

# FED UNI IS BEING RUN INTO THE GROUND BY ABLEISM

Dear fellow Ballaratians,

My name is Ben Debney. I was born and raised in Ballarat; I went to Ballarat College and then graduated from Ballarat High School in 1993. In 2023 I was a research officer for the Neurodiversity Inclusion and Success project in the Psychology department at Fed Uni, Mt Helen. This project was basically geared to student retention.

Like the higher education sector as a whole, Fed bleeds students like a stuck pig. It has annouced plans to sack 200 staff due to financial difficulties associated with retaining students. VC Duncan Bentley is still on \$900,000 p.a, but is not taking a payout. The tragedy of these proposed sackings is that we have a pretty good idea of some of the major reasons why higher education struggles to retain students. Like all other universities, Fed experiences a gross disparity between estimated numbers of neurodiverse (ND) students as a known percentage of the population (via ABS statistics), and those who register for academic welfare supports under 'reasonable adjustments' legislation. The classic example of 'reasonable adjustments' is making buildings wheelchair accessible. This same model is applied to things like Autism Spectrum Disorder and ADHD, as though human minds are the same thing as a wheelchair—and more to the point, that the academic environment is otherwise appropriate to the needs of neuodiverse students and staff.

As we found last year, 'reasonable adjustments' legislation is actually counter-productive and even harmful to ND students: Neurodiverse students and staff have to have a diagnosis, costing thousands of dollars in the middle of perpetual housing nd cost of living crises, to even be able to register for welfare supports with the DLAU. In addition to being extremely expensive and non-negotiable, it also takes a very long time. To have a diagnosis, ND students and staff have to be aware of neurodivergence, otherwise we internalise the

ableism that prevents them from succeeding as something innate about ourselves. This appears to happen often. We have to be willing to disclose, which a lot of people aren't thanks to the culture of ableism, which is as normalised and taken for granted as racism in the Jim Crow South, or Australia in general.

Even if students or staff get a diagnosis, 'reasonable adjustments' are still based on a medical model of disability, which still treats the neurodivergent individual as the problem that needs fixing, rather than addressing root causes in the ableist social culture that sees neurodivergence as an abnormality, rather than ableism as a typically maladaptive trait of settler colonial hierarchies built on conquest and supremacism.

In researching these issues last year, it becaame obvious that a correlation existed between the very small percentage of reasonable adjustment registrations (less than 20% of estimated ND students), and the high turnover of students. ND students enrol at an institution like Fed, fail to acculturate and settle into a milieu that invisibilises large parts of our daily struggle, drift, fall behind, fall into difficulties, and drop out. Meanwhile the administration can't be told anything about the built environment, about things like even the effects of flourescent lighting on students and staff on the spectrum, or approaches to learning and assessment that force students into forms of such that suit the institution, rather than the needs of the individual student. It then wonders why it bleeds enrolments like a stuck pig.

If the DLAU (Disability Learning Access Unit) statistics are correct, it would seem that, at any given moment, Fed Uni (let alone any other) has at least 6-700 students who are completely unsupported where they need it most at any given time. When they drop out, Fed loses funding. These job losses don't have to happen, but are arguably a great example of the community being made to wear the fall for

technocratic arrogance, maladaptivity and overreach. If the results of the 800+ respondents to our survey were anything to go by, the neurodiverse community of Ballarat know all too well what this looks like in practise.

One of the last things I did last year at Fed before being bullied out of my job by aggressive but fragile ableist thugs was to read and summarise all 800+ responses. The levels of pain and suffering amongst neurodivergent student and staff are deep and acute. I personally would wager few even realise how widespread that pain is. To take one example, I got permission from an old friend from school days to tell her story: let's call her Rose. Rose has schizo-affective disorder, CPTSD and depression. She did the first few years of a Bachelor of Health Sciences, and then withdrew due to complications from the above, not least of which being poverty and psychosis. She is still too messed up to read or write, but thanks to the ND barriers at Fed, Rose does still have a \$15,000 HECS debt that she can't pay off because she doesn't have a degree.

It is of particular concenn that both Fed and its welfare diviison know that things like this happen, but continue to stand by 'reasonable adjustments,' and try to shut down research workers like myself who have read 800+ survey results and know how badly they are failing students and staff. The power and privilege of the neoliberal technocracy that runs academia (into the ground) is, apparently, invested in the dysfunctional, maladaptive and antisocial status quo that keeps them 'reasonably adjusting.'

Even in the midst of large operating deficits and job losses, we find it easier to envision the university closing than evolving ideas about how it runs itself, ie. beyond the mentality that sees the university as a business

and students both product and consumer. For its part, La Trobe has saved hundreds of thousands of dollars by recognising that ableist supremacism creates practical inefficiencies. Instead of throwing large sums of money into treating neurodivergent students as broken and in need of fixing, it has fixed its own culture instead by making inclusion strategies standard practice—as opposed to discrete services requiring separate practices. The DLAU lives in fear of its own demise for good reason..

Maybe the problem is less redundant workers than redundant management and a redundant neoliberal, corporate-captured social order, which has forever promised progress and delivered the unintended consequences of maladaptive mismanagement and hierarchical systems less broken than working exactly as intended for the white men of property and neurotypicality who built them in the first place. From a neurodiversity civil rights perspective, Fed is an excellent example of organisations becoming too top-heavy and toxic when we preference enablers and sycophantic bootlickers who will tell maladaptive management what they want to hear over innovators, if not basic competency.

Maybe it's time to evolve ideas instead of continuing to try to roll neoliberal corporate turds in egalitarianism and inclusion glitter. If the enrolment issues are anything to go by, students can still tell it's a turd.

In solidarity,  
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2023 Neurodiversity Inclusion and Success project research office

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Year	ADHD	Male	Female	Autism	Male	Female	Learning Disability	Male	Female	Totals
2018	25	12	13	44	25	19	67	34	33	136
2019	15	9	6	20	13	7	28	9	19	63
2020	13	4	9	16	9	7	15	6	9	44
2021	26	12	14	19	6	13	16	5	11	61
2022	76	22	54	43	19	24	32	15	17	151
YTD 2023	66	15	51	38	20	18	20	8	12	124

DLAU statistics for 'reasonable adjustments' supports (est. neurodiverse student population of 8-900).