

Valuing diversity: teaching students with a disability

Ann Noble and Gerry Mullins
Advisory Centre for University Education
The University of Adelaide

Amongst the things we are encouraged to value and promote in higher education in Australia are the principles of (and the practices that go with) equity and diversity. Teaching students with a disability is one aspect of the challenge inherent in fostering equity and diversity. But teaching students who have a disability, and accommodating a range of needs, is seen by staff to raise difficult and complex issues. Often the reason for this attitude is the assumption that difficulties arise from the disability, rather than from teaching and assessment processes.

In a survey at the University of Adelaide academic staff indicated that they were willing to meet challenges raised by teaching students with a disability, as long as the demands on their time were reasonable, and they were supported by concise, accessible information on the nature of various disabilities, and the impact of a disability on learning, and guidelines on practical measures which might be implemented. We have developed a set of six brochures on different disabilities designed to meet these needs. These brochures are described in the paper.

The project also emphasised the complexity of teaching and assessment, and raised issues concerning what constituted genuine alternatives and choice. We focus particularly on assessment practices to illustrate this point. However, in the process of developing these resources, we have been able to show that improving teaching and assessment practices for students with a disability improves the learning experience of all students.

Introduction

With the increase in the number of students with a disability in tertiary education, the need for universities to develop Disability Action Plans and to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, and an increase in the number and variety of requests from academic staff for information related to teaching students with a disability, the need for staff development activity in the area has become crucial.

Since 1996, the authors have been involved in a project at the University of Adelaide to provide advice to academic staff who teach and assess students with a disability. In the first stages of the project we sought both national and local information: staff development units in universities around Australia were surveyed to determine what materials with a focus on teaching students with disabilities already existed; an extensive literature search was conducted; and a comprehensive round of interviews with academics at the University of Adelaide was completed (and reported in Noble, 1996; Noble and Mullins, 1998).

Over 40 teaching staff from a variety of disciplines and at various points in their careers were interviewed to determine the existing level of awareness of disability issues in the University, both in a general sense, and in relation to specifics including course offerings and 'selection', learning environments, and assessment procedures and accommodations. The interviews were designed to inform our understanding of current practice. We were also hoping to locate efficient and effective teaching and assessment practices which would be transferable between disciplines. Staff interviewed included those who had

experience teaching students with a wide range of disabilities, and also those who thought they had never encountered a student with a disability in the University.

The interview questions ranged from the simple: 'What disabilities have you encountered?' and the practical: 'Are you aware of the University's legal obligations in this area?' to the more challenging: 'Have you ever been uncertain about implementing an accommodation for a student with a disability?' and 'Did you ever feel you were disadvantaging other students by varying usual practice?' We were interested in what it meant for academics to be teaching students with a disability. How had they responded to new issues and challenges? Had they been able to identify potentially discriminatory practices in the selection of students (particularly in the later years of a course, eg. for Honours), or in the way in which courses were taught? The interview questions were designed to encourage reflection on experience – possibly leading to a change in practice – as well as to open discussion about specific experiences and concerns.

While the interviews uncovered general interest, good will, and apparent commitment to 'equity' in the learning process, they did not, on the whole, uncover the well-considered, innovative, extendable, transferable teaching and assessment practices which we had hoped to find. Many of the comments made in interviews indicated an 'ordinariness' and a certain 'safety' in the approaches and practices which academics acknowledged they had relied on when dealing with out-of-the-ordinary issues. But some academics spoke in the interests of both conservatism (maintaining the known ground) and innovation, seeing clearly how new ways of teaching led to the need for new assessment practices. In providing an effective and inclusive teaching and learning environment, academics were keen to discuss creative alternatives, particularly to assessment practices, as long as these alternatives were valid, viable, and time and resource 'neutral'.

In implementing alternatives, staff were aware of the desirability of discussing and reaching decisions on a departmental level, particularly when assessment was the issue. On the whole they were not happy about making decisions alone, particularly when there were no precedents (or none that they knew of) and/or no guidelines. We heard the often repeated concern that perhaps, in allowing students to be taught differently, or assessed differently, there would be accusations of compromising course standards or disadvantaging other students. So there were concerns about equitable practice. However, it was clear that academic staff did not want to be 'instructed' on what to do within their own subject areas, but rather, wanted guidelines which would lead them to consider a range of options and alternatives. And there was a tension evident: between what academics felt was an individual responsibility for decisions made; and what they perceived to be faculty and / or institutional responsibility.

Most academics brought up the issue of 'fairness' in one guise or another. We took their concern with fairness to relate to 'standardisation' – the fairness that supposedly comes from everyone undertaking the same task, and at the same time, and in the same way. In introducing different processes for some students, are we in fact disadvantaging others? A continuing worry for academics asked about the possibility of assessment alternatives in their subject is that anything 'alternative' may in fact be 'easier', and therefore 'unfair' as far as other students are concerned. One of the challenges of the project was to create a notion of fairness as provision of opportunity for all to demonstrate achievement, and mastery of learning goals, albeit in different ways. Clearly, academics need to feel

confident when making whatever accommodations are called for, and need a frame of reference against which decisions can be measured or judged. There were pleas for 'correct procedure' guidelines. Academics thought it would be helpful to know what others were doing, to know what issues were being faced in other departments, what practices others had tried and adopted, or tried and discarded, and what practices were 'reasonable'. But they were clearly not prepared to be constrained by 'common practice' if the practice did not fit their discipline.

Along with the concerns about fairness, appropriate individual behaviour and responsibilities, came comments focusing on responsibility in the wider system. A number of staff mentioned that they were unsure about who in the University (if anybody) was, to use one academic's phrase, '*charged with the responsibility of handling these issues.*' Such a comment reflects the tension between individual, departmental and institutional responsibility. There is also uncertainty associated with the role and responsibility of universities as educational institutions, and the role of professional associations or boards which are responsible for registering practitioners. Sometimes academics are in both camps, and may feel conflict between their role as educator, and their role as representative of a registering body.

As a result of the interviews, the aims of the next stage of this project were to:

- move disability issues out of the 'personal' and into the 'educational' context (Porter, 1994)
- present material which would challenge biases, assumption and 'tradition' by encouraging a focus on alternative perspectives in relation to teaching and learning and diversity in the tertiary environment
- provide both general and specific guidelines which would encourage academic staff to create learning environments and assessment practices which take into account a variety of learning styles and needs
- encourage supportive interactions between staff and students, and amongst students.

In meeting these aims we designed a series of brochures:

- Teaching students who have a psychological or psychiatric disability
- Teaching students who have a learning disability
- Teaching students who have vision impairment
- Teaching students who have hearing impairment
- Teaching students who have a medical disability
- Teaching students who have a mobility disability

These brochures (each four A4 pages) are contained in a folder on which is printed a statement about the University's obligations, and details of sources of further

information and assistance available to teaching staff. The brochures have been widely distributed throughout the University of Adelaide and are available on a Web site <<http://www.unisa.edu.au/eqo/pubs/uafacts/index.htm>>. However, follow-up evaluation of their impact on practice is still to be carried out.

In developing the material we followed a number of 'design rules'. We believed that it must be:

- *Focussed on learning and teaching*

The brochures are designed for academic staff rather than for disability liaison officers, student support staff, or students themselves. Consequently, the focus is on the provision of information and advice relevant to learning and teaching rather than to broader policy or procedural issues such as access, transport, financial support, etc. Implicit in the focus on teaching and learning is that:

- the brochures should reflect the characteristics of good teaching as established in the research literature (Ramsden, 1992, HERDSA. n.d.)
- discipline differences often matter, and so the brochures are sensitive to the fact that teaching and assessment occur in a variety of different contexts
- assessment is particularly important, not only in the minds of students, but as one of the more influential factors affecting how students learn (Boud, 1995a, Crooks, 1988; Nightingale et al, 1996).

- *Practical and concrete*

The brochures are designed to provide staff with assistance in the day-to-day practice of teaching and assessment. Hence we have tried to avoid theorising, and have sought to present the brochures as information sheets rather than as 'academic' articles.

- *A blend of generic advice and advice specific to a particular disability*

Each brochure was designed to provide information specific to a particular category of disability. However, as indicated earlier, many of the strategies listed in the brochures under the headings 'Students may also learn best when...' and 'There are some good assessment practices...' are about 'just good teaching', and adoption of these strategies might be expected to improve the learning of **all** students.

- *A model of appropriate language*

We believed that it was important to model to academic staff the language (and, by inference, the attitudes) appropriate in communication with students with a disability. This was seen as particularly important for academic staff who might have had little experience in this area or be unfamiliar with the disability/equity literature. Indeed, 'appropriate communication' with students was a common concern of staff interviewed. We have focused on 'strategies' rather than referring to 'adaptations' or 'adjustments'

since these are words which tend to have negative implications for academic staff. We were concerned to use, as far as possible, the language with which academics identify positively. Although we would also like to have avoided 'accommodations' as far as the word suggests 'things being made easier', it is a word in such common usage that we chose to reflect current practice.

- *Easy to read and easily accessible*

The limited amount of time which staff have to assist individual students means that information and advice is more likely to be used if it is short and to the point. And the fact that students with a disability may be infrequently encountered by individual academics means that the information must be available when it is needed. Hence the material in the brochures is largely introductory, but the folder in which the brochures are contained provides suggestions about where to get more detailed information and advice.

The brochures

The interviews with academic staff gave us a clear understanding of the varying levels of awareness, the great variety of practices, and the many different assumptions and needs underlying these practices. The accessibility and practicality of information provided was obviously of importance. Staff feared needing to become 'disability specialists'. During the interviews many indicated a level of apprehension in their dealings with students requesting accommodations - particularly students with a 'hidden' disability. Some staff were anxious about what they perceived to be their own inadequacies in understanding and responding to needs.

Each of the brochures has the same format, and the same headings:

- Information about a particular disability
- The impact of that disability on learning at university
- Communicating with students with the disability
- Teaching students with the disability
- Assessing students with the disability.

For the purposes of this paper, the brochure on teaching students with a psychological or psychiatric disability is used to illustrate the outcome of the project.

About the disability

Each brochure provides a brief description of the disability, the terms or labels most often used, and the characteristics or observable features of the disability, where relevant. In this section we were concerned simply to give academic staff some background information intended to eliminate the sense of 'not knowing anything about disability'.

Teaching students who have a psychological or psychiatric disability

Disabilities labeled as psychiatric or psychological may include schizophrenia, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, and anxiety disorders. Substance abuse and acquired brain injury (ABI) may have associated psychological disabilities, sometimes referred to as personality disorders.

These disabilities may be characterised by anxiety, erratic behaviour, panic attacks, attention deficit, fluctuating motivation, and disorganisation. These may also be features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

These psychiatric / psychological disabilities may be transitory (induced by recent personal trauma) or of longer standing. Symptoms range from mild and episodic to severe and ongoing, so that students may sometimes require academic accommodations, and other times not. To all intents and purposes these disabilities are 'invisible'.

Depression is one of the most common psychological disabilities evident in the university environment. Also common are various anxiety disorders. Anxiety may manifest itself in a number of ways. Students may withdraw from interaction with others. They may experience unpleasant physical manifestations – rises in temperature, sweaty palms, palpitations. Students taking prescription medication may experience drowsiness, persistent thirst, vision difficulties, and problems with coordination.

We were also concerned to emphasise the notion of difference - not the idea of difference of one group from a 'standard' or norm, but individual difference in the experience of a specific disability. It is equally important for staff to understand difference in relation to learning approaches and learning needs. Such understanding will minimise the unhelpful stereotyping and 'grouping' which leads staff to make assumptions, and students to have less than positive learning experiences.

Stereotyping lessens the likelihood that 'problems' will be approached positively and creatively. We wanted to highlight the importance of being open to new possibilities, and being flexible in responding to different students, different needs and different circumstances. Because we were focusing on difference, the words 'may' and 'possibly' needed to be used frequently throughout the brochures.

About learning

What academic staff **really** need to know about a disability is the way it is likely to affect learning and participating at university. We wanted an outcome which meant that students would feel that in giving academics information about the likely impact of their disability on learning they would need to explain their disability less often, and to fewer people.

The impact of a psychiatric or psychological disability on learning at university

The learning processes of students with a psychiatric or psychological disability may be affected in the following ways:

- The idea of being 'sick' or 'different' may have resulted in low self-esteem and lack of confidence, and this will affect approaches to learning. Students who are anxious about new situations and new people may isolate themselves in the university environment.
- Students may have frequent or unexpected absences owing to hospitalisation and/or medication changes.
- Staff may notice that students have rigid thinking patterns and inflexible approaches to tasks, a result of lack of confidence and anxiety about new experiences.
- Students may tend to rote learn because of anxiety, may lack confidence generally, and have difficulty performing consistently or following through on tasks. They may also worry about perceived inadequacies, without there necessarily being any evidence of these.
- Severe anxiety may significantly impair participation in tutorials and performance in examinations.
- There may be evidence of short-term memory loss which will affect both the ability to recall information, and attention span. Students may have difficulty following sequences, complicated instructions and directions, and with integrating material from different sources. They may be easily 'overwhelmed' by information.
- When students are unwell they may be inclined to misinterpret questions, comments or instructions, or be vague in their responses to questions. Some students may misinterpret non-verbal cues in particular. They may tend to impulsiveness and unpredictability and may sometimes appear obsessive, asking questions repeatedly, returning frequently to issues already covered, or repeating things.

In a recent student-based survey in South Australia, students with a disability indicated that increasing the 'disability awareness' of academics was vital to their confidence about disclosing their disability, and asking for information or advice or assistance. Many students indicated that they had failed to disclose their disability to staff because they feared a negative reaction, uncomfortable or prying questions, or the perceived likelihood of being labelled a poor or difficult student. Staff were sometimes described as unsympathetic and uncooperative. But clearly staff face difficulties when 'disclosure' does not occur:

Some students wait until it is too late for the system to respond.

We've had some students disclose their disability when they have failed an exam. We've arranged supplementaries - but this is not a very satisfactory way of doing things.

When academics understand the likely impact of a disability, the particular difficulties a student may have, or the reason behind a request for a particular accommodation, they are more likely to feel positive about negotiating with students for alternatives. We felt a need, too, to highlight the importance of staff approaches and attitudes in encouraging self-confidence in students with a disability, and easing the sense of isolation many of these students feel in the tertiary environment.

So the information given in this section was designed to facilitate a better interaction between students and staff, by outlining the way a disability might impact on teaching or learning processes and activities.

About communication

In our experience, both lack of information and departmental culture or 'politics' can be behind 'messy' communication - or indeed miscommunication - between students and staff. Communication difficulties are further exacerbated by uncertainty as to who should initiate discussions, say what, ask what, and how:

I've found that sometimes students aren't very good at articulating what they need, and I'm not sure how far I should go in making suggestions - or what suggestions I should make.

Whose responsibility is it to make suggestions? Do we just go along with what students ask for? Surely it's a big assumption that students know what their needs will be, especially if they are in the first year of a subject?

Is all this communication confidential, or are there other people who need to know?

I don't necessarily know what questions a student might find offensive...

Most students with disabilities I have encountered have not wanted to talk about it.

There is a range of experience in our department concerning disability issues. I often feel my colleagues are unsure what to do and how to do it - even what the issues are in this context. For some, disability is still an embarrassing issue, a personal issue, and many feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues.

In this section we highlighted students' rights and 'autonomy' in relation to making decisions about what information is discussed, but also highlighted the important role staff have in creating situations where the exchange of information is facilitated. We focused again on difference (some students will, some students won't disclose their disability) on the importance of responding to individual need, the importance of recognising different communicative styles and approaches, and indeed different approaches to the business of being at university.

How to communicate was closely related in the minds of some academics with behaviour and appropriate outcomes:

Some students expect you to go out of your way to help them; others don't want you to do anything - and there are those who fall in between. It's difficult to judge how to behave.

Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge that it is likely that some degree of difficulty and uncertainty will always remain, as it does for all students.

Communicating with students with a psychiatric or psychological disability

Interacting with students with a psychiatric or psychological disability should be characterised by respect for their rights to dignity, confidentiality and equity. How well academic staff are able to assist these students depends very much on the relationship they are able to establish with the student.

Some students will choose to disclose their disability; others will not. There is still a considerable social stigma attached to psychiatric disability, as well as numerous persistent myths, so that disclosure and discussion of their disability may be particularly difficult for a student. At your first lecture, you might invite any students who have a disability to contact you for a confidential discussion of their specific learning needs. In that discussion you might feel it is necessary to ask students to provide documentation to verify their disability. In doing this, ensure that students' rights to privacy and confidentiality are recognised. You might also ask students what, if any, information would need to be shared with other members of staff, or with other students in the class.

- When communicating with students with a psychological or psychiatric disability it is important to acknowledge that they are students first and foremost, not 'victims', 'sufferers' or 'conditions'.
- Negotiate about teaching and assessment issues on the basis of individual need. You may like to consider negotiating individual study contracts which allow students to meet your expectations in different ways which match their preferred learning style. This ensures that the curriculum offered is inclusive.
- Students returning to education after a significant absence may initially be very unsure of what level to pitch their work at, or may set unrealistically high standards for themselves. You may need to help students focus on more realistic and achievable standards and goals. If you have negotiated any adaptation to teaching or assessment with the student, it is good practice for both the student and staff member to have a written record of that decision.
- Always allow sufficient time for discussions with students so that they do not get anxious about unfinished conversations or unresolved matters. Students who fear that they are misunderstood (both generally and specifically) may have difficulty asking for accommodations.
- If any disturbing or inappropriate behaviour is evident in the classroom this should be discussed with the student privately, and future behaviour agreed upon.

About teaching

In this section we presented both specific and generic information relevant to good teaching practice - practice which would benefit **all** students. We were also aware of the role of the system, and not simply of the individual, in learning:

...the conventional viewpoint [of disability] places the burden for dealing with disability too heavily with the learner, failing to account for how factors constituting the particular educational setting (eg architectural barriers, restrictive attitudes, and poorly designed curricular, instructional, or assessment practices) can themselves be disabling (Porter, 1994:73).

The guidelines emphasise:

- the importance of flexibility in instructional design and delivery - and a curriculum approach which maximises learning outcomes
- the educational benefit of providing choice

- innovation and alternative ways of doing things which are neither difficult to implement nor time-consuming approaches to teaching, and which consider rationale, structure, approaches and objectives of courses, and of tasks within courses
- the importance of clarifying expectations
- the need for staff to develop teaching practices which cater for a diverse range of learning styles, and for different ways of knowing.

We know that **all** students are from time to time 'disabled' by lack of clear instructional or learning guidelines, writing tasks which are poorly expressed or inadequately formulated, or assessment tasks which are not clearly related to course objectives. So it was important to present information which involved a simple re-visiting of good teaching practice generally. By attending to issues around difference and diversity, we have an opportunity to improve teaching and learning for all students.

The environment of a department, the way things are managed, the way content is taught, the instructional setting and practices to which Porter refers, as well as the approachability or accessibility of academic staff, can all affect a student's performance at university. Throughout the brochures we have focused on the importance of 'involvement' on academic performance. The role teaching staff have here is clear: involving students in the life of the department, and of the institution generally, by creating environments which are open and accessible, is very largely their responsibility.

We know that academic staff have particular concerns about certain 'environments'. For example, there is the issue of ensuring safety and effective teaching practices in laboratories, and on fieldtrips, and in community or industry placements. We have sometimes given more attention in the brochures to these 'other' environments than to the traditional lecture or tutorial settings. We have also tried to focus the guidelines on making decisions about alternative ways in which students might acquire information which may not, for various reasons, be accessible to them in the 'usual' ways.

Teaching a group of students which includes students with a psychiatric or psychological disability

- Flexible delivery of teaching material via electronic media is particularly helpful for students who are unavoidably absent from class, or who cannot participate in classes for extended periods of time.
- Making reading lists and handouts available early in the course will assist students who may be frequently absent to continue with their learning, even though they may be unable to attend classes.
- Anxiety is prevalent among students with psychiatric disabilities. Severe anxiety may reduce concentration, distort perception, and interfere with the learning process. Students who are anxious about workload may benefit from tailored reading lists, with some guidance to key texts. You might allow work to be completed on an in-depth study of a few selected texts, rather than a broad study of many. It may also be helpful to provide an individual orientation to laboratory equipment or computers to minimise the anxiety likely for some students in unfamiliar learning situations.
- Emotional and behavioural changes associated with some psychiatric and psychological disabilities can make it difficult for students to participate in tutorials or to give presentations. It may be appropriate to organise one-to-one tutoring, or to ask the student to record their presentations on tape.

**Teaching a group of students which includes students with a psychiatric or psychological disability
(continued)**

- Some students with a psychiatric or psychological disability may be over-sensitive to what they perceive as criticism from others. They may prefer verbal to written feedback on assignments.
- Being able to record lectures will assist those students whose attentional processing is affected by their disability, as well as those who, because of the effects of medication and/or short-term memory loss, may tend to misinterpret or misquote.

Approaches to teaching which assist all students to learn include:

- Making sure students know what and how they are expected to learn, that is, they are told, or they can accurately work it out for themselves. This can be done by:
 - * previewing new topics and showing how the new material fits in with other parts of the subject
 - * making explicit what you expect students to learn from a lecture or tutorial
 - * summarising the main points of a topic and making clear how that topic will be assessed.
- Integrating instructions on how to learn with content teaching.
- Designing the workload so that students have time to think, to reflect on what they have learned, to see how it fits in with their previous learning and experience, to work out what they don't yet know but need to know next.
- Helping students see the relevance to their broader personal and vocational goals of their learning in a particular situation. Provide opportunities for students to relate what is taught in class to their own experiences and values.
- Demonstrating your interest and enthusiasm for your subject. For example, your students will better appreciate its intellectual challenge if you relate your teaching to your research interests and activities.
- Providing appropriate and adequate feedback on how they are progressing with their learning, particularly on their achievement of learning goals.
- Assessing students' learning in line with what they thought they had to learn. Provide opportunities for students to learn how to deal with assessment tasks before the final assessment.

Students may also learn best when:

- They have some choice about what they learn and how they learn – that is, when teaching is student-centred. Where possible, provide short 'electives' within a subject, and introduce a variety of learning tasks – project work, problem-based activities, and resource-based activities.
- They can talk through the material with other students or with a tutor. You might provide opportunities for structured group activities in your subject so that students experience both individual and collaborative learning. You might have students research selected areas of a topic independently, but then collaborate in small groups for the purposes of completing a report, assignment or presentation on the topic. There are many benefits to be gained from shared experiences in learning. Encourage the establishment of student self-help, discussion or focus groups. Such groups could be organised on the basis of existing tutorial or lab groups, but can also be organised beneficially across years and levels. Students thus have experience of a wider range of approaches and attitudes from which to draw for their own learning.
- They can apply their learning in a practical or vocationally-relevant way. Project work can take into account various career or further study options available to students.
- They are able to move from the concrete to the abstract. In your explanations, begin with examples or applications of theory to 'real life' situations, and then move to discussion of the more abstract issues.

About assessment

In revisiting good assessment practice we found that the issues raised were more complex than we had at first envisaged, the questions from staff more diverse, and the possibilities for alternatives seemingly endless. Considering assessment alternatives was undoubtedly the most interesting and challenging aspect of the project. It was here that academics perceived the real 'problem' to lie. As one academic commented in relation to assessment: *'Aren't we just working on educated guesses?'*

In this section of the brochures we tried to move beyond educated guesses, and point academics towards educationally-sound strategies for assessing learning (Crooks, 1988; Boud, 1995b; Hounsell et al, 1996; Nightingale et al, 1996). It is important that assessment procedures and tasks promote and reward desired learning outcomes. It is also important that students know just what the desired outcomes are, and how assessment tasks relate to them. Too often, however, assessment and the goals of learning are not clearly related. In a way, the issue of assessment is a more important issue than those of communication and teaching:

Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching; they cannot (by definition if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment (Boud, 1995a:35)

In relation to assessment 'alternatives' staff are always particularly concerned about 'fairness', about maintaining academic standards when students in the same course are being assessed differently or at different times, concerned about practicality and efficiency, and with the validity and reliability of alternatives. In several interviews staff recounted how assessment tasks were devised and undertaken according to departmental or institutional tradition, or according to time or organisational constraints, rather than according to the best assessment principles. Other difficulties were voiced:

The University requires us to specify aims and forms of assessment and presupposes consensus on aims and assessment - but in this department that is far from the case. How could we agree on appropriate alternatives?

Some students have been offered the alternative of oral assessment in this department. Some have not taken up the offer - and I'm glad, because I don't think we've really caught on how to assess in this way.

Those working in staff development know that in fact there is a good deal of very helpful advice relating to assessing alternatives - but academics are not, on the whole, familiar with this literature, and are not likely to have time to access it. The issue of assessment is complicated by a number of factors - the use of paid markers, peer and self-assessment, etc. It is also complicated by the fact that it is now often undertaken by professionals outside the university. This has happened often as a result of the shift toward work-based or experience-based education. Drama students, for example, may have a professional placement, and subsequent assessment, during several stages of their course; psychology and social work students may have their skills in observation and discussion, their performance in 'practice' and in written work, assessed by a practitioner in the field; and engineering students may have their seminar presentations assessed by other engineers. Sometimes professionals are required to complete a proforma provided by the relevant academic department; at other times they may be directly and solely responsible for assessing skills, particular presentations - posters, displays - and written work. One

could hardly hope that ‘outsiders’ would be as up-to-date on current assessment issues as ‘insiders’, but we are hopeful that the brochures will bridge the gap.

Our primary goal in this project remained fairly general: to shift thinking about assessment from an emphasis on what is taught to an emphasis on learning and learning outcomes; from an emphasis on the answers to an emphasis on the questions. Learning outcomes are central to the process of assessment, and assessing and learning should be viewed as an integrated activity.

The brochures encourage staff to:

- make decisions (department-based) about **what** to assess - so that there can be no concerns about leniency or unfair advantage when alternative strategies are implemented
- avoid assessment methods which lead to reliance on memorising and reproducing (moving away from ‘content-obsessed’ assessment)
- move away from traditional examination processes which seek and evaluate isolated factual information, and which neglect a range of skills and abilities which are part of the learning process
- recognise different ways of judging the substance and quality of learning - including assessing experiential learning
- develop ways of assessing a broad range of skills and attributes in a diverse population (for example, through learning journals, portfolios, log books, group and individual project presentations and posters)
- devise assessment tasks which have a knowledge component **and** a skills component
- value and assess practical as well as theoretical aspects of learning.

Strategies for assessing students with a psychiatric or psychological disability

In considering alternative forms of assessment, equal opportunity, not a guaranteed outcome, is the objective. You are not expected to lower standards to accommodate students with a disability, but rather are required to give them a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned.

Students with a psychiatric or psychological disability may need particular adjustments to assessment tasks. Once you have a clear picture of how the disability impacts on progress and performance you can consider alternative assessment strategies.

- Absences due to hospitalisation or the effects of changes to medication may affect the number of assignments students are able to complete satisfactorily. In such cases you might consider redistributing the weighting of assignments. For example, you might set six assignments for a semester, but inform students that only the best four marks will be counted. Students who have been absent or unwell will thus have some choice about what and how many assignments they submit.
- Students who are anxious about performing in front of others may prefer to tape or video record any presentations which are to be assessed.

**Strategies for assessing students with a psychiatric or psychological disability
(continued)**

- Some students may need extra time in examinations or require a separate room free from the distractions which may contribute to anxiety or trigger panic attacks. Take home examinations may be an option for these students.
- Keep written examination instructions and sentences within examination questions short. Questions using bullet points, lists or distinct parts are more likely to be followed and correctly interpreted, particularly by students who are anxious.
- Students with memory loss, reduced attention span or deficiencies in short-term memory will have difficulty with multiple choice questions. Short answer questions are likely to be a better test of their knowledge.
- When a psychiatric disability enters an active phase any assessment should be postponed. If the cut-off date for withdrawal without fail has passed, students should be counselled to seek advice from the Disability Liaison Officer regarding their situation.

There are some good assessment practices which will help students with a psychiatric or psychological disability (and all other students in the class!):

- Know what you are testing, whether it be decision-making, strategic planning, creative application of information, data collection and processing, logical sequencing, or argument, and develop assessment tasks accordingly.
- Create assessment activities in which students have the opportunity to link their learning to what they already know, and to past experience.
- Make your expectations clear so that students know what they are required to demonstrate.
- Avoid using assessment methods which encourage students to rote learn material. Open book examinations are one way of doing this.
- Make explicit the way in which marks will be allocated, both in discussion with the class beforehand, and on the examination paper.
- Provide optional pathways towards meeting stated objectives, options which allow for flexibility in approach, in organisation and assessment. You might provide project-based exercises in which students choose their own topic for exploration. Given the diversity of students, the greater the diversity in methods of assessment, the fairer the process. Make accommodations based on individual circumstance and need. Remember that students may need the opportunity to experiment to find the adaptation or accommodation which best meets their learning style or needs.
- Include self-assessment as a component of the course. Self-assessment involves discussion with students about the criteria according to which they assess their own performance and the level of performance required for different grades.
- Discuss and collaborate on assessment alternatives with staff who have had previous experience teaching students with disabilities. You (and your department) should regularly review any alternative arrangements to ensure that these meet both the student's needs (which may change over time) and stated course objectives.

Discussion: assessment and diversity

In developing these resources for academic staff, we hoped to show that improving teaching and assessment practices for students with a disability will improve the learning experience of all students. However, reflection during the progress of this project raised several issues, particularly with reference to 'alternative assessment', which are of concern to us as academic developers.

We found ourselves making suggestions about alternative teaching and assessment strategies without having a clear idea as to how these strategies might be comprehensively implemented. For example, we have suggested more extensive use of self-assessment as a way of overcoming the limitations of traditional assessment. Clearly, it is incumbent on us to spell out how our advice might be implemented in a range of disciplines and situations. Wetherell, Mullins and Hirsh (1999) have shown how self-assessment can work in Dentistry, a teaching situation involving relatively low staff:student ratios. But we would like to provide evidence that self-assessment is practical in disciplines with large student numbers. Research-based advice is not always available, and we need to exercise caution that we are not 'just working on educated guesses'. Even when research-based evidence is available, it is not always clear how alternative forms of assessment might be implemented effectively.

Self-assessment often induces uncertainty and anxiety. Students with a disability may suffer from low self-esteem, and so lack the confidence to make summative judgments about their work. We have also suggested that journals might form the basis of assessment, especially when what is being assessed is the process rather than the product or content of learning. Wetherell and Mullins (1996) have shown, again in Dentistry, that journals can be used in a process of formative assessment and as the basis of self-assessment, as long as the discussions of their content is conducted in an atmosphere of trust between tutor and student. However, students have expressed concern about their thoughts and feelings regarding a course or tutor being the subject of scrutiny, let alone the basis of assessment. Moreover, many students have no prior experience of the kind of analysis / reflection required, nor do staff have much experience in assessing this kind of work. Preparation for alternative forms of assessment is crucial for all students, and especially for students with particular disabilities.

Another issue is the way in which the term 'alternative assessment' is used by many academics and students in talking about something which is not alternative assessment as such, but very simply changes to established examination practices / procedures: for example, providing more time, providing examination material in a different format (large text or braille), collecting material by a different process (recording answers rather than writing them, using an amanuensis), or being examined in a different venue (at home or in a private room). However, when we use the term 'alternative assessment' what we are talking about is something quite different, and involves assessing some, or perhaps all, students in different ways, but towards the same goal, and meeting the same criteria as that met by more conventional assessment.

Students are now commonly assessed on a range of tasks which, several years ago, would have been considered 'alternative assessment': for example, they are assessed for the quality of their participation in tutorial discussion, undertaking collaborative projects, interviewing, communicating, or accessing electronic information. They are assessed on the basis of evidence in a variety of forms: for example, on the basis of journals, posters,

computer packages, and research reports. What was once labelled 'alternative assessment' is no longer necessarily thought to be a radical departure from standard practice. But it is quite clear that academics are not always comfortable with these new practices, for example, assessing 'orally' rather than via the written word.

One challenge for academic staff is to decide whether and / or how wider options provide students with a disability with the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. Integral to our notion of 'alternative assessment' is genuine choice by students of the process and content of assessment. If choice about process and content is important in the curriculum, students with a disability are no longer a 'fringe' group seeking 'accommodation'. In that situation all students are required to take more responsibility for their learning, and for the assessment of that learning. Are we ready for this?

Finally, to return to the discussion of 'fairness' begun earlier in this paper, one of the challenges of the project was to create a notion of fairness as provision of opportunity for all to demonstrate achievement, and mastery of learning goals, albeit in different ways. However, there is clearly an urgent need for further research to establish that alternative assessment practices are indeed fair to all students, ie fair both to students with a disability and to other students in the course; that these practices effectively assess course objectives; and that they are practical for both students and staff.

Despite these concerns, we are still convinced that improving teaching and assessment practices for students with a disability will improve the learning experience of all students, open opportunities for more creative and flexible approaches to teaching and assessment, and allow genuine choice amongst a range of assessment processes. Accepting and encouraging diversity will lead inevitably to change, hopefully to improvement in learning and teaching practices.

References

Boud, D. (1995a) Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary? In P. Knight (Ed), *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Kogan Page, 35-48.

Boud, D. (1995b) *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*. London: Kogan Page.

Crooks, T. (1988). *Assessing student performance*. HERDSA Green Guide NO : 8. Sydney: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

HERDSA (n.d.) Checklist on Valuing Teaching. Canberra: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

Hounsell, D., McCulloch, M. & Scott, M. (1996) *The ASSHE Inventory: Changing assessment practices in Scottish Higher education*. Edinburgh: Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, University of Edinburgh.

Nightingale, P., Te Wiata, I., Toohey, S., Ryan, G., Hughes, C., and Magin, D. (1996) *Assessing learning in universities*. Sydney: University of New South Wales.

Noble, A. (1996) *Teaching students with disabilities: What do staff need to know?* Pathways III National Conference, Adelaide.

Noble, A. & Mullins, G. (1998) *Guidelines for academic staff teaching students with disabilities*. Pathways IV National Conference, Perth.

Porter, J. (1994). Disability in higher education: from person-based to interaction-based. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 5 (1), 69-75.

Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Wetherell, J. & Mullins, G. (1996) The use of student journals in problem-based learning. *Medical Education* , 30, 105-111.

Wetherell, J, Mullins, G & Hirsh, R (1999) Self-assessment in a problem-based learning curriculum in dentistry. *European Journal of Dental Education* (in press).