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Professionalising Disability Services in Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

“Professional: an expert; a member of the learned professions; skilled and knowledgeable practitioner.”

Since the introduction of the DDA 10 years ago, significant progress has been made in the provision of disability services to students in tertiary education. We still have a long way to go, and the pressure of increasing numbers of students with disabilities and static or declining staff and budgets raise a number of issues for staff in the sector, and the institutions they work for.

One major issue that will become increasingly important is the need to develop the necessary infrastructure and resources to develop and increasingly professional approach and profile for staff, and a perception amongst our institutions that the work and status of disability service staff should be respected and recognised. A corollary to this professionalisation is the development of minimum standards of staffing and resources to minimise the wild disparities that currently exist within the sector.

To do this, the sector itself needs to be proactive, developing a professional body to oversee a system of accreditation, a set of minimum standards and a scale of remuneration appropriate to the levels of responsibility and the nature of work performed by staff.

This paper will examine some of the potential approaches to increasing the perception and actuality of more professional Disability Services in Tertiary Education. It will examine issues such as:

- The need for a Professional Association and some potential models;
- The need for a system of accreditation for disability service practitioners;
- The need to develop a set of minimum standards for disability services in areas such as funding, staffing levels, status & remuneration levels of staff, reporting & supervision, training & resources;
- Identification of issues and potential solutions;
- Communication with and between practitioners;
- Lobbying government and institutions for change;
- Possible avenues of development and implementation.

If we are to progress beyond the presently understaffed, undervalued and underfunded sector, to provide appropriate services for our students within a safe and effective working environment for our staff, some radical changes in the way

we operate are necessary. We need to join together and bring the vision of a respected and proactive professional body to reality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Disability support in universities has come a long way since the early 70s, when some friends and I used to carry a fellow student and his wheelchair up 2 flights of stairs because the university didn't even consider the possibility of moving his lectures and tutorials to an accessible room on the ground floor. This progress has something to do with legislation, but mostly it is the result of the commitment, enthusiasm and sheer hard work of many people involved in the sector. People who have battled for years to develop a more user friendly environment for people with disabilities to pursue their studies and maximise their options in life.

So far, however, we have not achieved a status for our knowledge, skills and experience, which recognises the specialist and skilled nature of the work we do. Many people in universities view the limited funds expended on staff and resources for disability services as something of a social conscience or charity expenditure. Or they view current provision of disability services as a luxury item, which could be just as effectively covered by very basic administrative functions. In an environment of pressured university finances, and a perception of disability personnel as general administrative personnel, the gains made over many years are under threat as never before.

What needs to be done is to change the perception of disability support so that the essential and specialist nature of the role is understood and appreciated. There are a number of strategies for achieving this, including:

- Education and awareness programs for staff and the university hierarchy
- Legislative action (complaints made under legislation)
- Submissions for appropriate staffing and funding
- Publicising the role and successes of disability services
- The development of Professional standards of accreditation, service levels, status and remuneration of staff.

In this paper I intend to concentrate on the final approach, although the others should be pursued as well.

If we are to develop a system of professional standards, then there needs to be some body or organisation which develops, monitors and implements those standards. For a person or position to achieve professional status, it is not enough to simply be capable of doing a good job, or to have gathered a range of experience. When we go to a doctor, we want to know that the particular person has the necessary knowledge and skills to perform the functions expected in a competent, capable manner. This assurance is provided by an extensive system of training and accreditation, so that the university degrees, the membership of a professional association, the Medicare accreditation, all contribute to our confidence in the competence of the doctor. If a person does not meet the required standards of knowledge and skills, they do not receive accreditation, and they cannot practise medicine. For acquiring those accreditations, doctors are remunerated at a rate significantly higher than the average.

Perhaps a more appropriate example is Psychologists. To become a registered Psychologist, people must obtain the appropriate Tertiary qualifications, undergo Supervision for a set period, and fulfil a range of other criteria, including the payment of a fee to the various State

and Territory Psychologists Registration Boards. The Australian Psychological Society, the Professional body for Psychologists, provides a range of services for its members, including:

- Professional Development,
- Recommended scale of fees,
- Representation/lobbying,
- Code of Ethics,
- Marketing advice & resources,
- Networking,
- Publications & Resources,
- Referral Service,
- Course Accreditation,
- Studying & Employment Advice
- News and Developments Information

(From APS Web-site <http://www.psychsociety.com.au/Default.htm>)

Some of these services (*such as marketing*) would not be relevant for our sector, but many others would be.

1.1 Roles

So what could a Disability in Education Professional Association do? The answer is many things which will assist in enhancing the effectiveness of disability services in the education sector, and facilitate more appropriate resourcing, staffing and working conditions. Among the roles a Professional Association could perform are:

2. ACCREDITATION

Presently, staff in this sector have travelled many different paths to their current roles. Some have come from an administrative background, others from psychology, social work and community welfare, and still others from education or personal experience of disability. There is no single path to disability services, nor should there be. The very diversity of backgrounds, experience and training of staff in this sector brings with it a wealth of ideas, resources and strategies, which have enhanced the quality of service provided.

However, along with this diversity and value comes a cost. It may be (and has been) perceived by university management that this diversity means that anyone can do the job, and that it is a generalist role, which could be filled by a relatively low level administration position. As we all know, and as the discussions on AUSTED have indicated, the provision of disability services in tertiary education requires an extensive and specialised range of knowledge, skills and experience. It is not something which can be easily transferred to inexperienced staff, without significant adverse effects on the quality of service delivered.

Also, at the moment, there is no clear career path or progression available to staff in the sector, unless they move out of disability into other areas such as management and administration.

Presently, universities can virtually set their own salary levels, conditions, staffing numbers and expectations, with no guidelines or standards by which to gauge the appropriateness of conditions. They can appoint anyone they like to a position, and no-one can really say that, for

example, a 21 year old Level 2, with no tertiary qualifications, no experience of disability services and limited experience of university, is an inappropriate choice as a DLO. That fact would become rapidly obvious, unless the particular person was quite remarkable, by a sudden rush of complaints and problems for students and staff. But, in the absence of accredited standards and guidelines, universities, with an eye on costs, may be tempted to try.

Accreditation can work to address these, and many other issues.

- It can recognise a mixture and range of qualifications and experience as an appropriate indicator of the requisite knowledge, skills and resources which are needed to enable effective functioning in the field;
- It can provide standards and guidelines to universities to enable the provision of appropriate service to students with disabilities, particularly in regard to providing the appropriate number of skilled staff for the numbers of students registered, and reduce the extremes of variations in salaries, numbers of students, resources and facilities;
- It can provide a professional development program to develop and enhance staff skills;
- It can facilitate the development of a career path for staff, with gradings based on qualifications, experience, training and professional development. Staff could begin in the field at, for example a Grade 5/6, then as they acquire further skills, undertake training programs and demonstrate a mastery of defined areas, they could then be re-accredited at progressively higher scales;
- It would enhance the status and recognition of the specialist knowledge and skills of staff in this area;

3. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Presently, disability support staff arrive with varied qualifications and experience, and develop their skills and knowledge in a very ad hoc manner. The process of acquiring the necessary qualifications, experience and skills is unco-ordinated, haphazard and varies enormously from individual to individual and institution to institution. There is no system of accredited courses which will acknowledge and reward people for the acquisition of further knowledge and skills.

Professional development is very much dependent upon an individual's own desires, initiative and opportunities. It is also very much dependent upon the level of support in the institution in which they work. Some universities and TAFE Institutes are very supportive and encouraging of professional development activities, whilst others are very reluctant to release staff from direct support activities and to provide the necessary funds for professional development activities.

Options for professional development activities are many and varied. There are a number of online courses available in Australia and overseas, some universities and TAFE Institutes offer a range of training courses, seminars and conferences such as Pathways are available and there is a wealth of knowledge and skills within the disability sector, both within and outside education. The professional Association could also become a provider of training and development through the development of a range of courses and resources, local seminars and development activities.

Another avenue for professional development and accreditation is those people who contribute to the development of knowledge skills and resources by presenting papers at conferences, developing and delivering training courses, the development of resources, and

publications. Additional factors could include supervised experience and practice in the field, contribution to policy development and participation in peer network activities.

What is missing is a comprehensive evaluation of available professional development options and a system of acknowledging and rewarding people who undertake a range of activities to enhance their knowledge and skills in the provision of services to students with disabilities. A professional association could collate a list of available courses, provide basic evaluation of those courses and develop a points system of accreditation to reward people for undertaking professional development and contributing to the enhancement of the knowledge and skills of practitioners.

The proposed system would incorporate the allocation of points for the successful completion of these activities, and the accumulation of sufficient points would then entitle a member to apply for accreditation at progressively higher levels. So a DLO may enter the sector as a Level 1 Disability Practitioner, on HEW 5/6, and after undertaking a number of short courses on various topics, such as Disability Awareness, Assistive Technology and Adjustment Strategies, plus attendance at a State Seminar on The Code of Ethics and the Code of Practice endorsed by the Professional Association, they would have accumulated the necessary points to apply for Level 2 accreditation, which would be approved by the Accreditation Committee of the association. This would then entitle the member to apply for a reclassification to HEW 7 on the basis of their accreditation and enhanced knowledge and skills.

This process would continue through Level 3 Accreditation, which would be equivalent to a HEW 8 and a Level 4 Accreditation for HEW 9/10. It would be appropriate for Levels 3 & 4 to include Management Training, since those Levels would be expected to undertake the management of Disability Units, staffing and budgets, along with the contribution to development of university or TAFE Institute policies and procedures.

This system would have the advantages of:

- Acknowledging, encouraging and rewarding professional development of practitioners;
- Providing a clear career development path for practitioners;
- Providing a structured system by which employing bodies can assess suitability for promotion and recognition of staff;
- Enhancing the capacity of practitioners to apply for positions in the sector;
- Facilitate the enhancement of knowledge and skills of practitioners to provide improved services for students;
- Encourage a more consistent level and type of service for students across the sector.

4. DEVELOP A CODE OF ETHICS

A Code of Ethics is the codification of the governing principles under which professional practitioners provide their services. They determine what is acceptable and appropriate service provision, and can be a means of protecting practitioners from inappropriate demands and pressures from employers, academics, administration, government and other bodies. It can also provide a clear structure for assisting students and practitioners to understand the nature, scope and limitations of services, and basic protections, such as confidentiality and academic integrity. It is both the driver and definer of professional practice.

At present, there are certain ethical principles under which we operate, and most practitioners would probably be able to readily agree on those principles. However they are not codified into a clear, coherent structure, which can be referred to when questions of ethical practice

arise. Our present Code of Ethics is a scattered mixture of legislation such as the DDA, the Privacy Act, University and TAFE Policies, widespread industry practice, individual philosophies and so on.

A Code of Ethics developed by the sector, informed by legislation, policies and practice and endorsed by the Professional Association would be a very effective device for empowering staff and students, facilitating best practice and defending staff and students from inappropriate demands and pressures. It would also inform the development of a comprehensive Code of Practice, which would provide the means of implementing the principles enunciated in the Code of Ethics.

5. CODE OF PRACTICE

A Code of Practice is a dynamic document that outlines a range of practical strategies, best practice examples and resources for the provision of professional services. It works best when informed by a Code of Ethics which provides the guiding principles for professional practice. A Code of Practice is the means of implementing these principles effectively and consistently.

The “*Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Tertiary Institutions*” http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/disabilities/national_code/code.html developed by Barrie O’Connor, Rhonda Watson, Des Power & Judy Hartley and published in February, 1998 provides an excellent basis for an updated Code of Practice. However, a Code of Practice should be a dynamic document, which is continually revised and updated to incorporate new developments in practice, strategies, technology, legislation and policies.

Updating the Code of Practice, under the guiding principles of the Code of Ethics and incorporating recent developments would provide the sector with a valuable resource for the development and provision of services and facilitate greater consistency of practice. It would also enhance the professional development of staff, and could provide the basis of part of the accredited professional development training outlined above.

6. STANDARDS

Currently there is substantial variation in staffing numbers, remuneration levels, resourcing and budgetary allocation across the sector. This produces inequities for both staff and students, with corresponding variations in workloads, range and quality of service provision, recompense for work, career opportunities and potential for successful outcomes.

When combined with a system of practitioner accreditation, recognition of professional development, a Code of Ethics and a Code of Practice, a set of clear standards of resourcing and service provision would enhance the consistency and effectiveness of services across the sector, and provide a structured set of parameters through which educational institutions, staff and students can determine the adequacy of services provided by individual institutions. It would also provide a measure of protection for staff against the stresses and difficulties created by increasing demands and static or decreasing resources.

Possible factors to consider for standards could include:

- Numbers of staff provided for services as a factor of student registrations and enrolments;

- Budgetary and resource allocations (*minimum for all, and enhanced according to student numbers*)
- Policy, procedural and Disability Action Plan development and implementation;
- Allocation of duties and responsibilities;
- Levels of staff remuneration and status.
- Support for Professional Development activities

The development of a set of standards would not necessarily limit the sector to a “lowest common denominator” model. The professional association could encourage the continued improvement of the sector by having a system of recognising institutions’ compliance with both basic and enhanced standards by awarding compliance awards for basic standards, awards of excellence for enhanced standard compliance and innovative practices, and publicising those institutions through an awards ceremony, media promotion and a web site.

7. POSSIBLE MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Possible models for a Professional Association will need to be investigated to determine which would be the most effective, cost efficient and practical. One of the major issues to consider is whether the numbers of staff in the sector, in both Australia & New Zealand, is sufficient to ensure that a Professional Association is viable. I do not, in this paper, propose to discuss the relative merits of the possible models, since this would require much more extensive investigation and negotiation. All I propose to do at this stage is to suggest some possible avenues to consider.

Options could include:

- An independent, stand-alone body, funded by member subscriptions;
- A Division auspiced by TEDCA;
- An Australia/New Zealand Chapter of an international body such as AHEAD (US) or NADO (UK);
- A Division of a larger organisation such as ANZSSA or EOPHEA;
- A specialist chapter of a Union such as NTEU;
- Other models?

8. CONCLUSION

If the sector is to build effectively on the hard work, the dedication and achievements of the sector which has seen significant progress made in opportunities for successful study by people with disabilities, we must move on to more professional structure to recognise the specialist nature of our work. It is no longer appropriate for individual practitioners and students to have to argue the case for improvements in their particular institutions, and in some cases, defend the present inadequate resourcing of the sector. We cannot sit back and lament the loss of skilled and experienced personnel who have had enough of stress, burnout, overwork, lack of support and an absence of a career path. It is no longer adequate for students with disabilities to take a ticket in the education lottery, hoping that disability services will be able to provide appropriate adjustments for them. It is no longer equitable for the dedicated staff in the disability sector to carry the ever-increasing load of students with disabilities without appropriate institutional or government support. It is no longer appropriate to have to defend and justify ourselves, one by one, against the lack of understanding, the lack of value and status, and the lack of recognition for the important work we do.

If things are to change, WE have to change. We need structure, we need organisation, we need resources, and we need each other to bring about that change. In short, we need to move on from the group of dedicated, hard-working, committed and productive amateurs we have been, to being truly professional, with all the advantages and obligations that entails.

9. REFERENCES:

“Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Tertiary Institutions”
http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/disabilities/national_code/code.html Barrie O’Connor, Rhonda Watson, Des Power & Judy Hartley, February, 1998

The Australian Psychological Society http://www.psychsociety.com.au/about/fr_about.htm

The Australian Association of Social Workers <http://www.aasw.asn.au/index.html>

National Association of Disability Officers (UK): www.nado.ac.uk

Association on Higher Education and Disability (US): <http://www.ahead.org/>

Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association: www.anzssa.org

Equal Opportunity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia: www.eophea.anu.edu.au

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