Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating Accessible Teaching and Support for Students with Disabilities

Final Report

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Executive Summary

Through funding grants from the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) and the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education a research team comprising researchers from a number of universities has over the past two years investigated issues relating to the teaching and support of university students with disabilities and has developed resources designed to support teaching staff and improve outcomes for students and universities.

The project team completed an extensive review of the literature relating to teaching students with disabilities in order to identify issues, teaching and support strategies, case studies of good practice and effective approaches to dissemination and staff development. Consultations were held with key stakeholders including university students, staff and community agencies to identify the major issues relating to the teaching and support of students with disabilities in the Australian context.

Some case studies of effective strategies and practices from the Australian universities that exemplify good practice were collected but the project team also identified a range of concerns in relation to current practices. A particular need for guidance for university staff in the area of mental health was identified.

As a result of this research a series of booklets was developed to summarise effective strategies for teaching and supporting students with vision, hearing and mental health disabilities and a web based resource designed to support good practice in the provision of teaching and support to students with disabilities in higher education was launched in March 2006.

This research informed the development of a quality assurance framework, including a range of principles, indicators of good practice and resources to support the adoption of inclusive practices across universities for teaching and supporting students with disabilities. The team have also developed an interactive web based self assessment tool to assist individuals and institutions to review their practice and develop action plans for improving teaching and support for students with disabilities.

The research findings suggest opportunities for consolidating project outcomes and further improving practices across the sector. The report makes a number of recommendations for further work.
1. Background

In 2003 the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) funded a consortium of universities to identify strategies for supporting students with vision impairments and improve access to information about teaching practices resulting in improved outcomes for students and universities across the sector. In December 2004 the project team submitted a progress report detailing the project activities, findings and outcomes which included the development of an interactive, web based resource and printed booklet designed to assist institutions to improve the teaching and support provided to students with vision impairments.

Through its research the project team identified the potential for broadening the focus of the Web based resource to include all disability groupings and extending the functionality of the tool to enable universities to review their teaching and support arrangements within a quality assurance context and develop action plans for further improvements to teaching strategies and services. In September 2004 the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education agreed to fund Phase II of this project. This enabled the further development of the website to include a framework for good practice in the provision of teaching and support for students with disabilities and the publishing of an additional booklet focussing on the needs of students with hearing impairments.

Through the second phase of the project, a significant need for guidance for university staff in the area of mental health was identified. Given the positive response to publication of the first booklet, the project steering committee proposed that publishing a companion booklet focussed on teaching and support strategies for students with mental illness would be strategic. In August 2005 the Carrick Institute funded the development, publishing and distribution of an additional booklet focussing on teaching and support strategies for students with mental illness.

2. Project Aim

The initial project aim was to identify strategies for teaching and supporting students with vision impairments and improve access to information about teaching practices resulting in improved outcomes for students and universities across the sector. This aim was later broadened to include the needs of all students with disabilities.

3. Research Activities

The multidisciplinary project team drawn from three universities completed an extensive review of the literature relating to teaching students with disabilities in order to identify issues, teaching and support strategies, case studies of good practice and effective approaches to dissemination and staff development. This literature review informed the development of a series of booklets described below and it was made available to colleagues through the project website.

Consultations were held with key stakeholders including university students, staff and community agencies to identify the major issues relating to the teaching and support
of students with disabilities in the Australian context. Academic staff were also surveyed about their experiences in teaching students with vision impairments. An audit of the Australian higher education sector was conducted to identify current institutional and local unit practices, strategies and responses to the identified issues and case studies of effective strategies and practices from the Australian higher education sector that exemplify good practice were collected.

Workshops involving selected case contributors, Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) and key community agencies were conducted in Melbourne and Perth to develop a draft framework for good practice. This quality assurance framework, included a range of principles, indicators of good practice and resources to support good practice in the provision of teaching and support to students with disabilities in higher education.

4. Research Results

The literature review and consultations with academics, students and practitioners identified the following key issues relating to teaching and supporting blind and vision impaired students in the university context.

- **Accessible Course Materials** - The provision of accessible course materials and texts was the most common issue identified through this project. Students and disability practitioners frequently reported difficulties in timely access to course materials in accessible formats. This was related to both accessing the materials from academics early enough to allow transcription into accessible formats and difficulties in arranging cost effective transcription services. These access problems resulted in an increased workload for students as they had to frequently “chase up” staff for course materials that were easily available to other students. Whilst the increasing availability of course materials via the web was welcomed the additional printing costs incurred by students is an increasing issue. For academics, a key issue was the ability to produce tactile versions of visual concepts e.g. graphs, diagrams etc or making spontaneously written notes or diagrams on the board accessible.

- **Accessibility of the web and other technologies** - Along with the importance of IT literacy, accessibility of the web and other technologies are seen as critical success factors in successful transition to university for students with disabilities. Students found IT policies confusing and many university web sites and web based administration systems are inaccessible to those with vision impairments. For the most part academics consulted do not consider themselves to be experts in this area and rely on disability liaison services and IT support to inform them.

- **Institutional Policy** – The literature review identified the need for disability-related processes to be embedded in institutional policy if they are to be successful and sustainable. Students however, were sceptical of the value of high-level policies in terms of improving outcomes having had limited experience of these actually translating into practice. Academics also felt that policy was ineffectual, with one commenting “the rhetoric is evident, but not so the practice”. Some academics urged universities to be more proactive in advertising their diversity policies. Policies, while differing from one institution to the next, are seen as ad hoc and academics suggested the need for a common policies and more collaboration across universities. Students emphasised the importance of consulting students in the process of policy
development. This highlights the importance of ensuring that institutional policies exist and are aligned with practice.

- **Physical Access** – Accessibility of the physical environment was identified as a key issue by both students and practitioners. The quality of physical access varies widely across institutions as does the extent to which these issues are being addressed in university capital management planning. Access and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) issues are critical for all students with vision impairments and inadequate orientation to the campus layout and/or inadequate information from university staff was frequently raised. Students frequently spoke of the frustrations associated with poor communication eg not being notified of changes in venue.

- **Transition and Student Life** – For some students the transition process was liberating, while for others disappointing. Some students experienced a great contrast between the supports offered at secondary school and those available through university. Many saw the coordination between community services and university transition programs as a critical factor, but for many this had not occurred. Students felt that access to social activities is still very limited. Few students received support from their student organisations and some student unions were reported as being discriminatory in relation to provision of services. Many students expressed disappointment in equity and disability staff often seeing them as gatekeepers limiting access to academics. The development of student independence is another key issue highlighted in the literature review. Several guides to transition into university highlight the importance of early preparation, necessary skills and ways that both schools and universities can facilitate such student development. Disability practitioners reported that the extent to which this actually occurs varies greatly.

- **Disability Liaison Services** - The support and advice offered by disability services at the institutions was of importance to students and academics. Some students consulted, praised the disability units and staff as providing excellent service, while others experienced disability services as inadequate and reported that staff were often ill informed and difficult to access. The academics consulted reported their reliance on disability services at their institutions with only one academic commenting that they received no formal support at all. Academics do not see that they have the time or resources to gather and research information on supporting students with disabilities.

- **Funding and Resources** - Students and academics both expressed concerns that the funding and resources dedicated to providing supports for students with disabilities were inadequate and were not necessarily being distributed to the departments and areas responsible for teaching and supporting students with disabilities.

- **Communication** - Students and lecturers universally noted the importance of developing strong lines of communication between students and academic staff, describing it as critical to the students’ success. Students recognised the importance of providing tips to lecturers where possible as many “wanted to help but did not know how”. Many academics recognised that the best source of information about accommodations and accessibility was the student themselves and that an understanding of each individual student’s impairment assisted greatly in teaching and supporting them.

- **Work Placements** – Academics, practitioners and students described the difficulties around securing and facilitating successful work placements for students with vision impairments. These included the provision of accessible technology, transport, physical access issues and the attitudes of agency staff while on placement.
• **Professional Development** - Teaching and working with students with a range of disabilities is clearly an emerging professional development need in universities for both academic and general staff, particularly teaching staff. Professional development requested included legislative requirements, rights and responsibilities of staff and students, communicating with students with vision impairments, and in designing and delivering inclusive curriculum and materials. Students and academics alike, expressed the need for such professional development and this issue is echoed through the literature review.

• **Reasonable Accommodations and Academic Standards** - Whilst the literature review identified a potential concern by academics that disability accommodations may impact adversely on the academic integrity of their courses, all but one of the academics interviewed understood the need for accommodations and expressed little concern about this issue. Academics were concerned however about their lack of knowledge and understanding about which strategies and accommodations are appropriate and how best to implement them. For this they rely heavily on their institution’s disability liaison services.

5. **Outcomes**

The major outcomes of the project are:

• **CATS Website**

A web-based resource has been established to bring together through one portal international and national research and resources related to the provision of teaching and support for students with disabilities. The “clearing house” approach and portal/database design provide a “one stop shop” to existing and new information and resources for the higher education sector.

The website targets academics, administrators, disability practitioners and other university staff. It was launched in March 2006 and is hosted through the Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training (ADCET) to ensure that content is continually updated. The website explicitly models best practice in electronic delivery and accessibility thus providing an exemplar for university web sites. As the usage graph below indicates usage of the website is high and growing.

![CATS Website Usage Statistics](image)
• **Disability Specific Booklets**
  A series of booklets providing information about supporting and teaching students with vision, hearing and mental health impairments has been published. These booklets have been distributed to all institutions and further copies are being provided on request. The content of the booklets and the CATS web resource (detailed below) reflect the requirements of the recently released Disability Standards for Education and the AVCC guidelines for services for students with disabilities. Response to these booklets has been very positive.

• **Quality Assurance Framework**
  A quality assurance framework has been developed to support good practice in the provision of teaching and support to students with disabilities in higher education. This includes a range of principles, indicators of good practice, benchmarks and suggests effective strategies for promoting professional development and the adoption of inclusive practices across university functions. The team have also developed an interactive web based self assessment tool to assist individuals and institutions to review their practice and develop action plans for improving practice.

• **Workshops & Conference papers**
  A series of workshops has been conducted providing professional development and information to senior managers, academics and practitioners about inclusive practices and the use of the web resource. The project has been showcased at a number of conferences and the booklets, website and resources are actively promoted throughout the sector. A comprehensive literature review has also been published.

6. **Recommendations**

The research findings suggest a number of opportunities for consolidating project outcomes and further improving practices across the sector. It is recommended that:

1. Further development of the CATS online resource be undertaken to
   - Develop a booklet on the use of the self assessment tool;
   - provide improved opportunities for collaborative learning (for example through implementation of “wiki” and Weblog features;
   - support the development of communities of practice focused on teaching and support for students with disabilities;
   - research and update content that leads to practical strategies for improved teaching and supporting students with disabilities; and

2. Identify options for the ongoing sustainability of the CATS resource

3. Review learnings from this project about dissemination and embedding strategies with reference to the Carrick objective ‘to develop effective mechanisms for the identification, dissemination and embedding of good individual and institutional practice in learning and teaching.’ A focus should be on the effectiveness of strategies such as workshops, booklets and the online resources, including the quality assurance framework, for embedding good practice at the individual and institutional levels;

4. Evaluate project outcomes as part of the RIN initiative, with reference to the architecture, stakeholder consultation and dissemination strategies.