Inclusive employment and developmental opportunities for students: Benefits, challenges and lessons learnt.

Key Words

inclusive, peer mentoring, developmental, student centred

Abstract

Constructing inclusive learning environments for students from all backgrounds and abilities has been a challenge for educators and universities on a global scale for some time (Baldiris Navarro et. Al, 2016). With close to 1500 Victoria University (VU) students reporting disability, it is imperative that they receive the same learning, employment and development opportunities as their peers. Statistics around further education and employment of deaf people in Australia are seemingly non-existent, however according to the ABS (2015), people with disability aged between 15 and 64 years have both lower participation (53%) and higher unemployment rates (9.4%) than people without disability (83% and 4.9% respectively). As these statistics look at disability as a whole (which includes long-term injury or illness), it could be proposed that the lower participation and higher unemployment rates would be magnified when looking specifically at deaf people. At VU, our mission of being the University of Opportunity and Success, where all students regardless of their background can access quality education, has been evidenced in the Student Transition Mentor (STM) program. In 2016, the program recruited its first profoundly deaf student which challenged but excited staff and STMs to think creatively about communication, collaboration and inclusion. Tasks and activities performed by STMs include daily drop-in sessions, presentations and program promotions in college based student events, facilitating workshops, providing one-on-one support and engaging students through the STM Facebook page and various campus events. Although the tasks are varied, a main component includes contacting first-year students by phone. While a profoundly deaf student is unable to make phone calls, they are able to contribute in drop-in sessions, one-on-one appointments and respond to Facebook queries from students. In order for deaf students to make a meaningful contribution to the learning environment, there may need to be changes made to how the environment is constructed (King-Sears et al. 2015). The program coordinator worked with the deaf STM to create and adjust tasks which utilise existing skills and challenge the STM to develop further. This paper will report on how the STM program coordinator, a deaf STM and the rest of the STM team has benefited from being more inclusive, along with challenges and lessons learnt.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, 4430.0 - Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, viewed 1 May 2017, .

Baldiris Navarro, S, Zervas, P, Fabregat Gesa, R & Sampson, DG 2016, 'Developing teachers' competences for designing inclusive learning experiences', Educational Technology & Society, vol. 19, no. 1, pp.17-27.

King-Sears, ME, Johnson, TM, Berkeley, S, Weiss, MP, Peters-Burton, EE, Evmenova, AS, Menditto, A & Hursh, JC 2015, 'An exploratory study of universal design for teaching chemistry to students with and without disabilities', Learning Disability Quarterly, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 84-96.