Legislative, Policy and Practice Initiatives for Students with Disabilities in Australian Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

Postsecondary education in Australia has undergone major structural change in recent years, particularly through merging of institutions and changing the balance of vocational education and training responsibilities *across the public and private sectors. At the same time, an increased awareness of, and response to, the needs of students with disabilities has been promoted by government social justice policies that are underpinned by anti-discrimination and disability services legislation. This paper briefly outlines the nature of these structural changes, the wider legislative background, and policy initiatives directed at improving the successful participation of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. Practice developments specific to the* vocational education *and training, and university sectors are outlined as well as wider collaborative initiatives that operate across both sectors.*

In the past decade, Australian postsecondary education has undergone major and continuing structural change, most visibly through government's merging institutions into large, multi-campus enterprises and reducing public funding available to the sector. Today, postsecondary education comprises 36 multi-campus universities, 84 Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) with 692 major campuses, and an increasing number of private Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers. Some universities now have enrollments in excess of 30,000 students while some Institutes of TAFE enroll up to 80,000 students.

Pathways available to students, including those with a disability, have traditionally been from school to university, or to further education or vocational education through the TAFE system. In the case of many young people with significant disabilities and high support needs, there have been no postsecondary education opportunities at all. These traditional options for secondary and postsecondary education have been overhauled as Australia seeks to refocus its labor force to ensure that it is competitive both nationally and internationally.

Increased participation of students with disabilities in postsecondary education programs during the nineties has been underpinned by government antidiscrimination legislation, vigorous social justice policies and improved services within tertiary education institutions. In spite of conservative government policies and funding cutbacks in recent years, the demand for enhanced services remains strong but is under challenge as institutions come to grips with reduced public funding. This paper outlines the broad legislative and policy contexts impacting on people with disabilities in postsecondary education, reports significant change in emphasis from publicly funded further and technical education institutes to private providers in the vocational education training sector, indicates improved services practices in TAFE institutes and universities, and the wider roles played by professional networks and student groups.

Legislative and Policy Contexts

In the past decade or so, there have been notable changes in legislation and policies affecting the lives of people with disabilities in Australia and the services they receive, at both Federal (Commonwealth) and state levels. The Commonwealth *Disability Services Act 1986* emphasizes inclusive practices and the empowerment of people with disabilities as service consumers. These new directions were reflected in parallel disability services legislation passed by the states and reinforced in the publication of disability services standards (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1993).

During this period, Labor Governments at both federal and state levels pursued social justice policies to improve the lives of people from targeted equity groups. These included women, indigenous Australians, people with disabilities and people from: isolated rural areas, socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and non-English speaking backgrounds. Enhanced access to higher education was one of the goals. The Commonwealth published its vision in *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). Although the Commonwealth and all state governments except one changed to the conservative side of politics by the mid-1990s, there remained some commitment to supporting people in designated equity groups.

Most Australian states developed their own anti-discrimination legislation in the early 1990s directed at discrimination on the basis of such characteristics as age, race, disability, gender, and political and religious affiliation. The Commonwealth has different Acts covering some of these areas of discrimination but the one most pertinent to the present discussion is the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. It has become a major vehicle for complainants with disabilities, especially in employment, education, and the provision of goods and services. Complaints are handled by tribunals established by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (recently renamed the Human Rights and Responsibilities Commission), a national body funded by the Commonwealth Government. The major goal of the Commission is to seek conciliation among the parties in dispute, but failing this, a tribunal is chaired by a Commissioner to hear and decide on the case. Tribunal findings may be referred to the Federal Court for enforcement or challenge. Under the present Commonwealth Government, the Commission has experienced a significant reduction in funding and the role of a specialized Disability

Discrimination Commissioner has been merged into wider roles undertaken by a smaller panel of commissioners.

Recent Structural Changes to Vocational Education

The Australian National Training Authority has been established by the Federal Government to drive the changes in vocational education and training. One of the greatest impacts on this initiative has been the National Competition Policy, which required a freeing up of the "training market" to ensure a greater number and diversity of training providers offering a broader range of options and opportunities in competition with the traditional, publicly-funded TAFE sector.

New opportunities for students with a disability now lie in postcompulsory (after age 15 years), rather than postsecondary education. Students not aiming at university study are faced with an array of options. Instead of seeking access to postsecondary education programs through TAFE institutes, students may now exercise options through any of three main avenues; Vocational Education and Training in Schools, Group Training Network, or Recognized Training Organizations.

Vocational Education and Training in Schools is available for students in the postcompulsory years 11 and 12. This program is a 4-year initiative in which part-time apprenticeships and traineeships will be implemented in schools. The concept is recognized as a pathway for postcompulsory education students to enter vocational education and training and move on to careers in industry. The Group Training Network comprises 115 Group Training Companies across Australia and is responsible for employing apprentices and trainees and placing them with host employers. Recognized Training Organizations may include TAFE institutes, commercial providers of training, community-based providers, and industry or enterprise trainers. There are 2507 registered private providers nationally and 501 registered Adult and Community Education providers.

In addition to this increased range of options, systemic changes to the delivery of vocational education and training were introduced at the beginning of 1998. These new arrangements seek to increase access by people who are disadvantaged or underrepresented in training, as is the case for people with disabilities. New Apprenticeships is the focal initiative that provides training in an industry context and requires that an apprentice or trainee is in paid employment and is receiving structured training. Previously, apprentices were indentured to employers and undertook on-the-job training interspersed with variable periods of block release to study in TAFE institutes. New Apprenticeships is designed to increase opportunities for entry level training for young people and better meet the needs of industry through offering greater levels of flexibility in training delivery, either on or off-the-job. Supporting the New Apprenticeships are User Choice and Training Packages initiatives.

User Choice provides a client, (i.e. an employer or an individual), with the choice of training provider as well as choice in the content, timing, location and delivery mode of

training. Training Packages represent a shift from the traditionally structured curriculum and lead to a nationally recognized qualification thereby allowing young people to transport skills from one industry to another or from state to state. They specify and underpin industry competency requirements including industry standards, assessment guidelines, and industry-determined qualifications. Within these generic initiatives lie opportunities for greater flexibility in addressing the needs of people with disabilities.

The next section reports developments in both the vocational education and training, and university sectors for students with disabilities.

Developments for Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

The mainstream of VET planning has made slow progress in accommodating the requirements of people with a disability, despite at least a decade of research and reports on the impediments to people with a disability accessing vocational education and training as a postsecondary school option, and comprehensive documentation of the major issues. A recent stocktake of these reports by the Australian National Training Authority (1977, June) identified a range of impediments to access and participation by people with disabilities. These included poor physical access to the VET learning environment; limiting assumptions and attitudes about the employability of people with a disability; limited provision of alternative learning resources and assistive technology; poor linkages between schools and VET, schools and work, and VET and work; lack of individual learning support; poor coordination in the provision of support services, programs and specialized equipment, and lack of clarity in relation to responsibility for this provision.

While it is estimated that 15% of the Australian population have a disability, 1996 participation rates of people with a disability in vocational education and training was only 3.5 % (Australian National Training Authority, 1997a). Given the emphasis on New Apprenticeships and their supporting arrangements, considerable effort will be needed to lift the participation rate in apprenticeships from less than 2 % in that area of training.

The 1996 Australian National Training Authority national consultations on access and equity strategies for inclusion in the National Strategy on Vocational Education and training resulted in the discussion paper *Equity 2001* (Australian National Training Authority, 1996, September) which identified key areas for activity. Those most significant to people with disabilities included improved long term funding arrangements which take account of the specific training and support requirements for people in particular equity groups; making training more relevant to individual need so that people with a disability move beyond non-accredited or unrecognized training programs that have little value in enhancing their employment opportunities; overcoming discriminatory attitudes to and assumptions about the abilities and personal attributes of people with a disability; eliminating bias in competency standards and the curriculum; increasing the levels of language, literacy and numeracy skills; improving basic work and

life skills that are generally not encapsulated in vocational education and training; ensuring that the high cost of support is extended from the public to the private provider sector; increasing Recognition of Prior Learning assessment, a significant issue for people with a disability because of the length of time out of the workforce; improving flexible delivery.

The new provider structures and training arrangements require consideration from a disability perspective if they are to benefit people with a disability in vocational education and training. At this time, little is known about how the new arrangements will impact on training provisions for people with a disability. The following areas have been identified as requiring particular attention because they could present systemic impediments to training providers in their response to people with a disability.

While Training Packages could offer new opportunities for people with a disability they may in fact cause impediments to increased participation and outcomes. Industry competency standards should be drafted to eliminate discrimination and bias. Failure to consider such issues fully at the time of endorsement of standards will result in significant resources being needed to customize standards so that they acknowledge the full diversity of the workforce.

As a consequence, advice from its Disability Forum has led the Australian National Training Authority to propose a review of Training Packages from a disability equity perspective and to create guidelines for the developers of Training Packages. A set of guidelines for ensuring that National Training Packages are inclusive of literacy and numeracy needs has already been produced in relation to workplace communication (Fitzpatrick & Roberts, 1997). During 1997, the Australian National Training Authority also funded the customization of portions of some Training Packages for people from specific disability groups. For example, modules within the Public Administration Training Package were revised for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

A second area of concern is User Choice. Under the current unit-cost funding models, funding does not support the type of flexible learning required by some people with disabilities. If additional dollars are not available as an incentive, training providers and employers will not see people with a disability as an ideal choice for training. One view is that the public training provider (i.e. TAFE institutes) will, by default, retain that responsibility unless policies are adopted to ensure that private providers also address access and equity issues in their training.

A number of Group Training Schemes in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia will soon test new funding models which reflect the enhancements needed to cover greater costs of training for clients from particular groups, or the costs arising from particular government training priorities.

The Australian National Training Authority advisory body, ANTA Disability Forum, which was established in 1995, has broad representation of: people with a disability; peak disability bodies; and the employment, education and training sectors. The purpose of the

Forum is to provide strategic advice to the Australian National Training Authority Board on a range of issues influencing the participation and outcomes from VET for people with a disability. Work carried out by Forum includes input into the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training; a national communications strategy targeting training providers, employee/employer groups, brokerage/ planning bodies, and people with a disability; input into state and national key performance measures of participation and outcomes for equity; recommendations regarding the New Apprenticeships and User Choice arrangements; identifying unit-costing models for support services; facilitating linkages between the VET sector, people with a disability and other equity groups.

As TAFE sectors in all states and territories down size and restructure to align with a more competitive training market, there are real fears that disability services personnel, who provide or arrange for support services, will be diminished. Current indications are, however, that this range of services will extend in some states to other VET providers. In relation to this wider context, the Australian National Training Authority (1997b) funded the development of a report to investigate the development of standards under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, for student services in the VET sector. Attention now turns to developments in the universities sector.

Universities

Since the early 1990s, the Commonwealth Government has provided special Higher Education Equity Program funding to universities to support the policy objective of improved rates of access and successful participation in tertiary studies for students from the targeted equity groups. Universities are required to develop and submit to the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, annual equity plans that detail specific program targets and strategies, and report outcomes for each equity group. These plans form part of the institution's profile that is assessed annually as a basis for government funding levels. Responsibilities to promote and report on equity initiatives are usually discharged by an equity section.

Included in the outcomes that have flowed through the university sector are an increase in the numbers and diversity of students with disabilities represented in enrollments, employment of disability officers, and cooperative university projects operating in each state and territory. Each is briefly discussed.

Increased enrollments. Universities generally report increasing numbers of students with disabilities in their enrollments, usually at a rate greater than overall enrollments. It is clear that participation rates for this targeted equity group are improving. However, it is still difficult to quantify, with any substantial accuracy, the extent to which rates of participation compare with number of people with disabilities in the general population. First, the base data of the incidence of people with disabilities in the general community, adapted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics census figures, are drawn from a problematically-defined disability category. Second, the performance indicator of university students with disabilities, nominated by the Commonwealth for statistical collection at enrollment, was itself ill-defined and flawed, and has only recently been

amended for the 1998 enrollment census. Students are now asked the question, "Do you have a disability, impairment or long term medical condition which may affect your study?" and invited to nominate the nature of their disability. Third, such disclosure of disability at enrollment is not mandatory. The need for disclosure usually has a bearing on the institution and the student only if additional services and adjustments are required. Fourth, many students delay making service requests until they realize assistance is needed, and so are not counted in the initial enrollment census, although they may be included in subsequent years.

While the climate for disclosing disability has improved because institutions seek to communicate a positive and helpful image, the accuracy of data on the incidence of students with disabilities enrolled in universities remains questionable. Nonetheless, disability officers report providing services to students with a wider range of disabilities than previously encountered, such as learning disabilities, acquired brain injury, psychiatric disabilities, multiple disabilities including deaf-blind, as well as students experiencing double disadvantage (e.g. indigenous Australians with a disability).

Disability officers. As in the TAFE institutes, most universities employ one or two disability officers, also known by various titles (e.g., disability services adviser, disability liaison officer, equity officer [disabilities], disabilities coordinator). These staff members provide advice and support to students (and staff) with disabilities, help them to make links with teaching and service staff, ensure that appropriate services and infrastructure are in place to promote the individual's independent access to all aspects of university life, and advise university administration on the development of appropriate policies and reasonable adjustments. Some universities have also funded specific initiatives to assist students and staff, such as the development of guidelines for teaching students with learning disabilities (Monash University, 1993).

While many disability officers bring skills for working with people with disabilities from other professional backgrounds (e.g., teaching, occupational therapy, psychology), others fulfill the role as part of their wider administrative responsibilities in equity. However, some institutions lack the commitment to employ staff other than on annual contract and this has led to discontinuity in development of services and overarching policies.

Cooperative university projects. In each state and territory since 1991, the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs has annually funded cooperative university projects for higher education students with disabilities. Aiming to develop and promote improved responses to students with disabilities, these projects have had significant impact at local, state and national levels.

Initiatives undertaken include outreach to prospective students with disabilities, service improvements within universities, and transition to employment for graduates with disabilities. Several examples of each are reported.

Outreach to prospective students have taken the form of: seminars for prospective students, school guidance and careers counselors (UniAbility, the cooperative project of

the three universities in South Australia); videotapes on making plans for coming to university (*The university option*, Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities, 1996, a project of eight universities in Queensland; and *Unlock your future*, Post Secondary Education Disability Network in Western Australia, 1995); and short university taster programs for school students (e.g., *UNITASTE*, a 3-day program operated annually for Year 10 and I I students by the Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities project).

Within universities, examples of service improvements include the development of information booklets to improve teaching (*Where there's a will there' s a way: Supporting university students with disabilities*, UniAbility, South Australia, 1997; *Scribing: The manual*, Post Secondary Education Disability Network in Western Australia, n.d.) and support services (*Supporting students with disabilities on small university campuses*, Ryan, 1997, for the Victorian Cooperative Projects Higher Education Students with Disabilities Committee).

Graduate employment initiatives help to build important bridges between graduates with disabilities, university careers advisers, and potential employers and employment agencies not familiar with responding to the varied job information and workplace requirements of people with disabilities. The Victorian cooperative project has provided a workshop on Professional Identity and Presence for final year students; Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities (1996) has developed a brochure for employers, *Benefits of hiring a university graduate with a disability*; and the New South Wales Universities Disabilities Cooperation Project funded the development of the Education to employment package for graduates with disabilities (University of Western Sydney, 1997).

Two projects are on-line to make resources more accessible: Queensland, http://wwwjcu.edu.au/disability/tipd/tipdhome.html and Victoria, http://www.deakin.edu.au/extern/rdlu/.

Managed by coordinating committees in each state, the cooperative projects have addressed particular issues nominated by the participating universities. The approach has inherent strengths such as local, hands-on knowledge; enthusiastic commitment from participants; and the informal sharing of outcomes at intrastate and national levels. However, a review undertaken by the Department of Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs (Redway & Heath, 1997) signaled the need for closer evaluation of outcomes and a more coordinated, national approach to the projects. National coordination would ensure a clear identification of national priorities, cooperative planning across the states, a wider application of project findings, and a more efficient use of scarce resources.

Collaborative and Parallel Initiatives Across Postsecondary Education

In view of the different federal and state funding responsibilities for universities, TAFE institutes and the wider vocational education and training sector, it is encouraging that both collaborative and parallel initiatives have been undertaken to promote the successful

participation of students with disabilities. Funds from the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs have supported such collaborative activities as national conferences on people with disabilities in tertiary education, the employment of regional disability liaison officers, the development of a national code of practice for tertiary institutions, and an investigation of the additional costs of students with disabilities in tertiary education. Parallel developments include the development of DDA Action Plans, promotion of staff development, improved physical access to the learning environment, and individualized learning support. Each is briefly discussed.

Pathways National Conferences

The three national Pathways conferences on people with disabilities in tertiary education (Geelong in 1991, Brisbane in 1993, Adelaide in 1996) were funded in part from the universities cooperative project moneys in the respective states. A fourth conference is scheduled for Perth in December 1998, organized by the Tertiary Education Disability Council. Support for delegates to attend Council meetings and for students to attend the conferences is also underwritten by the cooperative projects.

Regional Disability Liaison Officers

Federal funding was provided during 199598 for the appointment of 14 regional disability liaison officers throughout Australia. These officers have assisted in inter-institutional liaison across the secondary school, TAFE, and university sectors. Their task has been to reach out into the community to encourage students with disabilities to identify pathways that will enable them to pursue tertiary study (e.g., Regional Disability Liaison Unit, 1997), and to identify funding and service sources that support graduates with disabilities to find and gain employment. Funding for this initiative has not been renewed.

National Code of Practice

To foster better informed responses to students with disabilities in tertiary education, the Commonwealth funded development of a national code of practice for tertiary institutions relating to students with disabilities (O'Connor, Watson, Power & Hartley, 1998). This sets out general principles, minimum service standards, operating guidelines and good practice examples in the areas of: institutional obligations; rights and responsibilities of institutions, staff and students; policy development and implementation; planning; student recruitment, selection, admission and enrollment processes; teaching and learning; service provision. Copies of the document have been distributed to all universities and TAFE institutes nationally and is also accessible on the Internet (see References).

Additional Costs for Students with Disabilities

One concern that continues to face tertiary education administrators is the high cost of services for some students with disabilities. While reasonable adjustments for most

students are relatively inexpensive, institutions can claim under the Disability Discrimination Act that undue hardship may prevent the admission of some students with high cost support needs. This remains a vexed issue for administrators, because Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission tribunals usually take the view that institutions have sufficient means within their budgets to accommodate students requiring high cost services.

The Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training commissioned a study to investigate the additional costs of education and training for people with disabilities. The researchers estimated that in 1992, the total number of university and TAFE students who identified as having a disability was 12,800; of these, 72 % were likely to require support to undertake their studies, at an approximate average cost of $1,630 per student (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993, p. 20).

The report suggested (a) special funding to the institutions for some students needing additional specialist services and (b) direct support for those students requiring high cost services. Regrettably, there has been little progress made in resolving the issue.

A recent report, *Equality. diversity and excellence: Advancing the national higher education equity framework* (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1996, pp. 84-85) recommended further exploration of Commonwealth Government funding options, including: provision of additional funds to universities for students with high support needs; development of closer links with secondary schools,, TAFE Institutes and community agencies that already support students with disabilities in order to capitalize on existing program assessment and support expertise; establishment of improved reporting mechanisms to identify students' support needs. Whatever options are finally adopted, it is important that students can gain services at an institution offering the course of their choice rather than be forced to enroll at a location that already provides needed services but does not offered a preferred course.

Another problem of additional costs arose in the context of Australia's expanding enrollment of overseas students. Some institutions initially attempted to charge additional, disability-related service costs directly to the individual overseas student with a disability because the institution was not permitted to use Commonwealth funding intended for domestic students. The Tertiary Education Disability Council campaigned to redress the obvious discrimination in such a practice. The recommended solution, subsequently adopted, was to ensure that adequate provision was made in the fee structure for all overseas students to cover any additional costs for services to students with disabilities.

Tertiary Education Institution Disability Action Plans

The Disability Discrimination Act provides for development of disability action plans to focus attention on improving access to people with disabilities. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1995) published a guide recommending that tertiary education institutions develop and register action plans with the Commission to minimize

discrimination, to avoid complaints and to encourage broader participation of people with disabilities in the sector.

Many institutions are now developing such plans and further guides have been published to assist in this process for universities (Deakin University, 1995; Kelly, Deshon, Jones, & Fisher, 1996; UniAbility, 1996).

Staff Development

Most universities have a section responsible for staff development, particularly in the areas of teaching and research. Both formal (e.g. graduate diploma) and informal programs are offered to new staff, and ongoing staff development occurs in areas of emergent need, including teaching students with disabilities. Staff development initiatives funded by the cooperative university projects include: forums on students with learning disabilities; the production of a staff handbook (UniAbility, n.d.); a five-part videotape series titled *Creative teaching: Inclusive learning* (Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities, 1997); and, in conjunction with the counseling services of one university, the production of a kit on students with psychiatric disabilities (Queensland University of Technology & Tertiary Initiatives for People with Disabilities, 1997).

Attention is also paid to staff development in the TAFE/VET sector, addressing the skills and knowledge of instructional staff, workplace trainers and assessors, and their willingness to accommodate the requirements of people with a disability. *ResponseAbility: People with disabilities: Skilling staff in vocational education, training and employment sectors* is an accredited training program developed with funding from the Australian National Training Authority (1997, May) to provide effective services to people who have a disability. Staff have the choice of completing the program or having existing skills in this area formally recognized. The program comprises modules on mandates for change; communication with people who have a disability; principle of access and reasonable adjustment; legislative responsibilities; industrial relations; inclusive learning environments; planning for change.

While many academic staff members are embracing the challenges of teaching students with disabilities, others seek advice to ensure that requests for accommodations are genuine and reasonable. Staff are encouraged to review the ways in which they and other students communicate with each other in class to ensure that those with disabilities are genuinely included with respect and dignity.

Physical Access to the Learning Environment

Like most physical settings that have been established for some time, there are real challenges for universities and TAFE institutes in renovating older buildings to ensure appropriate levels of access and mobility for all users. Even in newer buildings that comply with national building codes and standards, there remain aspects of design that are inadequate for tertiary education institutions. The Deakin University (1995) guidelines were created to help fill that gap. A number of states, for example Queensland

and Western Australia, are conducting audits of TAFE institutes with a view to improving physical access to institute facilities.

A decision by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission under the Disability Discrimination Act (*Kinsela v Queensland University of Technology 1997*) has implications for all tertiary institutions to ensure that graduation facilities are accessible. A student using a wheelchair succeeded in a complaint against the university which usually conducted its graduation ceremony in a nonaccessible venue. Although the student could access the stage to receive his parchment, where his fellow graduands sat in the hall and how they processed onto the stage via a staircase was inaccessible to him. The tribunal dismissed a defense of unjustifiable hardship and found that the student was indeed discriminated against on the basis of his disability and the ceremony was rescheduled to an accessible venue.

Individualized Learning Support

Both the university and TAFE/VET sectors are progressively adopting policies regarding services to students with disabilities, including variations in academic assessment. Most tertiary education institutions provide funds to support various kinds of services to students with disabilities such as signing interpreters, notetakers, participation assistants, the loan of specialized equipment and access to rooms which house specific resources such as CCTV, TTY, computers and Braille embosser. While some of the funding has been seeded through the Commonwealth's Higher Education Equity Program grants to universities, most Australian state training authorities have a learning support fund to assist people with a disability in VET. To date, this funding has been available only to the TAFE sector but there are moves to extend the availability of these funds to other recognized training providers.

A major concern yet to be addressed is the training and availability of signing interpreters capable of working in the university sector. There is a severe shortage of highly skilled interpreters and no funds available to develop training programs.

Professional Organizations

Many Australian states have established postsecondary professional networks, as shown in Table 1. Membership usually comprises disability advisers, academics, secondary school representatives, community service agencies and students with disabilities.

The state bodies seek to promote access and participation for students with disabilities in tertiary education and develop cooperative initiatives across service sectors. All state bodies nominate two delegates to the national Council, one representing TAFE and another representing universities. Students with disabilities are eligible to be nominated from affiliated bodies for students with disabilities, Council co-hosts with a state organization the national Pathways conference on people with disabilities in tertiary education and promotes national initiatives to improve services for students with disabilities. For example, in recent years it has successfully (a) operated the e-mail

listserver ozuni-disability@ciut.edu.au to provide communication among disability advisers and others interested in the area and made representations; (b) to key Senators to block increased higher education charges believed to place heavy financial burdens on students with disabilities; (c) about the serious flaws in the national performance indicators for students with disabilities; and (d) to ensure that additional costs to support fee-paying students with disabilities be derived from the general fees charged all students, rather than as a direct user-pays impost.

Student Voice

Many institutions have student-managed advocacy groups funded through the student guild or union. Two examples are the Macquarie University Association for Students with Disabilities, and the Disability Information Group of Griffith University Students. The activity of such groups, which includes representation on university and student committees, varies according to the time and energy available among students who are already very busy with their own studies.

As the views of students with disabilities may be overlooked in institutional processes, the national Code of Practice (OConnor et al., 1998; Section 4, para B1.6e) emphasizes that students have the right to expect that "their views will be sought in the development and review of institutional policies, procedures and practices affecting their lives at the tertiary institution" (p. 8).

Conclusion

Students with disabilities have become a significant part of the diversity that enriches Australian postsecondary education institutions, even those students who choose to study extramurally through distance education. This paper has outlined the legislative and policy environment underpinning current developments for students with disabilities in postsecondary education. It has shown that, as one target group included in wider social justice policies, students with disabilities have begun to take their rightful place in postsecondary education, in increasing numbers. Wide ranging initiatives to improve access to both vocational education and training and university study have been described, together with some of the challenges facing these sectors such as timely identification of service needs; willingness to make adjustments to education and training; provision of adequate service funding for students with high support needs; ongoing staff development; and closer cooperation on national initiatives.

Staff are becoming more accustomed to including students from diverse backgrounds in their classes. Best practices for teaching and assessing student performance call for increased flexibility and creativity that potentially benefits all students. While systemic responses remain conservative in many institutions, national initiatives to improve teaching and learning, continued government pressure on institutions to demonstrate improved equity performance, and the possibility of litigation all act as persuasive influences for change. Students and graduates with disabilities are themselves important

advocates for change as they complete their studies and enter the workforce to demonstrate unequivocally what they have to offer the nation.

Table I List of State* and National Professional Bodies

Location	Name of Organization
Australian Capital Territory	Disability Advisers Network of the Canberra Region
Victoria	Post Secondary Disability Information Network Inc.
Queensland	Higher Education Disability Network (Q) Inc.
Tasmania	Tasmanian Tertiary Education Disability Advisory Committee
Western Australia	Post Secondary Education Disability Network
New South Wales#	Universities Disability Access Network
South Australia#	UniAbility Cooperative Network
National [TEDCA]	Tertiary Education Disability Council (Australia)

The Northern Territory now has integrated university and TAFE operations so that such an inter-institutional network in not presently needed.

#TAFE representation to TEDCA is nominated by the respective TAFE Commission or Vocational Education and Training agency in those states.

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