



The role of learning advisors and support staff within an increasingly differentiated student community

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Learning difficulties: problems of definition

- The student experience

Those struggling to demonstrate expected literacy and or numeracy skills are held to be experiencing 'learning difficulties'. A sub-set of this group may be living with a specific learning difficulty or a 'learning disability'.

- Relevant learning support

Many students with learning difficulties have the potential to achieve if they have access to appropriate support and tuition that takes account of factors impeding their progress.

Learning difficulties can best be provided for

- through established protocols for ongoing collaboration between
 - Course convenors
 - Classroom teachers/tutors
 - Learning and Academic Skills Units
 - Student Services
 - Students and their families
- by recognising unique challenges and responses

Learner Profiles



Ivan with AccessAbility: diagnosis and learning needs

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- is shy in new environments, can become anxious when stressed
- requires additional time to process new information.
- benefits from repetition of key points
- difficulty with abstract concepts and maintaining concentration
- extra time for assessment tasks
- provision of a note taker for all classes.
- has supportive parent and teacher

Ivan with LAS: support and tuition

- Education Access Plan forwarded from AccessAbility
- voluntarily makes appointment with LAS and attends regularly to discuss and review his written course work
- explains that 'living with Asberger's means I have to work at my own pace
- expresses preference for 'getting the facts right'
- avoids comparing and evaluating ideas
- insists on explaining new understandings "what he means is ..." or "what you are saying is ..."
- LAS advisor adopts learner's style

Edward with AccessAbility: diagnosis and learning needs

- mild intellectual disability
- poor concentration, memory difficulties, slower processing of information
- learns best by visual displays, clear and concise information
- information must be chunked/ broken down into smaller components.
- extra time for assessment tasks including tests
- a separate room because quite nervous when sitting a test
- provision of a participation assistant: to clarify and repeat key concepts, take notes and record important information and dates

Edward with LAS: support and tuition

- Education Access Plan forwarded from AccessAbility
- LAS advisor contacts classroom teacher and offers to visit classroom
- LAS advisor introduces herself to Edward
- Neither teachers nor student contact LAS further

Assif with LAS: support and tuition

- previously completed Australian tertiary qualification
- voluntarily attends on recommendation of current course convenor and teacher feedback stressing grammar, sentence structure, paragraphing difficulties
- NESB parents but came to Australia when very young and completely rejects suggestion that needs ESL specific support
- negotiates preferred LAS support as regularly reviewing writing portfolio pieces and develops own 'grammar rules book'
- attends (LAS) recommended appointment with AccessAbility but declines offer of assessment of learning style.

Assif with AccessAbility: diagnosis and learning needs

- diagnosis: unknown
- referred by LAS staff
- student reports he had something wrong with writing skills as a child
- determined to master his writing/comprehension skills and has worked hard at doing so, but LAS staff believe there is some need not being met/ recognised
- queries the need for comprehensive cognitive assessment - does not take up this
- Education Access Plan recommendations: to be determined

LAS anecdotal records and learner profiles show that

- attendance may be self-initiated or consequent on referral(s) or part of an Education Access Plan
- students experiencing learning difficulties will differ in their use of learning support services
- the underlying assumption is usually that the individual student is in some sense 'lacking'
- the learning advisor's role is to increase a student's capacity to meet given requirements

Alternative assumptions:

- students experience learning difficulties largely because the learning environment has disabled them
- the learning advisor's role is to first 'unpick' the point(s) at which course design or requirements are creating difficulties
- learning advisors and support staff are best placed to inform curricula writers of the common points at which students experience barriers to their academic progress
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles offer a useful conceptual framework for the development of inclusive curricula

Redefining the future contribution of learning advisors and access staff when attending to students experiencing learning difficulties:

- participating in collaborative course design and proposing ways in which curricula might more imaginatively provide 'inclusive spaces' for students who learn differently
- adopting UDL principles for all modes of Learning and Academic Skills delivery
- developing a methodology for documenting the lived experience of students grappling with learning difficulties
- contributing to evidence based research into the scholarship of teaching and learning within increasingly differentiated student communities

Further Reading

- Learning Differences:

Learning Difficulties: Factsheet 1: The difference between a learning difficulty and a learning disability

www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/714332/Learning-Difficulties-Factsheet-1.pdf

- Universal Design for Learning:

a curriculum framework for support and inclusion, based on three principles

- Representation: the way in which learning tasks and relevant resources are presented will influence the extent to which students can access content and its assessment

- Expression: the means by which students might demonstrate comprehension, mastery or understanding ought to be multiple

- Engagement: encouragement and facilitated motivation are empowering

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