SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Response from the National Regional Disability Liaison Officer Initiative

Introduction

The National Regional Disability Liaison Officer Initiative (NRDLOI) is a project funded through the Higher Education Division of the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). There are presently ten Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) contract positions in place across regions of Australia - three in Queensland, two in New South Wales and one in the Northern Territory and each other State.

RDLOs assist in coordinating disability services across the education (higher education and schools) and training (Technical and Further Education) sectors, and within specific geographic regions in Australia to help develop and foster high quality services to students with a disability.

RDLOs play a leading role in helping students with a disability make the transition from school to TAFE, to University, or from study to employment and, in so doing, help to increase access and participation rates. RDLOs work collaboratively across sectors and with each other on a national basis and therefore are well placed to observe and comment on cross sector issues relating to the coordination and provision of services to students with disabilities.

This submission contains information gathered collectively from members of the RDLO network. We thank the Senate for the opportunity to provide input.

STATEMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THIS INQUIRY

a) Whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs.

1. The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap:

▪ The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act provides a unified definition of disability, however, awareness of the scope of what disabilities are included under the Act remains an issue.

▪ Currently the various levels of education provision – school, VET and University sectors, differ in the criteria and the type of medical documentation upon which they base their ascertainment of a student's eligibility for support services. This creates inconsistency across the school, VET and University sectors. It is apparent that the criteria used in the school sector is less inclusive as evidenced by the fact that disability statistics do not include students with specific learning disability nor, in many states, students with chronic medical conditions.

▪ A common criteria based on the definition of disability in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) would provide consistency across all levels of education providers in determining who is eligible for adjustments on the grounds of impairment or chronic medical

conditions. The DDA definition is preferred because it has been found to be a useful tool as it includes physical, sensory and neurological impairment, and chronic medical conditions.

- "Differentiation between levels of handicap" seems to be a concept devised to satisfy a bureaucratic need to determine priority for funding. Focus within the universities and TAFEs tends to be on the educational requirements and supports for each individual with a disability, not the level of "handicap".

- Whilst most disability types are reasonably well identified, this cannot be said for learning disability. A nationally recognised and accepted definition of learning disability is urgently required. There is a demonstrated lack of understanding of learning disability amongst policy makers and many practitioners. Whilst post school institutions recognise learning disability and subsequently provide accommodations for students, there appears to be a widespread reluctance to do so in the compulsory education sector where, more often than not, no differentiation is made between learning disabilities and learning difficulties. (For clarification of this "differentiation" please refer to:

  http://student.admin.utas.edu.au/services/alda/options/info/history3.htm#3.1)

2. **The accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed;**

- There is currently no standardisation of assessment tools or processes used from one institution to another nor across sectors (ie. TAFE and University). A formal process for the transfer and recognition of information such as prior assessments, documentation and academic adjustments needs to be considered as a means of achieving consistent approaches across education sectors for students with disabilities.

- Whilst some Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs)/support personnel have a professional background or extensive years of experience through which they have gained knowledge and skills relevant to the process of assessing needs, many support staff in the sector do not. There are no formal education courses available in Australia which cater for the training needs of disability support staff working in education and training environments.

- Students with visual or hearing loss and medical conditions do not have access to accurate assessments of their learning support requirements in adult learning environments nor of their assistive technology needs. These students often are not aware of the availability of, and their right to access, learning supports in post school institutions. Recent research in WA on students with a vision impairment in TAFE supported the observation that these students are in a high risk group in terms of those more likely not to complete their course of study.

- The needs of a large cohort of students with Learning Disability (LD) are not currently being accurately assessed. This is largely due to the prohibitive costs often associated with the professional assessment of students with LD. A useful assessment from professionals such as educational psychologists, that clearly identifies appropriate strategies to overcome the impact of a learning disability may cost up to $1000. Without the validity that accompanies such an assessment, education providers at all levels are reticent to provide the appropriate adjustments required to meet the range of needs of students with a learning disability. Currently, in most states, the student and/or their family carry the cost of a professional assessment and its accompanying report.

- Current inconsistencies in approach to the assessment of students with a possible LD further compound the problem. This is due to the different terminology and underlying philosophical beliefs within each education sector and the lack of national guidelines and procedures for assessing the needs of students with suspected LD.

- There is a need for consistent reporting documentation under the regulation of a national set of guidelines. The guidelines should outline who should conduct assessment testing and who should pay for the cost of educational psychometric testing. It is only possible for education sectors to accommodate any disadvantages in an appropriate way when both the cause and implications have been accurately identified.

3. **The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas;**

    It is identified that these groups are poorly represented in higher education and VET sectors.

- The issues stated in (ii) have an even greater impact for students with multiple disadvantages, particularly those from low SES and rural and isolated backgrounds. The cost of gaining access to professional assessments increases with distance from the metropolitan centres.

- Economic disadvantage is an issue for many people with a disability, who often bear increased medical costs, transport costs, and living costs, and due to the impact of their disability, are often not able to seek part-time work to support their studies. An additional aspect of this is that people with a disability often take longer to complete their studies, and therefore do not gain paid employment in as short a time as their able-bodied peers. Course load concessions are a common adjustment student's with disabilities have to make to accommodate the impact of chronic illness or impairment in order to successfully complete their studies.

- Students from a non-English speaking background may be linguistically and culturally disadvantaged in seeking adjustments, as would aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander students, whose cultural attitudes and beliefs regarding impairment may form barriers for them in seeking appropriate support. The term 'disability' for some cultural groups can have little or no meaning. Therefore people with disabilities may not have access to the services and supports required for students with disabilities. Outreach services are required to ensure access to available services, information and resources.

- In addition, students from rural and isolated backgrounds are often far from family and friendship networks that would otherwise support them in their studies. This will mean that they then need to seek out services provided by government-funded agencies in order to have basic daily living needs such as bathing and shopping met. Such services range across both Commonwealth and State sectors, and in many cases, working through the complexity of referral and assessment issues, will prove a barrier that prevents successful integration into their studies. The outcome may be that they withdraw before completion of study, or do not seek to pursue a post secondary education at all.

- Access to transport remains a critical barrier to participation in post school education and training for many people with disabilities from low socio-economic backgrounds and those living in rural and remote areas. This is both in terms of the cost and the availability, especially of public transport.

- The lack of availability of specialist support staff in rural and remote areas is also an issue. For example, many students requiring the services of a Signing Interpreter have to relocate in order to access the Interpreting support they need to complete their studies. The lack of qualified Interpreters is not confined to rural and remote situations but rather is a issue of national concern. In some instances, whilst institutions are doing everything possible to supply the supports needed for these students, there are just not enough Interpreters available within each state to meet demand.

- Assistive technology is now almost considered an essential requirement for students with disabilities in education. The benefits of assistive technology are that it greatly enhances a

students level of independence, and can allow the student to equally demonstrate and compete at an academic level without undue disadvantage because of their disability.

The cost of computers and assistive technology software and devices, whilst a barrier for many students with disabilities, presents further obstacles for students residing in rural and remote areas. Often they find they have to physically travel to the campus to access assistive software or equipment. If they do have a computer at home, more often than not the machine does not have the power required to successfully operate the specialist software they need. These problems prove insurmountable for some students with the result being that they withdraw from their studies.

- Often people with a disability who are also representative of other disadvantage groups are limited in the types of services provided. Services do not tend to work across all areas of need and therefore students can tend to be double disadvantaged by this. Eg Indigenous people with disabilities often have to choose between culturally specific service and supports or disability specific service and supports. Collaborative practices across all equity services needs to occur to ensure people with disabilities are not further disadvantaged by being representative of other disadvantaged groups

Additional needs/relevant issues include:

- Access to training to help address low levels of computer literacy and to opportunities to learn how to use assistive technologies.

- The need for tutorial support to assist students with disabilities who experience language difficulties (including students from a non-english speaking background and deaf students whose first language is AUSLAN) and learning disabilities.

- The need for additional support staff in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in regional areas to assist people from an Indigenous background.

4. **The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs;**

- Although we may not be aware of all programs offered within the pre-school or school environment for children with disabilities, it does appear that early intervention programs are only available to a proportion of students. Therapists involved in the delivery of programs in some areas state that they are poorly funded and inadequate. Most do not cater for the specific needs of young people with LD.

- Transfer of information from early intervention services, early childhood services and primary school is an issue. Often, early intervention programs that focus on behaviour and learning are implemented in early childhood sittings with excellent outcomes. The transfer of these programs to primary school however tends to occur on an ad hoc basis which generally results in the school environment reinventing the wheel in developing teaching programs. This process creates excessive duplication of information and resources. The transfer of information is currently reliant on the commitment of staff to seek early intervention information, not on a standard procedure.

- In the post secondary education and training sector, it is better to consider the term 'transition' rather than "early intervention". Many post-secondary education and training providers have bridging courses as well as the RDLO (and soon the DCO) Initiative that provide an opportunity for students with a disability not only to prepare academically, but also to determine how an impairment or chronic medical condition will most appropriately be accommodated, when enrolled as a full-time tertiary student.

- Early identification of students with high support needs is essential to being able to arrange for support, such as brailing of materials, or recruit support staff, such as deaf Interpreters in a

timely fashion. The work of the RDLO has been effective in assisting in the early identification of both school leavers and adult entry students who have high support needs.

5. **Access to adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors, and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students;**

- Funding for support is inadequate across both the private and public school sector to meet student need. We are aware of families who are funding in-school support and special equipment themselves, e.g. A single mother was subsidizing the payment of a teachers aid in order to have adequate classroom support for her child. In some cases parents have attended the school/post secondary institution in order to provide attendant care services for their child.

- Funding in higher education and VET is also inadequate.   Institutions are required fund costs from within their own budgets. In most cases staff allocated to meet these student's needs have not increased despite significant increases in recent years in the number of students participating and the complexity of their needs. In the TAFE sector in most states, DLO resources are often inadequate for the number of students accessing that sector.

- Many private sector VET providers still lack awareness of their legislative responsibility to provide for the support needs of clients who have a disability, nor do they have access to specialist resource staff to assist students. This equates to low levels of participation in training offered through private providers.

- The biggest funding issue at present for the post secondary education and training sector is the cost of providing accommodations and making adjustments for individual students with high support needs, e.g. students who require deaf interpreters; students who require alternative print format such as Brailling or taping of textbooks and other print materials; or students with significant learning support needs. Whilst the Commonwealth Government is in the process of introducing a program of financial assistance to Universities to help them meet such costs, it is evident that the amount set aside for this purpose when divided amongst Universities, will not go far enough in helping offset these costs.

- The high costs associated with accessing LD assessments.

- A further significant funding issue relates to the cost of provision of attendant care. Compounding the difficulties for students requiring this type of support is the fact that there is currently no clear direction regarding who is responsible for meeting the cost of this care. In some instances, this results in students being unable to access courses. Additionally, in some states/regions there is a critical lack of availability of support services from where to access appropriately trained personnel.

- Disability service provision in education tends to focus only on the direct service delivery of students with disabilities. This is due to the fact that inadequate funding grants do not allow education providers the opportunity to research and investigate broader systemic approaches to compliment direct service delivery. Systemic approaches ensure that education processes and provisions are accessible for all students, including students with disabilities. The development of funding grants needs to be considered that focuses purely on innovative systemic approaches to enhance education opportunities for all students, including students

with disabilities eg the use of technology and flexible models of teaching within an education environment that would enhance access for all students, including students with disabilities.

- Accessible buildings and venues are also a key issue in providing mainstream opportunities for students with a disability.

- There is a major gap in funding for considerable "one off" capital expenditure on improving physical access. These are often "big ticket" items such as installation of lifts to older buildings, appropriate physical access to lecture theatres and science labs, improved ramps, pathways and parking facilities, installation of automatic doors, and upgrading of accessible toilets.

    There is no opportunity for education providers to seek assistance in funding such items, and the consequence is that high cost access issues remain unresolved for a long period of time. A recommendation would be to establish annual submission rounds for education providers to seek some compensation for capital expenditure that enhances physical access for students with a disability.

6. Teacher training and professional development;

- This is a key issue for school, VET and Higher Education teachers who have a student with a disability in their class. There are some limited post graduate programs available but new graduates are not equipped with appropriate levels of knowledge of inclusive teaching strategies.

- There is a demonstrated need for curriculum relating to inclusive teaching practices and disability awareness with specific emphasis on raising the level of understanding of LD to be embedded within the curriculum of teacher training courses. Current argument coming from within teacher training institutions is that, whilst the need is acknowledged, the curriculum is already full.

- There are difficulties associated with introducing professional development sessions on LD for schools due to the sector formally recognise LD within their policies, programs and practices.

- Deinstitutionalisation of mental health services has led to increased numbers of people with a psychiatric disability living and participating in the community and tertiary education, but often there is a lack of awareness of appropriate support needed from the institutions. There is an urgent need for professional development for staff in both the compulsory and non-compulsory education sectors to assist their understanding of the needs of people who have a psychiatric disability.

- DLOs in TAFE and many Universities are unable to provide pro-active professional development for academic and general staff because they do not have the time available to devote to such tasks.

- There is a great opportunity to link professional development and training in inclusive practices with the Quality Assurance procedures emerging within the higher education sector. A recommendation would be to develop a national strategy that is accredited to enhance promotion opportunities for teaching staff, and be included in the recruitment process of teaching academics.

7. **The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation;**

- Currently the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) provides for organisations to develop a Disability Action Plan to demonstrate the intent of that organisation in providing equal opportunity for people with a disability. The implementation of such plans should then form the central strategy in meeting the legislative responsibilities, which organisations are accountable to, under Commonwealth and State law. There needs to be a reporting of outcomes and an accountability process for educational institutions.

- Demographic surveys strongly indicate increasing numbers of students and increasing levels of disability resulting in corresponding increased demand on resources the cost of which are borne by institutions and not offset in any significant way by Government. In tight fiscal environments this situation may lead to increasing acts of indirect discrimination which are more difficult to identify.

- The move toward more students with significant needs in mainstream school classes without support for the schools and their staff is untenable. Under the DDA more parents and students will expect equivalent levels of access to education. If further resources are not available there will undoubtedly be more complaints and litigation. The delivery of education needs to be inclusive for all from the outset of design.

- Cutbacks in funding, not only to the education sector, but also to allied service sectors, will further compromise provision for students with a disability and place institutions and organisations in a position where they are unable to adequately resource the inclusion of students with a disability. This may lead to discrimination complaints being brought. A recent example is the complaint brought against the University of Tasmania in regard to the provision of print materials in accessible format.

b) **What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

- The level of public funding available in Australia for the support of tertiary students with disabilities, falls significantly below that which is available in comparable countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Canada. (Please see Appendix 1 for details)

- While there is a trend towards greater access by Universities and the VET sector to private sector funding (ie. in areas of research or delivery of specific workplace training programs), the reality is that current access remains minimal at best and mainly restricted to the commercial ventures within the higher education sector There is little likelihood in the foreseeable future, that significant private sector funding will be available for the support of disadvantaged groups within tertiary education and training.

- The role of the Commonwealth Government is crucial in–

➢ Supporting the inclusion of people with a disability in mainstream study opportunities by ensuring organisations are providing quality systems that allow people to study in an inclusive environment that is free from discrimination and harassment, and supports social justice for all people.

➢ Supporting research into the changing needs of people with a disability in an educational environment that is dynamic in response to changes in technology, and social changes that reflect a global focus.

- The development of standardised reporting systems that provide information on quality practices and best practice benchmarks in service delivery for people with a disability in education.

- Supporting the transition of students with disabilities through the various levels of education and careers.

- Instigating a system whereby students with disabilities could access a "one-off" grant to assist them to purchase assistive technology which they could then take with them into the employment sector.

- Developing processes that make the assessment and recognition of the needs of students with learning disabilities more generally available.

- Whilst the Commonwealth are currently financially assisting the development of a LD awareness package for the tertiary sector much more needs to be done in this area. We would suggest the introduction of LD screening as part of the national literacy and numeracy program in compulsory education for children who are performing poorly in these areas. Leadership and political will are urgently required to assist our country to recognise the incidence, impact (personal, social, educational and economic) of LD and support the development of national guidelines and practices which can be consistently applied throughout the education system.

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Summary of Funding Available
for
University Students with Disabilities
in The United Kingdom and New Zealand

UNITED KINGDOM

Source: Professor Alan Hurst, has worked with the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council of England) and is a trustee of SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities.

Note: Polytechnics and Universities are treated together under Higher Education Funding.

DSA - Disabled Student Allowance

- Paid direct to individual students not the institution.
- Evident that there is very little done in terms of auditing how the money is spent by the individual.
- This Allowance has been made available for many years and, since 1997, eligibility criteria has been widened. It is now:
  - available to part time and some post graduate students
  - the parental means test has been abolished

Funding:

1. *Up to $3300 AUD annually for extra disability related expenses*
   Can be used for transport, personal care etc, anything.

2. *Up to $27300 AUD annually for non-medical personal support*
   ie. Interpreters, note-takers etc.

3. *Up to $9900 AUD "one-off" payment to purchase special equipment.*
   Students are then able to own the equipment and take it with them once they complete their education.

NEW ZEALAND

Source: "Progress Through Partnerships" Conference, Auckland, Sept 2001

& Massey University's publication "It all counts: Financial information for students with disability 2001"

The New Zealand Government provides financial support to institutions to help meet the costs involved in supporting students with disabilities. Funds can be spent on anything ie learning supports, infrastructure including disability support staff positions.

Amount: $30 per EFT (Equivalent Full Time) Students (all students) annually.

In addition, students with disabilities may be able to access:

1. Training Support - administered by Workbridge

"Training Support is financial support available from Workbridge for those with high support needs. It may be used:

- for the provision of a support person to help sustain access to university;
- to pay transport costs to attend university;
- to pay for special equipment which is not covered by other provisions such as the Health Funding Authority."

Available to part-time, full-time, internal and extramural (off campus) students.
Amount of funding available is maximum of **$15600 for each individual for life**.
Applicants are not subject to income and asset testing.

2. Health Funding Authority (HFA) - Equipment Management Scheme

Students with disabilities needing equipment essential for them to undertake full-time tertiary training may be eligible for equipment funding assistance.

- must be studying full-time (or at maximum capacity)
- equipment must be given back to the HFA when it is no longer required for study purposes

3. Scholarships

There are also a range of Scholarships which students with disabilities can apply for.