



Survey Results

Disability and Tertiary Education

August 2011

Recommendations

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) believes that young people with disability need to be recognised as a key stakeholder group within the tertiary education system. The federal government has an opportunity to be a leader in engaging in genuine consultation in order to change funding policies for supporting students with disabilities.

AYAC urges the federal government to empower and support all young people - regardless of ability or disability - to access higher education and further training, and we offer some recommendations to ensure this can happen.

As such, AYAC recommends that the federal government develop and promote the following initiatives:

1. Mandatory disability awareness training for educators and support staff working at all campuses, in order to educate teachers and support staff about their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education, about disability assistance measures, and about harassment/victimisation of people with disabilities.
2. Support for the creation of a national youth disability advocacy service to ensure that students who are discriminated against on the basis of their disability have the support they need. This will enable them to negotiate with teachers and support staff to resolve issues, negotiate reasonable adjustments and navigate complaints procedures.
3. An independent and comprehensive *compliance audit* of all education institutions to ensure that there is real accountability of education providers under the Disability Standards for Education.
4. A review of eligibility requirements for student income support specifically for students with disabilities, with a view to increasing financial assistance for these young people.

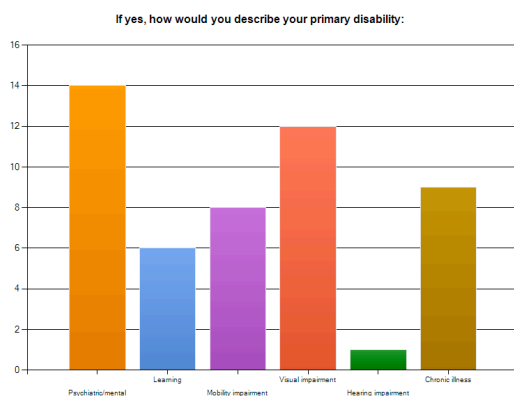
Background

“There is no way I can achieve the same things in 12 weeks as a student without disability. In an ideal world I shouldn't have to. In an ideal world I shouldn't have to twist myself to fit the system, the system should fit me and what I can do and how long it takes me to do things. I am a highly intelligent and motivated young person. I produce high quality work. It just takes me longer. I am disabled. Not dead. Not stupid. Just different.”

– Survey respondent

In April, May and August 2011, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) consulted directly with young people, parents of those with disability and disability workers via two online surveys, the first entitled *Your Views on Young People with a Disability and Education*, and the second entitled *Disability and Education Follow Up Survey*. Almost 400 people responded to each survey.

The AYAC surveys reflected the views of respondents from all States and Territories across Australia. In the first survey, almost 50% of respondents were university aged, and in the second 23% were currently undergoing tertiary education.



In AYAC's first survey, the majority of respondents were young people with disabilities (62%). In our second survey, nearly 40% of respondents reported having a disability. The majority of those (28%) reported having a psychiatric/mental disability, followed by 24% with a visual impairment. 18% of respondents said they had a chronic illness, and 16% had mobility impairment with another 12% reporting a learning disability.

“Dealing with major depression while studying at university I find very difficult because of the lack of understanding and education about the issue with university lecturers as well as lack of support from university lecturer. I think there needs to be improved training of lecturers themselves within university faculties about depression and other mental illness. Most lecturers I have spoken to have no idea of mental illness, but they are expected to agree to adjustments. Often the lecturers are resentfully for the adjustments they are asked to make, such as extra time to complete an assignment because of a mental disability.”

– Survey respondent

The AYAC polls investigated several issues. These included:

- Young people's perceptions of the Disability Standards for Education;
- Whether young people with disability experience equal opportunity to access and participate in education free from bullying and discrimination; and

- What more needs to be done for young people with disabilities so that they can receive the education they are entitled to.

Uniquely, AYAC's survey canvassed the opinions of the people most affected by these issues, on how students with disabilities can be better supported by decision-makers.

Previous experiences with education providers

The AYAC survey asked current and former students to rate how their tertiary institution had dealt with the specific needs of students with disabilities. Of those:

- 40% of students said that staff did not understand their needs
- 48% said that staff awareness of disability was poor
- 40% said that they had moved institutions in order to access better disability support.

"The Disability Support Services Staff and my DSO whom I have had contact with are working incredibly hard and long hours with what limited resources they have to improve the disability experience at university. I would like to see them better supported in the work they do."

– Survey respondent

Worryingly, 41% found that lessons were not accessible to them, and only 43% of students said that the level of support they received was enough to help them with their personal needs. A quarter of respondents said that the level of support provided by their school was not sufficient to enable them to continue with their studies. Despite the fact that education providers are required to make reasonable adjustments to help students with disabilities to access the education they are entitled to, this research shows that students are not receiving the support they need.

"Disability support can be based on the type of person in the role. The first disability adviser at my current university was amazing and pushed so hard to get me the accommodations I required. Unfortunately she resigned and her replacement was the complete opposite. In the end I gave up fighting because it wasn't getting anywhere. The person in the role needs to be accountable."

– Survey respondent

"Disability officers have too many students and not enough time. Students with simpler circumstances may only have cursory contact with support and miss out when circumstances change or have difficulty with a lecturer as they are less familiar or less likely to ask for more support or raise "small" issues. At the same time, students with more complex needs or fluctuating conditions don't get enough time or support."

– Survey respondent

When asked about the kinds of difficulties they had experienced at their higher education institution, the biggest obstacles facing young people were:

- The levels of support and adjustments provided by their university/college (74%)
- Missing class time due to disability (53%)
- Exclusions from learning activities (32%)
- Harassment and bullying (28%).

When it came to making a complaint, 51% of university-aged students said that the complaints process at their education institution was unsatisfactory. The top three reasons given were:

- Not believing that their complaint would be resolved (65%)
- Fearing further victimisation once they made a complaint (55%)
- Feeling unsupported by staff and teachers to talk about their disability and what needs they had (51%).

“Personally, I was too sick to fight the bureaucracy. I was a relatively good advocate for myself but when I came up against organisational brick walls it was just too much work and energy required to fight. I shouldn't have to fight to get an education. I shouldn't have to fight for the simple things like using a laptop to write my own notes or for 5 minute breaks in an exam.”

– Survey respondent

“As a student, you want to work well with your lecturers and support staff, you don't want to "rock the boat" or "burn any bridges" but sometimes things just don't work and must change if you are to continue studying. There is often a culture that making a complaint is causing trouble or exploiting the system to your advantage rather than a legitimate option.”

– Survey respondent

Even though students with disabilities have the right to receive an education, without an effective mechanism to enforce that right through an adequate and accessible compliance process, those rights cannot be claimed by the young people who are discriminated against due to their disability.

“The biggest issue at the university I attend is discrimination, it is so bad I was going to move states to go to uni, but unfortunately, the disability pension (including the education supplement) was nowhere near enough to live on, especially when I struggle to hold a job and go to uni because I fatigue so much. They neglected to inform me about the complaint's process, by the time I found it, it was too late. They forced me to withdraw from my original degree purely because I was diagnosed with a type of arthritis, they didn't tell me straight out to pull out, they threw subtle hints at me. By the middle of last semester, academic staff were no longer providing me with academic support, instead were asking if I was going to leave. I threw the hat in and they lost yet another future nurse. It makes me wonder how many other people are treated exactly the same but don't have the support to pull themselves back up again?”

– Survey respondent

Improvements to disability support in educational institutions

The AYAC poll also asked people to state what services they thought most urgently required *greater funding*. The top three responses were:

- 1) Better student support services delivered on campus
- 2) Financial aid for students with disabilities
- 3) Awareness training for staff and teachers

“There needs to be better financial support for students with disability. Many students with disability fall through the cracks at university if they can't study full-time and don't qualify for disability pension (youth allowance etc requires full-time load; disability pension requires under 15hrs/week ability to work). In the meantime, students try to do too many units just to qualify for youth allowance, sometimes leading to deterioration in health, poor marks or they drop out and end up disconnected and disengaged). The whole system is based on full-time load, if you are doing less then it's like you don't exist, like your education/participation don't matter.”

– Survey respondent

When asked what *specific services* would make the biggest difference in students' ability to access education the top four responses were:

- 1) Educating staff about the needs of students with disability (71%)
- 2) Making support services compulsory for education providers (39%)
- 3) Improving communication between support services and teaching staff (36%)
- 4) Reducing bureaucracy and paperwork required when seeking adjustments (34%)

"I am finishing my degree in social work at the end of October this year. I am shocked with the uncooperativeness of disability services at (my university). I made my way with the help of a SRC and my personal fight to get services for me. I cannot understand why disability services at the university do not cater for my needs and for the needs of other students with disabilities. Only after I got some senior staff from my faculty involved, did things start to change."

– Survey respondent

When asked what were the *main ways that education providers could improve* how they deal with students with disabilities, the top four responses said that decision-makers needed to focus on:

- 1) Accessible learning material (e.g. assistive technology, note takers etc.) (45%)
- 2) Expanded eligibility criteria for education support (38%)
- 3) Alternative and flexible learning options (34%)
- 4) Adapted evaluation/examination methods (34%)

"Universities often expect placements to be completed in a block and will not even consider modifications to requirements or work undertaken. I was denied any accommodations or modifications to the 11-week teaching internship I needed to finish my 4-year course. I asked for modifications and support over a year in advance but even with disability officer support and advocacy the university wouldn't budge. I got so sick it took me four months to scrape through and finish. I barely passed, I could barely move. My health deteriorated so much that it's two years on and I still haven't been able to work since. I've got my \$20k piece of paper, but I can barely leave my house. I wish I'd had the support to make a complaint. I wish I'd just dropped out. Four years of distinction average study marred by four months of hell."

– Survey respondent

Conclusions

"Young people with disabilities need initiatives to improve their confidence, know that it's OK to seek help, and be aware that their "pride" will hinder them from getting the support they require. They need to know that they too have a right to quality education which will give them more career opportunities."

– Survey respondent

Overall, AYAC's survey reveals that much greater support is urgently needed for students with disabilities across the whole Australian education system. The majority of respondents want greatly improved training for staff and teachers, and more dedicated support for students, both in and out of class.

“Poor communication” between teachers and students was cited as one of the biggest issues regarding the provision of support, suggesting that even though the government has sought to apply the Disability Standards for Education across Australia, tertiary education institutions charged with implementing these standards are either ignorant of their obligations, resistant to implementing recommendations from outside disability services, or are simply struggling with the burden of assisting students with greater needs.

More funding for training, and a concerted effort to introduce adequate and dedicated disability services in each college and university were widely called for by respondents. Where there are educational institutions that actually employ disability officers, it was found that these staff are required to service too many students with not enough time to ensure adequate assistance.

There was also a strong call for more support in helping students advocate for themselves, and to work with educators and support staff. Many respondents complained of lengthy complaints processes and disappointment with the resolution of their claims. Better complaints processes are essential if students with disabilities are to claim their rights.

Students reported that they wanted more flexible options for learning and assessment, without which they were most likely to drop out of study altogether. Also, the urgent need for increased financial aid was a common theme. Many students with disabilities fall through the cracks at college or university if they cannot study full-time and do not qualify for disability pension.

“Education is a right that everyone deserves - it's too bad that more effort isn't put into making it as accessible as possible.”

– Survey respondent

For further enquiries please contact:

Maia Giordano
Deputy Director (Young People)
02 9212 0500
maia@ayac.org.au

