

Students with Disabilities and Teaching and Learning Faculty of Education Issues Paper

**Disability Liaison Unit & Equity and Diversity Planning
May 2007**

Purpose

The Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) is currently developing the University of Melbourne's Disability Action Plan 2008-2011. This document identifies Teaching and Learning issues that impact on the participation of students with disabilities.

Summary of Recommendations

The Faculty of Education is encouraged to establish a Working Group to identify opportunities for integrating disability issues into its change processes. The Working Group is also encouraged to focus on:

- Staff development in relation to awareness of disability and mental illness.
- Refinement of teaching and learning policies and processes to enable convenient and consistent adjustments for students with disabilities.
- Strategies that encourage teaching staff to utilise inclusive practices.
- Strategies for enabling access whilst meeting the needs of schools communities.

Key Issues

Legislative Requirements

In 2005 the Disability Discrimination Act was revised and Disability Standards for Education introduced. Revised legislation now imposes more stringent requirements on the University in relation to the *participation* of students with disabilities. It is now unlawful to exclude or prevent students with disabilities from participating on the same basis as students without disabilities in University courses. The University is required to consult with students on how their participation may be limited by their disability and is required to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure participation of students with disabilities.

University of Melbourne Disability Action Plan

The University of Melbourne has been a leader in encouraging the participation of students with disabilities. It was the first organisation in Australia to lodge a Disability Action Plan with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1994. This Plan was updated to cover the years 2004 – 2007. The Student Equity and Diversity Committee recently endorsed a process for updating the Disability Action Plan in 2007. The Committee has given the DLU and Equity and Diversity Planning (EDP) authority to liaise with the University community to update the Plan.

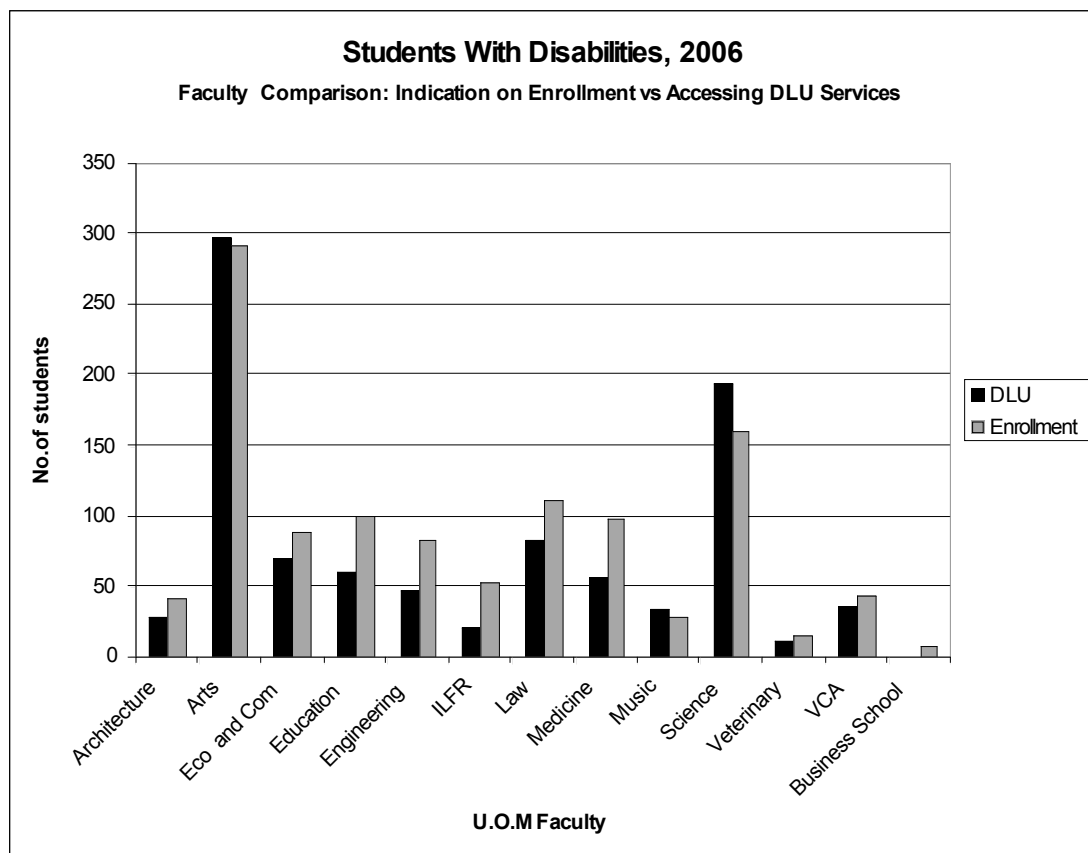
An opportunity presents itself with the introduction of Growing Esteem and the Melbourne Model, for the University to improve participation for students with disabilities. Essential to improving participation, is the integration of an awareness of disability issues with Teaching and Learning planning processes. The primary objective of the Disability Action Plan 2008-2011 will be to establish processes for communicating key disability issues to Faculty staff involved in Teaching and

Learning. In an effort to facilitate this process, key issues will be identified and circulated by DLU and EDP to Faculties on a bi-annual basis and it is requested that faculties devise an internal mechanism that responds to these issues.

Disability at the University

The University requests that students self disclose a disability during enrolment. The University access rate of 2.77% is below the state and national average. The University participation rate of 3.04% is below the state and national average, and reference value of 12.75%. The University performs well on indicators of retention (0.97) and success (0.96).

Not all students who disclose at enrollment utilise the services of the Disability Liaison Unit, and it is estimated that only 50% of students utilising the DLU disclosed at enrollment. In some faculties the number of students requiring services exceeds the number of students who have disclosed a disability at enrolment.

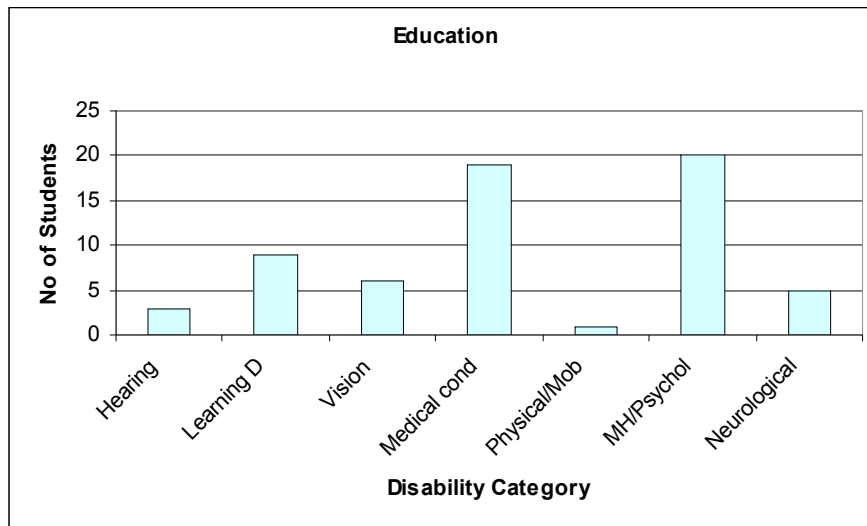


The DLU has primary responsibility for delivering services for students with disabilities. The role of the DLU is to identify the impact of a disability on study, and make recommendations to Faculty about the strategies that may minimise this impact. Common recommendations include alternative examination arrangements and extensions for assignments. The Unit also provides some disability specific services such as notetaking, captioning and provision of accessible course materials. Demand for services from the DLU, measured by new clients to the service, has increased by 63% since 2001.

Faculty Specific Issues

It is evident that faculties with medium to high numbers of students, and a history of students participating in their programs, have by necessity established effective processes for the management of disability issues. The academic context of Faculties and Departments also plays a role in how disability issues are managed.

The Faculty of Education has significant number of students with disabilities. Education programs are applied and disability often manifests across academic and practicum contexts. Education students with mental health and chronic medical conditions form the majority of demand for DLU services.



The nature of programs within Education means that the primary adjustments provided to students are extensions for assignments and resolution of practicum related issues. There have been recent changes to Faculty processes that centralise processes for adjustments such as extensions. This is likely to resolve issues relating to consistency of adjustments that are common across the University.

There are unresolved issues about how adjustments in the academic context relate to practicums. In reviewing specific student cases, it is evident that some adjustments reduced the capacity of the Faculty to identify potential practicum difficulties. Further, it is unclear whether some adjustments undermine skills development for successful practicums.

The opinion of the DLU is that the general sentiment of Education staff towards students with disabilities is positive, and instances of negative attitudes towards students are rare.

There is a significant challenge for communicating awareness of disability to academic staff. Although the participation of students with disabilities can be enhanced through specific teaching strategies, the prominence of these strategies is often lost in amid a range of competing ideas.

Disability Specific Issues

Mental Health Conditions

The impact on participation can vary significantly depending on the underlying condition, although issues primarily relate to health-related absences, difficulties with concentration on academic activities and managing practicums. Students report to

experience a high degree of stigma in their interactions with University staff. Many students do not immediately disclose their disability to the DLU, faculty or other services. The episodic nature of mental illness can result in poor health coinciding with key phases of the teaching and learning process. Issues relating to performance on practicums can be difficult to manage. Some students fall into a cycle of requesting multiple extensions for a specific assessment task.

Chronic Medical Conditions

The impact on participation can vary significantly depending on the underlying condition, although issues primarily relate to health-related absences and difficulties with concentration. Fatigue, pain and medication side-effects can limit participation in practicums on a full time emphasis. Students may experience difficulties with completing some University processes such as Special Consideration when the symptoms of their health issue are more severe.

Physical disabilities

The impact on participation can vary significantly, ranging from mobility related to dexterity related issues. Although the proportion of students with mobility difficulties disclosing at enrolment is relatively stable, the proportion of students with mobility issues seeking DLU services is decreasing significantly.

Learning Disabilities

Impact on participation can vary significantly, although common difficulties relate to the processing of written language (both receptive and expressive). The skills required in higher education can cause problems for students with a learning disability who may have succeeded without a diagnosis or with limited support in earlier educational experiences. Issues relating to the ability to model language proficiency in the class room have escalated to high level complaints. Some students fall into a cycle of requesting multiple extensions, as they underestimate the impact of their difficulties.

Neurological

Impact on participation can vary significantly, although difficulties are generally either interpersonal (i.e. aspergers syndrome, autism) or information processing (i.e. acquired brain injury, stroke). The needs of these students can be diverse and are best addressed by adopting individual case management strategies.

Vision Impairment

Impact on participation can be significant and high cost additional educational support is required for those with severe vision impairments. Access to text-based information is the primary difficulty. Students typically require access to software and hardware to generate and access electronic print based information. The issue of vision impairment and class room management may require detailed consideration.

Hearing Impairment

The impact on participation can be significant and high-cost additional educational support is required for those with profound impairments. Access to auditory information is the primary difficulty. The question of hearing impairment and class room monitoring and management may require detailed consideration.

Recommendations

The University is in the midst of significant change with the implementation of the Melbourne Model. Given this change involves some uncertainty, it is inappropriate to specifically chart detailed mechanisms for improving the participation of students with

disabilities. Instead it is recommended that the Faculty establish a working group to identify opportunities for integrating consideration of disability issues into its change processes. It is recommended that the Working Group comprise a range of staff including professional staff and academics, as well as the Disability Contact Officer and a representative from the DLU. It may be appropriate for this Working Group to link with the Faculty Equal Opportunity Committee and Teaching and Learning Committee. It is also recommended that the Working Group establish some links with the Victorian Institute of Teaching. It may assist the Working Group to focus on the following issues:

- Staff development and awareness of disability, and in particular, strategies for reducing the stigma perceived by students with mental health issues.
- The refinement of teaching and learning policies and processes within the faculty to enable the convenient and consistent identification and implementation of adjustments for students with disabilities.
- Strategies that encourage teaching staff to utilise inclusive teaching practices that may mitigate the need for further adjustments.
- Strategies for managing the tensions inherent in enabling access and meeting the needs of school communities on practicums.

Financial Implications

The scope of resourcing implications will be determined by the strategies developed in response to the identified issues. It is worth noting, however, that additional educational support costs (including staff time for training, equipment and software purchases) can be recouped by the University through the DEST Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Programme.

Implementation Arrangements

The University is aiming for the completion of a draft of the Disability Action Plan by July 2007. It is recommended that a working group be established by June 2007 to develop preliminary goals and targets.

Risk Assessment

While the University of Melbourne has made significant progress in matters pertaining to students with disabilities, there remains a high risk of complaint by students whose participation is limited. Associated with potential complaint is a series of financial and reputational implications. As legislative requirements in relation to students with disabilities have become more stringent, it is important that the University of Melbourne remains proactive in implementing strategies that enhance student participation and a full *Melbourne Experience* for all.

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