

From Coursework to the Workforce

Education Challenges for educators & women with disabilities

Introduction:

Whilst women with disabilities continue to be impacted by both gender and disability discrimination in most areas of their lives, in the education sector different dynamics seem to be at play. In education, their achievements are comparable to those of their male counterparts. However, their post year 10 participation in education is abysmal compared to that of both male and female non-disabled students.

It should be remembered when we examine trends and participation in education at any level in the sector that women with disabilities represent 20% of the female population.

Disaggregated Data:

Over the past decade it has been difficult for WWDA to ascertain just how women with disabilities have been faring in the education system. The lack of disaggregated data from publicly available sources has hampered analysis of education statistics. This is not unique to WWDA, and is a common theme with women's groups in more than the education arena. However, WWDA has often stated the need for disability disaggregated data in addition to gender disaggregation.

In 2005, WWDA paid for disaggregation of Higher Education Figures from the (then) Department of Education Science and Training. This showed that 2.9% of the female student Higher Education population had identified as women with disabilities (compared to 2.4% of the male student population). The total numbers of female students with disabilities was 15,000 compared to 10,000 males¹. However, these figures for both men and women are abysmally low, and represent lost opportunities for the Australian workforce.

The philosophy that the 'pendulum has swung too far' (in favour of women) may be coming to an end, and publicly available disaggregated data from government departments may now become more freely available. However, it is also necessary to review data collection/disaggregation policies within educational institutions themselves. Individual campuses need to be encouraged to develop accessible data sources which show data disaggregated by gender and disability (amongst other things). For example, the Manager of the Disability Office at the University of Canberra (Kovacs, *pers.com.* 2008), reports that it is not possible to extract gender-disability disaggregated data from that university's data base, even though this has been persistently requested.

Vocational Education & Training

It seems that the sector which is supposed to be delivering vocational education to students with disabilities is not funded to support sufficient numbers of them. Their numbers as a percentage of the total student population has gradually increased since 1998, but are still also abysmally small. Even an estimation of a 1:1 split between male and female students with disabilities would mean that only 3% of the total student population in 2006 were women with disabilities.

Table 1:

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| 1998 – 3.5% of students in VET system reported disability (53,000 swd/1,509,000 total) |
| 2000 – 5.0% of students in VET system reported disability (62,000swd/1,240,000 total) |
| 2003 - 5.3% of students in VET system reported disability (91,000swd/1,700,000 total) |
| 2006 – 6.0% of students in VET system reported disability (102,380 swd/1,676,000 total) |

¹ In fact, the figures for male students with disabilities are probably an undercounting of actual numbers because males tend not to register for assistance through the Disability Services Offices. Registration with the Disability Services Offices is the primary source of data about participation of students with disabilities. The degree of under registration is unlikely to account for the 1.5 to 1 ratio of female to male student with disabilities.

Nature of population of students with disabilities

Anecdotal evidence is that a high proportion of students who do identify as having a disability have Mental Health and/or Intellectual Disabilities (such as Dyslexia, Autism Spectrum Disorders). This means that women with physical disabilities, blind/vision impairment, and Deaf/hearing impairment may not be getting Higher Education or VET opportunities at all.

Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Standards

Negative attitudes to women students with disabilities remain a significant factor impacting on their achievement levels. At University there is significant resistance to the adjustment of teaching methods to cater for students with disabilities. There is also resistance to making 'accommodations' for such students at exam times (e.g. with provision of 'extra time', 'split examination times', ergonomic furniture, etc.). Whilst nationally recognized accommodation standards have been in place for some time, there is a tangible improvement in accommodations since the Disability Standards for Education were adopted in 2005.

Previously, students with disabilities only had recourse to the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) (DDA) when they were experiencing discrimination. Because under the DDA, the onus is on individuals to mount a discrimination case, very few cases are ever lodged with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC).

It is symptomatic of an attitude of generally ignoring the needs of students with disabilities that only 29 Universities (74%) and 24 TAFES (38%) have lodged Disability Action Plans (DAP) with HREOC. The lodging of a DAP indicates an intention, at least, to minimise disability discrimination. In fact most DAPs mean very little (e.g. a formal complaint was brought against the ANU in 2005 about lack of signage of wheelchair access to buildings. As a result a copy of the DAP was forwarded to the complainant with a letter stating that the signage would be rectified 'soon'. It is still not done).

However, recognition of the Disability Standards should bring about some changes. It is now easier for Disability Office personnel to inform staff about any particular requirements of students with disabilities, to have accommodations requests adhered to, and to give students better tools for having their support needs met.

Although 3 years have now elapsed since the adoption of the Disability Standards for Education, general knowledge about them is extremely limited, and there is need for all staff to have some basic education and training about the standards.

Education Obligations to get it right for women with disabilities

a. UN -CEDAW

The UN CEDAW Committee in its concluding comments about the Australian Government's Report '*Women in Australia*' (Australian Government 2003) emphasised that the collection and disaggregation of data about women with disabilities needs to be rectified at government level².

b. UN-CRPD

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities came into force on 10 May 2008 (YAY!). Australia is a signatory to the Convention, and is assessing legislation changes necessary prior to ratification. It contains a specific Article on Education.

Article 24 – Education states that: *States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, **States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning...***

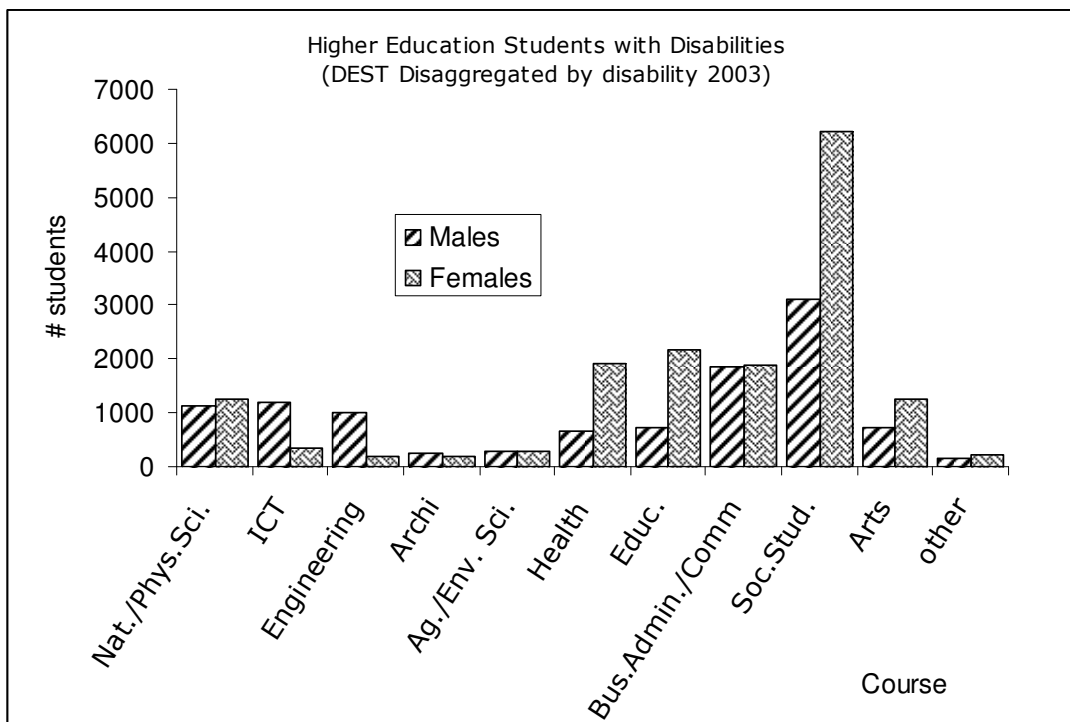
² '.....The Committee regrets the absence of sufficient information and data on women with disabilities. The Committee requests the State Party to include adequate statistical data and analysis, disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and disability, in its next report so as to provide a full picture of the implementation of all the provisions of the Convention. It also recommends that the State Party regularly conduct impact assessments of its legislative reforms, policies and programmes to ensure that measures taken lead to the desired goals and that it inform the Committee about the results of these assessments in its next report.' (CEDAW Concluding Comments, 2006, 3.5)

Education Achievement versus Employment Failure

The comparability of educational outcomes for women and men with disabilities is revealed as being a hollow achievement when employment and workforce participation figures are examined.

In 2003 the labour force participation rate of women with disabilities was only 46.9% compared to 59.3% for men with disabilities. The unemployment rate of disabled women in the same year was 8.3% compared to 5.3% for non-disabled women. Twenty-one per cent of men with disabilities were in full time employment compared to 9% of women with disabilities. Eleven per cent of women with disabilities have part time employment compared to 6% of men with disabilities. In any type of employment women with disabilities are already more likely to be in low paid, part time, short term casual jobs (ABS 2004).

These figures highlight the need to examine the sorts of courses that women with disabilities are selecting. The Higher Education tables for students with disabilities show the greatest numbers of women with disabilities (6223) in Social Studies related courses, and miniscule numbers in engineering (184) and ICT (354), at 20% and 30% of male counterpart numbers respectively. These are similar trends to those found in the non-disabled population. The situation in VET is worse with high numbers of women with disabilities found in non vocational courses. In employment once again, a major factor is the negative workplace attitudes of both colleagues and employers, coupled with the reduced ability of Disability Employment Networks to maintain workplace support under the NewStart and Welfare to Work measures.



Total student numbers 2004 = 944, 977

Discussion Points

- Address implementation of Disability Standards
- Enrolment targets are needed in both TAFE and Universities to increase the % of women students with disabilities
- Gender-disability disaggregated data
- Funding for disability support services/increase overall numbers
- Improve employment related course choices

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