



**“ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL AND WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES: HOW MIGHT
UNIVERSITIES BETTER ENGAGE IN THE JOURNEY?”**

PRESENTATION

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, I too acknowledge my deep respect to the traditional owners of the land on which the University of Queensland is situated, the Turrbai/Jagera (Yug-er-a) people. I pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge their continuing connection to the land. I also acknowledge any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders or community members who are here today and acknowledge their presence.

Introduction

Disability inclusion is more than a plan or piece of legislation – it is a mindset that is implemented by a course of conduct that is verifiable. Universities can affect attitudes for a generation. One attitude for persons with disability is they are too fragile to travel. This feeds into several unhelpful stereotypes concerning charity and roles in the community like employment. Change is required.

Change that acknowledges the whole of the journey and the dignity and time of the people involved. Change that asks a pertinent question, “should the Australian taxpayer, people with disabilities or the families of people with disability bear the cost of some forms of access?” Change that challenges whether the charity narrative portrayed for people with disability is correct.



An unresolved question is what role do employers and businesses have in the area of travel for people with disability in Australia given our human rights obligations, societal values and need for smart economic practices? Irrespective of this unresolved question though, universities have a wonderful role in society in promoting meaningful long-term inclusion of people with disability.

Mindset and Disability

A community mindset concerning disability is needed where we normalise diversity and understand its benefits. Mindsets take time and effort to develop – especially when seeking to be positive. The mindset we require going forward for people with disability in Australia is unashamedly positive. This requires a clear articulation of the benefits of diversity and inclusion and the critical role of people with disability in society.

A course of conduct is required where Australian society practices inclusion in design, education, employment and engagement in the community. Inclusion is more than just diversity or the acknowledgment of disability rights it is the meaningful acceptance of diversity.

For a course of conduct to be verifiable we need data and a clear implementation framework.

Role of Disability Action Plans

I would particularly like to commend the University of Queensland for organising this event and I was delighted to receive an invitation to speak. I am going to talk to you today about Disability Actions Plans, the role of universities in affecting behaviour and public debate in the future and airline travel for people with disability.

When Dr Paul Harpur of the Law Faculty reached out to ask that I come and present I was both excited and concerned. Excited as attendance at university was such a wonderful enabler and life experience for me where I developed confidence in who I



was and my life circumstances. I'm sure many of your students with disabilities will feel the same (although perhaps not around exam time or when choosing course(s)).

I was though concerned that Disability Action Plans are implemented. The Plans seek to address a significant underlying issue confronting people with disability in Australia; that issue for organisations is to understand and be aware of conduct that may impact negatively on people with disability. Disability Action Plans promote new dialogue and hopefully use best practices to try and facilitate organisations understanding the issues affecting people with disability and to make sure we reach a sustainable change. But there is an outstanding question as to their enforcement.

Fortunately, Paul has assured me of the deep commitment of the University of Queensland to ensuring people with disability are included in decision-making in the university and are able to travel. He specifically mentioned to me the role of the University of Queensland in ensuring he could travel internationally. This is to be applauded.

Another university in Australia in Perth had adopted this approach in the early 2000s. There a somewhat dishevelled law student who now sits in front of you today and was pessimistic at the prospect of ever leaving the State was part of a mooting team that qualified for the world finals in Washington, DC. He fondly recalls visiting the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Alan Robson, at the time and mentioning he might need some help with travelling with a disability. The enthusiastic response of "of course" was life changing.

It was not a question of law – it was a question of intent and mindset.

Universities, particularly leading institutions such as the University of Queensland, need to see themselves as drivers of social change, which is reflected in their own conduct. I'm delighted to hear the university has shown leadership in the area of inclusion of people with disabilities.



Disability and Changing Behaviour

The conduct of the University of Queensland in supporting its employees' travel requirements needs to be seen within a wider framework of disability policy and the difficulties of people with disability accessing public transport and airline travel.

Under s 31 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) standards were created for transport in Australia – the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (the DSAPT). The DSPAT covers airline travel and, if not, the conduct of airlines is caught by the *Disability Discrimination Act*. An issue exists within the present framework of the *Disability Discrimination Act* in that a person must bring a complaint for direct or indirect discrimination to enforce their rights and must proceed initially through mediation/conciliation. There is no ability for the Commission to bring a systematic claim.

Compliance with DSAPT could, at best, be described as sporadic. Reliance upon the *Disability Discrimination Act* as a regulatory tool has also not led to radical change in the transport sector for people with disability. A significant review is necessary.

People with disability in Australia often have no alternative to airline travel given the geographic expanse of Australia and lack of realistic substitute forms of transport. Given the need to travel by plane to see family and loved ones, it is concerning that people with disability are required to travel with care staff (whose time, at the least, is paid for by the government or Australian taxpayers), cannot (due to plane design) independently use bathroom facilities, have repeated issues with assistance animals or often need to wait hours on the telephone to book or confirm special assistance (which may need to be done by a paid carer during business hours). The agreed design of planes purchased for significant sums of money contributes to the need for people with disability to require assistance.

We are though seemingly not practicing at the cutting edge of universal design or developing effective inclusion strategies. For example, from my understanding, British



Airways has a full interactive online accessible booking system for people with disability. We need all our Australian airline carriers to do the same. The staff and cabin crews on airlines often act with the best of intentions and there are many instances of good practice. Indeed, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the tremendous kindness I have been shown, at times, by some crew and staff working in the airline industry who have always got me home, sometimes not in the easiest circumstances. However, more needs to be done at a systemic level with clear and unwavering commitment from senior management with explicit oversight from company directors and boards of directors.

Where complexities with security, safety or scheduling arise in including people with disability we need to constructively and respectfully deal with those problems – but with a starting point of inclusion and not exclusion.

For many people with disability in Australia a plane trip is an enormous sum of money for themselves or their family. The trip may be the highlight of their year or be required for medical reasons. As stated before, realistic alternatives do not exist. We need to be at the cutting edge of inclusive design and practice for people with disability.

In Australia, at present, much of the rhetoric concerning airlines is at the top end of the market. I.e. new planes, new fit outs, new lounges or clubs, airline fees and access to routes in domestic markets with questionable competitive constraints. It would be helpful if the leadership of organisations like the University of Queensland meant future generations would approach and discuss such industry developments in a more balanced manner. Yes, businesses seek to make profits but a commitment to diversity and inclusion should include a commitment to service the needs of people with disability (who make up 20% of the population). For example, how does the new fit out of a plane accommodate individuals with mobility or sensory needs? Is the advertising relating to the services offered truly reflective of, and respectful to, the entire Australian population?



The propensity for Royal Commissions in this country is, in part, related to the needs of the quietest Australians failing to be being heard or even acknowledged. Legal mechanisms and formal complaint processes have proven ineffective and are not used. The staff, students and graduates of this institution can though change the way in which diversity and inclusion is considered and respectfully debated. The culture of silence regarding people with disability needs to end.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we, the people of Australia, need good disability policy. We need it because it reflects our human rights obligations. We need it because it makes economic sense. And we need it, most of all, because it reflects our values of diversity and inclusion.

An aspect of that disability policy is Disability Action Plans provided for under the *Disability Discrimination Act* being entered into and acted upon by well-regarded institutions and thought leaders such as the University of Queensland. These plans need a clear monitoring and record keeping process to be established and commitment from organisational leaders.

Quite appropriately, the Disability Action Plan of the University of Queensland extends to the transport and meaningful involvement of its employees who have a disability.

More importantly, the University of Queensland has a mindset to ensure inclusion of people with disability. This is fantastic.

We need other universities, businesses and institutions to follow this example.

Thank you.