# Graeme Innes Podcast Transcript

DARLENE MCLENNAN

Welcome, I'm Darlene McLennan, the manager of the Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training, and I want to welcome you to this limited series of ADCET podcasts, Talking Tertiary, where we chat with current and former leaders and champions of disability in tertiary education. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Graham Innes. Who has championed the rights of people with disability for well over 30 years and has recently been appointed Chancellor for Central Queensland University. Welcome, Graham to this podcast. It's really wonderful to have you here. We were really excited and heartened last year to hear about your appointment as the Chancellor of the Central Queensland University. I think it's a big coup for them and a big coup for us working in the tertiary sector and in the disability space.

So how important is it that people with disability are seen in leadership roles?

GRAHAM INNES

You cannot be what you cannot see, and this is a well-known lesson in… for women and for people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And so, it's really important. I'm excited to be in the role because it's a wonderful leadership challenge for me and I can bring to it a lot of my experience and knowledge across a range of areas. But I'm also excited because I think it sends a message that people with disabilities can be successful in leadership positions. You know, we see people like Dylan Alcott as the Australian of the Year, Kurt Fearnley now as chair of the National Disability Insurance Agency, you know, myself as the Chancellor of a university and I'm sure there are… and sadly, I've just picked three men there, but I'm sure there are many women in equivalent roles who are women with disabilities, and we need to amplify awareness of that. Not so much… well, both amongst people with disabilities because Dylan Alcott talks very clearly about when he was younger and how he didn't see anyone who looked like him, you know, being successful and that was a real challenge for him. And that's true across the board of people with disabilities. So, it's important for people with disabilities, but it's also really important for the general community to see us making a contribution, making the contribution that we know we can make when we're included. You know, I always say people with disabilities want to be included, it's just society that chooses to keep us out. And so, it's important to have that message to broader society as well.

DARLENE

So, one of the main aims of this, this podcast series that we're doing is to talk to senior leaders and education providers around how they can better meet the needs of students with disability. And you know, you were once a student and probably have continued your education throughout your life. But I just wanted you to talk a little bit about your experience, so, when you were a student within the tertiary sector.

GRAHAM

Well, it was a while ago now, but… and it was well before technology and computers and the Internet, and so the world was very different. The challenges that I had though, are very similar to the challenges which we still face, and that is the negative attitude towards people with disabilities. The limiting and negative assumptions that are made about us, you know, one of the things that stands out to me was that my first… when I first went to law school, the Dean of the Law school was a guy who used a wheelchair and I thought fantastic, you know, I'm going to get a lot of support here, and he was significantly discouraging of me as a blind person attempting a law degree. So, you know, I had to… I had to get past that, which I did, but it's really disappointing that someone who himself experienced disability would take that approach. And I use that just as an example of the general view in society, the general negativity towards people with disabilities, and not saying ‘OK, yes, they can do this, what do we need to what sort of accommodations do we need to provide assistance?’ But rather saying ‘Oh well, you won't be able to do this, you won't be able to do that course. You know you… you can't be qualified as a doctor because you haven't been able to complete some of the practical parts of the course’. And that's been the situation in Australia for a number of years and still may be. So that's the first, and probably the biggest, barrier that I had to get past that negativity, that assumption that I wouldn't be successful. As well as that, there were all the sorts of challenges that people in the tertiary sector are still aware of. You know the time that it took to get my textbooks produced in alternate format, the fact that I had far smaller access to texts than other students, and so I worked out that what I had to do was know the material that I did have exceedingly, well better than most of the other students, and that was a real problem and often I was in classes where other students had the textbook in front of them and I was still waiting. So that's a significant challenge still for people with print disabilities, hopefully addressed to a large degree by availability on the Internet but, again blocked by people who, even though this material is on the Internet, lecturers who do things like not releasing their book lists soon enough, not making material available in other formats than print. And so, you know, most of the challenges that I experienced are a bit different now, but they're still being experienced by students with disabilities. And that's really sad, isn't it? That it's 40 or 50 years on, but those things haven't changed and they haven't changed because of the attitudes that I talk about.

DARLENE

Well, it is very frustrating, you know, to hear about your experience, but also to know that there are many students that actually are still experiencing that. We, I mean, I spoke briefly before we started that we've recently released guidelines to support the university sector to… around ICT accessible procurement. So when they are, you know, are getting learning management systems, or so forth, but those systems, you know, are going to be accessible cause we've even heard of students not even being able to enroll because the system is inaccessible.

GRAHAM

Yes. Yeah.

DARLENE

But this year, we're hoping to actually work on that next suite of work around, yeah, making sure that texts and reading lessons and so forth, are accessible as well because I think you know that's another barrier that we sadly can see that still exists for students. So if you're a student that's about to embark on studying, or you're a current student with disability, any suggestions or advice that you would give those students today in a university context while studying?

GRAHAM

Well, the first thing I would say is that you have to recognise, and there's no point hiding this from people, so I'm usually pretty upfront about it, that you have to recognise that you're going to be at a disadvantage in the way that you are viewed in comparison to other students. So you're always starting behind the eight ball and it's really, really sad. I feel really, really sad giving that message to, you know, new students or students embarking on university because I know how excited I was when I started university and I just couldn’t wait to learn all the stuff that I wanted to. But you will be starting behind the eight ball because of the negative attitudes that I've talked about. So you are always going to have to work harder than other students, and there's no point, as I say, gilding that lily that is the sad reality. I think planning is very important. More important for students with disabilities than for other students. So whether it is the access to the materials, whether it's the environment you're going to be operating in, you know, whatever the particular impact of your disability might be, you'll be better off if you plan ahead. If you go and scope out situations, if you try to learn from others and anticipate the challenges that you may run into and try and deal with them. In that sense, the third thing I'd mention is peer support. It's really critical to be linked in with a group of students in similar situations to you. The best people to inform you on the challenges and the way to circumvent those challenges are other students with disabilities. You know, there are experts in the area who do some wonderful work, such as your centre, but the best information you're going to get is from other students with disabilities. So really important to make those links and have those networks. I suppose they're probably the key pieces of advice that I would pass on, knowing that it's going to be harder for you, and recognising that right up front. It doesn't make the challenges easier, but a challenge that you understand is a much easier one to approach than one that you don't.

DARLENE

So we've kind of focused there on the student and what they need to prepare themselves for. In relation to tertiary providers, is there one or two things that you could, you know, advise tertiary providers, the university sector and the VET sector around what things that they could do to ensure success of students with disability.

GRAHAM

Well, the first thing you know, is stop making negative assumptions about people with disabilities. Most of those assumptions that you make will be negative and limiting, and most of them will be wrong, so step back from those. Suspend disbelief for a bit, and actually assume that people with disabilities will be able to achieve in the areas or the courses that they've chosen. And if that were done across the board in the VET and Higher Education sectors, then the pathway for people with… students with disabilities would be a great deal easier. But it's also the same issues that I talked about. So in the same way that a student has to plan, individuals providing training and education, and the organisations for which they work, need to plan, need to scope out courses and make the material available, because getting the material earlier can make such a difference to people with disabilities. Also thinking about the environment in which students will be studying, not just the physical environment but the virtual environment, and is your software accessible for everyone rather than just for people without disabilities, and just not buying software that isn't accessible. So making accessibility a criteria for your procurement, because organisations, big organisations like universities, can help to drive the access market by making procurement decisions which mean that they only choose accessible equipment and software. Also, understanding the importance of reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities, reasonable adjustments. The law is very clear that there's an expectation that lecturers and universities will make an adjustment for people with disabilities within the criteria set down under disability discrimination law, to the point where that adjustment becomes unjustifiable. So you, as a provider have to make the adjustment to the point where it becomes unjustifiable, and unjustifiable hardship is more than hardship. You're expected to go through some hardship in order to… when you're making those adjustments, in order to create that equal pathway for students with disabilities. It's only when that hardship becomes unjustifiable, that you can argue that you, you know, you haven't got to take that step, and there's a lot of law around that. I won't try and explain it in more detail now. I read an article, just to finish Darlene, during January about microaggressions and micro accommodations, and the important difference between a student having to seek an adjustment and an organisation making that adjustment or at least offering the adjustment before the student seeks it, and I had a very clear practical example. I was travelling with my wife, I was supposed to travel back on a train from where we were. The train… there was a problem with the line and we had to travel by coach, and I asked for a seat which would be more accessible for me, a seat near the front and the courier on the bus said ‘Oh well, you'll have to ask other people to move if you want the accessible seats’. In other words, putting it back on me to seek the adjustment that I needed. Really what she should have done was made that micro accommodation. So a really important distinction to draw, not putting the burden, if you like, on the student, but accepting that the burden is the responsibility of the provider.

DARLENE

Thank you. It's actually a really good segue into the next question I had, and so you've lined this up beautifully. Universal Design for Learning is… I mean that, you know, ADCET has been supporting, we've done a number of masterclasses and we've also got a eLearning resource that people can undertake: Universal Design for Learning. But the challenge we're seeing is sometimes education providers can see it as the silver bullet that's going to fix everything if we actually, you know, embed Universal Design for Learning across the institution and in our teaching, then you know everything will be OK and so forth. And you know, there's some really great thoughts around that. But just one of the things we're reflecting on now is, and the question I have is, do you think there is a risk that specific expertise relating to disability in the tertiary education, beyond Universal Design for Learning, could get lost in this?

GRAHAM

Well, yes, there is that risk. That risk certainly exists, and Universal Design for Learning is a really important plank in the development of learning platforms. But it's not job done. You know, it's not the end of the road, it's a key step in that road to equality, but it's not the end of that road, because there will still be people with disabilities who will need particular adjustments in order to be put in an equal place to other students and you know, it's really important to remember that when people with disabilities seek reasonable adjustments, they're not… we're not seeking extra benefits or special benefits, we're just seeking equal treatment. But the way to provide equal treatment is not to say... or the way to provide what is called substantive equality, is not to make the treatment equal. Let me give you a very practical example. You have a set of stairs. You build a set of stairs as a provider, and to provide substantive equality when you do that, you have to also provide another means of someone who has a mobility disability accessing the facility that that has those stairs. So if you don't do that, you're not providing what's called substantive equality you're providing sort of notional equality, but not substantive equality, so accommodations, or reasonable adjustments, aren't extra benefits or extra treatment, they're bringing a student with disability to that place of substantive equality.

DARLENE

Great, thank you. I suppose, yeah, with Universal Design for Learning, I suppose we're probably, not that it's the learning part, but even Universal Design is it would be quite nice if we didn't actually put stairs in in the first place.

GRAHAM

Oh, absolutely. But I just used that as an example, yes.

DARLENE

No, I did too. But I just see so many wonderful, beautiful buildings that, you know, especially around universities, that they get designed and the first thing they have is these great big stairs and they say, oh, we've got access, but it just feels to me as a barrier that already, you know, just visually it actually gives you a barrier to the tools in the place.

GRAHAM

Look, it is, it is a barrier and that's what Cox and the state of Queensland was all about many years ago when Kevin Cox, when the Queensland Exhibition and Convention Centre was designed and they had a beautiful set of sweeping stairs up to the front and people with disability were expected to go right round the building to the back and access it with a lift at the back and Kevin's argument, which was successful, was that that's not equal treatment. And so there is now a glass lift at the front of that building next to the sweeping set of stairs. And I always… every time I go there, and I go there a bit more often now cause I live not that far from Brisbane, I ride up in that lift and have a smile about what Kevin has achieved.

DARLENE

Talking about, you know, court cases and so forth, you seem to… and we seem to be able to segue right into the next question quite well, but have you had time to consider the impacts of Sklavos versus… which was on The rights of a future students with disability in tertiary education and what might be able to do about reforming the Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Standards in Education?

GRAHAM

I haven't turned my mind to that case specifically. I have turned my mind to reform of the Disability Discrimination Act. You know, the Disability Discrimination Act was 30 years old last year and… or 30 years old early this year, depending on whether you count when it passed Parliament or when it came into force. Thirty years for any piece of legislation is time for significant review, and I and others in the disability field are looking towards a campaign to have the DDA reviewed, and narrow decisions like that one will be in the focus of that review, because what that does is narrows the effectiveness of the legislation when the legislation was… the intent of the legislation was, to achieve what I described as substantive equality, not formal equality. So not saying well, we've got… you know we've got this pathway for access, so everything's OK. The intent of the DDA is to achieve substantive equality, so where cases narrow that effectiveness, then the law needs to be… the law itself needs to be changed to remove the impact of those cases.

DARLENE

Just to kind of raise for everybody who is listening, we do, in the show notes, actually put links to anything that's talked about and I think, Graham, you spoke about an article you read in January, we'll put a link to that and also the link to the case that we just spoke about then, and also the two acts that we're talking about, if people want to find out more information. With the obligations that we have around the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, how well do you think the Act currently represents that? And is that some focus that you'll be looking at that convention when you're actually asking for a review?

GRAHAM

Ah well, I would have thought so because the Australia… what Australia has committed to under the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities is going further than what the DDA goes and so the expectation would be that we would want to enact laws which make that international law international law. You know that sort of international law as set out in the Convention is what lawyers describe as soft law, so it provides guidance to governments, and there's encouragement to apply it, but there's not… there's not easy enforcement. So what you would hope governments would do as a result of signing on to the Convention, which we have done, is to put the Convention into effect in our own law. And so I would hope that that would certainly be a focus of any review of the DDA.

DARLENE

So one of the things that we've been banging on, and we're glad to hear that the current government is starting to bang on, is that nine out of ten future jobs require, actually I don't even think future jobs, probably jobs now, require a tertiary qualification and some of the challenges that we've found is that politicians and leaders are not seeing tertiary education in the same light as employment. So an example of that is the National Disability Insurance Scheme have done a significant amount of work in actually ensuring that employment is front and centre of any of the conversations, and the plan is not just for the people with disability but the people that support them, their carers or parents, is employment. But the post-secondary or tertiary seems to be out of that conversation and an example is, there's no data that adequately collects how many people on the NDIA or are receiving the insurance scheme are undertaking a tertiary qualification or have tertiary qualifications, and even that conversation around the national disability strategy, yes, tertiary was mentioned, but there was no priority given to it. Tertiary can play such a pivotal role in improving people's health determines and jobs. So what's your thought, or how do you think, we can help politicians and leaders to put tertiary education fairly and squarely, you know, at the forefront of the lives of people with disability?

GRAHAM

Well, the issue of employment was, you know, the NDI… the agency moved on the issue of employment because of strong campaigns by the disability sector, recognising the disparity in employment between people with disabilities and other people, it's like 30% difference and that figure hasn't moved for the last 30 years. But I think it's very disappointing that tertiary education doesn't get a much stronger role in the national disability strategy and an hopefully that's something that people will, you know, begin to campaign for and that governments will begin to look at, because if we want to achieve that sort of goal that Minister Clare and others in the education sector are saying in terms of needing these qualifications in order to carry out jobs in Australia, then we can't do it if we don't take into account the 20% of people who have disabilities. So it does need to be a stronger focus in the strategy and it does need to have resources, you know, put towards it. Where do those resources come from? Well, some of it comes from government, some of it comes from universities themselves and so could the push for greater inclusion of that issue in the national disability strategy. I think it's a real lack in the strategy that needs to be quickly addressed.

DARLENE

Excellent. Well, thank you for that Graham. It's been fabulous to have a conversation with you and to get your thoughts on tertiary education and disability. It's an area that, you know, it's our role, but we're also very passionate at ADCET around ensuring the success of all students. Is there any final words that you would like to say on finishing?

GRAHAM

Well, I think the key thing for people listening to this podcast, you know, to bear in mind is the important part that ADCET has played in helping supporting students and universities and the higher education and VET sectors to go on this journey. And that's been done over the years with significantly small resources, which potentially could get smaller. And so I think it's key that organisations like ADCET continue to be supported, whether it's by government or whether it's from some other source in the university sector, but it's important to recognise the role that has been played by these organisations and to take that into account when funding decisions are made.

DARLENE

Graham, just as we're finishing up, you’ve now started as the Chancellor of Central Queensland University. Will you be looking at disability and how that university supports students and what are the issues that are kind of existing there at the moment?

GRAHAM

I think it's inevitable that I will, and I think that's the expectation of the university. They know my background. When they appointed me, they knew my background and my passions and my advocacy. You can't switch that off after 40 or 50 years. So yes, I think it's inevitable that I will and in fact, some people in the university have already drawn issues to my attention that… I'm hopeful we are reflected more positively in future at CQU and if CQU can become an exemplar for other universities and the ways that they address disability, then I'd be very proud for that to be part of my legacy.

DARLENE

Absolutely brilliant. Well we'll make sure we keep connected cause a part of what we do at ADCET is to share good practice from right across the sector and we'd really love to keep the story and the conversations going around what is happening at CQU. So Graham, thank you, I've taken up a lot of your time today. I really appreciate you giving your time so freely to us and sharing your experience and thoughts. And yeah, look forward to hearing more and more about what happens this year in this new role.

GRAHAM

Thanks, Darlene. It's been a pleasure to talk with you.

ADCET OUTRO

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