INTRO: Hi everyone, welcome to the ADCET Podcast – supporting you – supporting students. We would like to acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which this recording is taking place and to the elder’s past, present and emerging.

This podcast episode is the audio taken from our webinar with Bruce Maguire from Vision Australia. During this podcast, Bruce Maguire outlines and discusses the findings of Vision Australia’s research into the significant barriers to online learning experienced by university students who are blind or have low vision.

Make sure you check out our show notes to find the link to the webinar. Enjoy

BRUCE MAGUIRE: Thank you for inviting us to be part of the webinar this afternoon. I'll be sharing with you the key findings of Vision Australia's research into the barriers that university students who are blind or have low vision encounter when they need to use online learning platforms and I'll also be providing you with an update on Vision Australia's work in this space since we released the report of our research and then, I'll be offering some suggestions for how you can assist students deal with those barriers while we continue to advocate for systematic solutions and as Darlene mentioned, I'll be happy to try and answer any questions that you may have.

When I was in my last year of high school more than four decades ago and thinking about what I wanted to study at university for the first time, I was keen to become a psychologist. But I left university with majors in linguistics and philosophy instead and I haven't become a professional in either of those fields, but working in the disability sector does give me plenty of scope for applying philosophical concepts, practical problems and for observing how profoundly our thoughts and actions are influenced by the language we use. When I was a kid, we talked about becoming astronauts when we grew up and we imagined how much fun we'd have zooming up into space and back then, space was sort of just space and once you zoomed off, there'd be no barriers to stop you until you crashed into a distant planet or tripped over a black hole somewhere out there. Over the past few months, the word "zoom" has taken on a whole new dimension, of course. We're all cyber-nauts zooming in cyber space, dropping into webinars and catching up with friends and family so we can practice social distancing, but paradoxically, stay socially close. Having virtual music lessons and studying online, all thanks to a software program called Zoom, which just happened to be in the right place at the right time and which, sort of, coincidentally... although I think it was also by design, includes many accessibility features, so people who are blind or who have low vision can participate in Zoom meetings and webinars, just as I am participating in this webinar.

But in cyber space, unlike in physical space beyond the stratosphere, there are barriers that we, as a society, have created and allowed to flourish and in this presentation, I'm discussing one set of those barriers that university units who are blind or have low vision experience when they're accessing online learning platforms. When I was at university in the mid-1970s, I experienced barriers as a blind student. The reason, in fact, that I didn't study psychology was because the Professor of psychology at the time told me that blind people can't study it and I'd be better to study philosophy, because blind people can study that and as an impressionable and shy 16-year-old high school student contemplating university, I believed him.

There have been many changes in the way our society approaches disability since then. Some of those changes have been positive and inclusive and some haven't. The barriers have changed, but they haven't gone away. The university sector has experienced many changes, too, of course. Government funding for universities has become much more contested. There has been increasing pressure on universities to align their courses with industry and career outcomes and there has been a need for greater flexibility in course offerings and study modes. At the same time, the value of a university education has increased with tertiary education being more strongly linked to employment outcomes and this is just as true for people who are blind or have low vision. An international survey conducted in 2018 by Vision Australia and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and the Blind Foundation of New Zealand showed that while people who are blind or have low vision are significantly less likely to be employed full-time… and I'll just go off on a slight tangent there and say that the unemployment rate is well over 50% and that's several orders of magnitude higher than even the unemployment rate will be as a result of the COVID pandemic in the general community. But even though that unemployment rate is well over 50%, there is a much greater chance of obtaining full-time employment for those people who are blind or have low vision who also have a postsecondary qualification, such as a university degree.

Perhaps the biggest single change in the university space has been the development of online learning. Now, just going back to the mid '70s again, if you had mentioned the word "online" back then, or even in the early 2000s, when I was at university again doing my Masters of Policy and Applied Social Research, we would have thought you were talking about a fish on the point of getting away or maybe colour coordinated clothes pegs on the Hills Hoist out the back. But it's now virtually impossible for a student at one of the 42 universities in Australia to avoid interacting with an online learning environment, even for those courses that are delivered online, or at least which were, until a couple of months ago when we were compelled by the coronavirus to zoom away from campuses in our homes. There's no doubt that this new online learning space has brought many benefits to universities and students alike. Universities can now offer courses via distance mode with unprecedented flexibility. Students can virtually tailor-make their own study program and have the freedom to study when and where they want. However, as those of us who are blind or have low vision or who work in the disability sector generally know only too well, accessibility barriers can and do spring up overnight when technology develops rapidly without any rights-based focus on the principles of inclusive design.

Over the past three years, Vision Australia staff have spoken with quite a number of university students who are blind or have low vision. Almost without exception, they've reported they've experienced numerous accessibility barriers when using online learning environments. In some cases, these barriers have prevented them from continuing their studies at all. We've received comments such as, "I felt humiliated and belittled, because I could not check my own assignment grades like everyone else because that particular function of the online software is inaccessible to people who use screen-reading software." And another comment was, "I was told that the online discussion board was accessible, but I found that there were 200 links on the page and I couldn't actually find anything I needed because of all the clutter." Another comment was, "Some of my lecturers were really good and helped me with those online activities that were inaccessible, but others made no effort at all and told me it was my problem." And, “I asked the disability services people for assistance with the online stuff, but it took them six weeks to get back to me and by then, I was too far behind in my course to continue with it.” Comments like these are disturbing and they suggest the burgeoning use of online learning environments by universities has led to numerous accessibility barriers, however the exact nature and extent of these barriers had not been previously studied. Vision Australia decided in 2017 to conduct some small-scale research so we could gain a more detailed understanding of the online learning experiences for recent university students who are blind or have low vision.

Now it's important to emphasise, though, that the barriers to online learning aren't the only barriers that university students who are blind or have low vision face. For example, we continue to hear disturbing reports of students being unable to obtain their study materials in their specified format, especially Braille. But the danger of researching all the barriers all at once is that the resulting report would be so voluminous and I might add, such depressing reading that it would go the way of many other reports and be quickly shelved and forgotten.

We wanted to maximise the chances of achieving real and lasting change that would bring benefits to students. So, we designed a survey to gather information about the online learning experiences of current and recent university students. It was available for completion online or by telephone from early May '17 until 30 June 2017 and because we wanted to keep the survey straightforward and user-friendly, all the fields were optional, including contact information, assistive technology used, the name of the university, where they had studied and non-directed comments about their experiences using online learning platforms - lectures, tutorials and online forums and so forth. Almost all participants shared the name of the university which they studied and, in fact, more participants withheld their phone number than the name of the institution, however, in our report of the research, we very deliberately avoided naming any particular university. The fundamental purpose of our research was to identify the extent of accessibility barriers to online learning across the university sector, rather than to draw attention to the shortcomings or failings or, indeed, the best practices at a particular institution.

So, the survey was promoted through Vision Australia's network, including contacts with university students and through our social media channels. So, what was the response? When we began the research project, we figured that we'd be doing well if we received a dozen or so responses. It's challenging to get university students to participate in surveys at the best of times and we know that students who are blind or have low vision are usually under increased pressure. But, in fact, we received 35 responses from current or recent university students and we think that this extremely high number is a reflection of the extreme importance that students place on sharing their experiences of the accessibility barriers that they encountered in the hope that, by so doing, they'll be contributing to systematic change that will make university study more accessible and rewarding, if not for them, then at least for students in the future.

In total, the participants in the research were studying or had recently studied at 24, which is 65%, of Australia's 37 public universities, which makes it possible for us to draw some reliable conclusions about the sector-wide nature of the barriers that were reported. One student had studied at a higher education provider other than a university and two had studied at institutions in the VET sector. 41% of participants used adaptive technology related to screen enlargement like zoom text and Windows magnifier and the remaining participants used synthetic speech or braille-based technology, such as JAWS for Windows and VDA screen-reading software and the Braille-note Touch which is a refreshable Braille note taker based on the Android system. A small number of participants relied solely on the Mac and its built-in accessibility features which, as you probably know, are Voiceover and Zoom. After analysing the results of the research project, we produced a report headlined Online, but Off-track, which is a concise way of saying that the university sector has strayed far from the path of barrier-free access as online learning systems have been introduced. Australia's then Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Alastair McEwan, provided a forward for the report and we officially launched it at the National Union of Students Disability and Accessibility Conference on September 30th, 2018. I remember launching that report and I was, again, sitting in my living room at my dining room table just as I am now, because that particular conference was in Melbourne, so it's interesting that here I am again, although for very different reasons, talking about the report from my dining room table. And the report is available on our website, and I'm hoping that most of you will have had a chance to read it, or at least to know you can read it if you want to.

I'll now move on to summarise the key findings of our research and they're described in much more detail in the report. The first thing to say is that not all participants experienced accessibility barriers to online learning. In fact, two of them described their experience in completely positive terms, although one of them noted that their experience could have been better. The second thing to say about our research findings, and the one that must be said over and over again, is that the other participants all experienced accessibility barriers of one kind or another when engaging with online learning environments that they were required to use as a part of their university studies. Each of these barriers warrants a presentation in its own right, but I'm just going, in this webinar this afternoon, to illustrate them with quotes from the research participants themselves, because it's their experiences which expressed in their own words, that speak most eloquently and most memorably and most persuasively and Darlene, are we going to…

DARLENE McLENNAN: I was about to interrupt you, so, well done. You've done very well. Jane, are you right to put the first poll up? Sorry, everybody that I forget to mention. The first poll is, are your university’s online platforms accessible to students who use assistive technology? Yes, no, or don't know. If people are right to put in your votes… Just while everybody is doing that, just to let you know, we will have another poll at the end, getting closer to the end, as well. Sorry, I didn't mention that at the beginning. Just wanting to check you're awake, but also, it's fantastic for us to hear what people's experiences are currently. How are we going, Jane? Do you think we can put the results up now? Are your university's online platforms accessible to students who use assistive technology? 33% of people said yes, 19% of people said no and 47% of the people said they don't know. Thanks, Bruce.

BRUCE MAGUIRE: Thanks, Darlene, and we'll be thinking about those figures while I talk about the comments we received from participants, beginning with one comment that we received from a participant who described the experience of online learning as follows, “Awful. The university website is very difficult to see. Also, I spend so much time looking for things. That makes for frustration and exhaustion." Another participant commented, "It has been a difficult experience, especially providing feedback to peers online.” The difficulty interacting with peers using online platforms was raised by many participants, including this student, “The Blackboard discussion boards didn't always allow me to post a comment. Blackboard Collaborate is inaccessible.” Another participant noted, "I can't use the discussion boards at all. I email comments to my lecturers and they post them for me. I can't complete online tasks like other students." Another participant commented, "I'm not able to participate in the discussion forums and sometimes, I miss the materials." A further comment came from this participant, "Discussion boards were inaccessible. Blackboard, Collaborate, navigability was limited as the chat functionality was inaccessible."

A number of participants also mentioned that some parts of an online learning platform are accessible, while others are not and it can be impossible to know in advance whether the functionality that is needed to complete a particular task is accessible. One participant explained, "When I launched Adobe Connect, I could never be sure whether I'd be able to participate with everybody else. Sometimes I could join an online seminar, but I couldn't read the PowerPoints that the presenter was using. Sometimes I could join an online chat group, but I couldn't access the list of participants or tell who was speaking at any particular time. It was very much hit and miss and it was never the same from one day to the next or one subject to the next. I wasted a lot of time how to figure out how to make it work."

One of the important concepts that's developed in the Disability Standards for Education is that of reasonable adjustment. The basic idea, of course, is that education institutions must have mechanisms in place for dealing with systems and processes that are inaccessible and cannot be made accessible. For example, if the function to submit a university assignment online is inaccessible, then the university must have some other way for a student who is blind or has low vision to submit it. The development of these reasonable adjustments is usually the responsibility of the disability support staff within each individual university and there doesn't appear to be any consistent approach towards the nature of reasonable adjustments, and students at different universities can have very different experiences. It often depends on the knowledge of the particular staff. Numerous participants in our research drew attention to this. Say, for example, "When I email them,” which was the disability services staff, "About some assistance I need, I generally get an automated out of office reply and it sometimes takes weeks before I get to speak to someone. In that time, things have generally become more difficult for me, because I haven't received the assistance." Another participant provided this comment, "I've had quite a bit of difficulty accessing online books as I cannot copy and paste them to view them in a larger font. I found the disability support department are not very understanding of low vision and I'm often required to provide medical certificates for assignment extensions. I'm feeling like I'm not helped much and it is only my determination that will help me complete my degree."

In conversations, a number of participants expressed their surprise and frustration that the support services they need to use during their university studies were predicated and administered according to a medical model of disability, at a time when the social model is widely accepted in other areas of social policy. One participant explained, "I go to my doctor when I'm sick or need a flu shot. She knows what my blood pressure and cholesterol are, but she wouldn't have a clue about what assistance I need at uni and yet, she's the one they listen to rather than me. How can that be person-centred?"

I'll finish this brief summary of the findings of our research with a comment from one participant, which I think will motivate us all to work as hard as we can to achieve change. "I spent years at university constantly trying to overcome barriers - online, offline, you name it, and constantly battling discriminatory, prejudicial and hurtful attitudes and behaviour from support staff who were employed in roles where they should have known better. I'm finished now, and I never want to set foot inside a university again as long as I live. I'm totally repulsed by the idea of further study. It was a deeply traumatic experience for me and I have emotional scars that may never fully heal."

So, what can be done to soften those scars? What can be done to help eliminate the barriers that caused them? As we reflected on the findings of our research, we developed ten recommendations which we formulated to address the sector-wide systemic and pervasive barriers to online learning, which were targeted at the three bodies that we felt at the time were best placed to address those barriers. The first of these three bodies is the Australian Government, which provides a significant amount of funding to universities and has a responsibility to ensure that its funding is used for the benefit of all students including those who are blind or have low vision. The second body is the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which is known as TEXA, which administers a number of standards having to do with quality of education that universities provide to students and the quality of the overall experience that students have while they are at university. Eight of the ten recommendations are directed towards Universities Australia, which is the peak body representing the 37 Australian public universities. The two initiatives that we believe would have the biggest impact in eliminating the barriers that students currently face are first, the introduction of sector-wide accessible ICT procurement policies that include requirements for vendors and distributors of online learning systems to demonstrate compliance with accessibility standards and best practices and secondly, the development of best practice guidelines for training resources for disability support staff. Are we going to do the second poll now, Darlene? Or, are you going to wait?

DARLENE McLENNAN: Happy to put it on now. We'll do another poll.

BRUCE MAGUIRE: If I've thrown the schedule out, I'm sorry, it just popped into my head that now would be a good time.

DARLENE McLENNAN: It's even better, because sometimes we forget to do them, so this is great we've got them down. The question is, does your university have an accessible ICT policy? It's either yes, no, or you don't know. Bruce, hearing you read those stories, I've read the report and became emotional and frustrated, but hearing you read them again, it's so powerful to hear people's stories and it's just terrible that people still experience those things in this day and age and you do worry, with COVID-19, that this has been exacerbated for many students at the moment.

Does your university have accessible ICT policies? 20% said yes, 20% said no, and 60% said they don't know. Okay, back to you. Thanks, Bruce.

BRUCE MAGUIRE: Thanks, Darlene, and those results are very interesting and keep them in mind as I talk now about what we've done over the past 18 months since we released the report. And we've had various discussions with government and university sector representatives as well as ongoing engagement with the Australian Human Rights Commission. We've had a mixed response, I have to say, from the university sector and so far, we've not been able to secure a commitment to a consistent and collaborative approach to accessible ICT procurement. We're encouraged that there is a growing focus by governments and industry on the adoption of standards for accessible ICT procurement, including here in Australia, and we're starting to see some developers of online learning platforms give more than lip service to accessibility and make long overdue improvements, but nevertheless, if the university sector in Australia were to develop a consistent approach, it would allow them to influence developers more effectively than any single university can at present. While we're continuing our discussions with the sector and with government, we are keen to work with individual universities to develop and implement best practices in online learning accessibility. Although each university by themselves might have limited influence on international software development, there's certainly a lot they can do to improve the experiences and outcomes for students who are faced with significant accessibility barriers.

When prospective students who are blind or have low vision ask me for some tips on how they can prepare for university, one thing I strongly encourage them to do is make early contact with the disability support staff and discuss their study plans and assistive technology options in detail. It's important, I think, that at least some disability support staff have advanced familiarity with screen-reading software and how it interacts with the university's online learning platforms so they can give students accurate advice. I also advise prospective students to speak with staff about arranging a test drive of the online learning system that they'll be using once they commence their studies. Being able to explore the system while there's no pressure to meet deadlines and participate in class discussions can be extremely valuable. I know of at least one university that has been able to provide students with a document that lists all the online systems that are used by that university and how each one of them interacts with the major screen-reading software. Again, this can be an extremely helpful resource providing, of course, that it's kept up-to-date.

The Australian historian, Professor Manning Clark, regarded modern Australia as a background between, on the one hand, the enlargers of life who embrace adventure, a vision of change and what he called the banquet of life, and on the other hand, the straighteners who are cautious, narrow-minded, suspicious of change and who want to keep things pretty much as they are. Many aspects of the ongoing quest for disability equality and inclusion can, I think, be usefully expressed in those terms and in the time that we've been promoting our Online, but Off-track report in the university sector, we've certainly encountered both the enlargers and the straighteners. As we begin to plan for university education in a world after the COVID-19 pandemic, more than ever before, we need enlargers more set to leadership and decisive action. Otherwise, it will be a long time before university students who are blind or have low vision achieve equal and barrier-free access to study opportunities.

I just want to conclude this presentation this afternoon by paying a tribute to the students who participated in our research, because in sharing their experiences, they're calling on us, whatever our place in the university sector or in government or in other organisations, to take action to bring the university sector back on track, to eliminate discriminatory barriers and provide equal access to the many benefits of a university education. To be worthy of the confidence that they've placed in us, we must take that action so that the community that we serve can participate fully in the benefits of a university education and zoom into that banquet of life. I'll stop there, Darlene, and hand back to you and I'm happy to sort of try and answer any questions.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Great, thank you Bruce, that's fantastic. It's fantastic, I think, taking the words from the page into our minds. Fantastic. We've had a couple of questions. We had a few questions prior to the webinar, but we've also got some that have come throughout the webinar. Just a reminder, if people have questions they would like me to ask Bruce, please add that to the Q&A pod. One of the key questions was… sorry, I'm going to bring it over, I've got three screens here and I've got one of the screens going in the wrong direction. “Is there a learning platform that you find is the most accessible that you've come across in this research, but also in your work?”

BRUCE MAGUIRE: It's not an easy question to answer and yet, it's an obvious one to ask. The reason it's not easy to answer, there's a couple of reasons it's not easy to answer. Firstly, some platforms have certain components that are accessible. There were certainly some parts of Blackboard that are accessible, but as the research participants indicated, there are other parts that weren't. The other thing, and this is, in a sense, a positive reason why it's not easy to answer the question, is that there are ongoing developments. I know, for example, that Blackboard has done some work in the last couple of years, I think, driven by accessible ICT procurement standards in countries like the US and the EU to improve accessibility. So, it's a bit of a shifting space, so what is not accessible today, may be less or even more inaccessible next week or next month. What I would say to people is, if you're contemplating purchasing or deploying an online learning platform, ask the vendor whether it's accessible. Ask them to demonstrate the accessibility. Get them to show you how it works with JAWS and not just one component that they happen to pick. You choose the components that you want them to demonstrate accessibility and ask them for whatever documentation they have about compliance with accessible ICT procurement standards.

DARLENE McLENNAN: And I think that demonstration is really important. I've heard of a recent example where the vendor was, "Oh yes, we're fully accessible,” and talked the talk, but when it came down to the university using it, it didn't prove as accessible. Another question we've got, Bruce, is, have there been advances in provision of learning materials in accessible formats over the last decade? From your experience, I can't believe it was that long ago, but have you seen things improve in recent times, or even over the last decade?

BRUCE MAGUIRE: There have certainly been some improvements, but as with many aspects of accessibility, it's kind of like you make two steps forward and you take one step back and whilst there are certainly some things that have become more accessible, I think, for example, there is a growing recognition on the part of publishers that providing texts in electronic format is useful and so, I think we're seeing more availability of electronic versions of materials. But at the same time, there's also been developments in digital rights management and some of those DRM sort of mechanisms make it harder to access materials. There've been developments, for example, in Kindle accessibility and I know — I don't know whether it's happening in Australia, but certainly in the US, some universities were distributing all their materials on Kindle and had to stop when it was discovered they weren't accessible and as a result of that, there were some improvements to Kindle.

Each new kind of platform that comes out can be accessible or inaccessible. It all depends on whether the accessibility has been built in from the ground up. I'd like to think that there is a more widespread recognition now about inclusive design so that as newer platforms emerge and as new formats come through, things like ePub, Daisy, accessibility features will be built in, but often the challenges that people have are not so much with the format, but the way it's used. So, for example, PDF these days can be made pretty accessible if the PDF files are marked up properly with headings and paragraphs and table structure and so forth. But many lecturers don't do that and so, students get image-only PDF files which have no structure and which they can't even read unless they use OCR software on it. So, there's the interaction between the platform and the user of the platform that really determines how accessible it's going to be. Sorry, that was a bit of a long, waffly answer.

DARLENE McLENNAN: I'm sure a lot of people that are listening today know that Vision Australia runs some great courses on ensuring that the person that actually is developing documents and stuff are aware of what they'd need. I'd encourage everybody to go to the Vision Australia website and look those up. They're really handy at the moment, because they're all online, so, for us in Tasmania, we were excited, because we didn't need to fly to Melbourne to do a course now.

Just in relation to, I suppose, with COVID, and it's a question around assessments, we're looking at assessments being more online now, looking at exams being online at this time. Have you got any recommendations regarding assessments, but also, even, some examples of where things have actually gone right so people can aim for that and bring about some necessary change?

BRUCE MAGUIRE: Yeah, look, I think, with most aspects of accessibility, things go right more often when the person — when you kind of consult and involve the person in the discussion. If a student needs to do an assessment, then, talk to the student. Find out what their preferred format is. Find out - if it's an online assessment, find out what they've been finding with the platform itself. Talk to them about what the assessment is going to include and some things aren't as accessible or aren't as easy to use. There is a difference between accessibility and useability and some things are accessible, but can be very hard to use. Because, as a blind student, or a student who has low vision, you're not, generally speaking, getting — when I sort of go into a Zoom meeting, I get one kind of meeting control at a time. While I'm trying to turn my video on, I can't also feel on my refreshable Braille display what's going on in the chat panel. So, things just take longer to do. Sometimes it's important to allow for that by providing extra time for students to do assessments. There's a long tradition of providing extra time in examination situations, both in the K to 12 school system and also at universities and it's important that that continues on with assessments moving to more online things.

Sometimes any kind of assessment, but specifically online assessments, too, can be very visual whereas, in fact, the concept being tested isn't really about being able to interpret something visually. I remember when I was doing maths at high school, one of the topics was solid geometry where we had to learn about what happens when lines and planes intersect with spheres. In the exam, I was given 3D models made by the metal working department at school with metal lines and planes and spherical structures, because what was being tested wasn't the ability to read a perspective line drawing of a sphere, but to actually predict what was going to happen to a particular line that met the sphere at a particular angle. So, it's important to look at what is being tested and find a way of testing that, which doesn't necessarily require a student who is blind or has low vision, to interact visually with the material which, in fact, they can't do, whether or not it's online or offline. They're some general points. If you have any specific — the particular person who asked that question, if they've got any more specific information or context, I'd be happy to talk to them offline about that.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Brilliant. We have a question; I won't put it into my own words. I will read it out as-is. “Do we need the DDA revised to have more teeth around penalties for developing of IT systems that don't meet accessibility requirements? We don't have so much of an issue with our tier 1 international providers as they comply with the Americans With Disability Act. Our Australian-based vendors seem to have a bigger problem.”

BRUCE MAGUIRE: I could talk for the rest of the afternoon about that.

DARLENE McLENNAN: I thought that!

BRUCE MAGUIRE: But the basic answer is, yes, we do need the DDA revised, and we've needed it revised for a long time. It does need to have more teeth, because I think as time goes on, the teeth that it did have are getting worn and they're not necessarily being filled, so, cracks and cavities develop in them. Look, having said that though, I think the review of the DDA education standards is going to happen later this year and that's an opportunity for all of us, whether we're in the university sector, or as we are in a service-providing organisation, to comment and say those things. Many of us have been saying them for the last three reviews, that the standards need to be more specific, they need to provide more guidance and you can do that. Like, you can make the standards a lot better without changing the DDA itself. Similarly, the Australian New Zealand Standard for — sorry, the Australian Standard for Accessible ICT Procurement, which is actually the same as the European standard, has been adopted now, so it's an Australian standard and you don't need the DDA for a university to adopt that standard. In fact, one of the things we've been advocating strongly for, is for the university sector as a whole to adopt that standard with its ICT procurement policies. Without the teeth, the sharper teeth in the DDA, it does mean that there's no compulsion to adopt the standards, but if the university sector as a whole decided this is what should happen, then that would be a powerful thing. Look, I might just add one other comment about the DDA which is that, sometimes, people say to me, why don't more universities students lodge DDA complaints against universities, or how many people do lodge complaints against universities? We don't know how many people do, but one of the reasons - and I'm sure many of you would resonate with this - the key reason that people don't lodge DDA complaints is because they think that the outcomes are going to be too long in coming and too little when they do come and it can be a fairly exhausting process. It's not unheard of for DDA complaints to take over a year to kind of go through from beginning to conciliation, or lack thereof. So, never think that the lack of DDA complaints is an indicator that things are going well.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Definitely. And in the research and the report you're writing up, were you able to compare how students who are blind or vision impaired, what their experience is like in Australia versus, or compares to internationally?

BRUCE MAGUIRE: We weren't really at the time, because there hadn't been much done internationally, certainly not recently. I think there might have been a little bit more done since then, although I'm not aware of any specific sort of research report, but certainly, anecdotally, in talking to our contacts and colleagues and their colleagues, the overwhelming impression we got was that our findings were not dissimilar from what findings would have been in other countries, had the same research been done there.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Yes, and just probably one final question before we finish up. If we have any other questions unanswered, we'll chat to Bruce about giving an answer. We'll put that on the website. But what legislation change is required to drive accessibility ICT procurement in higher education, probably even beyond that in further education, beyond legislative requirements, what else would it take, as well? Probably two questions there, Bruce.

BRUCE MAGUIRE: We would like to see a linkage between government funding and a demonstrated accessible ICT procurement policy, because funding often, or the threat to withdraw funding or reduce funding, is often a good motivator and we've been having some discussions with government - not for a while, because they've been side tracked a little bit with all the recent events - but we have had some discussions with government along those lines and we'll continue to have those discussions. We do think that the sector as a whole working together could make a big difference. If every university had an accessible ICT procurement policy, then vendors would have to — if they wanted to engage with Australian universities, they would have to make improvements. At least, they'd be more likely to make improvements. I mean, Australia is a sort of, I think, fairly small market in global terms, but it's not insignificant if everyone acts in concert. Again, I think that's the leadership from the representative from the university peak bodies and sort of saying, well, this is what the sector needs to do and this is how we're going to do it.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Okay. I might just get in a little sneaky question in. “Are the days of small print, poor-quality photocopied readers or PDF over?”

BRUCE MAGUIRE: No.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Oh, we wish.

BRUCE MAGUIRE: I think they're probably — there's less of them, but when you think about the number of old books in university libraries and by "old" I mean anything more than 10 years, there's a huge amount of stuff that's not electronically available, so it has to be photocopied and photocopiers have always been fine, it's just that if you don't make sure the toner's full and all the rest of it, you get poor quality and that will continue to happen. I don't know, I know there's a high casualisation in the academic workforce these days and who knows what it will look like after COVID. But I would imagine that universities will continue to photocopy — university lecturers will continue to photocopy printed stuff and some of them will do a good job and some of them won't. I can't see that really changing for existing materials, but hopefully most stuff now, and certainly with all the online databases, you can access a huge amount of stuff electronically that's been published in the last 10, 15, maybe even 20 years.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Just a practical question, too, and I know I said it was the last question, but there's a few coming through and we've got a couple more minutes. On that practical level, a person's asked, is JAWS so much better than NVDA to warrant the cost? I'm asking on behalf of a secondary student who's very much opposed to the cost of the Braille screen reader.”

BRUCE MAGUIRE: Is Mac better than Windows?

DARLENE McLENNAN: So, it is a personal choice?

BRUCE MAGUIRE: It is, to some extent, a personal choice and certainly, NVDA has the advantage that it's free. I think it's still the case that if you want to use advanced features, say, of Word, then JAWS does a better job than NVDA and JAWS, Freedom Scientific has more resources to put into developing JAWS than NVDA does. Having said that, some things work better with JAWS, some work better with NVDA. Just as some websites work better with Chrome and some work better with Firefox.

Two things I'll say quickly. If a student's in year 7, they've got time to learn both. Maybe their NDIS package can pay for JAWS or play around with the demo or get a trial version or something. As time goes on, and particularly if you get into things beyond the school level, knowing how to use two screen readers, NVDA and JAWS, presuming they both continue to evolve, is useful, because you'll find that you want to use one sometimes and the other one at other times. The other thing that I'd say is universities shouldn't expect a student to only — shouldn't require that a student use a different screen reader from the one they're using. If something is not accessible to one screen reader, then there's something wrong, because if you've been using JAWS, for example, for 20 years or so, then just switching to NVDA for one platform or one component of a platform is not a simple task. It's not as simple as just picking up an Android, a Samsung Galaxy when you're used to using an iPhone. It is a bit like giving someone who's used to Windows, a Mac computer and saying, here we go, we want you to produce a high-quality report by tomorrow. Take advantage, while people have the time, I think they should learn how to use both screen readers if they can and the university should talk about people's individual requirements with them.

DARLENE McLENNAN: I agree. Every now and again when I get on my daughter's Mac, I have no idea. I have no idea how people go between the two. We have a question here, I'm aware that we've run out of time. “Eight of the ten recommendations are directed at Universities Australia and you have tried to engage with them. Do you think you're going to be able to make inroads in there, or is there anything you think, as a sector, we could be pushing them to engage more with this report and the recommendations?”

BRUCE MAGUIRE: What we want to see is a consistent approach across the university sector and we felt at the time that Universities Australia was best placed to develop that consistent approach and provide guidance to the sector from the peak body. If there are other groups that are better and are likely to be more responsive at doing that than Universities Australia have been, then we would certainly be keen. We have had discussions with a number of other groups, but so far, not with any group that has the capacity to influence the sector and say to every university, well, we strongly recommend that each university develop an accessible ICT procurement policy. We are having ongoing discussions. Last week, for example, we had a meeting with Dr Bent Gauntlet, who's the Disability Discrimination Commissioner, and we are looking at ways of getting together a group of people from across the different stakeholders, government and universities to try and work out a collaborative approach, but it's going to be a while, I think, before anything further happens.

DARLENE McLENNAN: Thank you. Sorry to have pushed the time out, everybody. Thank you so much, Bruce, for presenting that report and to answering those questions. I think it’s really important and as I said I’m hoping it’s a discussion we as the sector will continue talking about. I want to thank Vision Australia and Reni in the background for supporting this presentation.

OUTRO:

We just wanted to thank you again for listening to our podcast. If you are loving our podcasts please subscribe to our channel so you can keep up to date with our latest episodes, you can head over to our socials and website for some more great content -  [www.adcet.edu.au](http://www.adcet.edu.au). In our next episode we will be hearing from a panel of students on the autism spectrum who will discuss some of the challenges they face in their studies and what has helped them succeed, we hope you can join us again!