

Please note: Computer users with Word prior to the Word 2000 version must open up this document in Excel to access the graph on page 1. (EWRE Secretariat)

Senate Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities Prepared by RMIT Disability Liaison Unit.

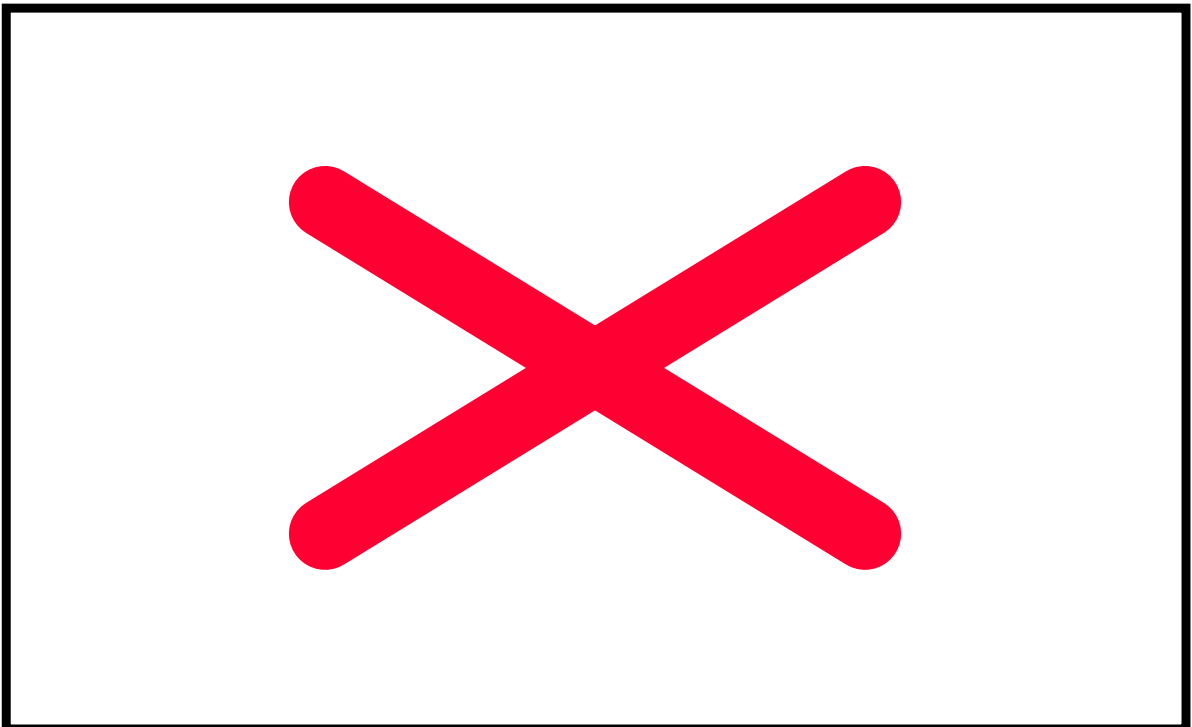
Terms of Reference

Inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sector of education, with particular reference to:

Nb. This response will be confined to the needs of students with a disability within the tertiary sector.

Preamble:

RMIT University has a commitment to providing a high level of support to students with a disability wishing to attend the University. Over the years RMIT University has developed a readiness to welcome all students with a disability as full participants in the university community. RMIT University has been able to demonstrate this commitment by the increase in numbers of students who identify as having a disability. This following graph shows a steady increase in the numbers of students with a disability participating in both sectors of the University.



From an initial baseline in 1995 of approximately 2.9% of students at RMIT University to the current situation where over 6.5% identify as having a disability indicates a positive improvement in services to this community.

Adequacy of Current Policies and Programs

As stated below, there are a number of concerns about adequacy of current policies and programs. It is hoped that the Senate Inquiry will find that the role of a federal government is to provide leadership and guidance to the Australian community. As a consequence of this determination the Senate Inquiry may recommend that the Commonwealth Government review current policies and programs in relation to learning support for people with a disability in education in concert with the State Governments and Territories. It is further hoped, that this may lead to a consistency of approach to learning support for people with a disability throughout Australia.

Definition of Disability

The definition of disability is vexed and sometimes leads to confusion amongst various practitioners. The World Health Organization holds to a particular definition, which is generally reflected within the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). This definition appears to have the widest acceptance in Australia and provides both consumers and service providers with clear guidelines. There are some areas of concern that would benefit from being addressed.

For institutions providing learning support to people with a Specific Learning Disability a problem of definition has become important. Traditionally there is a recognised standardised battery of psychological tests used to define people with a Specific Learning Disability. Recently increasing pressure being placed on services to meet the needs of students who are having learning difficulties, based on literacy issues but who do not show up under the standardised tests.

With a single accepted definition of disability that is accepted at all levels of government, as well as with service providers and consumers confusion can be substantially reduced.

Assessment of Disability

Currently the assessment of students with a disability is left with the student's individual medical practitioner or psychologist and this in turn is implemented by the appropriate officer. In the tertiary sector that officer is usually the Disability Liaison Officer or Disability Services Officer. Papers have been developed through the Cooperative Projects that address the interpretation of the impact of a particular disability on tertiary learning which guide the determination of Disability Liaison Officers.

For several years professional groups (state and national) representing Disability Liaison Officers have been discussing developing a process of professional registration and minimal standards for DLO's in order that some national consistency can be expected. It is important that government recognises the contribution made by DLO's in the overall learning support for students with a disability.

The issue of disability assessment will become more complex with the introduction of Disability (Education) Standards, which is due to be finalised

during 2002. It appears that from the most recent draft of the Standards (Edu#4A19B), educational institutions will have an increase in the level of responsibility for ancillary health support for students with a disability.

Division 4: Student support services, 1 - Application of Division

Rights given by this Division

The effect of the following standards is to give students with disabilities the right to use student support services provided by education authorities and institutions, on the same basis as students without a disability.

The standards also give students with disabilities the right to specialised services provided to them by education authorities and institutions and other agencies in the health and community services sector. These services include specialist expertise, personal educational support or support for personal and medical care, without which some students with disabilities would not be able to access education and training.

If the above section should remain in the Standards on promulgation the range of support provided by institutions to students with a disability will increase greatly.

Needs of students with a disability from low SES, NESB, indigenous and rural and isolated areas

Students with a disability at RMIT University are treated equitably across all groups including low SES, NESB, indigenous and students from rural and isolated areas. There is often a need to provide additional supports to students from these groups in order that their broader needs are met.

As an example of a particular concern, is the area of indigenous students with a disability. It is clear that there are a substantial number of indigenous students with disabilities in Australia, including those with sight and hearing impairments. It has been difficult for education institutions to attract students from this cohort into the tertiary system. Indigenous students with a disability will require learning supports that are culturally sensitive and appropriate, which requires a new knowledge in Disability Liaison Officers.

There is a need to develop financially supported programs that provides this new knowledge and attracts prospective students from the traditionally under represented equity groups who are doubly disadvantaged.

Early Intervention Programs

This area of disability support is not within the purview of tertiary education.

Adequacy of Funding for students with a disability

The government funding available for students with a disability is not sufficient to meet the needs of students with a disability. In the TAFE sector in Victoria there is \$1.7 million per annum that is designated for the support of students with a disability. For 2002 there has been \$5 million of applications by submission for this fund, meaning that TAFE institutions can look towards less than 35% of their submissions being met through external funding. The remaining costs will be met by the individual institution's internal budgets.

The funding from the Commonwealth Government for specifically for students with a disability has not been available until this year. The only fund available has been the Higher Education Equity Fund (HEEP) that is provided by the Commonwealth to meet seeding funding for the five equity groups of Women in Non Traditional programs, Rural and Isolated, Indigenous, NESB, and people with a disability.

The Commonwealth is introducing a retrospective fund source that meets a proportion of 'high cost' student support within the university sector. For 2002 it is estimated that there will be a total of \$500,000 for all students with a disability in the university sector in Victoria. The fund is based on a retrospective submission at the end of each semester where each institution is required to identify the costs of supporting students who have a high support requirement. Based on research 2001 by Ms. Yvette Devlin for the Equity and Diversity Unit of DEST, this fund is not likely to meet the needs of students with a disability in Victorian universities. As this is the inaugural year for this fund it is not possible to estimate the real shortfall.

In Victoria the State Government has for a number of years stated '*The purpose (of the Disability Support Fund) is to provide supplementary funding to support TAFE Institutes to meet the needs of students with a disability.*' Both sectors of tertiary education generally accept this view that there needs to be an apportioning of funding responsibility between governments and individual educational institutions. At the present the majority funding responsibility falls on institutions, governments are not taking on a full and reasonable liability.

The Nature, Extent and Funding of programs – Learning Opportunities

As stated above, programs within the tertiary sector are more the responsibility of individual agencies and institutions and increasingly not sufficiently funded by government.

As an example, in the past there were Commonwealth funds available for projects and research through the 'Co-operative Projects in Higher Education for Students with a Disability' a DEETYA Higher Education Equity Fund initiative. The national fund contained \$566,000 for the 1999 financial year. This fund ceased being available for this purpose in 1999-2000 when the funds were re-directed to the Regional Disability Liaison Officer initiative. The loss of these funds has been a major blow for research into most promising practices both nationally and internationally. Submissions for these funds were often made by a cooperative alliance between two or more institutions that worked together to improve an aspect of disability support. Disability Liaison Officers have no obvious funding source available to them to take up projects and research into learning support for students with a disability. It is through research and the sharing of experiences that a vigorous sector can be nurtured and expanded.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

In recent years the area of teacher training in aspects of learning support for students with a disability has become a growing topic of discussion. With concerns that the current economic model places greater stress on tertiary education the opportunities to develop and take on additional new paradigms of teacher training is reduced. There is a need for incentives to assist universities to research into teacher training with a focus on universal access and then to

develop new pedagogy and curriculum. All teachers should be properly equipped to meet the learning support needs of the diverse range of students. It should not be left for interested teachers to take on another level of training to become a 'Special Teacher'.

One of the biggest issues of professional development is to convince people who have no interest or enthusiasm for teaching students with a disability to attend training sessions. It is often said that in professional development in learning support for students with a disability that you are 'preaching to the converted'. There is need for additional incentive such as linking attendance at training sessions to staff promotions to convince people of the value of professional development.

Legal Implications and Resource Demands of Legislation

The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) has been a powerful incentive for all education institutions to provide appropriate levels of learning support to students with a disability. As a consequence of this legislation there has been an increase in participation throughout Australia of students with a disability in the university sector.

Year	Number	%
1996	10,976	1.8
1997	15,019	2.4
1998	17,574	2.8
1999	18,084	2.9

*Source: DETYA *Equity in Higher Education*, 1999 and unpublished DETYA data

It is very likely that this increase is even truer of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector that tends to attract a large cohort of entry-level students. But the negative consequence of this increase in participation is the increased funding required to meet the learning support needs of students with a disability. Therefore the resource demands for learning support for people with a disability is constantly growing in an environment where there is a shrinking of the overall funding pie. This additional pressure on resources must eventually lead to pressure to 'gate keep' in an inadvertent attempt to minimize the costs for individual institutions.

The Role of Commonwealth and State Governments

The role of both the State and Commonwealth Governments is to lead by example. The Commonwealth should be developing 'standards' that become a guide for all levels of Government. As an example of a standard by providing a definition of disability that becomes accepted as the Australian standard and can be equally used in schools or universities. In order that this can work it is necessary for the Commonwealth State Disability Agreement (CSDA) to include all levels of education in its deliberations. It should be that the State Governments assist in developing the standards and once accepted implement the standards within their areas of purview.

Recommendations:

1. The Commonwealth Government agrees on a definition of disability that is promulgated throughout Australia as the standard definition in order to

ensure that service providers utilise limited resources equitably for students with a disability.

2. The Commonwealth Government provides funding support for the National representative organization, Tertiary Education Disability Council of Australia (TEDCA Ltd.), to establish an Australia wide consultative process to develop a process for professional registration for Disability Liaison Officers.
3. That Tertiary Education Disability Council of Australia be funded to liaise with groups representing Indigenous Australian with disabilities in order that a focussed response to their needs can be developed.
4. That a funding model be accepted as a national model for funding students with a disability in tertiary education. Further, that the agreed model will share more equitably the responsibility of funding learning support for students with a disability in the tertiary sector between government and institution.
5. That State Governments be urged to take up a greater responsibility for meeting the funding requirements for learning support for students with a disability in the VET sector.
6. That the *Co-operative Projects in Higher Education for Students with a Disability* be reinstated with an appropriate funding level to increase research into most promising practices in disability support within Australia and to identify international experiences.