DEPARTMENT GUIDE

2016

LIFE IS FULL OF HURDLES.
WE CAN HELP.

Level 1, Union House
Email: disabilities@union.unimelb.edu.au
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/umsu.disabilities/?fref=ts
Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/umsudisabilities/
WHO WE ARE

The Disabilities Department welcomes you to the University of Melbourne and to UMSU. Located on the first floor of union house, we established ourselves in 2014 to bring together students with physical, psychological, sensory and intellectual disabilities looking to improve accessibility, to educate themselves and others about disability and to be a part of a very safe and friendly community.

As we follow the Social Model of disability we recognise that every person has their individual skills and their limitations. A disability is what you get when someone’s limitations, related to a diagnosable impairment, are at odds with the environment that they live in. Of course an environment full of barriers makes it difficult to live with a disability. However, in one that is inclusive and accessible a disability, in large part, simply becomes a difference, a part of who a person is. In some cases, medical science still has to play a part in ensuring the health and comfort of a disabled person, but society still has to do its fair share of the work to create an accessible environment around that person. This is the kind of environment that we want to work with you to create on this university’s campuses. We see the need to make them accessible for students who, for example, can’t take stairs, who experience sensory overload, who work better sitting than standing and who think and react to things differently to the majority of students.

We also believe in Neurodiversity, a concept in line with the Social Model that views neurological conditions such as autism and ADHD as long-existing naturally occurring variations in the human genome. We see them as trade-offs, giving a person a set of strengths and weaknesses that are unique but equal to anyone else’s. We encourage all students to see the disabilities present on campus as essential parts of human diversity. Our social and educational events are all about promoting disability pride and accessibility in all its forms. Any student can use our department as a resource for making your professional, educational and social events more accessible.
MEET YOUR
OFFICE BEARERS

Jess Kapuscinski-Evans
Christian Tsoutsouvas
I’m Jess and I recently completed a Bachelor of Arts specialising in French and Literature. When I grow up, metaphorically speaking, I want to be paid for hanging out in theatres and on the stage all day every day. I sing with a “crip folk” trio called the Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra and I’ve been doing student theatre since I started my course way back in 2009. I studied part-time so I could be involved in activism and culture on campus.

When I first came to university, I was surprised to learn that staff employed by the university to assist me with taking notes in class and at the library were not allowed, under federal legislation, to assist me with eating, medication and other personal care. This means that I had to have two people with me where one could easily be sufficient, or that I had to take preventive medication before my support worker employed by the Department of Human Services finished their shift. In terms of representation of the experiences of disability within the culture of the campus, I have found that in many ways I was often the first student with a disability to put on a theatre show for example, and that adjustments have had to be made hurriedly because there is not an assumed knowledge of the fact that students with disabilities have specific needs that need to be taken into consideration. This sometimes means that students without disabilities can be ignorant of some of the disabling aspects of university life. In first year I had someone ask me if my support worker was my sister. I wasn’t able to adequately explain to the person what my relationship to the worker was, and I feel that a generally better understanding of disability issues on campus could have prevented an awkward situation like this.

It is important for there to be a Disabilities Department within the union, as distinct from Student Equity and Disability Services, because before we came along there was inadequate representation for this group of students within the union, which is better at providing social and networking opportunities, whilst SEDS is better at assisting students with extensions on essays and alternative exam arrangements, for example. Having multiple points of contact for students to go to if they need help with a particular issue is also good practise given the fact that we don’t want students to miss out if funding for one particular service or organisation is cut. In general, I’m encouraged by the level of support for the department and the level of collaboration between SEDS, university administration and student union to improve things for students with disabilities on campus. We are hoping to work with the Graduate Student Association as we have been frequently told that students with disabilities find it harder to get adjustments made to their courses once they hit postgraduate study. In particular, many students are not allowed to study part-time.
Hi there! I’m Christian. I started getting involved with UMSU Disabilities as a bouncy, wide-eyed first-year at O Week, who came bounding up to the very first pair of office bearers of this brand new department. I’d just had to tear myself away from the Asperger’s Syndrome club I’d started at my high school, and since the University of Melbourne didn’t have one I was determined to start one. I certainly still needed a safe and fun place to share experiences with other Aspies. Gradually, my interest in Asperger’s than broadened to the rest of the Autism spectrum. Then, my interest in Autism broadened out to the wider universe of Neurodiversity, which encompasses other neurological conditions like ADHD and Dyslexia that make up the vast range of human brain types we need in the world. This then broadened out to the wider world of all disabilities on the planet.

The more people I met from the disability community, the more I realised just how many things so many of us in common. It can take a long time and a lot of courage to feel pride and seek acceptance and inclusion as a disabled person, but there’s no reason anyone should have to do it alone. Speaking from my experience of having and working with other people who have autism, developmental motor dyspraxia, and Tourette’s Syndrome, I know how vital it is to be connected with other people like you and to be included and assessed fairly at university (which is why you need to register with Student Equity and Disability Services!). Of course, it’s also super important to see yourself be accurately and equally represented in all of the public media and discourse that you come across. I can’t wait to start bringing this university closer to giving this to all of its students.

Before becoming an office bearer, I’ve been running mentoring programs for Neurodiverse primary, secondary and tertiary students, speaking at disability conferences and playing an autistic character in an independent film called Just Dandenong and hosting a radio show called Great Minds Don’t Think Alike on SYN Media, which has now given me the skills to host the department’s very own brand new radio show, Network Disabled, which is always on the lookout for new guest hosts and interviewees!
WHAT WE DO

TALKS
On Wednesday Feb 24 we’ll be holding a relaxed panel discussion featuring four experienced, proudly disabled students who’ve made the most of their time at University. Come to Graham Cornish Rooms A & B on level 2 of Union House for some great insights and tasty snacks.

RADIO
Tune in to Radio Fodder on Tuesdays at 10am to hear about disability in all spheres of life on Network Disabled. We’re always looking for guest hosts and interviewees, so if you have something to say and you’re keen to share it with our listeners, let us know!

AUSLAN CLASSES
For the Last 2 years, the union has run classes in Auslan, Australian Sign Language that were very well attended and received by the students who took part in them. We’ll be continuing them this year to allow those students to further their Auslan skills and to give new students the chance to begin learning how to sign.

DISABILITY CREATIVE ARTS WORKSHOPS
This year our department will be holding a series of workshops across campuses for any visual artists, writers, performers, directors and the like who are looking to portray disability in their art, and those who will work with a disabled artist at some stage in their career (all of you!). Students who attend will get to hear a range of opinions from people with a range of disabilities on what works and what doesn’t.
SCREENINGS
UMSU Disabilities holds several film and television screenings each year to educate and prompt meaningful discussions around public portrayals and perceptions of disability. In the past we have screened films such as *The Punk Singer* (2013), *Mary and Max* (2009), *Temple Grandin* (2010) and gone off campus to see *The Imitation Game* (2014) and the National Theatre Live showing of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. This year we’ll be having a focus on television portrayals of disability, from the telemovie *Front of the Class* (2008) about Tourette’s Syndrome to popular series like *Homeland*, *Hannibal* and *Breaking Bad* where disability plays more of a supporting role in the story. Anyone can come to these very relaxed but also intellectually stimulating events.

GROUPS
The Disabilities department initiates on-campus support groups where we can see a real need for there being one. Last year we ran a small anxiety recovery group of regular members that found it very helpful. We have also started a Neurodiversity collective for students with various neurological and psychological conditions to meet and promote an acceptance of difference within themselves and at the university. This year we also have a very friendly Facebook group that all disabled students are welcome to join.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?
We are always open to suggestions of issues we should address, and even how we might address them. If there is a campaign you’d like to run, a play you’d like to put on, a workshop you’d like to facilitate, we’d love to hear from you. If you have a really cool idea but need help putting it into action, that’s what we’re here for. The department exists to give disabled students what they want and what they need in the way of social connections, representation, and campus-wide education. The more of your input we have, the more of your needs we can cover. Feel free to drop by our office, email us or send us a Facebook message if inspiration strikes!
I developed fibromyalgia in my first semester of university. It was a tough period of my life, as I took on my disability while I was struggling to acclimatise to university life. I was barely attending classes due to fatigue and cognitive struggles. Getting around campus was a nightmare due to pain. I struggled with depression and anxiety in the wake of my failing health. I finished the semester nearly failing several subjects that I loved and was passionate about which was crushing.

My second semester was a semester of learning to cope. I was no longer in a period of mourning my health and I had to learn how to take my disability head on. I made the decision to take one fewer classes, and made a conscious effort to spread out my timetable to allow myself time to navigate campus and to rest between classes. I knew I needed more time and I gave it to myself. I also started to make connections with other disabled students. I took on the role of helping to run a collective for disabled queer students. I made friends there that helped me learn to live with my fibro. It gave me an avenue for commiserations about being a disabled student and a place to get advice on how to cope.

With those adjustments, and certainly not without struggle, I finished my second semester with straight H1’s and a better handle on my health. I’ve never been as proud of myself as when I opened up those results. Being a disabled student certainly hasn’t been a cakewalk, but it’s no longer an impossible challenge like it originally seemed.
MONIKA DRYBURGH

Things I wish I’d known when I was starting uni:
If you have a chronic illness, Student Equity and Disability Support (SEDS) is there to help *you*. This also applies if you have a cyclical or periodic mental illness, or have ADHD and/or are autistic. In fact, most students who use SEDS do not have the kinds of disabilities we traditionally think of when we hear that word (i.e. sensory or mobility impairments). Most students who use university disability services around the country have invisible disabilities - chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, and/or neurological differences.

Special Consideration: apply early, apply often!
(Well no, not exactly, but if the same medical condition caused unpredictable impediments to your learning and/or assessment performance multiple semesters in a row, do put in an application each time. Get a friend to help you write it, or just for moral support. Explaining for the fifth time about how having holes in your insides where no holes should be impacted your ability to write essays and concentrate during exams is never fun.)

Taking 3 subjects per semester (37.5 points) is totally an option, *and* usually counts as "full-time" for Centrelink and other (student Concession card) purposes. Consider it! Also consider taking a semester off, if you need to. It's not a race.

It can feel like it matters soooo much to finish "on time", but afterwards, nearly no-one will notice or care. My partner and I both studied the same (nominally 5-year) course, and he finished it in 4 years (via intensives and overloading), and I finished in 6.5 years. He wished that he’d taken longer; I wished that I’d *planned* to take longer, from the start, rather than crashing and burning in the middle (before my glorious salvation). Three subjects per semester probably would have been great.

Don't be afraid to change your enrolment along the way: find out the Census Dates and the "Last date to Withdraw without Fail". *Use* them, if necessary. Dropping a subject or going part-time doesn't mean you can't go back to full-time later, if things settle down.
ALEXANDER DARLING

Don’t feel under pressure to make friends at university – there’s plenty more freedom to go about doing that, for sure, but the hours aren’t as consistent or numerous as at school, and it can be hard to maintain a social life. Just talk to people, particularly in your course: remember, they’re interested in the same things you are!

Disclosure can be a slippery slope. I’d never say it to a potential employer because there’s still, unfortunately a stigma about autism spectrum disorders that leads to them making biased decisions not in your favour. To friends, I’d say do what makes you feel comfortable. I never had to, but then, they figured out pretty quickly anyway, just from how I am around them. It’s up to you.

It can be easy to panic with assessments and exams at uni. You want to put just as much work into them as you did at school but you’re also expected to work AND have a social life? Plz stop society! But the thing is uni, a lot more than school, is about you getting out what you put in. You can decide which assessments you’ll work harder on if there are some areas you’re not as good at, and so on and so forth.

FOURTH YEAR: FINDING A PATH

Written in 2015

I fell into first year uni without any idea that I could or should get help with what was turning into a pretty unsustainable mental health situation. I’d been coasting for a while already; by the end of high school the expectations of high achievement parents and teachers had held had already slipped to just hoping I’d do well enough to get by. I didn’t know and didn’t want to know anything about the structure of the degree I’d enrolled in. For most of first and second year my study plan was mostly copied. Up until then, various people had put in a pretty decent effort to convince me that I couldn’t possibly have mental health problems. I still have to fight with the idea most days. At the time I was looking at however many years of staying silent it would take for things to pass on their own or for me to burn out. I can’t say I was getting ready for it - I was already pretty close to burned out - mostly I tried to push it to the back of my mind, feel as little about it as possible.
I got really lucky. Somewhere, my fall back into a rhythm of necessities and empty time got interrupted by new friends. In all honesty, I don’t remember things too well past the last few years, or in general. Uni has still been hard. Ninety percent of the tiny amounts of time I set aside to study has been spent staring blankly at books and nothing else. I think about half of my semesters have been punctuated at some point by a month where I didn’t out of bed earlier than two or three pm if at all. My sleep problems got bad enough for long enough that the people in the offices by the food co-op were used to me sleeping there nigh-on every day.

Through all that, for the first time, I felt supported. I had places and times that I felt safe and comfortable. More importantly, I interacted regularly with people that knew more than I did about mental health - people that were willing to put in the effort to convince me that shouldn’t accept being worried and sad nearly all of the time. I’m so, so grateful for the time they’ve given me. Last year I figured out how my degree works and what I need to do to graduate. It’s taking longer than it could have, but I know where I’m going now. A lot of people have had to come to terms with the fact that by their old standards I’ve already messed up bad. It’s been a process. I managed to work around being terrified at hypotheticals (like the doctor shouting me out for pretending), and get a mental health plan to start receiving treatment at Headspace. I still have a ways to go - a lot to do and a lot that I don’t yet know to do. By the time I get through everything I should I’ll probably have been around for four years, and that’s not time that everyone has. I was very, very close to drifting through.

There’s a lot at university - people, communities, services that exist to try and make your life better - and I’m sure you’re worth the good that would come to you.