

26 April 2002

Mr John Carter
Secretary
Senate Committee
Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Suite 1.61
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Carter

Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education.

Thank you for your letter of 14 March 2002 inviting the Vice-Chancellor to make a submission to the above Inquiry. I have been asked to make a submission on behalf of the University.

We make the following points in response to certain of the Committee's Terms of Reference:

1.a.i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

A major area of difficulty for TAFE and Higher Education providers is the assessment and understanding of learning disability.

The DDA is generally more concerned with the effect of disability rather than issues of diagnosis, causes or definitions. In a tertiary education context it is usually also more useful, once disability has been established, to focus on its effect re accessing and participation in the learning environment, rather than focussing on degree of handicap. The exception would be for the student who presents with learning difficulties. A fundamental issue to be determined here is whether the student has the inherent ability to meet the entry requirements of the course, but because of learning disability requires adjustments to be made, or whether the student's learning difficulties are an indication that the student does not have the intellectual ability to undertake a particular course or does not meet the entry requirements for their chosen course due to other non-disability factors such as educational disadvantage. This difficulty is often more manifest in school leavers, as learning disability and learning difficulties have often not been differentiated throughout their schooling.

Two main issues arise:

1. the difficulty of having learning disability assessed because of the high cost of detailed diagnosis to both the individual student and the Institution and the absence of funding support for this purpose;
2. the importance of clearly articulated entry requirements to each course of study, against which the merits of each student can be assessed.

Some courses in entry level TAFE programs in particular tend to admit all applicants, and then refer for disability support rather than enforcing a base entry level, or adapting their programs to the needs of their chosen student group.

A nationally recognised and accepted definition of learning disability is urgently required.

1.a.ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed

We employ a team of Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) to coordinate the provision of services to students with disabilities. These services are based on professional corroboration of disability to establish eligibility and to determine the most appropriate support. In rural and remote areas, such corroboration is difficult to obtain, and can be costly both to the student and to the institution. The following example is provided as illustration:

A trainee from north-eastern South Australia was undertaking distance mode studies through our western Victorian TAFE campus at Horsham. The host employer identified that the student may have a learning disability. Phone conversations between our Horsham DLO and the student's mother revealed that there had been no 'assessment' through the student's schooling to ascertain whether or not the student had a learning disability or to ascertain appropriate support. Professional assistance was over 200km from the student's home, posing both transport and cost issues. Ultimately the University was left with a choice between no provision of disability services, or provision of services which may or may not have been appropriate – and may even have been detrimental.

Lack of access to appropriate professional assessment may lead to over-servicing eg of people without a disability or inappropriate servicing. Lack of access to appropriate professional assessment in rural and regional areas often results in higher costs to the educational institutions. Such assessment costs are not covered by government funding.

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

Additional costs for both students and Institutions in rural and regional areas is a major and under-addressed factor. As stated above, students with disabilities from rural and remote areas have additional disadvantages in terms of access to professional services. There are also difficulties and associated extra costs in accessing educational services themselves, and accessing the services of a DLO.

In terms of accessing educational services, the problems associated with living some distance from the point of study are exacerbated for many people with disabilities. They are often reliant on the disability pension, limiting funds available to own cars or afford the

costs of long-distance travel, or they may not drive because of their disability. Lack of public transport or bus infrequency may necessitate overnight or week-long stays, with the associated extra costs - both financial and personal.

In terms of accessing the services of a DLO, our case is not unusual in having a DLO cover a number of campuses over a large geographical area. The small number of students with disabilities and the expertise required of a DLO do not allow for a DLO to be based on every small campus. This poses additional travel costs for the educational provider to assess student needs and establish appropriate supports such as employment of note takers and participation assistants. Such costs are not covered by government funding.

1.a.v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

In both Higher Education and TAFE, the financial load carried by the Institutions of providing appropriate services to students with disabilities is extremely high – and is increasing.

In the TAFE sector the main source of funding assistance is through the State Office of Training and Tertiary Education's Disability Support Fund. In 2001, for our Institution, this and other government funding sources covered approximately 50% of direct support costs. In addition, the Institution covered the salary and associated costs of the DLOs, reducing the effective government funding to approx 30% of the cost of providing services to students with disabilities. The apparent increase of enrolment and/or reporting of students with disabilities in TAFE heralds an increase in Institution expenditure in this area. The effects of a funding squeeze is becoming evident in the reduced money available for essential but ancillary activity such as teacher training in working with students with disabilities and specific marketing initiatives for students with disabilities. No funding source is available for such activities. However, without such training, direct support costs will be higher than necessary eg providing participation assistants for students with learning disabilities rather than having a well equipped teacher having the relevant teaching techniques to cater for the student's needs. DLO time allocation is increasingly being squeezed to cater for increasing student numbers, at the cost of broader education and change initiatives (such as input to building works, curriculum, policies and practices etc).

Similar issues apply to Higher Education, with less funding support available. To date, most expenditure on supporting students with disabilities in Higher Education has been borne by the Universities. In Higher Education a new Federal scheme is to commence this year to supplement expenditure on students with high-cost need disabilities, but the level and adequacy of such funding will not be known until next year. It remains to be seen whether this funding will make a significant contribution to the costs borne by Universities as there are a high number of students whose needs will not put them in the high cost category but who collectively create a high cost for the University

1.a.vii) teacher training and professional development

As mentioned in the point above, there is extremely limited funding available for the provision of training to teachers in the broad and detailed issues relating to teaching students with disabilities. In addition there is a reducing internal consultancy role available to provide or coordinate such training through the DLOs, as their roles are having an increasingly higher emphasis on direct support needs due to the proportionally higher support costs borne by the Institutions and the increasing numbers of students with disabilities accessing tertiary education.

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

The responsibility for providing educational opportunities for students with disabilities is accepted by the tertiary education sector. However adequate funding should be made available to cover the additional costs of supporting students with disabilities. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are attending tertiary institutions as a result of mainstreaming students at primary and secondary levels. There is also an increase in the number of people who take up tertiary study as part of a rehabilitation plan. Primary and secondary students being assessed with learning disabilities are increasing significantly and it is anticipated that many of these students will access tertiary education in the near future.

Universities such as ours are strongly supportive of the right of people with disabilities to have equal access to the educational opportunities we offer and we value the contribution that students with disabilities bring to the University. However, Universities are put under financial pressure through the proportionally higher expenditure needed to properly support these students and hence we advocate strong government support to ensure that we are best positioned to provide the necessary supports.

End of Submission

Attached to this submission is a paper presented by one of our Disability Liaison Officers to a conference on disability in tertiary education in New Zealand last year. Whilst not endorsing this as an official position of the University, we include it as part of our submission so that the Inquiry is informed on relevant issues as perceived by a cross-section of staff working directly with students with disabilities in tertiary education.

If you would like any further information, please contact either Ms Barbara Webb, Manager, Equity and Equal Opportunity on 03 5327 9357 or email b.webb@ballarat.edu.au or Dr Vicki Williamson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Administrative and Academic Support) on 03-53279101 or email v.Williamson@ballarat.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

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