

UNIVERSITY ADMISSION POLICIES AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Introduction

This paper is not a description of admission policies at particular universities. Rather it seeks to examine some of the major issues surrounding the formulation and implementation of such policies in respect of people with disabilities.

As a starting point we shall assume acceptance of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, and particularly Article 6 which refers to education.¹ David Miller, a distinguished writer on social justice, defines the principle of rights as the guarantee of "security of expectation and freedom of choice".²

For disabled people, such security of expectation and freedom of choice in regard to university entrance can be ensured only if clear and comprehensive statements of admission policy are available to them well in advance of their application for a university place. Only on this basis can they, their parents and advocates attempt to ensure that their educational experience prior to application maximises their chance of acceptance into a university course. Only on this basis can a mature age disabled person make an informed judgement on whether to apply for a specific course without undue risk of a disappointing rejection.

Perhaps most important of all, a public statement of admission policy can greatly facilitate the assessment of whether a university is dealing justly with disabled applicants. The credibility of universities in the community can only be reinforced if they have the courage to make known their criteria of acceptance or rejection of applicants, and are prepared to justify and defend those criteria in terms of their institutional objectives and social responsibilities.

Under-representation of disabled people in higher education

In Britain, the National Bureau for Handicapped Students reports the following situation:³

The proportion of handicapped people proceeding to further and higher education, compared with the non-handicapped, is far smaller than could or should be expected. Recent surveys show that handicapped young people stand three or four times less chance of entering further or higher education than the non-handicapped.

It is widely recognised that in Australia at the present time (May 1981) statistical information on the incidence of disability and handicap is fragmentary

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and often unreliable.⁴ It is to be hoped, and indeed expected, that the 1981 Survey of Handicaps currently being conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics will greatly improve this situation.⁵ The Bureau intends that the survey will be but the first of a regular series, in which the precision of the survey instrument will be continually refined through consultation with self-help groups, other organisations of and for disabled people, and the many government and non-government bodies which will be using the information.⁶

However even on the basis of existing information it is possible, very tentatively, to explore the proposition that the proportion of disabled people proceeding to higher education in Australia is considerably smaller than that in the general population. The information concerned is provided by the 1976 Census⁷, the Australian Health Survey of 1977-78⁸, and figures available from some universities and colleges of advanced education on students with disabilities who identified themselves voluntarily at registration.⁹ The most cautious and conservative use of this, further safeguarded by confining the analysis to people with sensory and physical impairments and excluding those with mental impairments of any kind, suggests the following situation at three institutions:

- At the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology the participation rate¹⁰ of disabled people is between one fifth and one eighth of that of the general population.
- At Monash University the participation rate of disabled people is between one quarter and one fifth of that of the general population.
- At the Western Australian Institute of Technology the participation rate of disabled people is between one third and one quarter of that of the general population.

Certainly these conclusions are highly tentative, and cannot be used in a policy context without a great deal more validation. Nevertheless a belief that they may not be too wide of the mark is encouraged by the consistency of the best example with the average situation in Britain, where a much earlier start was made in rendering the environment of both secondary and tertiary education less handicapping to people with disabilities.¹¹ At the risk of appearing to labour the obvious in attempting to demonstrate that disabled people have a much worse chance of entering higher education than able-bodied people, it is argued that the measurement of present participation

rates is essential if we wish to evaluate the impact of any policy changes that may occur in the future, including admission policies.

The school-university interface

Accepting then that people with disabilities resulting from sensory or motor impairments may stand up to eight times less chance, or perhaps even worse, of entering higher education, in what ways can this be attributed to shortcomings either in the content or communication of admission policies?

In the realm of policy, admission policy forms the interface between school and university. On each side of this interface exist the two great sets of policy issues affecting the successful participation of disabled people in higher education.

On one side of the interface are the policy issues affecting the preparedness of disabled people for entry to higher education. On the other side are the policy issues affecting the provision of compensatory and support mechanisms aimed at ensuring that disabled people who have entered higher education may compete with their able-bodied peers on as near as possible equal terms.

The inadequacy or excellence of admission policy has a potentially crucial impact on both these sets of issues. On the one hand they can provide a benchmark against which the success or failure of the special education system can be measured. If the special education system, whether operating in special schools or in support of regular school programmes, fails to deliver as credible university applicants a similar proportion of intellectually suitable disabled students to that which obtains in the general population, then special education policy and/or broader aspects of social policy surrounding it, requires urgent review. Credible university applicants candidates are those who measure up to the criteria of the admission policy. On the other hand if the university fails to bring to graduation standard a proportion of its disabled students similar to that which applies in the general student population, then policy on the provision of compensatory and support mechanisms offered by the university or relevant outside agencies requires urgent review.

Developing an admission policy

How would a university set about developing an admission policy for students with disabilities, or reviewing an existing policy?

As in all policy development, the process can be delineated by a series of questions and sub-questions:¹²

a) *What are the objectives of policy, and who are the decision makers?*

(i) *What should be the aims of the policy? (What is necessary? What is desirable?)*

(ii) *What should be the scope of the policy? (What if anything will be changed? Or encouraged? Or legislated on? And to what ends? Who will get what? Who will lose what? Who will pay? Who will get paid?)*

(iii) *Who should decide and on what basis? (Who is deciding now? Is the power in the right hands?)*

b) *What are the means?*

(i) *What are the limits of present policy instruments? (What should be kept? What should be discarded? What is possible? What is impossible?)*

(ii) *What agencies and processes might best serve our policy aims? (The Registrar's Office? The Faculty Boards? The Counselling Service? The University Union?)*

Space does not permit examination of the arguments relevant to all these questions. However, by way of example, a few are explored:

Objectives and aims

As already suggested the objective of the policy is to achieve an equitable participation rate for disabled students. This implies certain aims for the university either in attempting to influence the special education system, and/or committing itself to bridging programmes that compensate for inadequacies at secondary level. In order to understand the difficulties involved, it is worth noting that in their *Survey of Special Education in Australia*¹³, a very valiant and difficult task undertaken on behalf of the Schools Commission by Andrews et al., no attempt is made to assess the numbers or proportion of disabled students who achieve university entrance standards.

Scope

What range of disabilities should the policy take into account? Students of adequate intellectual capacity, but with sensory or motor impairments would surely be included, but what of mental impairment? While a mildly mentally retarded person might benefit from some TAFE courses, the essential characteristics of university education would seem to preclude their participation. However students with intermittent emotional disturbance or specific learning difficulties should probably fall within the scope of the policy.

In a steady state situation, or in departments with fixed enrolment quotas, an increasing proportion of disabled students would mean a decreasing proportion of able-bodied students. Without additional funding, provision of compensatory and support mechanisms would mean loss of resources from existing areas. This issue must fall within the scope of the policy. It should probably be argued not in terms of positive discrimination (since discrimination on any grounds other than academic quality is alien to the university concept) but rather in terms of the principle of equity.

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Who should decide and on what basis?

Should the selectors know when they first consider an application that the student has a disability? Should the provision of information on a disability be mandatory? Apart from considerations of privacy, could it be guaranteed that the provision of such information would not sometimes work against a candidate? On the other hand if the information is not provided injustice could be done by not recognising that the candidate has hitherto performed at less than his potential because of schooling interrupted by therapy needs, or a handicapping school environment.

Then again entry to some professions may be formally restricted to those who are healthy, able-bodied, and have no record of emotional disturbance. If such restrictions are not applied at the time of entry to the course, they may be applied subsequently by the professional body granting the licence. At yet a further remove the major employers of professionals in a given category may as a matter of policy reject disabled candidates. The scope of the admission policy must include guidelines on how, if at all, such factors should be taken into account when admitting disabled students to a professional course.

Some courses involve fieldwork, practical work, or interactive techniques for which certain sensory, motor or emotional capacities are seen to be required, whether in the course itself or in subsequent likely work situations. What should be done if the disabled candidate is convinced of his abilities to deal with such problems but the selectors have sincere doubts?

What are the means?

To select but one issue that might arise as to means — to what extent can the advice of disabled people who have already successfully entered or completed university education be relied upon in developing and applying the admission policy? Having succeeded themselves without the benefit of such a policy, might they not feel that others can and should do the same? On the other hand, who in the university is in a better position to judge than those with personal experience of disability?

Conclusion

In this brief and selective treatment, the great potential influence of admission policies has been demonstrated, while at the same time it has been shown how difficult such policies may be to develop and implement. The importance of participation rates as a measure of policy effectiveness has been considered. For disabled people a sound admission policy can do much to guarantee the security of expectation and freedom of choice that are fundamental to educational rights.

Notes and References

1. Reproduced in Appendix I to the following document: Australia, Parliament, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Legislative Research Service, Education and Welfare Group, *International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) 1981*. Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1980. (Basic paper no. 11/1980). p.39-43.
2. David, Miller, *Social Justice*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1976, p.151.
3. *National Bureau for Handicapped Students*, London, National Bureau for Handicapped Students, 40 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ. Information pamphlet.
4. For example: Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training, *Education, training and employment: report*, AGPS, Canberra, 1979. (The Williams Report) v.1, p.500-505.
5. *1981 Survey of Handicapped Persons — Information Paper no. 3*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1981.
6. P. Gardner, 'The ABS Survey of Handicapped Persons'; Address delivered at the ANZSERCH/APHA Annual National Conference, "Disability and disadvantage: what can we achieve in the eighties?", University of Melbourne, May 11-14, 1981.
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *1976 Census: population and dwellings: summary tables*, ABS, Canberra, 1979, p.3.
8. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian health survey 1977-78: chronic conditions (illnesses and permanent disabilities)*, ABS, Canberra, 1980, p.22-23.
9. As recommended in:
V. J. Beasley, and D. J. Glencross, *Handicapped tertiary students — problems, needs and possibilities*. Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1977, p.80-81.
Voluntary self-identification figures used in the examples given are drawn from:
Rosemary Sorger, and Gordon Young, *A survey of disabled students at RMIT*. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Students Services, Melbourne, 1979, p.5
and
Pierre Gorman, and Don Schauder, 'Disabled library users at Monash University,' *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 11(2) 111-123 (June 1980).
Total size of age cohort used to calculate participation rates derived from:
Yearbook Australia no. 64, 1980. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1980, p.96.
Total student numbers for the three institutions cited derived from:
Sorger and Young; and Williams Report v.1, p. 136.
The above data allows the following ratios to be compared:
No. of students at given institution
Total no. of people in age cohort
and
No. of self-identified disabled students
Total no. of disabled people in age cohort.
10. The term "participation rate" as used here has the same meaning as that defined in the Williams Report as follows:

"Participation rate is defined as the ratio of enrolments for the number of persons in the population aged 17-29 years. This population group was selected as base as over 80 per cent of all university and advanced education enrolments are within this age group..." See: Williams Report v.1, p.27.

11. As reflected in:
Disabled students in higher education. National Innovations Centre, London, 1974.
and
Personal discussions with Mr Michael Reed, President, Royal National Institute for the Deaf (London), in Melbourne on 15/4/81.

12. This series of questions is drawn, with appropriate adaption, from:
Harvard University, Program on Information Resources Policy, *Information resources policy: arenas, players and stakes*. Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1977. (Annual report 1976-1977) v.1, p.44.
13. *A survey of special education in Australia: provisions, needs and priorities in the education of children with handicaps and learning difficulties*. Fred and Eleanor Schonell Educational Research Centre, Department of Education, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1979.