

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee  
Inquiry Into Education of Students with Disabilities

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## **Summary**

Our submission to this enquiry relates specifically to disabled students who are currently enrolled at a tertiary institution or prospective students who might consider tertiary education. Most Australian tertiary institutions offer facilities and resources for the disabled community on campus. Facilities are co-ordinated by a dedicated unit whose staff are employed to liaise with the institution proper on behalf of disabled people on campus, both staff and students.

Community perception of what constitutes disability may be quite different from that of the tertiary student. In our experience, an individual's perception of what constitutes disability is wide ranging. It encompasses a diversity of conditions, some of which are overt, some which are "hidden". Hidden disabilities include conditions not obvious to anyone other than the person affected. Examples are mental illness, intractable pain, weakness of limbs, multiple sclerosis, presence of HIV and/or Hepatitis, chronic fatigue syndromes and learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

Hidden disability (e.g. mental illness) is often compared with, and measured against, disability (e.g. physical) that is apparent. One may be viewed as less or more deserving of assistance than the other. Comparisons may manifest in a degree of suspicion or a lack of "good faith" upon the part of institutional staff, particularly in relation to resource allocations within departments for these students. Such comparisons are unhelpful and do little to support a tertiary student affected by either problem.

Ms Grehan and Ms Drew declare a particular interest in the needs of those students who are already enrolled or considering enrolment in tertiary education, and who are affected by a hidden disability.

## **Addressing the Terms of Reference**

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### **(a) i) The Criteria Used to Define Disability and to Differentiate Between Levels of Handicap**

Current policy of our institution endorses a determination by a medical practitioner of a) the presence of a student's disability, and b), how the disability might manifest. Disabled students who pursue tertiary education often face considerable obstacles in securing assistance during their studies, based on how they are physically perceived by others. Despite the disability being fully legitimised and endorsed by a medical practitioner, a tertiary student affected by a hidden disability may be subject to value judgements about the existence of, or the degree of, his/her disability. This may occur at a Faculty, Department or School level. As some resources for these students are provided by individual Departments and Schools within the institution, if the disability is "hidden", the student must be his/her own advocate, and in some cases, may feel compelled to justify to a range of people, his/her application for assistance.

#### **(a) i) Recommendation 1**

We believe that the disability determination should be approached at a uniform, national level, rather than a process of relying on each institution to determine its own criteria for determining disability. This would provide a nationally equitable benchmark for all tertiary students affected by a range of disabilities, irrespective of the resources available for students at individual institutions.

#### **(a) i) Recommendation 2**

To enable students with a pre-existing disability to choose which tertiary institution would best provide for their needs, and for those students who develop a disability during the course of their tertiary education, we believe each institution should openly declare in the public forum, e.g. on the institutional website and publications, at a minimum, the following policies:

- How students are determined as 'disabled';
- How it identifies which disabled students are eligible for its assistance;
- What needs students can reasonably expect to be assisted with under that institution's definitions of disability;
- How much assistance is available and in what form; and importantly,
- How long the process of assessment, consultation and implementation of assistance, in operational terms, will realistically take.

### **v) Adequacy of Support in the Public Sector**

A gulf appears to exist between what is institutional policy and what resources students actually are provided with, once ensconced in their respective faculty or school. Disability support workers cite the reason for this gulf, as a lack of interest and motivation on the part of institutions to direct limited funding to what is a rapidly expanding demand for services. Some support units respond to student needs simply by saying "sorry, we don't have the money". Limited information is accessible to the disabled tertiary student as to possible entitlements, and a great deal of personal fortitude is often required to pursue funding and resource opportunities. Some students choose to compromise their own, limited, financial resources to secure equipment and other resources when it becomes apparent that these are not available through the institution. At least in this way, they can progress their studies.

We identify the following as inadequacies of support in the public sector for tertiary students affected by hidden disability:

- Institutional policy on what is really available to students is not transparent; and
- Translation of policy into practice is not co-ordinated;
- Service delivery relies on the assertiveness of the individual student to pursue the promised resources, and staff at a department level to be interested in the particular needs of the student, eg a supervisor, librarian.

Most facilities on offer are available to a student providing that the student is actually attending the campus. It may not be ideal, or even possible, for students with mobility and comfort issues (eg. back pain when sitting) or psychological issues, to undertake tertiary studies in this way. A student may be able to work in less discomfort and more effectively in his/her home, rather than on campus. The issue of the institution's obligation to support the home-based disabled student to undertake study, however, does not disappear.

#### Case Study 1

To cite an example of how a student seeks "support", consider the case of Student A. Prior to commencing her tertiary studies, Student A consulted with a disability support service to seek advice. The student was unable to type or write for any length of time and her condition required the use of physical aids to sit. The presence and extent of her disability was confirmed by a doctor.

The unit's staff suggested that she use dictating software which precludes the need to physically use a keyboard. Dictating software was available to Student A on campus, in a designated room. The room, however, lacked appropriate seating and aids to meet Student A's needs for physical support. The software was used by a range of students and subject to a roster system. Following a second assessment by the support unit, Student A was permitted to have an institutional copy of the dictating software installed upon her home computer.

Soon after Student A's second consultation, but before the software had been installed on her home computer, the disability support unit's staff changed. Permission for Student A to use the software at her own home was withdrawn. Student A persisted in her attempt to access the resources previously negotiated, a process the student described as "a battle".<sup>1</sup> Permission to use the software at her home was subsequently reinstated.

Two years later, Student A sought permission through the support unit to upgrade the version of the voice recognition software, as considerable advantages accompanied updated versions. During that time, the tertiary education facility secured a network licence for use of this software, but instituted a policy of no longer permitting students to use such software applications supplied by the facility in their own homes. A moratorium was placed on the provision of resources (such as software upgrades) while review of current policy was undertaken. Six months after her initial inquiry for an upgrade of software, Student A was still waiting for an institutional policy decision on whether or not access to newer technology to assist her tertiary studies was possible. Because six months on a postgraduate scholarship constituted one fifth of the student's total time at the institution to complete a research degree, Student A elected to find the finances herself to procure the newer software which instantly increased her productivity, but left her financially depleted.

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<sup>1</sup> Grehan M Personal Communication with Student A, May 2002

## Case Study 2

A lack of co-ordination not only wastes valuable resources, but the experience of waiting for the institution to a) address the needs of a student and b) implement those identified needs can be enormously frustrating, as described by this student.

*...they've got the service here [for reading books onto tape for visually disabled students], but I actually got a lot of the texts I needed at the beginning of semester at the end of semester. So I've got all these texts now that I needed back then and I couldn't use any of them.<sup>2</sup>*

### v) Recommendation

We believe that a sound, co-ordinated infrastructure for services to disabled students needs to be established and accountable to students of the service at each tertiary institution. National policy development in relation to the use of technology and similar resources should be undertaken so disabled students are not disadvantaged at different institutions by a lack of access to technological advances which facilitate their studies.

### vii) **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

Most institution's support units cater for both paid staff and students affected by disability. Once students are enrolled, there may be little contact with the disability support unit except around exam times.

A number of faculties/schools are required to provide some assistance to students during their course of study. An interested staff member within a faculty or school may nominate himself/herself as a disability student support person for that faculty and this may be the extent of support provision. Despite the best intentions of these staff, our experience tells us that students often require more support than is available at this level. No specific training is provided to these faculty staff and the enormous variety of disability needs renders their position to provide support untenable.

### vii) Recommendation

We believe that staff with specific training and 'coal-face' experience in disability service provision are best placed to address the educational needs of disabled students and such staff should be employed at each tertiary institutions within both the support unit and each faculty to ensure that disabled students are not disadvantaged.

### **Issues of Confidentiality and Privacy**

People with any disability (particularly those with a hidden disability) are entitled to maintain their able-bodied identity if they so choose. Some students may choose not to disclose the disability to their faculty or department as they perceive that, in exposing the presence of a disability, they may attract criticism or discrimination.

In our experience, the right to privacy and confidentiality are not viewed as seriously by institutional administration as they are by the consumers of disability services. To cite one example of serious breach of privacy, a recent administrative e-mail was sent to a list of

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<sup>2</sup> Drew S (1997) *Student Agency: A feminist qualitative analysis of the participation of a group of students with disabilities in tertiary education*. Unpublished Honours Thesis, University of Queensland, Department of Sociology.p100

clients associated with an institutional disability support unit. When the e-mail arrived, it displayed the names and e-mail addresses of every disabled client of the unit to whom the e-mail was sent. Each individual's association with the unit was thus declared for all to read, without permission or consideration for the privacy of the individual.

Privacy may be breached in other ways. To access funding opportunities, students may be expected or required to disclose their disability. At one institution, in order to procure equipment/resources to assist their tertiary education, disabled students may apply for bursaries. Such applications require a letter of support from either the Dean of the Faculty, Head of Department in which a student is enrolled, or the Head of an Affiliated Residential College. The requirement of approval/endorsement of parties other than the disability support unit for access to resources is viewed by some students as an invasion of their privacy. Consequently, if the student does not wish to disclose his/her disability to staff of the faculty or department, it may be another avenue of funding inaccessible to the student. These measures may act as a disincentive to apply for such resources.

#### Recommendation

We believe that in line with recent Federal Government privacy legislation, such requirements such as open declaration of disability status in order to apply for equipment bursaries at any institution be abolished and funding opportunities for all disabled students be offered by a method which protects the privacy of individuals.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

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