

## Response to the Student Support Policy Discussion Paper on behalf of the University Disability Services Managers network.

This response to the Student Support Policy Discussion Paper is presented on behalf of the University Disability Services Managers network. As a collective body representing disability support managers from various institutions, we have considered the proposed policy. Our response is informed by our extensive experience in advocating for inclusive and equitable higher education environments, as well as our commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of their disability, have access to the support and resources necessary to thrive academically and personally. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute our expertise and insights to this crucial discourse on student support policies and enthusiastically support the abolition of the 50% pass rule and the development of Student Support Guidelines.

### Introduction

Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992, and subsequent Disability Education Standards, universities have had specialised teams working to support student success. They do this by assisting universities to be inclusive of students with disability, putting into place individual adjustments, referring students to other university support services, and developing systems for implementing these supports. We have seen the numbers and range of students seeking our support grow exponentially over the years and, without an equivalent growth in resources, have responded with innovations in the development of individual learning plans, administrative systems, and advocacy, training and development of inclusive practices and universal design for learning (UDL).

While not there yet, we firmly believe that when we get it right for students with disability, we are a long way towards getting it right for all.

### Ideas for consideration

The following ideas relate to the sections in the consultation paper on policy support for individuals, institutional level requirements, and implementing the guidelines.

1. Ensure the guidelines balance both individual support and the development of inclusive practices such as universal design for learning.
2. Offer proactive flexibility and adjustments that are readily available for all students.
3. Provide specialised support and individual planning where strategies and situations are complex.
4. Ensure language is inclusive and empowering, and not deficit or ableist.
5. Develop data systems that assist with analysis for future planning.
6. Provide specific training and support to university staff regarding diversity.
7. Develop systems that support students with episodic or occasional needs for student support.
8. Build independence and capacity building approaches into student support.

### Further information relating to the ideas for consideration.

1. Ensure the guidelines balance both individual support and the development of inclusive practices such as universal design for learning.

The policy response specifically addresses individual student support.

Individual adjustments, support and flexibility, along with supportive and understanding staff can make big differences to student confidence and success. Our experience with individual plans (sometimes known as [Learning Access Plans](#)) shared with relevant academic staff and others across the university is that they are largely very successful in

- providing students a way of not needing to 'retell' their stories,
- ensuring adjustments are put into place, and
- working with the support of disability practitioners, developing specific strategies for complex situations.

With progress in our ability to make use of the data stored in the systems that we use for developing and distributing these plans we are learning

- more about what is working and who it works best for, and
- how we can better systematise and support the implementation of more common adjustments.

Individual plans and approaches also have their limitations. They can

- cause additional stress to academic staff who need to implement adjustments,
- have the potential to elicit assumptions and discrimination regarding students with disability who have plans,
- 'other' or differentiate the students who have plans from those who don't.

In our experience, a focus on inclusive practice and universal design for learning (UDL) is also required to deliver ongoing results. UDL plays a positive role in ensuring universities address systemic issues, as it promotes a proactive approach to dismantling barriers and fostering a more inclusive learning environment. It serves as a cornerstone in good curriculum design and promotes inclusivity, equity, and accessibility in higher education, aligning seamlessly with Australia's commitment to providing equal opportunities for all. With Australia's diverse student population, including those with disability, international students, mature-age learners, and individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds, UDL ensures that all students can engage fully with educational materials and activities. Moreover, UDL helps universities meet stringent legal requirements, such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005, by offering flexible and inclusive learning experiences. By adhering to UDL principles, universities can not only enhance learning outcomes for all students but also bolster student success and retention rates, thus attracting a more diverse range of students.

Good practice examples:

[Implementing Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) at the University of Sydney - Lessons Learned and Scaling Strategies](#)

[Universal Design for Learning eLearning course](#)

2. Offer proactive flexibility and adjustments that are readily available for all students.

The framing of a student support policy can inadvertently foster the risk of band-aid solutions, where quick fixes are prioritized over comprehensive, systemic changes. When policymakers approach the issue of student support with a narrow focus on immediate problems or symptoms, they may neglect the underlying structural issues that contribute to those problems. Band-aid solutions often involve

short-term interventions that address the surface-level symptoms, such as providing extra tutoring for struggling students or implementing temporary academic incentives. While these measures can offer temporary relief, they rarely address the root causes of academic challenges, such as inadequate resources, unequal access to educational opportunities, or systemic inequalities. To create meaningful and lasting change, it is essential to frame student support policies within a broader context that considers the systemic issues at play and promotes holistic, long-term solutions that address the root causes of educational disparities.

A proactive approach to all students is essential because it allows educational institutions to identify potential issues early on and implement preventative measures. We are concerned that universities may rely on red flags which means students may have already experienced significant academic setbacks and emotional distress. Proactive strategies, such as regular check-ins, personalized support, and early intervention programs, can help create an environment where all students feel valued, supported, and more likely to succeed. By shifting the focus from reaction to prevention, educators and institutions can play a vital role in fostering student well-being and academic achievement.

### 3. Provide specialised support and individual planning where strategies and situations are complex.

We commend the discussion paper for naming up the need for proactive offers of ‘special consideration’ and academic adjustment arrangements for students who have experienced or been affected by a significant life event. Streamlined support for all students will often meet the needs of students with disability. But we wish to highlight that for some students with disability there is a requirement for skilled and qualified practitioners. Disability practitioners in the university sector in Australia play a vital role in ensuring the success of students with disability. It is imperative that practitioners possess the expertise and knowledge around the complexity of disability and the ability to design and implement reasonable adjustments, such as accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, and tailored support services, which are essential for students to fully participate in academic activities. Their expertise is instrumental in creating an inclusive and accessible educational environment. They work within the legislative framework of the Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Standards for Education (DSE). The DSE requires that education providers consult with students to determine whether academic adjustments are required.

### 4. Ensure language is inclusive and empowering, and not deficit or ableist.

It’s important when developing and framing the support for student policy guidelines that deficit language relating to students is avoided especially as it relates to students with disability. Employing deficit language perpetuates harmful stereotypes and stigmas that hinder the inclusion and acceptance of individuals with disability. It tends to focus solely on what a person cannot do, rather than highlighting their strengths, abilities, and potential contributions. This negative framing can have a detrimental impact often leading to a diminished sense of belonging and self-worth among students with disability. Moreover, deficit language can inadvertently shape policy and practices that prioritise fixing perceived deficiencies rather than fostering a supportive, inclusive environment that accommodates diverse needs. By embracing more inclusive and empowering language in student policy documents, we can promote a culture of respect, equity, and opportunity for all students, regardless of their abilities.

### 5. Develop data systems that assist with analysis for future planning.

We are increasingly developing and using systems in disability services that allow us to collect valuable information on the types of adjustments that are used and how they are implemented.

6. Provide specific training and support to university staff regarding diversity.

It is vitally important that academic and teaching staff across the university sector not only understand inclusive teaching methods but also possess a strong understanding of disability and its impacts on learning. It allows educators to design courses, assessments, and teaching methods that accommodate diverse learning needs, thereby reducing barriers to access and success. There is currently no national training for universities in understanding their obligations under the DDA and DSE. The Vocational Education and Training sector has two programs that supports their professional development and understanding around disability these are [VET Staff Supporting Students with Disability](#) and [VET Educators Supporting Students with Disability](#).

7. Develop systems that support students with episodic or occasional needs for student support.

The largest groups of students with disability at university have medical and mental health conditions. These are often episodic in nature. Student supports that are available to students when they need them, and are easily accessible, without having to go through complex administrative processes each time they are needed, would be very welcome.

8. Build independence and capacity building approaches into student support.

We support the idea of including evidence based additional supports such as peer supports as one of the program responses to support students. Students with disability like all students benefit from such programs to build connectedness and support the development academic skills. We would encourage these guidelines to promote the development of both general and specialist programs as a response to some students with disability. For example, designing and implementing specialist peer support programs such as for those on the autism spectrum, is crucial for fostering inclusivity and accessibility in higher education. These specialised programs cater to the unique needs of students with disability, providing tailored support, empowering students with self-advocacy skills, enhancing confidence and social abilities, considering sensory sensitivities, reducing isolation, fostering understanding among peers, ensuring legal compliance, and ultimately promoting retention and academic success. By including these programs, universities not only demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion but also create a more equitable and welcoming educational environment for all students. A number of universities have implements specialised peer mentoring programs that support students with autism, ADHD and mental health conditions.

Examples: [Curtin University: A specialist peer mentoring program for university students on the autism spectrum: A pilot study](#)

[Deakin Navigate](#)

Submitted by Darlene McLennan, Manager of the [Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training \(ADCET\)](#) on behalf on the Disability Services Managers network.