Learning Access Plans: what are we learning?

Merrin McCracken, Deakin University

Jackie Weinman, Curtin University

ATEND
Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability

Introduction

- The story of how we came to be doing this project
- What we will cover today
  - Results of the survey
  - How they resonate with our experience at Deakin and Curtin
  - Next steps
    - What would be useful for the sector?
    - What can ATEND do with this information?

The Survey Q1 and 2

Respondents
- Disability Officers/Advisers   32
- Managers   14
- Other   3

Type of institution
- University   33
- TAFE or equivalent   12
- University and TAFE   4

Are you using Learning Access Plans?
- Yes   40
- No   9

Q3 If yes, what are they called?

- Learning Access Plans 6/32 responses
- Disability Support Advice
- Disadvantage Impact Statement
- Reasonable adjustment (RA) – advice to academics
- Letter of support
- Academic Integration Plan
- Education Access Plan (EAP)
- Curtin Access Plan

Q4 If not, why not?

- System problems
- Different adjustments require different arrangements
- May not be in line with philosophy of trying to embed processes into the mainstream

"We stopped using these plans at the beginning of the year. At the time we believed that as none of the other students receiving services had them it did not make sense to have one for students who had a disability."

Q5 What is the alternative?

- Special consideration process and Alternative Examination Arrangements forms

- Not a 1 to 1 model – reasonable adjustments negotiated between student and lecturer, in-class assistants and assistive equipment provided

- Reasonable adjustments negotiated individually depending on type of adjustment and complexity

Q6 Why implement learning access plans?

- Everyone else was doing it
- Streamline and increase efficiency
- Increase students independence
- More timely
- Encourage collaboration
- More consistency
- Reduce need for contact with DLO
- Provide education

Q7 What information do they contain?

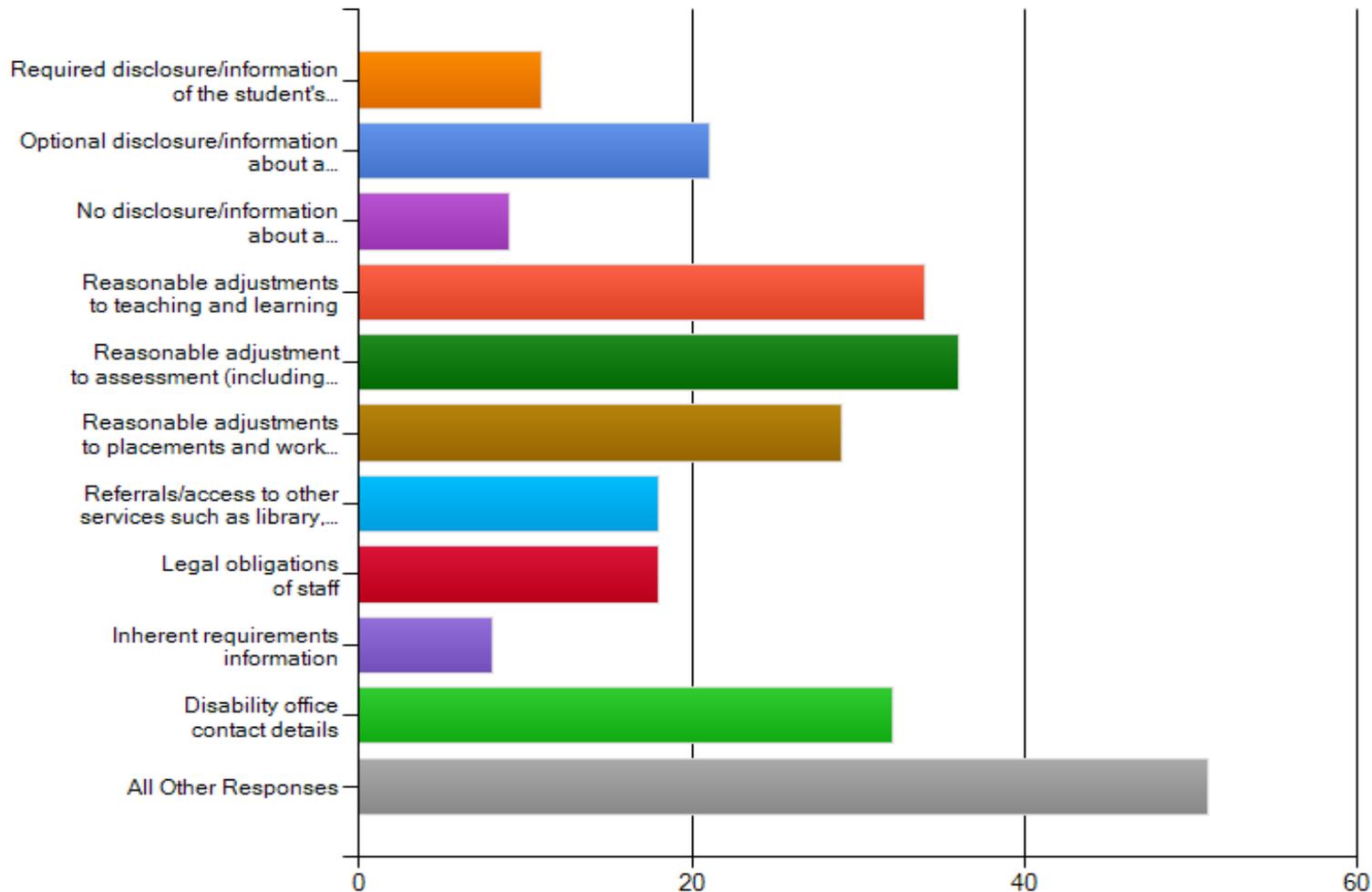**What information do they contain?**
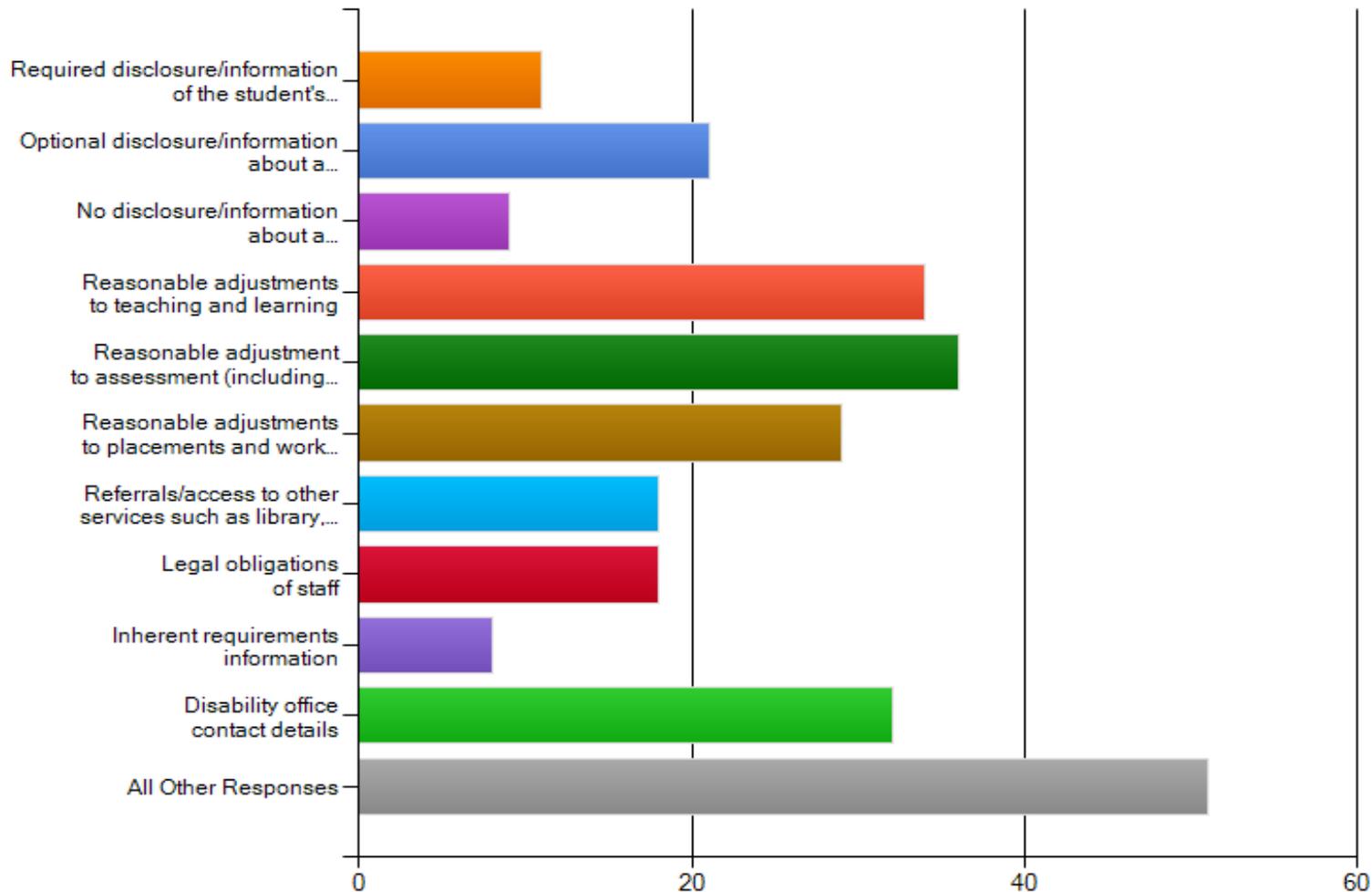
Q7 What information do they contain?

Other

- Student complaint procedure
- Student goals
- Indigenous heritage
- Scholarship information
- Student responsibilities re distribution of LAP
- Medical emergency or emergency evacuation plans
- Teaching strategies for particular disabilities (e.g. vision impairment, Asperger Syndrome)

Q7 What information do they contain?

What information do they contain?

Q7 What information do they contain?

Disability disclosure

- Optional disclosure   57%
- Required disclosure (broad category)   30%
- No disclosure   24%

Q8 Can students receive adjustments without a learning access plan?

Yes   58%   No   42%

Plan is not required:

- If adjustment is a one-off/temporary (e.g. broken wrist)
- If they only require exam arrangements, or other services such as Parking Permits that are organized using a different process
- If registered with service but no reasonable adjustments recommended
- In more complex situations a meeting with academic staff may be better than a plan
- If student chooses to negotiate directly with academics

Q9 Do teaching/faculty staff approve the Plan?

Yes   47%

"The covering letter asks them to contact us if they have concerns about the recommended adjustments."

No   53%

"We had a process where the Head of School had to sign approval for each Plan. However, this was too time-consuming and Plans were not treated consistently."
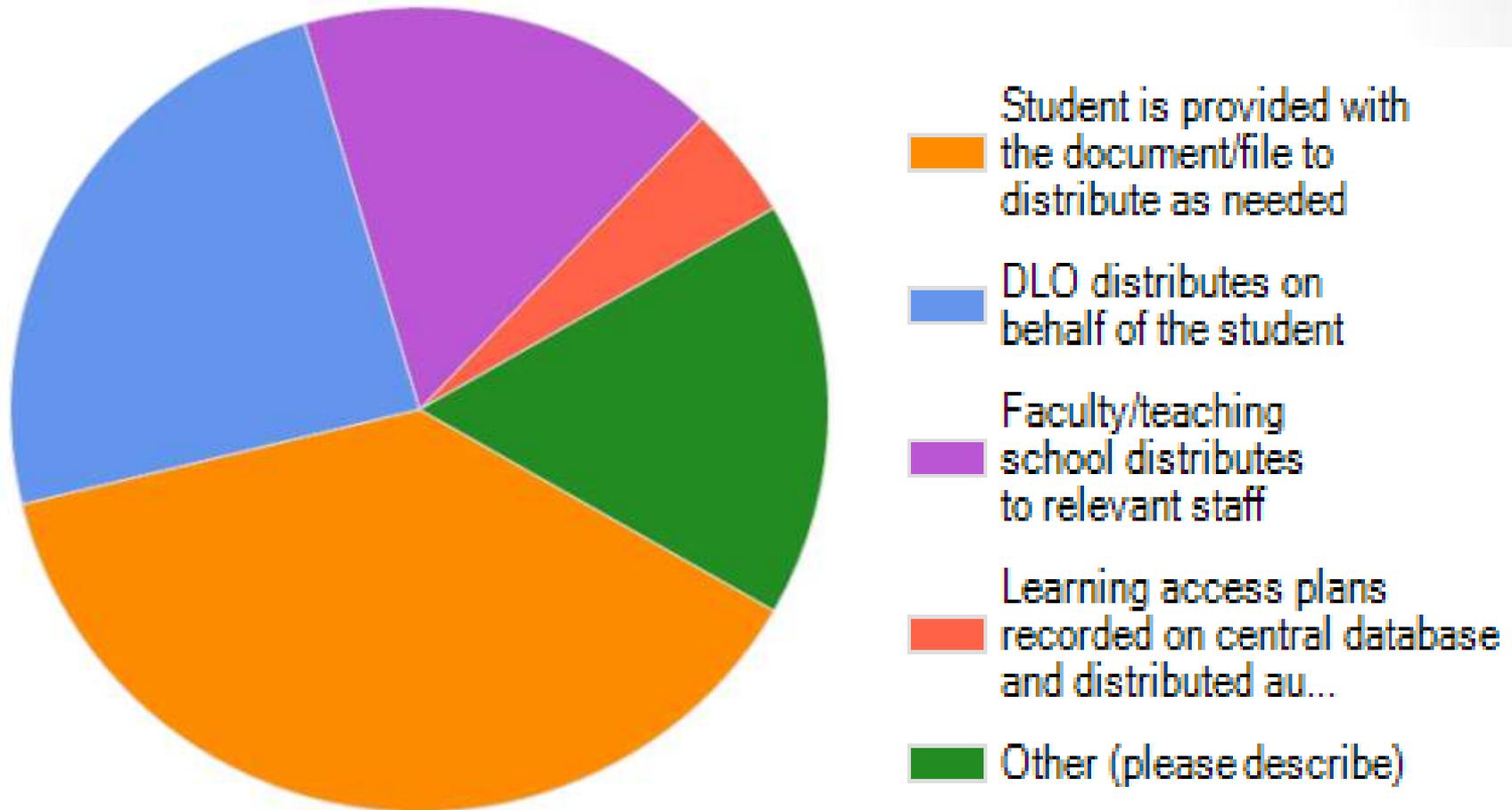
Q10 If yes, what is the process?

- "A spreadsheet of all new registered students within the academic unit is sent to the Dean each semester for authorisation. The spreadsheet contains all the info."

- "The responsibility for approval clearly rests with the course co-ordinator who considers the recommendations in light of the inherent requirements. However the plan is deemed to be approved unless the academic contacts the disability advisor."

- "After student approval, the plan is sent to faculty for Associate Dean teaching and learning approval."

Q11 What are the pros and cons of faculty/teaching staff approval?

- "The advantage is that staff virtually always accept our recommendation. If we are asking for quite complicated adjustments, we would discuss that in detail with the lecturer before writing the Access Plan."

- "Deans say they don't know enough about disability to really make a judgement. I like it anyway, in case an academic is resistant to the recommendations in the Access Plan."

- "Time consuming, difficult to contact and receive teacher input and delay in confirming adjustments for the student."

Q12 How do you distribute the Plan?

Student is provided with the document/file to distribute as needed

DLO distributes on behalf of the student

Faculty/teaching school distributes to relevant staff

Learning access plans recorded on central database and distributed au...

Other (please describe)

Q13 Do your plans have a review date?

Yes   77%   No   23%

- "Depends on the disability, but all are reviewed at beginning of the academic year if continuing."

- "Nature of the disability, eg a date limit based on medical docs for temporary injuries; typically 3 or 6 months for depression/anxiety (unless very longstanding and treatment resistant); Never for permanent conditions including learning disability."

Q15 Do your plans have application beyond people with disability?
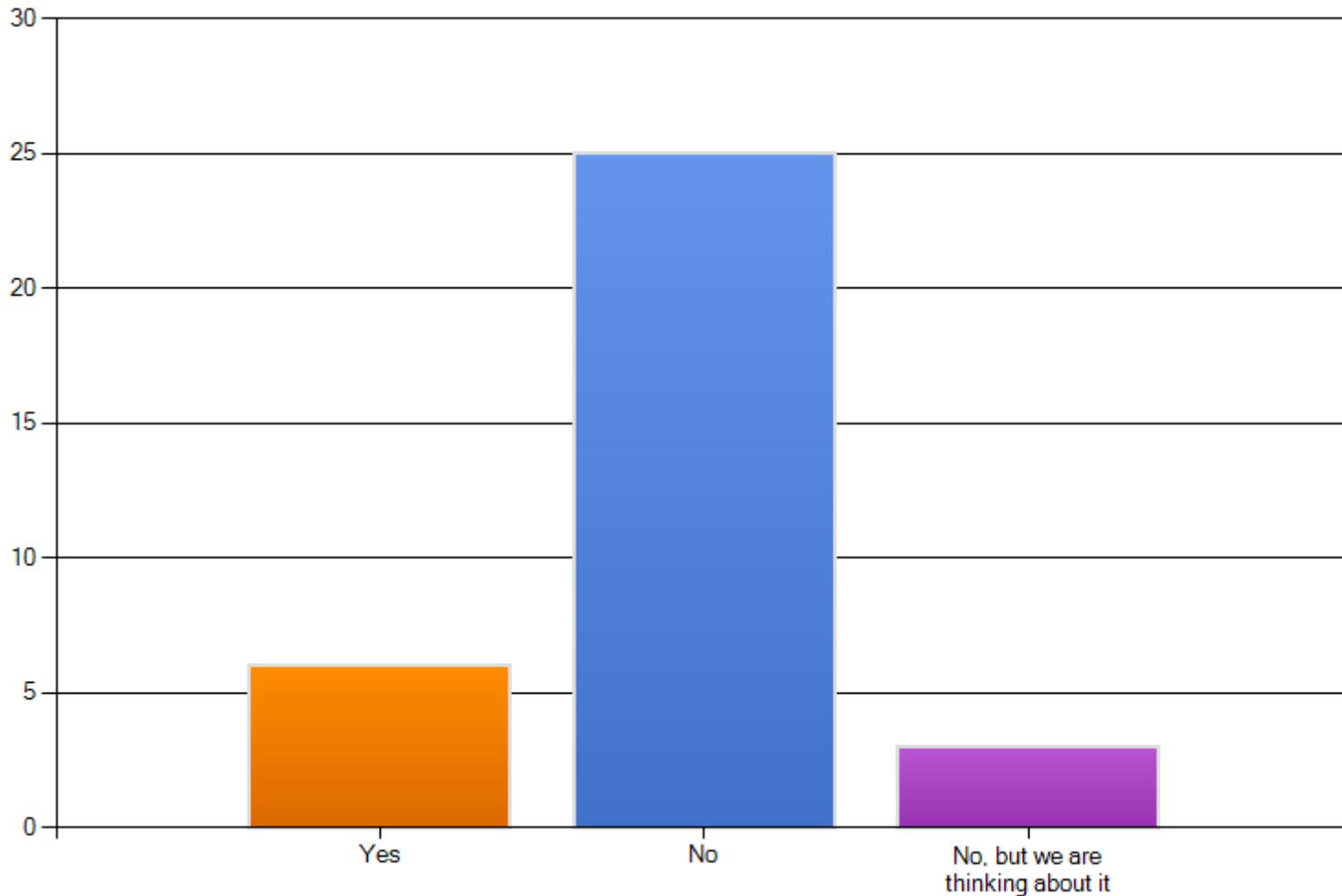
Q16 What do students say about learning access plans?

Positives

- Don't have to disclose disability or repeat their 'story'
- Makes it easier to approach academic staff
- Positive and empowering, gives student confidence
- Simpler process than applying repeatedly for special consideration
- Helps to see where they are going and what supports will be provided

Q16 What do students say about learning access plans?

Negatives

- Many are nervous about approaching lecturers, especially if they have mental health conditions

- Difficulty ensuring arrangements are made for in-class tests/assessments

- Academics don't always receive, understand or implement the plan

- Dispute about what is 'reasonable'(particularly length of extensions)

- Academics wanting more information than is disclosed on the plan

Q16 What do students say about learning access plans?

Negatives

- Students sometimes don't understand that they should still follow faculty processes (e.g. applying for extensions etc.)
- Not all students happy to disclose nature of disability
- Occasions where students have been identified in front of class
- "Not much"

Q17 What do teaching staff tell you?

Positives

- Most are glad that messy negotiations are taken out of their hands

- Assists in negotiations with student

- Clearly sets out responsibilities of academics

- Appreciate the information about individual students

- They have a way of knowing who in their class may need adjustments, and how to provide them

Q17 What do teaching staff tell you?

Negatives

- Not enough resources, staffing to put plans into action
- Staff want to be more involved in developing the plan and making sure that our recommendations are reasonable
- Issues arise when students don't provide them early enough
- Seen to be 'playing the disability card' when produced just for an extension without prior disclosure
- Misunderstanding of wording
- Some staff want more details about the disability

Q17 What do teaching staff tell you?

Negatives

- Can be overwhelming when large numbers of students in the same unit/course present a plan

- Lack of information within schools on the process

- Deans don't like students distributing the plan – feel that disability service should be doing this

- Staff taking Plan too literally and will only provide something if it is on the Plan – not using 'common sense' for a simple request

- More complex issues generally require a phone call or meeting

Q18 What works well?

- "The system we use to produce the plans works well. Having a student centred method of distribution generally works well as it bypasses confidentiality issues. Disclosure on an as-needs basis. Having a time frame for validity. "

- "It has enabled a huge increase in student numbers to be managed more efficiently."

- "The Plans do work well generally as a communication tool, and a means of staff being prepared to make adjustments. They are also positive evidence that we are meeting our legislative responsibilities."

- "I think the students feel empowered and like their confidentiality being kept by Disability Services. The students can negotiate their own adjustments and academics generally trust the system."

Q18 What works well?

- "We are proud of our system, and the process works well. Some students feel they shouldn't have to negotiate, or find it embarrassing to show their Plan to staff. We coach them on how to do this in the least distressing way, and to understand that they are learning valuable skills that they will need once they graduate."

- "We provide an information sheet to students which outlines how to use and distribute the DAP in a timely fashion."

- "It is our experience that the Access Plan process can lead to strong working relationships with academics who wish to support students to reach their academic goals."

Q19 What can be improved?

- "An automated process from our database, sending out the plan would be wonderful. We will amend our plan to specify it's currency in the current semester only."

- "Formalising procedures around the circulation of statements to teaching staff may be helpful, but I would be cautious about any automatic process for circulation that would take away students' autonomy around disclosure."

- "Include more info on legal obligations of staff and inherent requirements."

Q19 What can be improved?

- "Possibly to include ideas on how a student will best learn, i.e. what teaching approaches would assist the student."

- "We are too medical model, despite our philosophy being more 'social model' (although not exclusively). It would be wonderful if Plans were the exception rather than the rule. I don't think the reactive approach is sustainable, particularly with the increasing numbers of students presenting with complex issues. I would like to see a more strategic approach to inclusion, and a change of job title to reflect this in some way."

Food for thought

Proposed workflow model

- Information recorded in central system by Disability Advisor
- Student accesses system which brings up names of units and coordinators and can nominate who the Plan is sent to
- Academic coordinators receive notification and have to acknowledge within a time frame. Student automatically notified of acknowledgement
- If not acknowledged an alert is sent to their manager or Disability Advisor
- System can communicate with other areas of university – Exams, Library, Parking etc as needed

Food for thought

Review of Disability Education Standards

Recommendation 6

The Attorney-General, in consultation with the Federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research revise the Standards to include a requirement to implement an agreed support plan for students with disability in the tertiary sector. The plan should set out the…

- student's rights and responsibilities,

- the provider's responsibilities,

- any adjustments that have been agreed to,

- and mechanisms for review and support.

Food for thought

What can we do with this information?

- Publish a paper?

"I would be interested in the results of your research. to understand how different institutions are capturing information."

- Recommend best practice models?

"Not at this stage! Too busy to think about it!"

- Other ideas?

Conclusion

- We most of us use them

- They work, and they don't

- We love them, and hate them

- And we are still learning!!!