



SPEVI
South Pacific Educators
in Vision Impairment

Attn: disability.equity@dfat.gov.au

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DFAT Disability Equity and rights strategy submission: South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI)

South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) is the major professional association for educators of students with vision impairment in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific region. This SPEVI response to the DFAT Disability Equity and Rights Strategy seeks to emphasise a prioritisation of people who are blind or vision impaired, throughout DFAT's strategy, in an attempt to address the current inequities in developing countries for this disability group.

SPEVI is the professional body for the education and support of persons who are blind, have low vision, deaf-blindness, or additional disabilities. SPEVI membership is open to educators, professionals and parent groups who support and promote education for persons with vision impairment. Our vision is to promote educational systems in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific in which diversity is valued and disability is not viewed as a characteristic by which to judge a person's worth. SPEVI works in close collaboration with the Pacific Regional Board of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI Pacific).

The aims of SPEVI are:

- To be recognised as the professional body of educators whose specialty is in matters pertaining to the education of persons with vision impairment in Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island Countries.
- To advocate on behalf of members, persons with vision impairment and parents/carers for equitable education access and participation, in accordance with international and national disability anti-discrimination legislation.
- To encourage the highest standards in the educators of persons with vision impairment by promoting research and professional training for general and specialist teachers.
- To promote and facilitate the interchange of information and collaboration among educators, professionals, parent groups and the broader community concerning education and equal opportunity for persons with vision impairment.
- To encourage the use of appropriate mainstream and assistive technologies, resources and optical and non-optical aids, in the education of persons with vision impairment, and to promote teacher education programs in the use and care of existing and new techniques and technology.

What should Australia prioritise to advance disability equity and rights internationally?

Promotion of educational inclusion for children who are blind or vision impaired: SPEVI seeks to ensure DFAT explicitly identifies vision impairment as a disability group that requires more specific resources, skills, services and technical advice; to ensure full and equitable inclusion in all aspects of life.

Strengthening teacher, school and system capacity for the educational inclusion of children who are blind or vision impaired: SPEVI encourages references throughout the strategy to opportunities and funding to strengthen capacity building opportunities to better include children who are blind or vision impaired in formal and informal education across the Pacific region.

What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?

Partnerships with specialist organisations

SPEVI calls upon DFAT to use this strategy as an opportunity to promote working in direct partnership with peak specialist bodies such as SPEVI and ICEVI Pacific. This will ensure access to regional leaders and specialists including people with disability, vision impairment specialist teachers, orientation and mobility instructors, adaptive technology specialists, braille literacy specialists and academics. SPEVI membership possesses strong, evidence-based understanding of the necessary skills and resources for education systems to be able to provide the necessary responses to the current inequities experienced by people who are blind or vision impaired in developing countries. SPEVI Pacific membership, alongside our affiliated network of ICEVI Pacific, possess a wide range of relevant skills and knowledge to address access barriers and promote inclusion. Through our expertise and networks, we encourage DFAT to highlight partnerships with SPEVI and ICEVI Pacific as the most effective way to work collectively with a range of specialists skilled and passionate about vision impairment inclusion in the Pacific region.

Capacity building opportunities

SPEVI encourages reference to funding and support to attend disability-specific conferences and to establish regional hubs fostering remote and hybrid conference attendance by Pacific Islanders who support and promote the right to education for children with blindness, low vision, deafblindness, and multiple disability. As an example, one off funding through SPEVI and ICEVI enabled three education conference hubs to be held in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu for the January 2023 SPEVI conference. Hubs were co-designed within the three selected Pacific Islands with hub components identified with the aim to address the inequity in Pacific Island conference attendance. Key components included a venue with reliable internet access, travel allowances, catering, local side events, pre-recorded presentations from hub locations, international and in country hub coordinators and opportunities for collaboration. The results of the hubs indicate that the adoption of co-designed Pacific Island hubs reflecting these components lead to an increase in attendance, interaction, engagement with conference topics and regional networks. Approximately 70 Pacific Islanders were able to attend the SPEVI conference through these hubs in contrast to a handful of Pacific participants in previous conferences. DFAT commitment, and reference to such a commitment in the new strategy, should include support for disability-specific conference attendance and regional hubs in remote and island locations. This would increase capacity building opportunities for Pacific Islanders interested in vision impairment inclusion in education.

Communities of Practice

SPEVI encourages reference in the strategy to sector-specific communities of practice, for example, communities of practice with a focus on vision impairment inclusion in education. This aligns with the priorities of Pacific regional bodies and organisations of persons with disability (OPDs), and ensures ongoing dialogue, activities and shared practice across the region. These could be supported by SPEVI, ICEVI Pacific and university partners.

University partnerships

SPEVI encourages reference to Australian university partnerships where there is a strategic opportunity to build capacity through long term and short-term Australia Awards scholarships, Australia Awards Fellowships focused on vision impairment inclusion, specific projects and research opportunities.

The following are an example of university partners:

Macquarie University who offer a Masters in Disability Studies, with specialisations in blindness/low vision and deafness/hard of hearing, in affiliation with the NextSense Institute who have a strong research and professional learning program in sensory impairment inclusion.

The University of Melbourne who offer a Masters in Learning Intervention and Graduate Certificate in Learning Difficulties along with expertise in customised micro-credentials in inclusive education for developing countries.

The University of Newcastle who offer a Masters in Special and Inclusive Education and have expertise in delivering Australia Awards Fellowships for the Pacific Region in inclusive education and a strong presence in the Pacific for research and PhD supervision.

How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organisations of persons with disabilities?

SPEVI encourages stronger funding commitments with a focus on capacity building, customised training and the provision of assistive devices as essential reading and writing tools for people who are blind or vision impaired.

The following approaches, as referenced in the ICEVI Pacific scoping study on access to education for Pacific Islanders who are blind or vision impaired, conducted in 2021 by Deborah Rhodes and Mereoni Daveta, are recommended, in partnership with Pacific OPDs. The full scoping study report is available at <https://icevi.org/pacific/>.

- shared analysis of existing strengths in the national or school-based context and cultural values that shape inclusion and education
- co-production/co-design of activities such as promotion of the Marrakech Treaty, alternative formatting and use of essential assistive devices
- understanding of and mutual respect for the contributions of all those involved in activity implementation, as supported by OPDs across the Pacific
- recognition of the factors which influence 'how change happens' in each national context, through partnerships with OPDs

What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?

Education for children who are blind or vision impaired requires specific, and specialised 'inputs' and technology which distinguish it from more generic aspects of inclusive education. For example, creating accessible school buildings maybe sufficient for many students with disabilities to access education, but is not sufficient for students who are blind or vision impaired, who may require orientation and mobility services. Students who are vision impaired can use a variety of means to learn to read and write and then access information more broadly, including accessible digital documents, screen reader and magnification software and magnifiers (for printed or computer-based material) and large print and braille (both in printed format and electronic). Students who are blind require ongoing access to accessible information at the same time as their peers, either in the form of braille or screen-reader technology, as well as teachers who are trained in their use, and services responsible for maintenance and supplies.

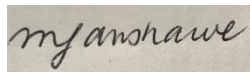
Currently, in many Pacific Islands, the chances that Pacific children who are blind or vision impaired will achieve their educational potential are very low to non-existent. Few, if any, of the necessary services are available in these countries and where they are, children outside major cities or towns are not able to access them. In addition, according to global experience, there are differences associated with accessing education for children who are born blind or vision impaired and children who become blind or vision impaired during the time they are at school. For example, students (and their parents) who have attended school prior to becoming vision impaired may expect to be able to continue, based on previous experience of being included and having access to information. Alternatively, children (and their parents) who have no prior experience of inclusion, tend to experience charitable (if any) contributions from others and form the view their participation in education, and therefore their potential in adulthood, is inevitably impacted.

Reference in the strategy to engagement with specialist peak bodies such as SPEVI and ICEVI Pacific, is recommended so as to ensure this currently marginalised group of persons with blindness and low vision, including those with deafblindness and multiple disability, is named alongside the specialists and networks skilled in their inclusion. The approaches, priorities and partners in this submission should be documented in the new DFAT Disability Equity and Rights Strategy to work alongside Pacific Island Ministries of Education, schools, universities and OPDs to achieve the shared goal for children who are blind or vision impaired to access barrier free educational opportunities so as to achieve their full potential.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at spevisecretary@gmail.com.



Phia Damsma



Dr Melissa Fanshawe

SPEVI Co-Presidents, on behalf of SPEVI Inc.