**Inform**

**Series 2, Episode 3: Higher education**

Ben Whitburn 1 (BW): there are research findings that show that there are many students with disabilities who have lower success and lower retention rates in higher education, and that that seems to be national. In fact, it seems to be International.

BW 2: if you thought about disability as something that is created and recreated every different context you step into, and I certainly could attest to that. Living with vision impairment, it all the time. I think you're always transitioning to it.

BW 3: accessibility changes in every different context.

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Intro narration:

Intro 1: Hello and welcome to Inform, a podcast where you’ll be hearing from people with disabilities, as well as industry experts, on a range of topics. I’m your host, Kirby Fenwick.

In this second series of Inform, we’ll be discussing accessibility. But not as you might know it. From the workplace to the classroom, we’ll be asking what accessibility means and why it matters as well as discussing some strategies and tips that we hope will be useful for you.

Intro 2: Today, we’re talking higher education.

Intro 3: While the number of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education is growing, research indicates that students with disabilities still experience lower success and retention rates. Why is that and what are universities doing to make higher education more accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities?

Intro 4: At the start of this episode, you heard from Dr Ben Whitburn. Dr Whitburn lectures in inclusive education at Deakin University but he also has first hand experience in what it means to pursue higher education when you have a disability.

Intro 5: Also, in this episode, we speak with Rick Boffa. Rick is the manager of equitable learning services at RMIT University and as well as explaining what equitable learning services can do for students, Rick also has some advice for anyone thinking of heading to university.

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BW 4: My name is Ben Whitburn and I hold the role of senior lecturer of inclusive education at Deakin University. I come to the role interested I guess, in the perspectives of people with disabilities and their families and their allies in what it means to be inclusive or what it means to be included in education.

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BW 5: what does accessibility mean to me? I guess on a surface level, it's, it's quite simple. It's having access to physical environments, digital environments, information, and everybody having access by one means or another.

BW 6: if it's a physical environment, more than one way to get in or out of a building. And to get around that building. If it's the information more than one way of presenting that information, whether it be pictorial, digital, electronic, so a screen reader could use it Braille, whatever it might be. And then the third step to that being, being able to use that what's the pedagogy there? How do you go about engaging with those different forms of the same access?

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BW 9: my experience as a person with a vision impairment, through higher education, I've had, I guess, unarguably, a long time in it. Now that I'm at this point. But I first went into a university degree when I after graduation. And I was studying there a journalism degree And, you know, at the time, I think I had misunderstood a lot about what support really could be. And I was vehemently independent, to the point and, and, and, to my detriment, really, too, I would go and buy a textbook, and I would scan it, and would take me, in those days, this is roughly 20 years ago, the scanner would take about a minute of page. So you know, I mean, at a page taken up on a four or 500 page textbook, I barely had time to read the thing. And then suddenly, there's an exam.

BW 10: now that I work at a university, I definitely come to understand that one person's request for support in one way or another. It doesn't speak to a weakness, it speaks to a strength in some ways to say, look, if I had this bit of extra time, or if I had someone reading me this material, or if I had someone scanning it for me, for example, it would make my life a lot easier. I think there's a lot to be said, therefore, about how disability is something that often takes up a lot of a lot of your time

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BW 11: If I could give a tip or some advice on on, on how people should go about getting into a degree of their choosing I, I would firstly say 100% push your way into a course that you really want. If there's a course that has a particular inherent requirement, that perhaps might seem a little ableist, if you like if it seems that there's a hurdle that you may not be able to cross because of your condition slows you down in some way or another. By no means Does that mean you should not try and strive to get into that degree, I think the more we have people challenging those barriers, the better will be for both the university. And for society.

BW 12: Now, that's not easy. Disability carries a lot of emotional weight. So I'm not suggesting for a minute that everyone should do that. And you might find that there is a more comfortable degree or career path, once you've explored something, but don't be afraid to explore, I think that's one of the main things.

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BW 13: The other tip I would really give is that I, as a lecturer, I get to know people who who talk to me, and and come to me and I don't know a student, just be by their access plan, I really like to get to know people come to talk to me, and, you know, they might have a particular accessibility need, that means that getting a certain assignment done might be difficult.

BW 14: go and talk to your lecturers, you know, be open about why you might have a problem with a certain aspect. And try and find solutions. You know, I, I think a lot of the time, as I said, disability is very emotional, it can, it can have such emotional weight on you. But to be able to work through them with others to recognize that you're not your condition, and you're not your context changes, tomorrow will be a different day. And that we can work through solutions together is really important. So be sure to get those those supports around you as you need. And that's not to say go and register with a disability team, either the disability support service, say that but engage others in finding solutions to your needs, I guess is how I put it simply.

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BW 16: I think there's a lot to be for universities to be congratulated for in terms of the way that they support students with disabilities. In that they offer the opportunity for you to go to them to register, I guess, both physically and to register your needs and concerns and to for those needs and concerns to be communicated in any which way that you feel comfortable with, to your teaching staff. So for example, I receive a lot of what we might call access plans or learning access plans where a student sitting down with people who work in the Disability Support Service of the university will have a good conversation about what their needs are. And they'll have a conversation about what it is that the they would like their lecturers to know about that, whether or not they want the lecturer to know everything, or nothing.

BW 17: It gives you the choice about what sort of support you might need. And whether or not you want to take take ownership of that and and communicate that yourself or have the service do it for you. And how you do that, I think that's what's most important

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Rick Boffa 1 (RB): in the context of people with disabilities, I think higher education access matters, because it's really important for people in minority groups, and disability is one of those in Australia, which needs to find a voice. And it hasn't been incredibly successful in the past, in terms of, you know, lobbying and whatnot. I think that by and large, because, you know, people with disabilities themselves, may not necessarily have historically had fantastic opportunities to engage with education. So one of the, you know, fantastic opportunities for me and the staff of equitable learning services, we're playing a small in a really big picture in terms of providing access to tertiary education in higher ed, for people with disabilities that may have not been all that accessible you know 10 15 years ago. And by doing that we're creating, you know creating a fantastic opportunity for the disability movement, I guess in Australia, to maybe gain some more momentum and clout. And hopefully, that leads to fantastic outcomes. Similarly to you know the National Disability Insurance scheme, and whatever else we've got to look forward to in future.

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RB 2: my name's Rick boffa on the manager of equitable lending services, or ELS at RMIT University. I've been in the role for just over 10 years, and I've also been a student at RMIT as well. So it feels like I've been here for a lot longer than that.

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RB 3: equitable Learning Services, really is the university's formalized process for students to disclose that they have a disability. And by doing so, um, students are able to register for assistance. And what that essentially involves is students booking a one hour appointment to come and see one of our ELS advisors, they would bring in some supporting documentation to verify the existence of a disability or medical condition or mental health condition and/or that they are a primary carer of someone with a disability. So that's the objective information that we would look at. And then we talk through with the student what they're experience in study has been so on and so forth and the ELSadvisor would then sort of crunch all that information together along with their expertise, in terms of what the university's legislative obligations are. And what we can really do in the reasonable adjustment space, and they create on behalf of the student, what we refer to as an equitable learning plan, or an ELP. And that then becomes the students passport if you like, while they're at RMIT, that follows them around, and you know really we hope levels the playing field for them. So they were able to engage and participate in their education on the same basis as they're peers. So that's what a ELS does in a nutshell.

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RB 4: How can engaging with ELS and and getting an equitable Learning Plan developed, make a student's experience at RMIt better. Look, I think it basically levels the playing field. So for example, if we've got a student who requires a note taker, you know, we're able to provide that, that service to to that student, when they need it, where they need it. So I get that that's a very sort of tangible example of being able to provide some useful assistance where a student who required a note taker who didn't have it their time and university would be yeah, probably significantly impacted. And I'd say not for the, not for the best. So I think it really does give students an opportunity to take the bull by the horns, and level the playing field, so as they can engage with their programs on the same basis as as their peers and that's a great thing to be able to offer so that's why I would encourage students to, to consider it, and you know, it is a it is a choice. And, you know, sometimes disclosing is not right for everybody at a particular point in time. So, you know, if they don't feel comfortable in doing it today, then maybe consider it again tomorrow, and so on.

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RB 6: at RMIT, we define reasonable adjustments as being both adjustments that we would make for a student, while they're on campus through semester, as part of the learning. So for example, it would be things like maybe a note taker, while they're in class or an auslan interpreter. It might be some additional time with their educators. So things things of that nature, on on campus during semester, we then also have what we refer to as equitable adjustment arrangements. And they they relate to university policy, and or adjustments that relates specifically to assessments, that they would be things like, additional time for exams, maybe extensions, those sorts of things as examples.

RB 7: some other services, for example, could be alternatively formatted study materials, or the provision of assistive technologies such as maybe voice dictation or screen reading technology, so we can certainly facilitate the provision of the those sorts of services.

RB 8: In addition to that, we've also got some accessibility technology, that we're overlaying the top of Canvas, which is our learning management system, which allows students in real time to format shift their course materials if they choose to, so a students, for example, who might be using, who might be significantly vision impaired or blind, using from screen reading technology, they can format shift their materials in real time into an accessible PDF, which then allows their laptop with the appropriate technology to read that material out to them. Which absolutely fantastic because that traditionally, would probably take a minimum of two weeks for the university to manually organize. And now we've got technology that allows that to happen virtually instantaneously.

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RB 9: people with disabilities face all sorts of challenges on a on a daily basis, I think those challenges would would probably translate into tertiary study, by inability to perhaps maintain your energy levels to sort of getting on campus and and hang around for long periods of time, while they're here, potentially move around campus freely, being able to engage with the technology there are a variety of complexities out there and to some degree that they unique to the individual, so it's really hard to sort of come up with an exhaustive list. through an equitable learning plan, or ELP, we can adjust for some of those factors you know bringing us back to trying to level the playing field as as best we're able, you know, given whatever the the complexities might be in relation to a particular student. And a good example of that, you know might be some part time provisions, which may not necessarily always be available to the majority of students. But we might be able to provide those to a student with a disability, it might be that we can enable a student with a disability to maybe have a little bit of leeway with regards to their attendance requirements, just to help them manage their their energy levels and concentration.

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RB 10: my tips for students in tertiary education.

RB 11: being really clear in terms of, you know, what do you what you want to do in life and picking up a course, that gonna to you best enable you to engage with that pursuit, I think it's really important.

RB 12: I think what is really important is getting a message out to prospective students and even current students, that irrespective whether you have a disability or not, it's really important that you choose an academic pathway that meets your your aspirations, you know, where you want to go with your life I think, in too many cases, I think, students with disabilities, tend to look for an institution or tertiary provider, who provides Disability Services of some description similar to equitable lending services, and tend to go with that institution and find a course that they'd like to do with that institution, which I think is backwards or around the wrong way. The students with disabilities are just like any other students, and they should always hunt around for, you know, that particular program or academic course, that they really want to do, because that's going to get them to where they want to be in life, and the services provided by disability services at other institutions the equivalent to els they're across Australia, they're nationally mandated. So you don't necessarily need to seek out a provider just because they've got good disabilities.

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RB 13: I think the other tip I would give to students would be that, you know, your well being is number one priority, you study and everything else sort of takes second place. So look, if you're feeling under the pump, you know, please look after yourself, you can reduce study load, you can take a leave of absence, or there are a number of things you can do. But, you know, the last thing we want our students to do is work themselves into the ground, so they're not well enough to actually enjoy the fruits of their labor when they eventually get there. So that would be my number two piece of advice.

RB 14: And probably my third piece would be, have fun, you know, education is such a wonderful experience and opportunity. Don't rush it, you know, really enjoy it. And if that means, maybe you're taking a bit of a reduced load, so you can enjoy the journey rather than speeding through it. I think give that a whirl as well, not a race. And if it is it's the turtle and the hare scenario

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Outro Narration:

Outro: Thank you for listening to Inform, a production of Independence Australia. Inform is hosted and produced by me, Kirby Fenwick. Our managing editor is Alison Crowe. Production and editing assistance comes from the team at SYN FM.

Our thanks Dr Ben Whitburn and Rick Boffa for being a part of this episode and sharing their stories with us

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