THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Senate inquiry into the education of students with disabilities

Submission on behalf of the University of Melbourne
May 2002

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE SUBMISSION

Background

One of the University's guiding principles is to create "a diverse, harmonious scholarly community committed to equity and merit as the fundamental principles through which staff and students are encouraged and assisted to realise their full potential" (University of Melbourne Strategic Plan: Perspective 2001). The University's Strategic Plan indicates a commitment both to enhanced access for students with disability, and also to ensuring appropriate levels of support.

> As well as heeding equity considerations in selection and access, the University also emphasises retention and completion rates as measures of the effectiveness of equity policies. The goal is not just to make enrolment in the University a realistic option for as many students as possible who are qualified, irrespective of their capacity to pay fees and related educational costs, but also to provide such specific support as these students may need to progress satisfactorily to graduation.
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> University of Melbourne Strategic Plan: Perspective 2001

The University utilises a needs based model in which the individual and the impact of their disability over time is the key to the provision of appropriate services and supports. Factors can include the variability of a person's disability, socio-economic issues, levels of personal acceptance, acquisition of skills required to manage disability in education environment, access to adaptive technologies and accessible environments. These factors may vary over time, requiring a potentially different response by the University.

Table 1 (below) shows the increase in numbers of students accessing the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) since it was first established in 1991.

Table 1 Numbers of students with a disability registering with the DLU 1991-2001
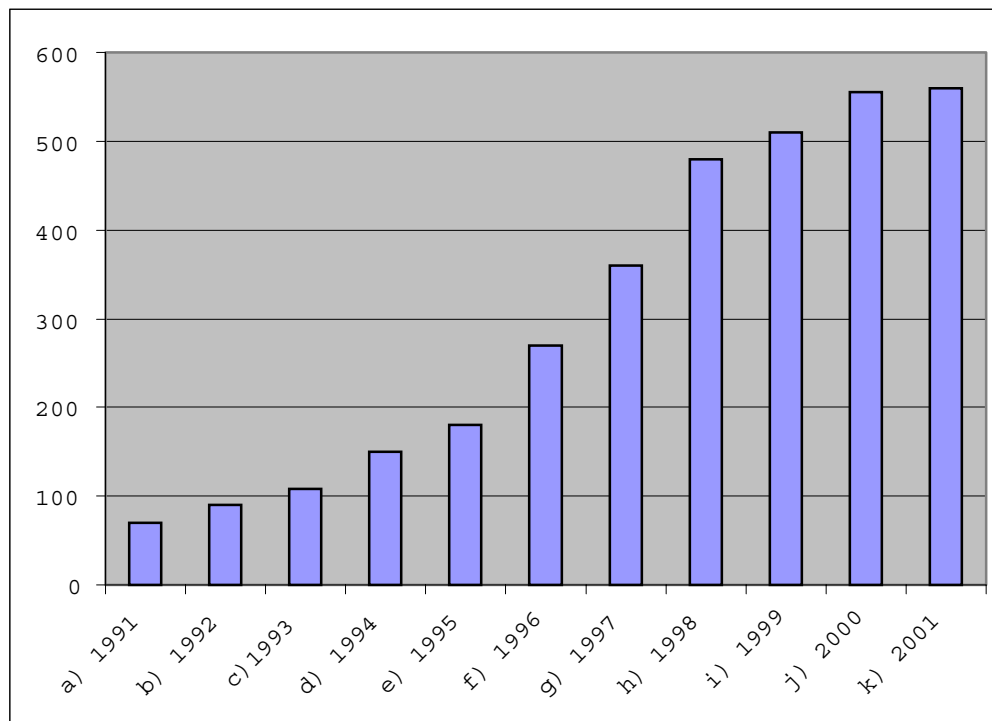
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Numbers of students with disabilities have increased over time, but more significantly, complexity of support needs has increased. Key issues relate to increasing costs associated with:

- A general increase in numbers of students with disabilities;
- Increased number of students undertaking full time study, with a corresponding increase in the volume of requests (there is also an increased number of combined degree students);
- Increased number of students undertaking courses in the Science, Education and Engineering faculties where the contact hours are higher and there are additional complexities in presenting scientific notation in alternative formats;
- Increased expectations as levels of support in the secondary sector have increased;
- An increase in post graduate students with disabilities (with higher support costs);
- An increase in numbers of high support needs students, in particular, students with vision impairments; and
- An increase in the cost of providing material in alternative formats.

Table 2 (below) shows the increase in expenditure for direct support to students (this excludes budget allocated to the University's Disability Liaison Unit – in 2002 this was $345,000).

Table 2 Increase in expenditure on disability[1] 1997-2000

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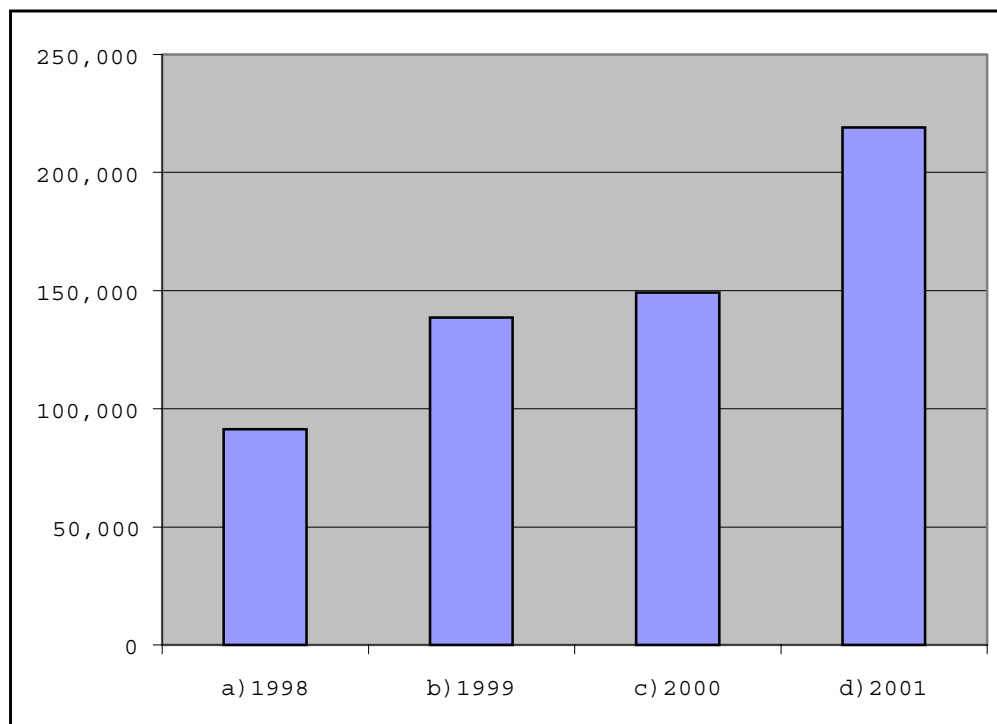
[1]   Direct support costs only (e.g. interpreters, notetakers etc; excludes Disability Liaison Unit budget allocation – in 2002 this was $345,000)

Senate Inquiry: Terms of reference

(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 different levels of handicap

The University of Melbourne uses the definition of disability contained in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1992. The DDA includes a broad range of conditions including temporary disabilities which potentially covers most of the population.   Existing definitions contained within the DDA are sufficient for the University's purposes.

Students who are able to demonstrate that they have a disability as defined by the DDA are eligible for support from the University. This support may be intensive assistance provided through the Disability Liaison Unit, or minor adjustments such as Special Consideration or extensions for assignments negotiated with faculty staff.

Students who request support from the University because of a disability are required to provide documentation from a relevant professional to substantiate the nature and extent of their disability. Criteria that establishes level of handicap are problematic in the sense that there are many disabilities that are not easily categorised or can be benchmarked against defined criteria because each disability/condition varies in its extent and impacts differently on each person. For example people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome may generally experience fatigue, but it is the extent of that fatigue and the way that an individual copes with it in a particular environment that determines their needs. On the other hand, students with vision or hearing impairments may be more easily categorised as their impairment is more easily measured against predetermined medical criteria that may indicate a level of handicap. Accommodations across the sector may therefore be more easily benchmarked against medical criteria indicating a differential in terms of handicap. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that not all students are at the same level of skill development to accommodate their disability.

Staff of the University with the exception of Health and Counselling Service staff, are not in a position to diagnose a disability and rely on information provided by external professionals to define disability. Staff of the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) are employed to assess the needs of students with disabilities and implement appropriate supports to minimise the impact of a disability.

The awareness of staff across the University who deal with the majority of disability issues as defined under the DDA is variable. Many staff seek guidance from DLU staff as to what supports or adjustments may be appropriate for an individual's circumstances. There are many staff however who are not in a position to differentiate what level of handicap exists and what type of support to implement. The staff of the DLU endeavour as part of their roles to increase awareness of disability issues with University staff.

NOTE: The proportion of students with disabilities who are supported by the Disability Liaison Unit is small in comparison to the number of students who would experience issues that would fall under the DDA (for example only 59% of students who registered with the DLU indicated a disability on their enrolment form).

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

The University generally assesses the needs of students with disabilities through the assessment of health professional documentation provided by students. This process relies heavily on the professionalism of the health practitioners completing the documentation.

Process for assessing documentation

The University has established the DLU as the primary means by which is seeks to provide services and supports for this group of students. The DLU has staff with the appropriate knowledge and experience to make recommendations to academic staff about a student's disability related needs in the education environment.

Assessment of a student's disability-related needs incorporates:

a) Reviewing documentation supplied by the appropriate professional; and
b) Interview with the student. The documentation usually, but not always, contains a statement of a diagnosis and impact that the condition/disability may have on a person with particular reference to learning.

The key to providing for an accurate assessment is the ability of policies and programs to be sufficiently flexible to respond to the needs of students.

Decisions are based on the following premises:

a) That a student's intrinsic disability/condition may alter over time;
b) That the skills the student requires to manage their disability/condition in the education environment may improve or need to be altered according to the nature of their disability over time. The development of these skills may also relate to the understanding a student has of their disability, a newly acquired disability and the degree to which socio cultural factors may impact on the development of skills; and
c) That the education environment alters over time. This may include further developments in adaptive technologies in the access of information, the development of an inclusive teaching practices and modifications to the physical environment.

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 understands that issues of disability can be exacerbated by factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background and geographic location. The University has a number of programs that facilitate participation of students with disabilities that take into account additional factors in the educational experience provided by the University.

- Targeted Access Program
  8% of first year enrolments are allocated to students from the equity groups designated by DEST (includes students with disability)
- Melbourne Access Program
  The Melbourne Access program aims to encourage access of equity groups by working with students in targeted schools from years 10-12
- Melbourne Scholarships
  There has been a 20% increase in equity scholarships – 78 in 2001
- There is also a housing bursary scheme (to assist with accommodation costs) and a housing scheme targeting students with disabilities (the University's Housing service supports students with disabilities and provides accessible housing).

The University also has a range of services in place to assist with a range of issues including:

- Disability Liaison Unit
- Housing Service (Including a student housing access program)

- Financial aid
- Centre for Indigenous Education
- Transition Program
- Learning Skills Unit
- Centre for English as a Second Language

Support of students with disabilities who have additional disadvantaging circumstances is generally more complex than those who do not have these circumstances and is manifested in a range of issues including:

- access to technology
- familiarity with technology
- access to extra-curricular aspects of student life

iv)   The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

'Early intervention' in the tertiary sector relates to transition from secondary to tertiary education but in a number of areas (learning disability and mental health issues for example), onset will occur during their candidature at university.

Transition to university

To date, specialised transition programs for students with disabilities are not well developed, although a project in 1999 looked at the transition needs of deaf and hearing impaired students (*Optimising the learning needs of deaf and hearing impaired students*. Victorian Cooperative Project between Vicdeaf, Chisholm and the University of Melbourne). Transition issues for students with disabilities are a focus of the 'New to Melbourne' program for rural students and others new to the Melbourne area. Orientation 'hosts' receive specialist training for enhancing the transition experience for students with disabilities.

Onset of disability during tertiary study

The average age of the University of Melbourne cohort is young, and more likely to develop a mental illness or acquire a disability through accident. Mental health issues have for a number of years been problematic for the University to solve. There are also numerous students seeking support from the Learning Skills Unit where learning disabilities are suspected and students referred to appropriate staff and organisations for a full assessment.

Also a number of mature age students entering through the Community Access Program who have learning disabilities that are undiagnosed. The University has been proactive in developing systems that can assist in early intervention these include:

- Development and publication of *Staying Sane on Campus: Strategies for optimising mental health*, which is handed out by academics and general staff who may suspect a student has an undisclosed mental illness or has disclosed that they have a mental illness.
- Establishment of a Mental Health Contact Officer Program. General Faculty staff who are trained in mental health issues act as an additional liaison point within the University to deal with mental health issues in a sensitive manner.
- Learning Skills Unit staff who are able to identify the symptoms of a learning disability and provide specialised learning support for students with learning disabilities and mental health issues

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

Universities have in the past funded disability support through their Commonwealth Operating Grant and other revenue sources. This has indirectly financially penalised institutions who have been successful in increasing the participation rate of students with disabilities, as this group of students have higher costs associated with their participation in higher education.

The Department of Science Education and Training (DEST) will in mid 2002 implement a funding program to assist universities in providing support to students with high support needs. This initiative represents an important shift in government thinking on the role played by government for facilitating participation in education for people with disabilities. DEST has budgeted $1.8 million for this program for 2002. The University of Melbourne experience is indicating that although the numbers of students participating in its courses grew dramatically through the 1990s, overall numbers with disabilities have remained stable over the last two years (table 1). However the number of students who require intensive support within this cohort is increasing (reflected in the increased costs indicated in table 2). Over the last two years at the University of Melbourne the numbers of students with high support needs has increased by 26% placing heavy pressure on University resources to meet this demand. Numbers of students requiring provision of material in alternative formats have increased significantly at a time when costs of converting to alternative format have increased dramatically (largely due to the move to full cost recovery by the major provider). The amount of Commonwealth money allocated for the Additional Funding for Students with High Support Needs spread between the 45 institutions with federally funded places will not have a significant impact on the budgetary implications of supporting students with high support needs. On current estimates, the amount allocated under this program appears inadequate to meet the needs of students with disabilities and should be increased following an evaluation of the first year of funding.

Students with disabilities can independently access their education if they have access to and training in the use of equipment and adaptive technology. There is currently no systematic process in place on either a state or federal level to provide technological solutions to the functional barriers experienced by students with disabilities. The use of such equipment can greatly enhance the educational outcomes for students with disabilities and can result in the development of broader skills that are readily transferable to the workplace. Federal funding is available for people with disabilities who require assistance and equipment in the transition to the workplace. There would be significant benefits to providing equipment to University students where appropriate such that a familiarity with equipment use can be developed, minimising barriers to employment for people with disabilities who have to apply separately for funding for equipment in the workplace.

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

The University of Melbourne does not offer specialist segregated programs for students with disabilities. The University offers a high level and sophisticated educational experience for a diverse student body, which includes students with disabilities, and does not see a need to implement alternative segregated learning programs for students with disabilities. All courses of the University are open to students with disabilities, with in some cases, some limitations for the participation of some students with disabilities depending on their individual disability.

vii) Teacher training and professional development

The University of Melbourne is committed to the development of its staff and provides a range of professional development activities. The University has found it problematic to provide specific

disability awareness training to all of its teaching staff in the context of many competing demands. There is however a recognition by the University that disability issues are an important issue that need to be addressed by professional development. Specific examples of training provided by the University include:

- Mental Health Contact Officer training for nominated staff that focuses on awareness of mental health issues.
- Tutors of some faculties are involved in an induction and training program that covers disability issues.
- The University will offer a disability awareness training package for academics in 2001. This may become part of the ongoing professional development following an evaluation.

viii)   State and territory legislation

The University of Melbourne works under the guidance of the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the State Equal Opportunity Act (1995). State Equal Opportunity Act (1995) in determining the needs and supports provided for students with disabilities. The University is obliged to provide services to students with disabilities to facilitate their participation in education at the University of Melbourne. There are significant resource implications for the University in providing an educational environment that is free of disability discrimination, as mandated by anti-discrimination legislation. In a climate of reducing reliance on government funding, the University has to allocate its resources responsibly and cannot afford to alter its environment and practices to comply with anti-discrimination legislation in a short time frame. While the University complies with standards for new buildings, many of the University's older structures require significant expenditure to meet modern compliance standards. There is a significant cost associated with building compliance, the provision of services and the employment of sufficient staff to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The cohort of students with disabilities in the University environment has increasing numbers of students with high support needs which will result in increasing demand for time and financial resources. There will continue to be barriers towards the participation of students with disabilities if the funding made available to Universities is not increased.

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

The participation rate of people with disabilities in employment and education is well below what could be expected given their representation in the population of Australia. Lower participation rates in employment result in a significant cost to the community both in the cost of welfare and reduced production. It is in the interest of government at both a state and federal level to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities in education as this is a pathway to increased employment opportunities and participation in society.

There are a number of barriers to increased participation of students with disabilities in education. Many of these barriers result in reduced academic performance that impact on the ability of students to gain entry into higher education. These barriers are beyond the control of the University but it does attempt to influence these barriers through its role in the training of professionals such as teachers, medical practitioners and psychologists.

Universities are expected to use public funding to provide the base level infrastructure that facilitates access for students with disabilities, including the employment of staff with expertise in the support of students with disabilities. Universities have also been expected to fund the additional support needs of students with disabilities. Expenditure on this support has increased dramatically in recent years and the Department of Education Science and Training has allocated some funding for this in 2002. This is a significant policy shift which is commended by the University of Melbourne, but without any experience of the administration of the program or

receipt of funding it is difficult to predict whether this program will adequately meet demand. The University expects that a small return on money expended will occur, and advocates strongly that if the Department is taking responsibility for the provision of this support that more money will need to be allocated in future.

There are a number of state and federal programs that can provide equipment to people with disabilities such as the *Futures for Young Adults* program in Victoria. The provision of adaptive technology that can assist people into employment is funded federally, but may result in greater benefits if this could be extended to higher education, such that students with disabilities could independently access their studies and develop skills that enhance opportunities for employment.

Appendix

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: TERMS OF REFERENCE

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,

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

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

  iv. the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,

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

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

  vii. teacher training and professional development, and

  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.