INTRODUCTION

This paper is not an admission of policies at particular universities. Rather, it seeks to examine some of the arguments surrounding formulation and implementation of such policies in respect of people with disabilities.

As a starting point we shall assume acceptance of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, and particularly Article 6 which refers to education.1 David Miller, a distinguished writer on social justice, defines the principles of rights as the guarantee of "security of expectation and freedom of choice." 2

The proportion of disabled people, such as the majority of disabled children, living in poverty is not known. However, the incidence of disability and handicap is fragmentary. 3

It is widely recognised that in Australia at the present time (May 1981) statistical information on the incidence of disability and handicap is fragmentary and often unreliable. It is to be hoped, and indeed expected, that the 1981 Survey of Handicaps currently being conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics will greatly improve this situation.4 The Bureau intends that the survey will be both a first of a regular series, in which the precision of the survey instrument will be continually refined through consultation with self-help groups, other organisations of and for disabled people, and the mony government and non-government bodies which will be using the information.5

However even on the basis of existing information it is possible, very tentatively, to assume that the proportion of disabled people proceeding to higher education in Australia is considerably smaller than that in the general population. The information concerned is provided by the 1976 Census,6 the Australian Health Survey of 1977-78,7 and figures available from some universities and colleges of advanced education on students with disabilities who identified themselves voluntarily at registration.8 The most cautious and conservative use of this, further safeguarded by confining the analysis to people with physical and sensory impairments and excluding those with mental impairments of any kind, suggests the following situation at three institutions:

- At the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology the participation rate9 of disabled people is between one fifth and one eighth of that of the general population.
- At Monash University the participation rate of disabled people is between one quarter and one fifth of that of the general population.
- At the Western Australian Institute of Technology the participation rate of disabled people is between one third and one quarter of that of the general population.

Certainly these conclusions are highly tentative, and cannot be used in a policy context without a great deal more validation. Nevertheless a belief that they may not be too wide of the mark is encouraged by the consistency of the best example with the average situation in Britain, where a much earlier start was made in rendering the environment of both secondary and tertiary education less handicapping to people with disabilities.10 At the risk of appearing to labour the obvious in attempting to demonstrate that disabled people have a much worse chance of entering higher education than abled-bodied people, it is argued that the measurement of present participation rates is essential if we wish to evaluate the impact of any policy changes which may occur in the future, including admission policies.

The school-university interface

Accepting then that people with disabilities resulting from sensory or motor impairments may stand up to eight times less chance, or perhaps even worse, of entering higher education, in what ways can this be attributed to anything in the content or communication of admission policies?

In the realm of policy, admission policy forms the interface between school and university. On each side of this interface exist the two great sets of policy issues affecting the successful participation of disabled people in higher education.

On one side of the interface are the policy issues affecting the preparedness of disabled people for entry to higher education. On the other side are the policy issues affecting the consistency of the assessment of compensatory and support mechanisms aimed at ensuring that disabled people who have entered higher education may compete with their able-bodied peers on as near as possible equal terms.

The inadequacy or excellence of admission policy has a potentially crucial impact on both these sets of issues. On the one hand they can provide a benchmark against which the success or failure of the special education system can be measured. If the special education system, whether operating in special schools or in support of regular school programmes, is credible university applicants a similar proportion of intellectually able disabled students to that which obtains in the general population, then special education policy and/or broader aspects of social policy surrounding it, require urgent review. Credible university applicants are not likely to be deterred from making the highest possible use of the criteria of the admission policy. On the other hand if the university fails to bring to graduation standard a proportion of its disabled students similar to that which applies in the general student population, then policy on the provision of compensatory and support mechanisms operates by the university or relevant outside agencies requires urgent review.

Developing an admission policy

How would a university set about developing an admission policy which would affect students with disabilities, or reviewing an existing admission policy?

As in all policy development, the process can be delineated by a series of questions and sub-questions:

a. What are the objectives of policy, and who are the decision makers?

b. What should be the aims of the policy? (What is necessary? What is desirable?)

c. What should be the scope of the policy? (Where should it apply? Should it be mandatory? Should it affect all current or prospective students?)

d. What are the means? (What strategies are possible in support of the objectives? What are the targets?)

(i) Who should decide and on what basis? (Who is making the decision? Is the decision justified?)

(ii) What agencies and processes might best serve our policy aims? (Who is involved? Are they expert? Are they up to the task?)

(iii) What is possible? What is impossible? (Are we thinking in realistic terms? Are we thinking in terms of resources and the interests of all concerned?)

SPACE does not permit examination of the arguments relevant to all three questions. However, by way of example, a few are explored.

Objectives and aims

As already suggested the objective of the policy is to achieve an equitable participation rate for disabled students. This implies certain aims for the university either in attempting to influence the special education system, and/or committing itself to bringing programmes that compensate for inadequacies at secondary level. In order to understand the difficulties involved, it is worth noting that in their Survey of Special Education in Australia,11 a very valuable and difficult task undertaken on behalf of the Schools Commission by Andrews et al., no attempt is made to assess the numbers or proportion of disabled students who achieve university entrance standards. Scope

What range of disabilities should the policy take into account? Students of adequate intellectual capacity, but with sensory or motor impairments would surely be included, but what of mental impairment? While a mildly mentally retarded person might benefit from some Targeted Access Programmes, the essential characteristics of university education would seem to preclude their participation. However students with intermittent emotional disturbance or specific learning difficulties should probably fall within the scope of the policy.

In a steady state situation, or in departments with fixed enrolment quotas, an increasing proportion of disabled students would mean a decreasing propor­ tion of able-bodied students. Without additional funding, provision of compensatory and support mechanisms would mean loss of resources from other existing areas. This issue must fall within the scope of the policy. It should probably be argued in terms of positive discrimination (since discrimination on grounds other than academic quality is alien to the university concept) but rather in terms of the principle of equity.
Who should decide and on what basis?

Should the selectors know when they first consider an application that the student has a disability? Should the provision of information on a disability be mandatory? Apart from considerations of privacy, could it be guaranteed that the provision of such information would not sometimes work against a candidate? On the other hand if the information is not provided injustice could be done by not recognising that the candidate has hitherto performed at less than his potential because of schooling interrupted by therapy needs, or a handicapping school environment. Then again entry to some professions may be formally restricted to those who are healthy, able-bodied, and have no record of emotional disturbance. If such restrictions are not applied at the time of entry to the course, they may be applied subsequently by the professional body granting the licence. At yet a further remove the major employers of professionals in a given category may as a matter of policy reject disabled candidates. The scope of the admission policy must include guidelines on how, if at all, such factors should be taken into account when admitting disabled students to a professional course.

Some courses involve fieldwork, practical work, or interactive techniques for which certain sensory, motor or emotional capacities are seen to be required, whether in the course itself or in subsequent likely work situations. What should be done if the disabled candidate is convinced of his abilities to deal with such problems but the selectors have sincere doubts?

What are the means?

To select but one issue that might arise as to means — to what extent can the advice of disabled people who have already successfully entered or completed university education be relied upon in developing and applying the admission policy? Having succeeded themselves without the benefit of such a policy, might they not feel that others can and should do the same? On the other hand, who in the university is in a better position to judge than those with personal experience of disability?

Conclusion

In this brief and selective treatment, the great potential influence of admission policies has been demonstrated, while at the same time it has been shown how difficult such policies may be to develop and implement. The importance of participation rates as a measure of policy effectiveness has been considered. For disabled people a sound admission policy can do much to guarantee the security of expectation and freedom of choice that are fundamental to educational rights.

Notes and References

10. Voluntary self-identification figures used in the examples given are drawn from: Rosemary Sorger, and Gordon Young, A survey of disabled students at RMIT, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Students Services, Melbourne, 1979, p. 5.
11. As reflected in: Williams Report v. 1, p. 27.
12. This series of questions is drawn, with appropriate adaptation, from: Harvard University, Program on Information Resources Policy, Information resources policy: arenas, players and stakes. Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1977. (Annual report 1976-1977) v. 1, p. 44.