AVCC

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee
the council of Australia's university presidents

AVCC Guidelines
relating to
Students with a Disability

May 2006

Further inquiries should be made to the Chief Executive Officer:

GPO Box 1142
CANBERRA ACT 2601
Ph: +61 2 6285 8200
Fax: +61 2 6285 8211
Email: avcc@avcc.edu.au
Web: www.avcc.edu.au

ABN: 53 008 502 930

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Foreword

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) believes that self-regulation in the higher education sector is both appropriate and effective.

In seeking to advance higher education through voluntary, cooperative and coordinated action, the AVCC continues to develop a range of codes and guidelines for the university sector which serve as benchmarks for good practice. Such documents include the AVCC's generic *Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities*, which incorporates guidelines for maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards in teaching and learning, and in higher degrees, and the code and guidelines relating to the provision of education to international students by Australian universities in Australia and offshore.

The release of the first edition of AVCC guidelines relating to students with disabilities (December 1996) was testament to the sector's recognition of the need to provide students with a disability with the opportunity to realise their individual capabilities, and that universities should strive to fulfil their responsibilities in this regard. Subsequently, the complementary *AVCC Guidelines on Information Access for Students with Print Disabilities* were developed in 2004.

This second edition of the *AVCC Guidelines relating to students with a disability (May 2006),* has been framed in the light of a number of major legislative and regulatory developments since 1996 with import for universities and their students with disabilities. The 2006 Guidelines retain the overall intention of assisting universities to fulfil their responsibilities to students with a disability through strategies and arrangements appropriate to each university's local circumstances. They are underpinned by a set of key general principles and encompass guidelines relating to university policy and administration, teaching and learning, and campus life and services.

The AVCC acknowledges with appreciation the constructive contributions of the AVCC Disabilities Guidelines Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from across the sector, and other key stakeholders including disability stakeholders in the development of this publication.

John Mullarvey
Chief Executive Officer

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1.   Context

Australian universities operate in a context which requires that institutions give explicit attention to the provision of educational opportunity to people with a disability.

Universities are subject to the provisions of State and Commonwealth Equal Opportunity and Anti-Discrimination legislation notably the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1992). These legislative provisions make it unlawful for a university to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability. This includes refusing to accept a person's application for admission as a student because of their disability, imposing terms and conditions upon the student that are not otherwise imposed on students without disability, denying the student access to benefits provided or available to other students, or excluding the student because of a disability.

To assist universities in providing accessible services to all students, the AVCC first developed *Guidelines relating to students with disabilities* in 1996. Whilst the 1996 Guidelines were very useful as a guide for institutions in the years immediately following their publication, there have been a number of changes in the higher education sector in the intervening years that indicated a need to update the 1996 guidelines.

In the intervening period since the 1996 Guidelines were first developed:

- DDA case law has developed, complementary state based legislation has been introduced, and obligations on institutions are now better understood.

- There has been a significant increase in numbers of students with a disability attending universities and in the expectations of these students.

- Students are more frequently resorting to formal complaints both within the University and under antidiscrimination legislation.

- There has been a significant shift in institutional response to disability issues, with most universities now having professional disability services in place.

- The *AVCC Guidelines on Information Access for Students with Print Disabilities* were developed in 2004.

- The Disability Standards for Education, which clarified both the obligations on universities to provide accessible educational services to all students and the rights and responsibilities of students, were introduced in 2005.

The Disability Standards for Education (2005) encompass all education sectors both compulsory and non-compulsory education environments. In terms of their implications for the higher education sector, the Standards affirm that universities are entitled to maintain the academic requirements of their courses and programs, while clarifying both the obligations on universities to provide accessible educational services to all students and the rights and responsibilities of students.

The 2006 AVCC Disability Guidelines have been developed under the auspices of a Steering Committee with representation from across the sector and have been widely circulated for consultation with key stakeholders including disability stakeholders.

Through these 2006 Disability Guidelines, the AVCC aims to assist universities in meeting the needs of students with disabilities by providing good practice guidelines across the spectrum of the student experience from recruitment and selection through to transition to employment.

The Guidelines encompass the three key areas of policy and administration, teaching and learning and campus life and services. Resources to assist universities in meeting the best practice indicators are available in the Carrick Institute funded CATS web resource (Creating Accessible Teaching and Support) available at http://www.adcet.edu.au/cats/

2.   General Principles

Underpinning the 2006 AVCC Disability Guidelines are two key principles:

1.   That universities will uphold academic standards such that students graduate with the requisite skills and knowledge associated with the degree conferred.

2.   That universities provide students with a disability with the opportunity to realise their academic and social potential and to participate fully in university life.

In the following guidelines, it is assumed that approaches to the development, delivery and evaluation of teaching and services for students with a disability should be:

- **Inclusive** – Core activities of the University are designed and implemented in order to accommodate the needs of all students including those with a disability.

- **Comprehensive** – Provision for students with a disability should cover all core university activities in recognition of the right to participate fully in the academic and social life of the University.

- **Equitable** – University responses to the needs of students with a disability should recognise the rights and responsibilities of all parties and ensure that solutions are equitable for all concerned.

- **Explicit** – Policies should clearly identify student and staff responsibilities in relation to provision of services and adjustments, the procedures whereby these will be implemented and the mechanisms for resolving disagreements.

- **Systemic** – Consideration of the needs of the diverse student population should be embedded within University-wide planning, administrative support and quality assurance processes.

- **Respectful** – Universities should ensure that all their interactions with students with a disability are characterised by respect for their rights to dignity, privacy, confidentiality and equity.

- **Consultative** – Students and staff should be engaged in planning and evaluation of teaching and support strategies.

- **Resourced** - Universities should provide adequate resources to enable the provision of learning environments and services that address the needs of students with a disability.

The following guidelines are presented as advice on good practice, with the aim of assisting universities to meet the needs of students with a disability through strategies and arrangements which are appropriate to their individual circumstances.

3. Guidelines: Policy and Administration

A. Transition to University

Admission, selection and enrolment procedures should be non-discriminatory and orientation programs inclusive in design and application.

3.1   The University provides explicit information about opportunities for people with a disability, the support services available to them, any special entry procedures, course requirements and student rights and responsibilities.

3.2   Admission policies and practices are non-discriminatory and do not directly or indirectly pre-empt the decisions of registration or qualifying bodies.

3.3   Students are encouraged to identify any disability related requirements as early as possible, and to consult with staff regarding any additional services or adjustments that are required.

3.4   Student recruitment, orientation, preparation, enabling and bridging information and programs are inclusive in design and accessible to students with a disability.

B. Planning and Quality Assurance

Planning and Quality Assurance processes should address the needs of students with a disability in relation to all aspects of academic and campus life.

3.5   University plans and policies address the needs of students with a disability with a view to them having the opportunity for full participation in student life.

3.6   The University actively seeks feedback from all stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of service provision for students with a disability and uses this information to inform planning.

3.7   The University has a Disability Action Plan which sets out strategies to enhance equal opportunity for students with a disability, identifies objectives and performance measures and monitors and reports progress towards achievement of these objectives.

3.8   The impact of all institutional policies, procedures and practices on the participation and performance of students with a disability are monitored, evaluated and reported to senior management.

C.   Information Management

All information published by the University, whether in print or electronic format, should be fully accessible to people with a disability and their rights to privacy should be protected.

3.9   The University's web site and online student services (e.g. application forms and exam results) are fully accessible and comply with W3C accessibility guidelines.

3.10   All university publications, information and forms use inclusive language and are made accessible to students with a disability.

3.11   Learning resources are made available in accessible formats in a timely manner, and the conversion process complies with copyright requirements.

3.12   Staff responding to inquiries are aware of services for students with a disability, and the information they provide is consistent, accurate and useful.

3.13   Whilst protecting the rights to privacy of students with a disability, university policies facilitate the confidential disclosure of disability related information to staff (as required to ensure the provision of services and accommodations).

D.   University Culture and Safety

The University should promote an inclusive culture that values diversity, does not tolerate harassment or discrimination and encourages a secure and safe environment for all students.

3.14   The University values diversity and responds to the needs of students with a disability from diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous and international students, in the context of their particular cultural requirements.

3.15   Effective induction and professional development programs ensure that all staff are aware of their responsibilities (including vicarious liability) under university policies, state and federal legislation and have the knowledge and skills they need to work effectively with students with a disability.

3.16   Policies and codes of conduct explicitly prohibit discrimination, harassment and victimisation of students with a disability and strategies are in place to prevent these behaviours.

3.17   Grievance procedures deal fairly and in a timely manner with all grievances arising directly or indirectly from a student's disability.

3.18   Occupational health and safety procedures are in place to ensure the personal security of people with a disability (e.g. security points and lighting) and their safety in the event of fire, evacuation or other critical incident.

4.   Guidelines: Learning and Teaching

A.   Course Design and Review

Curricula should be inclusive and student centred, taking account of the diversity of student needs.

4.1   Program design allows the flexibility to accommodate the needs of individual students with a disability without compromising academic standards.

4.2   Essential course requirements, assessment criteria and learning outcomes are explicitly stated and explained.

4.3   Course reviews and evaluations consider the need for equitable access and ensure that students are able to contribute to these processes.

4.4   Timelines are mandated for the preparation of reading lists to ensure that course materials can be made available in accessible formats in time to allow equitable participation by students with a disability.

B.   Course Delivery and Assessment

The delivery and assessment of courses should be inclusive and enable students with a disability to demonstrate equitably the achievement of learning outcomes.

4.5   Learning programs utilise inclusive teaching and assessment strategies and are as flexible and accessible as is reasonably possible.

4.6   Reasonable adjustments are made to delivery and assessment methods to accommodate the needs of individual students without compromising the standards or essential components of programs.

4.7   Students with a disability are encouraged to discuss their learning and support needs directly with teaching staff who are resourced to respond appropriately to these requests.

4.8   The information access and assistive technology needs of students with a disability are accommodated in learning and assessment tasks.

4.9   Learning support services are accessible and address any particular needs of students with a disability.

C.   Specific Learning Environments

All undergraduate and postgraduate learning environments should provide opportunities for equitable participation by students with a disability.

4.10 Field-work based and practical learning environments are made as accessible as possible and accommodate the specific needs of students with a disability without compromising academic standards.

4.11 Laboratory, practical and field-work policies and procedures minimise any disability related occupational health and safety risk to staff or students, where possible, without restricting the learning opportunities of students with a disability.

4.12 Students with a disability in higher degree research programs are able to negotiate alternative research methods if these are required.

4.13 The needs of students with a disability studying away from campus are accommodated, recognising the multiple disadvantages often experienced by rural and isolated students.

4.14 Transnational partnership arrangements explicitly address the needs of students with a disability.

5.   Guidelines: Campus Life and Services

A.   Physical Access

The campus environment should be sufficiently accessible to enable all students to participate fully in the academic and social life of the University.

5.1   The University's Disability Action Plan includes strategies to improve physical accessibility which are linked to resource allocation procedures and are reviewed following regular access.

5.2   New building work, refurbishment of existing buildings, landscaping, car parking or transport arrangements pay explicit attention to legislative requirements for physical access and ensure students with a disability are advised of construction work that may affect access.

5.3   Signage and information, such as large print and Braille notices, tactile maps and maps showing wheelchair-accessible routes, facilitate access by all students.

5.4   Where physical access is impossible or unreasonably difficult, strategies for enabling alternative means of participation are developed.

B.   Library and ICT Access

Library services and ICT facilities should be fully accessible to all students across all learning environments.

5.5   Library policies and procedures are inclusive, and respond to the practical and information access needs of students with a disability.

5.6   The needs of students with a disability are considered in developing the desktop computing environment, and information systems are accessible to all students with a disability.

5.7   Learning management systems and online learning resources are fully accessible to students with a disability.

5.8   Up-to-date assistive hardware and software is provided inclusively where practicable to facilitate equitable access to courseware and learning materials.

5.9   Staff responsible for training and supporting students with a disability to develop their information and IT literacy have access to expertise in assistive technology.

C. Student Services

Students with a disability should have access to the full range of university services and any additional support that they require to participate equitably.

5.10 All services (including commercial, sporting, recreational and social activities) are fully accessible to students with a disability and are responsive to their needs.

5.11 Wherever possible, the needs of students with a disability are met inclusively through mainstream services that enhance their independence as full members of the university community rather than through separate services.

5.12 Specialist disability advice and support services are available to students with a disability and to university staff who work with them.

5.13 Housing policies address the practical and social needs of students with a disability and pay explicit attention to the accessibility of university housing and transport arrangements.

D. Graduation and Employment

The University should assist students with a disability to develop the skills necessary to make a successful transition to employment or further study.

5.14 Graduation ceremonies and other ceremonial events are held in accessible venues and provide information about accessibility in notices and invitations.

5.15 Graduates with a disability are supported in their transition to employment or postgraduate study and are encouraged to participate fully in alumni activities.

5.16 Careers and employment services and activities respond to the specific needs of students with a disability and do so inclusively, where possible.

5.17 Part-time and casual employment services, study abroad and work experience programs accommodate the needs of students with a disability.