

Institutional support for the challenges of diverse student learning needs: is the concept of duty of care a way forward?

Dr Karin Strehlow, Simon Walters, Dr Sarah Veitch & Nikola Horley
Murdoch University.

This workshop builds on our 2018 TLF workshop titled 'Engaging with students with challenging behaviours', and our interest in adaptive responses to the challenges of diverse student learning needs. Increasing participation in higher education has led to greater diversity in student populations and an increase in the numbers of students with disability, including long-term medical conditions, learning conditions, behavioural issues and psychological conditions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Our interest is with students with diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities and mental health issues who request or are allocated support and/or who unit coordinators and tutors perceive as needing support. In addition, we are interested in how these students' needs are integrated into unit coordinators' and tutors' work, alongside adequate resourcing and staff wellbeing considerations.

In 2014, we initiated a workshop to assist unit coordinators and tutors in dealing with 'challenging' student behaviours. The workshop has run twice yearly since then. Informal analysis of the responses of the approximately 120 staff who have participated in the workshop revealed six major issues. These include being unprepared and isolated; a lack of institutional support; a lack of clarity around staff roles and responsibilities; and a lack of transparent communication between teaching and support staff. We have further analysed these as three main areas of need:

- Resources and support
- Organisational structure, processes and procedures
- Knowledge, attitudes and responsibilities of staff.

We have arrived at the concept of duty of care as pivotal to and uniting these needs. Our intention is to produce two distinct statements concerning duty of care:

- Duty of care to students in order to clearly outline the expected roles and responsibilities of staff.
- Duty of care to staff in order to clearly outline the support procedures when working with students.

In this workshop, we consider the usefulness of the concept of duty of care in defining the university's responsibilities to its students and staff, and staff responsibilities to the university's students, in the specific context of diverse students' learning needs. We do this through a discussion-based exploration of the concept of duty of care, and invite participants to test its application in a range of scenarios involving students with complex or challenging learning needs.