innovation is critical.

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[6] See Thaler and Sunstein (2008) "Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness", Yale University Press.