

**CQU Submission to the Senate Inquiry:
Education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities,
throughout all levels and sectors of education.**

Facts
Opinions
Arguments
Recommendations

- (a) Weather 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 CQU policy on people with a disability uses the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act definition of disability to determine eligibility for adjustments that provide equal opportunity on the grounds of impairment or chronic medical conditions. This definition has been found to be useful, as it includes physical, sensory and neurological impairment, and chronic medical conditions.

At CQU the ‘level of handicap’ is determined through documentation provided by specialist professionals to the Disability Liaison Officer (DLO), Equity and Diversity Office. The intent of this documentation is not to *prove* an impairment or medical condition exists, but rather to determine the impact this has on the students’ ability to demonstrate their best potential.

In a higher education setting, the most important aspect to consider is this impact on the students’ ability to engage in their study, rather than defining the ‘level of handicap’. Personal care, therapy, income support and other similar issues that may require consideration of ‘level of handicap’ are not within the realm of service delivery for higher education institutions. The issue for universities is how best to adjust the delivery and assessment of course materials and make adjustments to the physical, administrative and social environment, to provide equal opportunity for students with a disability.

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

A needs evaluation is conducted for individual students based on documentation provided by specialist professionals who are able to clearly describe the *impact* of the impairment in the study setting. At CQU there is an assumption that the advice provided in such documentation regarding this impact is accurate in that only appropriately qualified professionals provide it. It is then the role of the DLO to recommend reasonable adjustments to the academic environment based on the information provided in these reports.

It is beyond the role of the DLO to comment on the accuracy of this assessment. The range of different impairment types and chronic medical conditions make it difficult for any university to resource internal assessment of each student’s needs. The accuracy of assessment is assured by CQU procedures that require appropriately qualified professionals to provide accurate assessment of each student’s needs in

regard to their participation in studies at the time they seek such adjustments by the University. The cost of obtaining supporting documentation is borne by the student.

The needs of a large cohort of students with learning disabilities are not currently being accurately assessed due to the often prohibitive costs associated with professional assessment of learning disabilities. A useful assessment to clearly identify appropriate strategies to overcome the impact of learning disability may cost up to \$1000. Without such an assessment, universities would find it difficult to determine appropriate adjustments to meet the range of needs that students with a learning disability may experience.

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 issues stated above have an even greater impact for students with multiple disadvantages. For example, students from a non-English speaking background may be linguistically and culturally disadvantaged in seeking adjustments, as would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, whose cultural attitudes and beliefs regarding impairment may form barriers for them in seeking appropriate support.

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

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

The role of the Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) prepares and informs rural and isolated prospective students regarding the impact of these issues, and so provides transition opportunities for prospective students to plan wisely for their university studies. The RDLO role is externally funded through the Projects and Equity Unit, DEST.

These issues can be seen as peripheral to enrolment at university, but are often the barriers that prove too difficult for students with a disability to consider attending university, or continue their studies. CQU offers a wide range of courses in flexible (external study) mode, and this is often the preferred option for rural and isolated

students with a disability, who are then able to remain within established support networks.

Please also note earlier comments on the burden of the cost of assessment for learning disability for those students requiring support for this impairment.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

In a university setting, it is better to consider the term ‘transition’ rather than “early intervention”. At CQU there are bridging courses (STEPS and WIST), as well as the RDLO initiative that provide an opportunity for students with a disability not only to prepare academically for university, but also to determine how an impairment or chronic medical condition will most appropriately be accommodated when enrolled as a full-time student. Examples of issues that arise are adjustments to delivery and assessment of course materials, identification of and training in the use of appropriate adaptive technologies, and identifying the range of impacts that may occur in a university setting that may not necessarily arise in other aspects of a person’s lifestyle, for example personal care whilst on campus, transport to and from university, and income support for the additional costs associated with higher education.

Early *identification* of students with high support needs is essential to CQU being able to arrange for support such as brailing of materials, or recruit support staff such as deaf interpreters in a timely fashion. The work of the RDLO in the Central Queensland region has been effective in assisting in the early identification of both school leavers and adult entry students who have high support needs.

At present there is a 3-month lead-time required to arrange for brailing of textbooks. In order for a student who requires study materials to be brailled to access study materials at the start of each term, text books at least must be available 3 months ahead of time. Currently it is often the case that titles of textbooks are not known 3 months ahead of time, or alternatively the textbooks are not available for purchase in time.

In recognition of these issues, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is convening a forum to develop strategies for addressing the availability of accessible tertiary materials for students with print disabilities in Sydney in May 2002. This is a key development in ‘early intervention’ strategies to enable equitable participation by students with print disabilities, and the participation by CQU in this process is an important step in ensuring improved and timely access for people with a print disability studying at CQU.

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

The current funding model at CQU provides for budget allocation from internal funding sources to resource the needs of students with a disability. The biggest issue at present for this university is the possible cost for individual students with high support needs, for example students who require deaf interpreters, or students who require alternative print format such as brailing or taping of textbooks and other print materials.

DEST is currently developing a new funding programme to provide additional support for universities that have enrolled individual students with high support needs. CQU has participated in the development of this funding programme by providing extensive data to help establish the funding guidelines. At this time there has been no final advice on how this program will be implemented, however it is important to note CQU's support for additional external funding for students with high support needs for educational and equipment resources.

A common need reported by students is for a home-based study station, which offers appropriate ergonomic and adaptive technologies. Often the cost of setting up a computer work station at home is prohibitive for students requiring specialised equipment. At the same time, it is difficult for students with impairments and chronic medical conditions to physically access the computer labs provided on campus by CQU.

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

Access to the built environment is a key issue in providing mainstream opportunities for students with a disability.

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

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

vii) teacher training and professional development, and

At present there is no focused professional development program for staff at universities to develop skills and knowledge in regard to the inclusion of people with a disability. A recommendation would be to develop a national strategy that is accredited in some way to enhance promotion opportunities for teaching staff, and be included in the recruitment process of teaching academics, similar to the present CQU requirement for training in occupational health and safety to meet legislative requirements.

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

Currently the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act provides for organisations to develop a Disability Action Plan to demonstrate the intent of that organisation in providing equal opportunity for people with a disability. The implementation of such plans should then form the central strategy in meeting the legislative responsibilities that organisations are accountable for under Commonwealth and state law.

The issue of vicarious liability should also be noted, in that work supervisors and managers are responsible to ensure systems and processes exist to provide equal opportunity for, and prevent the discrimination of people with a disability.

Cutbacks in funding to the university sector will also compromise service provision for students with a disability and place the institution in a position where it is unable to adequately resource the inclusion of students with a disability, which may lead to discrimination complaints being brought. A recent example is the complaint brought against the University of Tasmania in regard to the provision of print materials in alternative format.

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

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

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

Develop standardised reporting systems that provide information on quality practices and best practice benchmarks in service delivery for people with a disability in universities.

Support the need for transition programs for students with a disability entering university study.

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Appendix:

CQU Students With a Disability 2002			
<u>Hearing Impairment: 20</u>		<u>Learning Disability: 46</u>	
Bundaberg	6	Bundaberg	10
Flexible (Distance)	6	Flex	13
Mackay	2	Gladstone	3
Rockhampton	6	Mackay	3
		Rockhampton	17
<u>Medical Disability: 199</u>		<u>Mobility Impairment: 104</u>	
Bundaberg	46	Bundaberg	16
Flex	71	Flex	39
Gladstone	5	Gladstone	9
Melbourne	2	Mackay	6
Mackay	10	Rockhampton	34
Rockhampton	65		
<u>Vision Impairment: 28</u>		<u>TOTALS: 397</u>	
Bundaberg	5	Bundaberg	83
Flex	11	Flex	140
Mackay	1	Gladstone	17
Rockhampton	11	Mackay	22
		Melbourne	2
		Rockhampton	133