

# Federation University Submission to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education (2005)

## Disability access and participation at Federation University

Federation University has a strong commitment to aspiration, participation and attainment for students with disability, providing excellence in the provision of accessible facilities and services, reasonable adjustment, Learning Access Plans (LAPs) and a culture of inclusion.

The University has the highest proportion of students identifying as having disability in Victoria and has consistently ranked highest in Victorian universities for the past five years for students identifying as having disability (9.45% in most recent data).

The University's Disability and Learning Access Unit (DLAU) is currently supporting approximately 840 students.

Federation University is drafting a three-year (2021-2024) Disability Action Plan led by a working group comprised of staff and students with lived experience of disability and with significant expertise in accessibility and universal access design.

## Feedback on the Standards

In providing feedback, Federation University acknowledges the 2010 and 2015 reviews of the Disability Standards for Education and notes that the reports from both of those reviews made recommendations, some of which may still be in train. This acknowledgement includes the provision of Guidance Notes to the Standards, to assist in interpreting them.

### 1) Updated definition of *Disability*

The current definition of *Disability* in the Standards uses language that does not reflect contemporary and respectful descriptions. The terms 'malfunction', 'malformation', and 'disturbed behaviour' are antiquated and should be replaced to reflect current language about disability widely used and acknowledged as both useful and respectful by people with disability, disability advocacy organisations and peak bodies. Reference to the *Social Model* of disability, which is widely accepted, would be advantageous, that recognises where people with disability may be 'disabled' by a lack of access or barriers to participation.

### 2) Clarity of terms: *Reasonable Adjustment, Unjustifiable Hardship, On the Same Basis*

While the Guidance Notes to the Standards seek to clarify the definition of the terms *Reasonable Adjustment, Unjustifiable Hardship* and *On the Same Basis*, provision of specific examples of what is and is not reasonable, what constitutes hardship and what 'on the same basis' means for provision of learning, is required.

### **3) Embedding *Universal Design* in curriculum development and education of academics**

*Universal Design* should be defined, addressed and supported by the Standards. Guiding literature should point educators and educational institutions towards information that ensures an awareness of universal design and implementation as best-practice, removing the requirement in some cases for reasonable adjustments.

### **4) *Inherent Requirements***

*Inherent Requirements* (IR) are the essential components of a course or unit, as well as knowledge and skills required to achieve key learning outcomes while maintaining the academic integrity of the course. The University may be able to provide reasonable adjustments that enable students to meet these requirements.

In some cases, there may be core activities, tasks or skills that cannot be fully met, even with reasonable adjustments. The Standards talk briefly to IRs, however, do not go into enough depth to support users to apply them. A better definition of IRs would help this process. There would also be value in some direction and support (through funding in addition to education) to tertiary institutions to develop consistent IRs across comparable courses. Developing and promulgating IR's to students prior to enrolment, whilst also promoting reasonable adjustments and academic integrity is key to ensuring students are not set up to fail.

### **5) Students as Carers**

The rights of students who are a carer for someone with a disability is not specifically covered in the Standards. The term '*Associates*', loosely covers students who are carers but does not adequately set out the rights of carers with regard to reasonable adjustments.

### **6) Tools for raising awareness and understanding of the Standards**

The provision of supporting toolkits for education institutions to ensure compliance with each area of the Standards is necessary to move broad use of the Standards toward a proactive and powerful guiding document rather than an enforcement checklist to be used retrospectively when complaints are raised.

A toolkit in plain language might outline key criteria and provide best-practice examples for:

- Enrolment
- Participation
- Curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
- Student support services and
- Elimination of harassment and victimisation

## Feedback on supporting elements

### **7) A better funding model for tertiary institutions, specifically TAFE/VET.**

Currently disability funding for tertiary institutions is heavily biased towards Higher Education (HE) providers with no additional or equivalent funding available for Vocational Education and Training (VET), including dual sector institutions. It is difficult to achieve the objectives of the Disability Discrimination Act (Com. 1992) (DDA) in these environments, even if the Standards are well defined, without adequate funding – particularly for support and reasonable adjustment.

Promotion of self-identification for students with disability as a positive and self-affirming action will be crucial for a workable funding model, where monies allocated are linked directly to student numbers, as many students do not disclose due to fear of discrimination and stigma.

### **8) Gaps around transition**

Students with disabilities are not prepared effectively for transition to tertiary education. These students often arrive without any knowledge of the tertiary system and can be disheartened due to negative experiences in the secondary school system and with the VCAA. In some cases, this leads to students failing to disclose their disability, which means they miss out on crucial early interventions that might make the difference between success or failure. The Standards could better address this transition phase and more education and awareness-raising could be done to remove this obstacle. While the National Disability Coordination Officer program (NDCO) takes carriage of improving transition for students to further education, more could be done to support students in their final years of school.

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