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Towards inclusion in university of people with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

This paper will describe the "Up the Hill" project, which enables the participation of students with intellectual disabilities to attend the Flinders University. "Up the Hill" is a post secondary educational program based in the School of Special Education and Disability Studies, Flinders University. The project provides opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to increase their range of experiences, exercise their rights for continuing education, enhance their vocational opportunities and develop their social networks.

Information presented will describe the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, two males and two females, aged 18 to 26 years, who attend the Flinders University of South Australia as auditing students. They are supported by student mentors, to negotiate the enrolment process, to meet lecturers and students, to attend lectures and tutorial; to take part in social activities and to increase their social networks through experiences inside and outside the University.

The data from the pilot study (Gibson 1997), the current experiences of the students and the proposed future developments for the program, will be described.

During the past decade Australian universities have become more proactive in the provision of access and equity for students with disabilities. Following the release of "A Fair chance for all" (DEET, 1990), a policy statement on equity and social justice in higher education for people with disabilities, universities around Australia appointed Disability Liaison Officers and developed Disability Action Plans which contributed to improved access and equity for students with disabilities. Although students with disabilities have gained a higher profile in universities in Australia (O'Connor & Watson, 1996), the range of students with disabilities accessing tertiary education identified by Andrews (1991), did not include students with intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities in Australia still remain excluded from a university education. This paper describes a program at Flinders University of South Australia which moves towards "INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED", the theme of this Congress.

Increasingly, students with varying degrees of disability are being included in early childhood, primary and secondary school settings (O'Connor & Watson, 1996). Tertiary education for people with intellectual disabilities has not attracted the same attention. Westwood (1987) argues that to ensure the benefits of inclusive education are fully realised by young adults with disabilities a wide range of opportunities should be made available to meet the post-school needs of these young people. Currently, post-school options tend to emphasise the vocational needs of young people with disabilities and concentrate energy in facilitating successful employment decisions (deFur, Getzell and Trossi, 1996). Knox and Parmenter (1991) found that young people with intellectual disabilities indicated that apart from employment, they had needs in other areas of their lives that must also be addressed, such as, friendships and social aspects, recreation and leisure activities, and community

and home living skills. Brown and Hughson (1987) support this in their proposed integrated model of rehabilitation that considers all areas of a person's life.

The reality for school leavers with intellectual disabilities presents a very restricted range of options which often only include sheltered workshops or supported employment agencies and a limited array of bridging courses and community life skill programs (McElwaine, 1993; Uditsky et al, 1988). Schleien and Ray (1997) reported studies of post school outcomes and community adjustment of young people with developmental disabilities that reveal young adults with disabilities become more socially isolated and engaged in activities primarily in the home, such as resting, watching TV and listening to the radio. Newton and Horner (1993) also report that a large proportion of studies concerning the social life of individuals with disabilities revealed lack of friends, few social activities and loneliness among the problems faced.

In South Australia, McElwaine (1993) identified over one thousand young people with intellectual disabilities without employment, recreation activities or other day programs, and having limited opportunities to socialise and form friendships. In response to the plight of young adults with intellectual disabilities, the South Australian State Government implemented the "Moving On" Post-School Options program which includes consumer focused funding. The program assisted young adults with intellectual disabilities to access a wider range of generic and specialised post school options.

The **Up the Hill** Project, is a new innovative post school option, which facilitates the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in the social and educational life of the Flinders University. The project is based on the pilot study of inclusive university education for a selected group of people with an intellectual disability by Gibson (1997, unpublished thesis). She commenced her thesis by stating that:

University is the place in a young adult's life where he or she "comes of age", begins developing his or her own identity, and makes the transition from being a child, to an adult with dreams and plans. Historically, for adults with an intellectual disability this opportunity has been denied...(p.1).

She concluded her thesis by stating that:

The elitist views of university education must be challenged...Inclusive university education for people with intellectual disabilities challenges the current knowledge base of society... Bringing adults with an intellectual disability into the university setting is a means of letting them know that options exist for them to learn and live in their communities (p.86).

The pilot study by Gibson (1997) involved the inclusion of four young adults with intellectual disabilities (18-26 years of age) in the Flinders University, who audited a topic lasting one semester. The research drew on the experience of the three programs operating in Canada and one in Finland which were the only identified programs providing structured opportunities for students with an intellectual disability to attend Tertiary Education Institutions (Weinkauff & Bowman, 1995; Uditsky, Frank, Hart & Jeffery, 1988). Data were collected primarily by participant observation and supplemented by surveys, interviews and field journals.

The research indicated some interesting findings that are briefly described here.

- The students with intellectual disabilities were observed to;
 - develop the norms of the university class members (eg wearing casual dress and bringing coffee into the lecture)
 - demonstrate a personal commitment (eg reflected in their high levels of attendance)
 - form relationships with the university students in the class (eg comments such as "I made friends" and "I had someone to hang out with").
- The lecturer's teaching adaptations and inclusive strategies were observed as follows:
 - careful clarification of class handouts

- directing questions to auditing students
- encouraging auditing students to contribute to class discussion
- praising contributions made by auditing students
- precise instructions related to activity requirements
- patience
- allocation of extra time to complete tasks
- asked auditing students to draw on their experiences to share with fellow students where appropriate.

(Gibson, 1997, pp.68-69)

The lecturer's teaching adaptations and inclusive strategies were considered as positive aspects by 80% of the student group who stated that the inclusion of auditing students did not hinder their learning capacity. One student commented: "...it increased my learning, slowing down lectures aided students and more detail helped everyone" (Gibson, 1997, p.69).

- The university student class group was observed to include the auditing students in the life of the university in the following ways:

- socialising during breaks and at lunch times
- assisting with transport - encourage participation in the class activities
- sharing experiences
- explanation of tasks and class work
- modifying language: plain English, visual prompts
- assigning roles during class group work
- tolerance and patience used in the application of inclusion
- extra time to complete tasks
- treating auditing students as equals
- creating a friendly group environment
- showing auditing students respect.

(Gibson, 1997, p.73)

In summary Gibson (1997) recommended that for individuals with an intellectual disability to be successful in a university setting, firstly, they need an individualised program in which their right to choose the areas of study is exercised and the goals clearly stated. Secondly, that a mentor system be developed to support the auditing students and facilitate their inclusion throughout the university campus. Thirdly, that academic lecturing staff be well informed, sensitised to the specific needs of the auditing student, and assisted to adapt the teaching process where possible.

The Up the Hill project commenced in January 1999 as a volunteer-based program staffed by students undertaking the Bachelor of Applied Science (Disability Studies) degree. The students receive credit towards the practica requirements of the degree for their involvement and contribution to the project. They provide mentor support to the individuals with disabilities to; familiarise them with the University campus, choose topics to study, meet, brief and support the lecturers concerned, navigate the enrolment procedure and attend lectures. The individuals with disabilities, referred to as 'participants', gain access to the university by enrolling as auditing students and paying an audit fee for each topic to be studied. This requires the participants to abide by the statutes and by-laws of the University, which states that their attendance cannot subsequently be credited towards a degree or diploma of the University. Although an auditing student is officially limited to attending the lectures, a number of additional benefits have been negotiated, for example, the allocation of a student card, access to and use of library facilities and the inclusion in excursions, projects, tutorial and seminars. An equally important part of the Mentor's role is to increase the social networks of the participants by facilitating contacts with other students within the university. For example, meeting students for coffee and lunch breaks, taking part in recreation activities, club membership and being involved in the wide range of functions and events that occur throughout the University year. Mentors also extend their support to the participant in off-campus activities that may involve reciprocal invitations to share time with family and friends.

St Peter, Ayres, Meyer and Park-Lee (1989) propose a short list of strategies for mentors to assist in the development of relationships between peers. The strategies suggested are:

- provide positive information to non-disabled students about students with disabilities
- teach non-disabled students and adults how to interact with students who have a disability
- use cooperative activities to promote interdependence
- involve students in interactive rather than isolated activities
- establish ongoing rather than episodic interaction opportunities.

Mentors make contact and communicate, where appropriate, with family members who are encouraged to become involved with and well informed about the Up the Hill Project. The family members' understanding and support of the project contributes significantly to the satisfaction and success experienced by participant.

The Mission Statement of the Up the Hill Project indicates that it endeavours:

to provide a quality service at Flinders University that enables people who have an intellectual disability: to access the University environment, to develop social skills & social networks and to experience a range of educational opportunities and activities.

The aims of the Up the Hill project are:

- to facilitate the educational development and functioning of people with intellectual disabilities in a positive and supportive environment
- to provide opportunities to develop the social networks of people with intellectual disabilities
- to provide opportunities to increase the range of interests and knowledge of people with intellectual disabilities
- to enable people with intellectual disabilities to exercise their rights to continue formal education
- to facilitate the development of self-esteem and self confidence for people with intellectual disabilities
- to enhance the vocational opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities
- to provide opportunities for both academic staff and students to benefit from interactions with people with disabilities.

To ensure the participants are able to gain the greatest benefits from the project the following criteria identified as necessary for successful participation are used for selection of participants.

1. The person has an intellectual disability and is eligible to receive the Disability Support Pension.
2. The person states an interest in further education.
3. The person is able to make choices from the available University topic offerings.
4. The person should display reasonable interpersonal skills (ie .be non-disruptive in social and educative settings).
5. The person must be able to arrange travel to and from the University.
6. The person must be able to arrange or care for immediate personal needs.
7. The person must have the physical ability to fulfil the role of a student, which includes the physical ability to attend classes daily for a full semester.

As well as meeting the above criteria, potential students with intellectual disabilities would benefit from the experience of the tertiary setting if they have; an interest in establishing new relationships and a motivation to participate in new experiences.

A university is an exceptional community resource and an ideal facilitative environment that has the potential to provide students with intellectual disabilities a wide range of opportunities for personal growth and development, which include:

- a wide range of peers to act as models for the development of social behaviours
- the development of social networks, providing social contacts and acquaintances which may lead

- to long term friendships
- the acquisition of interpersonal skills and competencies for community living and enhancing employment possibilities
- the expansion of leisure and recreation activities involving both formal and informal participation in university clubs and facilities, such as the student union restaurants and bars
- the freedom to experiment and make decisions in a supportive environment, for example, not to attend lectures or try alcohol and cigarettes
- the development of an identity as a student, and the related rise in self -esteem and self confidence
- the opportunity to develop self-advocacy skills and assertiveness by participating in student demonstrations or protests.

During the past eighteen months the Up the Hill project has supported ten (10) participants (7 females & 3 males), aged between 17 and 26 years, with a disability range between moderate to mild intellectual disability. Seven (7) participants live at home with family members, two (2) live independently in supported accommodation and one (1) lives in a group home. The variety of courses audited by participants included the following topics.

- Human growth and development.
- Management of groups and organisations.
- Drawing and design fundamentals.
- Perspectives in disability studies.
- Family professional partnerships.
- Augmentative communication systems.
- Rediscovering science.
- Play and recreation in disability studies.
- Earth sciences.
- Art.

The outcomes and benefits gained by the participants in the Up the Hill project which were observed and reported by the Mentors in the project are as follows:

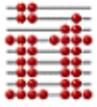
- an observed increase in self-esteem and self-confidence - (Observations: participant's pride in the acquisition of a university student card; parents reported that participant met peers while shopping and informed them she was attending University; participant met with peers who transitioned from the same secondary school, in the university café; participant who completed several courses offered to act as mentor for new participants in the project.)
- an expansion of social networks and contacts - (Observations: participants' interactions with university staff when acquiring student card and diary, completing membership of the library, acquiring an email address, email exchanges between participants and students or staff, membership of a football club with student, acknowledgment of participant by students and staff while moving about the university campus.)
- the acquisition of social skills - (Observations: participant emulating student peer model behaviours including; greeting, sharing, dress, food preferences, and communication.)
- the development of work associated skills and competencies - (Observations: participants asking questions in lecture, speaking to student group, completing class assignment, waiting, listening, learning and using vocabulary of social group, completing a take-home examination, borrowed book from library independently.)
- the opportunity to participate in work experience - (Observations: participant carrying out work experience one day a week at university childcare centre.)
- the inclusion in a range of social activities on and off the university campus
- the participation in leisure and recreation activities. (Observations: participant performed with mentor in a karaoke session at a local hotel; participant celebrated 26th Birthday at a hotel with 30 invited student and staff guests; participants together with mentors attended movies, football match, netball match and indoor cricket; shared fast food at McDonalds, Hungry Jacks, Fasta Pasta; participants and mentors travelled to the city centre for window shopping, a visit to the Art gallery, Museum and Botanical Gardens.)

If we conscientiously believe in community inclusion for people with an intellectual disability so that they can have the opportunity to enjoy the best quality of life then this should include access to and inclusion in a University setting. To ensure that the Up the Hill project is an ongoing program within the Flinders University a community grant was applied for and awarded by the Intellectual Disability Services Council, South Australia. The funding will allow the appointment of a manager to assist with the day to day functioning and further development of the project. It is planned to establish the project as an understood, accepted, integrated and ongoing program within the structure of the Flinders University. Uditsky (1988) argues that if a person with an intellectual disability can succeed at University, which other doors in society can remain closed?

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