

Chapter 6

Disabilities and Post-Secondary Education

6.1 Students with disabilities are under represented in post-secondary education. The committee acknowledges however, that participation rates in higher education are improving. The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act and policy initiatives such as the 1990 *Higher Education Equity Plan* have been influential in providing better access to universities for people with disabilities. In 1996, 1.9 per cent of domestic students enrolled in university identified as having a disability. By 2000, this rate had increased to 2.7 per cent.¹

6.2 Students with disabilities are under-represented in the vocational education and training (VET) system: in 2000, 3.6 per cent of total students in the VET system identified as having a disability. These students are more likely to be enrolled in a general education course than a course with a vocational focus.² The committee was not surprised to learn that employment and income outcomes for VET students with a disability are substantially lower than for other students³ and agrees that such inequality requires attention.

6.3 The focus of this chapter will be on universities and this reflects the weight of evidence from the post-secondary sector. The committee regrets that it was not able to give adequate attention to problems that students with disabilities have to overcome when they move from the education sector to the workforce. This issue may warrant an inquiry of its own.

Outcomes for students in the vocational education and training sector

6.4 The committee considers the depressing figures on the proportion of TAFE students with disabilities employed after training to be a serious indictment of the capacity of the VET sector to respond to the needs of its graduates with disabilities. The ANTA chief executive told the committee that the proportion of graduates with disabilities who are not in the workforce is increasing significantly. There is no known reason for this: only speculation about disenchantment with job prospects.⁴ The committee makes the point that disability numbers as a percentage of the total VET population is lower than that of the independent school sector, in which participation rates are very low.

1 Submission No. 178, Department of Education Science and Training, p. 22

2 Submission No. 191, Australian National Training Authority, p. 3

3 Submission No. 124, National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd, pp. 7–8

4 Ms Moira Scollay, CEO, ANTA, *Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 September 2002, p. 445

6.5 The committee believes that for people with disabilities the range of options in the VET sector should offer a realistic choice – and chance – for employment and career success. One of the great strengths of the system is the flexibility of its enrolment processes, enabling those with a chequered history of formal school education to make a fresh start. The committee was therefore concerned about the under representation of students with disabilities in this sector. The proportion of the people aged between 15 and 64 with a disability is 16.7 per cent yet the proportion of the VET population, aged between 15 and 64 with a disability is 3.6 per cent.⁵ The Australia National Training Authority (ANTA) estimates that the shortfall in the participation rate of people with a disability in VET was nearly 178,500 people in 1998, and without changes to the system will reach more than 215,000 by the year 2005.⁶ Clearly there is a need to address the systemic barriers that face students with disabilities in the VET system.

6.6 The committee is concerned that employment and income outcomes for VET students with a disability are substantially less than for other students. Only 43 per cent of graduates who reported having a disability were employed in 2001 compared with 73 per cent of all graduates⁷. Research by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd (NCVER) reveals that new TAFE graduates are significantly less likely to obtain employment compared to other TAFE graduates. Further, students with a disability who are successful in securing employment after graduation, are less likely to receive the same level of income as Australians as a whole, after allowing for factors such as field of study, occupation and level of qualification obtained.⁸

6.7 ANTA told the committee that the prospect for employment for students with disabilities was reduced because they were more likely to be enrolled in a general education course rather than a course with a vocational focus. Other reasons included a changing age profile of students with disabilities in VET and reasons for study:

...employment outcomes following training are declining for people with a disability. People with disabilities are most likely to be undertaking AQF levels 1 and 2 at 34 per cent in 2001 compared with 29 per cent of total students. We also know that in 2001, one-third of students with a disability undertook VET in multi-field courses compared with 14 per cent of all students, which means they are not in the training package job specific competencies area. The proportion of TAFE graduates with a disability employed after training declined from 50 per cent in 1997 to 43 per cent in

5 *Bridging Pathways: A National Strategy from 2000 to 2005*, Australian National Training Authority, p. 5

6 *ibid.*, p. 5

7 *ANTA Annual Report, 2001–2002*, p. 74

8 *Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics 2000: Students with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training*, NCVER, p. 10

2001. Over the same period the proportion of total TAFE graduates employed after training increased slightly from 71 per cent to 73 per cent.⁹

6.8 TAFE Directors told the committee:

...the reason why employment outcomes have declined for students with a disability is the programs that we currently offer, that are funded, do not focus strongly on employment outcomes. That is an area that needs as much attention as any other part of dealing with students with a disability.¹⁰

6.9 The committee heard that training packages developed under the Australian Qualifications Framework did not meet the needs of students with disabilities. Course content was described as inadequate, while the workplace delivery of these packages did not cater well for students who were not employed. The committee was told that despite the New Apprenticeship Scheme, only 1.8 per cent of new apprentices in 2001 had disabilities:

With regard to traineeships, they have not served students with a disability well for a number of reasons. One reason is that they tend to favour people who are employed in the workplace. Another reason is that there has been little funding available for TAFE institutes to develop programs which can strengthen people's opportunities of gaining employment through traineeships and apprenticeships. Most of the educational programs that are conducted in vocational education in secondary schools tend not to have clear vocational outcomes and are focused at the Certificate I level rather than the Certificate II level.¹¹

6.10 TAFE Directors suggested that there is a need for state and Commonwealth governments to agree on some key programs to improve vocational outcomes for students with disabilities. The committee supports this view and will closely monitor the implementation of the Australian National Training Authority's policy strategy, *Bridging Pathways*. This strategy aims to increase opportunities for people with a disability in vocational education and training.

Assessing the needs of students in universities with disabilities

6.11 The committee received submissions and heard from a number of universities, student associations, advisory councils, academics and university students. The evidence indicates that universities have generally developed consistent frameworks for supporting the needs of students with disabilities. Universities operate under the inclusive definition of disability under the Disability Discrimination Act while the *Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Institutions* establishes principles and guidelines for planning and delivery of services to students with

9 Ms Moira Scollay, op. cit., *Hansard*, p. 444

10 Mr Bruce Mackenzie, Deputy Chair, TAFE Directors Australia, *Hansard*, Canberra, 11 September 2002, p. 628

11 *ibid.*, p. 624

disabilities across the sector.¹² It recommends national minimum standards of service and support, and identifies and documents examples of good practice in institutional responses to students with disabilities.¹³ The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee has also produced guidelines relating to students with disabilities. These guidelines act as advice on good practice, with the aim of assisting institutions to fulfil their responsibility to students with disabilities through strategies and arrangements which are appropriate to local circumstances.¹⁴

6.12 More than half of Australia's universities developed action plans under the Disability Discrimination Act. These voluntary plans provide institutions with the opportunity to indicate how they intend to overcome perceived discriminatory practices in the longer term. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission consider them when making determinations in relation to unjustifiable hardship.¹⁵ The Disability Advisory Council of Victoria argued that action plans had become a powerful tool for change:

We are seeing some really positive changes. Things like the action plan are a good example. That was a fairly minor part of the DDA, but the action plan itself has become a very powerful tool of change for many institutions in many places, at least in giving a time line where change can be introduced.¹⁶

6.13 Typically, universities have a specialised unit to administer and deliver support to students with disabilities. The Disability Discrimination Act requires that reasonable accommodation is made for students with disabilities to enable full access to learning opportunities. Examples of strategies used by universities include: note taking, interpreting, practical assistants, readers, transcription of material into alternate formats, individual examination provisions, mentor programs, tutoring program, prospective student interview programs, disability integration rooms, support groups, alternative methods of assessment and the provision of specialised computer facilities.

6.14 While the evidence suggests that universities have policies and procedures designed to support students with disabilities, the committee was told that many continue to be disadvantaged. There are substantial costs associated with a disability, for example, the cost of attendant care, transport and assistive technologies. Meeting

12 Submission No. 70, University of Newcastle, p. 1

13 *Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Tertiary Institutions*, http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/disabilities/national_code/code.html (access: 18 November 2002)

14 *Guidelines Relating to Students with Disabilities*, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, December 1996, <http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public%5Fstatements/publications/gldisab.htm> (access: 17 November 2002)

15 *Register of Disability Discrimination Act Action Plans*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/action_plans/Register/register.html (access: 18 November 2002)

16 Mr Martin Fathers, Chair, Education Working Party, Disability Advisory Council of Victoria, *Hansard*, Melbourne, 12 August 2002, p. 216

these costs are especially onerous for those students who are unable to work part time. Students with disabilities also have to invest considerable time and energy to overcome numerous difficulties relating to their condition. The Monash Students Association told the committee:

These kinds of difficulties are manifest in the extra investment of time, energy and financial resources by students. They are also manifest in the time lags between identifying a need for a service or a support and the actual achievement of that service or support, in the significant capital infrastructure investment that students with disabilities are required to make in order to succeed at a tertiary level and, of course, in the ongoing additional costs that students with disabilities suffer.¹⁷

6.15 Blind Citizens Australia, on the same issue, told the committee:

Students are still expected to personally negotiate with each and every teacher about their needs, badgering lecturers for advance copies of reading lists, chasing up teachers who repeatedly forget to put handouts on disks, searching for textbooks in alternate formats. This is happening in each subject year after year.¹⁸

The role of disability liaison officers

6.16 Disability liaison officers are employed by universities to provide assessment, advice, advocacy and services to students who have a disability; and to ensure that those students have equal access to programs and facilities. They are also required to support, educate and advise institutional staff and the wider community regarding disability. Disability liaison officers are also responsible for assessing students' disability related needs. Although there are documents to assist this process, it is generally left to the judgement of the disability liaison officer to make appropriate recommendations for meeting student needs. The evidence suggests that the quality and appropriateness of support varies across the sector.

6.17 Access rates published by Department of Education Science and Training suggest that certain institutions are far more attractive to students with disabilities than others. Access rates¹⁹ varied from 0.0 per cent for Marcus Oldhan College in Victoria to 8.1 per cent in the National Institute of Dramatic Art in New South Wales. Universities with high access rates included the University of Wollongong (7.5 per cent), Flinders University of South Australia (5.6 per cent) and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory (5.5 per cent). Universities with particularly low access rates included the Australian Defence Force Academy

17 Miss Rebecca Tomilson, President, Monash Student Association, *Hansard*, Melbourne, 13 August 2002, p. 255

18 Ms Karen Knight, Board Member, Blind Citizens Australia, *Hansard*, Brisbane, 6 September 2002, p. 475

19 Access is the proportion of commencing students that report that they have a disability on their enrolment form.

(1.0 per cent), Swinburne University of Technology (1.3 per cent) and Curtin University of Technology (1.3 per cent).²⁰ On the other hand, success and retention rates do not vary as widely across institutions. Once students with disabilities commence their courses, they continue with their studies and succeed at rates that are, on average, only marginally lower than for other students.²¹

6.18 The committee was told that although some disability liaison officers have a professional background or extensive years of experience, many do not. There are no formal training requirements for disability liaison officers. While Griffith University has prepared the curriculum for a *Graduate Certificate/Master of Disability Service Managements in the Tertiary Setting*, the committee notes that it has been unable to secure funding to offer the program. There is no standardised training course or qualification available in Australia. Consequently no uniform assessment tools and processes are being used across sectors or states resulting in inconsistent support practices.²²

6.19 Griffith University argued the need for consistent assessment procedures. In its submission the university wrote that in some universities the role of the disability liaison officers was being marginalised, or downgraded. This was effecting on the quality of support provided to individual students with disabilities:

In some places (universities) the role (of the disability liaison officer) is marginalized and performed in conjunction with other equity-related tasks. In others, the position may have been downgraded during restructuring to be at a basic administrative level. There is also a trend for these positions to be casualised and in some instance there can be a high turn-over in staff. These trends are of concern because of the potential negative impact that they may have on the participation, retention and success of students with disabilities in the tertiary sector.²³

6.20 The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology suggested a process of professional registration and minimal competency standards as one means of achieving consistent approaches across the sector:

For several years professional groups (state and national) representing Disability Liaison Officers have been discussing developing a process of professional registration and minimal standards for DLO's in order that some national consistency can be expected. It is important that government recognises the contribution made by DLO's in the overall learning support for students with a disability.²⁴

20 *Characteristics and Performance Indicators of Australian Higher Education Institutions, 2000*

21 *2000–2002 Triennium Equity Plans*, Department of Education, Science and Training, p. 16

22 Submission No. 60, Tasmanian Tertiary Education Disability Advisory Council, p. 2

23 Submission No. 102, Griffith University, p. 7

24 Submission No. 129, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, p. 2

6.21 The committee believes that the development of minimum competency standards is a matter for national coordination: an appropriate role for the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

Assessing learning disabilities

6.22 Under the Disability Discrimination Act an educational institution must make reasonable adjustments to give a student with a specific learning disability access to the curriculum. Across the education sectors however, there appears to be a lack of willingness to formally assess a learning disability. Most school authorities do not differentiate between a student with a learning difficulty and a specific learning disability. The committee believes it important to reach national agreement on the definition of learning disabilities.

6.23 The identification of a learning disability and an assessment of what is an appropriate compensatory level of assistance has been particularly difficult because of the prohibitive cost of assessments. For disability support at university, students are responsible for providing documents outlining the nature of their disability and its effect on their studies. In most instances documents are provided by a medical professional, the costs of which may be claimed through Medicare. In the case of learning disabilities, an assessment by an educational psychologist is appropriate. For many students, the cost of this assessment is prohibitive:

A useful assessment from professionals such as educational psychologists, that clearly identifies appropriate strategies to overcome the impact of a learning disability may cost up to \$1000...Currently, in most states, the student and/or their family carry the cost of a professional assessment and its accompanying report.²⁵

6.24 The committee believes that it is regrettable that many students with learning disabilities are not appropriately assessed because of the prohibitive costs of assessments, and considers that options for financial assistance should be investigated.

Meeting technological needs

6.25 Advancing technology is easing the burden for students with disabilities in accessing higher education. The past decade has seen unprecedented technological change affecting disability assistance. The advantages of technology for students with disabilities include improved mobility and communication and access to information. New technologies can greatly enhance a student's level of independence, and allow a student to achieve academic success with little or no disadvantage. For instance, for a person with a mobility impairment, computers, CD ROMS, and the Internet make possible the task of undertaking research and independent study in a wheelchair. The development of screen reading software allows students who are blind or vision impaired, or those that have learning disabilities, to benefit from developments such as the Internet, on-line library catalogues, and searchable electronic databases. The

25 Submission No. 54, National Regional Disability Liaison Officer Initiative, p. 2

application of computerised methods to the production of braille, large print and E-text formats has led to radical changes in the way materials can be produced.²⁶ The committee is aware that accompanying these developments are a number of challenges. Assistive technologies, for all the advantages they provide, are expensive for universities to support and require changes to administrative processes and teaching routines.

The provision of transcription services

6.26 Universities lack strategic direction in the use of assistive technologies.²⁷ The evidence suggests that they are struggling in their attempts to provide efficient and effective transcription services. Services are *ad hoc*, often duplicated and there is a lack of coordination across the sector.

6.27 The committee was told of long delays, usually of three months, to provide reading materials in Braille:

At present there is a 3-month lead-time required to arrange for brailing of textbooks. In order for a student who requires study materials to be brailled to access study materials at the start of each term, text books at least must be available 3 months ahead of time. Currently it is often the case that titles of textbooks are not known 3 months ahead of time, or alternatively the textbooks are not available for purchase in time.²⁸

6.28 Some universities have an in-house production capacity,²⁹ but most universities use the transcription services provided by the National Information and Library Services (NILS). This year, the organisation moved to full cost recovery. Because the cost of providing transcription services had previously been subsidised, the move to full cost recovery is expected to have significant financial implications for universities. Table 6.1 gives an indication of the magnitude of expected cost increases for universities. These figures are based on the transcription services provided to Griffith University in 1999 and 2000.

6.29 In response, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) held a forum in May 2002 to develop strategies for addressing the availability of accessible tertiary materials for students with print disabilities. The forum agreed that the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee and the commission should establish a working party to investigate the feasibility of a national approach to the acquisition and production of accessible materials for students. The committee supports this initiative.

26 *Storm or Sea Change: Meeting the Challenges of Providing Tertiary Materials in Accessible Formats for Students with Print Disabilities*, A Discussion Paper, HREOC, May 2002, p. 9

27 *Storm or Sea Change: Meeting the Challenges of Providing Tertiary Materials in Accessible Formats for Students with Print Disabilities*, A Discussion Paper, HREOC, May 2002, p. 9

28 Submission No. 116, Central Queensland University, p. 3

29 For example, the University of Newcastle

Lack of training

6.30 American literature as reported by Leung *et al* concludes that a lack of commitment to training for new technologies is a major barrier in its use.³⁰ Increased awareness about new technologies has placed large demands on expertise in the evaluation and selection of appropriate assistive technologies.³¹

Table 6.1: Subsidised charges and actual costs for BRAILLE transcription services³²

Semester and Year	Number of students requiring BRAILLE	Total fees charged	Total actual costs
1/99	3	1 875	51 024
2/99	1	625	18 100
1/00	3	1 875	34 783
2/00	1	625	91 319

6.31 An Australian study reported that lack of training and a difficulty in keeping abreast of assistive technology developments is a matter of concern for both disability liaison officers and students.³³ The study concluded that access by students to assistive technology depended mainly on knowledge acquired haphazardly by disability liaison officers. The role of academic staff who had knowledge of the student requirements was also important.³⁴ The study found that some disability liaison officers had minimal training or less in the use of adaptive technologies.³⁵

6.32 Both the University of Sydney and Griffith University raised concerns about the limited exposure that students in schools appear to have in the use of assistive technology. Sydney University argued that the intensive staff support provided to students with disabilities in schools fails to encourage independent management of a disability. The National Library and Information Service agreed with their assessment:

30 Leung, P., *et al*, *Assistive Technology: Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, November 1999.

31 *ibid.*, p. 10

32 Submission No. 102, Griffith University, p. 18

33 *ibid.*, p. 35

34 *ibid.*, p. xi

35 *ibid.*, p. 26

Although universities provide adaptive equipment for students with disabilities, it is often useless to the students because they have not been trained in how to use it during secondary schooling years.³⁶

6.33 While this evidence suggests a need to expand the use of assistive technologies in schools, the committee agrees that universities have a responsibility to train their disability liaison officers and academic staff in the use of assistive technology. The committee believes that regional disability liaison officers should be proactive in assessing the assistive technology needs of students with disabilities before enrolment to ensure a smooth transition from school to university.

The cost of new technologies

6.34 Whilst the growth in adaptive technologies has improved the educational opportunities for many people with disabilities, the committee was told that it has also increased the costs of studying for students with disabilities. For instance, it had cost one witness over \$5,000 to purchase a laptop computer and screen reading software:

The program for the speech that you hear—depending on exchange rates—costs about \$1,700. This laptop was about \$3,500 a couple of years ago.³⁷

6.35 Students from low socio-economic backgrounds find it hard to afford the purchase of computers and assistive technologies for home use. While most universities provide students with disabilities with access to computers on campus, use of these computers is not an option for all students. Central Queensland University submitted that:

A common need reported by students is for a home-based study station, which offers appropriate ergonomic and adaptive technologies. Often the cost of setting up a computer work station at home is prohibitive for students requiring specialised equipment. At the same time, it is difficult for students with impairments and chronic medical conditions to physically access the computer labs provided on campus by CQU.³⁸

6.36 A number of submissions recommended that the Commonwealth should make one-off grants at the time of enrolment to allow students to purchase their own equipment for home use. This equipment could then be used in the workplace at the completion of training:

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

36 Ms Jane Evans, General Manager, National Information and Library Service, *Hansard*, Melbourne, 13 August 2002, p. 274

37 Ms Karen Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 477

38 Submission No. 116, Central Queensland University, p. 4

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.³⁹

6.37 The committee concludes that the establishment of a scheme to assist students with disabilities to purchase assistive equipment will further enhance their independence and improve their ability to complete their courses.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends that the Department of Education, Science and Training explore options for the establishment of a scheme designed to assist students with disabilities to purchase assistive equipment.

Professional development and teaching

6.38 The committee was provided with a number of instances of a lack of awareness about disability issues by some academic staff. Blind Citizens Australia provided the following example.

Decisions that may seem small to educators can have an amplified impact on a student's capacity to learn and their access to a quality education. For example, a decision to provide a handout containing complex information in electronic format rather than in braille can mean that a student spends hours brailleing it by hand. This is not time spent studying; it is time spent preparing to study. Blind students' valuable remaining vision is being put at risk by educators who provide reading materials in inappropriate formats, sometimes out of ignorance but often because it is the cheapest option.⁴⁰

6.39 While many universities adopt the principle of inclusive teaching practices, the practical implementation of these strategies appears to be a problem. Teaching qualifications are not required for university teaching. As a consequence, lecturers and teachers are reliant on professional development programs to raise their awareness about disability matters.

6.40 A number of submissions from the higher education sector explained that even when programs were made available, the increasing workload of academic staff meant that it was not always easy to attract lecturers to these workshops. Of the

39 Submission No. 186, University of Melbourne, p. 7

40 Ms Karen Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 475

962 permanent staff at the University of Western Sydney, only 150 had attended workshops designed to address disability related issues.⁴¹

6.41 The Students Union of Monash University – Gippsland campus, reported that the university’s professional development unit did not deliver training sessions in inclusive practices. They also reported that staff were not encouraged to seek training and development in providing academic support to students with disabilities.

6.42 Although the role of disability liaison officers includes the provision of professional development to staff on inclusive practices, the evidence suggests that professional development and training is managed reactively rather than proactively. A regional disability liaison officer wrote that neither regional disability liaison officers nor disability liaison officers had sufficient time to devote to professional development. A number of other universities wrote that academics usually only sought help when they were confronted with a specific disability issue. The University of Western Sydney submitted that:

There are workshops that staff can be involved in. I would have to say that most staff do not really think about it until they are actually facing an issue, and then the disabilities advisers are there to work with staff and to help them make various arrangements or accommodations.⁴²

Funding students needs

6.43 The committee agrees that universities are responsible for the provision of an environment and pedagogy suitable to all students. However, the cost of recovering from a history of institutionalised discrimination is considerable. The cost of meeting the needs of individual students is also increasing as the number of students enrolling in university with high support needs grows. The University of Melbourne commented on this issue:

Over the last four years, they (the number of students with disabilities) have increased by nearly 60 per cent. Over the same period of time, the amount of expenditure on support for students with disabilities that has been provided by the University of Melbourne has increased by 140 per cent.⁴³

6.44 With the exception of the Australian National University, Australian universities are established under state or territory legislation and have a high degree of financial and academic autonomy. Commonwealth funds are paid under the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988*. Further support for students with disabilities is provided through the Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP). Funds under this program are

41 Ms Sandra Norris, Counselling and Disability Services, University of Western Sydney, *Hansard*, Sydney, 3 July 2002, p. 151

42 Associate Professor Marsha Durham, Dean of Students, University of Western Sydney, *Hansard*, Sydney, 3 July 2002, p. 151

43 Ms Lin Martin, Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar, University of Melbourne, *Hansard*, Melbourne, 13 August 2002, p. 261

linked to universities' equity performance and are allocated as part of their operating grant. The program aims to encourage universities to develop strategies to increase the participation of a number of equity groups, including students with disabilities. In 2002, \$5.8 million has been provided to universities under this program.

6.45 In the 2001/2002 budget, the government introduced new Commonwealth funding to provide support for high needs students with disabilities. Funding is provided under the *Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Program*. The program will allocate \$8 million over three years. Funding applies retrospectively and will contribute to the cost of providing educational support services or equipment to students with disabilities.

6.46 While the majority of universities welcomed the new funding initiative, the committee was told that significant increases in the cost of purchasing transcription services would offset the financial gain of the new funding arrangement. Several submissions were also critical of the new funding arrangements, arguing that by contributing to the cost or providing disability support to individual students the Commonwealth was encouraging reactive rather than proactive management of students with disabilities:

The recent Federal Government initiative for additional funding for students with disabilities could act as a disincentive for providing ongoing quality service. Rather than setting up ongoing systems, policies and resources for students with high support costs, the universities could claim retrospective payment for services for individual students and not look for cost effective ways to manage the needs of students with high support costs.⁴⁴

6.47 Having heard the evidence and read the submission, the committee formed an impression that universities were generally adopting reactive approaches to the management of students with disabilities. The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act has meant that universities are being held accountable for failures to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Avoiding litigation plays a significant part in the management of disability support.

6.48 The evidence suggests that budgetary constraints are restricting the ability of universities to develop long-term strategies to address systematic discrimination, despite the preparation of action plans. The committee agrees that without appropriate funding for long term applied research and implementation of systemic changes, universities will continue to function reactively, crisis managing individual cases rather than making systematic changes.

6.49 The committee agrees that the Commonwealth has an obligation to assist universities undertake systematic reform to enable them to be more responsive to the needs of students with disabilities. To this end it recommends that the Commonwealth

44 Submission No. 70, University of Newcastle, p. 2

provide base funding to allow universities to develop long-term strategies to improve both the physical environment and pedagogy of universities to ensure equality of access for students with disabilities. This funding should be in addition to HEEP funding.

Recommendation 16

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth fund universities to develop long-term strategies to improve the physical environment and pedagogy of universities to ensure equality of access for students with disabilities.