

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

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Increasingly diverse cohorts within Higher Education and Vocational Education courses now include students presenting with learning difficulties. This may suggest an extension to the roles of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisors. It also raises the question as to whether a deficit model of student learning is a legitimate pedagogical framework from which to operate. An alternative is to ask if course requirements themselves require re-examination, and further, whether learning advisors are equipped to instigate such? Professional development is readily accessible for educators wanting to understand the implications of student learning difficulties, but we also note that the umbrella term ‘learning difficulties’ embraces concepts wherein terminology can be confusing, particularly for anyone seeking clear definitions of relevant support roles. At Swinburne University of Technology, two of the several services directly involved with providing for students who struggle with their studies are the AccessAbility team and the Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) unit. Using documented student profiles from each of these units we outline instances where barriers to successful student participation have been overcome, along with others of limited progress. We have focussed on learner characteristics and learning strategies as individual students grapple with the content and delivery of courses. The steps taken by LAS and AccessAbility staff are offered for discussion and scrutiny. We conclude by suggesting that the exploration of ‘Universal Design for Learning’ principles provides an exciting orientation for redefining the special future contribution accessibility staff and learning advisors might make while attending to students’ learning difficulties.

Key Words: learning differences, inclusive curricula, universal design, AccessAbility, LAS, learning advisor.

1. Introduction

Increasingly diverse student cohorts within both Vocational Education and Higher Education courses now include persons experiencing a range of learning difficulties. But unlike students presenting with physical attributes which potentially limit their full participation, students who learn differently from the (albeit mythical) average student are more likely to go unnoticed. Their ‘difference’ is hidden. The following discussion deliberately references ‘learning differences’, but in doing so we remain acutely aware of and pay attention to the various meanings attributed to that umbrella term. In the broadest sense, high achievers differ from the average student too, although our concern here is primarily with students who present as academic underachievers.

Sensory impairment, emotional issues, not being provided with appropriate educational opportunities, and ineffective instruction, are only some of the reasons behind academic underachievement and each may account for a student's perceived learning difficulties (dsf LITERACY AND CLINICAL SERVICES, 2014). In order to interrogate the role of learning advisors and support staff within differentiated student communities, we have found it useful to retain the notion of students as exhibiting 'learning differences' with underachievement being conceptualised within two frameworks: the learning difficulty framework and the learning disability framework (ADCET, 2017). Two distinctions are of particular relevance to our analysis: first, whereas a 'learning difficulty' is a non-categorical definition, a 'learning disability' is a categorical definition based on diagnosis, and second, whereas intensive educational intervention alone will assist individuals with learning difficulties, academic adjustments, accommodations and individualised learning plans are needed for any student with a learning disability to reach their potential (ADCET, 2017).

Our primary intention is to exam the issues that acknowledged 'differences' raise for academic or learning advisors and support staff within education support programs. The scenarios presented here are drawn from individual consultations with students who have either self-referred or have been recommended to attend for support by their teachers. In outlining a 'general approach' to learning support, we want to ask why our role often seems problematic; whether we are engaged in 'best practices', and thirdly by turning the spotlight away from learners and toward the context and expectations made of them, whether learning advisors and support staff can contribute to reducing barriers to full participation.

The range of support services available to students at Swinburne University of Technology includes the Learning and Academic Skills Centre (Swinburne, LAS, 2017) and AccessAbility (Swinburne, AccessAbility Services, 2017). LAS modes of delivery include individual consultations and drop-in sessions for assignment advice; embedded skills and team-teaching projects; generic workshops; and conversation classes. AccessAbility advisors work within the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) which makes it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of disability across a range of criteria, and the Disability Standards for Education Act (2005) which requires universities to make their courses accessible to students with disabilities and to make reasonable adjustments to enable the students' participation. Consultations for learning support are managed through the LAS online self-booking system or by students accessing shorter 'drop-in' sessions. Students also attend for support with our AssessAbility Service of their own volition or after being referred by their teachers or a LAS advisor. The inter-dependence of staff within these units and with mainstream class teachers forms part of our later discussion of issues, arising from our responses to four individual students presenting with quite different learning needs.

Swinburne's categorisation of students seeking and being registered for support includes (but is not limited to) students recorded as experiencing a learning and/ or neurological disability. Of the students registered with the Accessibility unit in 2017, almost twenty-five per cent were recorded as experiencing a learning disability (Swinburne Accessability Services, 2017). However, as demonstrated by research into the reporting of learning needs, determining the extent and nature of learning support required within educational institutions can be complicated, not only because of an increasing awareness and identification of impediments to full participation, but also because the categorisation of students held to be experiencing learning difficulties can be uncertain (Graham, 2015).

The four illustrative scenarios presented here are from face-to-face individual consultations and teaching sessions with students grappling with their course work generally; with classroom instruction (including the almost ubiquitous PowerPoint presentations); with associated assessment tasks, or with materials posted on the university Learner Management System. The student pro-

files and anecdotal records are drawn from the TAFE sector of our dual sector institution. Collectively they indicate (at least in part) the diversity of learning challenges faced and strategies employed by tertiary entry level students who 'learn differently'.

2. Working constructs

Unlike personnel trained for work in access or disability services, learning advisors when asked to work with an increasing number of students designated as demonstrating 'learning difficulties' may feel inadequately prepared. However, there are many opportunities for further professional development, often found within organisations and networks devoted to promoting a greater community understanding of terms such as 'autism' or 'dyslexia'. The resources that have been particularly influential in the development of our thinking are included here as professional development opportunities so as to indicate 'where we are coming from' and as exemplars of sources for 'knowing about' learning difficulties. We note too, that despite the description and categorisation of 'difficulties', this is a field characterised by highly nuanced terminology. The VET Development Centre (VET, 2016) provides webinars, workshops and conferences for teachers working within the Australian Vocational Education and Training sector. Guest (and inspirational) presenters at VDC seminars have included consultants experienced in working with students with 'learning disorders'. The co-founder and current Director of the Learning Disabilities (LD) Network is also a member of the Victoria Department of Education's Learning Difficulties and Dyslexia Reference Group. Their workshop, *Addressing Dyslexia and Specific Learning Disorders in the Classroom*, has been repeated for sell-out sessions (VDC, 2017). The peak body for Specific Learning Difficulties in Victoria (SPELD) meets with government and the community to advocate for increased awareness. Both SPELD Victoria (speldvic, n.d) and SPELD NSW (speldnsw, 2017) support professionals who work with and teach those with Specific Learning Difficulties and provide professional development in the form of courses, conferences, seminars and workshops throughout the year. Learning Difficulties Australia (2017) is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties. Maintaining that their recommended teaching practices are based on scientific research, LDA conducts seminars and conferences (sometimes in collaboration with SPELD) to promote effective teaching practices. The Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training (ADCET 2017) provides a wealth of information and resources for academics, teachers and students on inclusive practices within the post-secondary education sector. These resources are invariably directed toward the classroom teacher, but once you accept that academic advisors have a meaningful role to play in the amelioration of learning difficulties, advice for classroom teachers can be readily appropriated by individual learning consultants/advisors. Checklists of recommended steps for accommodating students' needs can be used by all learning support staff. Other professional development activities of value are networking days convened by individual educational institutions or special interest groups, focussing on providing for diverse student communities and funded to include Learning Advisors from other centres. These offer a productive basis for the development and sharing of operational guidelines. In-house Professional Development days for study support staff and facilitated by an external consultant can also be a means of consolidating shared experiences and reviewing current teaching principles and practices.

The scope and ready availability of resources and advice can however, be overwhelming. The identification of key constructs within the literature (as noted in our introduction) is problematic, and hence the risk of incorrectly employing particular terms is considerable. Apart from the complexity of unravelling terms such as 'learning disabilities', 'learning disorders', and 'learning problems' (SPELD NSW, 2017) we also learn that

Learning difficulties can be caused by internal factors ... AND/OR, external factors ... Internal factors are intrinsic to the individual, can cause a person to learn differently, are usually life-long, and ... usually considered a learning

disability – also referred to as a specific learning difficulty.... Dyslexia is generally considered to be a learning disability, or specific learning difficulty. (Learning Difficulties Australia, 2017)

From a different perspective and in a footnote to their paper, ‘Meeting the needs of learners with autism spectrum disorders: Universal design for learning’, Domings, Crevecoer, and Ralabate (2014, p. 21) note that although they agree with the view of autism self-advocates that autism is part of [their] individuality and therefore should not be separated in language like a disorder or disability, it can also be argued that barriers in the curriculum, in essence, lead to ‘disabled’ learners.

The argument that learners can become ‘disabled’ by their learning environment (course work, learning resources, assessment tasks, modes of delivery) informs much of our later discussion. Distinctions are important and best understood by professionals in the field. Indeed, much of our interest in professional development may spring from a fear of not fully understanding the fundamental issues at stake. How many of us have been reminded that we are not Special Education teachers? Learning advisors have a strong case in arguing for the systemic and facilitated collaboration of teachers, access staff and learning advisors.

Three-way collaboration between teaching staff, AccessAbility services and learning advice units is not always readily achieved, nor is it necessarily premised by individual students’ agreeing to (and preferably attending) discussions of how to meet their needs. Much of our AccessAbility advisor’s work involves negotiating reasonable adjustments to assessment tasks, and the outcomes are often satisfactory. However, in the absence of an overall understanding of learner diversity there may be a failure on the part of course coordinators to readily make accommodations. Further, explicit and implicit prejudice and misunderstandings on the part of teachers and peers may be communicated to students with learning difficulties to the point that students may not seek consideration (May & Stone, 2014). The AccessAbility advisor’s role then becomes one of demystifying perceptions of learning differences. But most problematic for learning advisors seeking models of best practice is that much of the literature and advice on providing for learning difficulties is underpinned by a deficit model of student learning (Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). From this perspective the student is seen as essentially lacking in the ability to manage and master what have been designated as normal or ‘expected’ academic requirements. As a consequence, the focus of learner support and/or intervention is more likely to be designed around ‘props’ or accommodations for particular students rather than any holistic critical analysis of the expectations posed by their coursework.

In reflecting on and sharing our own attempts to better understand the concept of learning differences; what it means to be a student identified as requiring support; how as learning advisors and access staff to properly provide for increasingly diverse needs; and finally, how to use one’s understandings to work with greater effect; we identified a major tension within our work and our capacity to identify its future direction. Unequivocally, steps ought to be taken to maximise any student’s capacity to learn. With measures including assistive technologies, supplementary or adjunct teaching, individual support and customised accommodations within course delivery, the emphasis is on facilitating an individual’s increased capacity to meet given requirements by ameliorating the negative effects of (if not overcoming) an acknowledged difficulty. A different approach is to improve access and participation on the part of all learners by reviewing the content and conditions of their learning environment(s). After outlining four profiles of individual students registered with our AccessAbility unit and/or attending LAS consultations, and the steps taken to support their learning, we take up in more detail the notion of learners being ‘disabled’ by the learning environment and the challenges that this perspective provides.

3. Learner Profiles

The promotion of individual agency is fundamental to the work of learning advisors, support professionals and teachers, and individual agency is predicated on a sense of self. In our experience, it is not unusual for students (and in some cases their families) to use an assigned appellation when first introducing themselves and presenting for help with a particular assignment or their studies more generally. Volunteered information such as, “I’m dyslexic” or “I suffer from dyslexia” or “He’s on the spectrum”, is not infrequently offered in the same way that students may report, “I haven’t studied for years” or “I’m the world’s greatest procrastinator”. Should this be a cue for us to immediately make further specific enquiries? Or is it more appropriate to respond with a more general remark such as, “students often find tertiary or formal studies hard at first” or “let’s have a look at what you are working on ...”, and then use the concrete and specific task at hand as a basis for determining the nature of the barrier(s) with which this particular student is contending?

Study support personnel undoubtedly develop and refine their own *modus operandi*. Despite ongoing self-managed professional development (a career pathway that many learning advisors share), the demands of adequately responding to students presenting themselves as having ‘learning difficulties’ are not easy to codify. As an introduction to the scenarios presented here, we have summarised our ways of working during individual consultations. LAS appointments usually progress as follows: establish the primary reason for the student having made the appointment; move as quickly as possible from the general to the specific; check what is expected and the progress made to date; support the learner in identifying and articulating immediately apparent stumbling blocks; work together on the particular task (usually through modelling or scaffolding) until there is some indication of mastery; then, broaden the framework to locate the task at hand (and achievement so far) within the student’s overall studies; seek to determine whether the difficulties as presented are indicative of a more general barrier to learning; offer follow-up or continuing appointments (again with specific tasks and progress to date); if appropriate, ensure the student is aware of other relevant on campus support services, then ascertain whether other services have been accessed. This is a lot to cover in a single 50-minute session, although individual records of LAS support sessions show that a single session may be sufficient for developing strategies to manage a particular task. Additional appointments are offered if deemed necessary by the student. Shorter ‘drop-in sessions’ rarely extend beyond working on the particular (usually assessment) task at hand, but are sometimes preliminaries to or follow-ups to longer appointments. Some students are proactive, register with AccessAbility services at the start of the semester and make enquiries about study (LAS) support. Others are reluctant to disclose at the outset that they find studying difficult. Students too, can be surprised that the demands of their course leave them feeling unable to participate. Teachers are recommended to provide contact details of AccessAbility services in a sensitive manner. For students registered with the service, and with the student’s permission, an Education Access Plan is drafted and forwarded by email to their teachers and to LAS advisors. The plan does two things: it outlines the impact of the disability upon the student’s studies, and it makes recommendations for reasonable adjustments.

In reflecting on the adequacy of our overall approach to providing for students’ ‘learning differences’, a recurring issue has been that of individual agency, particularly as it relates to the ‘scaffolding’ of students’ work, or of ‘self-sufficiency’ in the management of their learning. Scaffolding is an accepted teaching strategy and an important aspect of providing for individual differences (Munro, 2016). In their analysis of scaffolding theory however, Wilson and Devereux (2014) argue that since the ultimate objective of our work is student autonomy, scaffolds should be conceptualised as temporary aids to growth. However, determining whether and how scaffolding is leading to a learner’s increased participation in mainstream studies is in practice, less than straightforward. Perhaps the growth towards independence is quite simply slower for some students than for others: an issue worthy of future research across the broader student community. In some instances, there may have to be provision for prolonged individual support as a means of

maintaining morale until the implementation of course accommodations and adjustments permit a sense of self-sufficiency.

The following examples of student approaches to learning, together with the use made of support services, have been chosen to further illustrate the kinds of uncertainties potentially arising from our roles as learning advisor and AccessAbility advisor. Each is necessarily an abridged version of interactions extending over protracted periods and all names have been changed.

3.1. “Anthony”

Anthony registered with AccessAbility services three years ago and is now in his fourth year of study. He initially reported that he had been diagnosed as dyslexic and was starting to struggle with his Certificate IV course. Anthony first attended AccessAbility services with his concerned and supportive parent. An Education Access plan with a series of recommendations was prepared and forwarded to his teachers. These included the following: additional time may be required to complete assessment tasks; Anthony will need to negotiate any extensions with the relevant academic prior to the submission date; for in-class tests he will need additional writing time and the use of a computer; discretion may be needed in relation to the student’s spelling in assessments or exams. Further specific requests of the student’s class teachers were that they provide any hard copy notes (or learning materials) in digital form so Anthony could customise them to suit his needs, and to accommodate his using a note-taker and a laptop to record notes in class. In practice and after consultation with course teachers a note taker to type notes for Anthony in class was provided but eventually ceased as confidence in his word processing skills increased. Anthony’s study load was reduced slightly with quite complicated enrolment issues being supported by course coordinators and AccessAbility staff. For the initial year his progress was monitored by the AccessAbility advisor and discussed with the student’s teachers and parent. Anthony’s part time and supported studies continued for another two years – but with all enrolment matters being navigated by himself. Notably, Anthony’s teachers reported that although his handwriting remained difficult to read, his increasingly competent word-processing skills had given “a very professional finish to his work”. Presumably this meant it was easier for his teachers to read his work. For his fourth year Anthony embarked on undergraduate studies. He did not require a note taker for classes or lectures. Equitable exam arrangements were put in place and he reported to AccessAbility that he was “going well”. Anthony had not at any stage sought the support of the LAS unit.

3.2. “Ivan”

On requesting support from the AccessAbility unit, Ivan reported that he had been diagnosed as living with a Spectrum Disorder: Autism. A negotiated series of accommodations (Education Access Plan) was then forwarded by the advisor to both the student’s course coordinator and the Learning and Academic Skills unit. Ivan’s Plan and recommended adjustments included the following: the student may at first seem shy in class; he will require additional time to process new information; he will benefit from repetition of key points; Ivan has difficulty with abstract concepts and maintaining concentration; he can become anxious when stressed; he will need extra time for assessment tasks. Ivan’s teachers were also advised that the student would be provided with a note taker for all classes. Ivan was enrolled in a Certificate course with defined pathways into undergraduate studies in the humanities. After his meetings with the AccessAbility advisor, Ivan voluntarily made an appointment with the LAS unit and continued to present for regular individual consultations to discuss his course work. Ivan explained that he had anticipated being required to “read a lot and to write essays” but added that “living with Asperger’s means I have to learn at my own pace”. From the start, Ivan appeared very nervous whenever attempting an assignment task that required him to evaluate and compare information or ideas. Secondly, he expressed a preference for “getting the facts right” and for regularly reiterating new information or ideas in his own words prior to proceeding with a task. Over several study support sessions it

became obvious that Ivan had (and was perfecting) a strategy for making sense of and incorporating new information. Our working together increasingly included his voluntarily using the whiteboard to offer explanations or summaries of what he had just taken on board ... “what you really mean is that ...”. His depictions were invariably creative and accurate. Having acquired this sense of mastery Ivan increasingly volunteered and elaborated on specific instances of difficulties encountered when comparing ideas. Added to this was his frustration with any apparent ambiguity in assignment instructions. Throughout our further sessions and when addressing these barriers Ivan’s insistence on checking and rechecking “what he really means is ...” or “in other words what you are saying is ...” remained fundamental to his progress. It seemed an easy enough strategy to accept and work with.

3.3. “Edward”

Edward was referred to AccessAbility Services by his Vocational Certificate course coordinator. He presented with very little information pertaining to his claimed learning disability – only a school report from several years ago. From interviews with the AccessAbility advisor the following were ascertained: Edward has a mild learning disability; he has difficulty following instructions and understanding complex information; because he is slower processing new information, he takes longer to understand and learn. Subsequent AccessAbility recommendations for Edward’s support (Education Access Plan) included: the provision of an in-class Education Access Worker together with a list of recommendations for his class teachers: some course work will need to be scaffolded; extra time to complete work may be needed; key concepts may need to be repeated to assist Edward’s retention of information; an explanation of key concepts, important dates and information may also be required, while it will be necessary to arrange extensions to dates for completing and submitting assessment tasks. It was also suggested that Edward use a diary to organise his course work and interestingly the request that Edward “is allocated into a mature group for any group work tasks.” In practice, Edward has been assigned an Access Worker whose role is to accompany him to class, and to assist him in following instructions, keeping up with the class and organising his work. Edward was also advised of the services of the LAS unit and his Access Education Plan forwarded. To date, although LAS learning advisors have offered to visit Edward’s classrooms and to work out a program of individual support, there has been little requirement to do so. The implementation of AccessAbility recommendations within the classroom and liaison between the unit and class teachers remains the primary means of meeting Edward’s learning needs.

3.4. “Assif”

Assif made an appointment to speak with a LAS advisor at the suggestion one of his teachers because he was having difficulty writing extended text. Feedback from his teachers included corrections to spelling, sentence structure and paragraphing. One teacher suggested that because Assif had been born overseas to non-English speaking parents he could benefit from specialist ESL teaching. Assif rejected the idea completely, explaining that he had come to Australia as a very young child and had “always spoken English easily.” With an alarming frankness he reported that in gaining a previous tertiary qualification he had “probably flown under the radar” because his studies had required mainly writing with dot points and within templates “so that [he] still couldn’t write properly.” To date, and over an extended period the steps Assif has taken have included the following: enrolling in a course with units covering grammar principles and structured and creative writing; regularly attending individual LAS appointments to review progress with assigned course work tasks and to develop self-editing skills; employing a private tutor and assiduously adopting recommended writing techniques such as highlighting and focussing on one sentence at a time; centring attention on the tense(s) used within a paragraph, and reading his own writing aloud. But Assif’s preferred approach has been to practise and practise the driest of dry grammar exercises. And the overall outcome of this strategy has remained disappointing.

Perhaps Assif's struggles are related to a learning difficulty. But in considering such I found it difficult to introduce the subject. Is the role the learning advisor in these instances necessarily problematic? It was explained to the student that as a LAS advisor I was aware of (but not trained to conduct) assessments designed to give a detailed picture of the ways in which a person learnt, applied and recorded new information and that I thought this might be helpful in our working out what next steps to take. Because Assif seemed interested, he was provided with information about our AccessAbility service and contacted them. Assif kept his appointment but did not follow through with the suggestion that an assessment of his learning style might be useful. Assif has advised LAS since, that he is continuing with his studies, will continue to come for support with his assignments, has employed a private tutor who will concentrate on spelling and vocabulary extension (and who has reassured him he was not dyslexic), and that he is certain that his self-directed grammar studies are providing him with "clicks that make me feel I can write". An example of a "click" is realising that he is writing about the past (or future) and that he can self-edit his work by looking for, underlining and then checking all the verbs used "... now that I know what a verb is". The promotion of individual agency is arguably a central tenet of the learning advisor's role. It follows therefore that this includes embracing and supporting learning differences such as that exhibited by Assif.

4. Exploring the learning advisor's role

Differentiated support and instruction is the logical extension of a perspective that acknowledges and provides for individual difficulties. It is consistent with professional advice as to how needs may be categorised and provided for. In practice, differentiated support can be implemented at two levels: within course delivery, through accommodation and customisation designed for a particular student, and within consultations, by 'helping' individual students to meet given requirements. But differentiated support often runs the risk of dependency or a lack of individual agency, primarily because the management of particular circumstances by or for a student may not be generalised. Our individual records include students returning for appointments with little evidence of having transferred learned strategies to new but similar tasks. An alternative approach is to ask whether it is the requirements themselves, or at least the conditions under which they are to be reached, that need re-examination. This is where learning and AccessAbility advisors can make a critical contribution at the institutional level. It involves an extension of their role to include close collaboration with curriculum writers and academics.

Provision for the participation of previously excluded groups within tertiary education and the development of inclusive practices is perhaps best represented in educationists' exploration and elaboration of the concept of a Universal Design for Learning (National Centre on Universal Design for Learning, 2015). UDL is a curriculum framework that incorporates not only support for learning but a set of principles for reducing barriers to full participation by all learners. UDL curricula rest on three principles: multiple means of representation; multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2017). Universal Design for Learning encompasses the Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) framework wherein instruction is designed not for the average student but for "potential students who have broad ranges with respect to ability, disability, age, reading level, learning style, native language, race and ethnicity" (Burgstahler, 2017, p.1). Within a UDL framework 'reasonable adjustment' is reconceptualised. Instead of modifying or 'tweaking' practices to accommodate identified individuals, likely needs are anticipated, delineated and used as starting points in the initial planning and design stages of curriculum writing. The implementation of UDL principles does not however, render differentiated instruction (DI) as being irrelevant within diverse student communities. The intersection of UDL and DI principles is that whereas "UDL emphasises proactive design of the environment and curricula ... DI emphasises responding to individual needs" (CAST, 2013).

Our experience suggests that learning advisors when working with curriculum committees in the planning and preparation of course content and its delivery are likely to find the implementation

of UDL principles, as a strategy for inclusion, both a long term goal and in practice one fraught with problems. From their study of student perspectives on teaching methods and strategies, and the alignment of those with UDL/UDI principles, Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin (2015) recommend that in addition to training in recognising the needs of students, and in order to establish the ways in which curricula may be disabling students, teaching staff ought to liaise more closely with disability service offices. We would add, and with all units delivering learning support. At the same time, it must be recognised that a collaborative approach to the development of curricula in which barriers to learning are minimised and wherein the principles of multiple means of representation, expression and engagement are operative, might seem nothing more than fanciful to staff who are constrained by the real and perceived requirements of Vocational Education Training Packages; limited planning time; the increasing casualisation of their profession, and a sense of being inadequately trained for the tasks of revising existing course content and associated assessment tasks around a new set of principles.

At a recent meeting of AccessAbility and LAS advisors with mainstream teachers to discuss ways in which a Diploma course could be reviewed and made 'both accessible and on par' for one of our students in particular and therefore, for all students, it was proposed that the course material should be reformatted to include pictures, diagrams and videos; that assessments be adjusted to lessen the requirement for analyses of observations, role-plays or non-verbal cues, and that all written materials be digitised. It was immediately apparent such an undertaking could only be undertaken as a team based project. But further, reference to relevant previous studies (within the Vocational Education Sector) showed that even within large-scale projects designed to develop strategies for the individualised and institutional-level support of students with disabilities, the ongoing and systemic role of learning advisors remained poorly defined (Fossey, Chaffey, Ven-ville, Ennals, Douglas, & Bigby, 2015).

We suggest that UDL/UDI principles provide a way of working for both learning advisors and support staff even when operating within curricula which are by no means inclusive. While students often present for support with only vaguely defined needs, others are adamant as to what is impeding their studies. While this is hardly surprising it does raise the issue of where we might start within our individual sessions. Professional development programs centring on individual learning differences provide invaluable 'awareness training' and practical teaching resources. On the other hand, the three guiding principles of UDL of representation, expression and engagement offer a way of 'unpicking' what can appear as a tangled web of primary and secondary sticking points. Directing attention to the ways in which a required learning task and/or the associated resources is 'represented' and whether the student has access to that representation suggests a worthwhile starting point. While 'Interpreting the topic' is a regular part of our work with all students, students who think or learn differently may benefit from the task being imaginatively 're-represented' on our part. In turn, providing an appropriate 're-representation' may mean drawing on our understanding of how differently learners may learn. Secondly, the means by which learners 'express' their comprehension or mastery of a topic should be multiple. As learning advisors we do not have the responsibility of formally assessing students and can only make recommendations as to individual accommodations, but we can invite students to demonstrate their current levels of understanding in ways other than specified (or implied) in course outlines, and thereby gain insight into a learner's knowledge. In this way learning advisors (if working within a collaborative environment) can potentially add to those alternative forms of assessment devised by course writers, teachers and students during periods of curricula review. The third principle, 'engagement' is perhaps most readily realised through opportunities to increase students' motivation. We all know that facilitated access to learning resources and the chance to demonstrate understanding in various ways are empowering. The application of UDL principles to the delivery of individual support is best seen as an orientation to the overall goal of inclusion. It offers a perspective which takes learning difficulties as being (at least in part) manifestations of the learn-

ing requirements as specified, or more importantly, as interpreted by an individual student. Learning advisors can make a practical contribution to the development of inclusive curricula by using their documented experience from within study support sessions to help anticipate the nature and scope of learning requirements. In other words, if we can learn from the students who seek learning support why aspects of courses appear insurmountable, we are well placed to contribute to the development of inclusive curricula.

Less interventionist than a call for the application of UDL principles across curricula at the planning (design) stage, but more immediately influential at an institutional or systemic level than the restricted adoption of UDL principles within one to one sessions, is the practice of embedded skills development through the collaboration of course teachers and learning advisors. 'Embedding' as a pedagogical strategy is consistent with the objective of developing curricula designed to benefit all students rather than providing adjunct support only for students identified as 'at-risk' (Veitch, Johnson & Mansfield, 2016). It is a mode of delivery with which learning advisors are quite familiar and conceptualised by Briguglio (2014) as a continuum, the Multi-layered model of language development provision (MMLDP) whereby the role of learning advisors decreases as mainstream teachers increasingly assume an informed responsibility for the development of essential academic skills. The embedded delivery of the skills underpinning a course is consistent with and perhaps should be seen as a stage in the construction of inclusive curricula. However, learner diversity will only be properly acknowledged if the requisite capabilities of the 'host' course are scrutinised together with the various ways in which these might be acquired and demonstrated. Chanock (2013) points to the necessity of gaining entrance to the "focus, scope, structure and approach of a subject" (p. A106) if learning advisors are to make a relevant contribution. To this we would add the need to anticipate the likely range of course participants' learner attributes. Particularly salient to our discussion is that underpinning Chanock's (2013) description of the online delivery of academic competencies is the author's 'knowledge' of the points at which students are most likely to become 'stuck'. And this 'knowing' comes from an accumulated wisdom gained through listening to and watching students during individual learning support consultations, where the focus can be on a learners' particular definitions of requirements and the strategies they so far have in meeting them. Further, monitoring and reviewing embedded delivery within the classroom provides a second source of insight into how students learn in various contexts. Learning advisors are well placed to witness both.

A review of research into the effectiveness of adopting UDL principles is beyond the scope of this discussion and we note that Rao, Ok, and Bryant (2014) point to the difficulty of demonstrating such when the research has been characterised by varying study designs and a lack of participant data. At Swinburne it is however, accepted practice for learning advisors and their colleagues to reflect on and share definitions of their roles and the nature of contributions they might make to educational debate. Learning advisors possess a potentially valuable perspective for the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning because not only do they see students from a range of disciplines; they also have an overview of course commonalities, differences, and points at which students encounter problems. Working with students individually or in small groups provides the opportunity for learning advisors to experience at first hand and in detail the varying learning strategies students employ. If we also take the opportunity to observe and document student responses within both individual consultations and embedded programs we have the potential to generate a rich source of data for informed collaboration and course improvement. Added to this is the advantage of meeting with students from a wide range of course backgrounds and levels. But to take full advantage of this privileged position requires direction and planning. The proposition that the documentation of our 'helping students learn and perform effectively' could be the basis for evidence based research directed toward improved teaching practice (Chanock, 2007), points to an exciting 'possible role' for advisors working in the area. And in turn it asks that we (or at least the research oriented members of our practising community) give

consideration to developing a methodology for harnessing and processing the accumulated experience from learning how our students learn.

5. Conclusion

This paper suggests ways by which we, as learning advisors and AccessAbility support staff can best contribute to an imagined future for students who self-refer or are referred to us because they are experiencing learning difficulties. Although within the literature the term ‘learning difficulties’ is at times used to denote specific circumstances of individual impairment, we suggest that within educational discussions the term often references broader meanings. Learning is experienced as ‘difficult’ when expectations and experience are mismatched. We ought not to be surprised when an increasingly diverse student cohort includes students whose learning styles differ markedly from the mythical ‘average’ student. In other words, some students learn differently and we might legitimately refer to ‘learning differences’. Further, when learning support is sought because difficulties have been encountered, the deficit may not lie in students’ capabilities but within the curriculum within which they are operating. Evidence based research that takes account of the lived experience of learners, of individually experienced barriers to full participation and that acknowledges the relevance of anecdotal (personal) accounts is clearly relevant (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Calder & Daly, 2009). Within this context the potential value of qualitative enquiry and its associated methodologies is obvious. Our immediate task is to provide spaces for learners to show us why grasping defined learning objectives is often almost too hard. At the same time, we should be acknowledging that understandings may legitimately be expressed in different ways. Through careful observation, listening, imaginative scaffolding and comprehensive documentation we as learning advisors are potentially in a position of providing relevant feedback for research into, and the development of, inclusive learning practices. The proposition that individual agency can best be promoted by scrutinising the learning environment within which competency is expected is challenging. It is arguably particularly pertinent to educational settings brave enough to acknowledge that many of their students ‘learn differently’ and best promoted by learning advisors and AccessAbility staff who witness at close hand students’ ‘learning differences’.

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