



DISCOVER

ENGAGE

IMPACT



## FAIR GO FOR ALL ABILITIES

**A UQ researcher is using his first-hand experience of living with a disability to advocate for others like him, aiming to destigmatise disabilities in the workplace and change perceptions and policy in the process.**

**Every day, millions of Australians head off to jobs to earn a living, support their families, and achieve a sense of accomplishment and pride.**

This ability to be gainfully employed is a basic human right. That's why it's alarming that many people with disabilities continue to be excluded from the labour market.

According to the Australian Network on Disability, more than nine per cent of Australians with a disability are unemployed. But the unemployment figure is significantly higher for people with certain disabilities, such as vision impairments.

In fact, in more than 50 per cent of Australian job seekers with vision impairments remain unemployed because they are too disheartened by the process of finding work, according to a recent article by Vision Australia.

Dr Paul Harpur, a senior lecturer at UQ's TC Beirne School of Law who is also legally blind, says the discrimination against people suffering physical and mental disabilities is a national crisis, and the way society regulates disability is both inefficient and denying people their human rights.

"From the outside, it would seem that recent policy changes around discrimination in the workplace have benefited people with disabilities," Dr Harpur says.

"There are more opportunities for those already in the workplace to progress in their careers but, in the 25 years or more since the establishment of the *Disability Discrimination*

*Act*, the number of people with disabilities who are employed hasn't actually increased.

"It's a policy puzzle."

Dr Harpur's teaching and research expertise spans disability rights, anti-discrimination laws, work health and safety laws, and corporate social responsibility.

His work includes analysing the capacity of laws to enable people with disabilities to exercise their right to work; how the enforcement of laws (including anti-discrimination and domestic violence laws) reduces the capacity of people with disabilities to exercise basic human rights; and how disability interacts with ableism studies and other oppressed identities.

"Something is still significantly wrong when it comes to laws and regulations that impact the rights of people with disabilities," Dr Harpur says.

"People want to work, they have the capacity to work, but something is wrong with the system when they apply for a job but can't even get an interview."

Dr Harpur lost his eyesight in a 1993 train accident at just 14 years of age, but remained a high-achiever. Prior to academia, Dr Harpur was a lawyer in private practice and a professional athlete, competing in the 2000 and 2004 Paralympics. Since completing his PhD in 2009, he has built a strong international reputation as a leader in the global fight for disability rights, informed in no small part by his personal experience.

Despite his considerable achievements, Dr Harpur has experienced discrimination at an

education level and in the workplace, and has been passed over for job opportunities because of his disability.

"As a high school student all the way through to my PhD, I found my limited access incredibly frustrating and disabling," he says.

"E-books weren't available so I had to scan books myself or ask other people to read them for me. Usually I could only access books weeks after everyone else, and had to scramble to catch up.

"As a person with a disability, you experience a lot of knockbacks when you apply for work, and that takes an emotional toll."

This topic was explored in a paper Dr Harpur recently presented with Professor Michael Stein from Harvard School of Law.

"We have looked closely at the challenges people with disabilities face when transitioning from university to the workforce," he says.

"There's a big gap where we are seeing more people with disabilities entering and graduating from university but not being able to find work."

Dr Harpur is engaged in collaborative interdisciplinary research, which connects expertise and methods from business, law and psychology.

His primary contributions involve traditional legal research, policy development and connecting researchers with international and domestic collaborators and industry partners, including from Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Dr Harpur hopes his research will have further impact among policy and law makers following the 2017 release of a book inspired from his own experiences.

*Discrimination, Copyright and Equality – Opening the e-Book for the Print-Disabled* was published through Cambridge University Press and explores the hurdles faced by people with disabilities that affect their capacity to read printed content, such as blindness, dyslexia and quadriplegia. It also examines domestic and international copyright and equality laws, with a specific focus on Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Dr Harpur says the print disabled are in the midst of a book famine, despite new equality laws and innovations in technology.

“For centuries the written word has been a closed book to the print disabled. Braille and digital scanners were significant innovations, but the means of converting books were labour intensive and expensive,” Dr Harpur says.

“Since losing my eyesight, I wanted to be able to enjoy printed works but was denied this right.

“E-books have opened a new world. I have put my international disability rights expertise to work to make sure law and policy makers understand the implications and legal frameworks they can now provide reading equality for millions of print disabled people across the world.

“Unfortunately, copyright concerns usually trump equality of access. For instance, a lot of textbooks aren’t available as e-books because publishers want people to pay for content and limit students’ ability to illegally share their material, which is much easier with digital content.

“The print disabled are a small, often economically disadvantaged minority, so publishing houses and media outlets pushing for tough copyright laws to tighten access can have a stronger influence on government.

“As a result, about five to seven per cent of all published books are available as e-books in developed countries, and less than one per cent are accessible to those in the developing world.

“Anti-discrimination law doesn’t impose any duty on publishers to make their books accessible except at the end-user stage.

“Copyright is important but we need to find new ways of protecting copyright and facilitating access.”

Dr Harpur says universities have an obligation to provide equality of access to books for their students.

“Institutions like UQ are doing their part to help,” he says.

“When I started working at UQ in 2011, there were very few e-books available to me. Now, the UQ library has about 823,000 print books and around 3.75 million e-books.

“New technologies and opportunities can perpetuate disabling barriers in society or we can use them to our advantage to enhance equality.

**“I plan to continue to influence regulatory and policy developments so that disability is seen as a greater point of diversity rather than an oppressed identity.”**

[uq.edu.au/research/impact](http://uq.edu.au/research/impact)

Image: Dr Paul Harpur with his dog Chester.

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### The story so far:

**2011:** Dr Harpur and Dr Rebecca Loudoun of Griffith University publish an article titled *The barrier of the written word: analysing universities’ policies to students with print disabilities* in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. Using a combination of survey data and policy searches, the paper examines whether Australian universities are enabling students with print disabilities to take advantage of these technological advances.

**2011-12:** Dr Harpur is awarded a post doctoral research fellowship at the TC Beirne School of Law for his project titled *Ratification to Implementation: The disability human rights paradigm and the right to work in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

**2012:** Dr Harpur publishes a paper titled *Embracing the new disability rights paradigm: The importance of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in the *Disability and Society* journal. This paper analyses the impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and provides practical guidance as to how this convention can be used to drive change. This paper establishes a new disability rights paradigm that influences Dr Harpur’s subsequent research. The theoretical approach he proposes is widely adopted and cited.

**2014:** Dr Harpur’s work to promote equity issues at UQ gains national and international attention. He publishes five articles in top-tier journals that analyse and explain how technical advances improve and alter how people with impairments are disabled.

**2015:** Dr Harpur becomes an international distinguished fellow with the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University.

**2016:** Dr Harpur and Professor Heather Douglas of UQ’s TC Beirne School of Law publish an article titled *Intellectual Disabilities, Domestic Violence and Legal Engagement* in the *Disability and Society* journal. This article draws on the narratives of women with intellectual disabilities ((collected as part of Douglas’ Future Fellowship work) to analyse their experiences of engaging with the legal system as a response to domestic violence.

**2017:** Dr Harpur publishes his book *Discrimination, Copyright and Equality – Opening the e-Book for the Print-Disabled*.