

# Services for people with disabilities

## Swinburne Library's Disability Interest Group

The move in the last decade, towards multicampus tertiary institutions, prompted an initiative at Swinburne which remains to this day a positive and effective tool for maximising support for library patrons, while enhancing the professional awareness and confidence of the library staff involved. Covering six Swinburne campus libraries, some with librarians with a special responsibility for disability support, some with adaptive equipment and some with neither, the Disability Interest Group (DIG) began its life in mid 1999 as a response to the need for a consistent approach at all campuses.

Swinburne University, like many other tertiary institutions at the time, was working on the formulation of a policy on disability. After clarifying its terms of reference, DIG set to work on a policy that ultimately became part of the Swinburne Disability Action Plan. The core commitment of the University has been to provide a learning and working environment, based on equality of opportunity for all, with each campus library working to maximize the accessibility of resources and facilities. A designated disability librarian providing liaison and support for students and staff with disabilities at each campus library was formalised as one of the strategies.

DIG includes each of the campus designated disability librarians as well as the Disability Support Officers from both TAFE and Higher Education sectors. A team approach and close collaboration with Swinburne Disability Support Officers are crucial elements of the support process.

Reporting to and with strong support from Swinburne Library's Information Service Managers, the group has maintained an ongoing presence within the library for over eight years. 'Face-to-face' meetings of DIG are held infrequently, but there is an easy ongoing and open communication between members, primarily by email and/or phone.

Using formal meetings and informal communication, members take the opportunity to exchange information, share concerns and generally remind each other that they're not 'working in a vacuum'.

The group has undertaken tasks such as: policy formulation, including the Policy on Disability Support in the Library <http://www.swin.edu.au/lib/info/disablibpolicy.htm> and the Library component of Swinburne's Disability Action Plan, maintenance and



management of adaptive equipment, service issues, and evolving marketing strategies. Information gathering and dissemination, the organisation of presentations/information sessions to library staff on disability related topics, the creation and maintenance of a statewide network of tertiary library staff with disability responsibility/concerns and the organisation of forums have also been undertaken by the group.

The forums arose from a belief that staff could benefit by coming together to learn and share experiences. Supported by senior management, the first 'Connecting' forum was held in November 2002.

Attendees came from a list compiled from scouring the internet and exploiting

connections with various library groups. We heard about the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act from one speaker, while our second speaker spoke with authority about the student experience of the library, from the point of view of someone with severe disabilities. The speakers were followed by an animated discussion session that allowed for sharing of ideas and useful advice, after which came a unanimous decision to follow up this forum with ongoing contact through a mailing list and the organisation of further forums. We learned from this first forum, the value of allowing sufficient time for social networking: chatting over lunch was just as important as the formal question and answer sessions.

The Tertiary Libraries Disability Interest Group (TLDIG) was subsequently initiated to provide an ongoing opportunity to share information and experiences, and this mailing list is maintained and managed by Swinburne's DIG.

The following year the team ran a second forum; this time the topic was 'Technology in the inclusive library', and included plenty of social networking. Believing that a varied approach to the program would be beneficial, we encouraged other members of TLDIG to host the next forum, and in 2005

the University of Melbourne volunteered. This forum looked at the thorny issue of copyright in relation to accessibility, and also introduced attendees to the new DAISY (Digital Accessible Information Systems) services.

In 2007, again Swinburne DIG hosted the forum, on the topic of mental health as it related to students' library needs. This generated lively discussion in the morning and for the afternoon session attendees drove or 'trammed' down the road to Vision Australia, where they were introduced to the services provided there.

As before, the feedback from this latest forum included positive comments about the helpfulness of hearing from professionals working in the disability



field about strategies that could be used by library staff when interacting with students with disabilities. Primarily though, the highlight for participants was the chance the forum provides to network with colleagues, relishing the opportunity to feel part of a group that shares goals and faces similar hurdles or dilemmas. Like our own small group, the larger TLDIG community, and the forums in particular, provide a valuable tool to help members in their professional well-being and development, as well as personal support and a greater strength and credibility than as individuals.

As in all fields of endeavour, being part of a team ensures that you feel supported in your trials, encouraged to try new options and committed to putting all your efforts towards achieving desired outcomes. When this results in all library users having best possible access to all resources in the library, it's a win win situation!

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## Book review

**Improving the quality of library services for students with disabilities**

Edited by Peter Heron and Philip Calvert

*Libraries Unlimited, Westport Connecticut, 2006*



When considering their role in meeting information needs, libraries tend to focus on the general population they serve. This book looks specifically at the needs of one group - students with disabilities—when considering libraries' service quality assessment. Suggesting that there has been a tendency to make assumptions, and often to purely address minimal legal requirements, the book puts the case for a well researched data-collection process to ascertain the library-related expectations of this user group so to improve services.

With academic libraries as its primary focus, there are contributions from library directors and campus disability officers from tertiary institutions in both New Zealand and the United States making the book comprehensive and relevant to Australian tertiary libraries, although specific reference to the Australian experience is fairly limited.

The first section of the book considers trends, definitions, examples of approaches and the broader context, including legal aspects, whilst the latter part considers the practical intricacies of the survey itself.

Two versions (one focussed on students with physical disabilities, the other on those with learning differences) of a data collection instrument, based loosely on SERVQUAL but refined to allow more flexibility and input of local relevance, are then detailed. It is suggested that this flexibility will enable academic libraries to better address the issues of this specific target group.

There are undoubtedly particular difficulties facing those trying to gather information about the needs of library users with disabilities. Anecdotal evidence regarding a low response rate, and problems reaching the target audience within the constraints of privacy legislation, given that only users prepared to *declare* their disability can be approached, are discussed. Noted also is the reluctance of many of the students to appear critical and the fraught nature of a text based questionnaire for students with learning disabilities. Good communication between library staff and campus disability support services is suggested as a critical tool in the process.

The lengthy bibliography and a thorough index complete this book and make it a helpful resource for any library keen to review their service approach so as to ensure that no member of the library is, to use Heron's succinct phrase, 'left behind'.

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