

# ***Griffith University Submission for the Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities***

## ***Preamble***

Higher education has long been recognised as the source of intellectual nourishment, a vehicle for the pursuit of knowledge and the acquisition of functional occupational competencies. Australians with disabilities are eager to take their place in mainstream society and make a meaningful contribution towards civic life and the 'common good'. Universities can and do play a significant role in achieving this desire in the lives of people with disabilities. This has not always been the case. Universities traditionally only serviced the aspirations of a small segment of the population excluding many members of marginalised groups by restrictive admission policies, administrative procedures and practices. In addition, universities were viewed albeit suspiciously, by many people with disabilities, as the 'training ground' for professionals and experts who would subsequently take on powerful roles and control over their lives. Since the UN *International Year of Disabled Persons* (IYDP) in 1981 higher education institutions throughout Australia have undertaken a reassessment of their role and relationships with prospective and enrolled persons with impairments and have implemented various equity and equal opportunity initiatives.

In the twenty-first century, higher education in Australia has the potential to facilitate a reversal of those traditional asymmetrical power relationships experienced by many people with disabilities through student acquisition of knowledge both occupational and cultural, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This reversal can lead to significant increases in the quality of life for the individual with disability, not only in terms of greater social and economic mobility but also a furtherance of the principles of self-determination and freedom. In a post-industrial competitive economic environment where individuals are exhorted toward greater self-reliance and social reciprocity, universities can change the way people with disabilities are positioned in

society from being seen as 'burdens' (receivers of care) to 'contributors' (providers of expertise). Furthermore, for many people with disabilities the nature of their impairment(s) has led to the often life-long burden of extra financial costs not experienced by the rest of the population. The literature has shown that these extra costs of disability have contributed to high levels of poverty and lack of opportunity in the lives of Australians with disabilities.

For many people with disabilities, the completion of higher education increases pathways to greater income security and earning power, stimulating occupational engagement and the eradication of poverty concerns. For individuals with 'marked' physical impairment, access to higher education may, to put it bluntly, make the difference between purchasing accommodation support services (including attendant care) by way of a salary and paying taxes or living in a nursing home and surviving on welfare. In summary, higher education can play a crucial role as a change agent in redressing systemic imbalances in the lives of people with disabilities.

## ***Introduction***

How disability is conceptualised in a document such as this can prefigure the responses given. In the scholarly and research area of Disability Studies, for instance, the question is posed as to *whether disability can be defined or merely described?* Importantly, then, it needs to be recognised that it is often the sought *purpose* of a task or activity (eg for statistical information, funding and resource allocations etc) that sets the parameters of definition. A significant constraint of this approach is that it most likely serves to determine eligibility criteria or assess needs rather than represent an accurate description of the actual *phenomenon* of disability experienced by a particular individual in a particular context.

Historically, disability has been perceived as a result of a deficit-marking condition or impairment of an individual. Hence responses to the individual

have focused on modes of decreasing the impact of such deficits, according to the knowledge and assessments of 'expert' professionals. More recently, practice perspectives have embraced notions of normalisation and social role valorisation. In relation to people with disability, the focus was then to facilitate opportunities for excluded or segregated people to access the ordinary experiences of other members of society such as community living, employment, education etc. The aim of this approach was to pursue enhancement of positive social values attributed to people with disability. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an increasing awareness of the human and civil rights of people with disability, along with social justice considerations, have more recently resulted in the increased scrutiny of the social structures of the society in which people with disability live. The implications of this approach, which has been led by people with disability themselves, necessarily encompass the need for the whole of society to consider social barriers such as exclusion, discrimination, oppression and vulnerability across the whole of government spectrum of social policy.

The terms of reference of this inquiry will necessarily prompt certain responses within particular perspectives of understanding disability within the tertiary sector. The use of words such as *handicap*, *accuracy*, *needs*, *assessed*, *adequacy etc* presuppose either a deficit individualised approach or a normalisation approach whereby the nature of impairment, or the assistance required to reduce the impact of impairment, is the focus. The extent to which issues of exclusion, discrimination, oppression or vulnerability can be critically considered by the Inquiry in relation to the experiences of students with disability, may therefore be constrained by the set terms of reference. It must be recognised, then, that final considerations resulting from the Inquiry will need to embrace more contemporary philosophical, theoretical and research-driven understandings of the social model of disability. This, in turn, may then command the consideration of alternative practice frameworks within the tertiary sector such as brokerage models or affirmative action models which presently sit outside of the possibilities that can be offered within these frames of reference.

## Response to Terms of Reference

**1) Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:**

**a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:**

**i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,**

Defining the nature of the disability is perhaps not as critical an issue in higher education as it may be other sectors of education where resources may be allocated according to an ascertainment of need and where it is compulsory for students to be engaged in educational activities. When examining the adequacy of current policies and programs in higher education, it is important to recognize that higher education is post-compulsory education and that students with disabilities are engaged in accredited mainstream programs that in some instances lead to professional registration.

As a point of reference for the development of policies and programs for students with disabilities, Griffith University uses the definitions of 'disability' as stated in the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* and the *Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act (1991)*. We are also guided by documents such as:

- Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Tertiary Institutions (February 1998)  
[http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/disabilities/national\\_code/code.html](http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/disabilities/national_code/code.html)
- AV-CC Guidelines Relating to Students with Disabilities  
[http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public\\_statements/publications/gldisab.htm](http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public_statements/publications/gldisab.htm)
- Griffith University's Equity Strategy  
[http://www.gu.edu.au/equity/equity\\_strat\\_feb01.pdf](http://www.gu.edu.au/equity/equity_strat_feb01.pdf)
- Griffith University's Disability Action Plan  
<http://www.gu.edu.au/equity/frameset2sub4.html>

In higher education, the focus is on understanding how an individual's impairment or condition impacts upon them, particularly in relation to their specific program and its essential components, rather than on categorising them into specific disability groups. This is because the way in which a person's disability impacts upon them, particularly in the learning environment, will vary greatly from person to person. It is not possible, nor is it useful, to make assumptions about the support that a student may require just because they indicate that they have, for example, impaired vision or a learning disability.

What appears to be impacting on the participation of students with disabilities in higher education is that there seems to have been a subtle shift in recent years about what the perceived purpose of higher education is. This shift is reflected in an increasing emphasis on programs of study that are essentially vocational in nature. Because of the vocational nature of these programs, professional bodies have significant input into the curricula in relation to the knowledge and skills which a student needs to demonstrate mastery, if they are to successfully complete their program of study and subsequently achieve registration. In this way, the inherent requirements or essential components of courses and programs are being shaped to the requirements of particular professions. These inherent requirements may reflect uninformed and stereotypical perceptions of how people with disabilities operate in the 'the world of work' and society in general because of a limited understanding in the various professional bodies of disability discrimination legislation and in particular of the concept of reasonable accommodations. In effect, the ability of students with disabilities to meet the inherent requirements of programs has become a criterion for participation in higher education. Making universities the 'gatekeepers' for professions may in fact be a systemic form of indirect discrimination for people with disabilities. The grounds upon which particular skills and knowledge are included in curricula and assessed could to be challenged.

***ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,***

There are two quite different interpretations that can be applied to this term of reference.

The first interpretation relates to the need for the University to ensure that it has processes and qualified staff in place to facilitate the inclusion of each student with a disability into the learning environment. An element of this process will involve staff from the Disabilities Service 'assessing' the requirements of the student with a disability. The second perspective relates to the quality and usefulness of assessments provided by service providers external to the University and over which we have little, if any, control.

- *'Assessment' process undertaken by the University*

In order to identify the most appropriate support for them, students are requested to provide documentation that outlines the nature of their impairment or condition and the functional implications that this has for them in the learning environment. This documentation can come from many sources and is not sought in order to 'validate' whether a student has a disability or not.

Staff from the Disabilities Service work collaboratively with the individual student to evaluate the broad issues related to their participation in University life and in the various aspects of their program of study. Discussion may encompass the essential requirements of the program, how specific courses are being delivered, resource availability, the nature of assessments and if they are required to engage in any work placement and practicum.

The approach taken is one of joint problem solving rather than being clinical or diagnostic and it reflects the fact that each party has rights and responsibilities. The result of this process is that the student with the disability is provided with the support that will be necessary in order for them to participate in their courses. (The variety of services provided by Griffith

University is evident in the attached *Information Booklet for Students with Disabilities*)

When this process is understood, it becomes evident that the knowledge, skills and experience of the staff involved in undertaking this 'assessment' process at the University will directly impact on the quality of the educational experience that the student with the disability will have. This is notwithstanding the resources that are made available to provide the necessary services and support for the student. Griffith University has always valued the diversity of its community and, over a number of years, has developed a highly experienced team of staff to provide support to students with disabilities.

The issue that is emerging in relation to the quality of process of assessing the requirements for individual students with disabilities is that there are no broadly recognised standards in relation to the knowledge, skills and experience that someone performing the duties of Disabilities Officer should have. While Griffith University has a highly qualified team, this may not be the case in other tertiary education institutions. In some places the role is marginalized and performed in conjunction with other equity-related tasks. In others, the position may have been downgraded during restructuring to be at a basic administrative level. There is also a trend for these positions to be casualised and in some instance there can be a high turn-over in staff. These trends are of concern because of the potential negative impact that they may have on the participation, retention and success of students with disabilities in the tertiary sector.

- *Issue related to assessments from external sources*

Most people with disabilities have extensive documentation that allows staff to work collaboratively with them to identify the issues that they may face when undertaking a particular program of study and to then examine strategies that can be implemented. In some instances, impairments may not have been previously evident or identified and analysed or they may be episodic in nature. In these instances it is often necessary to refer individuals to the

relevant professionals to obtain assessments or to review existing assessments. For instance, some students have developed strategies that have allowed them to minimise the impact that a learning disability may have on them. When they enrol in a program at university, they may find that these strategies are ineffective. This then leads them to investigate the reasons behind the difficulties they encounter.

The issue that arises when students need to obtain assessments from external providers relates to the 'usefulness' of the documentation that they receive. The quality of the documentation for some impairments and conditions can vary significantly. In the case of assessments for learning disabilities, it is most important that any assessment not only describes the learning disability but also provides strategies that they can employ not only in their studies but also in their everyday life to manage the impact that the learning disability has on them. It has only been more recently that we have been able to refer students who may be considering having an assessment for learning disability to resources that describe the benefits of having such an assessment and the form that such an assessment should take. (Australian Learning Disability Association website:

<http://student.admin.utas.edu.au/services/alda/index.html>) Having access to such information empowers them.

The issue of disclosure also may impact significantly on a student when the need for assessments is examined. This relates to whether students a) need to disclose their disability in order to participate in their program of study and if they do need to disclose b) whether they understand that it is in their interests to disclose the nature of their disability. In some instances, students with disabilities will find that they are accommodated seamlessly into the mainstream learning environment of the university. All of their requirements may be met by existing services or by procedures embedded in the system. Other students, however, may require support but for various reasons decide that they will not disclose that they have a disability or the nature of that disability. These students are vulnerable because they may require some assistance in order to maintain their studies. There are interesting corollaries



to this in that some students may request support for one impairment, however it is other impairments or conditions that have a greater impact on their ability to undertake tertiary study.

It has been reported that International students may not disclose that they have a disability for various reasons including:

- their application for a visa may be rejected;
- they may not anticipate any support requirements in Australia; or
- they may not acknowledge their disability for cultural and other reasons.

Indigenous students share some of these concerns. They may feel that they are disadvantaged more by their aboriginality than by their disability in the learning environment and so may not seek assistance from the Disabilities Service.

***iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,***

A number of examples illustrates that current policies and programs are not adequate to meet the needs of students with disabilities who also belong to other marginalised groups. The term 'double disadvantage' is often used to describe people with disabilities who belong to more than one equity group whereas the reality is quite different – the disadvantage is multiplied far more. While the following examples given here may be specific to one of the groups listed, the reality also is that these are not discrete groups. It should also be noted that the above list is not comprehensive. There are other groups of students with disabilities for whom current policies and program are not adequate. For example, the needs of post-graduate students with disabilities require urgent systematic investigation.

- *Access to financial support*

There are many graphic examples of students with disabilities who have to make compromises in relation to their education because of their limited resources. Being a university student is financially demanding (*Paying their Way: A survey of Australian undergraduate university student finances* [http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public\\_statements/publications/final\\_report\\_rev\\_22\\_oct\\_01.pdf](http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public_statements/publications/final_report_rev_22_oct_01.pdf))

It is commonly acknowledged that having a disability often imposes additional costs on people. However students with disabilities who engage in higher education are frequently exposed to 'hidden' costs that are not covered by existing income support programs. For example, students with disabilities who are financially disadvantaged are not likely to own a car. They may also live in areas that are not well serviced by public transport. While they may have budgeted for the costs involved in getting them to and from university when necessary, they may not have anticipated the additional costs and difficulties involved in traveling to and from a scheduled work placement, or field component, or professional activities associated with their program of study.

While some students may be eligible for income support through Disability Support Payments and the associated benefits such as Pensioner Education Supplements, there are other students with disabilities who rely on Austudy and Youth Allowance and some who are not eligible for any financial support but whose circumstance could be best described as marginal. The effect of the loss of the Federal Government's Merit-Based Equity Scholarships in 1999 for some prospective students should be noted. Griffith University has maintained a commitment to providing Equity Scholarships, however it is evident that there is a significant over-demand for this type of financial assistance. For example, at Griffith University for 2002, 117 applications were received for the 19 Equity Scholarships offered.

There are also inconsistencies in the administration of Austudy and Youth Allowance for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who are eligible to receive Austudy payments are able to undertake a concessional study load. This concessional workload can be at 25% of the normal full-time

workload. A similar condition does not apply for younger people with disabilities who are eligible for Youth Allowance payments and who also need to study part-time. They are required to make up a full-time workload with supplementary activities or provide medical documentation that states that they are incapacitated. This process is stressful and costly.

An issue that often arises for students with disabilities who are financially disadvantaged is the cost of obtaining reliable and comprehensive assessments. This is particularly evident in relation to assessments for learning disabilities. Perhaps it would be more useful to explore some alternative options that might assist people to defray these costs. For example, could the Medicare system be extended to cover such assessments? While the services of psychologists are covered by some private health benefit schemes, it is most unlikely that many people with disabilities who are financially disadvantaged would be able to afford the costs of private health insurance.

- *Access to specialist support in regional, rural and remote areas*

Students with disabilities in regional and rural areas may experience a number of disadvantages. These may include limited access to specialised support services such as qualified sign language interpreters, specialised equipment and instruction to use that equipment. (See attached Briefing Paper prepared for TEDCA on issues related to Interpreter Support)

This limited access often creates a need for the student to relocate to metropolitan areas in order to be able to access the support that they require. Such a move makes a student with a disability even more vulnerable because it removes them from their long-standing support networks. This also places additional emotional and financial burdens on students and their families. It is often suggested that students with disabilities in these areas should consider online learning opportunities. However there are a number of disadvantages in them doing this. For example they may find that they would benefit from the social interaction and other networking opportunities that accompany studying on campus.

The needs of indigenous students are complex and require an understanding of the diversity within the indigenous population. There are different issues for those from an urban environment to those from rural and remote areas and these require very different policies and programs in order to address them.

- *Access to bridging or preparatory programs*

There are a limited number of funded programs available that provide bridging or preparatory programs for students with disabilities who may have experienced educational disadvantage in the past. For instance there are examples of mature-age students with learning disabilities who were frequently withdrawn from more academic or subject specific classes for remediation of their reading skills etc. They may have missed fundamental concepts in key subject areas such as mathematics or science that may impact on them when they undertake higher education. Similarly other students with disabilities may have experienced absences during their education that also impact on their acquisition of literacy skills and foundation knowledge in specific subject areas. Griffith University works collaboratively with the Logan Institute of TAFE to provide the Logan Tertiary Access Program but once again demand for programs in other locations is significant. The importance of acquiring these fundamental academic skills cannot be underestimated, as they are critical to the ways in which students with disabilities are able to participate in their programs of study, be retained in those programs and ultimately be successful.

***v) access to adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,***

At Griffith University, there has been a long-standing commitment to providing the support necessary for students with disabilities to participate in their programs of study. However, we are finding that it is becoming more difficult to respond to the increasing costs of the support required.

Attitudes to funding services for people with disabilities fall into two categories. There are those whose perspective is influenced by the traditional

welfare model where funding is allocated for the maintenance of service provision at a base-line level. Conversely, there is another perspective that acknowledges that it is important to fund initiatives that enhance the opportunities available for people with disabilities, to achieve to their full potential. The difference is between taking a short-term cost-focused view as opposed to a long-term investment approach that results in the person with a disability fully participating in all aspects of society.

- *Department of Education, Science and Training funding*

One issue that is impacting on the quality of services that Griffith University can provide relates to the difficulties of planning the allocation of resources when the parameters of funding support from Federal Government are not clear.

Recently DEST undertook consultations in order to develop a funding process that would provide additional funding to universities providing support to students with high cost support needs. While this was a welcome initiative, the lack of detail available in relation to the funding formula makes it very difficult to make realistic budget projections. This is because DEST have not specified the threshold above which expenditure will be reimbursed and the proportion of expenditure above that threshold that will be reimbursed. At Griffith University, we have significant numbers of students who would be considered to require high cost support and the University is committed to providing the necessary support. However it is not possible at this time to estimate what funding the University will receive as a consequence of the new funding initiative.

Griffith University has a reputation for providing high quality support for students with disabilities, for example the provision of support for Deaf and hearing impaired students. As a consequence, the University is seen to be an attractive option for many people with disabilities when they are considering further study. This has resulted in increases in the number of students with disabilities who have enrolled at the university and an increased demand for various levels of support.

The following statistics track the increasing numbers of students with disabilities at Griffith University over a twelve-year period.

**Table 1: Griffith University – Students with Disabilities**

Year	Number of students with disabilities	Year	Number of students with disabilities
1991	181*	1997	658**
1992	250*	1998	800**
1993	300*	1999	925**
1994	312*	2000	939**
1995	447*	2001	757**
1996	616**	2002	1265** (to date)

\* figures represent the total number of students who indicated that they had a disability on the enrolment form.

\*\* figures represent the total number of student who indicated that they had a disability on the enrolment form + those students who only disclosed to the staff of the Disabilities Service

The lower figure for 2001 can be partly explained by the introduction of online enrolment. The process required students to access an additional web site if they identified that they had a disability. This link was not effective and many students reported that they simply didn't identify that they had a disability during the enrolment process.

In order to manage this trend for increasing numbers of students, the University has developed particular programs that enable the provision of support to large numbers of students in a cost effective manner. For example the University has a Peer Notetaking Network that in 2001 provided notetaking services and associated assistance to 82 clients in 211 different courses through 144 notetakers. This model of service provision relies on the effective coordination of the service to ensure a quality service, and contrasts with a situation where the services of notetakers are outsourced at a high cost and may not necessarily meet the needs of all possible clients in the most appropriate manner. DEST's intended approach to funding will disadvantage Griffith University, as we are able to operate the Notetaking Network with the costs of service delivery spread across the entire cohort of clients. It is likely

then that the costs per individual student will not reach the anticipated threshold above which we can claim the additional expenditure.

- *Increasing costs of service provision*

There are a number of factors leading to a general trend for increasing costs in service provision for the University. There is no doubt that there are increasing numbers of students who are identifying that they have disabilities. The *Higher Education Report for 2002 to 2004 Triennium* states that the increasing number of students with disabilities is a reflection of an increasing domestic student population rather than any significant increase in the share of the domestic student population. (DEST, 2002:18) This may be the case but the effect is that staff in the Disabilities Services are seeing more clients each year without any increases to their staffing and resourcing levels. If we consider the data currently available for Griffith University enrolments, there are 28 033 (18/4/02) students enrolled at the University – award and non-award, fee paying and funded programs. Data available to the Disabilities Service indicate that there are 1265 students with disabilities identified at this time. This is then a 4.5% share of the student population. Staff from the Disabilities Service would liaise with approximately one-third of the cohort during a twelve-month period.

- *Increasing complexity of support requirements*

There is an increasing number of students who have multiple disabilities or disabilities which necessitates them to access on-going intensive support, for example, students with Asperger's syndrome, students with psychiatric conditions, students with acquired brain injury.

It is also increasingly difficult to define support requirements that are directly related to the functional implications of the specific impairment/s in the educational environment and those that are part of the overall milieu of disadvantage that can be experienced by people with disabilities. For example economic disadvantage/welfare dependency, low self esteem, gaps

in educational experiences, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and non-existent support networks all impact.

- *Longer and more frequent consultation times*

The following data highlights how over the past three years, staff from the Disabilities Service are experiencing increasing numbers of client contacts.

**Table 2: Comparison of number of client contacts for first quarter 2000 - 2002.**

Year	Total number of client contacts by Disabilities Coordinator (1 EFT) and Disabilities Service' Officers (1.8 EFT) January - March
2000	458
2001	711
2002	869

While some of the increase in client contacts is related to improved service delivery across all campuses of the University and on increasing numbers of clients, there are individual clients who meet frequently with staff. Griffith University Disabilities Service' staff have always worked towards meeting the needs of the individual student rather than simply relying on assumptions about support requirements based on identification of a particular disability category. This trend for increasing numbers of client contacts stretches service providers to the limit.

- *General increases in the costs of support due to increasing wage/salary costs.*

Some of these increases are due to the impact of enterprise bargaining agreements. However there is a need also to ensure that rates of pay for casual staff employed by the University keep pace with rates of pay in the broader community. For instance, recently the Queensland Deaf Society significantly increased their rate of pay for sign language interpreters after a number of years of stable rates. Consequently, we have to examine how we



can ensure that employment as an interpreter at Griffith remains an attractive alternative, by analysing rates of pay and conditions of employment.

- *Changes in costs of services accessed through external providers.*

Perhaps the most graphic example of this is the shift in policy to full cost recovery in relation to the production of text materials into accessible formats, particularly BRAILLE.

For the BRAILLE resources, we prefer to use the services provided by RBS/RVIB (NILS) because of the highly complex and technical nature of the material that be need transcribed and the fact that we can be assured that the end product is of a high standard. We send course materials and exam papers to be transcribed into BRAILLE and it is essential that this work is absolutely correct. We also use NILS because they represent the largest group of consumers in this field and as such have had considerable input on the issue of copyright and accessible formatting and on lobbying publishers to make electronic versions of texts available to students. NILS can access databases that indicate whether a text has already been produced in an accessible format and this can greatly reduce the turn around time on material.

In the past, the service that they have provided has been heavily subsidised. It would not have been possible for the University to produce the material to an equal standard in the time required in a more cost-effective manner. However this is why the full impact of the newly implemented cost-recovery policy will be felt.

The following table shows some of the costs for BRAILLE that were incurred over 4 semesters. The 'fee charged' was the cost to the University, while the 'actual costs' were what RBS indicated it would have charged on a full cost recovery basis.

**Table 3: Subsidised charges and actual costs for BRAILLE transcription services**

<b>Semester and Year</b>	<b>Number of students requiring BRAILLE</b>	<b>Total fees charged</b>	<b>Total actual costs</b>
1/99	3	1 875	51 024
2/99	1	625	18 100
<b>Totals for 1999</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2 500</b>	<b>69 124</b>
1/00	3	1 875	34 783
2/00	1	625	91 319
<b>Totals for 2000</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2 500</b>	<b>126 102</b>

- *The need to maintain currency of equipment/technology provided in the learning environment.*

This is an on-going challenge and issues are often created when software developers produce upgrades to their software which then make the software incompatible with commonly used assistive technology such as screen-readers like JAWS. This then requires the purchase of upgrades to the specialised software and even then it may not operate as effectively as it previously did. Software upgrades often require access to more memory/processing power, thus requiring upgrades of hardware.

Another dilemma that can arise in relation to the purchase of technology is defining who has responsibility for purchasing technology that may be of a more personal nature. It is not unusual to receive requests for new laptops because a laptop previously used in the schools sector becomes irreparable, or for new wheelchairs, new glasses and new hearing aids. There seems to be a need to define where the boundaries lie in relation to the responsibilities of the individual, the community and the University.

Griffith University is also a multi-campus operation. This then requires that assistive technology be made available on all campuses, not just one. This results in considerable additional costs related not only to the replication of technologies but also in deploying staff across campuses and providing training to staff who can be 'on-call' at each campus to deal with problems related to the technology as they may arise.

- *Students accessing external support*

Students with disabilities may or may not meet the criteria for receiving support through other programs provided by different sectors of government, for example, Mobility Allowance through Centrlink or Adult Lifestyle Support Packages provided by the Queensland Government. The concerns relate to:

- students being unable to access, in a straightforward way, comprehensive information about the various programs that are available from the different sectors of government;
- how eligibility criteria are developed and applied. For example a student may be deemed ineligible for mobility allowance based on the number of hours they have in tutorial and lectures. However, this does not take into account that they need to engage in private study, group meetings and research activities often on campus.
- limitations to funding, causing some eligible students to be on waiting lists for long periods of time.
- inappropriate or inadequate support offered through these programs which does not take into account the demands of the educational activities in which the student is engaged. For example, participating in work placements can necessitate access to assistive technology or interpreter support.

- *Research funding*

Another issue of concern is the lack of funding to undertake research activities in the sector. DEST (DETYA) have de-funded activities such as the Cooperative Projects for Higher Education Students with Disabilities and the subsequent Disability Initiatives Program (DIP) forcing researchers in this field into competition for limited funding dollars.

An associated concern is the process by which the limited research resources are allocated. There needs to be greater consultation with the sector to ensure that research projects are developed from a very sound knowledge of the fundamentals of service provision in the sector, acknowledge the practical realities and will not result in a duplication of research effort.

**vi) *the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,***

Students with disabilities in higher education are already participating in a mainstream environment. The support provided by the University facilitates their participation. As previously pointed out, this support is flexible and does not negatively impact upon the academic rigour of the program of study. As a result there are mainstream services such as Student Services (including Counselling, Health, Careers and Employment, and Welfare services), Griffith Flexible Learning Services, Student Administration and the Learning Assistance Unit that add value to the learning experience of any student seeking their support but which should not be seen as an avenue for remediation.

- *Transition programs to university*

The transition to study at university can be difficult for any student, however the difficulties are often magnified for students with disabilities regardless of whether they are coming to the university straight from school or as a mature age student. Current government programs and policies do not adequately provide the resources necessary to enable universities to target transition programs for students with disabilities. The issues that have the most significant impact on the transition of students with disabilities are:

- their understanding of what is expected of them in the tertiary learning environment; including the inherent requirements of their program of study;
- their ability to effectively utilise the resources, such as assistive technologies, that are available to them;
- the lead time available to facilitate the production of resource in accessible formats; and
- their ability to manage the impact that their impairment or condition has on them along with the demands of their study

Griffith University does provide a transition program involving additional orientation activities as well as mentoring for any students who identify with an equity group. Some students with disabilities find that this is of great assistance to them. Other students will require additional activities to ensure a smooth transition. For example Deaf students need to know how to work with sign language interpreters in the academic setting.

It is a major concern that students with disabilities have not been exposed to opportunities that enable them to prepare adequately for their studies. In previous years we had a mechanism to address some of the transition issues through the Federally funded, Cooperative Project: *Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities Project - 'Unitaste'* program. This was an opportunity to reach students in years 10 and 11 and provide a three-day on campus experience that allowed them to experience what life at university was like. Unfortunately, this program was de-funded by DEST and it has not been possible to continue with the joint program in Brisbane. (Attached are copies of the evaluation of the *Unitaste* Program.)

- *A changing learning environment.*

Transition assumes greater importance when the changes that have occurred in the tertiary learning environment are considered. There has been a growing emphasis on the development of strategies that will support flexible learning. This requires students to be more independent in their approach to learning and to be able to interface with technology. Flexible learning at Griffith University is defined as an educational approach using a variety of student-centred teaching and learning methods, resources and flexible administrative practices that respond to the needs of a diverse student population, enabling them to achieve vocational and professional qualifications and the goals of a university education. The adoption of a flexible learning approach has the potential to remove some of the traditional barriers to learning that have existed for students with disabilities. However the way in which flexible learning is operationalised, impacts significantly on students with disabilities. For instance, there are issues related to the manner in which students with disabilities participate in work placements. There are

constraints imposed by systems, employers and the specific work environments that may mean that a student does not have the required flexibility to specify particular working conditions such as working hours and workload. Current policies and programs, particularly in relation to funding, need to be reshaped to take into account the demands of this changed learning environment.

- *Increasing demands for learning support*

Students with learning disabilities or other impairments (e.g. neurological) that impact on their ability to assimilate information are among the largest cohort in the population of students with disabilities at the University. While information is being presented in a variety of methods and a large amount of material is now available to supplement learning resources, there is a growing need to provide specialised support for students in these cohorts. They may need time with a tutor to review material covered in lectures or to develop strategies that will assist them to minimise the impact of their disability. This assistance falls outside of the parameters of current service provision of the University through either the Learning Assistance Unit or the Disabilities Service and requires specialised and sometimes intensive support. There is no provision for this level of support under current federal or state funding programs. Two questions need to be resolved in order to address this issue. Firstly who is responsible for funding this support and secondly where should support programs such as these sit. Consideration should be given to other service provision and funding models that have been implemented. For example, there is funding made available to provide indigenous students with tutorial assistance. There are also other models in operation in other countries such as the UK.

- *Assistive technology*

Our experience is that many students with disabilities in the schools sector have had little exposure to, or training in, the assistive technology options that would be appropriate for them. This then produces difficulty in their university

studies. Funding and processes for such equipment and skills establishment needs to be much more widely available.

***vii) teacher training and professional development***

Comment will be made on professional development activities for staff in the Disability Services sector, the availability of specialist teacher training programs and the availability and provision of funding for training for specialist personnel, for example, sign language interpreters.

- *Professional development activities for staff in the Disabilities Services sector*

As has been alluded to in another area of this submission, the role of the Disability Service's staff can be pivotal in identifying the most appropriate support for an individual, in coordinating the delivery of this support, monitoring the quality of the support provided and evaluating the effectiveness of the support provided for the individual. While it may not be necessary to specify a particular degree in a position description, it is important that staff employed in this role have access to useful professional development activities. These may or may not be accredited. For example Griffith University has prepared the curriculum for a Graduate Certificate/Master of Disability Service Management in the Tertiary Setting. At this stage though, the University has been unable to secure funding to offer the program.

- *Professional development program for staff – academic and general*

It is important that all staff at the University are skilled in the provision of services to students with disabilities within the context of their specific role. Access to meaningful professional development activities is even more important with the move towards flexible learning and introduction of new learning technologies. While there are some most useful resources available that can be used by Disability Services staff to develop professional development activities for academic and general staff, the main hurdle to overcome is the fact that staff in all roles within the University experience

heavy demands on their time. Certainly the most valuable experiences often emerge from fora where staff have the opportunity to engage in face-to-face discussions. More innovative ways of delivering these activities need to be explored. Developing alternative strategies though is time and resource intensive and at the moment there are few if any ways of accessing funding to do this.

- *Availability of specialist teacher training programs.*

The Faculty of Education at Griffith University has provided teacher education programs for teachers engaged in a wide variety of special education areas for over 25 years. This activity began when the current faculty was a part of the Mt Gravatt Teachers' College and the Brisbane College of Advanced Education prior to amalgamation with Griffith University. Programs are provided at the undergraduate and postgraduate level in the areas of vision impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual impairment, learning difficulty, physical impairment and autistic spectrum disorder.

Currently around 280 students are enrolled over the four years of the undergraduate program and around 100 in the postgraduate Master of Special Education. There is a high rate of completions and a 100% employment rate post graduation. Currently in Queensland there is a severe shortage of trained special education personnel. The University could probably double the number of student places and still enjoy the high completions and employment rate. This could not be achieved in the current environment without additional places being made available.

With reference to the Special Education program provided at Griffith University, a recent study by Education Queensland entitled *Teachers' Pre-service Tertiary Education Preparation* noted the following findings:

With reference to special education graduates from Griffith University who were first year teachers it was found that:



Teachers at special schools demonstrated a higher level of satisfaction across all aspects of teaching, compared with teachers at primary and secondary schools.

With reference to the rating of special education graduates by school principals on their general suitability, level of commitment, and professional readiness, it was found that:

Special teachers were rated high on this scale than teachers at other schools.

A compatible finding mentioned above is that special teachers also rated their courses at a higher level than beginning teachers at other schools.

As Griffith University is the sole provider of special education teacher education programs in Queensland, these independent findings clearly indicate that Special Education programs at Griffith University are of a high standard.

- *Availability of and provision of funding for training for specialist personnel – sign language interpreters*

Currently there is a real shortage of skilled specialist staff who have the knowledge and skills to be able to provide specific support for students with disabilities. This is a great concern because as the aspirations of people with disabilities are raised and they are encouraged to participate in higher education, their efforts can then be frustrated by a dearth of appropriately qualified support staff. This is particularly evident in relation to the availability of sign language interpreters. There is a limited pool of suitably qualified interpreters able to work in the tertiary sector. In order to manage this limited pool, Griffith has assumed the coordination role for interpreter services for UQ and QUT. This issue is also evident at a national level and a discussion paper prepared by Griffith University, Disabilities Coordinator, Judy Hartley, on

behalf of TEDCA (Tertiary Education Disability Council of Australia) is attached for reference.

Clearly there needs to be an audit of skills required by the sector and additional training and professional development for specialist staff.

***viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation; and***

- *Legal implications of current legislation*

The legal implications of current Disability discrimination and Anti-Discrimination legislation for the University cannot be viewed in isolation from the implications of a range of legislative and economic imperatives. For instance, under the various pieces of legislation, the main role of the University is as an educational provider, an employer and a provider of goods and services. Tensions can and do develop when the University in its role at education provider must be responsive to the needs of industry and professions when developing curricula and designing learning experiences for students with disabilities. There needs to be more discussion of issues related to the definition of inherent requirements and for defining what accommodations are 'reasonable' particularly when students need to demonstrate mastery of inherent requirements that may lead to professional registration.

From the University's perspective it would be helpful for there to be more wide-ranging discussion about some of the 'big picture' issues that relate to discriminatory practices that are embedded within systems so that there can be a more suitable response to the needs of students with disabilities from the whole of the sector.

- *Obligations of government*

There is also an imperative for all levels of government to ensure that they do not introduce policies and programs that are either directly or indirectly

discriminatory. For example, it is important for them to consider the impact that general changes in existing policy or new policies may have for students with disabilities from the outset. This has been highlighted by the proposed introduction of the Graduate Skills Assessment. Before the decision is made to fully implement this test, it would be important to ensure that key stakeholders in the disability field and students with disabilities are consulted about the development of the test and the implications that such a test may have for people with disabilities. For example, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission should be consulted about the implications of such a testing process for people with disabilities. Specifically they need to be asked whether implementing such a test could constitute a form of indirect discrimination.

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

There is an urgent need for a more effective whole-of-government approach to the development of policy and the provision of programs for students with disabilities. It is our experience that many students who find it necessary to rely on support from various government agencies and programs are falling through the cracks. They are either referred from one agency to another or simply not referred to anyone at all. Increasingly, people with disabilities are forced to rely on under-resourced community organisations, their families, friends and the public in general for the resources that they need in order to participate in education.

Such an approach would also go a long way towards minimising the negative impact that variations in access to and levels of service provision from state to state, sector to sector and institution to institution have on the achievement of positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

## Concluding comment

Successive governments have spoken of the need to nurture Australia's intellectual capital. They have alluded to the benefits for all Australians of participating in education, developing skills and becoming more productive.

There has been progress towards ensuring that students with disabilities can take their place beside other students in higher education since *A Fair Chance for All* (1990) first set out the Commonwealth Government's broad equity objective. Griffith University has recognised its social and legislative responsibilities and committed resources towards creating an inclusive learning environment. However, there are factors external to the University which are now impacting on the quality of the services and support that can be provided to students with a disability and that can only be addressed through more informed policies, programs and practices. Attention needs to be paid to the highly complex relationships that exists between all levels of government, universities and the students whose participation and success we are trying to secure for the benefit of all.