

**Senate Enquiry**  
**Education of students with disabilities, including leaning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education.**

Submission from Deakin University, Student Life Division, Burwood, Geelong and Warrnambool

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**Overview:-**

This submission is written from a tertiary education perspective and focuses on issues that will enhance student access to an education program. To this end linkages have been made between practices in secondary education and the transition process between secondary and tertiary education.

**The key points for considerations are:-**

1. Tailoring support programs through all levels of education to ensure students with disabilities move through the education program learning independence and self help skills in the generic environment.
2. Looking at the issues and support programs from an environmental perspective rather than a case by case perspective i.e the social, emotional and physical environment are adapted for the individual not the other way around.
3. Taking a national perspective on consistency of assessment, availability of materials and technology and tackling major issues in relation to accessibility.

**Terms of Reference**

*1) Inquire into the Education of students with disabilities, including leaning 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.*

- Current documentation and support programs focus on the disability category, or label. This categorisation does not take into the account the impact of the disability for the individual and the environment in which they live. In a tertiary education setting support services are assessed and provided on the basis of need.

Moving away from categorisation into need assessment for all levels of education should address issues related to perception (i.e if you have Down's you are....). This will also promote a focus on environmental changes/adaptation and individually tailored packages that can be modified on the basis of individual growth and long term life plans.

In saying this, the critical component of education is the development and promulgation of inclusive environments and practices rather than case by case management.

- Current documentation is poorly developed or understood in relation to mental health conditions and learning disabilities. There needs to be a national campaign addressing the understanding of these areas. It is not uncommon for a learning disability to be perceived as dyslexia only and something that can be cured rather than a neurological condition that can be managed. Addressing the delivery of education programs in terms of best practice that are flexible enough to cope with diversity would go a long way in addressing equitable access.

Universities face an increasing pressure to modify and develop teaching practices to cater for a broader, changing student group. Funding to allow institutions to move to the proactive development of programs, which address all levels of diversity, as opposed to the reactive actions would be of great benefit to all students and minimise overall input.

Validation, and education, of learning disabilities on a national basis will move the education sectors to openly discuss and address management strategies for the individual, strategies that focus on independence and self help. There is currently no consistent assessment process, clear understanding of the issues or recognition of the support required in this area.

- In the Mental Health arena the main issue in the tertiary sector relates to lack of understanding and acceptance. Lack of understanding impacts on education processes in a number of ways, particularly communication and being accepted into university life.

In this area there is often a tension between pieces of legislation and this tension needs to be addressed by the Commonwealth. In particular there would appear to be tension between the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Disability Discrimination Act in terms of inclusion versus safety. If we then add in the relatively new documentation in relation to International Students, tertiary facilities struggle with the issues of discipline related to behaviour, standards of facilities and operating in an inclusive way whilst maintaining safety for staff and students.

- Assessment processes, a prime tool for all levels of education appear to be inconsistently understood and implemented in the learning disability area. Or indeed, the mental health arena within an educational setting. This lack of clear usable assessment processes often result in the individual needing to advocate strongly for inclusion and understanding.

Assessment processes appear to focus on the disability whereas they would be more informative and usable tools if they could assess the individual needs in terms of environmental impacts.

Students with a disability are often assessed by professional staff from outside the university environment, rather than by those with an understanding of how to manage the need. As a result recommendations are often unrealistic and target strategies that continue to promote dependence. Given the role of a tertiary education facility the strategies that emerge from an assessment need to take into

account the fact that students are moving towards an independent career and the university should be assisting them in this.

A national process to move the University employed Disability Liaison Officers (DLO) into a professional category would go a long way to addressing this. Making the DLO group a professional body will allow universities to handle processes internally, streamline the provision of services, raise the status of the issues being addressed and provide a professional body for consultation. In addition University accountabilities in terms of DEST funding and industry representation would be enhanced.

- In looking at equity groups there are two obvious gaps that appear. Firstly for students with a disability from low socio-economic background or rural and remote areas there can be skill gaps in certain areas. The impact of these gaps may be seen in utilisation of resources, technological skills etc. A development of the current DEST enabling program would allow these to be addressed in a systematic way.

For students with a disability transition issues can be quite problematic as they move from a protected school environment into the tertiary sector. In addition this group are often best supported through the use of technology as this allows access to written materials, home access to materials, a clear communication process, and a range of other benefits. For some students purchasing the necessary hardware and software and learning how to use it can be time consuming and costly. Education in the use of this type of software should be occurring at secondary school or be available as an enabling or skills acquisition program in the time between leaving school and commencing university.

- The establishment of bridging programs at each transitional stage of education could be of great benefit to students with a disability. The current system provides a range of early intervention programs for young students that are primarily focussed on individual aids or groups with a low student/teacher ratio. These are obviously essential programs in the primary years where nurturing is an essential part of the overall needs. However as a person progresses through their education the level and type of support needs to change to reflect the social norms for the age group, movement out of the school environment and developing self management strategies.

A bridging program from secondary to tertiary education would allow students to become familiar with technology specific to their needs, understand the difference between secondary school and university and establish self advocacy skills that will enable them to move into the tertiary sector on an equal footing with other students.

- In regards to funding there are two areas that need to be looked at – the cost for the individual and the cost for the institution.

For the individual there are costs associated with the use of technology and an extension of the Workplace Modification Scheme to cover career/work linked education should be considered. The importance of students being assisted to

purchase assistive hardware and software, can not be stressed too much: it is critical to the students success at university.

For the tertiary institution there are a range of costs that are unrecognised at this stage. As learning disabilities and mental health issue are primarily supported by staff time DEST does not recognise the high costs that can be associated with individuals with these types of disabilities.

The highest cost for any university in relation to providing education for students with disabilities relates to the provision of print materials in alternate formats. It is recommended that this Inquiry review the outcomes from the HREOC forum on the provision of print materials in alternate formats to be held in Sydney, May 2002.

Inclusivity should be part of the design of any learning materials, whether produced within the University, or produced commercially. Inclusive design will decrease the cost, and shorten the waiting times, now required for material conversion. There is a clear role for the government in encouraging and supporting publishers to provide materials in an inclusive manner.

- The provision of educational programs for students with a disability would be greatly enhanced if the level of knowledge and understanding of teaching staff, at all levels, is increased. In saying this it is not necessary for all teachers to understand the cause and medical issues related to disability types but to extend teaching theory to assessment, and targeting, of need for diverse groups of students.

The current system appears to revolve around a socialisation of dependence whereas both the individual and the institutions would benefit if the system could move to a socialisation of independence.

*b) What the proper roles of the Commonwealth, States and Territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.*

- From a tertiary perspective the commonwealth should be taking a leading role in terms of future development, understanding and addressing legislative issues, advocating on a national basis for research, program development, and sponsoring planning forums.
- In addition the commonwealth as the funding body for universities needs to address issues of high cost support for students with learning disabilities and mental health issues. There is also a role for the commonwealth in establishing educational programs for the community that raise awareness and understanding of these two areas.
- As mentioned earlier the commonwealth has a role in encouraging the production of materials used in educational facilities in an inclusive manner e.g electronic books, videos with captions, audio with typewritten script.

- Finally the role of the commonwealth needs to be assessed and determined on the basis of inclusive practices and focussing on environmental changes.
- States and Territories have a continuing role in providing the associated supports for people with disabilities at all levels and types of human endeavour. For a University student it is essential that the State or Territory governments recognise and address issues pertaining to attendant care, transport and the provision of a skilled base of support staff i.e sign interpreters. It would also be worth exploring the use of State established internet networks (rural health etc) for rural and remote students to facilitate access and the undertaking of transition or skill acquisition programs.

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