

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Reference Committee
Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

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

There are a number of terms of reference which are not directly applicable to the tertiary sector: this is one such area. All tertiary institutions employ the definitions used in the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

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

The assessment of student support needs related to their disability is not uniform across the tertiary sector. The provision of support services is usually based upon a documented assessment of the impact of the student's disability, mental health issue or medical condition on their academic performance at a given time in the student's life. The documented assessment should be by a health professional. The documentation in conjunction with an interview with Disability support staff assists the student and the University determine what reasonable support services and accommodations are required. This process is undertaken within the legislative framework. This process also necessitates the knowledge of Disability staff to be contemporary with respect to technological advances.

Learning disability: an ill-defined and unsupported disability

Currently, we have no nationwide definition of what constitutes a 'learning disability'. A uniform, and nationally agreed definition is vital. A corollary of that is the urgent need to establish an agreed set of educational testing instruments to assess the level and type of learning disability.

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

In the case of some students, all of the above attributes apply: they are from an Indigenous background, often from rural and isolated areas and living in a low socio-economic context. In combination, and/or individually, those factors combined with a disability create a flow-on effect, which compounds the potential disadvantage inherent in the disability.

Should the student need to re-locate for their studies, the impost of specialised services and accommodation (which can include carer accommodation) is

often of such a magnitude that both the University and student are severely financially disadvantaged.

The provision of specialised services at regional campuses can also create extra costs. Specialised staff such as Auslan Interpreters is often not available locally, thereby adding on top of costs for travel and accommodation.

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds

Students with a disability whose first language is other than English can face additional difficulties. The services available to someone with a vision impairment for example are provided in English, with no facility for translation to other languages. Software such as JAWS could readily be made available in languages other than English; the cost would need to be borne by both the organisation and the student for off campus study.

Financial hardships unique to tertiary study

Materials, fees and General Service Fees are usually not optional at the tertiary level. Those fees can amount to \$1,000 or more. Therefore, people from low socio-economic backgrounds often face insurmountable hardship overcoming that financial barrier to starting a course of study; financial assistance may be required to cover the high on-costs of starting and continuing in a University course.

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds can struggle to purchase specialised equipment, for example computers/software; this then necessitates unnecessary travel to campuses.

Rurally isolated face bigger on-costs of access to Internet

Students from rurally isolated areas face bigger costs for all services than their metropolitan-based peers. Travel costs to and from University campuses is far more difficult, time-consuming and expensive for students with a disability in rural areas. Distance education could provide a partial solution. However, home-based access to the Internet is more expensive, and often not an option for financial reasons and/or personal choice.

iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

In one sense, this term of reference is not immediately relevant, since early intervention programs are not part of the tertiary educational landscape. As cited under term of reference (iii) above, tertiary education is part of a continuum. Failure to provide adequate interventions at the primary and secondary level results in the obvious outcome: a related failure to gain entry to tertiary study.

One example of the interrelationship between all levels of study is in the education of the deaf. In the year 2002, there is still a critical shortage of Auslan interpreters. Additionally, many deaf people, whose language is Auslan, have had to undergo their secondary schooling in an English language environment. Their secondary school teachers have used signed English rather than Auslan, thereby limiting the development of the students' academic

development in their first language. There is only limited recognition of the cultural differences in communication styles between deaf students using Auslan and those whose first language is English.

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

With few exceptions, tertiary education in Australia is funded within the public sector. It has been the experience of La Trobe University that the approach to providing funding and support for students with disabilities is still in a very inchoate stage.

The cost of providing services falls largely upon Universities to fund within their operating budgets. These are no longer marginal costs. Students with complex disabilities are undertaking studies. Their specific educational needs can cost in the order of \$40,000 per student per annum. There is urgent need for Universities to be funded accordingly. As reported in the DEST publication, *Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium*, the number of students with a disability has continued to rise and in 2001 they made up 3% of the domestic student population. This figure given the trend over the last decade will continue to rise.

Whilst it is a welcome advance that the government has commenced a scheme to fund students with high cost needs, the resources allocated across the sector for students who have costs exceeding \$4,000 per annum will not be sufficient to recoup costs for all the students in this category. There are many more students with costs below \$4,000, the combined costs are creating a very significant cost to Universities.

Higher education institutions cannot work on case mix funding for students with disabilities in the sector due to the number of variables such as, campus location, course requirements, nature of disability etc. A generic program of funding to cover the costs of students with disabilities coupled with an increase in the total amount allocated for students with high costs is urgently needed.

Financial support to participate equitably in the life of the University

Participation in a course at University involves a great deal more than attending lectures and tutorials and workshops. A major bonus of University life, particularly for full-time students, is the access to the many clubs and events organised via the Student Union, the SRC or independent groups. Given that students with disabilities, and students who are deaf, pay their General Service Fee, it is vital that they have equity of access to other than academic activities. Currently, Universities are mainly funding only access to academic related activities.

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

All learning opportunities for students with disabilities at this University are provided with mainstream students. Universities do not offer their accredited

courses as enclave programs established for people with disabilities. However, as part of our wider social responsibility charter, La Trobe University does support financially a Life Skills rehabilitation program for young adults.

vii) teacher training and professional development, and

It is essential that as part of all teacher-training courses, students are made aware of their responsibilities towards students with a disability. Ongoing professional development is also critical. Many of the teachers in primary and secondary schools graduated prior to the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. They require information and support about how to ensure equality of educational opportunity for their students.

At the tertiary level, teaching qualifications are not required. It is a requirement of this University that staff seeking promotion, and/or new staff, undertake training sessions in the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

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

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

There is overwhelming evidence that students with a disability are exercising their rights to participate in tertiary studies in ever increasing numbers. The legislative requirements for institutions to facilitate the access, participation, retention, and success of these students is clear and unambiguous.

As implied in the above responses, the Commonwealth must ensure a seamless approach across all state and territory borders to the provision of education to people with disabilities. In Victoria, our students have access to limited additional support via the Futures for Young Adults. That support is not available nationwide and does not adequately meet the comprehensive personal needs of attending University.

Adequate funding is required to meet the needs of students undertaking tertiary studies and participating fully in University activities. Currently Universities with the added assistance of some resources for high cost students from 2002, meet the financial costs from within their operational monies.

The numbers of students, the complexity of their needs has created the need to reassess how Universities are funded to ensure the ongoing rights for students with a disability to participate fully in the tertiary sector.