

Pathways 6 Conference 2002

Working Together – Inclusive Educational Pathways

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Keywords: DCO additional numbers research funding

ABSTRACT

Working Together – Inclusive Educational Pathways

The Commonwealth Government's initiatives announced under the *Australians Working Together (AWT)* package will provide almost \$8m over three years for higher education institutions to support students with disabilities with high cost support needs. The challenge facing the Department in establishing the new additional support programme was to develop a funding model that directed funds only to those institutions which were supporting students with disabilities with high cost needs and which would encourage recipient organisations to seek innovative ways to make the best use of the funds. The paper discusses the issues that led to the final model. The paper also looks at how the new Disability Coordination Officer programme, costing \$3.8m over three years, will operate and build on the successful Regional Disability Liaison Officers (RDLO) programme by establishing additional positions to further the Government's objective of increasing the successful participation of students with disabilities in VET and higher education. A further \$24.4 million will also be available, as part of the AWT package from 2002 to contribute to State and Territory efforts to assist people with a disability to enter and complete a VET course.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the Commonwealth Government released its *Australians Working Together* package. An important objective was for more people with a disability to find satisfying employment and to improve their opportunities for community engagement. Driving the initiative was a deep concern that only 53 per cent of people with a disability were in the workforce compared with 80 per cent of the general population of working age.

The strategy, costing \$36.9 million over the first three years, was to support increased and successful participation in mainstream education and training.

- \$3.75 million were set aside to establish a new Disability Coordination Officer (DCO) initiative. This would assist people with disabilities to move between school, vocational education and training, higher education and employment and to succeed in their education and training;
- \$24.4 million were to be directed to State and Territory efforts to assist people enter and complete vocational education and training; and
- \$ 7.8 million were set aside to establish a new programme for additional support for students with disabilities with high cost needs in higher education.

2 OUTLINE OF THE DCO INITIATIVE

The Disability Co-ordination Officer (DCO) initiative will provide information, co-ordination and referral for people with a disability interested in, or enrolled in, post-school education and training. It will complement the existing Regional Disability Liaison Officer (RDLO) initiative, which provides similar services across education sectors though the RDLOs are hosted by universities. The new initiative means there will be around 25 RDLOs / DCOs across the country, forming a national network.

In developing the new DCO programme, discussions were held between the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and members of ADTAC, the Australian Disability Training Advisory Council, and Equity Managers of State and Territory Training Authorities.

The location of DCOs was a particularly important issue, to ensure a good coverage across the country of the combined DCO/RDLO network, with as little overlap between the DCO and RDLO boundaries as possible. The current RDLO placements are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Location of RDLOs

State /Territory	Host University
New South Wales	University of Newcastle University of Western Sydney
Victoria	University of Ballarat
Queensland	James Cook University (Cairns and Townsville) Central Queensland University (Rockhampton) University of Southern Queensland ((Toowoomba)
South Australia	University of South Australia
Western Australia	Edith Cowan University
Tasmania	University of Tasmania
Northern Territory	University of the Northern Territory

[Column 1 lists States and Territories. Column 2 lists host universities.]

The new positions were to be in the following locations:

- Two half-time and three full-time DCO positions in New South Wales
- One half-time position in the ACT
- Four positions in Victoria
- Two positions in Queensland
- Two half time positions in South Australia
- One full-time and two half-time positions in Western Australia
- One half-time position in Tasmania
- One full-time position in the Northern Territory

The following types of organisations may host DCOs:

- Registered Training Organisations (public and private)
- Higher education institutions
- Government Departments and Statutory Authorities
- Other Government Organisations
- Community based organisations, including disability organisations

Proposals for the new DCO positions were called for mid-year and the selection process for host organisations has been finalised. It is expected that many DCOs will be appointed by the end of 2002.

3 ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PROGRAMME

The Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Programme provides universities with additional funding to assist with providing high cost support to meet the needs of higher education students with disabilities. The development of the funding model needed to take into account: the Government's objectives for the funding; the data recorded within the sector and available to the Department on students and their needs; and the funds available.

3.1 Objective

The Government's objective for the new programme was to help universities meet the educational needs of those of their students with disabilities who required high cost support. The objective would include encouragement for universities to find the most cost-effective ways to meet their obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

3.2 Numbers of people needing support

3.3 a. Students with disabilities

In 2000, 19,689 higher education students had declared on enrolment that they had a disability. This was 2.7 per cent of the total enrolment. Students declaring a disability are recorded in the DEST higher education statistics collection against 6 disability categories (Table 2).

Table 2 Percentage of students with a disability in disability categories

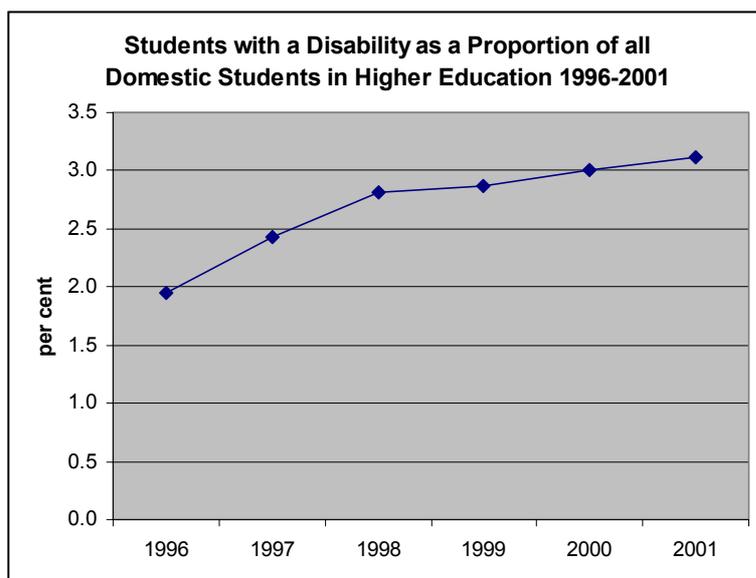
Disability category	Percentage of total %
Students with hearing disability	10
Students with a learning disability	9
Students with a mobility disability	13
Students with a visual disability	19
Students with a medical disability	37
Students with other disability	22

[Column 1 lists disability categories used for reporting to DEST and Column 2 lists percentages of total students with disabilities against each category.]

The legislation under which the new programme is to be funded is the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988*. This means that the funds will be restricted to the use of domestic students.

The number of students who declare they have a disability has been recorded since 1996. At that time there were 11,656 domestic students with disabilities. By 2001 there were over 20,000 students. In 1996 these students comprised 1.9 per cent of the domestic student population and by 2001, 3.0 per cent. Figure 1 shows the trend.

Figure 1 Proportion of students with disabilities



DEST 2001

[The Y axis gives the per cent of domestic students with a disability and the x axis the year.]

3.4 b. Disparity between the number of people with disabilities and the number needing support

The number of students who have declared a disability does not necessarily equate with the number of students needing support, let alone high cost support.

In 2000, of the students identifying as having a disability, only 53 per cent identified an interest in receiving information about support. Anecdotal information from a number of universities also suggested that the number of students who received support differed from the number who declared a disability on enrolment. In addition, some of those receiving support would appear to have not declared that they have a disability on enrolment.

3.5 Which universities were funding high cost support? - uneven spread across the sector

The proportion of students identifying as having a disability varies considerably across the sector. In 2001, for example, the proportion of each university's domestic students who identified as having a disability ranged from 0.8 per cent to 8.6 per cent (Table 3). At most institutions, somewhere between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of domestic students have identified as having a disability. At some institutions, however, a considerably higher proportion declares a disability and at others a considerably smaller proportion declares a disability.

Table 3 Proportions of students with disabilities at universities

Proportion of domestic students with a disability in 2001	Number of institutions
0.0 - 0.9 %	1
1.0 - 1.9 %	5
2.0 - 2.9 %	12
3.0 - 3.9 %	10

4.0 – 4.9 %	7
5.0 – 5.9 %	3
6.0 – 6.9 %	1
7.0 – 7.9 %	0
8.0 – 8.9 %	1

DEST 2001

[Column 1 lists proportions of domestic students with a disability in 2001 and Column 2 shows, against each proportion, the number of universities with that proportion.]

DEST had anecdotal information that some institutions were supporting quite high numbers of students with expensive support needs, eg Braille services and other alternative formatting for vision impaired students, while others had more students with low cost needs.

In summary, as we prepared to develop a funding model we knew that the number of higher education students declaring a disability was increasing but this did not necessarily correlate with the number receiving support and that the need for high cost support appeared to be spread unevenly across the sector.

3.6 Research to develop a funding model

We commissioned Jenny Pearson and Associates to carry out research which would assist us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and develop the most appropriate funding model for the programme. Altogether seventeen universities assisted with the research.

3.7 a. The research supported a number of our previous understandings

The research supported our understanding that not all students declaring a disability actually needed support. Overall, from the universities participating in the research, 41 per cent of students declaring a disability received support. The research also appeared to support earlier anecdotal information that students needing support were not necessarily those who had declared a disability on enrolment. Most universities in the study noted such discrepancies, for example one university noted that of eighteen students receiving support only two had declared their disability on enrolment.

3.8 b. The research gave us some idea of costs

The research enabled us to gain some idea of the funds institutions were expending on students with disabilities. Universities were asked for the number of students in high cost categories above \$5,000 per year. Overall, across fifteen institutions there were 121 students costing over \$5,000 per year. Table 4 shows the spread.

Table 4 Number of students in high cost categories

Category (\$ per student per year)	Number of students
\$5,000-\$9,999	80
\$10,000 - \$14,999	21
\$15,000 - \$19,999	9
\$20,000 – 24,999	8
\$25,000 - \$29,999	0
\$30,000 +	3

[Column 1 lists high cost categories and Column 2 lists the number of students in each category.]

An additional data collection was undertaken to gauge numbers at cost categories below \$5,000 per year. Seventeen institutions were able to assist with this question. Numbers increased in the lower cost categories, for example, universities in the study had funded support to over 200 students that cost between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per student per year. Almost 4,000 students were assisted at costs less than \$1,000 per student per year.

The Pearson research also gave us some indication of the types and costs of support provided by universities. However, cost data for audio taping and Braille were not provided. (Table 5)

Table 5 Students and support costs for types of support

Type of support	Number of students	Average cost of support
Multiple support	63	\$4,597
Note taker	21	\$3,016
Audiotaping	2	No cost data provided
Braille	1	No cost data provided
Other support	5	\$7,113

[Column 1 identifies types of support, Column 2 identifies the number of students against each support type and Column 3 identifies the average cost of support for each support type.]

3.9 A wild card to consider – NILS full-cost recovery

At the same time as the Pearson research was being undertaken, the Department had received advice from a number of sources about the decision of the National Information and Library Service (NILS), a major Braille translating service provider, to move to full-cost recovery from 2002. This was expected to significantly increase the cost of transcribing textual material for vision impaired students. Whilst we had preliminary information about the likely costs of transcribing material per item, universities had not approached us directly or provided us with hard data as to the actual costs they were expecting to meet. However, we were aware that this was, in a sense, a wild card with regard to the new programme and the support universities would be providing in the new year. Off-the-record discussion with some disability support practitioners in the sector suggested that the proposed high costs for Braille could consume the major part of our new programme's available funds, so leaving insufficient funds for supporting other needs.

In summary

To sum up these points:

- We now had some indications of numbers of students needing high cost support but not full data for the sector.
- While more students received lower cost support, there were some students who receive very high cost support.
- The costs of providing alternative format materials for the vision impaired and print handicapped could be very costly but no hard data was available to us.

4 DISCUSSION WITH THE SECTOR

A crucial step to be taken before any funding model could be developed was to seek the knowledge and understanding of the sector itself. The Department drafted up a discussion paper in the form of guidelines and asked for the sector's advice on these.

A broad range of very useful advice was received. The most widely expressed concern related to the inadequacy of the draft disability categories set out in the guidelines. A number of universities expressed concern about the likely administration costs of the new programme and several institutions raised a concern about privacy issues.

Negotiation continued with the sector for some months until a balance was found between the sector's concerns about the level and detail of required information to be included in funding applications and the Department's need for sufficient information to ensure programme accountability would be met.

5 THE AGREED MODEL

Several models were proposed for the new programme. In the end, however, to ensure available funds reached institutions with students with high cost needs, it was decided to reimburse or partially reimburse funds already spent by institutions. The new model also took into account the requirements of the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* and the *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997*.

5.1 Key features of the new programme

The programme defines eligible types of disability and eligible types of educational support and equipment. Institutions are required to maintain proper records for students who receive support with regard to these types of disability, types of support and the funds spent on the support. Institutions provide DEST with information on numbers of students and their support costs as well as minimal information about equipment purchased or leased.

Under the programme, institutions may make claims each six months against five high cost categories.

- \$500 to \$1,499
- \$1,500 to \$2,999
- \$3,000 to \$5,999
- \$6,000 to \$9,999
- \$10,000 plus

Because the total funding is limited, the Department could not commit to a 100 per cent reimbursement of all approved costs under the programme. Rather, to allow for all eventualities, a sliding scale was decided in which the minimum threshold for payment could be adjusted, although it was never to be less than \$500 per 6 months, and the proportion of reimbursement could also be adjusted.

There is a presumption that as universities are responsible for meeting the educational needs of their students under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, they are not reliant on this funding for their forward planning.

5.2 b. Accountability requirements

As with other programmes, such as the Higher Education Equity Programme, the Department needs to have data to show that the students receiving the funds were enrolled. Therefore universities are requested to submit a list of student ID codes, as used for the purpose of the DEST higher education statistics collection, with the funding applications. The ID codes, as with all other student ID codes received by the Department, have no names or addresses attached. The DEST data base does not contain the names or addresses of higher education students. The IDs are not linked to any other information on the claim form. As well as allowing verification of enrolments, this information will also enable DEST officers to undertake basic performance monitoring, as it does for other groups of students.

As with other programmes of this nature, audit and risk management arrangements are in place. In this case, the possibility of random verification audits is stated, as is the possibility of targeted audits if claims data suggest inconsistencies. Also, the guidelines include a standard clause which states that in the case of an alleged or suspected breach of the law the Department's Investigations Unit may inspect relevant records.

5.3 c. Privacy issues

Departmental officers are bound by privacy legislation, as are universities. This means that if a random verification audit were to take place, under *the Privacy Act 1988* universities would not be able to provide student records containing personal information to auditors unless the students in question had been informed that this might occur. For the first round of funding applications universities did not have time to issue privacy notices which identified the possibility of random verification of records to students for whom funding would be claimed under the programme. DEST wrote to institutions clarifying that in the case of a random verification audit of the first round, universities would not be able to provide student records containing personal information to auditors without the consent of the students in question. However, for future application rounds, students need to be advised that a verification audit might possibly take place at a future time.

5.4 The first round of the new programme

Applications for the first round of the new Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Programme were received in mid September. Altogether, thirty institutions made claims for the funds they had spent in the first 6 months of the year on educational support and equipment.

Within a couple of months we expect to receive claims under Round 2. We are confident that the new programme will contribute greatly to the support universities are providing for their students with disabilities who have high cost support needs.