**Submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training: Inquiry into the Transition from School to Work**

August 2017



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Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) and the Koorie Youth Council (KYC) with the support of the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic).

# About the Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) is a state-wide advocacy service for young people with disabilities in Victoria, offering a free individual advocacy service to young people aged 12-25 who have a disability.

YDAS is a core agency of the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, the state’s youth peak body. YDAS is guided by a Steering Committee who are predominantly young people with disabilities aged 12 to 25.

# About the Koorie Youth Council

The Koorie[[1]](#footnote-2) Youth Council (KYC) is the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria. Led by an Executive of 15 Aboriginal[[2]](#footnote-3) young people, KYC advocates to government and community to advance the rights of Aboriginal young people.

# About YACVic

The Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria. YACVic’s vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities.

YACVic is an independent, not-for-profit, member-driven organisation that represents young people (aged 12-25 years) and the sector that works with them. Through our research, advocacy and services, we:

* lead policy responses on issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector and elevate young people’s voices to government
* resource high-quality youth work practice.

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# Introductory remarks by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) welcomes the decision of the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training to inquire into the school to work transitions of young Australians. YACVic and our partner agencies advocate for the equitable social and economic participation of young people from all walks of life. We recognise that education is central to young people’s wellbeing, citizenship, future employment opportunities, contributions to their community, and personal growth.

It is vital that young people themselves are active agents in all of this. As our CEO Leo Fieldgrass has remarked: “Students learn best when they have respectful, positive relationships with teachers, the opportunity to make real decisions about their education and the chance to contribute to the school and wider community.”

In 2016 YACVic helped contribute to the development of an education advocacy platform by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), called “Creating Engaging Schools for All Children and Young People”. YACVic supports the recommendations of VCOSS’s platform, which include embracing diversity, providing extra support to vulnerable students, better management of school transitions, actively collaborating with families, inclusion of every child in every classroom, a focus on the ‘whole child’ and involvement of the local community (VCOSS 2016). YACVic urges that these recommendations be used to guide education policy development.

We are pleased to support and amplify the advocacy of our core and partner agency, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS), and our partner agency, the Koorie Youth Council (KYC), who have taken the lead in this submission in recognition of the critical importance of these issues to the young people they represent.

In this submission, the KYC observes the continued struggles of Aboriginal young people in educational and training spaces that do not take into account their culture, communities, families and personal experiences. Aboriginal students continue to be harmed and discouraged by racism and lack of public understanding of their culture, heritage and circumstances. KYC highlights the need to hear the voices of Aboriginal young people themselves in policy and program development. There is still a strong unmet need for culturally safe schools, programs and workplaces and recognition of students' diverse learning needs.

Meanwhile, YDAS highlights two key systemic concerns: the social exclusion of people with disabilities and the low expectations held by key stakeholders in respect to the education outcomes of young people with disabilities. YDAS identifies these factors as contributing to the violation of young people’s rights to an education and participation in the labour market. Recommendations by YDAS highlight the need for a nationally consistent inclusive education framework, the adoption of "universal design" in education spaces, and support for transitional programs that provide real and meaningful opportunities for employment and growth.

YACVic is proud to support the advocacy of YDAS and KYC on these important issues.

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# Recommendations from the Youth Disability Advocacy Service

YDAS is committed to upholding and promoting the rights articulated in international human rights instruments ratified by Australia. Because YDAS works with young people aged 12 – 25, this includes both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CPRD) (OHCHR 2006) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) (OHCHR 2002).

Recommendations in this submission will primarily address two systemic issues: the social exclusion of people with disabilities and the systemic low expectations held by key stakeholders in respect to young people with disabilities within the education system.

Throughout this submission, YDAS will address barriers in the mainstream education system that slow the transition of young people with disability from school to work.

In relation to young people with disability, Article 24 and 27 of the CRPD outline the rights of people with disability to equity in education and employment respectively:

“(b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;

(c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;”

And

“1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.” (OHCHR 2006)

In a submission to the 2014 Inquiry into social exclusion, YDAS discussed the barriers to the realisation of both these rights. The right to learn and the right to earn stand as two of the four primary indicators of social inclusion (YACVic and YDAS 2014).

YDAS understands that the realisation of these rights is fundamentally linked. Inclusion in the workforce is largely dependent on a transitional period that begins during high school. There is a need for inclusive, accessible and adaptive curricula that prepare for the transition from school to work in fashion that is equitable to that of their peers without disability.

This submission has been developed in consultation with our steering committee, as well as a number of our individual advocacy clients. YDAS acknowledges the unique barriers faced by young people with disabilities when attempting to enter the workforce.

YDAS supports the social model of disability that focuses largely on developing an inclusive and accessible society. The social model would see the visibility of disability increase; doing away with the out of sight, out of mind attitude that lead to the institutionalisation and segregation of people with disabilities.

Furthermore, segregation serves only to slow the normalisation of disability. Inclusive education is integral to this process. YDAS recognises that participation of marginalised groups such as young people with disabilities in the mainstream employment market is dependent upon participation in all other facets of the community.

YACVic, KYC and YDAS are guided by young people from varied backgrounds and lived experiences. YACVic advocates for policy and practice that incorporates the varied needs of all young people regardless of personal circumstance. This is most effectively achieved by policy that is inclusive of the voices of young people from the ground up.

# Proactive and universal supports

In a recent submission to the United Nation’s day of discussion on inclusive education, Melbourne University’s Disability Research Initiative made a number of recommendations regarding key standards of inclusivity. YDAS supports these recommendations on the principle that they will lead to greater capacity for students with disability (Melbourne University 2015).

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends schools and relevant stakeholders take all reasonable measures to support students even if their profiles may not attract funding. Providing appropriate funding is made difficult by the lack of a nationally consistent definition of both disability and severity. Without appropriate supports, timely transition to employment is extremely unlikely.

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends the adoption of ‘universal design’. This would allow for buildings and frameworks to be proactively accessible rather require the implementation of reactive reasonable adjustments.

# Culture of low expectations

Young people with disabilities are often sheltered by authority figures. This includes the silencing of disabled voices and the omission of the dignity of risk. This instinct to ‘protect’ young people with disability often results in further social exclusion and the limiting of development.

This ‘protective’ instinct often goes hand in hand with a systemic culture of low expectations. These low expectations result in young people with disabilities being overlooked for developmental opportunities (Adoniou 2016).

# Inclusive education

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends the development of a nationally consistent inclusive education framework in collaboration with young people with disability. This should not be limited to participation in the classroom and include participation in extracurricular activities and student voice.

A study conducted in 2012 indicated that involvement of university students in clubs and extra-curricular activities greatly increased vocational readiness. This supports the benefit of student involvement in all aspects of ‘school life’ especially for students with disability who are typically excluded from these activities (Mizusawa et. Al. 2012).

The Australian media recently put a spotlight on the suggested ‘cost’ or impact of inclusive education. This media attention prompted widespread outcry from the disability advocacy sector. Many reputable voices including that of Disability Discrimination Commissioner Alastair McEwin, brought attention to the overwhelming benefits of inclusive practice. The continued use of segregated education has led to ‘education’ becoming a major focus of the Commissioner’s term (AHRC 2017).

Inclusive transitional practice begins with inclusive education policy. Research conducted by Children and Young People with Disabilities Australia indicated that a number of participants in segregated education felt infantilised and expressed a desire to be both challenged and treated as a competent individual.

“They want to attend mainstream schools and need timely, individualised and flexible supports to succeed there; they do not want to be segregated or singled out in order to receive support (YDAS, 2008).”

Australia has been consistently criticised for lagging behind the international community in regards to the advancement of inclusive education. Researchers from the University of New England support the assertion that segregated education does not meet the requirements of the CRPD (Boyle 2015).

The quality of education for students with disability (including regulations concerning inclusive practice) is maintained by the Disability Standards for Education. The final report produced by the 2015 review of these standards suggested a need for both greater clarity of the standards as well as a shift to a proactive approach in maintaining them. At present the standards are upheld through a complaints based system similar to that found within the disability services sector (Victorian Disability Services Commission). This is accompanied by the same knowledge and power gap often observed between service providers and people with disabilities. The definition of inclusion is inconsistent across types of educational institutions (primary schools, high schools, tertiary institutions, vocational institutions).

The report also indicated that individual institutions possess disproportionate discretion in regards to their individual implementation of standards. Australia has ratified the CRPD; responsibility for maintaining the standards of inclusion should not fall on people with disability and their families.(URBIS 2015)

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends that the Australian government:

* Enable own motion investigations and systemic advocacy under the Disability Discrimination Act.
* Work to establish nationally consistent standards of inclusivity that go beyond the minimal standards found in the DSE.
* Fund further research into whether current educational practice meets the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability.

# Accountability, measurable gains and standardised testing

The terms of reference for this inquiry make reference to ‘measurable gains’ and how these statistical measures can inform support and transition decisions being made by schools. Generally speaking, measurable gains refers to standardised testing. It is the experience of YDAS that standardised testing (such as NAPLAN) is often inaccessible to students with disability. For example; the formatting of NAPLAN testing often results in the exclusion of vision impaired students. This is supported by CYDA and researchers at Griffith University. This poses significant issues. Policy decisions need to be informed by complete data that reflects the experiences of all students (including those living with disability) (Davies 2012 & CYDA 2016).

When young people with disability are excluded from standardised testing it limits the ability for stakeholders to adequately track their education outcomes. Accountability for the education outcomes of young people with disabilities is essential in building their capacity to transition from school to work.

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends a review of NAPLAN (and other standardized testing) in pursuit of greater accessibility and;

Review school practices regarding the exclusion of young people with disability from standardised testing.

In the case of young people with disabilities it may be ineffective to make use of past employment outcomes to inform transitional decisions. People with disability are wildly under-represented within the open workforce in Australia. Identifying any standard transitional practice would likely yield poor results. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics on average only 53.4% of people with disability take part in the workforce as compared to 83.2% of their peers without disability (ABS 2016).

# Transition

When discussing the transition from school to work for young people with disabilities in particular it is important to distinguish between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ employment. Government employment policies in Australia effectively encourage young people with a disability to transition to non-vocational pathways; a quarter of all young people with disabilities who have been assessed as having lower support needs transition from school into disability day programs instead of into paid employment (Wakeford & Waugh, 2014). This leads to the systemic undervaluing of the economic contribution of people with disability.

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends that disability day programs be phased out and no longer viewed as a viable transition pathway for young people with disability.

The transition from school to work is often facilitated by a foundation of entry level experience in the form of after school (part- time) jobs, work-experience programs or internships. These experiences are often inaccessible to individuals with disability. In an effort to lower the barrier to entry and assist people with disability to enter the workforce the Australian government developed Disability Employment Services. Unfortunately, DES requires prospective participants to be over the age of 18 in order to receive supports. This leaves young people below the age 18 disadvantaged when compared to their able-bodied peers who may have been participating in paid employment from the age of 15.

### Recommendation

YDAS supports transitional programs that provide opportunities for challenge and growth to young people with disabilities.

Australian Network on Disability’s Stepping into program provides transitional experience to university students as they approach graduation. This program operates with the goal of allowing people with disabilities to gain meaningful experience and complete in the mainstream employment market. The implementation of similar programs with industry backing for high school students would greatly increase the likelihood of transition.

### Recommendation

YDAS recommends that appropriate transition plans are developed in cooperation with the person with disability with a focus on choice and control remaining with young person with disability.

This preceding recommendation is reflective of choice and control remaining a core principle of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013.

Recommendations from the Koorie Youth Council

The Koorie Youth Council welcomes the opportunity to bring the voices of Victoria’s Aboriginal young people to the Australian Parliament’s Inquiry into School to Work Transition (the Inquiry). Informed by consultation with young people, our submission recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have cultural needs that differ from non-Aboriginal students. Cultural understanding is key to the success of any school, program or tertiary institution working with Aboriginal students. Most schools and workplaces in Australia are culturally unsafe; they do not value or understand Aboriginal culture and history. As a result, many Aboriginal young people are discriminated against at school and work and this is a major barrier to young people achieving their work goals.

### The Koorie Youth Council recommends:

1. That the Inquiry seek the voices of Aboriginal young people accessing school, transition and employment services to inform its recommendations
2. That the Inquiry, schools, transition programs and workplaces consider Aboriginal young people within their cultural context
3. That the Inquiry support the creation of culturally safe schools, programs and workplaces through cultural training for non-Aboriginal people, engaging programs with Aboriginal communities and responding to the cultural loads of Aboriginal young people
4. That the Inquiry support and strengthen the role of Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO) and their equivalents in other states
5. That the Inquiry address the need for culturally safe, community-led programs within school, in transition and in workplaces that recognise students’ diverse learning needs by supporting programs such as Wan-Yaari’s Employment and Mentoring Program.

It is essential that the Inquiry understand Aboriginal young people within their cultural context. Culturally-informed strategy requires understanding the unique experiences of Aboriginal young people within their culture. This approach uses a framework of culturally specific strengths, challenges and protective factors. The Not One Size Fits All report examines the need for policies and programs to understand the cultural context of Aboriginal young people’s lives,

“For too long Aboriginal children have been assessed using measures and assessment approaches which do not take into account their culture, beliefs, connection to community and place, spirituality and their individual experiences. Furthermore the assessment of an individual’s social and emotional status independent of the family and community is an alien concept to Aboriginal people as well as being ecologically uninformed (Bamblett et. al. 2012).”

KYC’s consultations with Aboriginal young people also demonstrate that institutions fail to understand the cultural context of their lives,

“Schooling is a big one for me! It also fits in with racism, it’s hard to be an Aboriginal or TSI at school because you’re so confused whether you be yourself or change. Because if you be yourself the teasing, bullying, racism comes into it, and if you change and forget about your background then you’re losing identity and culture and being someone you’re not! I think it’s good if there is [sic] more Aboriginal activities around schools!” – Survey respondent, What’s Important to Youth

“Learning culture in school…will keep Indigenous kids in school so they have something to look forward to and then they would want to go to school, I believe they will also feel more comfortable about being at school by knowing non-Indigenous kids are also learning about our culture! I believe this will also let non-Indigenous kids understand our culture a whole lot more and they will stop stereotyping is and change their aspects on how they see us!” – Survey respondent, What’s Important to Youth (Koorie Youth Council, 2015a)

These findings are consistent with the work of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists’ Association in their development of an Aboriginal Social Emotional Wellbeing Framework. Implementing this guide as a basis for understanding Aboriginal young people’s needs at school and work is an important step towards a culturally-informed system.

Figure 1. Aboriginal Social Emotional Wellbeing Framework (Gee et. al. 2013)



The

Inquiry must acknowledge that Aboriginal young people often take on roles in work and family life that are considered adult in the non-Aboriginal community. Aboriginal young people are more likely take on responsibilities for care and cultural loads[[3]](#footnote-4) as adolescents, resulting in little separation between the responsibilities of teens and adults. Young people in the Koorie Youth Council’s Yarning Justice workshops reported that their wellbeing is negatively impacted by significant responsibilities such as earning money, finding stable housing and dealing with family violence (Koorie Youth Council, 2015b). What’s Important to Youth consultations further demonstrate the weighty family, workplace and economic pressures that concern Aboriginal young people, these include:

* Limited employment opportunities in rural areas
* Poor pay rates
* Discrimination in the jobs market and workplace
* Balancing employment with child care costs
* Lack of employment opportunities
* Intergenerational experiences of unemployment
* The need for more employment pathways and career options
* Aboriginal role models in work fields
* Improved support in accessing vocational training
* Finding employment (Koorie Youth Council, 2015a)

Supporting Aboriginal young people within their cultural context often requires diverse pathways within education and work. Different learning pathways reflect the diversity of students. By working within a culturally safe, strengths-based approach, Aboriginal students are empowered and supported to achieve their goals. All students should have access students to programs that are built within a supportive framework that matches their individual needs.

The need for culturally safe schools and workplaces is consistently expressed by Aboriginal young people (Koorie Youth Council n.d.). While some schools have cultural safety guidelines or Aboriginal perspectives in their curriculum, this rarely translates into a culturally safe experience for students. Cultural understanding cannot be effectively gained by reading a static document or attending cultural awareness training. True cultural competency recognises that working proactively and respectfully with Aboriginal people requires ongoing relationships with Aboriginal communities, Elders and businesses. These partnerships are key to building culturally safe schools and workplaces that support young Aboriginal students into the workforce.

### Showcasing best practice – Wan-Yaari Employment and Mentoring Program

The Koorie Youth Council recognises Wan-Yaari’s Employment and Mentoring program as best practice in school to work transitions for Aboriginal young people. Based in Geelong, Wan-Yaari’s Employment and Mentoring Program grew from the need to support Aboriginal young people from school to work within a cultural framework (Koorie Youth Council and L. Hunter, 2017). Wan-Yaari recognises that while Aboriginal young people need support, non-Aboriginal people also need support to create culturally safe workplaces. The program “provides culturally appropriate and empowering mentoring support with a holistic approach that focuses on three main areas; cultural strengthening, professional mentoring and personal guidance” (Wan-Yaari Aboriginal Consultancy Services, 2017). Working to meet the individual needs of young people, the program takes a strengths-based approach that acknowledges the cultural identity and pride of participants, as well as the barriers to workplace inclusion such as intergenerational trauma and discrimination.

In addition to working with young people, the program provides cultural education to schools and workplaces to increase their cultural capacity. This helps create culturally safe schools and workplaces that are able to understand and support Aboriginal young people. This training is key to ensuring that Aboriginal young people feel safe and connected at work by valuing their voices and identity.

For more information about Wan-Yaari visit [**www.wanyaari.com.au**](http://www.wanyaari.com.au/)

The Koorie Youth Council is committed to promoting best practice in school to work transitions for Aboriginal young people. For more information on our submission and recommendations, please contact:

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1. The Koorie Youth Council uses the term Koorie in our organisation’s title as inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people living in Victoria. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. We use Aboriginal as a term also inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cultural load: Culturally-specific responsibilities that Aboriginal young people carry. These responsibilities are often complex and can include management of family and kinship responsibilities, practicing self-determination and intergenerational trauma. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)