PARENTS OF VISION IMPAIRED (NZ) INC

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Providing a community to support parents of children with vision impairments

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Tēnā koutou,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the joint Long-Term Insights Briefing ("the Briefing") on youth at risk of long-term limited employment outcomes. PVI's submission is attached below. I am more than happy to be contacted by the reviewers and include my contact details below.

Ngā mihi,

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About Parents of Vision Impaired

Parents of Vision Impaired (PVI) is a registered charity which supports parents who have blind, deafblind, low vision, or vision-impaired children. There is no cost to enrol and we provide a supportive community of parents who are overcoming challenges every day. Our current membership is at just over 1300 active members, with close to 800 email subscribers.

PVI offers parents advice, information, and opportunities to meet other parents. We publish a quarterly newsletter (eVision) and have a members-only Facebook page for families and whānau to share information and to network. We run an annual conference and AGM which allows parents and whānau to get together face to face for a longer time to talk, listen and learn in a social setting.

PVI takes an active part in the disability sector through making sure that the voice of visually impaired children and their parents is heard in consultations with government, schools, local councils, and other organisations.

Overview of whānau experiences post-secondary school

Overall, it is the experience of our families that post-secondary school and post-ORS funding is "big giant hole of nothingness". Supports dry up, tertiary institutions are unhelpful and unsupportive of the needs and required accommodations can be difficult to access.

There seems to be a reluctance to support part-time study needs. Work & Income and Study Link are not seamlessly set up to support part-time study or the needs of disabled students. Additionally, the insistence on sending blind, deafblind, and low vision persons to the inaccessible MyMSD website is frustrating, time-consuming and penalising for blind and low vision persons.

Blind students report difficulty with unsupportive lecturers and administrative staff, difficulty obtaining needed time extensions, and challenges with assistive technology that does not easily link with university systems. This was exacerbated during Covid.

Experiences at secondary school impact on future decisions with regards to future training and employment. Insufficient funding, inadequate training, and a lack of understanding of the particular needs of vision impairment all impact on experiences and thus on employment outcomes.

Responses to Questions

Q4. Is youth at risk of limited employment a worthwhile subject to investigate further through a Long-Term Insights Briefing?
Yes

Q5. What kind of initiatives, programmes or approaches do you think are most successful for youth at risk of limited employment?

For blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired youth who are looking to move on from secondary schooling, having **access to specialist support** for tertiary education AND support for employers - irrespective of the severity of the persons vision impairment - would make an enormous improvement for their ability to fulfil their potential.

Addressing barriers such as ableism, ignorance, and the cost of accessibility would go a long way to addressing issues such as inflexible forms of employment, unrealistic expectations, and inaccessible work places that disadvantage blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired young people.

This might mean funding to increase capacity for tertiary organisations, ringfenced funding for specialist staff such as Independent Living Services (ILS) and Developmental Orientation and Mobility (DOM's) to work with employers to make their workplaces accessible, and/or increased funding for employers and young people alike to attend trainings together. It might mean lifting or shifting provided funding so that **all** youth who need support with their vision are able to access services and associated funding.

In conjunction with this, we recommend sensible wages and job security for disability support staff. Doing so will contribute towards vision impaired learners experiencing continuity of skilled support. It is difficult when a support worker only attends once a year, or when turnover is high, to build the rapport needed to address workplace and training barriers. In an ideal world, every region would provide a dedicated staff member to secondary schools to work alongside blind, deafblind, low vision and vision impaired students to consider what specific accommodations would be required for employers and/or tertiary institutions (depending on the students pathway). This role would pay a reasonable wage and come with appropriate levels of job security and benefits (e.g. holiday pay, opportunities for professional development, sick leave) to reduce staff turnover.

Free tertiary student support for disabled students is much needed – tertiary education environments have significantly reduced needed supports, their websites are often inaccessible, and it is very difficult for blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired

young people to find out information regarding enrolment and what supports are actually available to ensure accessibility.

This proposal overlooks the significant impact of health and access to health-related services needed by blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired persons. Such appointments are routinely made by DHB's during work hours with little regard for a persons employment situation. Blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired persons may require additional support to attend health-related appointments and this is often a barrier for employers who may not support their employee to take time off work for health-related appointments. It is worth noting that not being able to independently drive a motor-vehicle means that health-related appointments can require a full day off work, rather than the half-day or two hours that fully abled persons may required.

More thought needs to be given to the impacts of health and disability on employment and training; excluding these risks the Long-Term Insights Briefing overlooking the key interlocking and exclusory nature of health in employment.

While these are excellent focus areas, they are solely on those most vulnerable to - and at-risk from - upstream causes. That is, these focus areas do not consider the wider disabling environment that school students and school leavers are subjected to or the need for these to change. For example, school classrooms and employment offices that are too noisy, too bright, and too overwhelming. Educators and employers need to routinely ask and then provide material in appropriate alternate formats. Mobility toilets in schools and workplaces are used as storage cupboards and/or locked to prevent access. It is unfair to expect young people to have to constantly advocate for basic accessibility and understanding. These types of disabling environments are not identified in your focus areas but addressing such things would be highly effective in increasing accessibility of employment for blind, deafblind, and low vision youth.

We note that there is a clear need for educators and employers alike to be overtly welcoming and supportive of disabilities such as vision loss. Disabled persons and their whānau are keenly aware of body language and the subtleties of spoken language that are employed to exclude disabled people and promote stigma. This form of terminological inexactitude, where people use polite language to exclude (e.g. suggesting another school/job as a 'better fit' or saying it would be 'too hard' to introduce accessible signage/entranceways) clearly communicates to that a young person is not welcome. This type of indirect yet clearly communicated rejection is harder to challenge than more overt forms of discrimination. Nonetheless, it is clearly communicated and can leave young people feeling unwanted, excluded, marginalised – and reluctant to ask for the reasonable accommodations to which they are entitled to.

Contributing to these challenges are the sometimes negative attitudes of other workers, who may not understand or value inclusion, who may have concerns and worries of their own with regards to including disabled young people in the workplace and who may view disabled young people as barriers to their own achievement. There is a need to address wider societal attitudes towards disability and to ensure that workplaces and post-secondary school training alike are inclusive and welcoming.

Q8. Which focus areas do you think should get the highest priority?

Clearly our focus is on disability, and in particular, removing accessibility barriers for blind, deafblind, low vision and vision impaired persons.

Almost **one** in four **New Zealanders** live with a **disability** that limits their day-to-day activity, according to the 2013 New Zealand Disability Survey, which is a total of 1.1 million people (24 percent of the population). Of these, 11% of children and 27% of adults were limited in their daily activities by a range of impairments. Link here: https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/one-in-four-new-zealanders-identified-as-disabled

With regards to blind, deafblind, low vision and vision-impaired persons, Blind Low Vision NZ has over 14,000 persons registered with their service. Of these, approx. 800 are under the age of 16. Accessible workplaces are a key issue.

For example, a Braille learner started at a new (mainstream) secondary school. The school employed a teacher aide that was a non-braille user and unfamiliar with the Perkins Brailler. The rationale was that employing an inexperienced teacher aide at a lower rate of pay would increase the contact hours the school could employ them for. The school assumed that the teacher aide would be able to quickly learn how to use braille and that the RTV would teach the teacher aide[1]. The student was already familiar with braille and was frustrated at the slowness of the teacher aide in producing braille work for them to complete. The student expressed this frustration in the language

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[1] The school scheduled the TA and the RTV to attend on different days which posed a logistical challenge for this learning process!

available to her and was subsequently suspended from school for hitting the teacher aide. While these issues were eventually addressed and the student is now participating in and enjoying their classes thanks to the fortitude of the parent persevering with the school, the entire process took nearly the whole first term of the school year. This was time that the aforementioned braille learner was unable to fully participate in their learning. What are the pathways and employment support available for this young person post-secondary school?

Q9. Are there any other focus areas you think we should consider?

There is a need to address and remove barriers faced by young people seeking further education and employment. For example, one young blind person wanted to enrol at university to gain formal qualifications in their chose field in order to improve their employment outcomes (they are currently employed on short-term contracts which are insecure, vary from term to term, and poorly paid). The University online enrolment process was not accessible for them (or for blind persons generally). They rang Blind Low Vision NZ for support, but the person they spoke with was unfamiliar with university enrolment processes and unable to offer any further information. Overall, this person's experience was that accessing university enrolment information was near impossible, which left them questioning if the programme itself would be accessible, or even if they were capable of university study.

There is a need to ensure sufficient learning support for blind and low vision students and that accommodations are easily available (that is, that lecturers and administrative staff alike are aware of their responsibilities to ensure accessible programs). Accessibility is a significant barrier for blind and low vision students.

10. What do you see as the best opportunities to get better results for young people at risk of limited employment?

Working with educators and employers to consider how they might alter their practices to be more inclusive and less alienating for disabled people, and to ensure that ALL their systems from first contact right through to long-term employment is accessibly and disability-friendly.

Rewards/incentives for disability-friendly employers and educators.

- school and tertiary study do not work for everyone
- not all young people get the support they need to be ready for work or training
- employment support for young people does not begin early enough.

Are there any other barriers you think we have missed?

As we have commented throughout, there is little mention of factors and barriers such as ableism that are significant barriers to quality employment, and for which there are very few levers available to address. The focus seems to be on changing the young person to "better fit" within the existing education and employment systems, which may not be an effective approach.

We also not that where multiple disabilities occur, much of the currently available supports are inadequate and insufficient. As one parent notes, "It's when your child has multiple disabilities that things can get really complex, and the [system] may fail to work as planned." For our parents, many of their school-related experiences are of an education system that fails to work for their child. More thought needs to be given as to how to address this for disabled youth and to ensure that they receive a high-quality educational experience, which in turn leads to a high-quality tertiary or training experience and then on to high-quality employment.