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The Pathway to Unemployment – Disability Contact officers at the
University of Melbourne

Matthew Brett

University of Melbourne, Disability Liaison Unit

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ABSTRACT

The University of Melbourne has over a number of years developed a network of faculty contacts to assist in implementing supports for students with disabilities. The role of the Disability Contact Officer has evolved over time from being an additional administrative duty during examinations to a set of responsibilities now established in faculty staff member position descriptions. In recent times the role has grown further to incorporate the role of the Mental Health Contact Officer. Faculty staff are accumulating significant expertise in disability related issues with the assistance of Disability Liaison Unit staff.

This paper investigates the history of the change, current status and future directions of Faculty Disability Contact Officers at the University of Melbourne. In exploring the issue, the roles of the Disability Liaison Unit and Officer are considered, leading to the conclusion that the influence of various internal and external factors may lead to a decentralisation of Disability Liaison Unit activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The participation of students with disabilities within universities has increased significantly over the last decade. The introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992 is having a profound impact on the access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education. Although formal statistics are only available since 1996, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of students with disabilities participating in higher education across Australia. The increase in the numbers of students with disabilities becomes more significant when seen in the context of students seeking support from individual organisations. The numbers of students registered with the University of Melbourne Disability Liaison Unit (DLU) has increased from 25 in 1991, to 582 in 2002. Registration with the DLU involves an assessment of the impact of a student's disability on their studies and the implementation of accommodations and adjustments to minimise this impact. The ability to respond to the needs of students with disabilities in the context of significant increases in student numbers requires a considered approach to the provision of disability services within the University environment. The University of Melbourne has made incremental changes to its service delivery over the previous decade and is moving towards generic service provision in a range of functions that were previously the responsibility of the DLU. A number of internal and external factors will influence the framework under which services to students with disabilities are delivered, which may have a significant impact on the role and future of the Access and Liaison Officers currently employed by the University's DLU.

2. DISABILITY AND THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The introduction of the Federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1992 provided a working definition of disability and disability discrimination that applies to all Australians. The DDA does however use a broad definition of disability and discrimination, that when coupled with an absence of extensive determinations on disability discrimination, provides organisations with little clarity on determining what practices do and do not contravene the Act. There are ongoing issues relating to the enforcement and administration of the DDA that undermine the fulfilment of the Acts' objectives (Bidmeade 1997). The Act does make provision for the introduction of Disability Standards in a range of areas including education, although standards relating to education have yet to be introduced. The DDA and the Draft Disability Standards for Education do not specify how universities should structure support services for students with disabilities, leading to differences in service delivery models between universities.

There is ongoing debate within higher education disability services practitioners as to the optimum type of disability services model that should be present within the higher education environment. An important factor in the type of disability service model that is adopted is the way in which disability is perceived by the organisation. Although the DDA provides a working definition of disability, organisations and the staff involved may approach disability issues from varying perspectives. Staff approaching their work with a human capacity or medical model may be more interested in how the individual with a disability adapts themselves to the environment, whereas others using a public studies or sociological model may focus on how the environment can be adapted to better meet the needs of the individual (Turnbull and Stowe 2001). The paradigms used by disability support practitioners will have a significant impact on the service model adopted by a university. In evaluating optimum disability service delivery frameworks it is useful to establish how disability is perceived, which models of conceptualising disability are present and how this will impact on the experience of students with disabilities participating in higher education.

3. DISABILITY SERVICE MODELS

It is important to articulate that universities exist for a purpose. The specific purposes of each university will differ depending on their statutes and legislation, but in broad terms universities exist to provide higher education to students. Students with disabilities are part of a university's student cohort, and universities are legally obliged to provide reasonable accommodations to this group of students. Legislative and funding obligations also require that universities provide specific supports to students with disabilities.

Disability service models have been described as lying on a continuum between specialist disability services and generic service models (O'Connor and Watson 1995). A DLU with a responsibility for all of the needs of students with disabilities lies at one end of the continuum, while disability services offered throughout the organisation as part of generic services strategy lies on the opposite end of the continuum. Most Australian higher education organisations have established DLUs to meet the needs of students with disabilities, with some specific services for students with disabilities available as part of generic services. It is not expected that any university disability service would be placed at an extreme of the continuum. There would however, be a general tendency for services to fall into either a generic or specialist service model category.

Proponents of generic services argue that by establishing a specialist service, a segregated notion of disability arises. Equitable participation in university education requiring adaptation by the individual rather than having an environment that adapts to the needs of the individual. It is

argued that generic service provision models are more tolerant of the individual, which facilitate an organisational change towards inclusive practices.

Proponents of specialist services argue that societal acceptance of disability is poor which is reflected in low levels of staff expertise in dealing with disability issues and negative attitudes towards disability. As a result of this, most organisations would not be sufficiently developed to offer an effective generic service model that meets the needs of students with disabilities (CADSPPE 1999).

As with most theories of organisational structure there are unlikely to be any universities who have adopted service delivery models in the “pure form” at either end of the service continuum, however it is evident that many specialist services are working towards a generic service model. A number of stages can be adopted by organisations to facilitate the move from a specialist service to an integrated access model (CADSPPE 1999):

Work to ensure that entire institution is responsible for disability issues.

Work with faculty to assist them in better responding to the needs of students with disabilities.

Allocate specific tasks related to disability support in the most appropriate structural unit.

Become politically involved in the organisations long term strategic planning.

Encourage senior staff to publicly endorse organisational commitment to disability issues.

Enable students with disabilities to be effective at self advocacy.

4. DISABILITY SERVICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

The provision of support to students with disabilities at the University of Melbourne predates the introduction of the DDA, with the University establishing a committee to address the needs of students with disabilities in 1968. An increase in the numbers of students with disabilities studying at the University of Melbourne resulted in significant difficulties in their needs, and led to the establishment of:

- A Liaison Officer position in 1986 where a staff member was responsible for disability issues in addition to their contracted, non-disability related duties.
- A dedicated Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) position was established in 1991, where duties were focused specifically on the support of students with disabilities.
- In 1994 student demand resulted in the appointment of additional specialist disability staff and the establishment of the DLU.

The rise in the numbers of students seeking support from the DLU has had major ramifications for the way support is provided to students with disabilities. When numbers were low, and the implications of the DDA were yet to be clarified, a greater level of intervention was present in service delivery. The University’s Disability Action Plan for instance, advocated for the wide scale provision of modems and computer equipment for students with disabilities to minimise the impact of a disability. The continued provision of this type of support was financially unsustainable. Increased student demand has also resulted in other departments of the University taking responsibility for providing support to students with disabilities. Time intensive and interventionist processes that were possible when supporting a small number of students are now no longer feasible when supporting over 500 students with a small number of staff.

5. FACULTY DISABILITY CONTACT OFFICER PROGRAM

The University of Melbourne in response to rising numbers of students established the role of Faculty Disability Contact Officer (FDCO) to assist in the implementation of providing accommodations during examinations. Each Faculty of the University has a contact officer who in addition to their existing responsibilities has a role in:

- The approval of applications for accommodations during examinations.
- Finding alternative venues for examinations with special requirements.
- Providing supervision during examinations.
- Coordinating the presence of an academic to answer questions relating to the exam during reading time.
- Providing papers in an alternative format.
- Assessing the needs of and implementing examination accommodations for students with temporary disabilities.

6. MENTAL HEALTH CONTACT OFFICER PROGRAM

The support provided to students with a mental health condition can be problematic in the university environment. Students with an episodic illness may not require ongoing support, but do require intensive support if an episode corresponds with assessment tasks or class participation. Students with a mental health condition comprise 30% of student appointments at the DLU. To address the ability of the DLU to respond to the needs of students with mental health conditions the role of Mental Health Contact Officer (MHCO) was established. Most faculties now have a MHCO who has undertaken initial intensive and ongoing issue specific training relating to mental health issues. Most FDCOs are also the Faculty's MHCO and have a role in:

- Implementing accommodations for students with a mental health condition within the faculty.
- Providing faculty staff with information about mental health conditions.
- Providing students with a mental health condition with faculty specific advice and information.
- Liaising with students about their mental health condition.

The staff who take on the role of FDCO and MHCO are usually employed as student advisors, advising all students on course related issues. They generally have a Bachelor qualification and are employed at a HEW Level 6 or 7. The staff employed in these roles receive specific training on disability issues and have regular contact with general students and students with disabilities. The FDCOs are developing knowledge and skills similar to that held by DLOs and in many cases identify strongly with their role. There is a possibility that University of Melbourne FDCOs will take on a greater responsibility for providing disability support to students with disabilities (including needs assessments and liaison activities), altering the scope of activities in which the DLU is involved.

7. THE ROLE OF THE DLU AND DLO

May 2002 saw many postings on the austed-list email discussion list-server about the role and skill requirements of staff involved with the provision of support to students with disabilities in the higher education environment. At the University of Melbourne the role of a DLU is to assess

the needs of students with disabilities and implement reasonable adjustments for the impact of a disability. In meeting the needs of students, staff are required to have an understanding of issues including; disability and its impact in the educational environment, strategies that can minimise the impact of a disability, the Disability Discrimination Act, Equal Opportunity legislation and other relevant legislative requirements, University policies and processes, and, assistive technology,

The individuals who are employed as DLOs across Australia have a variety of educational, professional and personal backgrounds. Personal correspondence with many DLOs indicates that their passage into the role was by accident rather than design, and that they have developed their expertise whilst in the role. As the role of DLO has matured there are now calls for a professionalisation of the role. It appears that DLOs desire that a centralised specialist service delivery model be retained.

8. FACTORS INFLUENCING MOVEMENT ALONG THE GENERIC – SPECIALIST SERVICE CONTINUUM

There are a number of factors that will impact the movement of service provision along the generic – specialist continuum including:

- **Resourcing:** Increasing student numbers are resulting in greater demands on financial resources. Pressure to reduce expenditure on students with disabilities may influence the movement of service delivery to a generic framework. The introduction however, of the Additional Support for Students with Disabilities program places pressure on universities to have a centralised mechanism for monitoring expenditure thus validating a specialist service model.
- **Legitimacy:** Specialist service departments are perceived to have a legitimate role in dealing with disability issues. Devolvement of service provision to staff that have not developed a legitimate role in service provision may result in resistance from students who may have an expectation that their needs should be met by staff with an established role and reputation.
- **Political constraints:** It is important to recognise that workplaces are dynamic and political environments. Decisions relating to how work is allocated and organised is often linked to political considerations whereby staff attempt to secure more power and influence. Changes to the service delivery model may be influenced by staff attempting to increase, retain or decrease their influence and responsibility.
- **Legal considerations:** Changes to legislation such as the introduction of Disability Standards may impose greater reporting and accountability requirements that may be difficult to achieve if responsibility for disability issues is thinly spread across a university, shifting service provision to a specialist service model.
- **Historical considerations:** As service delivery models become entrenched in the policies and practices of the university, it becomes harder to change the service delivery mode. The imperative for change may also be stifled by a “this is how we do things around here” mentality amongst university staff.
- **Students with disabilities:** Students with disabilities have more contact with academics and faculty staff than they do with disability support staff, and there appears to be merit in the idea that disability issues are resolved by the staff with whom they have the most contact. There is however an entrenched system in place that encourages students with disabilities to seek support from a specialist support service. It can be asserted that students are

conditioned to see their disability as significantly abnormal and that the resolution of any disability related issues requires specialist intervention. This expectation may impact on universities who wish to dismantle established services and move to a generic service model.

9. SERVICE DELIVERY IN OTHER DEPARTMENTS

There are a number of parallels between disability service provision and other specialist units at the University of Melbourne that offer an insight into how the University addresses other issues and how it is likely to address disability issues in the medium term.

Equal Opportunity Unit: The University of Melbourne has an Equal Opportunity Unit (EOU) that addressed issues relating to discrimination, harassment and equal opportunity for women. An anti-discrimination advisor and sexual harassment officer network has been established as a generic service delivery model, with the EOU having a responsibility for training, policy and complaint resolution. Staffing numbers are lower than what would be required if a generic service model was not present.

Learning Skills: Some faculties have established a learning support service (available only to students from the specific faculty) in addition to the Learning Skills Unit, which provides learning skills advice to all students. This has occurred because the generic learning skills unit has been perceived as not having enough faculty specific expertise to meet the learning skills requirements of students within specific faculties.

Transition Program: The University of Melbourne Transition Program was the recipient of the 2001 Australian Awards for Teaching. Transition Program staff work with faculties and departments in the establishment of faculty and departmental based transition programs. The skills and experience of transition program staff are used to assist others in the provision of services, rather than having a direct role in the provision of services to students. A similar service model is readily applicable to disability services given the expertise of DLU staff and an established network of Faculty Disability Contact Officers.

10. THE PATHWAY TO UNEMPLOYMENT OF DLOS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

The Faculty Disability Contact Officers and Mental Health Contact Officer network at the University of Melbourne are participants in a process of transferring disability knowledge and understanding from a specialist service to a broad range of University staff. It is not outside the realms of possibility that disability services will move closer towards a generic service model as a result of a range of internal and external factors. What then is the role and future of the DLO, and what role should the DLO play in this process?

A significant issue in a generic service model is that of consistency of service across the university and centralised processes for funding and policy initiatives. Even with a move to a generic model there remains a valid role for a smaller DLU that provides centralised and consistent training, policy development and budgetary management. The attributes currently present across members of the DLO field are such that this role may be adopted with ease, but validation of these attributes is somewhat problematic. Qualifications in disability studies are not widespread or seen as relevant by practitioners. Experience in disability support provision may not be sufficient to adopt a role specific to staff development and policy development. DLOs

faced with similar issues to that of University of Melbourne DLOs may need to consider the directions that disability support provision is taking and equip themselves through additional qualifications or relevant experience to adapt to changing roles and expectations. What is perhaps most important is to consider the experience of students with disabilities and the role that can be played in meeting their needs effectively. Do students prefer utilising a specialist service or a generic service? The University of Melbourne offers students a choice in how they access supports, particularly through the Mental Health Contact Officer program. Perhaps this can be seen as a transitional phase that will in time, lead to greater faculty responsibility for disability support. How disability is perceived is related to the service model adopted by universities and has a significant bearing on the experience of students with disabilities. Individuals calling for a professionalisation of the DLO role are encouraged to consider the questions raised in this paper, the future directions of disability service provision, and the needs of students with disabilities. Facilitating an entrenchment of the current systems may not be the most appropriate course of action.

11. REFERENCES

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