

# ACCESS AND SUCCESS: ISSUES AFFECTING POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND

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## ABSTRACT

With an increasing number of post-graduate students with disabilities enrolling at the University of Otago Disability Information and Support recognised the need to identify issues affecting postgraduate students with disabilities. In 1999, an Advisory Group was established which consisted of a number of university staff and students with disabilities. This group met regularly to discuss the proposed research methodology. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through personal interviews and a questionnaire. A total of 53 students participated and the results highlighted a number of issues, among them the importance of a supportive supervisor, the perceived need to complete a post-graduate degree in order to obtain employment and the energy and time involved in completing their study. These are some of the issues that will be discussed in this paper.

## INTRODUCTION

The University of Otago was founded in 1869 and is New Zealand oldest university. It currently has four campuses, in Dunedin, Christchurch, Wellington and most recently Auckland. The Dunedin campus, which is the largest of the four, is the main academic and administrative centre and this is where most of the students live and study.

The university is committed to providing equality of opportunity in both an educational and employment context. It states in its Charter that it will “*provide support to students with disabilities, and ... increase the number of students undertaking study*” (Charter 1997:5). It also reports as part of its mission that it “... *is committed to ... providing a stimulating campus environment in which students from all sections of the community may develop lifelong learning skills.*” (Charter 1997:1). To fulfil these aims the university must recognise and value the diversity of its staff and students and continue to provide for the varied groups on campus. The university must also develop and implement processes and resources to help it achieve its mission.

The university also states that it is committed “*to maintain and where necessary improve the quality of the university experience and the supportive environment in which students live and work*” (“Strategic Direction to 2005” p.12). Furthermore, Objective 9 specifically targets students

with disabilities when it states that it aims “*to provide support to students with disabilities*”. The Performance Indicators monitoring this Objective being identified in the University of Otago’s “Statement of Objectives 2000-2002” include:

- “i. *Increased enrolments of students with a disability affecting study to at least 425 students in 2000; 450 in 2001; 475 in 2002.*
- ii. *Providing learning assistance and/or access to special equipment for at least 225 students with disabilities in 2000; 250 in 2001; 275 in 2002.*
- iii. *Updated Strategic Plan for Disabilities Support.*  
*Report on retention rates for students with disabilities”.*

(Source: Statement of Objectives 2000 - 2002:11)

Disability Information and Support is structured within the Academic section of the university in the Division of Student Services. Its function is to provide resources and learning assistance to those students with disabilities who require it.

## **STATISTICAL PROFILE**

In 1999, 17,133 individual students, or 15,198 equivalent full-time students (EFTS), were enrolled at the University of Otago. Postgraduate students accounted for 2,244 EFTS. This represented no significant growth when compared with 1998 figures (2,242 EFTS) (1999 University of Otago Annual Report, pg. 28).

The number of postgraduate students with disabilities at the University of Otago has grown significantly from 107 in 1998 to 171 in 1999 (an increase of 37%). Students are asked on the main university enrolment form if their disability affects their ability to study. The number who reported that this was the case has increased from 37 in 1998 to 59 in 1999 (representing a 37% increase) (The University of Otago’s 1998/1999 enrolment data).

Statistical data collected by Disability Information and Support reveals a similar growth in the number of students with disabilities seeking support or learning assistance during their tertiary study. In 1998 the office supported 297 students with disabilities (Table 1). This figure increased to 436 in 1999, representing the largest increase since statistics were first collected in 1996. A growth in the number of student contacts is also evident. In 1998 staff at Disability Information and Support reported 1762 student contacts, while 2374 were reported in 1999. This represented a 35% (612) increase.

**TABLE 1. Disability Information and Support statistics since 1996.**

	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>
New students with disabilities	169	198	297	436
Student contacts	735	924	1762	2374

(Source: Statistics collected by Disability Information and Support)

With the increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in postgraduate programmes, combined with the university's objective to increase the number of such students undertaking study, the need was identified to document and address issues currently facing these students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To identify issues affecting postgraduate students with disabilities an Advisory Group was established. This group consisted of staff and students, both with and without disabilities, who met regularly to discuss the proposed methodology. Three instruments were used to collect data. These included a questionnaire, one to one interviews and the option for students to write their personal story. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Ethics Committee.

An Information Sheet and Consent Form were sent to students that identified to the university as having a disability, either by completing the disability question on the university's main enrolment form or by registering for support at Disability Information and Support. The names and addresses of these students were extracted from the university's enrolment data and compiled from records held within Disability Information and Support. Students who had not formally identified to the university or Disability Information and Support as having a disability were contacted through the use of posters placed strategically around the university. Information was also included in the student newspaper Critic, the Staff Bulletin, placed at the Otago University Students' Association office and distributed electronically through the Otago University Postgraduate Association. Students were asked to contact Disability Information and Support and information about the research programme and procedures were then posted to them. Once the consent forms had been returned, questionnaires were sent to participants and interview times were arranged. No students chose to write their personal story.

### Questionnaire:

The questionnaire collected primarily qualitative data, and hence the majority of the questions were open-ended to give students the opportunity to be specific in their responses and for their concerns to be raised and presented in their own words. In some instances quantitative and qualitative question formats were combined. This was undertaken so that the research findings could be substantiated numerically while presenting qualitative examples.

The questionnaire went through numerous developmental phases. The Advisory Group met to discuss each of these steps in an endeavour to develop a tool with which to collect accurate data. The completed questionnaire was piloted on seven students and small changes were then made before the questionnaire was implemented. The questionnaire was available in alternative formats to reduce any difficulties encountered by students with specific requirements.

### One to one interviews:

For those who preferred to talk about their experiences one to one interviews were conducted. These were undertaken in an environment in which both the interviewer and interviewee felt comfortable. The majority of these interviews took place in an interview room

on campus. Three interviews were conducted off-campus. For convenience purposes the interviewer visited one participant in their flat, another at their private home and a third in their workplace. Interviews were unstructured although the interviewer was prepared with generic questions to guide the path of discussion. Each interview was transcribed, checked by the interviewer, sent to the participant for final corrections and approval and analysed. During analysis the main topic areas were identified and grouped with similar responses from other interviews and questionnaires.

In total 53 postgraduate students with disabilities participated in this research. Specifically, 42 students completed the questionnaire and 11 took part in an interview. No students chose to write their personal story. The range of disabilities and medical conditions represented by participants included vision impairment, hearing impairment, physical conditions resulting in limited mobility and wheelchair use, psychological and psychiatric conditions, multiple sclerosis, head injury, breast cancer, leukaemia, chronic fatigue, cerebral palsy and Epilepsy.

## COURSES OF STUDY

Participants were asked to specify the most recent postgraduate course they had undertaken or were currently enrolled in. As evident in Table 2 the results are encouraging as they suggest that the postgraduate students with disabilities who participated in this research enrolled in a wide range of courses and subjects. In total, 19 of these students had undertaken a postgraduate diploma, 15 a Master degree and 7 a Ph.D. in subjects ranging from Education, Theology and English to Sports Medicine, Ecology and Health Sciences. The nature of the courses in which students enrolled varied. Some courses required students to complete a number of papers, which were assessed primarily by examinations, and a written research report (without supervision). Others required students to work closely with a supervisor while writing a thesis.

**TABLE 2. The most recent postgraduate courses students with disabilities who completed a questionnaire were enrolled in.**

Course	Frequency	Course	Frequency
Dip Grad	2	Masters in Health Sciences	3
PG Diploma in Clinical Psychology	2	Masters in Music	1
PG Diploma in Community and Family Studies	1	Masters in Physical Education	1
PG Diploma in Community Nutrition	1	Masters in Public Health	1
PG Diploma in Education	1	Masters in Science	2
PG Diploma in Gerontology	1	Masters in Theology	1
PG Diploma in Political Science	1	MSc in Ecology	1
PG Diploma in Public Health	3	MSc in Electronic	1
PG Diploma in Rehabilitation	3	Ph.D.	2
PG Diploma in Science	1	Ph.D. in Biochemistry	1
PG Diploma in Social Sciences	1	Ph.D. in Education	1
PG Diploma in Sports Medicine	1	Ph.D. in English	2
PG Diploma in Theology	1	Ph.D. in Psychological Medicine	1
Masters in Education	3	LLM	1
Masters in Geography	1	Did not specify	11
		Total:	53

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This paper identifies issues that:

1. affected students with disabilities access into postgraduate programmes at the University of Otago.
2. impact on the ability of these students to successfully study at a postgraduate level.

The overriding aim of this project was to provide a platform from which these students could have their concerns voiced and documented. As a result, the issues identified, wherever possible, are presented in the words of the participants. Little interpretation has taken place and any comments provided by the researcher have been done so in an attempt to place issues into context.

### **ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES INVESTIGATING POSTGRADUATE STUDY**

When asked if they had encountered any barriers when investigating the option of postgraduate study, over a third (34%) of the respondents who completed a questionnaire reported that they had. Participants identified these barriers as including the perceived inaccessibility of postgraduate study, the timeliness of information, financial considerations, environmental barriers and supervision.

#### *Perceived inaccessibility of postgraduate study*

The grades that students with disabilities achieve in undergraduate studies often do not reflect their true ability. This has implications for students wishing to study at a postgraduate level and for those competing for limited positions in restricted entry courses. One student with a psychological/psychiatric condition spoke of being concerned with the results of their previous academic study. They perceived their "*poor results in earlier attempts at study*" as a potential barrier for them in terms of enrolling in postgraduate study and stated that "*I felt this would tell against me if I applied for a postgraduate course*". Another student with a physical disability described how "*getting accepted for the Clinical Psychology programme that only takes 10 people per year*" created an obstacle for her.

#### *Timeliness of information*

Not receiving timely and accurate information created difficulties for two students considering postgraduate study. One student with a physical disability and vision impairment described how "*written information took a lengthy time to arrive. [I was] given several names but each seemed to pass me on to someone else or give me another name*". Another student with a physical disability stated that "*as the M.Mus [Masters of Music] is a performance degree, nobody could tell me any possible outcomes if my arthritis came back. I thought, for instance, that it could be made into a degree with two recitals and a thesis*".

#### *Financial considerations*

Several participants mentioned the barriers that were created as a result of a lack of financial resources. The Training Incentive Allowance, which formerly funded a proportion of the course fees for postgraduate students with disabilities, has been discontinued. This has

placed greater financial constraints on students with disabilities and has forced some to take out a student loan to fund their studies. It is acknowledged that students, regardless of disability, encounter financial constraints. For some students with disabilities, however, finding part-time work to fund their studies is often not an option. When asked if participants had encountered any barriers when deciding to enrol in postgraduate study one student with a physical disability responded with "*financial*". Another student with a psychological/psychiatric condition reiterated these sentiments when describing one barrier they encountered as "*finances primarily*" and a third student with a vision impairment also stated "*financial*".

Acquiring a student loan has long term implications for students with disabilities. Working part-time while undertaking study is often not an option for students with disabilities. For some students securing full-time employment once having completed their study is not an option as a result of their disability. As a result the prospect of having to pay off a student loan can be daunting and stressful.

#### *Environmental barriers*

One student with a physical disability believed that the physical environment would create barriers or challenges for them. This student stated that they were concerned about "*being able to get to the campus and around it. Being able to park near-by. Being able to function away from home, in a different city - what I would do if my leg deteriorated and I couldn't get to campus*". A second student, who experienced fatigue and a chemical intolerance, simply stated that the "*barrier of distance*" had created challenges.

#### *Other barriers*

Other students described the barriers or obstacles they encountered when investigating postgraduate study in the following ways. For one student with a physical disability "*finding a supervisor who was interested in conducting research that looked at aspects of physical disability!*" was difficult.

For another participant the "*sheer amount of written work required – it is difficult for me to concentrate on writing essays etc. for longer than an hour at a time*" was perceived as a barrier for a third participant with a psychological/psychiatric condition.

### **ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ENROLLED IN POSTGRADUATE STUDY**

Participants undertaking postgraduate study identified a number of factors that impacted on their ability to study successfully at a postgraduate level. These included supervision, full-time versus part-time study, fatigue, medication and stress and anxiety.

#### **SUPERVISION**

Stoddart (2000) presented the experiences of all postgraduate students working with a supervisor at the University of Otago. This research highlighted the difference it made for students if their supervisor was helpful and supportive. As outlined in this report, one student stated that "*my supervisor is excellent. I have seen several students leave*

*because of bad supervision*" (Stoddart 2000:7). Students with disabilities who participated in this research also spoke of the difference a supportive and understanding supervisor made in terms of their study. It is important to remember that not all students required supervision. A total of 7 students who participated in this research reported that they received inadequate supervision, while 13 stated that their supervision was adequate.

### ***Level of supervision***

Students who completed a questionnaire were asked if they had received adequate supervision. Approximately a third (35% or 7 respondents) stated that they did not receive supervision of an adequate standard. When asked to explain why they felt that their supervision was inadequate mixed experiences were reported.

A number of students stated that they had to change supervisors, as things were not working out. One blind student, for example, changed supervisors because feedback and communication processes were not working and this led to time delays in having material put into an alternative, readable format. With a change in supervisors things improved noticeably.

### ***Environmental***

For one student with a physical disability and vision impairment environmental constraints affected the relationship he had with his supervisor. He explained that "*I was satisfied with the supervision by the end but answered this NO as it was a battle! Having to meet in another building with associated problems caused two-way inconvenience*".

### ***Variability of disability or medical condition***

It is often difficult for some people to understand the fluctuating, or variable, nature of some disabilities or medical conditions. One student, who described their disability as psychological/psychiatric, stated that "*my initial supervisor did not supervise anyone adequately, then could not cope when I spent time in Ashburn Hall [a private hospital]. Afterwards, I changed supervisors, and got superb support*".

### ***Support and friendship***

Other participants (65% or 13 respondents to the questionnaire) were extremely positive about the experiences they had with their supervisors. One student stated that her supervisor had given her a lot of support and that he convinced her not to withdraw from her course. She subsequently completed her Masters degree. Another student reported that her supervisor was "*willing to go out of his way to give me a hand*" and that he was very encouraging. A third student stressed that his supervisor was instrumental in him returning to study and that this support enabled him to complete his thesis.

For one student who experienced epilepsy it seemed inevitable that she would have to withdraw from her course as a result of her disability. She explained that "*my supervisor gave me a lot of support and helped me to stick at it as I was*

*basically going to drop out. He convinced me to write up what I had*". She went on and noted that "*he convinced me not to pull out [of] the Ph.D. or give it up, but to drop that to a Masters*".

A student who acquired a head injury during the course of his Masters also stated that his supervisor was incredibly supportive. He noted that "*if I didn't have him, then there's no way I would have been able to return*". He went on to explain that his supervisor was

*"just an amazing friend. He was also the person who I was responsible [to] for my teaching position. He gave me a lot of slack. I think he was really instrumental in me coming back. I don't know if the Department or the University actually knows that. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't have been able to come back to complete".*

As reflected in this last account, the relationship a student has with his or her supervisor may change for better or worse when they also work as colleagues. This experience was also reflected in the comment made by one student with a physical disability. She stated that she "*didn't want to inform them [her supervisors] of it [her disability] as they are also work colleagues*".

The account given by another student with a head injury and medical condition when describing the support and friendship offered by her supervisor is encouraging. She explained that:

*"My supervisor has been magnificent all the way through. Any man who can sit in a hospital room and watch while a student is having her head shaved and talk about her thesis has got an amazing amount of sang-froid (coolness of mind, calmness, composure). And so, no, I think he's a marvellous supervisor who basically takes me as I am and then works with it".*

#### *Open environment for discussion*

It is important for any student to feel comfortable with their supervisor so that they can discuss their research or any concerns they may have. One student with a physical disability described how his supervisor "*doesn't see my disability as being an issue. He's always treated me like every other student. I've come to explain to him a lot more about what my disability has meant to me in terms of how I study and how I work*".

#### ***Impact of disability on student/supervisor relationship***

Participants were also asked if they felt that their disability had affected their relationship with their supervisors. A third (33.3% or 7 respondents) of those who completed a questionnaire agreed that their disability did affect their relationship with their supervisor. A number stated that their supervisor would not have been aware of

their disability, as they had not disclosed it. One student with a physical disability noted that “*they would have been unaware of my disability*”. A second student with a psychological/psychiatric condition stated that “*I have not talked about it openly with either, although I suspect they are aware. It hasn't really interfered as yet with my study but it is always in the background for me*”.

#### *Environmental constraints*

Postgraduate students often experience a feeling of isolation. Stoddart (2000:15) reported how one student experienced “*feeling isolated*”. This student went on to state that “*apparently that is typical of other postgraduate students*”. This feeling of isolation can be compounded for a student with a disability by constraints imposed by the built environment. A student with a physical disability, for example, is likely to feel isolated if they are unable to access the building in which their supervisor works. The relationship one student with a physical disability had with her supervisor was made more difficult by constraints imposed by the physical environment. She stated that it “*was difficult to approach them at times as by the time of my Masters degree I could not get into their building as I was in a wheelchair and there were steps and stairs*”. She went on to explain that it “*was embarrassing, as they had to go out of their way to meet me elsewhere. [We] ended up using email but this excluded [the] opportunity for discussion. I felt [like the] "odd one out" as the department was not accustomed to such a student. I was also reluctant to ask for help outside the necessary*”.

#### *Goal of supervisor*

Developing a physical disability during the course of ones study affected the relationship one student with a physical disability had with her supervisor. She stated that:

*“I feel that there is some personal resentment towards me on the part of my supervisor, that I did develop arthritis and that this really did affect my study as an undergraduate. I know in myself that I would be further on piano-wise than what I am if I didn't have arthritis and I feel that dreams that my supervisor may have had for me before I was ill have had to be put on hold. I feel that because of this my present supervisor has lost interest in my ability”.*

#### *Flexibility and acceptance of change*

It is important for any supervisor to be flexible to the changing needs of their students and accepting of any changes in circumstance. This is particularly important for students with disabilities that are variable in nature. The positive relationship one student had with his supervisor is reflected in the following statement. This student, who described their disability as being physical and vision, stated that “*I have always had an excellent relationship with my supervisor. He is patient when I cannot read/write quickly enough and was extremely supportive when spinal problems interrupted my Masters work*”. Another student, with a psychological/psychiatric condition, attributed the fact that she completed

her thesis to the support that she received from her supervisor. She noted that “[my] initial supervisor couldn't cope. [My] second supervisor helped me break things down into pieces I could cope with. I couldn't have completed my thesis without this. He could also understand when there were times of no work”.

#### *Understanding of the constraints of the disability*

One student with a physical disability explained the frustration she experienced working with her supervisor who did not seem to understand her disability. She said the following:

*“I suffer from heat really badly. The heat would just wipe me out. It was pre-Christmas [and] unseasonably hot for Dunedin. At that stage I wasn't using a wheelchair except in small amounts. I mainly got around with crutches. I would crutch in [to see my supervisor] and [he] would say, “Oh look, I haven't got that now, but if you come back at three o'clock I'll have it”. And I would come back at three o'clock and he wouldn't have it. It was very frustrating”.*

She went on to say *“I felt as though my disability was actually disadvantaging me unfairly, because he was asking me to jump through hoops. I would jump through them, but it still wouldn't get me anywhere”*. Furthermore she said, *“I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know if because I was a student with a disability I didn't really count”*. Having changed supervisors things were still not perfect. She explained that she felt that her new supervisor *“wanted control. She would actually write down the words I was supposed to say [in my interviews]”*. The participant went on to state that she felt her supervisor saw the need to take control *“because I had a disability”*.

#### *Timeframes*

One student who is blind described the difficulties that arose with her study because her supervisor did not understand the importance of her timeframes. She explained how her supervisor *“didn't do the things they were meant to do in a decent time frame. It then threw everything else into disarray and put me way behind”*. She went on to explain that she would be *“waiting a long time - like weeks - if not months for things to come to get put onto tape”*. Further frustrations arose for this student who explained that *“I work in a different format to my supervisors, and so I would have my information on the computer and get a copy to them to check and the supervisor that I had never gave me any written feedback. Not even written on the draft in pen, let alone through email or anything that I could access myself”*. She also noted that *“I do know of other people that have had similar problems, so I'm pretty sure that it really had nothing to do with my disability. It was just complicated by the fact that I had one”*. When describing her new supervisor she explained that *“I know their method of working and that it involves giving all the feedback on email, so that it is in a format that I can read”*.

## FULL-TIME VERSUS PART-TIME STUDY

All students have to make the decision whether to enrol as a full-time or part-time student. For some students, however, their options may be limited as a consequence of their disability or medical condition. Almost half (47%) of those students who completed a questionnaire indicated that they had always studied full-time during their postgraduate studies. The remaining 53% had studied on a part-time basis. Interestingly, approximately 69% of the students who stated that they studied part-time indicated that it was their preference. Why the remaining 31% preferred full-time study but chose to enrol part-time requires further investigation. This move towards part-time study is in line with the wider student population, which has demonstrated a similar trend across all categories of postgraduate students (1999 University of Otago Annual Report, pg. 28).

### *Constraints of disability*

Students who enrolled part-time did so for a number of reasons. For some the reasons they gave for enrolling part-time were disability related. One student stated that “*since the head injury I have not been able to study full-time*”. Another, with a physical disability and vision impairment, noted that the “*unpredictability of [their] physical condition at that time [and the] extra time it [took] to get from A to B on crutches, and later in [a] wheelchair, create[d] difficulties for full-time study*”.

One student with a physical/cognitive condition explained how “*initially it made sense to do it [her degree] whilst continuing to have the field experience of working full-time. Now with relapsing-remitting MS I do not have the energy to study full-time*”. Similarly, another student with a psychological/psychiatric condition explained how she enrolled part-time “*because I became unwell and was unable to manage full-time study*”. The perceived stress involved with undertaking a full-time course resulted in one student with a psychological/psychiatric condition enrolling part-time. She said, “*I did not think I could cope with the stress of a full-time course*”.

The constraints imposed by one student’s physical disability prevented her from enrolling full-time. She described how she was unable to study full-time because of her disability. She said “*I’ve never been able to [study full-time] because of OOS – full-time means extra workload – writing, computer and my OOS plays up*”. Another student with a physical disability specified that he studied part-time “*to ensure that my workload did not overtake my energy levels or anything like that. It was mainly a disability-related decision*”.

After acquiring a head injury one participant enrolled in postgraduate study part-time. When asked if he enrolled full-time or part-time he simply stated “*after my accident – part-time*”. Another student explained that she has been enrolled part-time since acquiring a head injury. She said, “*I’ve been doing it part-time quite a lot over the last few years*”. She went on to explain that she enrolled part-time because “*physically I can’t concentrate for more than two hours in a day*”. Another student with a head injury stated that they enrolled part-time and that as a result “*I was able to study effectively, but I tended to forget things easily since the head injury*”.

### *Fear of aggravating a previous condition*

The fear of aggravating a previous condition prevented one student with a physical disability from enrolling full-time. She said, "*I developed OOS in my 5<sup>th</sup> year of 7 full-time years studying. The condition had been stable for nearly four years and I did not want to aggravate it*". Being concerned with the possible effects that study could have on her health one student with a physical disability enrolled part-time. She stated that "*having been to university before, I wasn't sure how it would go, and my health*".

### **FATIGUE**

Fatigue is a direct symptom of many disabilities, for example Multiple Sclerosis, arthritis and head injuries, but it may also be a side-effect of some medications used to manage these conditions. Fatigue is an important issue for a number of students as it can have extreme effects on an individual's study. Participants spoke of poor energy levels, the need to ensure that they got plenty of rest and sleep and the importance of reducing the number of hours they spent working to support themselves financially. Enrolling part-time and implementing time management strategies were two measures students employed to reduce the effects of fatigue on ones study.

One student with a head injury said, "*I have to make sure I get the rest and sleep*", while another with a physical disability described how they "... get very tired". One student who had acquired a head injury described the effects of fatigue. She said, "*I found reading a lot slower and tiring. As well as my speech was affected, and I found that speaking and attending ... is a lot more fatiguing. Fatigue was a major component or symptom of my head injury, and still is now*".

### **MEDICATION**

The type and quantity of medication that an individual is prescribed can produce a range side effects, including fatigue and nausea. Some students with mental health conditions who receive medication report as having difficulties with motivation and fatigue. The interplay between the condition and treatment is a complex one, as it is with many conditions. A student on medication for a psychological/psychiatric condition may, for example, experience fatigue and a lack of motivation. One participant with a head injury described how he "*needed quite a bit of sleep. Medication tires you anyway*". A second student with a physical disability explained that a change in her medication made it unsafe for her to drive. She stated that "*I haven't been driving a car a lot, because I've had a change in my pills --- I prefer to be sure I'm safe when I'm driving*". As this student illustrated, changing ones medication can produce side effects that can ultimately affect ones study. Another student with a psychological/psychiatric condition stated that "*I became pregnant this year and had to go off my medication. [This] has made me a lot more vulnerable to relapse and/or negative symptoms*".

One student described how her medication had controlled her epileptic seizures up until she began collecting data for her postgraduate course. She stated that "*when I started university it was basic. I was still on medication but it was controlled. It was controlling the seizures*". In

order to collect data for her Ph.D. she was required to go out to sea on a boat for ten days. She described how “*the effect of the rolling motion caused my epilepsy to worsen and made it difficult to control on medication*”.

### **STRESS AND ANXIETY**

Participants talked of the effects that stress, if not managed properly, can have on their disability or medical condition. For one student coping with deadlines and having a psychological condition was difficult. Another student with a head injury talked of “*falling to pieces*” when a lot of things happened at once and becoming “*really, really stressed*”. In such situations the implementation of effective study strategies was paramount.

One student with a psychological/psychiatric condition stated that “*if I become too stressed I can't get anything done*”. Another student, who described their condition as psychological/psychiatric, became stressed and anxious when “*dealing with the stress of meeting deadlines for assignments*”. She stated that “*due to my mental illness I didn't cope with these deadlines very well and often ended up back in hospital at these times*”. The pressure of examinations caused another student with a psychological/psychiatric condition to become stressed. She became anxious when “*dealing with the stress of exams and [was concerned about] being in a fit mental state to study*”. Another student with a psychological/psychiatric condition simply stated that “*anxiety is a huge problem*”. One student with a head injury described how “*if too many things happen, I become really, really stressed, and that affects me immensely*”.

### **OTHER ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS**

Participants identified a range of other issues during this research. Students with physical disabilities and vision impairments, in the main, reported issues that related to environmental access. Disability related challenges, including managing heavy research materials, concentration, pain and self-confidence, were also important to students with disabilities enrolled in postgraduate study.

Challenges imposed on students by outside influences were also identified. Specifically, financial concerns and the options relating to funding ones study were raised. One student with a physical disability noted that the thought of having to pay off his student loan was daunting. He stated that as it was unlikely that he would attain full-time employment once completing his degree it would take years for him to pay off his loan. Other students stated that supporting themselves during their study with part-time paid work was not an option as a result of their disability.

Some students experienced difficulties developing friendships and peer support networks. For two blind students the need to work from home where their specialist computer technology was set-up created a sense of isolation. Independent participation in extra-curricula activities also proved difficult for one of these students as they felt reliant on others for information and required a buddy for some recreational activities.

A number of students experienced difficulty accessing information both within formal classroom settings and in terms of collecting reference material in the library, for example. Within the classroom participants stated that they experienced difficulties relating to note-taking, fatigue, hearing, retaining and understanding information, attending class and being able to access information in an appropriate format. Within the library environment difficulty associated with managing heavy resource materials, accessing books on high shelves and being able to borrow books for only a short period of time created challenges for some students.

It was also important for students with disabilities to be able to access appropriate resources and support during their postgraduate studies. Approximately a third of the students who completed a questionnaire noted that they experienced difficulties accessing the resources they were entitled to use in their department. One student with a physical disability described how the “*computer and my supervisors laboratory are upstairs meaning I don't have access to them*”. A second student with a physical disability explained how they “*couldn't walk to or park near the computer room*”.

Participants also noted that they received support during their postgraduate studies from various offices, departments, groups and people both within and outside the university. Some students received support from their department or Disability Information and Support at the university. Other support networks existed outside the university and included, for example, friends, family and doctors.

Technological developments have created more opportunities for students with disabilities in terms of independent learning. Advancements in speech recognition software and speech programmes have enabled students with both specific learning disabilities and vision impairments to study more productively and independently. Having said this, students who rely on specialist technologies for their studies can encounter some difficulties and challenges. A blind student noted the frustration associated with relying on her specialist computer technology. She stated that “*none of the computers on campus are user-friendly for blind people so I don't have access to any of them*”. She also noted that “*if there was a more user-friendly system in the library I could do more of my own research*”.

Finally, a number of students talked of the difficulties they experienced as a result of the university's assessment processes. The common methods of assessing the knowledge of students do not allow all individuals to perform to their best ability and display their true knowledge. Some students held concerns with regard to their examinations. One student stated that “*as my OOS is caused by writing I was apprehensive about writing exams*”, while another student with a physical disability reiterated these sentiments when stating their concerns in relation to “*writing, especially the exam [as] my hands get sore with continuous writing*”.

## **KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has discussed a range of issues that affect postgraduate students with disabilities studying at the University of Otago. The following key issues and recommendations have been identified as a result of this research.

### **1. Key Issue**

The need for students to access accurate and timely information upon which to decide whether or not to enrol in postgraduate study.

#### **Recommendations**

**That the University's web site is made accessible to all students with disabilities, including those who rely on specialist technologies.**

**That University Departments provide up to date information in their handbooks and, in particular, web sites and that this information is accessible to all students with disabilities, including those who rely on specialist technologies.**

**That a brochure/handbook be developed specifically targeting postgraduate students who experience disability.**

**That all materials relating to postgraduate study clearly recognise the needs of, and value the participation of, students with disabilities.**

### **2. Key Issue**

That the university's physical environment needs to be accessible to all students.

#### **Recommendation**

**That an environmental accessibility audit be conducted to identify, and assist in remedying, problem areas on campus.**

### **3. Key Issue**

That supervisors need to be made aware of the additional constraints and barriers students with disabilities face when studying at a postgraduate level.

#### **Recommendations**

**That a specific disability awareness module be developed which focuses on the roles and responsibilities of supervisors working with students with disabilities.**

**That materials and resources be developed and made available in print and on the web for supervisors working with students with disabilities.**

#### **4. Key Issue**

That the library systems need to be accessible to all students, especially those with disabilities who are reliant on specialist technologies.

#### **Recommendations**

**That the Library and the Information Technology Service reviews the accessibility of the electronic library systems, specifically in relation to students who use specialist technology.**

**Postgraduate students with disabilities are made more aware of resources available to assist them in research.**

#### **5. Key Issue**

That the assessment process itself, creates a barrier for a number of students with disabilities.

#### **Recommendation**

**That more detailed research is carried to identify the issues relating to assessment at a postgraduate level in relation to students with disabilities.**

## **SUMMARY**

This research has shown that students with disabilities have much in common with their non-disabled peers. They also face many of the hurdles at a postgraduate level that they encountered when studying towards their undergraduate qualifications. However, there are a number of issues that they face which are unique to their postgraduate experience. This paper has raised a number of these issues. It must also be remembered that each student's experience is unique. This is true for all students, but more so for students with disabilities whose lives are further complicated by circumstances beyond their control.

What should the reader take away from this research? As Erickson (1992:10) says:

*[the] focus of judgement about what generalised from one setting to the next lies with the reader of the report rather than with the writer ... The reader must ask ... how does the situation the author describes resemble what goes on around here?"*

The challenge to the reader of this paper is to look at their environment and determine if the experiences of students with disabilities studying at a postgraduate level are similar to those who participated in this research. If so, many of the recommendations made here may apply.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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students who participated in this research and talked so freely about their unique experiences at the University of Otago. Our overriding wish is that this research will make a difference in making the university an inclusive learning environment.

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### **Copies of the complete research report can be obtained from:**

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