

Creating a wheelchair-friendly campus

Making an entire university accessible to students in wheelchairs is a major challenge. James Cook University believes it has come up with the answers

WHEN Robert Pyne zooms around the Cairns campus of James Cook University in his electric wheelchair, he has good reason to feel at home.

As student association president in the late 1990s, he was a member of the committee that helped plan the new campus. The result is a wheelchair-accessible campus, linked by a network of covered paths.

"In my time with the student union I visited other campuses around Australia, and this has to be one of the most accessible universities in the country," says Pyne, who now works on campus as a part-time regional disability liaison officer, funded by DEETYA.

The covered walkways are an example of what Pyne sees as good planning that benefits all students and staff.

"For someone in a wheelchair a chest infection can be a major setback, so I wanted to make sure people could make it from one building to another in the wet season without getting soaked – but of course that's in everyone's interest."

Although funding limitations meant Pyne didn't get everything he wanted (he succeeded in getting automatic doors on each building, but would like more) he finds the campus a pleasure to travel around.

"One of the big advantages was that we had a green field site – we weren't trying to fix up old mistakes. And the university realised very early on that it was cheaper to plan things carefully from the start."

Pyne filled out his enrolment application for his first degree in 1992, while he was still in hospital recovering from a swimming accident which left him a quadriplegic.

His experience has made him a strong advocate for regional universities.

"In those days JCU Cairns was tiny, but the important thing for me was that it was here – I didn't have to think about leaving home, leaving my support network, to get a degree."

He completed a bachelor of arts majored in history and politics and is now studying law externally.



Robert Pyne at his graduation ceremony

Pyne found the small class sizes at JCU an advantage. "For someone with a disability it's definitely helpful to be on a campus where lecturers are approachable, and classes are small enough for everyone to get to know you."

Associate Professor Dawn May, who taught Pyne in history and politics, describes him as a remarkable person and an inspiring student to teach. "Not only did Robert complete his degree in good time while coping with a recently acquired disability, he was also a consistently high achieving student, and made an outstanding contribution to the university community."

In a region where the general participation rate in tertiary education is comparatively low, Pyne's task as regional disability liaison officer is to encourage people with disabilities to take on the challenge of study at either university or TAFE.

In his school and community visits he

tells potential students that a degree will give them a competitive edge in the job market. "People with disabilities need all the advantages they can get. That's why I'm doing a second degree in law – I want that advantage on my side."

He takes every opportunity to encourage disabled people to take on new challenges. "For young people my message is not to give up on your life. Get back into it as soon as you can."

The same culture of cooperation Pyne enjoyed as president of the student association now helps him in his new role, which includes training staff to understand the needs of students with disabilities.

"At a lot of campuses I've visited, the student union is in one corner and university's senior management are in the opposite corner. Here the staff are very accessible – I can just roll up and talk to them and they're usually very willing to work together."

Pyne cites reading lists as an example

of change that can make a major difference to students with disabilities, and need not cost a cent. "Getting plenty of notice of what reading you need to do can be very important, especially if people need to use assistive technology to do their reading."

The cost of transport in regional and rural Australia and a lack of accessible public transport is an ongoing gripe for Pyne, who makes the 28k trip to work by taxi.

"That's one of the things I envy people in the major cities – wheelchair-accessible trains and buses. Public transport out in the regions is still a major source of frustration."

JCU Cairns equal opportunity administrator, Ros Calder, says 110 of the 2800 students on campus have registered with her as having a medical condition or a disability.

They range from people with RSI, whose only requirement might be rest breaks during exams, to people with hearing and vision impairment, who use a special assistive technology centre in the library.

Calder says the advantages and disadvantages of a small campus sometimes balance each other. "A student with, say, a hearing impairment, is going to find more people in that same situation on a larger campus. Studying on a smaller campus they might be one of only two or three hearing impaired people, but they're going to find staff more accessible."

"Our approach is one of embedded support," explains Calder. "We don't want students to rely just on services designed specifically for people with disabilities – we aim to make the whole environment a supportive one."

The disability resources centre at the JCU library, includes large-screen computers, ergonomic furniture, a Braille embosser, computers that operate on voice recognition and a rest room.

Colin Shortland, a vision-impaired computer programmer who is completing a combined degree in arts and science, uses the centre regularly. Shortland is also a student mentor, providing assistance to newer students in his course.