



Disclosure Anytime During Study

Into the Swing of Study

Post secondary education and/or training is a significant commitment of time and effort and often involves courses that may take several years to complete. Students have to find ways to stay motivated, to survive financially and to manage competing demands for their time and energy.

Students with a disability also have to manage their disability related needs including the impact of a busy study timetable on their health and well-being. For some students, living away from family and other supports, often for the first time, can also provide some challenges as well as enjoyable experiences, including being more independent. It is possible for many students with a disability that it will only be once they are well into their course that they are faced with a decision about disclosing their disability.

Disclosure During Study

Often being a student can involve a commitment of several years. Many changes can occur in a student's circumstances, including a change in how a disability impacts on a daily basis, acquiring a disability or chronic medical condition, changes to personal situation and increased workloads at University or TAFE. All or any of these circumstances can be a catalyst to a student needing to consider whether or not they disclose their disability while studying.

Some students tend not to disclose their disability in the early stages of their course, sometimes for fear of discrimination, and sometimes because they are able to manage their workload. However, every student's situation can change for a variety of reasons and this may impact on their decision to disclose.

It is possible for students at anytime during their studies to unexpectedly acquire a disability or to experience a deterioration in an existing disability or medical condition. This may result in the student needing to disclose their disability to seek support to continue their course. Occasionally, students disclose their disability at a time of crisis, because they did not anticipate potential issues or difficulties, which may arise in any course of study.

As these are unexpected circumstances, a student may require disability support to be put in place quite quickly, to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in their study. This may or may not be possible depending on the level of support required.

Students have a number of opportunities to disclose their disability during their study, if they choose to, such as disability support staff, counseling service staff and teaching staff:

Disability Support Staff or Counseling Service Staff

When Joe applied to do welfare studies he was aware that there would be practical placements he would need to complete as part of his course requirement. Unfortunately, Joe had not anticipated the added stress of doing a practical placement on a full time basis and he discovered that he could not manage the workload without serious consequences to his health. At this point Joe decided to disclose his disability and seek some assistance.

Students often contact the disability support service staff or counseling service at their institution when they are in crisis. Disability support service staff or counseling service staff may provide a valuable support at this time, assisting the student to identify their needs and to develop an appropriate plan of action to address the situation. Disability staff, in consultation with the student, may also negotiate education related adjustments with teaching staff, especially when a student does not wish to disclose personal information about their disability.

Belinda has been advised that she will need to undergo further treatment, involving hospitalisation for some time. Belinda has a very good relationship with her course coordinator and so has decided to approach him directly to negotiate some arrangements to support her both during her hospitalisation and at the time of returning to her study.

Students also have the option of approaching teachers to negotiate directly with them for any education related adjustments or supports they require. To do this effectively, the student will need to be clear about the reasons for disclosing at this time and what support will be required.

On occasions a meeting of disability support staff, academic staff and the student is an effective way of developing a responsive plan for moving forward.

Why Students Choose To Disclose

Jannette is in her second year of study and has noticed that she is becoming more tired, finding it difficult to continue to attend lectures and tutorials, and complete assessments in a timely manner. She has therefore decided that she may need some minor educational adjustments to ensure that she keeps up with her classmates. For this reason she has decided to notify the disability service staff at her institution to find out about her options and to discuss her needs.

Students may choose to disclose their disability at any time during their studies because:

- their personal circumstances may change, such as a student acquiring a disability or medical condition
- a student's disability may progress and its impact on daily living may also increase
- a student may feel more confident that disclosing at this time will not lead to discrimination
- course requirements including fieldwork or excursions may highlight issues in relation to a disability
- a student may have identified specific supports that will enable them to participate in their course, on an equal basis with other students.

Why Students Choose Not to Disclose

Ashraf has almost completed his 3 year course and has not needed to disclose his disability to academic or other staff. He found it extremely beneficial to have lecture notes available electronically and he was able to organise his timetable in such a way that he could rely on public transport to get him to his classes on time.

Students may choose NOT to disclose their disability at **anytime** during their time of study for several reasons including:

- a belief that they can manage their study and the impact of their disability without additional support or assistance
- they may have put in place adequate structures to ensure that their disability does not impede their study.

Students need to prepare how they would like to disclose their disability. It is important that the information presented is clear and concise and relevant to their study. Very often it is not essential to disclose in-depth medical or personal information about a disability.

The type of information presented to the appropriate person may include:

- what the disability is
- why the student has chosen to disclose their disability
- how the disability and life experiences may positively impact on study
- the type of education related adjustments that may be required while studying
- examples of how education related adjustments have benefited the student in previous educational settings and/or other experiences.

To Whom Should Students Disclose?

Students choose whom they will disclose their disability to based on a variety of issues. These include their preparedness to share information about their disability, their perceptions of other's attitudes to disability, their specific needs and issues at the time and their knowledge of available services.

Students have a number of opportunities to disclose their disability during their study, if they choose to, such as to disability support service staff, counseling service staff and teaching staff.

Purpose of Disclosure

Often students choose to disclose during their study because their circumstances have changed or requirements of their study highlight issues around their disability.

Sometimes the changes are of a crisis nature, at other times they are a response to other circumstances such as at the time of field placements or work experience. Some students will be very clear and feel comfortable about disclosing their disability to a work experience supervisor, for similar reasons to those outlined previously, such as seeking support or education related adjustments, or to raise awareness of disability etc.

Other students may choose not to disclose, either because they are confident that they can manage the placement without additional supports or because they prefer to wait and see how they manage.

It is essential that students state their purpose in disclosing their disability. This ensures that the disclosure can achieve a beneficial outcome. Disclosure is most effective when the student is

“...knowledgeable about their disability and (is) able to articulate both their disability-related needs and their (skills).” (1)

It is not essential or necessary for students to disclose specific medical or personal information about their disability. The most important thing is for the student to identify with their teacher or disability support staff how their disability impacts on their capacity to undertake education, training and study.

Students have a right to:

- seek information about disability support services at anytime during their course.
- appropriate education related adjustments, support and information in relation to their disability to enable them to successfully complete their course.
- have information about their disability treated confidentially and respectfully.
- know what happens to personal information provided to the institution.

Students are responsible for:

- advising staff in a **timely manner** of their needs including the organisation of education related adjustments, support and information
- understanding that disability support service staff may not be able to **effectively** address disability related issues in the education environment if these are not presented to the staff in a timely manner
- understanding the academic core requirements of the course they are undertaking and be aware of any requirements of registration if undertaking a course for a career that involves such registration.

Staff Roles And Responsibilities In Responding To Student Disclosure Anytime During Study Role:

Role:

- to advocate with all other staff on behalf of students with disabilities to ensure access to all services provided by the institution
- to meet or discuss with the student identified issues and inform students about any available support structures
- where appropriate develop a individual education plan with the student, which may include agreements about how much information in relation to the disability can be disclosed to other staff and who will negotiate with staff around required education related adjustments.

Responsibilities:

- to assist students to access appropriate education related adjustments and supports
- to take all reasonable steps to work with students in crisis to identify and implement education related adjustments and supports (*note: staff may not be able to **effectively** address disability related issues in the education environment if these are not presented to staff in a timely manner*)
- to advise students of available support services
- to keep all information confidential, unless the student has provided written consent to have information disclosed
- to be non intrusive and respectful of the student's right to privacy

Responsibilities of Educational Institutions:

- where appropriate, provide education related adjustments and supports that
 - *enable students with disabilities to participate in their course of study on equal terms with other students. An equitable learning environment is created by taking into consideration all aspects of the learning process: students, teaching staff, physical aspects of the environment, the curriculum, delivery strategies, assessment strategies and access to support services*
 - *enable the student with a disability to fulfill the academic requirements of the course.(2)*
- to ensure students with a disability receive non-discriminatory treatment. The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) makes it unlawful for an educational authority to:
 - *discriminate against a person on the grounds of their disability or*
 - *a disability of any of the person's associates*

For information about the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1992 refer to the Disability Discrimination document in this Resource at <http://pubsites.uws.edu.au/ndco/disclosure/legislative/dda.htm#1> or refer to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission website at: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/legislation/index.htm

Footnotes

- (1) Scholl & Mooney, Undated Draft Document, Disclosure in work based learning programs <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/ya/pdffiles/brief3.pdf>
- (2) Students with Disabilities: Code of Practice for Australian Tertiary Institutions. http://www.equity.qut.edu.au/programs/forstudents/disability_services/Disability_Aust_Cod_%20of_Practice.doc