

Students Experiencing Academic Disadvantage

Title	Students Experiencing Academic Disadvantage
Overview	Describes arrangements and processes for making adjustments for students with disabilities or students who are experiencing other continuing academic disadvantage, to ensure equitable access to the University's academic programs.
Key Words	Disability, equity, adjustments, access, support, progress
Scope	All coursework courses (except where indicated)
Related documents	
Approved by	Academic Board
Date approved	27 June 2008
Start Date	January 2009
Date for review	September 2009
Business Owner	Office of the Provost
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Definitions: (NB. These are working definitions that may be changed to ensure consistency with terminology employed in the Student System).

Disability: Within the University environment, a disability occurs when a person experiences difficulties in undertaking academic tasks as a result of an interaction between health status, body structures and functions, personal and environmental factors.

Disadvantage: defined, ongoing, unpreventable circumstances that hamper a student's ability to participate and to demonstrate their academic merit.

Ongoing: a situation that has lasted, or is likely to last for at least six months.

Episodic: a disability or disadvantage that is not constant, that occurs either periodically or without warning, which nevertheless can be predicted as potentially occurring and its impact anticipated.

Reasonable Adjustment: An adjustment is a measure or action taken to assist a student to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students. An adjustment is reasonable if it achieves this purpose while taking into account the student's learning needs and balancing the interests of all parties affected, including those of the student with the disability, the education provider, staff and other students. The University is required to provide reasonable adjustments to students experiencing disability, but extends this concept to all students experiencing academic disadvantage for the purposes of this policy.

Policy applies to: All coursework degrees

This policy intersects with the Assessment, Special Consideration, Extensions, Examinations and Alternative Examinations Arrangements (AEAs), and Remission/Refund of Fees policies.

Objective

The University of Melbourne has a long-standing commitment to facilitating the participation of students experiencing academic disadvantage, and aims to make the university an educational institution that is accessible to all students with the capacity to take advantage of a world-class education.

In the University environment, supports, services and policies exist to minimise the impact of short-term health issues and impairments (see the Special Consideration Policy, Extensions policy, or Consideration for Shorter Assignments & Tests). For this reason, the University focus is on students whose experience of disadvantage can be reasonably predicted to interfere significantly with activities on either an ongoing or episodic basis.

The University is committed to working with students hampered by disadvantage, with the goal of ensuring, whenever practical, that they are not deprived of the opportunity to demonstrate their academic merit during teaching and assessment.

Whilst the University provides services to students experiencing academic disadvantage which may arise from a wide range of circumstances, the University is required to make reasonable adjustments to its learning environment consistent with requirements under the Disability Standards for Education. Not all students experiencing disability will experience academic

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disadvantage or require reasonable adjustments. The intent of this policy is to enable the provision of adjustments to students experiencing disadvantage in completing academic tasks, and is not an overarching University policy on disability in broad terms. The concept of reasonableness is also extended to students experiencing disadvantage for a range of circumstances. This policy, where appropriate, specifically delineates between general academic disadvantage and disability-related disadvantage to reflect the specific legislative requirements that apply to disability, but not other disadvantaged groups (Reference: the Disability Discrimination Act [1992] and Disability Standards for Education [2005]).

Policy:

The University encourages a flexible approach to the provision of assistance to students experiencing disadvantage, subject to preservation of the integrity of academic programs and equity between students.

Provision may include Alternative Examination Arrangements, renegotiation of assessment deadlines, provision of accessible format learning materials, timetable planning and flexibility about class attendance requirements, deferment, leave of absence, late withdrawal and refunds.

Discretion available within these policy areas may be applied to students experiencing disadvantage.

Identification & responsibilities of students

Students who wish to have arrangements made to address their disadvantage have a responsibility to identify themselves and to seek the assistance of the services of the University.

Students experiencing disadvantage are required to notify the University about their circumstances in a timely manner to enable adequate time for the identification and implementation of reasonable adjustments.

Despite this, staff of the university, both teaching and professional staff, may suggest that a student seeks support should disadvantage be identified.

Students who wish to receive assistance on the grounds that they have disadvantage must submit appropriate documentation verifying their circumstances. They may be required to update their record with any changes, or annually, where appropriate¹.

If a student's circumstances change and they are no longer impacted by circumstances² or their disability, or no longer feel the need for specialist support or other adjustment, they must advise the University as soon as practicable.

¹ Depending on the nature of the disability or other disadvantage.

² Continuing to receive adjustments for which the student is no longer entitled would be misconduct.

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Established grounds for disadvantage

The following are examples of circumstances which can constitute grounds for disadvantage, which include but are not limited to:

- Disability, which may include students whose participation is restricted by psychiatric, intellectual, sensory, brain injury or physical/diverse medical impairments;
- Intensive carer responsibilities – e.g. being a carer for a disabled child, partner, or for an elderly, infirm parent;
- Symptoms associated with pregnancy³;
- Unstable or violent living conditions / family circumstances, where the student is in a position of responsibility;
- Being of no fixed address or otherwise homeless;
- Significant financial and legal problems, such a bankruptcy or mortgage default; and/or,
- Precarious residency status relating to issues such as refugee applications.

Adjustments may not always be possible

The University commits to making reasonable adjustments to enable students to demonstrate their academic potential.

- In assessing whether an adjustment to the course is reasonable, the University must always maintain the academic requirements of the course or program, and other requirements or components that are inherent in or essential to its nature.
- The University must always ensure the integrity of its courses or programs and assessment requirements and processes, so that those on whom it confers an award can present themselves as having the appropriate knowledge, experience and expertise implicit in the holding of that particular award.
- In some courses there are aspects of a program that are inherent, and for which no adjustment is possible. In Medicine, for instance, surgery is an essential part of the course, and it is not possible for an adjustment to be implemented that fully negates the requirement to undertake surgery independently and safely⁴.

This means that at times there can be tension between reasonable adjustments for students and a commitment to upholding academic standards⁵. When determining reasonable adjustments for students, the University is required to consider the inherent (or essential) requirements of its

³ Whilst the University sees pregnancy in favourable terms, it recognises that symptoms associated with pregnancy can disadvantage some students if adjustments (such as flexibility in attendance requirements or special seating and additional time in exams) are not provided. Students who feel that pregnancy related issues may impact on their study are encouraged to contact the Student Equity Officer to discuss the adjustments that could be made to support them throughout their pregnancy.

⁴ There may be circumstances where adjustments for an inherent component of a course can be provided. For example, should a surgery student break a finger, they may be excused from some parts of the course, temporarily. This may constitute a reasonable adjustment under the act.

⁵ This tension is explicit where a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO), or a Student Equity Officer (SEO) is consulting with academic staff and exploring options for /seeking flexibility around reasonable adjustments (see *Discretion* below).

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courses. For students experiencing disability this process is encapsulated by requirements of the Disability Standards for Education⁶.

The University is also required to ensure that the integrity of its assessment practices is not compromised. There may be circumstances where a requested adjustment jeopardises assessment integrity, and therefore cannot be implemented. Take-home exams as an alternative form of examination, for instance, may not be appropriate in some subjects and courses, as the integrity of the examination cannot be guaranteed.

Procedure and Practice: All coursework degrees

1. *Application for assistance*

1.1. Timing of requests

- Subject to other policies relating to enrolment and assessment, there are no formal deadlines by which students must request assistance on the basis of disability or disadvantage, however the timing of requests will have an impact on the University's capacity to provide assistance.
- Students are advised to seek assistance at the earliest possible time to ensure the best outcome.
- If it is too late to make arrangements, a student may be advised to apply for Special Consideration, noting that potential outcomes are more limited.

1.2. The first request – Identification & initial consultation

- Students likely to require reasonable adjustments because of an ongoing disability will be asked to identify themselves at the time of their enrolment in the course. Students may not wish to disclose their disability at enrolment, but may do so when they are further along in their course.
- Students otherwise seeking assistance for the first time on the grounds that they are experiencing academic disadvantage should make an appointment with a Student Adviser in their Student Centre to discuss their particular needs and to provide appropriate supporting documentation (see below).
- Student Advisers should consult with a Student Equity Officer (SEO) in their Student Centre to identify potential reasonable adjustments.
- Students with more complex problems, or problems not covered by existing precedent, should be referred to a Student Equity Officer (SEO) in the Student Centre for more specialist advice & support.
- Where academic disadvantage is disability related, a Student Equity Officer (SEO) may consult with, or make an appointment for the student with a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) from the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU):
 - discuss their particular needs,
 - identify potential reasonable adjustments;
- If the grounds on which a student is claiming consideration fall outside this policy or established precedent, the Student Adviser may refer the matter to the Student Centre Manager, who may consult with the (DLU) prior to a recommendation to the Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar for determination.

⁶ This is defined in the Disability Standards for Education (2005) See: <http://www.ag.gov.au/agd/WWW/agdHome.nsf/AllDocs/1821B1CD1293253DCA2570610014D867?OpenDocument>

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1.3. Documentation

- Students seeking reasonable adjustments as a result of academic disadvantage must provide suitable supporting documentation.
- Students unsure of the documentation required to substantiate the nature of their academic disadvantage should discuss their situation with a Student Adviser.
- For disability-related academic disadvantage, students must provide supporting documentation (for example, from an appropriate health professional or educational psychologist) that:
 - Is on letterhead paper and clearly dated; and,
 - Includes information on the difficulties the student will experience in undertaking academic tasks, for example explain the impairment, mental health or medical condition; and,
 - Indicates whether the disability is permanent, temporary or episodic; and,
 - Clearly outlines the functional implications and impacts on study access of disability; and ideally,
 - Gives any suggestions and recommendations for relevant alternative support.
- Supporting documentation must be recent:
 - In the last fortnight for a temporary condition or in the last 6 months for an episodic condition. A recent date is not required for an ongoing disability;
 - For Learning Disabilities (LD): documentation should be no older than 3 years and contain results from a comprehensive sequence of relevant and recognised tests devised for the assessment and diagnosis of a LD of an adult in an academic setting.

1.4. Development of an impact statement

- Depending on the circumstances, a Disability or Disadvantage Impact Statement will be completed by the SEO – (more complex disability related circumstances may be referred to the DLU which then completes an Impact Statement).
- A Disability or Disadvantage Impact Statement will:
 - detail the nature and impact of a disability / disadvantage⁷;
 - outline indicative adjustments considered as reasonable⁸; and,
 - advise whether the adjustments are:
 1. ongoing (apply to all teaching and assessment). Ongoing adjustments may be implemented for a maximum of 4 years, the time by which most students can reasonably be expected to complete their program of study. Adjustments will need to be renegotiated beyond this date or;
 2. relate to an episodic condition (e.g. will apply only if the disability or disadvantage is currently active as advised by the Student Adviser, SEO, or DLO);
 3. could apply to specified forms of teaching or assessment (e.g. affect on participation in classes, applicable to examinations but not to assignments); and

⁷ Whilst it is necessary for the nature to be listed for initial assessment, this detail will not be reproduced, and not entered on the student system. For example: if someone has been the victim of a sexual assault and is having resulting difficulties, the reason for their difficulty is not promulgated, just the fact of disadvantage.

⁸ The DLU and SEO recommend indicative adjustments, rather than pre-determining an outcome for the student.

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- provide a contact person for teaching staff with concerns about the practicality or appropriateness of implementation of the adjustments.
- Once a student's status has been established, this can be noted appropriately on the Student System⁹ so that future requests do not have to be verified to the same extent; although, depending on the nature of the disability / disadvantage, verification may be sought in the next semester or the next year when appropriate.

1.5. Negotiation of requests

- Once a student's status as experiencing disadvantage has been established, special arrangements are generally considered on the basis of the impact statement.
- Requests relating to the impact of an episodic condition should always be negotiated through a Student Adviser in the relevant Student Centre, although these may be mediated by a DLO or SEO.
- Once an impact statement is completed, consultation occurs between an SEO and departments or subject coordinators. It is the SEO's responsibility to ensure that subject coordinators are promptly notified of students with disadvantage in their subject and likely implications. (Students, whether registered with the DLU or not, should not discuss their requirements individually with lecturers.

1.6. Management of Expectations

- The Student Adviser acts as an intermediary¹⁰ for the student, but must not create unrealistic expectations for the student by implying that specific adjustments will be implemented or are an entitlement. Appropriate adjustment for a student will vary according to the student and the learning objectives of each subject they undertake. For this reason, possible adjustments noted on a Disability or Disadvantage Impact Statement should not be presented as a *plan*, only as *potential*, indicative outcomes.
- Neither the DLU nor SEO should make statements that students will interpret as promises, promises that individual subject coordinators may be unable to honour if they are unreasonable given the inherent requirements of subjects or if they potentially jeopardise the integrity of assessment.

1.7. Ongoing management of the student

- The Student Adviser should document arrangements made for the student each semester, and continue to act to negotiate the implementation special arrangements for the student in each following semester as the student enrolls in new subjects for which consideration and adjustment may be required.

⁹ Privacy requirements are a key consideration, and the system would report the fact of an ongoing circumstance, not the detail.

¹⁰ It is important to note this does not mean acting as an advocate for a student. A Student Adviser may in the context of providing suitable support to a student, make suggestions and recommendations about possible adjustments. If a student requires advocacy support (e.g. because of potential challenge to adjustments offered), a referral should be made to an appropriate independent body (such as a student organization).

2. *Short-term disadvantage*

Student Advisers may make arrangements for students that have short term difficulties, for example, resulting from injury, where the impact occurs throughout a study period, using Disability or Disadvantage Impact Statement. Student Advisers can exercise discretion about whether such an arrangement requires completion of an application for Special Consideration or may be dealt with under this policy.

3. *Assistance/adjustments to be considered*

- The precise nature of the assistance provided to each student will vary depending on the nature and extent of their disability /disadvantage. Examples of assistance that may be considered and/or provided include:
 - Extended deferment or Leave of Absence: Subject to the relevant policies, recognised impediments and commitments may constitute compelling grounds for additional periods of leave of absence, approval for late application for leave, or of deferment of commencement¹¹.
 - Renegotiation of assessment deadlines: Permission for appropriate extensions of time to complete assessment tasks.
 - Alternative Exam Arrangements (AEAs): Permission to undertake examinations, tests and other timed assessment tasks with revised conditions (see the Alternative Examinations Arrangements policy for more details¹²).
 - Timetable planning: Subject to the availability of classes that facilitate involvement in required activities, such activity may constitute grounds for particular class registration.
 - Alternative formats of learning materials:
 1. If the student is unable to attend all classes, or to fully participate in face-to-face activities such as tutorials and lectures, the subject coordinator shall *where possible* arrange to provide learning materials in accessible formats (or facilitate the production of materials using special formats, e.g. Braille, by the Disability Liaison Unit).
 2. The student should provide advice as soon as possible in order for alternative format materials to be considered and then if appropriate, to be provided.
 - Alternative Assessments: Permission to undertake an alternative assessment to that offered to other students in the program.
 - Academic Support Workers: Permission for the student to be accompanied to classes & assessment by a required assistant (e.g. note-takers, exam supports, AUSLAN interpreters).
 - Laboratory or practical classes: Whilst adjustments to practical classes are sometimes considered appropriate (i.e. not inherent requirements) and possible (such as with the engagement of an Academic Support Worker), in each case a review of the academic requirements, health and safety requirements and ongoing independent participation of the student should be undertaken by the DLU.
 - Equipment /software loan: Access to special equipment (e.g. dynamic Braille displays, audio augmentation systems) or software (e.g. voice dictation).

¹¹ Students should note that under fees policy, fee levels are reviewed annually. An increase in fees may take place for any student deferring or taking extended periods of leave.

¹² Currently *Guidelines for Alternative Examination Arrangements for Student with Disabilities*.

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- Withdrawal: A student having a disability or experiencing ongoing disadvantage that impacts negatively upon their attendance and assessment performance may apply in writing for special permission to withdraw late from subjects without academic penalty (that is without a grade of fail on their academic record). Such written requests must be submitted before the end of the semester.
- Remission/Refund of fees: In the event that a student having a disability or experiencing ongoing disadvantage is forced to defer or withdraw from study as a result of a worsening situation, the University will consider remitting the student's HECS for the relevant units (subject to Federal Government guidelines¹³), if the withdrawal occurs after the census date. If the student is enrolled in a full-paying course and is forced to withdraw, the University will *consider* refunding the student's fees for the relevant units if the withdrawal occurs after the census date.

4. Student Adviser

- Student Advisers are trained staff based in Student Centres who verify, identify the impact and nature of academic disadvantage, and assist students in obtaining reasonable adjustments. These staff seek advice from or refer students presenting with more complex needs to the SEO or DLU for more expert assistance.
- Student Advisers may negotiate adjustments that meet established precedents with academic staff within this policy.

5. The Student Equity Officer (SEO)

- SEOs are specially trained staff based in Student Centres who, working in close collaboration with the DLU, identify the impact of disability and reasonable adjustments for students experiencing disability. These staff seek advice from or refer students presenting with more complex needs to the DLU for more expert assistance.
- SEOs may negotiate adjustments with academic staff within this policy and can provide local expertise supporting other Student Advisers.

6. The Disability Liaison Unit (DLU)

The DLU provides support and services to both students with disabilities and to staff implementing this and other policies, such as the Alternative Examinations Arrangements Policy.

Some of the services the DLU may provide students are:

- Liaison with academic staff and Student Adviser & Student Equity Officers;
- Organising / providing Academic Support Workers (e.g. note-takers, exam supports, AUSLAN interpreters);
- Equipment loans;
- Proposing and supporting Alternative Examination Arrangements;
- Assistance with the preparation of Course Materials in Accessible Formats;
- Preparation of a Disability Impact Statement to facilitate access to services and adjustments from other University staff;

¹³ See the Remission/Refund of Fees policy for eligibility and conditions.

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- Referral to internal and external service providers.

Some of the services the DLU may provide staff are:

- Training of Student Equity Officers and general training for Student Advisers;
- Advice on precedents and appropriate adjustments for specific conditions;
- Advice on appropriate adjustments and where adjustments cannot be made;
- Assistance with the implementation of a Disability Impact Statement;
- Advice on episodic conditions and their impact when they occur.

The DLU has expertise in identifying core issues with and impacts of various disabilities and about what appropriate long term learning considerations and arrangements and AEA's should be put in place. The Unit has a detailed working knowledge of the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and other legislation pertaining to students.

7. *Discretion*

- Students experiencing academic disadvantage are expected to contact a Student Adviser from their Student Centre for assistance in the first instance.
NOTE: Students are not excluded from approaching a SEO or the DLU for assistance, either initially or on a continuing basis. However in order to promote consistency, engagement of students with their student centre and to ensure referral to appropriate services, it is recommended that students initially approach a Student Adviser in their Student Centre and then if necessary or if referred by their SEO meet with specialist services such as the DLU.
- The *Disability Liaison Unit* has overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy and oversight of the processes of assessment and support of students with disabilities undertaken in Student Centres.
- Where this policy is unclear or silent on the subject of eligibility for assistance, and there is not any established precedent, questions are referred by the DLU (or Student Centre if relating to disadvantage) to the Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar for determination (in consultation with relevant expert functions, such as Legal Services or Anti-Discrimination Advisers).
- Where this policy is unclear or silent regarding the appropriateness of adjustment sought, and there is not any established precedent, questions are referred to the Manager of the relevant Student Centre, or to the relevant dean or custodial dean for final determination.
- In the case of alternative examinations, or related to clinical or practical work, the teaching department must also be consulted if the request involves an arrangement for which there is not any established precedent.
- Subject coordinators, when considering adjustments, are required to be cognisant of the integrity of assessment requirements and processes and therefore that this integrity is maintained where adjustments are considered and implemented, in consultation with the relevant dean or custodial dean if there is any doubt.
- The dean or custodial dean of the relevant faculty is responsible for ensuring that adjustments do not compromise the appropriate knowledge, experience and expertise implicit in the award of the relevant course.

8. *Appeals*

Students concerned about decisions made in respect to this policy should consult the Student Grievance Policy for information about how to conduct an appeal.