

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY
INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES**



The University of New South Wales Student Guild of Undergraduates and Postgraduates

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INTRODUCTION

This submission will concentrate specifically on Section (a) v– “Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors” of the Terms of reference for the Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities, with specific reference to the Kensington campus of the University of New South Wales.

Since 1997, the number of students with a disability enrolled in Australian Universities has risen from 5761 to 6414¹, whilst total student enrolments in Australia universities has risen from 558,827 to 695,4852, reflecting a decrease in the percentage of enrolled university students with a disability, from 1.03% of the total student body in 1997 to only 0.92% in 2000.

Since 1999, the University of New South Wales has seen a marked improvement in enrolment access for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities now make up 2.88% of enrolments, the highest rate for the last 3 years. The participation of students with disabilities has been steadily improving since 1997, with a marked increase between 1998 and 1999. Despite these improvements, progress rates for students with disabilities have not achieved parity with other students, even though rate outcomes for the group have been very favourable, exceeding the national average. The retention rates at the University of New South Wales are good and exceed the national average.³

SERVICES PROVISION ON CAMPUS

EQUITY & DIVERSITY UNIT –UNSW

The Equity and Diversity Unit at the Kensington Campus of the University of New South Wales provides services to the University community across a broad range of targeted equity issues, including support and training on anti-discrimination legislation, training in UNSW Grievance procedures, providing disability support services for both students and staff as well as providing support for ACCESS students⁴ at the University. Further to this broad range of tasks, the Equity and Diversity Unit provides a number of other substantial services, including advice on equity and diversity policy development, planning, programs, strategies and evaluation, progress reports and statistical updates, training and education programs for managers and staff, and advice and information on inclusive curricula and teaching practices for academic staff.

The primary failure of support services on campus is the lack of informal or social networks to build community feeling amongst students with a disability. Students with disabilities felt that it would be appropriate to establish Early Intervention programs at universities such as these are a beneficial way for young people to work through their diagnosis and reality of living with a mental illness with the support and encouragement of their peers. Many localities do not provide such early intervention programs, which suggests that universities should be providing this kind of group therapy on their campuses.

Further, students reported the difficulty of engaging with other students in class, especially if students were mature-aged, or did not have the same pattern of study as their classmates. This dislocation of study patterns meant that many students reported that they sometimes felt quite isolated on campus. This is an area of engagement for the Student Guild, which is currently attempting to build an ongoing and more proactive student disability network.

1 “Table 86: Commencing and All Non-Overseas Students by Equity Group, 1991 to 2000”, Students 2000: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000, p. 174.

2 “Table 29: All Students by State, Institution, Citizenship and Residence Status”, Students 2000: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000, p. 58.

“Table 9. All Students by State, Institution and Broad Level of Course, 1997”, Selected Higher Education Statistics, 1997, Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997, pp. 23-24.

³ http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/pubs/equity00_02/unsu.htm

4 The ACCESS scheme is a scheme operated by UNSW whereby 5% of places within the HECS and Local Fee undergraduate program is reserved for ACCESS eligible applicants. Applicants are eligible if they fall into one of the proscribed areas of disadvantage, including disability, English language difficulties, difficult home circumstances or disrupted schooling, and have achieved a UAI or equivalent of at least 65.00. Further information available from www.equity.unsw.edu.au/access.html.

Students also provided positive reports on the ability for students with registered disabilities to gain access to a resource room within the Library on the Kensington campus. Further, students reported that access to such resources greatly helped them to engage with their university studies, and that these kinds of spaces enabled them to complete their assignments.

Recommendations

1. **The UNSW Student Guild recommends the expansion of disability support services, including support services for student with mental health disabilities, to provide substantial support to those students to aid them in the successful completion of their university studies.**
2. **The UNSW Student Guild recommends that the Federal Government fund initiatives that increase the engagement of students with a disability with the wider community, such as early intervention programs, and other informal support programs.**
3. **The UNSW Student Guild recommends that the Federal Government fund initiatives that encourage universities to establish and appropriately maintain resource spaces for students with disabilities to use to aid their study programs. These spaces should include access to suitable information technology, including technology such as large print display monitors for students with visual impairments, ergonomic desks and chairs, and other resources as appropriate.**

STAFF ACCESS

Students reported that, in the main, staff were amenable to providing support and extensions where appropriate, although where this support was not forthcoming, it seemed to be due to perceptions of what a 'disabled student' was. This issue arose specifically with regards to students with a mental health disability. Students reported that staff had good knowledge of the services available to them as disabled students.

However, it was apparent that students are in need of greater training and awareness of the needs of the students in their classes. Some students reported issues such as requiring a break in classes over an hour in length but teachers often do not provide for such breaks in their lessons.

PHYSICAL ACCESS

Students also noted with concern the ability to move across the Kensington campus without significant travel, especially for those students with mobility impairments. The Student Guild supports the substantial efforts that have been made by the University to improve physical access to the Kensington Campus.

Recommendations

4. **Universities must aim to provide a physical environment in which students with disabilities can undertake their studies. In the design of new buildings, the UNSW Student Guild recommends that explicit attention be paid to building design to ensure ease of access and use by people with disabilities, further that Universities should endeavour to improve access to older buildings that do not meet the required standards.**

ENROLMENT PATTERNS

Students provided positive feedback on being allowed to enroll in one subject per semester, and indicated that this was one of the primary reasons for allowing them to cope with the pressures of a university workload.

Recommendations

5. **That students with a disability be encouraged to enrol in study patterns that are lifestyle appropriate, including the ability to enrol in one subject per semester.**

INCOME SUPPORT

Students with disabilities can receive various forms of income support. Applying to Centrelink was reported to be arduous and costly. Many students with a disability, including those with a registered mental illness, reported that they were unable to study a full-time load because of the nature of their disability. Therefore, although they are studying what for them is a full-time load, they are ineligible for Youth Allowance or Austudy.

Instead they must either apply for a New Start Allowance or the Disability Pension. Centrelink officers do not appear to have a clear method for processing applications for students with disabilities, and it was reported that applications can be passed from one officer to another, causing substantial time delays for the processing of applications for income support.

Students with a mental illness reported that they often have to continue to submit forms to Centrelink from their psychiatrist every 3 months to show that they are still suffering from a mental illness, at which time their application is reviewed. This is a costly and unnecessary burden to ask students with a lifelong illness to submit forms from their psychiatrist and visit a Centrelink office every 3 months.

Many students with disabilities are either on the New Start Allowance or the disability pension. Neither of these caters specifically for students with disabilities, and students reported a general lack of understanding by Centrelink staff, many of whom seem to lack training in services available to students with disabilities.

As income support is crucial in enabling students with disabilities to attend university, the Student Guild sees it as appropriate that the Committee consider this issue.

Recommendations

6. **That students with a disability be paid income support according to specific income support criteria.**
7. **That Centrelink improve its processing of applications made by students with disabilities and seek to make the procedure as easy as possible for students with disabilities recognising the extra difficulty students with disabilities may have with satisfying requirements that are costly or time consuming, or involving travel.**

S U M M A R Y O F R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

The following is a summary of the recommendations put forth by the University of New South Wales Student Guild.

1. The UNSW Student Guild recommends the expansion of disability support services, including support services for student with mental health disabilities, to provide substantial support to those students to aid them in the successful completion of their university studies.
2. The UNSW Student Guild recommends that the Federal Government fund initiatives that increase the engagement of students with a disability with the wider community, such as early intervention programs, and other informal support programs.
3. The UNSW Student Guild recommends that the Federal Government fund initiatives that encourage universities to establish and appropriately maintain resource spaces for students with disabilities to use to aid their study programs. These spaces should include access to suitable information technology, including technology such as large print display monitors for students with visual impairments, ergonomic desks and chairs, and other resources as appropriate.
4. Universities must aim to provide a physical environment in which students with disabilities can undertake their studies. In the design of new buildings, the UNSW Student Guild recommends that explicit attention be paid to building design to ensure ease of access and use by people with disabilities, further that Universities should endeavour to improve access to older buildings that do not meet the required standards.
5. That students with a disability be encouraged to enrol in study patterns that are lifestyle appropriate, including the ability to enrol in one subject per semester.

6. That students with a disability be paid income support according to specific income support criteria.
7. That Centrelink improve its processing of applications made by students with disabilities and seek to make the procedure as easy as possible for students with disabilities recognising the extra difficulty students with disabilities may have with satisfying requirements that are costly or time consuming, or involving travel.