



## Student Partnership Approach to Staff Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

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**This case study outlines the development and implementation of a Staff CPD session to enhance staff understanding of reasonable accommodations for students.**

### Introduction and Context

The Office of the Assistant Registrar and Student Engagement explored methods of increasing the student voice to enhance staff understanding of reasonable accommodation for students. The goal was to increase staff understanding beyond policy documents. The Disability Support Services (DSS) was approached to further explore how this could be achieved. They in turn brought the conversation to both current and past students who they were aware had varying experiences of availing of reasonable accommodation.

This collaborative exploration resulted in the development of a Staff CPD session with an open “chat show” style format to be marketed to all staff of the university during staff CPD week. Students welcomed this format as they felt it would provide them with a secure platform from which they could safely speak without fear of losing track or forgetting an essential piece they had planned to share. This format also facilitated the opportunity for students to provide fresh, open, and dynamic responses to any attendee questions that might arise. DSS staff discussed the interview questions with each student individually and they each had opportunity to prepare, reflect and adapt content and design. Students were made aware that DSS staff could advise, should questions specific to MTU policies/structures outside the student experience arise. Students were also given the opportunity for an advance visit the venue on the day, to acclimatise to the environment and connect in with their fellow students prior to the session.

The attendees were from across academic departments and offices of various functions from within MTU. The session was attended and received very well by staff. Staff reported they welcomed the opportunity to hear directly from students with disabilities of their lived experiences, as one staff member said, “I never realised the additional stress certain disabilities put on an individual in the classroom and I can see now how this is an increased pressure on the students learning and if we (the staff) can minimise this pressure by changing how we do things it is a privilege not a hassle.”

Staff feedback was that it was powerful to hear the voices of students. Staff stated that they would welcome more sessions like this, as it gave them an insight to the range of actions that they could take in terms of their teaching, assessment and feedback practices that would enhance the experiences for both students with and without disabilities.

Students recounted feeling a sense of ownership, pride, and gratitude on being asked to participate in this session, balanced with some degree of apprehension about sharing their stories in this public manner. Regarding their experiences during the actual session, the telling of their stories, the listening to their peers and the responding to staff questions, one student referred to feeling “secure” and “confident” while another referred to a sense of “fulfilment” and “validation”. One student interpreted the free-flow questioning from attendees as indicative of their interest and care for students. Common to the student experience was a sense of empowerment with each also recalling how inspired they felt on hearing their peers’ stories. There was a common endorsement from all of the courage of students and the importance of staff making small adjustments which can have such significant positive impact for students.

## Research and Development

Research has long promoted that the sharing of lived experiences has an enhanced impact on influencing change in people’s behaviour, (Passon, 2019). This is because personal stories increase our ability to hear the story for several reasons: we feel an emotional connection, our attention is held, we are able to understand complex issues easier, and the stories are persuasive and memorable.

Although there have not been many studies published in terms of impact of student voice on staff training in education (Morris, 2019), there has been an increase in listening to and promoting student voices in higher education through work of individual universities, NStEP, USI and AHEAD. The essence of this action was an idea that only came to fruition due the partnership approach of the disability support service staff with the students they work with from the first day they meet. The relationship is student-led to move and identify students’ needs at the pace the student is comfortable with.

This meant that when we approached DSS they were in a space with students to have honest 360-degree discussions as to whether this was something they wanted to do without placing them under an inappropriate pressure. The power of this relationship was evident on the day of the session, the fluidity between DSS staff and the student presenters.

Students also spoke of the relationship over the years with DSS staff and how the facilitation of their rights to reasonable accommodations by DSS and wider MTU community was an empowering process. They spoke of being heard and responded to, leading to their sense of equity of place at MTU. These processes increased their confidence in their rights to vocalise their needs specific to their learning. They spoke about the importance of feeling from day one that they identified reasonable accommodations they needed.

## Actions Taken During Project

Action	Brief Description
Reaching out to students via DSS	This protected the privacy of students and ensured no pressure placed on a student to participate.
Respecting established relationship between student and DSS	All decisions to participate, the format and duration of the session were left between DSS and the students so that this would be truly informed by students' view.
Session was designed as an interview scenario with each student and Q&A for attendants post session	This format worked really well, it provided a format that aided student presenters comfort and immediately drew in attendees.
Gathered staff introduced themselves by name and role to the students in a "round robin" before the student interviews commenced.	Students gained some insight into who they were going to be sharing their stories with before the interviews commenced – not only did this act as a very effective icebreaker, but far more importantly, it acknowledged an equity within this gathering of staff and students.
Post Event Review	Recognised importance of valuing student time commitment and professionalism both by appropriate remuneration and acknowledgement through certification for students. We are also now exploring students as staff trainers in wider settings for next academic year.

## Reflections on Engagement

It is clear how central relationships, trust and support are to students feeling empowered to participate in staff training sessions and this is something we are feeding forward to CPD plans. This was a very interesting finding as before this session we would have been focused on concepts of equalising power for students by enhancing presentation skills etc. MTU will identify more opportunities for student voice; to directly inform CPD, design and delivery of CPD and to explore shared student staff learning spaces.

The symbolism of facilitating this session within a regular classroom setting could not be missed and the positioning of staff in chairs and desks usually occupied by students really spoke to the dynamic of this session and will be replicated going forward.

This session allowed staff insight into the “why” of reasonable accommodation in an authentic manner. The students communicated their experiences from deep within themselves and this reached attendees at a level that spoke to feeling and trust in the student-staff dynamic. This evidences the impact of the importance of relationship development between students and staff.

The impact on students of hearing other’s voices and experiences will feed into our shared learning spaces for staff and students. MTU commits to a partnership approach towards the development of future staff CPD. MTU community will continue across our systems to enable and advance the cultural change required to develop meaningful student partnership.

Students’ reflections were gathered by the DSS, through conversations on the day, afterwards and follow up phone conversations/email. Students indicated that their experiences of participation were extremely positive. The event had meaning for each of them and their awareness of the impact of each of their stories on others generated a common sense of achievement, with one student referring to a “renewed sense of purpose” and another describing the “positive and uplifting” experience. As one student stated “...I think that their stories will stay with me for a long time, and I hope mine does too...”. All students referred to wanting to help others in similar situations and to the importance of educating staff.

## Supporting Evidence and References

Morris, D. (2019) Student Voice and Teacher Professional Development; Knowledge Exchange and Transformational Learning. Palgrave Pivot. Switzerland.

Passon, B. (2019) The Power of Storytelling for Behaviour Change and Business. American Journal of Health Promotion. 33(3):475-476.