

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

Key Words

Learning Advisors, Disability support

Abstract

Our increasingly diverse student cohorts within both Higher Education and Vocational Education courses now include persons experiencing a range of learning difficulties. Perhaps this makes our roles as learning advisors increasingly salient. It also raises the issue of whether we, as academic advisors, ought to continue to draw on a perspective which essentially defines an individual student as someone who needs special 'help' to cope with what is accepted as given or 'normal' academic requirements. In other words, whether a 'deficit model' of student learning whereby the student is essentially seen as 'lacking' is a legitimate framework from which to operate. An alternative perspective is to ask if it is the requirements themselves, or at least the conditions under which they are to be reached, that need re-examination. And who should instigate such a revision? We would suggest that carving out the most constructive role(s) for academic advisors is problematic. There are wonderful Professional Development opportunities for learning advisors, support staff and teachers seeking to become more informed about the learning challenges faced by students experiencing learning difficulties. Sometimes the focus is on learners and their ways of learning, at other times on making the learning environment more inclusive. Guides to the resources we have found most useful will be included in this presentation. The principles of inclusion and equity require that all students have full access to whatever they need in order to pursue realistic study aspirations with confidence. Although institutional arrangements for ensuring full access do vary, at Swinburne University of Technology two of the several services that are directly involved with seeking to understand and provide for students who struggle with their studies are the AccessAbility team and the Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) unit. Using documented case-studies from each of these units we would like to share instances where barriers to successful student participation have been overcome. Additionally, instances of limited or negligible progress are proffered for further analysis and discussion. Our case-studies include instances where the care of students has focussed on the individual student and learner characteristics. Other examples centre on the content and delivery of courses in an effort to isolate specific barriers to full participation. For each case-study the steps taken by support and advisory staff are offered for discussion and scrutiny. We conclude by asking whether 'Universal design' principles within curriculum development, while providing a useful perspective for a clear statement of policies of equity and inclusion, and the reassessment of learning experiences (Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin, 2015), might also provide a starting point for a clarification of the kinds of practical steps accessibility workers and learning advisors ought to be taking when responding to students with learning differences.

References

Black, R D, Weinberg, L A & Brodwin, M G 2015, 'Universal Design for Learning and Instruction: Perspectives of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education', *Exceptionality Education International*, vol. 25, no.2, pp.1-26.

