



## **Students with Disabilities in Post Secondary Education Issues and Trends For a New Decade**

Jaye Johnson  
State Disability Liaison Officer WA  
Edith Cowan University  
C/- Disability Services commission  
PO 441, West Perth. WA 6872  
Jayej@dsc.wa.gov.au

### **Background**

In July 1999 a demographic survey was undertaken in Western Australia to piece together information that would give some idea of what we might expect in regard to the future student population in the post secondary sector.

As disability officers in Western Australia we knew workloads were increasing. We generally tended to react to current or short-term demands rather than plan for the future in a longer-term strategic manner. It was unclear if demands for both time and resources would continue to increase but what was clear to most was that the budget was not likely to increase to any great extent.

Some unexpended funds from a previous Regional Disability Liaison Officer budget were utilised to fund a research officer (RDLO) with the specific purpose of undertaking a demographic survey to provide the post secondary education sector in WA with a better picture of what to expect in the future.

The survey was undertaken from July 1999 to April 2000 and was the first time a review of data across various sectors in WA had been gathered for a review of potential trends.

Data was gathered from the secondary education sector for year 10 – 12 students with a disability via

- ◆ A student survey of their post secondary education aspirations and needs
- ◆ Education Department census statistics
- ◆ TEE examination data on students who had had special examination considerations
- ◆ TISK data (the organisation that handles students applying to universities through the TEE system)

Data on students with disabilities was collected from the universities and TAFE colleges on

- ◆ Total of all enrolled students with and without a disability
- ◆ Total of all students with a disability
- ◆ New enrolments of students with a disability in 1999
- ◆ Disability categories

Population data was gathered from the

- ◆ 1998 ABS Disability, Ageing and Carers Survey
- ◆ ABS demographic statistics for WA at June 1999
- ◆ ABS population projections 1997 – 2051
- ◆ AIHW Australia Now – A Statistical Profile

Overseas data on students with disabilities in post secondary education was collected from USA, Canada and the UK

## **Results**

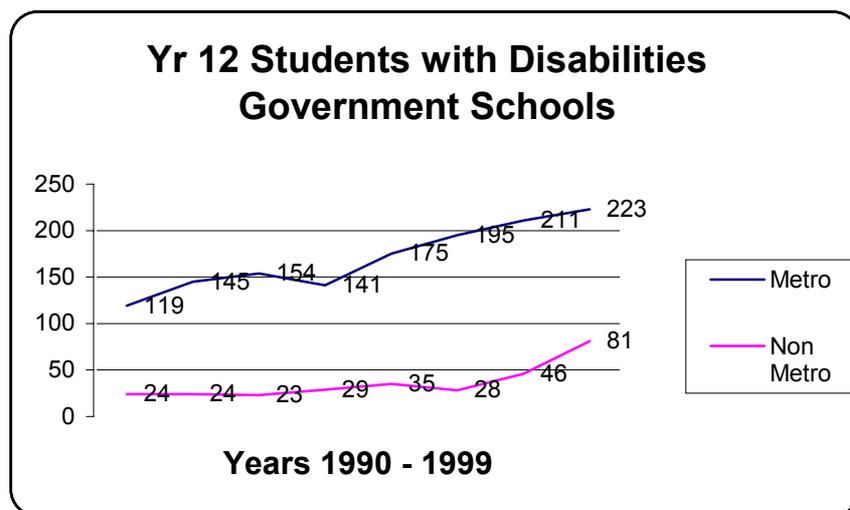
The results and conclusions drawn have to be viewed in context. The data collected in the various sectors differs and each sector can only be compared within itself for trends. For example the definition of disability in the Education Department of WA is very specific and quite narrow. They do not include students with a specific learning disability or medical conditions. On the other hand, in the post secondary sector it is self-reported and much broader - in line with the definition within the Disability Discrimination Act. Nevertheless, there are trends within each sector that are similar and reflect population trends.

### **Secondary Sector**

Over the past 3 years there has been an increasing proportion of the student population in years 10 - 12 with a disability:

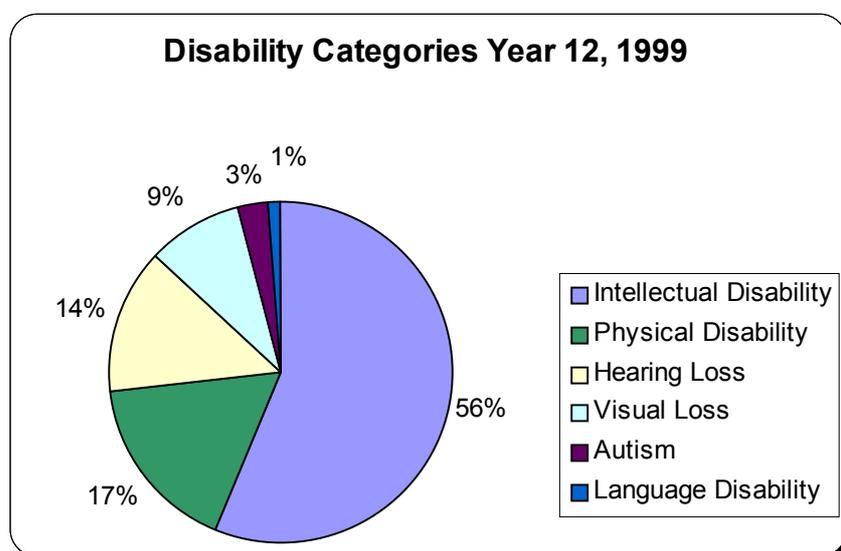
- ◆ 1.58% to 1.96% in year 10,
- ◆ 1.35% to 1.87% in year 11
- ◆ 1.62% to 2.11% in year 12.

The number of students with a disability in non-metropolitan areas has significantly increased over the past two years and the ratio now reflects the proportion of the general population living in the metropolitan to that in non-metropolitan areas.



In 1999 there were double the number of students with a disability in year 11 compared with year 12 who received teacher aide support. The increase in teacher aide support was predominantly to students in the non-metropolitan area.

The proportion of students with a specific type of disability has not changed over the past 3 years and does not vary from years 10 - 12. This is more a reflection of who the Education Department classifies as having a disability. For example 56% have an intellectual disability and 17% a physical disability.



For students sitting the TEE examination with examination considerations the largest group were those with ADD/ADHD followed by those with a physical disability and then those with a specific learning disability (dyslexia). The numbers have increased significantly for all groups other than those with impaired vision.

The response to the student survey was poor and inadequate to base any definite conclusions, however it did support the secondary education data. Those responding in year 10 intended to complete year 12. The majority of those who did respond indicated they would benefit from/require a number of support needs.

### Post Secondary Data

Two country colleges of TAFE did not provide statistics and one university had very small numbers of students with a disability as a ratio to overall student enrolments which staff felt may be due to the data collection rather than reflect the actual population of students with a disability.

Specific numbers of students were obtained for Western Australia which are available, though for the purposes of this paper only general trends are presented.

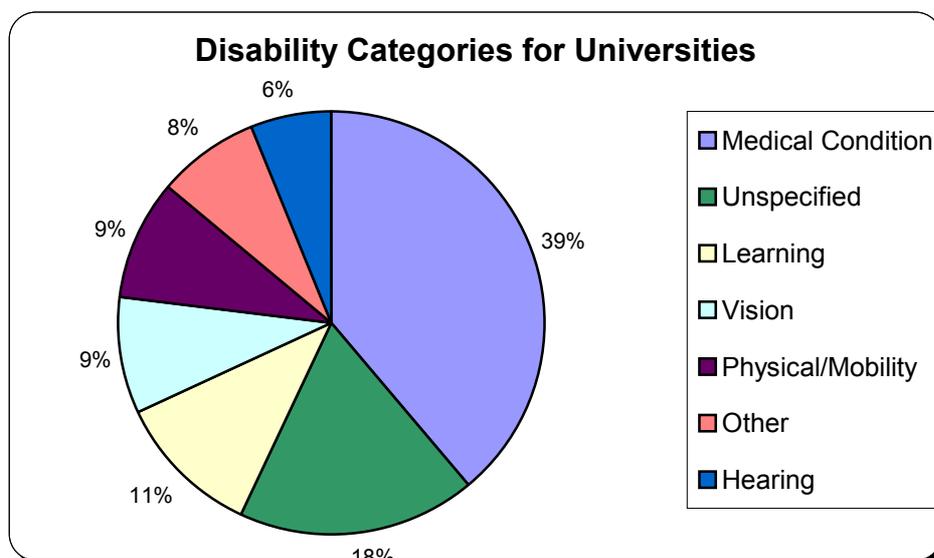
76% were enrolled in the TAFE sector and 28% in universities. Of those enrolled in TAFE 38% were in non-metropolitan colleges.

The ratio of students with a disability in the student body varied. In TAFE it was between 1.32% to 3.63% and in university from 0.7% to 3%. The 0.7% is suspected to be a data collection issue rather than an actual reflection of the population.

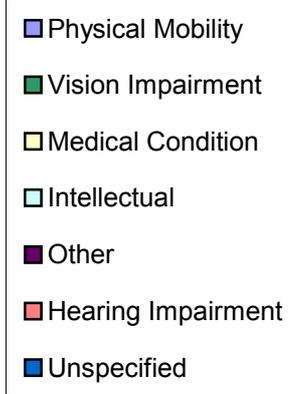
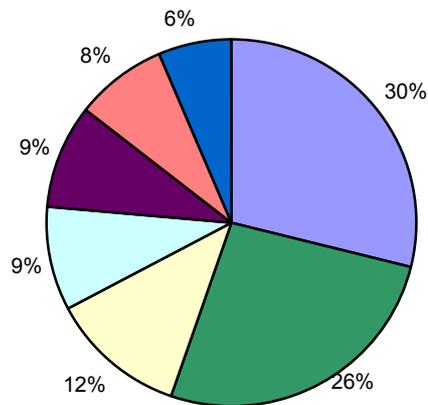
There were differences in the population in TAFE and universities with regard to the type of disability.

In TAFE 27% of students with a disability had a physical disability followed by 22% with vision impairment.

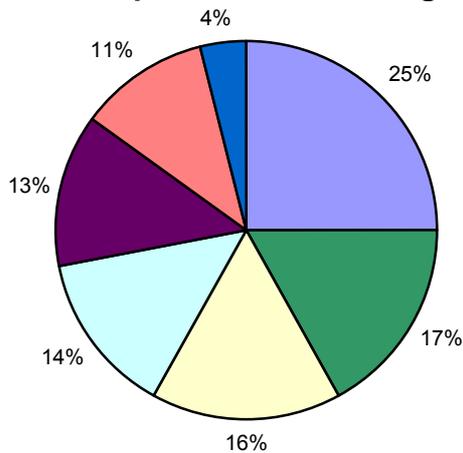
In universities 39% had a medical condition followed by 18% with an unspecified condition. In universities only 9% identified as having a physical disability and 9% with vision impairment.



**Disability Categories  
Metropolitan TAFE Colleges**



**Disability Categories  
NonMetropolitan TAFE Colleges**



**ABS National Data**

In 1998 when the latest Disability, Ageing and Carers survey was done, 5.6% of people with a disability aged 15-24 years identified as having a limitation in schooling or employment. At the same time 7.1% aged 5-14 had a limitation in schooling. As the 5-14 year olds progress through the education system over the next 8-10 years, there will be an increased proportion of the population who will be 15-24 a limitation in schooling or employment. Specific information on percentages and numbers in each state this can be obtained through the ABS. This suggests a significantly increasing number of people with a limitation in schooling in the age group most often seen in the post secondary education sectors.

The other key indicator is severity of disability. Nationally, at the time of the survey, 2% of those aged 15-24 had a severe to profound disability whilst 4.4% of those aged 5-14 had a severe to profound limitation. Again over the next 8-10 years the proportion of people moving through the education system will have a severe to profound disability.

Another indicator of interest is the different ratio of the various diagnostic categories between those aged 15-19 and those aged 20-24 years of age.

For females, respiratory system disorders accounted for 23% of 15 to 19 year olds compared to 15% of 20-24 year olds. At the same time musculoskeletal disorders rose from 9% to 20%. In males there is a similar pattern with intellectual/developmental disorders being most prevalent in those aged 15-19 at 28%, but less at 15% of those aged 20-24. At the same time, musculoskeletal disorders accounted for 15% of those aged 15-19 years and 24% of those aged 20-24. Disability due to injury in males was 8% in the younger group and 17% in the older group. It may be suggested that the change is due to the incidence of acquired disorders between 15 years and 24 years. Some conditions are recognised to have an onset in later teens and early twenties.

### **Overseas Trends**

In the USA students with a disability represent 9% of the student body. One U.K. survey reported a ratio of 4.1%. In WA the highest ratios are between 3% to 3.67%.

### **Specific Learning Disabilities**

The greatest growth has been those with a specific learning disability. Of students reporting a disability, the percentage has increased from 15% in 1988 to 41% in 1999 for first year students, and currently accounts for 46% of all students with a disability in USA surveys.

A Chartered psychologist in the UK, David Grant, specialising in dyslexia diagnosis estimates 25% of all students has a specific learning disorder. He states that although disclosure is higher than several years ago, he considers there are still a number undiagnosed students.

In the West Australian data TAFE did not report on these students as a separate diagnostic category and universities reported 11% of those students with a disability as having a SLD. This is far less than the 41% reported in the national USA study.

The variance may reflect awareness of, and availability of, specific support services, improved diagnosis, and the accuracy of data collection for this group of students.

## Asperger's Syndrome

Disability Officers in the USA and UK report an increase in the numbers of students in the post-secondary sector with Asperger's Syndrome. Whilst the known numbers in the post secondary sector are small in Australia, anecdotal information suggest that there has been an increase.

Including Pervasive Developmental Disorders, 'The Psychologist' June 2000, Vol. 13, No 6, page 285, published by the British Psychological Society quotes the Mental Health Foundation pointing to an incidence of one in every 140 people. The ratio is much higher than previously reported and it is suggested it may be due to a greater awareness of the disorders and subsequently diagnosis.

An article in the Boston Globe, February 2000, suggests individuals with these disorders may have been diagnosed with a number of other disorders in the past.

A survey carried out in Central Queensland schools by RDLO Eric Boadman recorded 21.73% of students in year 12 with the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. For year 12 students in 1999 the Education Department of Western Australia reported 3% of students with a disability having a diagnosis of Autism.

It is not known if the variations and increasing numbers are due to awareness and diagnostic practices alone, provision or non provision of specific services and supports which encourages or discourages identification, or other factors. For example, where a student with a disability is eligible to access additional support they are far more likely to be identified than situations where no benefit from identification exists.

## Mental Health Conditions

The ABS data indicates an increase in mental health disorders from 1% of males 15-19 years to 4% of males 20-24. For females aged 15-19 it is 20% falling to 11% of those aged 20-24. These percentages relate to the proportion of people identifying with a disability and not the incidence in the overall population.

A Canadian survey of post secondary students with a disability identified the proportion as 5.2% and an USA survey at 8%

WA universities and TAFE colleges do not record this diagnostic group for general reporting purposes to funding bodies, although Disability Officers do provide services to students with a mental health condition. Disclosure is a particular issue and it cannot be determined with any certainty if reported

increases in numbers are due to increased willingness to disclose or increased/decreased incidence in the overall student population.

## **Discussion**

It is evident from the data collection that there are significant difficulties making any comparison across sectors. Indicators in the secondary, post secondary and ABS data, however, suggests there will be an increasing number of people with a disability over the next 8-10 years who may access post secondary education and training. Of these students, it is likely a greater proportion will have severe to profound levels of disability than is seen in the present student population.

The collection of data requires review to ensure we are better able to accurately identify the current and potential population.

The difference in the information available in WA from the public and private secondary education sectors differs significantly from that in the post secondary sector.

In the post secondary sector data varies within and across sectors. The questions on enrolment forms differs not only between sectors but also between individual institutions and from that of the ABS.

Not all students who self identify on enrolment access disability services, and students do access services that have not identified a disability on enrolment. Some institutions in WA keep easily accessed data systems on those students specifically accessing services and others do not. Reliance on data from enrolment alone is not considered accurate.

With resources currently stretched in many areas, it is time to examine practices to ensure we are making the best use of what we have. Are courses and programs being developed and delivered in the most flexible and inclusive manner to reduce the need for some students to require some types of supports? Are there unnecessary procedures that use valuable resources that could be changed so existing resources may be used more effectively elsewhere? Are management and all staff contributing to the provision of a more accessible education and training environment or is there over reliance on Disability Officers? Are funding models appropriate for the current and future delivery of services?

## **Conclusion**

The survey has been a useful project to identify trends and issues for the post secondary sector. Whilst there appears to be trends that are supported by information from various sources, the survey has raised many questions. Importantly, it has identified areas for further research and development.

