COMMITTEE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

FINAL REPORT ON UNIVERSITY TEACHING DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Title: Enhancing disability awareness at the University of Otago

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Snapshot of the case (150 words)

As producers and disseminators of knowledge, universities play a significant role in determining the nature and future of societies, in terms of who and what is valued and considered worthy of attention. Many students may complete their studies and enter professions and other positions of power without any opportunity to think about, let alone question their interpretations of disability. This project, to identify and learn from exemplar practice, explored the work of lecturers across a range of disciplines considered inclusive in their teaching practice, and examined how these staff incorporated disability issues within their teaching. Analysis of focus group discussions (n=15) and in-depth qualitative interviews (n=12) generated four key themes: the fundamental importance of lecturers' values and beliefs in underpinning 'good' teaching for all students; specific teaching and learning practices that facilitate student engagement; issues that demand recognition and resolution to enable academia to more truthfully serve as the critic and conscience of society; and possible ways of addressing such issues.

Introduction

In our project we are asked the question: How do we meet our obligation under the various Acts and Strategies of Parliament[1,2] and international conventions[3] to which New Zealand (NZ) is a signatory, to ensure that all staff and students at the University of Otago are disability aware? Underpinning the 2001 NZ Disability Strategy (Making a World of Difference / Whakanui Oranga) was a vision of a fully inclusive society.[4] Following this the Kia Ōrite, Achieving Equity, the 2004 NZ Code of Practice for an inclusive tertiary education environment for students with impairments focussed on "ensuring maximum educational opportunity for all New Zealanders."[5] The University of Otago values diversity and equity: In 2010 the University of Otago's Vice Chancellor's Advisory Group agreed to the establishment of a working party investigating how the Tertiary Education Committee's 'Kia Ōrite' Code of Practice could be implemented.[6] Three of the University of Otago Teaching and Learning Action Plan (Interim Plan 2011-2012)[7] overarching goals (Goals 1-3) explicitly support diversity and enriched learning experiences. However the Office for Disability Issues in its briefing to

the incoming Minister[8] in 2011 stated "Disabled people say that a key barrier they experience in all areas of life, including employment, is negative attitudes towards them".

Whilst the University of Otago caters admirably for the needs of disabled students via the Disability Information and Support Centre, the general awareness of disability across the campus is still questionably poor. The NZ Education Act (1989) requires that universities accept the role as being the critic and conscience of society. We would argue that to achieve such a role, to enable all students enrolled at the university to be "global citizens"[9] it behoves the University to ensure all students, and staff, are disability aware; that all students highly value all lives, no matter how diverse, and work towards achieving a fully inclusive society. This desire to have every student at the University of Otago, no matter their faculty or level of ability, be aware of disability issues and to reflect on these in their studies and future careers, initiated our first standalone research project.[10] In that project, we asked the question: How can we enhance the content and delivery of disability awareness and issues within papers at the University of Otago? One of the main suggestions from this project was that instead of "reinventing the wheel" we should capture the good teaching practices currently done by a number of staff at Otago. So the objectives of our current study were, at the University of Otago:

1. To understand and describe identified good practice within the disability context.
2. To provide recommendations of how teaching and learning activities could be improved to enhance awareness of disability issues both via content and accessible delivery.

Methods

This project used a sequential mixed methods design. Firstly we facilitated two focus groups that included both academic and general staff, as well as student representatives (n=15). These groups assisted us to determine what constitutes "good inclusive practice" at the University of Otago, and helped us to identify staff who were considered to be actively incorporating this practice into their teaching. We then explored the good teaching practices of a purposive sample of 12 participants, who held lecturing positions in a range of disciplines and were known to be inclusive in their respective teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant; further data were generated through the analysis of course documents provided by some participants, a questionnaire, and through observations of lectures given by certain participants. The focus group discussions and individual interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed by a professional transcription service. NVivo software was used as a tool for thematic analysis of the transcripts. Thematic analyses included data from all sources (survey results, focus group and interview transcripts, observation field notes, and review notes of course related documents) to allow not only a description of the 'good practice', but a thorough exploration and understanding of the nature and elements that comprise 'good practice'. We invited original focus group participants to a second facilitated discussion where we presented our findings for robust discussion, verification and refinement.

Key findings

Analysis of data generated four key themes:

1. The fundamental importance of lecturers' values and beliefs in underpinning 'good' teaching for all students.
2. Specific teaching and learning practices that facilitate student engagement and learning.
3. Issues that demand recognition and resolution to enable academia to more truthfully serve as the critic and conscience of society.
4. Possible ways of addressing these issues.

Implications for theory or practice

Participants expressed enthusiastic willingness to contribute to the process of change necessary to make disability an integral component of university teaching and research. Their suggestions include:

- Investigate the feasibility of developing Disability Liaison staff (‘champions’/’warriors’)
- Establish a group of resource people who can support staff
- Include as a required component of induction of new staff, and of Professional Learning and Development initiatives
- Offer brief, focused visits to staff meetings (e.g. “back of the truck” sessions)
- Include a requirement in departmental reviews that every department needs to show that 5% of their content is devoted to alternative world perspectives
- Offer lunchtime seminars (incorporate disability/diversity within a general series of seminars)
- Develop a Critical Disability Studies paper/school/degree that operates across divisions and departments/schools
- Promote multi-disciplinary research

How such change is driven, whether mandatory (top down) and/or ‘hearts and minds’ (interested staff), is yet to be determined, but it is likely that both approaches are necessary to realize the magnitude of such a shift in thinking, values, structures and practices.

Outputs or outcomes

- Initial findings from this project have been presented by Dr Rutherford at Disability Studies in Education Conference 2014: Learning from the past. Ensuring the future. Victoria University, Melbourne, 25 - 27 July 2014: “ *‘We put a few ramps in here and there, that’s about it:’ The need to ramp our minds in academia*”
- We are presently writing a paper for publication.
- We will be working with HEDC to organise a workshop for staff to promote our findings more widely.