National Disability Strategy
Youth Roundtable Report

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Executive Summary

The National Disability Strategy Youth Roundtable report outlines some of the issues and barriers faced by young people with disabilities in Australia. It also describes some of the actions and solutions that young people with disabilities are seeking in the upcoming National Disability Strategy.

Young people with disabilities want the National Disability strategy to address the barriers that they experience in the following areas of life:

- Education
- Transport
- Access to the Built Environment
- Social Participation
- Independent living, housing and support
- Employment
- Income Support
- Community Perceptions

Young people with disabilities want to see the following actions incorporated into the National Disability strategy:

- a national disability awareness training program for students and teachers focusing on the social model of disability and reducing bullying in schools
- improved supports for students with disabilities within schools to increase funding and a framework for accountability for the provision of supports
- legislation that makes access mandatory in all public places and in new housing developments
- an accessibility audit of public transport and a commitment by government to make public transport accessible to all.
- a funded national advocacy and social action network for young people the disabilities that will support information sharing, peer support and leadership.
- increased support to access age-appropriate and self-directed recreational pursuits
- more flexible, individualised and self-directed attendant support that is sufficient to facilitate independent living.
- a focus on recruiting and retaining young people in the attendant support industry
- an online database for all disability services as a one-stop shop for people with disabilities
- reforms in the disability sector towards more individualised and client centred approaches and the employment of more people with disabilities in leadership roles
- more affordable and accessible public and private housing.
- clearer pathways and more appropriate services for young adults with disabilities transitioning from paediatric healthcare
- improved mental health support services for young people with disabilities
• increased disability awareness among employers and employer groups
• a minimum quota for the employment for people with disability in large organisations such as the public sector
• more comprehensive supports for finding and keeping work including increased funding for workplace modifications and the workbased personal assistance scheme
• the introduction of a National Disability Insurance Scheme
• a Disability Allowance that is not means tested and that reflects the additional cost of the persons disability
• a range of disability awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities.
• increased positive representation of people with disabilities in the media, especially on television and on film.
Background

The Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) is a statewide advocacy service funded by the state government of Victoria to provide advocacy for young people with disabilities between 12 and 25 years of age. YDAS is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and is a partnership between YACVic, Disability Discrimination Legal Service and Youthlaw.

In October 2008 YDAS was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA) to host a roundtable consultation for young people with a disability from around Australia to provide input into the framing of the National Disability Strategy. The National Disability Strategy is an overarching strategy for all policies and programs that address the needs of people with disabilities in Australia. When completed, the Strategy will describe how Australia will act on its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The event, entitled the National Disability Strategy Youth Roundtable, was held on 19 November 2008 in Melbourne between 10.30am and 4pm. The Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services, Bill Shorten, and 27 young people with disability were in attendance. Support staff included the YDAS team, the CEO of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, the Director of Youthlaw, FAHCSIA staff, direct support workers and Auslan interpreters.

Over 60 young people with disability responded to an expression of interest to attend that was broadly distributed throughout the disability and youth sectors as well as schools, universities and TAFEs. The participants that were chosen included 16 females and 11 males, who ranged in age between 14 and 25. With the exception of the ACT, all Australian states and territories were represented. Participants described their impairments as intellectual, physical, sensory and mental illness.

The data in this report has been derived from the contributions made by the young people who attended the round table, as well as from the information provided by young people in their expressions of interest forms. It explores the barriers and issues these young people face, as well as some solutions and actions proposed by the participants to address these. The report is not an exhaustive exploration of all issues experienced by young people with disabilities, nor does it contain solutions to all the concerns raised. Rather, it aims to provide an illuminating snapshot of concerns and changes that a diverse and passionate group of young people with disabilities would like to communicate for the benefit of other young people across the country. The recommendations that are provided here for inclusion in the National Disability Strategy, reflect important social policy priorities for young Australians with disabilities.
Section 1: Issues and Barriers

Issues raised by young people could be divided into a number of different ‘areas of life’, each of which are listed below.

**Education**

A ‘good education’ is a major foundation from which to build other parts of life such as employment, a career and financial security. Although access to education has improved significantly for young people with disabilities in the last decade, they continue to experience significant issues, some of which are explored below.

**Bullying**

Being able to ‘fit in’ with peers at school and in the community more generally is a major concern for most young people including young people with disabilities. A number of those who contributed to the roundtable related stories of being bullied on account of their disabilities at school. Others felt that teachers and other members of the school community discriminated against them. In some cases, this left the young person increasingly frustrated and isolated. Young people stressed that although they may need extra support in school, or have requirements that vary from their able-bodied peers, they did not want to be made to ‘feel different’, segregated or singled out from peers.

“Equity, not special treatment – (Young people) Need…. acceptance and belonging within (their) social circle(s) – young people with disability need to feel (they are) "normal" - "just one of the girls/boys”.

“They’d tease us about not being able to hear, and how we can’t understand them, and they mock us by giving facial expressions or imitate ridiculous made-up signs. Sometimes they would be behind us mumbling and calling names when we can’t hear until our hearing friends tell us what they did to us. It’s an embarrassment when people watch this happen and we have no idea until we’re told”

**Lack of support for people with disabilities attending mainstream schools**

The majority of young people with disabilities voiced a strong preference to attend mainstream schools. However, many indicated that the lack of supports, equipment and adaptive resources in mainstream settings created difficulties and barriers to their full participation and made school, in the words of one young person "a struggle". Young people cite cuts to
funding for integration and student support as impacting negatively on their schooling. Likewise a lack of adaptive resources such as captioning, note-taking and speech recognition software, were seen as detrimental to young people’s education. Some students also indicated that teachers had been unwilling to adapt to their needs (i.e. by using adaptive technology) in the classroom and did not seem to understand the negative impacts this would have on the student with a disability.

“There have been some teachers who have refused to adjust to my needs at all.”

“I remember my Year 8 Science teacher said she couldn’t wear my Microphone because it put holes in her clothes. I couldn’t do anything about it... she was the teacher – I was the student. For the record – I failed year 8 science – and it had nothing to do with my ability because in Year 9 science, I had a teacher who wore the Mic and I topped the class.”

“At the beginning of Grade 3, I was fully integrated into my local mainstream Primary School. Educationally, I feel that integration was a positive experience for me, but in terms of support, I struggled to cope throughout school due to a lack of teacher’s aide funding”.

**Lack of support for students with learning difficulties or other ‘hidden’ or recently recognised disabilities**

Participants at the roundtable whose disabilities had only recently begun to gain recognition in the community such as diabetes, mental health issues, Asperger’s Syndrome and dyslexia raised a number of issues. Most indicated that their difficulties had not been recognised during compulsory education and for many it was not until attending TAFE or university that they were able to access support.

Lack of support and early intervention compounds the issues that these young people already face. As indicated by some of our participants, this can result in isolation, falling behind and an increase in stress. Although primary and high-school teachers may potentially be in a good position to identify learning difficulties in their students, a lack of training for teachers in recognising and supporting young people with learning difficulties contributes to these going un-noticed.

“One of the main issues facing youth with a learning disability today is that they are seriously disadvantaged by the lack of resources they receive during compulsory education. This places students significantly behind other able-bodied students if they want to reach tertiary education”
“Conditions such as dyslexia are not understood or managed in many schools. Many dyslexics are just lost, as they are regarded as stupid. They do not pass the normal tests used to measure capability. I feel this means that a great resource in young Australians is just lost, as dyslexics drop out of the normal streams”.

Need for transitional supports and accountability in schools

Young people indicate that support is particularly critical in transitional stages of schooling, such as when the young person is moving from primary school to high school or from a more supported special education setting into mainstream school. Young people are also concerned that systems are not in place to ensure that schools are made accountable for providing necessary and effective support to students with disabilities and that this may mean that students with disabilities miss out on the support they need.

“There is no appropriate or independent disability quality assurance process for the student”

Inability to access funded attendant support during post-compulsory education.

The inability to access funded attendant support for personal care assistance during post-compulsory education is another prominent issue for young people with disabilities. Young people indicate that not having access to personal attendant support during University or TAFE generally resulted in them either not being able to attend an institution, or being forced to rely on informal means such as family members to provide this assistance. One young person attending the roundtable who had fought successfully to be provided with funded personal assistance for university put this simply; “without personal care assistance, and in particular, toileting; TAFE was out of the question”.

Access to the Built Environment

Lack of access to the built environment is a significant issue experienced by many young people with disabilities, which potentially impacts on almost every area of their lives. Major areas of concern in relation to access include:

- General lack of access
- Inadequacy of minimal access standards
- Variations in the definitions and standards access
- Misleading or inadequate advertising regarding access
- Lack of universal access to premises
While young people acknowledge that ‘things are getting better’, it is clear that adherence to minimal access standards has not resulted in access for everyone. Slow changes to making premises more accessible and the lack of regulation to enforce these changes still means that many of the places young people attempt to go remain difficult or inaccessible. Young people indicate that variations in the definitions and standards of access also present difficulties, with the potential to encourage misinformation, create confusion and hamper universal accessibility.

Given the wide range of access needs for people with a disability, young people also indicated that the current labelling system for accessibility (often simply the international (wheelchair) access symbol) is inadequate and/or misrepresentative for a range of access needs. As a result, the presence of this symbol is often not sufficient for the young person/family/friend to work out if a location actually caters for a particular persons access needs.

"There are a number of so-called ‘wheelchair accessible’ toilets on my campus, but there is only one on the entire campus that I can fit in with my motorised scooter."

**Transport**

The public transport system is an important, increasingly popular and cost-effective means of getting from place to place, which is utilised by many young people, including young people with disabilities - in some cases as their primary form of transport. However, participants at the roundtable cited a number of factors that were barriers or deterrents to them using the public transport system. The major issues that were expressed by young people through the roundtable outlined below.

**Lack of Accessible Services**

Public transport users with disabilities remain significantly effected by the lack of accessible services and infrastructure. For example, the percentage of Melbourne’s trams that are accessible is relatively small, as is the number of accessible ‘superstops’, which are furthermore only found on some tram routes. This results in those who routinely rely on accessible transport having only infrequent access to a small portion of the tram network. The lack of accessible buses, and the steep gradient at which the accessible bus ramps are placed (depending on the height of the kerb) also presents an issue for how effectively and independently young people with disabilities can access bus services. Participants from rural areas also point out that these difficulties are heightened in regional and rural Australia.
Public transport infrastructure and systems are not accessible to everyone

Some young people also indicated that they have experienced difficulty when using public transport because the systems and infrastructure that support the network are not easy to access or user friendly. Some young people told us that the content and layout of public transport timetables are difficult to understand and the extreme gradient of many station ramps makes them difficult or impossible for people with mobility impairments to use without assistance. Perspex safety screens also make it difficult for hearing impaired young people to communicate with station attendants because it is difficult to hear and/or lip-read. Changes to services (such as platform changes or train cancellations) are also potentially difficult for those with sensory or mobility difficulties because these are often done swiftly and not announced through all available channels i.e. verbally and visually, resulting in the young person with the disability missing vital information and not having enough time to catch the correct train.

"I have spoken to many friends who have missed trains or caught the wrong train because public announcements in relation to timetable or platform changes have not been heard."

Some young people also mentioned that safety issues also deter them from using the public transport system. This is most significant in relation to railway crossings.

Because of the difficulties associated with using public transport, some young people with disabilities indicated that it was necessary for them to rely on family and friends to get around. As a result, young people felt their independence was diminished.

Taxi system is unreliable

Another alternative transport option utilised by many young people with disabilities was taxis. While it was clear that the subsidised taxi scheme made this type of transport more affordable and useable, there were significant issues with the co-ordination of accessible taxis. People spoke of extremely long wait times being a common occurrence, even in city areas (up to two hours was cited), and with very long wait times even more likely on Friday and Saturday nights and in the outer suburbs. Some young people in the Australian states that relied on the paper-based voucher system, found it difficult or inconvenient to use (signing, filling them out etc). Similarly, young people with hearing impairments found the telephone based taxi booking system problematic.
Social Exclusion and Isolation

Having an active and fulfilling social life is generally a high priority for young people. Similarly, socialising, going out with friends, networking with other young people with disabilities, developing relationships, enjoying a variety of chosen activities whether it be in arts, culture, sport, live music, pubs and bars were amongst the activities that were described as important to young people with disabilities. However, as with the other areas of life, young people with disabilities experienced various including lack of physical access, negative attitudes and discrimination when attempting to pursue various social activities.

Lack of physical access, negative attitudes and discrimination

Lack of physical access, already discussed in this report is a pervasive barrier that prevented or made it difficult for young people to access the social spaces and activities they want to take part in. Physical barriers such as lack of (usable) ramp or lift access, hearing loops, and captioning at public events were some examples of non-inclusiveness. Negative attitudes and discrimination in the general community are also experienced by some of the young people with disabilities when taking part in mainstream social activities.

Inadequate networking opportunities with other young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities see participation in, and access to the wider community as an essential right. However a number of young people also speak of isolation, lack of support and low self-esteem. In turn, some feel that they would benefit from spaces, services and events created by and for young people with disabilities. Young people spoke of often having their disabilities defined by others (usually in medical terms) and of spending a significant amount of time amongst able-bodied peers. Therefore there is a role for social spaces designed specifically for and by young people with disabilities where they can take control of defining their disability, create a positive shared identity, network, socialise and gain support from others. A number of participants from outside of Victoria expressed a strong interest in establishing services like YDAS in their own States and Territories as well as a national network.

Independent Living, Housing and Support

Having the option to move out of the family home and live independently is an essential and exciting right of passage for most young people growing up. However the current system in Australia does not enable young people with disabilities to have independence or appropriate support for their needs, and therefore this is a significant area of concern for young Australians who have a disability that require a high-level of
support. This is further complicated by the difficulty in finding affordable and accessible housing.

The issues related to independent living and support raised by young people centered around:

- Inadequate and inflexible support services
- Inadequate accessible and affordable housing options
- Young peoples’ lack of knowledge of supports available
- High cost of equipment and long waiting periods

**Inadequate and inflexible support services**

Young people with disabilities reported long waiting times for support services and often these services were not suitable to their needs. Young people also said that they did not like being supported by people who were not close to their age or who did not share similar interests. A number of young people indicated that the 9 to 5, Monday to Friday provision of support presented problems for them, as they quite often needed support outside these hours.

"I don’t want someone assisting me who looks like my Nanna."

**Inadequate accessible and affordable housing options**

Young people who attempted to find private rental describe this process as challenging and gave evidence for the lack of accessible and affordable rental stock in the Australian market. Young people with disabilities want to live with other young people in rental properties and often need to make modifications to properties that are not permitted by landlords.

**Lack of awareness of services available - particularly for those outside disability services**

Many young people indicated that the biggest barrier to accessing services was simply not being aware of them – particularly if the young person was not part of the disability services system. They want these services to be highly visible and will advertise, particularly outside the disability service system to help reach a broad range of people, including those who had little or no access to disability services.

"I feel that one of the biggest issues facing young people with disabilities is a lack of information regarding services available to them and their families, including support networks and respite services."

"Some young people are unaware of services that are available to them, particularly if they mainly/traditionally operate in the mainstream or are not connected to disability support services."
Not being able to access necessary support is an even greater problem for CALD young people, especially if their first language is not English. This contributed to difficulty in understanding information and accessing services, as well as potential isolation from other people with disabilities.

**High cost of equipment and long waiting lists**

The high cost of adaptive and mobility equipment if purchased outright, and long waiting periods to receive them (partially) funded often creates serious issues for young people. Individuals often find it difficult to cover the partial costs of adaptive equipment. People also find it difficult to go about daily life while they wait for long periods of time for funding.

**Employment**

Young people with disabilities saw contributing in the work force as both highly desirable and a basic right. However, they described a significant number of barriers to employment which are outlined below.

**Discrimination in employment**

Although awareness of the desires and capacity of people with disabilities to be in the paid workforce has increased in the general community, young people’s feedback continues to indicate that there are real problems in this area. Misinformation about people with disabilities (such as potential adaptive needs, difficulties and particularly, their abilities) is still very much a problem in contemporary workplaces. Based on this, some young people feel that they experience issues of discrimination, lack of appropriate supports in the workplace and in some cases, harassment. As a result of these issues, some young people either did not disclose their disabilities (where possible) or felt trepidation in doing so.

"I didn’t declare all my issues because I thought they wouldn’t employ me”

**Perceptions of OH&S as a barrier to employment**

One young person at the Roundtable indicated that they had not been employed in a workplace because they were deemed to be “an OH&S risk”. Similarly, other young people expressed concerns about this legislation being used inappropriately by employers who may be acting on misperceptions about disability or using it to hide discrimination.
Varied quality of job network support and difficulty in changing providers

Young people raised significant issues with the varied quality of disability employment services. Some do not offer good follow up support or services beyond ‘resume building/checking’ and others appear not to follow up on their obligations to clients. Young people were also angered by the fact that the support system was set up so there is an incentive for job network providers to get them into ‘any work’ ‘just to fill the quota’, rather than helping them find lasting and meaningful employment. Young people also indicated that the process of finding a good disability employment service was made very difficult because of the processes and checks required for changing providers. This includes a complicated job capacity assessment and Disability Support Pension Review – creating another occasion where young people were fearful of losing their entitlements.

"Changing to a different Disability Employment agency requires a comprehensive review of your disability pension, which is horrendous”

Income Support

Many young people with disabilities rely on the disability support pension (DSP) as sole or supplementary income. This support provides important financial relief. However, it was apparent that the current system causes significant stress and is not conducive to supporting young people’s desire to work. Issues around income support included:

- Difficulties with DSP payments and reporting requirements when working
- Lack of information about Centrelink entitlements
- Centrelink procedures are ‘dehumanising’

Difficulties with DSP payments and reporting requirements when working

Young people who are working while receiving the DSP find this situation difficult, stressful and feel that the system is not complementary to working arrangements. The constant need to report employment income, particularly given that reporting periods do not line up with payment periods in the workplace can make it difficult to calculate income earned for the period. Quite often people reported losing payments if they missed their reporting obligations. The low threshold for pension payments being effected or lost entirely in the event of paid work (any time a recipient works more than 15 hours per week) results in a situation of forced welfare dependence. Young people and other DSP recipients risk being cut off from entitlements and concessions unless their employment remains two days per week or less. This inflexibility does not cater well for the changing nature of many disabilities, fluctuations in work hours that
are common in the workplace and does not help young people feel secure in being able to get the support they need. Young people also feel that pension payments need to be reviewed in line with the rising cost of living.

**Lack of information about Centrelink entitlements**

Young people also indicated that they were not necessarily sure of their Centrelink entitlements - they felt that they are not made clear to them and they had to ‘find out for themselves’. In addition, many young people felt that others might go without entitlements because they did not know about them.

"While we were able to claim the Pension we did not discover its existence till 1-2 years after we were able to apply."

Some young people also expressed difficulties when filling out the Centrelink paperwork that is required to receive entitlements. Feedback indicated that this is particularly difficult when the young person had vision or comprehension difficulties.

"If I didn’t have a supportive family, I would get lost in the process"

**Aspects associated with the income support system that young people felt were “de-humanising”**

In the words of one young person, various aspects of the income support system were “de-humanising”. Particularly negative was the need to continually prove the existence of a permanent disability, as were frequent reminders about their obligations without much acknowledgement of successes, such as finding a job or staying in work.

"It’s very disheartening to have to ‘prove’ and confirm a disability over and over that is lifelong, diagnosed and confirmed."

**Community Perceptions**

Young people feel that they are adversely effected by a lack of awareness of disability in the general community. Participants voiced the need for people to be educated to help dispel negative stereotypes of people with disabilities and to understand that in terms of wanting to live a full life, work, pursue their dreams and aspirations etc they were ‘just like everybody else’.

Young people from CALD communities also appear to battle misconceptions and stereotypes about people with disabilities in their own communities as well as discrimination based on race or ethnicity more broadly. One young person who attended the roundtable gave an example of these ‘double’ discriminations. As a young deaf person he faced
misperceptions in his community based on his deafness - including particularly, about his ability to work and generally contribute to society. He felt that his inability to get work in Australia had been further compounded by his disability and racial background.

Young people feel that there is a lack of representation of people with disabilities in the media both in popular television shows and fictional roles, and that representation of young peoples experiences and achievements is also lacking.

Participants of the NDS Youth Roundtable. Photos: Chris Garbacz
Section 2: Actions and solutions

At the roundtable participants were asked to develop actions or strategies to address the various issues that they identified as being experienced by young people with disabilities. The actions or strategies that were proposed by participants are presented below:

Education

In the area of education young people propose actions around several main themes, including:

- More disability and diversity awareness training
- Anti-bullying training for teachers and peers
- Training to increase teacher knowledge of specific disabilities
- Better supports for people with disabilities including in accessing the curriculum
- A system of accountability for the provision of support to people with disabilities in schools.

Disability awareness and anti-bullying education in schools

Young people are clear about the need to have more awareness of disability targeted at a wide range of people in the school community including regular and temporary teaching staff, students and school administrators. Participants suggest that such training should include significant elements that are ‘hands on’ and experiential so that people actually ‘get to know what it’s like’. Young people also made clear the importance of focusing on the capabilities of people with disabilities in education programs.

Many of the participants are keen to have more programs in schools aimed at reducing bullying and it is thought that this issue should be tackled from the early years of schooling onward. One young person also suggested that given the self-esteem issues teenagers and young people (with and without disabilities) often face it would be good to have motivational and wellness seminars and workshops in schools for the benefit of everyone, some of which, participants suggest, could be facilitated by people with disabilities.

Some young people also indicated that there is a need to have ‘better communication’ with emergency and relief teachers about the needs of students with disabilities, so that temporary staff could be, in the words of one young person “clued up, not asking” and provide appropriate support if necessary. Young people want to avoid the potential embarrassment or responsibility of recurrently educating temporary staff about their disability.
Training and resources for teachers in providing support for students with learning difficulties

Given that teachers (particularly classroom teachers) are in a position to observe the changing needs, growth and development of their students, young people with learning difficulties feel that they are in a strong position to be able to ‘pick up’ any problems or issues that students might be experiencing. These young people strongly supported comprehensive training and awareness, which would strengthen a teacher's capacity to identify student difficulties. Suggested elements for such training include knowledge of varied learning and processing styles, awareness about learning difficulties, their consequences and manifestations and particularly ongoing support strategies that teachers could implement. Young people with learning difficulties emphasize that all supports should be individualized, adaptive and flexible.

"By (being able to recognise learning difficulties early) (teachers) can create strategies focusing on the different styles of learning and processing information that students with learning disability have, helping to ensure that they are able to achieve their full potential. Currently students do not have help to create strategies until they find their way into a Learning Skills Unit at a TAFE or University”

Accessibility – Fully accessible schools and curriculum

The school performance of many students with disabilities had been, and continues to be compromised due to not having full access to the curriculum. One suggestion from participants for improving this is that schools make learning supports acceptable for use at school (for example, speech to text software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking being allowed in exams). Students also stress that ALL school texts and other paper-based resources need to be made available in alternative formats and to be compatible with screen reading software.

Some young people (particularly those who attended older schools) reflected on not being able to fully access school grounds. Participants are adamant that a systematic plan for making all schools accessible should be implemented urgently across the country.

Support throughout school and university

Young people who attended the roundtable identified a number of areas in which support in their educational setting (predominantly mainstream schools) could be improved. Young people identified career guidance as an area where they feel they could have extra support and leadership, in relation to career choices and their rights in the workplace.
Participants attending university or TAFE also indicate that they experience a lack of support for related studies (particularly placements and other learning opportunities that occurred off campus) and indicate that there needs to be easier systems for arranging extra-curricular support. Young people also suggest that Universities and TAFE’s should provide more scholarship funds specifically for students with disabilities. While such scholarships are provided on an adhoc basis at some universities, young people supported the idea of a national initiative to ensure that scholarships for a range of disadvantaged groups, including students with disabilities are offered at every University.

**Access to funded attendant support for post-compulsory education.**

The lack of availability of attendant support for post compulsory education is a critical barrier for young people with disabilities being able to access further education. Personal care assistance is currently funded for students with disabilities throughout primary and high school. Although tertiary and TAFE students can get funding for provisions such as note-takers, funding for attendant support and personal care is not made available at tertiary level. Completion of further education is increasingly necessary for many occupations, and assistance with personal care is fundamental to many young people with disabilities being able to attend an educational institution – without personal care, the provision of note-takers and other supports are irrelevant. As one young person put it, “if I can’t go to the toilet, I can’t go to TAFE”.

Young people attending the roundtable advocate strongly for a national policy that would ensure anyone with a disability who requires attendant support whilst in tertiary education can obtain it. Young people also want to be able to have a support person who is able to perform a wide range of support tasks for students with disabilities as required. Some tertiary students relayed experiences of ‘note-takers’ who would only perform a limited ‘note-taking’ role and resisted doing other things to help the student therefore not meeting their support needs. Participants suggested that a position title such as ‘tertiary educational assistant’ for a role where staff could perform a range of duties including personal care would result in integrated and flexible support. Students also have suggestions around more general training for those wanting to become assistants at tertiary level, including having training courses run by people with disabilities, as well as more time and provision for the individual obtaining support to ‘induct’ a new support person. A mentor scheme is also suggested for the benefit of new employees. Students also indicated that support roles should receive higher remuneration to increase the retention of staff. The need for on-going performance monitoring for educational assistants, including regular meetings between the individual, their assistant and the University or TAFE (which does not happen in any systematic way at this level) was also stressed. Young people also call for well-developed marketing campaigns for the personal support field, which they feel would promote core values related to this work and would attract suitable staff.
**Accountability framework for all schools in the provision of support to young people with disabilities**

Roundtable participants also suggest that there needs to be a system of accountability at the various levels of schooling to ensure that the school system is providing effective support for students with a disability. Young people feel that this framework should particularly make schools accountable for how well the student was able to access the curriculum, and the effectiveness of support provided by the school from the perspective of the student with the disability.

**Access to the Built Environment**

In relation to improved physical access, young people wanted hearing loops and captioning to be made mandatory for all public events. They also wanted organizations to have ready access to guidelines and checklists for planning and putting on accessible public events. Participants spoke of wanting lift access to every building, and accessible emergency exits. There was also a discussion on the need to have clearer and more accurate accessibility advertising and signage. Young people suggested that Australia should introduce new symbols for accessibility, specific to disability - i.e. those that indicated the venue may be accessible for someone with a mobility impairment (for example, all stairs had rails). The desire for a system that would easily identify the type and level of accessibility of a building was also discussed. Participants also want to have easier avenues to prosecute the owners of premises that were not accessible.

**Transport**

Young people suggested a number of actions that would improve the lives of people with disabilities in relation to accessing public transport.

**More frequent, better connected accessible services and flexible public transport options**

Young people want accessible transport services to be more frequent and for there to be better connections between the different modes of transport. They also want clear information about when accessible services run rather than having to ‘wait and see’ if a service is accessible. Young people also support the use of more flexible transport options such as telebuses, which provide flexible, door to door service.
Reducing waiting times for wheelchair accessible taxis

Young people voiced that they want all taxis to be accessible to wheelchairs to overcome the discrimination and excessive waiting times that wheelchair users currently experience. There should be a significant increase in the number of wheelchair accessible taxi licences and non wheelchair accessible taxis should be gradually phased out. Furthermore, drivers of wheelchair accessible taxis, should be required to primarily service wheelchair users.

National roll-out of swipe-card system for taxi fare subsidies

Participants were strongly in favour of a replication of the swipe-card system for taxi concessions that is in place in Victoria, as well as a standardization of fare subsidies across the states. Young people see these two changes as creating the most convenient, effective and universal system possible.

Accessibility audit of transport infrastructure

Young people support an audit of the public transport system in every state, which could identify the barriers experienced by users with disabilities. Participants at the roundtable are adamant that such a process should involve a high level of involvement from passengers with disabilities. They propose that the audit should include an examination of physical safety, accessibility to infrastructure around public transport hubs (such as ticket machines, timetables etc) as well as access barriers at stations and stops. In the future, young people want to see a public transport system designed to be universally accessible to everyone.

Social Isolation And Exclusion

Young people with disabilities require more accessible social spaces and more reliable transport to reduce the social isolation that they experience. The following suggestions for action were also provided.

A National youth and disability advocacy and social action network

Participants suggest a National advocacy and social action network which is youth orientated and presents information and resources to help raise awareness around issues facing young people with disabilities. The network would have a website that would be a one-stop shop with resources that young people with disabilities need and a forum for young people with disabilities to discuss issues. Young people also suggested
that this website could include blogs for and by young people with disabilities.

Participants in rural areas expressed a need for more local networks and social groups for people with disabilities such as youth or special interest groups.

**Support to access mainstream recreational opportunities**

Young people also want increased access to mainstream sporting and recreational arts and cultural opportunities. They want to know what clubs and pubs are accessible and need more flexible support services that will allow them to come home late at night and access the support that they need to go out. Participants strongly supported all organizations having disability action plans as well as some framework of accountability for implementing these.

**Independent Living, Housing and Support**

The importance to people with disabilities of being able to live independently was highlighted by the large amount of feedback that young people around Australia provided around this issue. Young people wanted more flexibility in attendant support and choice about how the support was provided, access to affordable, accessible housing, and a fairer income support system.

**More flexible attendant support and choice about who, when and how support is provided**

Support workers play a varied and often critical role in the lives of young people with disabilities. It is important that these people are able to provide the services that the young person wants in a way that works best for them.

Young people indicate that they want some key changes in relation to attendant support, including greater availability of individualised support packages, more flexibility in the ways that attendant support is provided to them, and the availability of before and after hours assistance for activities of the young persons choice. In line with wanting flexible, self-directed support, young people also strongly supported the availability of individualized and self-directed funding across all states and territories in Australia.

Participants are also keen for an increase in the number of young people employed in attendant support, and a strategy to increase the recruitment and retention of young people. To achieve these goals, it is suggested that
the profession should be promoted more extensively to younger people through targeted campaigns. Young people would also like to see some changes in support worker training, including more training courses run by people with disabilities, as well as training the range of values that will support the outcomes young people want, such as respect for their choices. Participants also indicate that agencies needed to be more concerned about matching people with disabilities to support staff who were closer to their age.

Online database for services and supports

The Internet has become an essential tool used by many people in many areas of life. Particularly for younger people, it is ‘the port of call’ to find information, gather resources and connect with others. Given that most people now have access to the Internet, including people with disabilities, young people suggested a national online ‘disability hub’ which listed all the services available to people with disabilities across the country. Young people suggest that such a resource should have a range of facilities, such as a library where people could find out more about various disabilities and a register or ‘members area’ where people with disabilities, families and friends could connect.

Housing – Affordable, accessible and easy to find

Finding affordable and accessible housing was often one of the biggest challenges facing young people with disabilities. Participants feel that having better access to information about the availability of housing, particularly in the private rental market would be useful. To this end, young people suggest building a national database that lists all houses available across each state and important details relating to the level of accessibility, price, location, proximity to public transport etc.

Reforms in the disability sector - including employing people with disabilities

Participants were encouraged by some of the reforms in the disability services sector, such as the introduction of Individual Support Packages, and the shift to self-directed services. However young people saw that changes in policy were not necessarily reflected in day-to-day practice within disability services. Young people support regular training and review processes for staff so that services are “more accountable, respectful and centered (around) the goals and needs of the person with the disability”. Young people also said they would like to see more people with disabilities employed in leadership and management roles in disability services.
**Independent Living Support**

With respect to independent living support, young people indicated they would like to see individualized programs that were relevant and helpful to them (classes in cooking and budgeting was suggested). Young people also want to be given the skills needed to be able to access services, retrieve information and network across the different services as they need to.

**Healthcare transition supports, counseling for young people and families**

In relation to their healthcare, young people want to have better follow up and transition services at hospitals. They particularly want clear information about equivalent adult services that are on offer for themselves and their families, as they get older. Young people also want there to be more counselling available for themselves and their families, connected to both hospitals and disability support services.

**Mental health supports**

Participants who had experienced mental health issues or who worked in the mental health and/or disability fields wanted more mental health professionals employed at disability services, so that people with disabilities and mental health issues are able to access or be referred to appropriate support. Participants also thought that all workers in the mental health field should have disability awareness training so that they are aware of the issues these young people may be dealing with. Young people also support more general collaboration between the mental health and disability fields, so that the young person was able to easily access the variety of supports they may need.

The need for additional and in some cases specialized mental health supports for people with disabilities from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds was also highlighted. Suggestions of more targeted support in Indigenous communities for survivors of generational trauma and suicide prevention were two areas specifically raised. Young people from these backgrounds highlight the need for more Indigenous mental health workers and for all workers in this sector to be trained to be aware of Indigenous culture, community, and the varied needs of Indigenous and CALD young people with disabilities.

**Employment**

Young people want to participate in the workforce as valued, contributing, tax-paying citizens. Participants suggest a number of changes, which
would help support them in getting into and remaining in meaningful paid employment. These include **more support for employers taking on employees with disabilities as well as more awareness around which supports already exist. Disability awareness in workplaces and more effective supports for people with disabilities who are searching for, or looking to maintain paid work.**

**Increased awareness among employers**

Young people felt that in order to overcome the apprehension that some employers had about employing people with a disability there needs to be far more education and awareness in the workplace. This could include general disability awareness training for all staff, and the provision of specific information for employers about the current supports available when taking on an employee with a disability. Young people also thought that the on-costs of employing someone with a disability should be covered as an extra incentive. It is also suggested that workplaces have an employment policy (perhaps as part of their Disability Action Plans) that ensures a minimum quota of people with disabilities are employed, particularly within a larger organisation.

A number of the participants had experienced discrimination in their workplaces, and this is often a problem for people with disabilities more generally. To discourage workplace discriminatory behaviour, young people also support the enforcement of anti-discrimination policies, as well as more encouraging awareness around practises in the workplace that may be discriminatory towards people with disabilities.

**More comprehensive and effective disability employment support**

It was clear that many young people who accessed disability employment support services did not feel that the services offered were comprehensive or particularly effective in preparing them for the workforce. As discussed earlier in the report, the quality of services offered by different disability employment support agencies is greatly varied, and it was revealed that it is difficult to change job network providers if the young person was not happy. It would be useful to have some standardisation of service provision, easier processes for changing disability service providers, as well as more comprehensive supports available. Young people suggest additional services such as interview preparation and training, workshops in writing cover letters, learning from interview feedback, job searching through various mediums, and career advice. Young people also want follow up supports once they are in employment, including funding that people with disabilities could apply for, which would cover the costs of attendant support in the workplace.

“The right to work is a basic human right and more could be done to support young people with disabilities to maintain employment and build their careers.”
**Income Support**

Young people suggest a number of changes to the income support system. Changes which would encourage and support young people in being able to work, or would allow them to live reasonably comfortably if the income support system was their sole source of income. Participants thought that there should be more money available on the Disability Support Pension so as they were not forced to ‘just get by’. They also felt they would benefit from more transitional supports when moving into the workplace, particularly if it was for the first time. Participants felt strongly that the pension should be less effected when they are in paid work, which would help cover the additional expenses that arise when in employment. Young people also support changes to income reporting that would make the process less difficult. It was clear that young people with disabilities want an income support system that:

- Supports their desire to work
- Does not penalize their income support so heavily when they are working
- Acknowledges the added pressures that are on people with disabilities when attempting to find and maintain work
- Provides for the additional costs associated with having a disability, such as medications and therapies regardless of work status
- Provides them with a measure of income security regardless of their circumstances.

**Community Perceptions**

Lack of awareness of disability, stereotypes and discrimination are all issues that continue to effect people with disabilities in some way throughout their lives.

Young people believe that there needs to be an increase in community awareness around learning difficulties, with a strong emphasis on dismantling negative stereotypes. Young people also want community awareness raising to be done around other ‘hidden’ disabilities such as Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. Participants with mental health issues felt they suffered particularly from stigma and misinformation in the community, and would like to see campaigns that would humanize, demystify and educate the community about the effects of mental illness.

In addition to informing people about the nature of various disabilities, participants also feel strongly that there should be more awareness in the community about how disability is lived and experienced; including some of the barriers that are faced. Young people feel that the community needs to be more aware of disability discrimination laws and the rights of people with disabilities – such as the right to access a building or be accompanied by an assistance animal.

Young people acknowledge the power of the media in shaping public perception and would like to see this used in widespread disability
awareness campaigns. Young people also feel that an increase in the representation of people with disabilities in the popular media is important and would like to see more frequent and diverse representations of people with disabilities. Participants stressed how important it is that representations of people with disabilities in the mainstream media are non-stereotypical and realistic.
Conclusion and Recommendations

The Youth Roundtable for the National Disability Strategy provided a range of views and a large amount of information about the issues and concerns of young people with disabilities in Australia. It is clear that young Australians with disabilities want access to an education, they want meaningful jobs, they want accessible and affordable housing and flexible, timely and self-directed support services. Young people with disabilities want to be able to choose where and how they live and to have the freedom through accessible transport to move around. Overall, young people with disabilities want the many barriers that they face to be removed and the necessary supports put in place so that they can access the same opportunities as their peers.

In order for this to happen, we need the issue of disability and impairment to be addressed across the whole of government and we also need major policy reform to occur. Two examples of such necessary reforms are the introduction of a national disability insurance scheme and the introduction of a non-means tested disability payment.

**Recommendation 1: A National Disability Insurance Scheme**

The introduction of a National Disability Insurance Scheme would provide support for all people who have a permanent disability, regardless of the origin or cause of the disability, and would allow for the provision of supports such as mobility aids, home modifications, and early intervention as they are needed. Such a scheme would provide far more equality in the provision of support for people with disabilities in comparison to the current system where the level of support that they receive is usually dependent on how their disability is acquired. It would alleviate the many difficulties voiced by young people with disabilities in this report especially in relation to access to education, support services and independent living.

**Recommendation 2: A Non-means Tested Disability Allowance**

Another policy reform that would address some of the concerns presented here is the introduction of a disability allowance. Such an allowance should be available to all people with a permanent disability based on individual needs should not be means tested or affected by the employment status of the person with the disability or members of their family. Entitlements within such a payment system should be determined individually, based on a persons level of impairment and the costs associated with their disability. This would allow for a more adequate and fairer provision of financial support, which acknowledges the additional costs of living with a disability and the wide variation in these for people with different types and levels of impairment. It would also address the many concerns with the disability support pension that were outlined.
earlier and would support more young people with disabilities to move into employment.

**Recommendation 3: A National Advocacy Body for Young People with Disabilities**

Finally, a very powerful message that emerged from the youth Roundtable is that young people with disabilities want their voices to be heard loud and clear by government. They also want a vehicle to network with one another to work together on issues that are important to them. This could be achieved by the establishment of a national advocacy organisation by and for young people disabilities. This would facilitate a national approach to issues effecting young people with disabilities and it would follow a youth participation model where young people with disabilities would have a high level of control over all aspects of the organisation. Like the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS), it would be an excellent vehicle for the development of young people with disabilities as leaders.

Participants of the NDS Youth Roundtable. Photos: Chris Garbacz