



**post-secondary Disability Integration Network Inc.
Executive Committee**

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post-secondary Disability Integration Network (psDIN) Victoria

**DRAFT Submission for Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Reference Committee's**

Inquiry into Education of Students with Disabilities.

Background

The post-secondary Disability Integration Network (psDIN) is the peak body for Disability Liaison Officers working in both the University and TAFE sectors within Victoria. psDIN is made up of three representatives from the University sector and three from TAFE. psDIN has approximately nine face-to-face meetings per year.

psDIN's role is to:

- promote the integration of students with disabilities into post secondary education;
- identify the barriers faced by and needs of students with disabilities in post secondary education;
- provide a network for the exchange of ideas;
- co-ordinate effective use of resources between post secondary institutions to assist students with disabilities; and
- act as a lobbying group on relevant issues.

Given the above roles psDIN over saw the day-to-day direction of the Regional Disability Liaison Unit for Victoria between 1995 – 2001.

1) Inquiry 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

The University and TAFE sectors use the broad definitions as outlined in the Disability Discrimination Act, 1992.

University and TAFE staff relies on the judgment of health and other appropriate professionals to determine the existence of a disability and the likely impacts on academic study.

Levels of handicap have a significant impact on the students and may therefore require greater or lesser levels of support. Definitions in their broadest sense are useful, but the reality of the impact of a particular handicap/impairment is also dependent on the individual and can also be mitigated by the particular activity or requirement of their course.

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

In the both sectors we rely on the advice of relevant health and other professionals and must accept their advice in relation to the student's disability. Disability Liaison Officers (DLO's) rely on professional expertise and experience to assess the impacts on academic programs which is a complex role. It involves assessing documentation, which raises many questions of adequacy, conducting student interviews and review processes so as to provide an accurate assessment. In some instances a person's disability and the impact may also vary over time, thus adding to the complexity of the provision of supports and services. DLO's also need to be familiar with a wide range of disability types and the relevant supports available, and given the constant changes in technologies and other supports this can be difficult within the current resource allocation.

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

The University and the TAFE sectors have limited funding from government for students with disabilities, which is a long way short of covering the actual costs incurred by the institutions to support these students. The highest costs come from employment of staff to support students (Auslan interpreters and notetakers) and transcription services. For example the employment of Auslan interpreters in rural campuses often incurs the added cost of travel from Melbourne due to the chronic shortage of interpreters in rural areas.

Equipment such as Brailers, screen reading software, accessible computers, ergonomic furniture or electronic wheelchairs are also high cost items with many students needing to use them. For rural institutions and campuses the higher operating costs and the limited associated services in rural communities compounds this.

As a result equipment use is limited predominantly to on campus. In some Universities and TAFEs limited loans of items such as laptop computers are made but due to cost are restricted to those with very high needs. As with other students they are expected to purchase their own equipment or use that available to all students.

Students from the equity groups, in particular those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or rural and isolated areas in which the cost of relocation may impact on the ability of families to provide the additional financial support, are the least likely to be able to purchase their own adaptive equipment. This increases the need to travel into the campus, for some students with disabilities, which adds to the already high cost of living with a disability. More time consuming methods of achieving academic work are often the only alternative. This affects student's academic success and can lead to student drop out.

Specific funding to provide equipment for high needs students and greater support for Universities to purchase equipment for loan would help to alleviate this situation. A truly creative approach may be to provide students with a disability a “one-off” grant at the time of enrollment to purchase appropriate hardware or software to support their studies and future employment. This would mean that students own the resource and universities would not be faced with high cost replacements or a collection of resources, too outdated to be useful to future students. The Federal Government is currently mooting the idea of a one off grant to assist unemployed people with costs associated with finding work, eg purchasing clothes for interviews, or transport costs etc. Something similar for people with a disability engaging in further education could be seen as an investment in Australia’s improved educational status.

Students with the double disadvantage of disability and belonging to one of the equity groups identified often experience enormous difficulty in adjusting to the experience of becoming a tertiary student. This is frequently compounded by the need to move away from their community to regional or metropolitan sites to undertake this study. This move may involve the need to learn a whole new way of relating to people, developing new support systems to assist with daily living as well as managing the transition from secondary school student to tertiary student.

A case example may help: A visually impaired woman who needed to move from a small rural community to a larger regional centre to undertake tertiary study, realized for the first time that she needed to inform people about the impact of her disability to facilitate effective communication. This was a new experience as her previous community had all been aware of her visual impairment and its implications and had learnt how to accommodate her needs from a very early age. This woman may have benefited from programs directed specifically around transition issues for students with a disability. Unfortunately tertiary institutions are often only able to provide support around the issues relating specifically to academic supports required.

There are also issues related to students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds whose cultural framework interprets the issue of disability differently to the traditional western paradigm. This may impact on the ability of students with a particular disability to access appropriate disability related services, and thus impact on the participation and completion of academic programs.

iv) The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

It is here that the notion of dependence and independence is started. Independence assists in the transition from preschool to school and school to tertiary education. It is also at this time that possibilities to do all sorts of things are made possible or are discounted. Students who are most likely to be successful have often had parents who have ignored the advice that they have been given by the professionals who concentrate on what they can’t do rather than on what they can. A focus on ability not disability here is important.

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

Some limited funding from DEST is available to the University sector beginning in 2002 that will cover high cost students but is only expected to allay a small proportion of the costs associated with their support. Universities welcome the introduction of support for high needs students however there are significant numbers of students with costs below \$4,000 per year who are not funded. Other generic costs such as specialist equipment, computer software, modifications to buildings and disability liaison staff costs are currently covered by faculty and department budgets.

The Disability Support Fund (DSF) provided to TAFEs from the State Government has remained the same over the past few years despite the known increases in the number of students with disabilities accessing Tertiary Education. There is an expectation on behalf of many students (especially those who have had support in Secondary Schools) that this same support is available to them at TAFE. There are also students who have been supported over the past few years who return to TAFE to undertake different courses or courses at higher levels (ie following the pathways available to them and all other students through Cert II courses on to Cert IIIs etc) with the expectation that on-going support is available. (After all they have all been encouraged to attend further education from other Government sponsored bodies). The shortfall from the DSF is usually picked up by the Institution. This shortfall is getting larger each year, as the DSF doesn't adequately meet (even halfway) the actual costs of providing support services.

We advocate a generic program of funding which allows institutions to cover the additional costs of supporting students with disabilities as well as an increase in the funding available under the current DEST scheme for universities and the DSF for TAFEs.

psDin is supportive of a "one-off" payment to assist students purchase their own adaptive technologies.

vi) The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.

Not relevant to the university sector.

vii) teacher training and professional development

While the principle of inclusive teaching practices are adopted by many Universities and TAFEs there are difficulties bringing this into effect in practice. There is limited training available to staff in teaching for inclusion with regard to a wide range of disabilities. The decreasing funding base of universities and TAFEs has also made it more difficult to provide extra training and staff is under enormous pressure and often cannot justify the time to attend additional training. There is also a question of the resources required to support the appropriate people to conduct that training.

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

The Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 and the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act puts universities and TAFEs under obligation to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. In the context of universities and TAFEs overall funding this has been interpreted as an almost absolute requirement to meet the support needs, regardless of the costs. We also see and accept our moral responsibilities to meet the educational needs of these students. However these can be extremely high for some students. For example one deaf student can cost \$30,000 a year in notetaking and Auslan interpreting. If a university and TAFE has ten or fifteen such students the costs are a significant financial burden on already under resourced institutions. They may also be disadvantaged by having developed programs of excellence in some areas of disability thus attracting a disproportionately large number of students with those disabilities.

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 these students. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are attending tertiary institutions as a result of mainstreaming students at primary and secondary levels. This is expected to rise significantly. There is also an increase in the number of people who take up tertiary study as part of a rehabilitation plan.

The commonwealth, state and territory governments need to support their legislative requirements of higher education institutions with adequate specifically targeted funding and support to ensure all students with a disability receive the opportunity to undertake and complete their tertiary studies. Commonwealth, state and territory governments also need to work closely with local government, local agencies and communities to address other essential services to support students with a disability to access further education e.g. addressing transport issues, accommodation and availability of support services, such as AUSLAN interpreters, especially in regional and rural Australia.

There are currently significant differences between states in the type and extent of services provided to students with disabilities, which hinders the ability of students to relocate interstate for higher education. It also leads to discrepancies in the levels of support between otherwise similar students.

The Futures for Young Adults Program (FFYA) in Victoria is designed to meet the support needs of young people with disabilities. There is a lack of clarity about the types of costs covered by this program and whether they should be borne by the FFYA or the University. Many of the students with disabilities eligible for some FFYA funding also don't receive enough funding to cover the

cost of support staff. The program may pay for the cost of the course in the case of TAFE and/or equipment to complete the course but the provision of support staff has fallen on the TAFE. The implementation of this program varies markedly between regions, institution and individual student. . Students who undertook secondary school studies in another state are not eligible to use this program.

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