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Department of Education, Employment
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University of
Western Sydney
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STAYING THE COURSE:

Retaining students with disabilities in post-secondary education

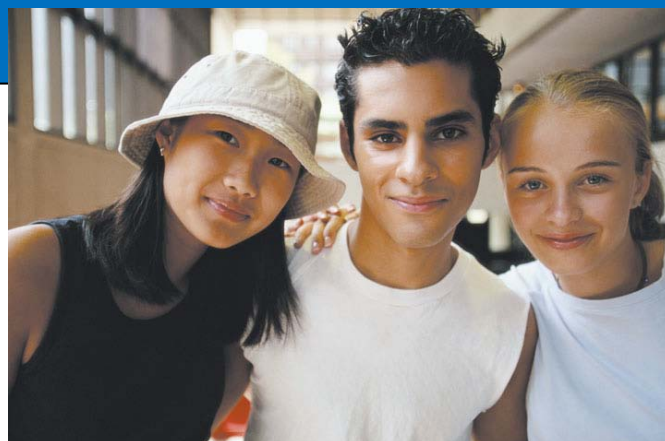
‘Staying The Course’ is a reference guide for educators looking to improve the retention rates of their students with disability in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) settings.

We have identified some of the key factors that contribute to higher rates of students with disability discontinuing their tertiary studies.

The suggested practice ideas are sourced from recent research about successful participation by students with disability and several excellent comprehensive practice guides currently used in the adult education sector.

About Retaining Students with Disability

- ◆ Discontinuation rates are higher for students with disabilities in post-secondary education than almost any other group of disadvantaged learners.
- ◆ Recent evidence suggests that this is caused mostly by a raft of systemic barriers, such as:
 - overly-bureaucratic processes,
 - poorly designed student facilities and
 - inadequate resourcing of student support services.
- ◆ It will take a broad shift in the wider education system and institutions to comprehensively address these issues and successfully retain more students.
- ◆ However, evidence also suggests that there are strategies individual educators can use to improve the situation. The research also indicates that adjustments by educators to their own practices can significantly boost the likelihood of their students with disabilities completing their course.



What is Disability?

A disability may affect mobility, ability to learn, or ability to communicate easily. Under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), the following points of definition constitute a disability:

- ◆ total or partial loss of a person's bodily or mental functions
- ◆ total or partial loss of a part of the body
- ◆ the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness
- ◆ the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person's body
- ◆ a disorder or malfunction that results in a person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction
- ◆ a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour.

A disability may be visible or hidden, may be permanent or temporary and may have a minimal or substantial impact on a student's abilities and studies.

The following list gives examples of those conditions which are considered disability:

- ◆ **Chronic Medical Conditions**
(including Asthma, Diabetes, Cancer, Cystic Fibrosis, Crohn's Disease and Arthritis)
- ◆ **Intellectual disabilities**
(including Down Syndrome and Fragile X Syndrome)
- ◆ **Learning disabilities**
(including Dyslexia, Dysgraphia and Scotopic Sensitivity)
- ◆ **Mental Health Conditions**
(including Depression, Anxiety Disorders, Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder)
- ◆ **Neurological conditions**
(including Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy and Asperger's)
- ◆ **Physical disabilities**
(including Spinal Cord Injury and Cerebral Palsy)
- ◆ **Sensory disabilities**
(including Hearing Impairment and Vision Impairments)



Reasons it is Important to Make Changes

DISABILITY IS BROAD!

With 1 in 5 Australians having a disability, more current students at university and VET have a disability than is widely recognised. These students may need and are entitled to disability-related adjustments in their tertiary education settings.

DISABILITY IS HERE!

The prevalence of disability means that there is likely to be a student with some type of disability in every university or VET course. It is no longer considered that meeting the needs of students with disability is an issue which belongs solely to the disability specialists in our field. Whilst these experts remain a critical resource in retaining students with disability, increasingly it is recognised that accommodating students with disability is part of 'core business' for every educator.

DISABILITY INCLUSION IS LAW!

Disability Discrimination Act has been with us since 1992 and makes disability discrimination in higher education (and other settings) unlawful. However, there are new Disability Discrimination Act Education Standards, introduced in 2005, which makes even clearer that educators have a legal obligation to take *active* steps to prevent disability discrimination.



AND FINALLY.....

ADJUSTMENTS BENEFIT ALL!

The great diversity of students currently participating in VET and university is increasingly recognised and valued. Therefore, efforts to make adjustments to education delivery and create more accessible education will benefit many existing and potential students. Disability adjustments need not dilute the academic standards or lower the course requirements.

Making a Difference

Practice ideas you can use to help students with disability stay with your course

Here are a set of key barriers to successful course completion by students with disability relevant to face to face educators. Under each is a list of suggested practice ideas - simple changes you could make to create a difference to the students currently enrolled in your course, unit or class who have a disability.

Barrier: Poor preparation of students in secondary education for adult education settings and/or demands

PRACTICE IDEAS for improvement:

- ◆ Expect that students with disability often (but not always) enter post-secondary education with a less developed academic and social readiness, compared to other commencing students.
- ◆ Be aware of students who avoid getting involved, seem to be struggling to ‘fit in’ socially or who have poor attendance. Students who do not have a sense of belonging are more likely to leave. Be sure to let these students know that there is help available and refer these students to appropriate services within your institution.



- ◆ Incorporate curriculum based activities designed to identify and explain adult education expectations and responsibilities (and any other relevant transition-related topics).
- ◆ Reinforce the differences between school and adult education settings; remind the student that it is their responsibility to ask for help and adjustments.
- ◆ Remember that students with disability may also take longer to develop new competencies due to the additional complexities of studying with a disability.

Barrier: Educators demonstrating unhelpful attitudes about and/or towards people with disability

PRACTICE IDEAS for improvement:

- ◆ Wherever possible, include in course content and materials examples of people with disability in real-life and empowering scenarios.
- ◆ Brush up on your own disability confidence. Find out a few disability basics, including:
 - common types of disability amongst tertiary students and typical affects of these types of disability on studying;
 - effective communication strategies when educating adults with disabilities; and basic knowledge of disability-related legislation in education and your responsibilities as an educator
 - You can access resources to help you at the WSNDCO website: www.uws.edu.au/ndco
- ◆ Enrol in staff training on disability issues through your institution and/or research information online about disability in higher education (see list of useful websites on page 8).



Barrier: Inflexible delivery of education and course-related material

PRACTICE IDEAS for improvement:

- ◆ Provide an opportunity for assessment-based feedback as early as possible in each unit, class or course. Students with poor academic success early in their course are more likely to leave. Identify students who are underperforming early on and provide information about support that is available.
- ◆ Provide course material, including lecture notes, in a digital format and one that is accessible for students using assistive technology. The availability of lecture notes is one of the single factors that make the biggest difference to whether a student can complete the course.
- ◆ Routinely use a variety of delivery methods to help engage students with diverse learning styles and needs, including online; digital; voice; and image based.
- ◆ Develop a range of assessment methods for each class, unit or course to accommodate differences in learning styles and allow students to select assessment tasks best suited to their individual academic strengths. Examples include oral presentation, demonstrations, PowerPoint presentations, and using audio recordings.
- ◆ Make required reading, book lists and course materials available early to allow students to begin their reading and preparation before the semester starts. Extra time to read material is often a critical determinant of a student's success.
- ◆ Read speaking, any points that are presented visually via data projector, interactive whiteboard, overhead projector or hand outs.
- ◆ When reading aloud, ensure you always face the class. When writing on the board, try not to speak while facing away.
- ◆ When writing on the board, avoid using colour; black markers are best.
- ◆ Make available chapter outlines and study guides that highlight the fundamental points.

- ◆ Give an orientation to any laboratory workshop, studio or sports and equipment before classes to help students familiarise with the different setting(s). Students may require additional preparation prior to practical placements.

Barrier: Reluctance by students to disclose their disability/or connect with student support services

PRACTICE IDEAS for improvement:

- ◆ Tell all students during each commencing class, lecture or tutorial that you encourage any student with disability (including those with chronic medical conditions and mental illness) to contact the student support services or speak directly to you about possible adjustments to accommodate the affect of their disability on their studies.
- ◆ Highlight that any information about a student's disability is kept strictly confidential and that early identification of any disability-related needs plays a critical role in helping students to complete their studies. Reinforce that support is there to help students reach their full potential, not just to support students who are really struggling or at risk of failing.
- ◆ Include the contact details for student support services in introductory material about the class, unit or course.
- ◆ Have a general understanding of available support services at your institution, including disability, counselling, welfare and learning support services, so that you can help students connect with the right people.



Useful Websites

- ✚ Disclosure: Choosing your path – This NDCO website provides substantial information for people with disabilities that can be used in assisting to make decisions around disclosure.

www.uws.edu.au/ndco/disclosure

- ✚ Creating Accessible Teaching and Support - (CATS) is a web based information source that provides comprehensive information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, accommodations and support services for people with disabilities.

www.adcet.edu.au/Cats

- ✚ Getting ready for University - NDCO website providing Information for students with disabilities who are considering or have begun university study.

<http://www.uws.edu.au/ndco/getready>

- ✚ Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training - (ADCET) provides information and resources to support the work of disability practitioners in the postsecondary education and training sector. www.adcet.edu.au

- ✚ DDA Education Standards - Information to help users understand important parts of the DDA Education Standards. www.ddaedustandards.info

- ✚ In My Shoes – An induction program for education providers to raise awareness of obligations and provide equitable access to education for people with a disability. http://ndco.wodongatafe.edu.au/in_my_shoes.aspx

- ✚ Australian Human Rights Commission – Federal Government website, provides information on Disability Rights under Federal Law.

www.hreoc.gov.au_disability_rights/



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We also acknowledge that parts of this resource were developed using the excellent original sources as listed below:

- ✦ “Reasonable Accommodations, Strategies for Teaching University Students with Disabilities” compiled in 1991 by University of NSW, The University of Sydney, Macquarie University and the University of Technology, Sydney. The Australian National University’s website currently includes an online resource based on this publication, which we used in developing the above information.
http://www.anu.edu.au/disabilities/resources_for_staff/reasonable_accommodations.php#7
- ✦ “Accommodating students with disability: A Guide for Academic Staff in Education, Registrations and Employment” includes a practical resource developed in 2001 for staff about how to better accommodate students with disability developed by University of South Australia.
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/ltu/staff/practice/documents/disability.pdf>
- ✦ “Inclusive Practices for Students with Disability: A Guide for Academic Staff” (2nd edition) by the Universities Disability Cooperative Project in 2000 as available on the website of the University of Tasmania at
http://www.studentservices.utas.edu.au/adcet/Articles/inclusive_practices_for_disability_students.pdf
- ✦ “Inclusive Practice is Good Practice” compiled by Jane Barrett at the former Tasmanian Regional Disability Liaison Officer program and available on the website of the University of Tasmania at
http://www.studentservices.utas.edu.au/Gateways/IPIGP_pubs/ipigp.html
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- ✦ Getzel, E E. (2008). Addressing the persistence and retention of students with disabilities in higher education: Incorporating key strategies and supports on campus. *Exceptionality*, 16, 207-219.
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- ✦ National Audit Office (2007). *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education*. London: The Stationery Office.
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- ✦ Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.