THE INFLUENCE OF DISABILITY, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS & REGIONALITY ON HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS & PARTICIPATION:

Practical advice for stakeholders working with students with disability

COYLE, J., FREIRE, K., WOOD, D., WILDING, C., TAYLOR, D., GANGULY, R., BURKE, J., DOWNING, L., AND SILIÉZAR, L.

The Influence of Disability, Socioeconomic Status and Regionality on Higher Education Access and Participation

Practical advice for stakeholders working with students with disability

Professor Julia Coyle (Lead), University of Wollongong
formerly Charles Sturt University (Lead Institution)

Dr Kate Freire (Project coordinator) Charles Sturt University

Professor Denise Wood, Central Queensland University

Dr Clare Wilding, Knowledge Moves

Ms Davina Taylor, Central Queensland University

Dr Rahul Ganguly, University of Southern Queensland

Associate Professor Jenene Burke, Federation University Australia

Mr Liam Downing, Charles Sturt University

Ms Larissa Siliézar, James Cook University

April 2018

Cover and Back Cover design by Georgie Demertzis© 2018

Table of Contents

About this guide

These guidelines have been developed from research findings arising from a project conducted under the Higher Education Participation and Pathways Program National Priorities Pool. An exploratory mixed method approach was undertaken with two sequential studies. Study One involved a survey of university students with disability (respondents = 540) from five regional universities across three states of Australia to investigate: making decisions to study at university; resilience and career optimism; self-advocacy; and student demographics (such as employment status, age, gender). In Study Two, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 university students with disability, 15 community members with disability and 9 school students with disability. Study Two sought to explore experiences and perceptions of university study by people with disability and how these influenced aspiration, participation and success in university study. Human research Ethics approval was provided by all participating universities (*NB: in these guidelines pseudonyms have been used to replace participants' names*).

The research found that rather than location, other factors impact upon the experience of higher education for students with disability. That is, it is the ways in which universities work with students with disability and the impact of poverty that form the key levers and barriers to students' success. Despite this finding there remains a difference corresponding to location regarding entry to university.

Moving beyond the deficit model

Current university practice was found in this research to focus on reacting to the individual needs of students rather than addressing more broadly the provision of education that includes a diversity of learners; a focus on management of, rather than engagement with, difference. Such an approach is based on a deficit view of disability rather than challenging the ideologies that underpin the view that disability is a "problem in need of a solution" (Titchkosky and Michalko, 2012). This is manifested in universities' practice by requiring students to identify that they have a diagnosed disability in order to receive *reasonable adjustments* based on their specific needs. The adjustment support model draws upon a deficit perspective in which the student with disability is positioned as "the problem". Locating the problem within the student and requiring students to seek support rather than addressing systemic challenges leads to inflexible, reactive and backward looking methods of instructional services.

The need to repeatedly disclose their disability status was evident. The majority of respondents had notified both academic support services staff (57%) and teaching staff (54%) of the need for adjustments due to their disability. In contrast, only one fifth of respondents had notified administrative staff (20%) and support staff (20%) about the need for adjustments due to their disability.

Students described their embarrassment and lack of confidence in seeking assistance by using terms such as "demeaning", "insulting", "diminishing" and "degrading" as descriptors of the gatekeeping processes they encountered in order to receive accommodations. In particular, the requirement to obtain medical proof for a particular accommodation (sometimes repeatedly) demonstrated that universities employed deficit and reactive approaches. Sadly, nearly one fifth of survey respondents reported that a university staff member had refused to provide them with reasonable adjustments for their disability.

The research findings show how hard it was for students to ask for help, and the day-to-day struggle they experienced in negotiating access to their education across multiple subjects and with multiple staff concurrently. As well, students with disability needed to repeatedly follow up with staff to see that items had been implemented. That is, students had to be vigilant in ensuring requirements for their access needs were met as well as diligently adhering to study timetables and assessment submission schedules. This situation highlights Edwards (2000) stance, that the model adopted by Australian universities to manage the needs of students with disability is "inherently discriminatory, inefficient and inadequate" (p. 1).

When emphasis is placed on the "the impairment as it resides within the individual", the impairment becomes a person's "dominant characteristic" (Ginsberg & Schulte, 2012) and such a response fails to acknowledge each student's personal strengths and attributes as a learner and their goals for undertaking study. As well, this type of response neglects to address the unique complexities of individual needs, and contexts, which may explain why at times staff did not adopt a particular adjustment because another student identified as being within the same disability 'category' had not required it.

These guidelines have been drafted to provide practical advice for all stakeholders including, higher education sector leaders and policy makers, in order to inform access and successful participation in university study by people with disability.

For Students (their families and support networks)

- Be confident in your right to participate in university study and experience the benefits and opportunities that this provides to all citizens
- Actively seek out expert advice regarding participation in university study, including the range of services available to you and universities' responsibilities with respect to working with students with disability
- Challenge schools and universities to effectively support your study needs including the development of study skills and personal development that enhances your sense of agency
- Assert your right to access and use quality disability services and to have reasonable adjustments that are tailored to your needs and implemented with empathy

Key advice to higher education sector leaders and policy makers

1. Discard the deficit model

First and foremost, think about students with disability as students who have a variety of needs, which when met make it possible for them to undertake learning.

2. Work in partnership with students with disability

All staff in schools and in universities ought to work in collaborative partnerships with students with disability, and universities need to adopt an approach that minimises the need for students with disability to negotiate on multiple levels with multiple different stakeholders.

3. Adopt universal design

To be more inclusive, universities need to adopt an approach to learning and teaching that is more flexible and adaptable and that acknowledges the diversity of student experiences. Although there are resourcing implications required to adopt a more inclusive mode based on the principles of universal design, the benefits extend to all students regardless of their backgrounds and experiences.

4. Facilitate students to develop agency

For all students, success in navigating the academic and social demands in school and in higher education requires the ability and propensity to take self-determined actions. In other words, it requires agency. Schools and universities need to provide more explicit instruction in self-advocacy and time management skills, since mastering these skills is critical for success in meeting the academic and social rigours of university as well as for life after university.

5. Recognise the cumulative impact of poverty and disability

Poverty and disability impact cumulatively on students with disability and require targeted strategies, as finding work (as a solution to financial stress) is not a clear or easy option for students with disability.

6. Proactively address the gap in participation

Universities need to act in partnership with students, families, schools and community disability services to address the gap in university participation rates between students with disability and students without disability.

1. Discard the deficit model

First and foremost, think about students with disability as students who have a variety of needs, which when met make it possible for them to undertake learning. This research found wide diversity among students with disability at university and that stereotyped adjustments classified by disability type are insufficient for accommodating students' learning needs. Although it was usually possible to allocate each student research participant to a designated disability category, these categories did not strictly or exclusively define their learning needs. Added complexity arose from the fact that significant numbers of participants in this research identified more than one disability. Essentially implementing a set of impairment-specific responses based upon a disability label is neither appropriate nor effective.

The primary aim of inclusive education is to ensure access to and full participation in education for all. Inclusion requires an institution-based response to providing access to the basic human right to educational opportunity (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2011). A fundamental element of inclusion is that the education institution must adopt a set of practices that meet the needs of the learner, rather than requiring the learner to adapt to fit the institution. In this way, factors that serve as barriers to learning are reduced and facilitators for learning are increased (Loreman et al., 2011). Within an inclusive framework, difference due to disability difference is acknowledged, accepted and respected within a diverse student cohort. Inclusive education should be seen "not as an additive process of stacking up different ways to attend to all student diversities, but in the possibility of deconstructing barriers common to all" (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017, p. 141). In this respect, effective teaching strategies for students with disability will also be effective strategies for all students.

The importance of shifting the focus to the student and the contribution they make, rather than their disability, is highlighted by following findings:

Students are driven by a love of learning

Students with disabilities valued studying at university because they fundamentally loved learning. Participants felt inspired to attend university because they appreciated learning as an activity in its own right.

> *"I've always wanted to attend university. I have a passion for learning. I love to learn stuff. I love to learn new things. I love the experience of learning, and I like teaching people the things that I learn"* (Mark, university student)

University participation means more than just studying

Beyond this love of learning, university study was very important to students with disability as it provided the opportunity to:

Meet new people

School students, enjoyed the social aspects of school, and they anticipated that this sense of being with friends would be reproduced at university:

"I like being able to sort of be with my friends, you know in a, in an environment where I'm, where I feel safe" (Ben, school student)

As well, the social support provided by other students made attending university pleasurable.

Relationships with my colleagues. I find that really enjoyable. We're there together, we've got similar things and focus in mind, and we just banter, and relationship talk about why we're there and what things have frustrated us for the day, and what things have made us nervous. We get there at lunch time. We'll bounce off each other in our conversations about what we're doing… if we can all get together at the end of the day as well and talk about what's going on. That's helpful. (Evan, university student)

Advance careers

People with disability sought courses that addressed career advancement and expanded future employment options. For example, Amy (uni student) said,

"I like doing psychology because it is helping me get into the field I want and am interested in, in the future"

Teresa's motivation for future study arose from her desire to move into a new area of work:

"I plan to return to full time studies in the near future as I am no longer satisfied with working in the administrative field. I haven't decided what course to take yet however" (Teresa, community person)

For some participants, the limitations due to their disability meant that they needed to change career direction. For example, Gerard (university student) reported that

"I had to medically retire from my former profession. And it's not portable, I cannot use it anymore. So as I said, I'm requalifying so I can get back into the workforce and doing something else.

Meet challenges and develop personal characteristics

Alice returned to university after she became blind because the loss of her eyesight meant that she needed to develop new skills and a new direction from her previous career. She said

"I did some arts, and mostly sociology. I didn't complete the degree. I really think I went back to prove to myself, and maybe others, that I hadn't lost my brains when I lost my eyesight" (Alice, community person)

Robyn (university student) was unwavering in her desire to finish her university studies because she wanted to inspire her children and she desired the satisfaction attained through completing a goal.

I'm stubborn. I kind of knew that there was a goal at the end, and I just had to, I set a commitment to myself. I'd given up a job to be able to study. And I really wanted to succeed. Nobody in my family has got a degree, but they're all successful in their own way. So I'm the very first person to get a degree. I wanted

my boys to see that if you put your mind to it, you can achieve. (Robyn, university student)

Experience respite

Peter (university student) noted that attending university

"helped me mentally to look beyond any day to day negatives"

and Lara (university student):

"it gets me away from my personal problems for eight hours"

For Olivia, university study provided space to just be,

> *The other thing I get from it is that when you are fixed on your study, you are in another world. So you don't have, particularly with mental health, you don't have different thoughts coming in, because you're really focused. For me it is, it is definitely therapeutic.* (Olivia, university student)

Try out a new role

> *"I enjoy the fact that I've got somewhere to go to, to get out of my house. That's really good, and when I'm at uni, I'm not Mum, I'm not anyone else but a uni student. Although I am still thinking about what I have to do when I get home, I get to just be a student. And it's kind of a nice break in a way, even though it's a different stress, because I'm at uni. So that's kind of what I enjoy about it."* (Jodie, university student)

Determination and tenaciousness are required and are hallmarks

Many people with disability have developed a tenacious attitude to life through constant exposure to struggle, set-backs, prejudice, and difficulty; students with disability drew upon their resilience developed through these harsh trials to cultivate an attitude of determination and fortitude. The experience of living with disability presents challenges in all aspects of life; participants drew upon the tenaciousness they developed through living with disability and applied this determination to assist them to complete their university studies.

> *If you think about it, if you've got a disability already you've got the tenacity sticker, because you've had to deal with this, whether it's prejudice from people, or stigma, whether it's frustration of not being able to get into a building because there's no lifts or stairs.* (Kate, university student)

University students cultivated a mindset of dogged determination.

> *People without disabilities have their own struggles as well and they need to persist, but I think especially for me, it's like an everyday challenge for me to get up and to get out of bed and look at the books, and think okay, so study equals pain [but] I'm going to try and do it today. I think persistence and resilience is important. I've had a few knockbacks and just keep going forward. Focus on the outcome, really.* (Sandra, university student)

Suggested Strategies

1.1 Establish strategies that develop stakeholders' capacity to act in a person centred rather than disability focussed way

1.2 Establish strategies to ensure access to social and cultural aspects of participation (in schools and) at university

1.3 Celebrate the success of students with disability in ways that enhance awareness, and understanding and to provide role models for future students

Suggested Strategies

2. Work in partnership with students with disability

All staff at universities ought to work in collaborative partnerships with students with disability, and universities need to adopt an approach that minimises the need for students with disability to negotiate on multiple levels with multiple different stakeholders. Both the current research and previous research (Fossey et al, 2015; Kilpatrick et al, 2016) identified that collaboration between multiple parties is crucial for successful participation for university students with disability. This is critically important as the current adjustment support model is failing students with disability at university. Universities' capacity to adopt a more inclusive model as a mode of operation will require a partnership with students to fully understand what is needed and to ensure equitable access to education in the current environment.

The consequences of the universities' lack of inclusive approach are costly for students with disability. Students with disability faced with inflexible university services need to develop idiosyncratic "workarounds" to overcome blockages, and these require significant additional effort for students. Student participants described extreme fatigue arising from the extra effort needed to access and participate in university learning, and in a self-reinforcing cycle, this tiredness and negative emotional experience destructively impacted upon their cognitive processes and their capacity to persist with university study. Cumulatively the lack of an inclusive approach depleted participants' self-confidence so significantly in some cases that some participants made the decision to withdraw from study.

Working in partnership with students will require universities to deeply understand individual perspectives. The ability to embrace and engage difference, rather than continue to manage or deal with difference will be informed by institutional awareness of critical elements found in the research, including:

Cumulative impacts of disability and university engagement

There is no doubt that studying at university stretches all students. Indeed, a primary purpose of attaining a university qualification is about achieving growth in knowledge and skills through struggle and effort. However, this research has shown that the level of challenge for students with disability is considerably increased by the presence of disability.

> *I'm passing, and passing with HDs [High Distinctions], so it must be working. But I'm possibly sad about uni, and it's a constant pain in my backside with all the worry and the stress that I go through. So yes, it's working in an academic sense. But on a personal level, it's kind of destroying my soul. It's not ideal. It's not how I wanted uni to be.* (Jodie, university student)

University students with disability in this research identified barriers to learning that were experienced by all student populations in addition to impediments that were unique due to the impacts of their disability.

The level of difficulty of study for students with disability is increased if students experience disability that affects many different functions, if they experience more than one type of disability, and if the effects of their disability are not immediately apparent to their teachers and colleagues. Many students were dealing with more than one type of disability. Forty-one percent of respondents (n = 197) reported that they had more than one disability (N =

479). The most common secondary disabilities were: mental health disability (36%), medical disability (30%), mobility (15%) and learning (9%). Clearly, this increases the number of obstacles.

Tiredness is a feature of juggling the impacts of disability

As a consequence of juggling the impacts of disability, along with the additional time and effort required to access study, participants repeatedly experienced tiredness and this fatigue limited their ability to participate in university activities.

> *The amount of reading that has to be done is for me, difficult. Because of having MS [multiple sclerosis] which makes my eyesight tired, and stuff like that, and makes it difficult to read for long periods of time. So the amount of work that I've been doing more lately is limited. And of course, doing your own research reading, books that may not be part of the set reading, can be a bit difficult.* (Claire, university student)

Tiredness also impacted the core university task of learning, because being weary made thinking, understanding and remembering more difficult. Tyler (university student) noted that

> *"the more tired I get, the worse the memory gets."*

Likewise, Caroline (university student) observed that

> *"I just get so damn tired, and then I can't think, and then I'm reading, and I'm not listening to what I'm reading."*

Feeling tired can also reduce one's motivation to be active, as James experienced.

> *Because I had a heart problem, I was tired all the time, so I just had no motivation to do work. And I'd just lose interest in subjects. Like start off really well, and at the end of semester I'd be just not handing stuff in, not going to exams.* (James, university student)

Expert and skilled staff are critical to success

It is vital that all staff understand that the presence of disability creates additional challenges for students and therefore they require information, support, advocacy, and a willingness from university staff to adapt and change their practice to enable access for all students. For example, Lisa (university student) found not all staff were willing to change their practice so that she could access her education,

> *"and some of them, you just cannot hear, and I have told them that we can't hear them, and I've asked them to use a microphone and they have said to me, 'oh no, I don't like the feedback of a microphone'. So basically, no one can hear a word they say."*

However, students with disability also need the support of experts in disability to assist them to attain appropriate and individualised help. Students with disability rely on disability support services to assist them. Well managed disability support services can ease the additional difficulties that students with disability face.

Even having access to accessibility services at university has just been fantastic, because I can go to someone when I'm feeling particularly disconnected or stressed, I can talk to someone about it, and they can help me develop strategies. And I've got a teaching and learning plan, so that if I'm unable to complete an assessment piece on time, I myself can email the lecturer and say, can I get an extension? And I don't have to go through the whole process of going and getting a doctor's opinion on that issue. I've already got my doctor and my specialist's opinion there, registered, and that makes it a lot easier. (Matthew, university student)

Adjustments, tailored and implemented with empathy, are critical to success

Sometimes staff members were compassionate and caring and sometimes the participants found staff to be "ignorant" and "disinterested".

I have to be careful, and I have to pace myself. And if I'm finding I am getting a little bit stressed or behind, I have to say something. You have to. You have to communicate. I have found that in most instances, the lecturers and subject coordinators have all been very understanding about the situation. (Georgia, university student)

In Teresa's situation, lack of understanding of the staff resulted in Teresa experiencing significant disadvantage and discrimination in learning opportunities.

I have also unfortunately had to deal with ignorance from facilitators who didn't understand the need for social inclusion and refused to reorient desks during class interaction activities to allow me to read classmates' lips when there was a need to whisper! My raising such issues only caused tension and ironically excluded me from "the pack", so I gave in instead of advocating for myself or asking more senior staff for assistance. (Teresa, community person)

However, they need to be tailored to the individual

Well it would depend on the student; it would depend on the disability, and depend on the support. Like I kind of gave you an idea of how it would work for me, but it might not necessarily work for every other person. Like even people with the same disability as me it would work completely different. Like they might be completely fine with the social aspect…They could be completely fine and not need support at all. Or they might be like and need, you know the audio and the one on one and stuff. It's really varied and depends on what, it's, your aiming for, for that certain student. (Trent, community person)

Proactive, as opposed to just reactive support, is needed

Adopting a more pre-emptive approach to supporting students with disability would not only ensure that students with disability were more likely to access the assistance they require to study under equitable conditions, but also demonstrate that universities are adopting appropriate levels of pastoral care towards students with disability.

I think it's just people knowing what's available to them, or maybe being successful and having someone check in now and again can be really beneficial.

Even if it's just a: "hey, it's been 12 months, I just want to check that your study access plan is going well? Do we need to continue it? Do we need to extend it? How are you going with the year? What's working? Is it all working? Is it not working?" I don't know. That could be beneficial to make people feel cared, they're still checking in and they're making sure you're getting the support you need to be able to complete your studies. Because I think sometimes they can be the biggest things that will really aid in people dropping out of uni. Because they think, no-one's really checking in, no-one really cares. It's all getting a bit too hard for me. I might just give it a bit of a break for a while. (Milla, university student)

Although university students with disability may require help, they ought not to be worried about asking for support; Sarah (community person) asserted that students with disability have a right to ask for aid.

Make sure you do tick that box that you've got a disability, because you won't get any help otherwise. Right from the start, and make sure the university is aware that it is actually something they have to do. I think that was one of my problems at the start. It was almost like they were doing me a favour. I had to basically say, "no, just back up here, this is actually something you have to do, is to make reasonable adjustments. You're not doing it out of the kindness of your heart". The people that are working in this area need to know that it is actually a requirement. (Sarah, community person)

Scheduling and the pace of study has an impact

Studying with disability is complicated and challenging increasing the amount of time needed to complete university tasks. For example, Gerard (university student) found it time-consuming to physically move around the campus; what may be experienced as a quick journey for students without disability was significantly slower for Gerard.

There wasn't enough parking there that I could even be relatively close to where the lecture was. It was very, very painful. I would have to stop every 50 metres or so. If you're at the other end of the university, it's a kilometre to get to where you need to be. So then of course I'd have to make sure I arrived with plenty of time to actually get where I wanted to be. So you're wasting more and more time. (Gerard, university student)

Time and effort spent travelling to classes meant that Gerard had less time and energy for other activities. In addition, Gerard's disability could impact upon the timing and sequence of his classes; he may have been unable to take a class that was scheduled to occur immediately after an earlier class, if the two classrooms were not adjacent to each other.

Often participants struggled with the pace of learning. The prescribed timetable for learning activities was inconsistent with their needs and preferences, for example:

I worry about the pace of my course, as I need to spend time examining and researching each aspect of my learning as an autistic person, not because I am slow to learn, but because my learning style is very involved. I need to really understand in order to retain the information. I find neuro-typical people grasp concepts at surface level before moving onto another topic. This I cannot do. I

worry that my sensory sensitivities will get in the way of my classroom learning.
(Michael, university student)

Lack of fit between the rate of introduction of new topics and the time that people with disability need to learn, is a significant problem, as the timetable for a university course is typically not amenable to alteration. Therefore, students struggling with the tempo of learning, like Michael, need to keep up as best they can by applying for extensions of time to complete assessment items. Although students identified that they relied upon gaining extensions in order to continue with their studies, this situation meant that students' completion of assessment items was out of sync with the teaching topics.

Disability related fluctuations in health derail students' well thought out plans

Students with disability must manage and organise their participation and performance at university without knowing if or when their capacity to participate and to perform may change.

> *Don't be afraid to think in advance what you might need if the wheels fall off, because you might be just fine now, but life has a way of having moments on you. It's much better to pump your tyres up before you get on the road than to be cruising along the road at 100km an hour, and all of a sudden the wheels fall off. So look out for yourself. I think you have to think about it a lot more when you've got a disability. What do you need to do, worst case scenario? So you'll be fine if you put in a bit of prior planning, and then you'll just be fine.* (Rachel, university student)

Frequently students with disability described fluctuations in health as a result of disability that made it difficult to meet schedules and complete tasks, and at times derailed well thought out plans.

> *I think it's challenging, because when you've got illnesses that can debilitate you really quickly and very suddenly, you find that you've got subjects, three or four subjects, and the workload is really heavy. And one minute you're fumbling along, you're getting through it, and next thing you wake up, oh, yeah. That's a bit sore. Oh dear. And before you know it, you're really ill. All of a sudden it comes crashing down.* (Katherine, university student)

Suggested Strategies

2.1 Use data analytics to expand understanding of barriers experienced by individual students to inform curriculum design and evidence based practice of staff

2.2 Work with students to adjust practices and streamline processes to minimise additional effort required by students, including ensuring that practices adopted are proactive, rather than just reactive, to student needs

2.3 Provide professional development opportunities and resourcing to ensure that university staff receive adequate training and have sufficient time to support students with disability and understand the cumulative impacts of studying with a disability, in particular, levels of tiredness experienced

2.4 Ensure that policies and procedures are in place to support the implementation as required of reasonable adjustments and that these are tailored to the individual needs of students and applied empathically

2.5 Partner with students with disability and institutional and community based disability services to provide and promote staff development opportunities that raise awareness and understanding of the aspirations and experiences of students with disability

2.6 Universities should review practices associated with timetables and the pace of study from an accessibility perspective to systemically minimise blocks to education

3. Adopt universal design

To be more inclusive, universities need to adopt an approach to learning and teaching that is more flexible and adaptable and that acknowledges the diversity of student experiences. Although there are resourcing implications required to adopt a more inclusive mode based on the universal design for learning (UDL) (CAST, 2011), the benefits extend to all students regardless of their backgrounds and experiences. Universal Design is defined as the design and development of an inclusive environment that can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their abilities, race, age, gender, nationality or any other factor (National Disability Authority, 2014).

Students noted that there were actions that universities could take to make learning environments more universally accessible to all students, for example, ensuring buildings are designed to be accessible to people using wheelchairs. Ironically, sometimes even the support services were physically inaccessible:

> *I would like to be appropriately catered for as a student with a mobility disability; but given that many of the support services on both campuses are located on upper levels, without any lifts nearby to access, I don't believe this would be possible. Perhaps if I could articulate my inabilities more effectively I would be more confident in approaching others for assistance.* (Teresa, community person)

Universal access was lacking in other contexts as well. For example, Teresa noted

> *"I am partially deaf, which made attending lectures in large theatres difficult if the acoustics weren't adequate"*

Despite common misconceptions, according to the principles of universal design there is no "one size fits all" solution, but rather, by following the principles, the need for and cost of custom solutions is minimised. The principles of UDL focus on developing flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that are designed to meet the needs of all learners, and thereby reduce (but do not remove) the need for expensive and time-consuming retrofitting of curricula to meet the needs of specific learners (Wood et al., 2017). There are three principles underpinning the UDL framework:

Provide multiple means of representation

Providing a range of options for the representation of instructional materials (for example audio, visual and text) enables students from diverse backgrounds, including those with sensory and cognitive impairments and those who have differing cultural backgrounds and languages, to comprehend information more easily. Moreover, conveying information in multiple forms of representation can facilitate learning transfer for all students.

Provide multiple means of action and expression

The optimal means for action and expression will differ between students, particularly those with disability, and those of differing cultural backgrounds and languages. Providing students with the option to interact and express themselves in a variety of ways that best meet their needs (for example, the option to complete an assessment item via audio, text or visuals) is more likely to lead to optimal learning outcomes for those students.

Provide multiple means of engagement

Students differ in the ways they respond emotionally to differing approaches to teaching. Accordingly, the third principle of UDL advocates for teachers to provide a range of teaching approaches to accommodate the diversity of their students, thereby maximising the likelihood that students will be engaged in the learning process and motivated to learn.

Universities are faced with a challenging task of leading cultural and attitudinal change for staff and students, which needs to commence with increased understanding about how disability can add to adversity for students with disability and move to agreement that students with disability have a right to accommodations in order to ensure equity and justice. If students with disability are to be successful at university, then all staff should understand the additional burden that disability can place on students and they need to agree that it is equitable to provide students with disability with assistance and support to overcome disadvantages wrought by disability. Most importantly, staff ought to be prepared to act on this knowledge and effectively and efficiently provide information, implement supports, and proclaim the rights of students with disability.

Suggested Strategies

3.1 Adopt the principles of UDL and the flexible learning model advocated by Edwards (2000) provide a blueprint for universities to implement the benefits of inclusive education for all students, while minimising the cost associated with applying custom solutions

3.2 Sector leaders work collaboratively with stakeholders to develop guidelines across the student lifecycle that support the adoption of the principles of UDL, improve the experience, retention levels and success of students with disability

4. Facilitate students to develop agency

For all university students, success in navigating the academic and social demands in higher education requires the ability and propensity to take self-determined actions. In other words, it requires agency. Schools and universities need to provide more explicit instruction in self-advocacy and time management skills, since mastering these skills is critical for success in meeting the academic and social rigours of university as well as for life after university.

The students in the current program of research were navigating a multi-layered complex life where they, at times, maintained a precarious existence trying to keep study, health and wellbeing, and other life roles in balance. Their ability to maintain equilibrium was not only influenced, as discussed before, by the fluctuating state of their disability, but by complex university organisational structures in which communication between staff was lacking.

Highlight rights and responsibilities

Sometimes students with disability may not realise that they have a right to receive accommodations and support from universities. Universities have an ethical obligation to proactively advise students of the supports that are available.

> *You know, sort of, ask that question to the students because a disabled person mightn't realise that they can have their assessment criteria adjusted to be able to meet around their, their disability… And also, a lot more information in connection with rights. You know I, I was persistent because I knew my rights. They don't, most of them may not know their rights. (Sandra, community person)*

The most common primary disability (39%) and secondary disability (36%), was a mental health condition. The high levels of mental health disorders identified are important as students with mental health disability described feeling reluctant to acknowledge and seek help. This seems to stem from concerns that others may not perceive this disability as legitimate.

> *So I think also, particularly with people that have mental health concerns, a lot of them don't want to identify that as being a disability, but it can be really impacting on themselves. I think even just people recognising that that also can be seen as a disability, and it is, they are within their right to get assistance. I just think that awareness is key. People knowing what's available to them, having those extra little supports in place, the access plans, but also the disability support team that you can contact. (Milla, university student)*

Another issue that may affect students with disability when seeking support is discomfort in having to ask for assistance:

> *"contacting people is hard to do, but it needs to be done. Okay, I've got an issue, I'm sorry, I'm not going to be able to get my assignment in. Or I can't return this, or I can't do that"* (Mark, university student).

In another example, Oscar (university student) felt that he needed more support but he experienced difficulty asking for and finding this help.

I didn't think it was going to be as hard as it was. I thought it would be a lot more communication… between the lecturer and the online students. A lot more support, and a lot more extra tuition… I'm not very computer savvy. I'm timid, didn't want to ask for help. It's part of the condition as well. I felt embarrassed asking for help. (Oscar, university student)

Plainly, the issue of trying to support students with disability who are shy or self-conscious about seeking support is a predicament for both students and universities. However, there may be actions that both parties can take to ease the quandary. For example, universities can promote that students with disability have a right to seek assistance, and that such aid is not about receiving special dispensations but rather that it is enabling more equitable conditions.

Universities can help students with disability to develop agency by normalising diversity, providing mentors to help students with disability develop skills and self-confidence, and increase communication with students with disability.

Confidence levels are critical to being successful

Students with disabilities derived comfort and strength to continue through realising that all students at university felt challenged by the experience of study. Initially, David (university student) feared that he would be the only student who was challenged by university work:

"I more or less had more of an expectation, through school experiences, more of an expectation you were the person that, you know, had to go through it harder."

However, once he arrived at university, David discovered that

"everyone struggles just as much as me."

Develop skills that give you control

University students with disability recognised the importance of developing study habits to be successful in study. For example, Claire broke things into small steps rather than being overwhelmed by a task that was too big.

You know, making sure that breaking it down into smaller components rather than, and that's the same with all assignments… Break assignments down, and concentrate on one small amount of it. Get that done, and then go onto the next bit, until you've done the whole lot, rather than trying to do it all in one hit, and tie yourself up in knots over it. (Claire, university student)

This also provided a buffer when the efect of their diability derailing their plans, for example, starting assignments well before the due date was a common strategy.

Starting everything early is very important as well, for a disabled person. Because you don't know what's going to happen down the track. You can't afford to leave things until the last minute, because if you do, and then you find that you're sick for those last three days, then you won't get it done anyway… I'll probably have to get a few extensions here and there. But I do find that I need to get a little bit more prepared earlier, at times nowadays. It just comes down to, with a

disability, it just comes down to having good time management. (Steve, university student)

Suggested Strategies

4.1 Develop a comprehensive and systematic approach with coherent communication lines to increase the capacity for students with disability (and students without disability) to control stress, and successfully study.

4.2 Adopt a formative learning environment that facilitates students' development of agency dependent upon individual circumstances.

5. Recognise the cumulative impact of poverty and disability

This research found that poverty and disability impact cumulatively on students with disability and require targeted strategies, as finding work (as a solution to financial stress) is not a clear or easy option for students with disability. Many Australians with disability experience financial stress. ACOSS (2016) reported that 16% of adults with disability are living below the poverty line and for those with a core activity limitation this is increased to 18%. As well, Bexley et al., (2013) noted that students who were worried about their financial situation were "twice as likely to have a disability … and more likely to have had a recent a mental health condition" (p.58).

Decide between purchasing textbooks or paying rent or medical bills

This research found high numbers of the university student with disability participants were also identified as being of low socioeconomic status. As well, participants described experiencing financial stress, such as difficulty covering the associated costs of university study leading to the dilemma of making a choice between purchasing textbooks or paying rent or medical bills.

> *I think it's just the fact of financing, the fact that you just don't have the finances and stuff like that. I haven't been able to hold, I had to give away my permanent job that I had due to my health, and my disability per se. So that hasn't helped, that's been added to the stress of university … I've got a disability support pension, so that helps. But even that gets pretty - that gets stretched pretty thin between all the medical bills and everything else. There's only so much that can provide. So that's the other reason I do distance education, is that fact that I don't have a car or anything like that, because I can't afford one. It puts a damper on things that way.* (Anna, university student)

The impact of financial assistance requirements on Study loads

For some students with disability, the amount they studied per semester was not based upon their individual capacity for study, but rather by the need to maintain a minimum amount to be eligible for funding from Centrelink[1].

> *And I can't get part time studying due to Centrelink, because of constraints, because I have to be studying three subjects to be classified as a full time student. And then I don't get the education supplement or the mobility pension if I don't.* (Robert, university student)

People with disability are often financially disadvantaged because of their disability (ACOSS, 2016), and it is also not easy for them to engage in employment as a means of reducing financial hardship because working adds its own stressors upon their health and wellbeing, and their ability to complete university tasks.

---

[1] Centrelink is part of the Australian Department of Human Services. It delivers social security payments and services to Australians.

Suggested Strategies

5.1. Review government and institutional financial assistance for students with a disability that addresses the need for some students with disability to study with lower loads and recognises that for many students with disability working on top of study and managing their disability is not possible

5.2. Ensure that material is developed that clearly advises students with disabilities of their rights with respect to financial assistance

5.3. Develop grants and scholarships targeted at reducing financial stress for students with disabilities

5.4. Work closely with industry to identify appropriate paid work integrated learning opportunities aligned with courses to facilitate students with disability career prospects and reduce financial stress during study

6. Proactively address the gap in participation

Universities need to act in partnership with students, families, schools and community disability services to address the gap in university participation rates between students with disability and students without disability.

Students with disability (must) significantly plan their participation

Prior to arriving at university, people with disability research available options and ensure that they chose the university, course, mode, and pace of completion that best suits them, taking account of their needs, wants, abilities, and disability.

The right university and course

University students encouraged others to try studying for themselves but cautioned that universities ought to be investigated first. Bailey (uni student) underscored the value of choosing the right course for the right career.

> *Talk to other people. Do the preparation, do your homework. Check out the different universities. Talk to as many people as you can who have studied at those universities. … I think often what happens is that people have ideas about stuff they'd like to study, but haven't really thought through what's that going to mean to me as a blind person? I think often careers advisors both at schools and universities have very little understanding of what jobs blind people can do, realistically, given that we live in a society where disability is that socially constructed concept, and there are so many barriers that prevent you doing what you want to be doing. If you do a Bachelor in Social Work, are you going to be able to practice as a social worker? And what might the barriers be? And are you prepared to work at overcoming them? I think to be honest, you have to be resilient. I think it's hard.* (Bailey, university student)

The right location

Choosing the right university and the right course is an important first step in setting up for success at university. For students with disability choosing a study location that is supportive and conducive to having a positive experience is critical.

> *My biggest concern probably is being away from home, even though it's only an hour's drive really, it's just, you know I've had this sort of support, my whole life, and that won't be as easy to access. Living away from family, you know it's, it's sort of, not frightening, but seems like something looming at the end of a long journey that I'm not really too sure about.* (Ben, school student)

The right mode of study

Although Poppy (university student) preferred to learn by attending face-to-face classes, she acknowledged that online learning enabled her to better manage the effects of her disability. Poppy has a back injury that meant that sitting for a long time was painful and tiring; she liked the freedom afforded by online learning to take a break and move when she needed to

"I get sort of embarrassed when I have to get up in the middle of class when I'm face to face. But it's okay when I'm at home. I can even lie down and listen to the lectures and online classes and interact online, because they won't be able to see what I'm doing, really". (Poppy, university student)

Building confidence in student capabilities

For some participants, confidence in their own ability was a significant challenge they had to overcome to access university study. For example, Ben (school student) worried about

"not getting overwhelmed by everything and then you know having a breakdown"

Lack of self-confidence was an element that caused some school students to dismiss university as an option. Xaviour (school student) felt that university would be "a bit hard" and that he "wouldn't be able to handle it". At times self-doubt was fed by the opinions of others and blocked access to university

It's like you shouldn't be studying, it's like, well you're no good at it. Don't bother. Like that kind of thing, or, "No, you won't be able to survive uni with your anxiety issues", for example. (…) So it's not only self-sabotage. It's also external sabotage (Lincoln, community member)

Suggested Strategies

1.1. Develop material and strategies (including through open days) that enable people with disabilities to make informed choices about study at your institution

1.2. Sector leaders work collaboratively with schools, health professionals and communities to develop a series of guidelines that support aspiration and successful transition into university by school students with disability

1.3. Develop clear guidelines for school students with disabilities and their families that highlight their rights with respect to education at a tertiary level

1.4. Develop strategies that link school students with disability to university role models and mentors to support aspiration and participation in university study

1.5. Develop in partnership with community disability services material and strategies that enhance community member's understanding of contemporary university study

References

Australian Council of Social Service (2016). *Poverty in Australia.* Australian Council of Social Services, Strawberry Hills, Author.

Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. (2017). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for embracing diversity in education.* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Bexley, E., Daroesman, S., Arkoudis, S., & James, R. (2013). *University student finances in 2012: a study of the financial circumstances of domestic and international students in Australia's Universities.* Centre for the Study for Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

CAST (2011). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines* version 2.0. Wakefield, MA.

Edwards, M. (2000). Wising up: strategies for moving towards an inclusive model of service provision for higher education students with disabilities. *In Pathways 5 Conference Proceedings.* Canberra, Australia.

Fossey, E., Chaffey, L., Venville, A., Ennals, P., Douglas, J., & Bigby, C. (2015). *Supporting tertiary students with disabilities: individualised and institution-level approaches in practice.* National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Adelaide.

Ginsberg, S., & Schulte, K. (2012). Instructional accommodations: Impact of conventional vs. social constructivist view of disability. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 8*(2), 84-91.

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., McLennan, D., Fischer, S., & Magnussen, K. (2016). *Exploring the retention and success of students with disability.* Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Loreman, T., Deppeler, J., & Harvey, D. (2011). *Inclusive education: Supporting diversity in the classroom.* (2nd ed.). Crow's Nest, N.S.W. Allen & Unwin.

National Disability Authority (2014). *What is universal design?* Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/

Titchkosky, T., & Michalko, R. (2012). The body as the problem of individuality: A phenomenological disability studies approach. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes & L. Davis (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (pp. 127–142). Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wood, D., Scutter, S., & Viljoen, J. (2017). *Evidenced-based approach to the design and redevelopment of inclusive technology enhanced learning environments* (ID13-2658): Final report. Department of Education and Training, Office for Learning and Teaching, Sydney, Australia.