

Providing a university experience for persons with intellectual disabilities

Australia – Centre for Disability Studies (CDS)

SUMMARY OF PROJECT

The vision of CDS is to advance the rights of people with an intellectual disability through its research, clinical services, and training programmes. In particular, CDS is passionate about inclusive educational practices that promote quality education for people with intellectual disabilities. CDS, under the leadership of Prof. Patricia O'Brien, in 2012 CDS conceived, planned, and implemented a pilot Inclusive Education Program (IEP) at the University of Sydney. The IEP provides a university experience for participants in a range of studies of their choice, with students participating in regular lectures and tutorials as well as attending one-on-one tutorials and receiving peer mentoring for added support.

"Before I started the Sydney University IEP, I was a young girl at a special school, and now I am an independent adult living in a much wider world."

—Steph Walker, IEP student

FACTS & FIGURES

- To date, the IEP has supported 23 people with an intellectual disability to attend the University of Sydney.
- The IEP has had the support of 65 peer mentors.
- The IEP has established links to nine of the University's 16 faculties.

PROBLEMS TARGETED

Traditionally, tertiary education has been based on a belief that students with an intellectual disability are not academically capable of achieving success. However, being part of campus life, taking university classes with students without disabilities, and learning to navigate a world of high expectations actually leads to the development of skills needed for successful adult life (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010). A successful university experience can be measured in many ways apart from grades, including increased learning, independence, self-determination, and positive social experiences (O'Brien, 2009; Hart, 2010). Having a peer with an intellectual disability also improves social understanding of disability within a university community.

SOLUTION & METHODOLOGY

As a first step, the IEP team established a steering group and simultaneously secured pilot funding through local government to provide an opportunity for five people with intellectual disabilities to attend the University of Sydney for one semester. The programme structure was informed by and modelled on other fully inclusive education models that are already in operation internationally. The team sought expert input from international leaders in this area to implement a fully inclusive audit model, adapted to the local context and infrastructure of the University of Sydney. Programme structure, content, and strategies are informally and formally reviewed on a regular basis to align the programme with participant feedback and international best practices. Each IEP student takes one to two units of study, thus fully participating in all aspects of the course, except formal assessment. Instead, IEP students prepare an individualised project that suits their interests, strengths and personal learning goals. All IEP students are matched with a minimum of two peer mentors and have access to additional academic support through one on one tutoring sessions with a university tutor

OUTLOOK & TRANSFERABILITY

To facilitate growth as well as future sustainability, the IEP team are developing a viable scholarship program to support students to transition into an adult life of their choice, for example employment or further education. The program will launch as “uni 2” beyond in 2017, incorporating both philanthropy and social enterprise. The engagement and recruitment of foundation members and scholarship partners is ongoing, and a first foundation member has already been secured.

Photo: Yes

Life story: Yes

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