'Access Leads to Inclusion: Disability at UTS' exhibition

UTS is proud to present ‘Access Leads to Inclusion: Disability at UTS’, an exhibition showcasing the lived experiences of students and staff members with disability at UTS.

Through a selection of text and photographs, curator Naomi Malone sheds light on the voices and experiences of people with disability, raising awareness and knowledge about inclusion and access at the university. By exploring diverse abilities, the exhibition aims to remove barriers and stigma associated with accessibility needs and create greater pride in disability.

“People with disability exist everywhere. In fact, 1 in 5 Australians have a disability. Access requirements experienced by people with disability need to be met to ensure their inclusion and participation in the community,” says curator Naomi Malone. “After all, where there is access, there is inclusion.”

The event, funded through UTS’s Equity and Diversity Unit, will serve to commemorate 25 years of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and mark the International Day of People with a Disability.

Photos by Sue Jo Wright and Anna Zhu.
Image: Dr Naomi Malone – Curator
Dr Naomi Malone – Curator:

’Where there is access, there is inclusion.’ - Curator: Dr Naomi Malone.

At the University of Technology Sydney, there are hundreds of staff and students with a range of disabilities, whether these are visible or invisible. A disability is an impairment, which can be manifested as sensory, physical, neurological, cognitive, intellectual or mental. But really what makes the impairment a disability is when the person experiences physical, communicative and attitudinal barriers. After all, having barriers in addition to the impairment actually means disability.

Access requirements have emerged as ways to address these barriers, empowering students and staff with disability to be active contributors at the university. This situation is driven by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 and the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2008.

As strongly influenced by its Social Impact Framework and through the Equity & Diversity Unit’s Access and Inclusion Plan 2015-2019, UTS is committed to enhancing the learning experience of students with ‘diverse’ abilities through enriching the accessibility and inclusiveness of enrolment, learning and assessment practices. Further, the workplace at UTS is to be facilitated as a diverse and equitable environment, removing barriers to employment and career development for people with disability.

It is hoped that this exhibition will generate an increased awareness of disability and the availability of access assistance for students at UTS through Accessibility Service. Ultimately, this will lead to more inclusion, which is ‘better business’ for all concerned at the University of Technology Sydney.

Audio descriptions are available at

https://www.uts.edu.au/about/equity-anddiversity/%20accessibility-and-inclusion/leadership

Introductory panel curated by Dr Naomi Malone (external link to Soundcloud)

Dr Naomi Malone_Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Image: Shirley Alexander - UTS Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Education and Students)
Shirley Alexander - UTS Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Education and Students):

Shirley Alexander is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Education and Students) with responsibility for all of the students’ education experiences at UTS, covering the quality of courses, teaching and learning. In her work portfolio are the UTS Library, Student Support Services and Activate UTS. And she has single-sided deafness.

Shirley has ‘almost no hearing’ in her right ear and experiences loud tinnitus continuously. Her left ear has hearing and she has no problems in communicating if in a quiet space facing the person speaking. However, when there is background noise, Shirley has extreme difficulty in hearing what is being said and understanding it.

To achieve her career goals, Shirley wears a hearing aid and is ‘fairly good at lip reading’, which is a shock to people when they realise that she can lip read. Other access aids that assist Shirley is her role are hearing loops, live captioning, which provides text coverage of the audio content, and typed notes including agendas and minutes of meetings. These typed notes help Shirley to mentally prepare for the forthcoming structured communications held within the meetings and to encapsulate what was said afterwards. As for what makes Shirley feel included, that happens when she can hear what people are saying. Shirley has some tips when speaking with people who are hard of hearing or hearing impaired; firstly, ‘speak clearly’, and secondly, ‘don’t put your hand over your mouth when speaking’.

Shirley’s portfolio’s most significant recent achievement is an international award, the Wharton QS Stars Reimagine Education for hybrid learning, received for Learning.Futures. This is a university-wide strategy to ensure that students have an authentic learning experience in terms of how they make use of what they learnt, which is ‘active learning’. Shirley’s vision for UTS: ‘We continue to give students the best possible education we can possibly provide for their future careers and for their lives’.

Shirley Alexander_Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Image: Professor Simon Darcy - UTS Business School
Professor Simon Darcy – UTS Business School:

‘Inclusion is better business.’ - Quote by Simon Darcy.

Now a Professor in Management at the UTS Business School, Simon Darcy started as a tutor 25 years ago. He has a high-level spinal cord injury, meaning that he is paralysed from his neck down with very limited use of his arms and no ability to stand, walk, move himself and control his posture.

Being a ‘power wheelie’ liberates Simon’s mobility to get around actively at the university and its city surrounds as long as there is a continuous accessible path of travel that provides independent and dignified access. He is regularly seen zipping around the campus or down along the Goods Line on his way to Darling Harbour. UTS has been a good employer for Simon by being understanding of his access requirements. Flexibility is essential for Simon as personal care activities in the morning to prepare for the workdays are time consuming. Hence, meetings and class timetables are held later in the day where he can be in physical attendance.

Other access considerations for Simon are adjustable tables and desks, accessible amenities, self-opening doors, speaker phones and assistive technology like speech recognition software along with a laptop and iPad that are integrated with his home computer. Having time to work from home built into Simon’s workplan enables him to ‘do the job to the best’ of his abilities – ‘the more enabling the environment is, the better I’m able to function for the university in any case’.

UTS has actively supported Simon’s travel by funding his attendance and extra costs of disability travel. This has enabled Simon to forge a strong international research reputation for developing accessible tourism and inclusive sporting environments.

Simon has also been good for UTS through being involved actively in all forms of the built environment, equity and diversity, teaching and learning, and research committees to advance excellence in these matters. Working in diversity, access and inclusion has enabled Simon to be awarded numerous prizes, grants and awards in recognition of his university, community and industry work, all of which have benefited UTS significantly.

Simon believes that the biggest impact he has had is on his interactions with thousands of students who leave UTS with a better understanding of what it means to recognise a person’s ability and not their disability.

Simon Darcy Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Sarah Houbolt - UTS Equity & Diversity Officer:

Sarah Houbolt is an Equity and Diversity Officer for accessibility and inclusion within UTS’s Equity and Diversity Unit. She is responsible for coordinating central staff and student accessibility policy and practical responses across the university. Sarah is passionate about cultural leadership and being specific about accessibility.

Her definition of disability is aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which states that the attitudinal and environmental barriers that prevent participation for people with impairments is the disabling factor. Her experience is that barriers can change depending on which environment she is in.

Sarah is glare sensitive and becomes slightly lost in unfamiliar spaces so appreciates working in contained and quiet spaces where she can sit away from glare through windows. She uses a screen magnifier/reader called Zoomtext to access the computer and smart technology for taking notes and accessing electronic copies of presentations at events. To move around campus, Sarah relies on the frosting on glass doors to tell her that there is an obstacle and on painted lines on the edges of steps to define the width and number of stairs. In new environments, she uses a cane.

While there is a number of useful apps on her mobile phone, Sarah relies on people around her having a positive attitude about communicating non-verbal and visual items in a verbally descriptive way and mentioning their names when they say hello so that she knows who they are. She feels included when she feels welcomed, asked about her access requirements and valued for her contributions.

Sarah believes that inclusive practice at UTS is about everyone having a role to play in ensuring that students and staff with disability are not unfairly disadvantaged by detrimental attitudes and practices. She likes to talk about the leadership potential of students, staff and visitors with access requirements.

In 2017, Sarah spoke at TEDxSydney and created the Accessibility Resource Guide for UTS. She wants to continue to speak up about the importance of diversity, representation and accessibility. Sarah’s vision for a social justice future is one where study, work and social spaces, systems and processes are universally designed.

Sarah Houbolt_Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Image: Allen Jiang – UTS student
Allen Jiang – UTS student

‘Mental health is an invisible disability.’ - Quote by Allen Jiang.

With a Co-op Scholarship, Allen Jiang is an undergraduate student in his second year of studying a Bachelor of Information Technology at UTS and he has a mental health condition.

To overcome the barriers Allen was experiencing, he visited Accessibility Service, which embarked on creating a tailored study program for him. They helped Allen to enrol in suitable classes, particularly by finding space in ‘full classes’ more appropriate for him to attend. This enabled him to attend lectures commencing in the afternoon and ending before the evening as he noticed that in the ‘first semester, evening classes didn’t work well for me’.

For exams, Allen had provisions that assisted him to complete his exams, with additional time, in a separate block apart from the ‘main exam block’. Due to these arrangements, Allen was able to ‘concentrate better’.

As for inclusion, Allen advised that the support services at UTS such as the Counselling Service and Accessibility Consultants made him feel included at UTS – ‘so it’s just good to know that UTS does have that for students’.

Allen mentioned that there needs to be stronger community awareness and understanding of mental health, especially of the more severe conditions in mental health. For example, people need to know the symptoms – for depression, ‘feeling sad for at least two weeks’ – and what to ‘watch out’ for when someone might be at risk of having an episode.

For his future, Allen aspires to finish his university education and to work as a business analyst for a company specialising in IT, which provides a workplace with a strong awareness of mental health and respectful managers. ‘So I would like to work at Google… they have a really good workplace!’

Allen Jiang Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Image: Eeman Shahzad – UTS Student
Eeman Shahzad – UTS Student:

Eeman Shazad is a third year UTS undergraduate student studying for a Bachelor of Medical Science. Due to having a physical disability, she uses a motorised wheelchair to travel around the university environment.

For Eeman, accessible entrances and continuous accessible paths of travel around the UTS campus are required to attend lectures, tutorials and laboratory work. The entrances and paths need to be step, obstruction and turnstile free and flat with lifts and ramps, being no steeper than 1 in 14 incline, for movement between levels of buildings. Eeman commented that ‘UTS has lifts everywhere, which is awesome’. Also, the paths need to be wide – at least, one metre – and avoid surfaces such as grass and rough gravel as they can be a risk hazard for people using wheelchairs or have spinal sensitivity and for people who are blind or have low vision. ‘Overall, I think UTS is pretty good with smooth, flat surfaces. All the buildings are pretty smooth. Even in between buildings, it’s pretty smooth…so that’s good for me’. Where improvement can be made, doors need to be adjusted to be wide and automatic to enable dignified and independent entry, exit and movement. In the laboratories, Eeman’s wheelchair can be self-elevated upwards and downwards to meet the heights of various ‘science’ tables and reach the taps for water.

Another access requirement was to have a height-adjustable table for exams. Hence, Eeman’s exams are held at the same time as her fellow students’ exams but at different locations for access to the height-adjustable table.

At UTS, Eeman feels that reaching her third year of study – ‘made it in three years’ – performing her UTS Equity Ambassador role and being appointed an Access Ambassador for UTS this year are significant achievements. These are enabling her to start conversations about disability, access and inclusion while seeing the world from various perspectives held by people with a range of disabilities.

Eeman Shahzad_Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Stephanie Town – UTS student:

‘Inclusion…it’s time.’ - Quote by Stephanie Town.

In her final undergraduate year, Stephanie Town is studying a Bachelor of Advanced Science, majoring in Infection and Immunity. She has a severe sensorineural hearing impairment, which was moderate when she was 11 years old but worsened by the end of her adolescence. This means that Stephanie has difficulty hearing high-pitch and soft sounds.

To access her study, Stephanie wears digital hearing aids during ‘all waking hours’ and gets by with lip reading. Group work is ‘very challenging’ because there are multiple speakers, all with different voices that are tend to ‘ramble’. To access the audio content within group work, Stephanie has a stenographer and a notetaker. A stenographer is a typist that sits next to Stephanie who reads the typing on a laptop in front of her, which is connected to the stenography equipment. The notetaker is useful for taking notes during laboratory work where the stenography services would not be appropriate.

Stephanie feels that there needs to be more community awareness of deafness and hearing impairment so that people understand with certainty about how to communicate with people who are deaf, hard of hearing or hearing impaired. For lip reading, she appreciates it when people don’t cover their mouths while speaking, especially when joking.

Stephanie’s significant achievement is her self-advocacy. When she did not have the access aids that she needed, her grades were ‘pretty low’. After seeking access assistance at UTS, her grades have ‘gone up’ that she is now a ‘distinction average’ student. Stephanie helps out at UTS by being an Access Ambassador, advocating for inclusive practice. Also, she serves as a student representative on the university’s Accessible Environments Advisory Group, advising on student access requirements within the UTS built environment. Stephanie says: ‘Inclusive practices leads to better innovation, more relevant outcomes and improvements in the mental health of the population’.

Her vision for her future is to complete an honours year that leads to an academic career in a workplace benefitting from a commitment to diversity where access is understood and provided readily.

Stephanie Town, Audio Description (external link to Soundcloud)
Image: Annmaree Watharow - UTS student
Annmaree Watharow – UTS student:

A first year PhD candidate at UTS, Annmaree Watharow is researching the healthcare communication needs of people who are deafblind or with sensory impairments. She has a degenerative condition that involves loss of both hearing and sight, which brings an unique insight to her study. This is a disability, which is more than the sum of its parts. For learning, people with hearing loss tend to use their vision while people with low vision tend to use their hearing and touch. Those with deafblindness cannot use the usual coping methods of a single impairment. This results in a complex communication disability.

To access her university education, Annmaree requires numerous assistive devices, software, information management platforms and accessibility assistants. The assistants are ‘the greatest gift to helping me get through the day.’ They help with logging into websites, webpages and clouds, taking notes, live transcribing, environmental description as well as social haptics – signals for communication. Assistants are critical for her safety – ‘I can’t just meander around the university falling over backpacks’.

Attending lectures requires Annmaree to use a bluetooth microphone system, which is worn by the lecturer whose voiced sound is transmitted wirelessly directly to her hearing aids. Annmaree commented, ‘that’s absolutely fantastic but one drawback is not being able to hear other voices around’. For access to documents, she uses two software programs, Zoomtext and ABBYY FineReader. Annmaree has a journal reading club where the members read aloud the text and check every page to ensure that she has understood the material correctly. She also has a video magnifier, ‘which is really quite nifty’ because it can quickly enlarge a whole page rather than ‘chunks of it’. All journal articles and books need to be converted to an accessible format by the UTS Library – ‘the Library’s fabulous. They’re so good at converting a lot of things’.

Other access aids are a large texta, notepads and an iPad, which Annmaree loves as she can read on it, enlarge text and find information more easily. The iPad can be moved around into ideal positions very close to her face for reading. The texta is used for written communication as she cannot read writing by biro pen. Annmaree uses a safe study space to work with her assistant, store equipment and have meetings with her supervisors.

Annmaree celebrated her first six months of undertaking her PhD with a tea party for her family and friends who helped her – ‘I thought it was a big achievement!’