

Sean Tyrell
2/Rear 3-5 Docker Street
RICHMOND VIC 3121

SUBMISSION TO SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In this submission I would like to describe an aspect of my experience as a blind student at the University of Melbourne between 1999 and 2001, where I was initially enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts and later in the Bachelor of Public Policy and Management.

During my time at university a progressive eye condition has destroyed most of my sight. I have become vision impaired to the extent that I can no longer read printed materials, and I require the use of a white cane to move around the campus.

I began my tertiary studies at the University of Melbourne in the combined Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Engineering (Chemical) in 1993. At this time I was only beginning to experience difficulty with vision, and I had no idea what lay ahead. In 1998 I applied for a Leave of Absence from the University and referred myself to the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, where I received training in Braille literacy and technology that enables blind people to use computers. This assistance equipped me with the skills and knowledge I would need for a successful return to my studies.

The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind also provided me with information about my rights and responsibilities as a student with a disability. Chief among these is the right for me to receive all study materials in an alternative format to print, such as Braille or electronic text. The Institute provides a transcription service to Victorian learning institutions.

The University of Melbourne subscribes to this service and through it provides blind students with study materials in alternative formats, but it requires blind students to wait until late in semester or after final examinations before receiving these materials. The reason for this is that academic staff do not plan their courses and decide what materials to prescribe until the fortnight before a course begins. Since it takes three months for the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind to transcribe print into an alternative format a blind student must wait until after semester concludes before his study materials are ready.

Receiving study materials after examinations is a significant disadvantage, and can make it difficult to complete subjects successfully. The University has not always agreed to my requests for extensions on submitting work until after I have received the materials on which the work is to be based, and as a consequence my academic record contains a number of zeros. I do not expect that these fails will enhance my future opportunities in employment and further study.

In every subject I have taken since returning to the University as a blind student in 1999 I have requested early access to study materials for the purpose of obtaining transcriptions to an alternative format. Academic staff at the University of Melbourne routinely refuse to accommodate this request, although it should be noted that there have been a small number of staff who have been prepared to make the adjustments required for my participation in their subjects. Staff are not usually moved by my arguments about their responsibilities under anti-discrimination legislation or the effect their decision will have on my learning outcomes.

I have complained to higher authorities at the University about discrimination each time a member of academic staff has refused to provide me with early access to study materials for the purpose of obtaining transcription to an alternative format. Professor Alan Gilbert, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor Stuart MacIntyre, Dean of Arts, routinely ignore my correspondence and deny my right to participate in education at the University of Melbourne. The University does have a Disability Action Plan, a policy regarding students with disabilities, and a procedure for resolving grievances about disability discrimination. In practice, however, senior staff at the University pretend that these things do not exist.

My frustration with the University has reached the point where I have decided to discontinue my enrolment in the Bachelor of Public Policy and Management and pursue my concerns about disability discrimination through the Federal Disability *Discrimination Act (1992)*. I am convinced that the University of Melbourne will not give blind students the same access to materials as enjoyed by people without a disability unless it is forced to do so by the Federal Court.

I will participate in education on the same terms as fully sighted students in my course, or I will not do it at all. In those few subjects where I have enjoyed fair access to materials I have recorded very good results, and I believe that there is nothing inherent in the acquisition of a vision disability that impairs my capacity for thought and learning. It is rather the way the University of Melbourne has decided to respond to my blindness that is the root cause of my difficulties.

I would be pleased to attend the inquiry and provide more information about the problem I describe in this submission. I have documents that verify all of the assertions that I have made above.

I can be contacted by telephone on (03) 9429 0707. It would be appreciated if any return correspondence could be made by e-mail, in deference to my blindness. My address is seantyrell@bigpond.com

Sincerely

Sean Tyrell