



## **Supporting university students with socially challenging behaviours through professional development for teaching staff.**

### **Key Words**

disability, staff development, social inclusion

### **Abstract**

In Australia and globally there is an increase in the numbers of students presenting with diagnosed and undiagnosed equity and social inclusion considerations related to disabilities and medical conditions, including mental health. This increase is due in part to greater recognition of these conditions, increased diagnosis, greater willingness to disclose, the pressures of higher education, students' ages and living conditions, and general increases in population (Stallman 2010; Kilpatrick et al 2016). Attention in Australian universities focuses primarily on the students, in terms of services such as counselling and accommodations such as time or equipment, rather than on professional development for staff in how to support these students in their learning activities and interactions. Murdoch University is one such Australian university, albeit one that has championed social inclusion throughout its forty-year history. As academic staff working in the area of student learning, we became aware of the incongruence between students' needs and staff knowledge and capacity in terms of responding to what are largely perceived as students' challenging behaviours, behaviours that may be 'challenging' to the students themselves, their peers, and staff. This paper argues that professional development for staff, and in particular teaching staff, concerning understanding the diversity of students' behaviours is largely missing in the context of Australian higher education, and is needed. A focus on staff development is as necessary as, and compliments, the focus on supporting students through accommodations and support services. The paper discusses a collaboration between Learning Support, Equity and Social Inclusion, and Counselling to develop an introductory workshop for staff at Murdoch University. The workshop includes a specific focus on staff responses to students' socially challenging behaviours in terms of why and how staff may feel 'challenged'. Within this approach, the staff-student interaction is first and foremost a social interaction: it is the social dynamics that are the initial challenge for both the students and the staff and that must be considered before moving on to the actual teaching and learning context of university education. Developing more nuanced responses to and awareness of 'challenging behaviours' is an essential prerequisite for productively attending to students' academic needs and academic development. This position will be discussed with reference to student diversity, transformative education, and Gidley et al's preference for "models of possibility instead of models of deficiency" (2010, 135).

### **References**

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