

**Monash University Gippsland  
Student Union Inc.**

**Submission to**

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and  
Education References Committee**

***“Inquiry into the  
Education of Students with Disabilities”***

**30<sup>th</sup> April 2002**

## **Author's Note**

It must be noted that this submission is written in the express context of experience at Monash University Gippsland Campus. It would be inappropriate to make comment about experiences at other Monash University campuses and Universities without having such experiences. Further it must be noted that this submission is in no way an attempt at attacking or discrediting Monash University and its policies and procedures.

## Introduction

The education of students with disabilities is a critical issue for all Universities in Australia to ensure that these students have an equal opportunity of attaining a higher education. Given the importance of ensuring equal opportunity and access to higher education for student with disabilities, Monash University has introduced a number of initiatives.

A fundamental element of Monash University's commitment to the education of students with disabilities is the Monash University Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities (MUACPD). This forum advises the Vice Chancellor on the needs and requirements of people with disabilities. It develops specific disability support policies in response to the Federal Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (1995). The MUACPD also identifies needs through a campus-based sub-committee structure.

The MUACPD developed the Monash University Disability Action Plan (the Plan), which outlines its educational and legal responsibilities to students with disabilities; records the objectives to which Monash University is committed and identifies areas where Monash University should focus in the future. The Disability Action Plan was also done in response to the Federal Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and commended to Monash University by the Vice Chancellor in 1998. It is interesting to note that the Plan highlights that a budget of \$180,000 is provided each year. This particular aspect will be discussed later in the submission.

In its commitment to students with disabilities, Monash University has established the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) from which its disability support programmes are delivered. The DLU engages Disability Liaison Officers (DLO) to administer and deliver support to students with disabilities. It is the DLOs that are also responsible for assessing and determining the educational and physical requirements of students with disabilities to ensure suitable access to education.

Monash University has been proactive in its approach to supporting students with disabilities at university-wide level; however, this is not necessarily the experience at a campus-wide level. This submission is written with from the experience of the Monash University Gippsland Campus.

This submission will cover the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee's terms of reference, excluding term 1) a) iii).

## 1. Defining Disability and Differentiating levels of Handicap

Monash University has utilised the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) as the basis for formulating its criteria for defining disability. According to the Monash University *Eligibility for Services from the Disability Liaison Unit* a disability is defined (in accordance to the Disability Discrimination Act):

- ❑ Loss of physical or mental functions, for example a person who has quadriplegia, brain injury, epilepsy or who has a vision or hearing impairment;
- ❑ Loss of part of the body, for example a person with amputation or a woman who has had a hysterectomy;
- ❑ Infectious and non-infectious diseases and illnesses, for example a person with AIDS, hepatitis or TB (tuberculosis), a person with allergies or who carries typhoid bacteria;
- ❑ The malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a persons body, for example, a person with diabetes or asthma or a person with a birthmark or scar;
- ❑ A condition which means a person learns differently from other people, for example, a person with autism, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder or intellectual disability;
- ❑ Any condition which affects a person's thought processes, understanding of reality, emotions or judgement or which results in disturbed behaviour, for example, a person with a mental illness, neurosis or personality disorder.

This is quite extensive and covers those elements identified in the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). Students that want access to the services offered by the Disability Liaison Unit need to be registered with the Unit and must attend an interview to be registered. While Monash University uses these criteria to define disability, it is also necessary for students to be eligible for the services offered by the DLU that they furnish recent and comprehensive documents from a medical practitioner. The documentation must also include a full statement about the impact of the disability on the student's ability to study and the recommended *reasonable* accommodations that Monash University could undertake.

The DLOs do not differentiate between levels of handicap in a formal sense. That is, there are no set criteria for differentiating between levels of handicap and cases are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. During the interview between the DLO and a student, the DLO determines, using their judgement and training, the extent of the disability and the extent of the impact the disability will have on the student's learning and education. From the documentation furnished by the student and the interview the DLO is able to recommend to the Faculty and relevant Divisions appropriate measures to ensure equal access for the student.

The criteria used to define disability is generous enough to give any person with a disability needing support the scope to utilise the services offered by the Disability Liaison Unit.

## **2. Accuracy of Assessing Disability Related Needs**

Monash University, as mentioned, has been proactive in giving students with disabilities the opportunity of attaining an higher education. To this end, it has developed policies and procedures to ensure that such opportunities exist. The accuracy with which a student's disability related needs are assessed is very good.

Students are required to produce comprehensive documentation that includes a full statement of the nature of the disability and the impact of this on the student's ability to study. As a student is also required to attend an interview with a DLO, the DLO is able to assess the student's requirements and the appropriate services, in conjunction with the medical documentation and the statement on the impact of the disability on the ability to study. This allows for a comprehensive and accurate assessment of a students' disability related needs.

At the Monash University Gippsland Campus the DLO, with direct consultation of each student, will determine the appropriate service required for the student to allow as fully as possible participation in the education process. Further, the DLO actively encourages students that utilise the services of the DLU to maintain regular contact. The on-going contact is used by the Gippsland Campus DLO to assess whether or not the student's condition is deteriorating or improving. This encouragement instils a culture of making the DLO an essential element for students with disabilities succeeding in their studies. It also ensures that students' disability related needs are regularly being assessed and updated.

### 3. Effectiveness and Availability of Early Intervention Programs

The definition of *early intervention program* is not clear. Hence, in the context of Monash University an *early intervention program* would be providing essential information and advice to prospective students with disabilities at the earliest possible time before admission and enrolment.

The Monash University Disability Action Plan clearly and specifically identifies the need “*to maintain and further develop early community education and outreach strategies which are more inclusive of the needs of prospective student with disabilities*” and “*to ensure all prospective students with disabilities have access to information in appropriate formats about courses, admission, enrolment and orientation procedures and disability support services*”.

Every year Monash University holds a widely publicised *Monash Day* at each of its campuses. It is during this event that information and advice is given to prospective students with disabilities on the day. The Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) participates in a Victorian-wide *Information Day* providing information about tertiary study options and programs for student with disabilities. The DLU also visits secondary schools to provide information about the Monash University Disabilities Support program. The *Resources Guide for People who have a Disability or Long Term Medical Condition* is made available in print, on audiotape and on the Internet to all secondary schools in Victoria. Monash University also provides information about the DLU and its disability support program in all university and Faculty handbooks.

Monash University has made endeavours to ensure that eligible people with disabilities are offered a place as soon as possible. This has been done as the Monash University Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities (MUACPD) recognised that Orientation Week can pose limitations to participation as it involves queues and trips across campus. At the Gippsland Campus this is not an overwhelming issue for students with disabilities as the campus has had strong input from the Gippsland MUACPD to ensure that it is disabled user friendly.

All prospective students with a disability are strongly encouraged to contact the DLU so that assistance in selecting subjects and enrolling can be provided. They are also strongly recommended to contact the DLU as soon as a place has been offered so that the appropriate services can be arranged. These can range from organising assistive technology to advising Faculties of special consideration and Alternative Arrangements for Assessment (AAA).

This has been very effective as more and more people with disabilities are enrolling at Monash University. At the Gippsland Campus, students with disabilities are aware of the services that are available prior to enrolment and are supported throughout Orientation Week. The campus has a number of students

with disabilities that have been able to enjoy either full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.

It is important to note that despite the information that is available to people with disabilities thinking of enrolling, it is still their responsibility to ensure contact is made with the DLU. This in itself can be restrictive especially for those students who may be suffering from mental illness, neurosis or personality disorder. Students with mental illnesses, neuroses or personality disorders tend to not engage the DLU due to the stigma attached to these conditions. Furthermore, these students do not necessarily see having a mental illness as being disabled.

#### 4. Access to and Adequacy of Funding and Support

Monash University provides, as part of its budgeting process, significant funds towards the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) and its disability support program. However, the budget allocations for this important service have been declining. It is very important to note that at the time of writing this submission Monash University had still not supplied any information regarding its expenditure on the disability support program, staffing the DLU, or acquiring and maintaining assistive technology.

This information was requested immediately following the Easter long weekend and followed up with further requests for this information. Therefore it makes it difficult to comment on the access or the adequacy of funding and support of the disability support program or the DLU at Monash University.

The adequacy of funding and support from the Federal Government is clearly outlined in the *Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium*. The report determines that *around \$8 million over the next three years will be given "to institutions to support students with disabilities who have high cost support needs"* (Nelson, pg. 94, 2002). According to the report:

*"The programme recognises that while universities are responsible for the needs of students with disabilities, the provision of support for those relatively few students with high support needs is a significant and growing cost to universities."* (Nelson, pg. 94, 2002)

The Federal Government, through the Higher Education Equity Programme (HEEP), will provide Monash University with \$165,000 in 2002. HEEP allocations, according to the Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium, are not intended to cover the costs of equity initiatives but are to be used as seed funding (Nelson, pg. 91, 2002). This *allocation* is supposed to assist in providing appropriate programmes for:

- People from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- People from rural/isolated areas;
- People with a disability;
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds and;
- Women in non-traditional areas.

The amount provided as *seed funding* to ensure the provision of programmes for these groups is not nearly adequate enough. The high costs associated with providing programs to support those with disabilities means that a significant proportion of the \$165,000 will need to be set aside for disability support programmes. Furthermore, Monash University has multiple campuses, which require differing levels of support for students with disabilities. The funding from the Federal Government to support equity programmes is not nearly enough.



Despite the *seed funding* and the provision of \$1.8 million for *additional support for students with disabilities* programme in 2002, it is difficult to say that the Federal Government is giving adequate funding to ensure that universities are able to provide disability support programmes.

## 5. The Nature, Extent and Funding for Learning Opportunities

Monash University, through the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU), provides services to ensure that students with disabilities are able to participate as fully as possible in learning opportunities with mainstream students. The DLU delivers a range of services for students with disabilities including:

- Organising Special Consideration
- Preparing Alternative Arrangements for Assessment (AAA)
- Providing note takers, scribes, assistive technology and materials in alternative formats such as Braille, large print, disk or audiotape.

These services are offered with the support of other Divisions within Monash University. The DLU also gives new students with disabilities support during Orientation Week in touring the campus. The support for students with disabilities is extensive. These students are encouraged to fully utilise the services of the DLU. The nature of these support programmes is to ensure that each student, despite their disability, is able to fully enjoy the university experience and succeed in obtaining a higher education.

The nature of funding for providing such learning opportunities is unable to be discussed, however, the extent of funding can be superficially discussed. At the Gippsland Campus of Monash University the Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) is available 2 days per week to provide assistance for students with disabilities. The reality of such a situation is that in many cases students may not be receiving the best possible support. Furthermore, it can lead to a situation where students with disabilities at the Gippsland Campus are not able to participate as fully as possible in learning opportunities and gives an indication of the extent of funding for the DLO at the Gippsland Campus. The Federal Government does provide funding for Regional Disability Liaison Officers (RDLO) to ensure that students with disabilities in regional institutions are given adequate support. However, as Monash University is not considered a regional university it does not have access to funding for RDLOs, which disadvantages the Gippsland Campus.

As mentioned in the previous section, Monash University had not divulged disability support expenditure information at the time of writing this submission. It is disappointing that such information was not provided, as it would have demonstrated the extent and nature of expenditure on disability support programmes. With universities in crisis and the pressure to ensure that there are equal opportunities in higher education the *seed funding* for institutions needs to be increased. A paltry amount of \$1.8 million in 2002 to support students with disabilities with higher costs is not going to be adequate once distributed across the universities of Australia.

## **6. Lecturer Training and Professional Development**

The Professional Development Unit (PDU) at Monash University is charged with the responsibility of delivering training and development to staff of the university. The PDU did not have any training sessions prepared for lecturers that require development to ensure that materials and lecturing styles were conducive to supporting students with disabilities.

The Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) does provide information for teaching students who are blind or vision impaired and who have a hearing impairment. The DLU also provides links to information on making websites accessible to students with disabilities. The information provided by the DLU is not extensive and does not adequately prepare lecturing staff that may have students with disabilities in their classes.

There also appears to be a lack of encouragement of staff to seek training and development in providing academic support to students with disabilities. While the numbers of students with disabilities is not overwhelming at the Gippsland Campus it is necessary that all lecturing staff be provided with training to ensure there is academic support for student with disabilities. Furthermore, regular training and development would ensure that when a student with a disability is in a lecturer's class, the lecturer is aware of what support is available and what they can do to ensure that the student enjoys as full as possible the learning opportunities.

## **7. The Role of the Commonwealth, States & Territories in Supporting Students with Disabilities**

The Commonwealth government has clear a obligation to providing support to higher education institutions in their provision of supporting student with disabilities. The Commonwealth government needs to recognise, beyond that identified in the *Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium*, the enormous expenditure of universities to adequately support students with disabilities. The anticipate funding under the Higher Education Equity Program, while a seed fund, is not adequate to ensure that universities have the necessary additional funding to support students with disabilities. The Commonwealth, States and Territories must contribute more financial support to higher education institutions in their endeavours to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity of obtaining a higher education.

The Commonwealth, States and Territories must play a role in encouraging students with disabilities in seeking admission to higher education institutions. Further the Commonwealth, States and Territories can play a role in ensuring that information about the disability support programs of higher education institutions is accessible through their relevant Departments and/or Agencies. For example, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), formerly the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, can provide information about disability support programs of Universities in the Higher Education section of the DEST website.

The Commonwealth, States and Territories must re-evaluate their programs and strategies for supporting Higher Education institutions in their endeavours of providing an equal as possible opportunity for students with disabilities obtaining a higher education. It is necessary for Commonwealth, States and Territories to be more proactive in encouraging and supporting students with disabilities and the Higher Education institutions they choose to attend. Further, the Commonwealth should recognise the value of the Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) program it initiated and that some universities have regional campuses, as is the case with Monash University Gippsland. The extension of the program to establishing and supporting an RDLO at the Gippsland Campus is an appropriate measure that the Commonwealth should consider.

## **8. Conclusion**

Monash University endeavours to encourage and support students with disabilities. The university has been proactive in establishing a dedicated advisory committee for people with disabilities and the Disability Liaison Unit. While the university has been proactive in supporting students with disabilities the Commonwealth needs to provide more funding under the Higher Education Equity Program.

The Commonwealth, States and Territories all play a vital role in providing the necessary funding to ensure students with disabilities are given the chance of participating in learning opportunities at all levels of schooling. In Higher Education, the Commonwealth, States and Territories must be proactive in providing support to institutions through increased funding and distribution of institutional information about support programs for students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations:**

1. It is recommended that the Commonwealth, States and Territories contribute more funding to Universities for disability support programs.
2. It is recommended that the Commonwealth, States and Territories promote more the disability support programs of Universities.

## References

Monash University *Disability Action Plan*.

Monash University *Resource Guide for People who have a Disability or Long Term Medical Condition*.

Nelson, B, 2002, *Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium*.

### Materials Reviewed for this Submission

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Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee, *Guidelines Relating to Students with Disabilities*, December 1996.