

# **Pathways 6 Conference 2002**

## **Shaping a More Inclusive Learning Environment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This Project began as a Higher Education Equity Program Funding Application in March 1999, titled 'Electronic Provision of Information Resources to Students who have a Print Disability.'

Since 1999, mainstreaming of the project objectives has enhanced the access to higher education at Deakin University by students who have a print disability. Our objectives were and are:

- to integrate the provision of information resources to students who have a print disability with procedures already in place for providing information resources to other students
- to provide teaching materials electronically to empower independent learning
- to make information resources on reading lists more accessible to university students who have a print disability
- to establish a mechanism to obtain materials electronically from publishers

A growing number of people who have a print disability use computer technology to access electronic information. This paper will describe the policies, workflows, and procedures that have been implemented at Deakin University, specifically within the Learning Services area, to shape a more inclusive learning environment.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The obvious difference between what Deakin University is doing and what some other universities are known to have done is that it is not the Disability Liaison Officers responsibility to provide alternate formats of books and course materials. In Deakin's Disability Discrimination Act Action Plan, the actions falling into the responsibility of the Executive Director of Learning Services and University Librarian are :

- Develop and regularly review policy and guidelines for online course and web site design to ensure they consider the needs of people who have a disability
- Develop and regularly review policy and guidelines for the production of course materials in accessible formats (e.g. audio or large print) to ensure they address the needs of students who have a disability with equal amenity
- Develop guidelines to ensure essential course materials are available on time to enable the production of accessible formats (e.g. audio or large print)
- Develop a strategy to enable Library materials to be available in a range of formats on request (e.g. online, audio)

Deakin has made progress on each of these actions, although it would be overly optimistic to claim that a state of perfection has been achieved!

## **2. METHODS**

The following workflow has been taken from the webpage made available to students by the Division of Student Life :

### **2.1 What the student will do:**

- Register with the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) and talk to a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) about access needs.
- On being assessed as eligible for this service, students provide to the DLO: -
- The names and codes of the units required
- Lists of the materials required. [Unit material lists are available from the Unit Chair in the faculty.
- Details of the type of computer hardware and software used
- The address to which the course materials should be sent
- Return the Early Notification Form by the date requested. This will allow adequate production time for materials

### **2.2 What the Disability Liaison Officer will do:**

- The DLO has the role of assisting students to identify their needs, assessing eligibility for this service, and forwarding the request for material to Learning Services. The DLO will: -
- Complete the assessment and registration process
- Provide students with advice on specific assessment and training where required
- Send a request for materials production to Learning Services
- Send students a letter confirming that the request was sent
- Provide orientation for the adaptive technology laboratories
- Answer any queries regarding the process

### **2.3 What the Learning Services staff will do:**

- Learning Services has the role of obtaining the material in the requested format, or converting it to the requested format, and forwarding it to the student.
- Obtain the study guides, readers, and textbooks in digital formats, where available. Fourteen book publishers have cooperated in supplying digital files of textbooks, to date. Two of the electronic journal aggregators have committed to providing journal articles in accessible formats.
- When digital formats are not already available, obtain the study guides, readers, and textbooks in print
- Scan the print items to digital image files
- When time allows, send the image files to a software development company that has produced accurate and satisfactory output. They have contracted for a turnaround time of 1000 pages per day [with a 4-day lag time for set-up].
- When the requirement is urgent, or the materials are needed by a post-graduate research student, use optical character recognition software to create accessible digital files in-house

- Send audio and Braille conversion tasks to NILS. These are now rare. Deakin University students with print disabilities are strongly encouraged (as other students have previously been encouraged) to use digital files in preference to physical output. That is, to use screenreader software such as JAWS, or Braille output such as BrailleNote BT.

### 3. RESULTS

Advantages of incorporating alternative formats into the regular work practices of Learning Services are as follows:

- The librarians involved in purchasing books and negotiating access to electronic journals are alerted to the accessibility requirements and can ensure that publishers are also informed.
- The Information Resources Licence Manager is informed to negotiate for accessibility to be considered in the licences for electronic information resources.
- The course materials developers for print and online materials are aware from the outset of development that course materials must meet the requirements for accessibility.
- The Learning Services staff involved in academic consultancy, and teaching and learning support know that work must comply with the University's accessibility guidelines, and are in an excellent position to convey their knowledge to teaching staff.

Inclusive design becomes more likely, at least when Learning Services staff are involved in helping the academic staff.

### 4. DISCUSSION

On 29 May 2001, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission hosted a National Forum on Accessible Tertiary Materials. Certain of their recommendations would address the major issues that have been identified in implementing inclusive course material provision at Deakin University. These issues are detailed below.

#### 4.1 Major issues :

- Learning the students' requirements in a timely fashion. Currently so much time (a minimum of 4 weeks) is required for conversion that we would prefer to have at least 3 months notice of which materials are required.
- Students naturally withdraw from units or change their research topic. The items that were converted for them may not be useful to another student at their own university, so potentially thousands of dollars can be 'wasted'. Less 'waste' would occur if items could be shared with students at other universities.
- Students may want to study topics for which the western character set is insufficient. The sciences, mathematics, and foreign languages are all problematic for Deakin at present. There needs to be a national provider of conversion services that can produce such materials to acceptable standards.
- Reducing turnaround times. Ideally, all students should be able to obtain all their essential course materials on the first day of classes, by meeting standard enrollment deadlines. And that is often their expectation – not at all unreasonable, but very difficult to achieve at present.

- Reducing costs. Universities are not funded for the services required. Redirecting staff time and money to the production of alternate formats reduces the time and money that was previously available for other university priorities.
- Record-keeping and notices to ensure copyright compliance. The provision of detailed quarterly reports to the Copyright Agency Limited requires detailed record-keeping that is not necessary for materials supplied in print form to other students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Inclusivity should be part of the design of any learning materials, whether produced within the University, or produced commercially. Inclusive design will decrease the cost, and shorten the waiting times, now required for conversion. If the principles of inclusivity can be extended to publishers of textbooks and journals, then the students will be better served.

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