

**‘Every Child has Special Education Needs’
The Des English Memorial Lecture 2016
AASE and PASS Conference, Melbourne 2016**

Introduction

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting – the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation – and to pay my respects to their Elders – past and present.

Thank you for giving me the honour of delivering the 2016 Des English Memorial Lecture.

Lewis Desmond English was an innovator, a builder and a collaborator. Above all Des was a great advocate who fought for the education of students with disabilities to be tailored to their special needs.

Des believed in the rights of children with disability in the 1970s, a time when the United Nations was debating the Declaration of Rights of Disabled Persons.

He was ahead of his time because it would take another 40 years from Des’s untimely death in 1977, to 2007, for the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disability to be agreed and for Australia to become a signatory.

The NDIS shares many of Des’s values. It takes the UNCPRD as a foundation stone, is a platform for innovation, requires partnerships to reach its full potential and puts people with disability at its centre and in control.

It stands on the shoulders of leaders like Des who reshaped public policy and community attitudes to make them more supportive and inclusive of people with disability.

To be invited to give this speech in Des’s memory is therefore a great privilege.

It is also of great importance, because the NDIS is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we cannot achieve its full potential without the strong support of the education sector –and within it special schools and special units and classrooms located within mainstream schools.

Many students who are participants in the NDIS will be receiving their education and forming their attitudes and values in your schools.

The NDIS therefore needs mutually beneficial partnerships with you and your colleagues and I am here to secure your deep engagement and support.

The need for a partnership between the NDIS and all of the nation's schools is demonstrable.

Until now, if you have been born with or acquired a disability in Australia you have been shut out of mainstream life and—to all intents and purposes—treated like a second-class citizen.

If you don't believe me, consider the facts:

According to the OECD, 45 per cent of Australians with a disability were living at or below the poverty line in 2010 – the worst outcome of any OECD country;

Australia's record in terms of employment of people with disability is also very poor, ranking in the bottom one-third of OECD countries;

And, in 2012, 60 per cent of children without disability completed high school compared with just 36 per cent with a disability and, over the preceding decade the gap widened, as completion rates for children without disability improved more than for those with a disability.

The NDIS is designed to break down these differences and barriers—to provide opportunities and make mainstream life more accessible to Australians with disability.

The greatest challenge facing people with disability has been the disability support system itself.

In 2011, the Productivity Commission found the current disability system was...

“underfunded, unfair, fragmented, and inefficient, and gives people with a disability little choice and no certainty of access to appropriate supports”.

The Productivity Commission concluded that the best way to fix this broken system was to build a new one—the NDIS.

But it is essential to recognise that the NDIS cannot and should not do everything for Australians with a disability.

The NDIS does not and should not fund education for children with disability. That responsibility remains with primary, secondary and tertiary education providers.

Similarly, the NDIS does not fund health services for people with disability. This is the responsibility of health.

In fact, every Commonwealth, State, Territory, and Local government agency and department still has obligations to ensure their programs, services and premises are accessible and inclusive to all Australians.

Those universal service obligations are spelled out in the National Disability Strategy.

And—once the NDIS is rolled out—Australia needs to become even more accessible to people with disability, so they can take their rightful place in the life of the nation.

We therefore want to work side-by-side with the nation's teachers and schools.

We need you to help us overcome prejudice in the broader community, because so many societal attitudes are formed and shaped at schools.

You and your colleagues have a crucial role to play, as educators and custodians of Australia's future, and we want you to be our partner on the NDIS journey; to be part of its evolution.

With that in mind, today, I want to do three things.

1. Brief you on the NDIS and its progress.
2. Explain the insurance principles which underpin the NDIS and the NDIS Outcomes Framework.
3. Explain how schools and the education sector can partner with the NDIS, to transform the lives of children with a disability.

NDIS Overview

The NDIS is the most significant social and economic reform since the introduction of the original Medicare scheme in the 1970s.

The Vision of the NDIS is to maximise the independence and social and economic participation of people with disability.

The Scheme commenced a three-year trial phase on 1 July 2013.

Currently, the Scheme is operating in all States and territories and has close to 25,000 participants with an approved plan.

The trial period—which ends on 30 June this year—has been a success.

The NDIS is on time, on budget and participant satisfaction is in excess of 90 per cent.

Given the enormous complexity of the NDIS, these are remarkable achievements.

From 1 July this year, the full roll-out of the NDIS will commence across all States and territories, except Western Australia, and more than 400,000 participants will enter the NDIS during this phase, which is due to be completed in 2019.

In most jurisdictions the rollout schedule is geographic and the details of when the NDIS will become operational in your area are available on our website.

I would encourage you to familiarise yourself with this information.

And please talk to colleagues who have experienced the NDIS, first-hand, in our trial sites to learn more.

When it is fully operational, the Scheme will serve around 460,000 participants.

NDIS participants include people with intellectual, physical, sensory and psychosocial disabilities. The most common disability is intellectual, with about 70 per cent of NDIS participants having an intellectual disability.

The Scheme includes early intervention services for children with significant developmental delay and manifest disabilities, as well as adults with progressive disabling conditions.

Participants receive services and supports that meet their ‘reasonable and necessary’ needs—primarily using a functional assessment, rather than a medical diagnostic, approach.

Each participant has a plan and goals that focus on maximising independence and social and economic participation, in line with the key goals of the NDIS.

All participants and their families will have access to a Local Area Coordinator—or LAC—to assist them with planning and community access, including schools.

The planning discussion is strengths focused and starts with the capacity of the individual, their potential and family and community supports. Only then is there a discussion about NDIS funding in order to achieve an ordinary life.

The participant and their family then have ‘control and choice’ over how the funding is spent, so as to maximise the utility for them, but none of these funding allocations are to cover the costs of educating a child.

We expect about 3 per cent of all school-aged students will be NDIS participants.

If your school has a student who is a participant in the NDIS our job is to ensure that boy or girl has the supports they need to access your school.

That might mean a wheelchair.

Or a hearing aid.

Or help in the morning to get ready for school.

Or an aide to assist with personal care at school.

Or early intervention before prep or foundation year—to give them a running start in life.

The law does not allow us to fund the education of those children or to make the curriculum or the school accessible. Those responsibilities remain with the school.

In other words, the NDIS is not a new source of funding for the education system.

Insurance Principles

The NDIS is a disability insurance scheme.

It is designed to provide funding for the disability supports that the 460,000 Australians who are expected to be participants will need.

The NDIS is also for everyone... and for future generations.

By paying premiums to the NDIS, through the Medicare levy and general taxes, Australians share the risk and help each other.

Once the NDIS is fully rolled out, it will cover the reasonable and necessary needs of every Australian who is born with or acquires a disability before the age of 65—and whose disability is permanent, and significantly affects their functional capacity, and requires ongoing support.

In many ways, the insurance principles upon which the NDIS are based are ground-breaking.

Traditionally, the costs of disability services have been approached using a short- to medium-term outlook.

Governments plan for expenditures over a 12-month period to—at most—a five-year time frame.

As a consequence, the funds available for disability have changed—depending on the economy, tax revenues and the requirements of other portfolios.

That means disability services have had to perennially justify their existence—and there are always short- to medium-term pressures to cap or cut costs.

Insurance models are very different.

Under an insurance model, expenditure is factored in over the life of an individual—and scheme sustainability is measured by calculating the total future costs of all those who are insured.

This approach creates an incentive to make short-term investments that maximise lifetime opportunities and reduce long-term costs.

For example, the best way to reduce long-term costs is to increase an individual's independence and lift his or her participation in the community and the workforce.

Outcomes are continually compared with forecasts and divergences are investigated carefully to control long-term costs, ensure Scheme sustainability—and drive improvements.

We are a data and evidence-based organisation, which is deeply committed to listening, learning and improving, as well as building the NDIS.

Our philosophy is to learn and build; build and learn.

And we will keep coming up with more refined and improved approaches, as part of an Outcomes Framework, that enable people with disability to

have more choice and control,

live independently,

have relationships,

be healthy and engaged,

have a home of their own,

keep learning throughout their life,

find a job, and

participate in the life of their community.

For school-aged children the Outcomes Framework includes the following key domains:

children grow in independence,

children are welcomed and educated in their local schools,

children form friendships with peers and have positive relationships with their family, and

children participate in local social and recreational activities.

The domains for families with school-aged children are:

families understand their children's strengths, abilities and special needs,

families know their rights and advocate effectively for their children with disability,

families help their children develop and learn,

families feel supported,

families are able to gain access to desired services, programs, and activities in their community, and

families enjoy health and well-being.

Make no mistake, the NDIS is a social and economic revolution.

According to the Productivity Commission, the NDIS will boost Gross Domestic Product by 1 per cent by 2050.

It will create around 60,000 to 70,000 new jobs on a full-time equivalent basis.

And it will give hundreds of thousands of Australians with disability the opportunity to join in the mainstream life of this nation.

It will make us more diverse and more productive.

But what, I hear you ask, does all that mean for the education system?

Let me explain.

Building the Partnership between the NDIS and the Education Sector

Generations of Australians with a disability have been held back by the burden of low community expectations.

The NDIS is designed to turn that burden of low expectations on its head.

Instead of treating Australians with a disability as a social and economic burden to be carried, we consider each and every participant in the Scheme as an individual to be empowered.

And we have high expectations of those individuals.

For these expectations to be met, children with a disability must receive a good education and there must be strong and positive partnerships between the NDIS and the education system at every level.

But what does partnering in a good education for children with a disability mean?

Partnering in a good education for students with a disability means all schools must be truly inclusive.

All children have special needs. Children with disability are no different to their able-bodied peers; they just have different special needs.

To the extent that the terms 'special' and 'special needs' mean identifying and tailoring school curricula and teaching to individual learning requirements all teachers and students are special.

However, the truth is students with disability are still not included in many schools, because 'special' really means 'different' or 'too different'.

They are frequently tolerated, rather than welcomed.

Too often they are not accepted as equal members of school communities and this kind of discriminatory use of the word 'special' and insidious segregation has to end.

Partnering in a good education means giving students with disability and their families the power to exercise control and choice and building supports around them, rather than the other way around.

As the father of children with disabilities, I understand the extreme stress within families which disability can trigger and so working with families requires great listening skills and empathy.

We need to hear better and empower parents.

Parents know their child best and the feedback they are giving us is they want learning and development at school and at home to be coordinated and holistic. They want better communication between the organisations supporting their child.

Each child should have a unified Statement of Support Needs, rather than what we have seen which is children with up to 17 different plans. Imagine having 17 plans!

The single plan and agreed goals should be developed and reviewed jointly, rather than having multiple, potentially uncoordinated goals and plans spanning disability, education and health.

Putting the child at the centre is best established through formal coordinated structures which bring together the child, families, schools, health services and the NDIA. The funding arrangements should then be sorted out in the background, based on agreed responsibilities.

Putting the child at the centre also means empowering them and so as they grow older the goals and plans should increasingly belong to them. They should be their goals and they should be encouraged to plan their careers and place in society.

Partnering in a good education means using the NDIS Local Area Coordinators or LACs to deepen community connections and provide support for children as they transition from pre-school to school, primary to secondary school and from secondary school to post-school.

Our LACs will be able to assist with planning and coordination, as well as advocate, at key transition points in life to help select the most suitable education setting and plan ahead.

LACs can assist with local community connections, sport and recreation, which can be especially important for children attending special schools far from their homes.

Up to the age of 6, children with disabilities will also be supported through our Early Intervention Early Childhood Gateway.

Partnering in a good education means children who are NDIS participants will have access to a range of specialist supports.

These supports are available to advise schools on individual needs to make it easier for students to learn.

These supports should be coordinated and organised so they do not distract from teaching of the curriculum.

Partnering in a good education means planning for a student's life post-school much earlier in their secondary schooling with a focus on work and inclusion.

Young people with disability should have the same access to school-based traineeships and work experience as their able-bodied peers.

Schools should also link up with NDIS strategies, such as the School Leavers Employment Support Package.

Employment-focused partnerships between students with a disability, their families, schools and local businesses will also help to build more inclusive communities.

Many of our special schools are like havens. At the same time, we need to ensure that they reach out to make community connections and build broader experiences, to help young people with disabilities prepare for life in the community, once their school years are past.

In my experience, our special schools are expert at bringing the community into the school, through volunteering and faith groups. But we need to extend those connections, which are so vital for an ordinary life, outside the school gate.

Partnering in a good education means harnessing next-generation technologies.

Late last year the National Disability Insurance Agency hosted the *NDIS New World Conference*.

Our goal was to turbocharge investment in technologies that benefit people with a disability.

What we learned is that accessibility is now part of the DNA of Microsoft, Apple, IBM, Google and every major global technology company, because those of us without disabilities expect our smart devices to work when we cannot touch, see or hear them.

The potential for progress through technology is boundless and so we need to keep pushing for progress in schools, in communities and in workplaces, so people with disability, through smart use of technology, have the opportunity to be full citizens.

Partnering in a good education means we need a much more open discussion about what constitutes ‘reasonable adjustment’ so that the expectations of the NDIS and the education sector are much better aligned.

We need families to feel that they have genuine choice between integration into mainstream schools and special schools, based on best meeting their child’s unique needs.

They should be able to mix and match schools to maximise their learning and circle of friends.

Finally, partnering in a good education for children with disability means we need to learn and build together.

We have learned much from the trial phase of the NDIS and in the years ahead we are committed to working with the education, health and other sectors which people with disability need to access.

We are also required to report on how successfully the NDIS is working with these complementary systems, identify any support gaps or attempts to shift costs and measure overall progress.

Conclusion

In closing I would like to pay three tributes.

My first tribute is to the special educators who gave my sons with disabilities the best possible start in life.

When I refer to their special educators, I refer to all of their teachers.

In their school years they attended mainstream schools, special education units and special schools in Australia and the UK.

All of their teachers in all of these schools practiced 'special education' because they all developed a program of learning that was tailored to their individual needs; both stretching them and giving them confidence in supportive learning environments.

All effective teachers are special teachers who adjust their practices to meet individual learning needs. They reach across cultural, linguistic and other potential barriers, including disabilities, to be truly inclusive and optimise learning so that all of their students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Second, my sons, like many children with disabilities have benefited enormously from the dedication and commitment of many volunteers.

Today I want to pay tribute to the hundreds and thousands of volunteers who generously give their time to assist children with disabilities in our schools and beyond.

One of those volunteers who has assisted my sons in life-long learning is John Dowell, now aged 89, and who is in the audience today.

John's oldest son, Peter, was born with a disability.

His family experience taught him a great deal about the education needs of children with disability and in mid-life he made a decision to change career and become a teacher.

John's passion became a Work Education Course because he wanted every student with a disability to have the opportunity of gaining open employment, a goal he had managed to help Peter achieve by employing him in his own business.

Following his retirement, nearly 30 years ago, John became an active volunteer both in special schools and assisting adults with disabilities and this is how my sons were fortunate enough to meet him.

John, who is now a cherished family friend, has come to our house most weeks for more than a decade making learning fun, because the passion that led him to establish a Work Education Course nearly 40 years ago still burns bright.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to the legacy of Des English and shine a light into the future, so that we can build on Des's legacy, together.

Des was a visionary leader. But to remain true to his legacy of innovation we must anticipate changing needs and respond to new evidence in a fast changing world.

Currently, the NDIS has nearly three years' of data from 25,000 participants.

By 2019, we will have data from 460,000 participants and Australia will have the richest data base on disability anywhere in the world.

The Agency has a large actuarial team and they are using the data to measure Scheme results, using the Outcomes Framework, and to refine the Scheme.

Those measurements and refinements will continue for as long as this Scheme is in operation.

That's because Big Data doesn't just tell us about what happened yesterday.

It can also tell us what is probably going to happen tomorrow – and that depth of insight is vital for an insurance scheme looking to make life-long investments and to work in partnerships.

We don't know exactly what hidden connections we will find. That's because we don't yet know what the data will be.

All I can tell you is that we will continue to aggregate and analyse the data.

We will challenge today's concepts of best practices.

We will be open-minded.

We will learn.

We will build.

And we want to work in close partnership with you.

We must do this, together, to ensure that students with disabilities receive all the benefits from the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that is the NDIS.

Then, we will truly stand on the shoulders of Des whose legacy we honour today.

Thank you.