

# THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



## Experiences of students with disabilities & long term illnesses at VU

**What helps? What hinders?**

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Associate Professor Katie Hughes  
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 **VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA





# **EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES & LONG TERM ILLNESSES AT VU**

WHAT HELPS? WHAT HINDERS?

Final Report

FEBRUARY 2014

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

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# About

## The Victoria Institute

**The Victoria Institute is a research institute with a focus on inclusive education. We work with researchers, teachers, communities and policy makers to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all.**

Our research aims to build better learning for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Institute was founded in 2011 in response to fading sophisticated research into education policy and programming.

Led by Professor Roger Slee (Director), we aim to analyse, evaluate and challenge education practices, curriculum and assessment.

Located in Melbourne, the Institute forms part of the College of Education at Victoria University.





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# Glossary

## **Attrition**

Attrition is defined in this study as leaving the university by withdrawing or deferring from a course, and not returning the following year.

## **Disability**

Any limitation, restriction or impairment, which restricts everyday activities and has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months (ABS 2009).

## **Disability Action Plan (DAP)**

Strategic plan designed to improve the accessibility for people with disabilities. The DAP is submitted to the Australian Human Rights Commission.

## **Deferred**

Students who have received an offer at a university but been given permission to delay the start by 6 months or 12 months at the start of the course.

## **DLTI**

Disability or long-term illness

## **DSU**

Disability Services Unit

## **FYHE**

First Year in Higher Education

## **HE**

Higher Education

## **Long-term illness**

Long-term illness is defined as having a complex causality, multiple risk factors, long latency periods, a prolonged course of illness, or a functional impairment or disability (AIHW 2013).

## **SES**

Socio-Economic Status

## **Mature age**

Students over the age of 25 years.

## **NESB**

Non-English Speaking Background

### **Non-traditional student**

Non-traditional students can be defined as meeting one or a combination of the following factors: mature-age students, first in their family to attend university, coming from a Non-English Speaking Background, students from low SES backgrounds, rural, regional and remote students, Indigenous Australians, off-campus and part time students.

### **TAFE**

Technical and Further Education

### **VE/FE**

Vocational Education and Further Education

### **VU**

Victoria University

### **WEBCT**

Web Course Tools - online tool used to deliver course material and to share information.





# Executive Summary

Despite the operation of a variety of international and national conventions and legislation that protects disabled people from discrimination, there is abundant evidence that demonstrates that disabled students experience discrimination in higher education (HE) (Soorenian, 2013). This is not surprising, given the enduring difficulties that educational systems have had in accepting and establishing access and inclusion for students with disabilities (Barton, 1987; Fulcher 1989; Slee 1993; Victorian Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Commission 2013; Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations 2013; Victorian Office of the Auditor General 2013). Access to participation in universities is compromised by the gap between university prerequisites and the restricted and attenuated schooling that people with disabilities and long-term illnesses experience in a bifurcated schooling sector (Slee 2011). Titchkosky (2011) is amongst a growing number of disability studies researchers who have further identified the ubiquitous barriers to participation, inclusion and success that students with disabilities and long-term illnesses experience within universities.

Australia is a signatory state to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006). As a signatory, Australia has specific obligations to people with disabilities and long-term illnesses with regard to education across their lifespan:

Article 24: 1. States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to:

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.
- d. The Convention is unequivocal. Tertiary education needs to develop structures, programs, policies and cultures that are inclusive for all comers:

Article 24:5: States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities. (United Nations 2006)

This report proceeds from the perspective of the social model of disability and disablement (Oliver 1990, 2009). We understand disability to be a consequence of the social responses to people's differences. In other words institutions, cultural practices and social discourses, including policy texts and established medical authority, institutional structures and built environments, more or less exclude or include people with diverse identities.

Our social and cultural practices and institutions variously disable or enable. Universities, like other educational sectors, are becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities and are recognising the benefits for all learners in developing inclusive education cultures built on principles of universal design.

This is the first research undertaken at Victoria University to ascertain the perceptions of university life by students with disabilities and/or long-term illnesses (DLTI)<sup>1</sup>. This research is distinctive in Australia due to its attempt at fidelity to the student voice in its findings and recommendations.

The report covers eight broad areas of concern:

1. The demographic profile of the students who participated in the research.
2. What Victoria University offers students with a disability or long-term illness.
3. The factors that help or hinder students' learning journeys.
4. The responsiveness of the University to the articulated needs of the students.
5. The communication levels between students and academic, support and administrative staff.
6. Access levels to a range of support services, including the library, the learning management system, teaching materials and technology generally.
7. Student success and attrition.
8. How VU can improve its support for students with DLTI.

Of interest is the fact that just over 85% of the participants in this project, who had registered with the Disabilities Services Unit (DSU), identified themselves as having a long-term psychological or medical condition rather than a physical disability. As a result, the term 'long-term illness' has been used to capture this cohort, whose needs may be intermittent and ongoing.

Although it is clear that VU has both lower access and success rates of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses than the higher education sector generally, the students who responded to this survey had – for the most part – very positive things to say about both the organisation and the staff. The lower participation rate of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses necessitates this preliminary research and the development of recruitment and retention strategies.

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1. Defined as 'any limitation, restriction or impairment, which restricts everyday activities and has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months' (ABS 2009). Long-term illness is defined here as having a complex causality, multiple risk factors long latency periods, a prolonged course of illness, a functional impairment or disability (AIHW 2013)

The outstanding systemic issues identified in this project include:

- The incorporation of the principles of universal design in the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.
- An increase in the flexibility for handing in items of assessment.
- An improvement in the delivery of on-line units and the Learning Management System.
- The need for teaching staff to be made aware of their obligations to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities or long-term illnesses.

The final point above is the only one that pertains specifically to students with disabilities or long-term illnesses; the others are equally as important for those students who are negotiating complex personal and working lives.

This leaves open the question of why Victoria University tends to attract fewer students in the DLTI cohort and why, once students are enrolled, there is a greater likelihood they will leave when compared to students with disabilities and long-term illnesses at other universities. This may be linked to other demographic characteristics that are also precursors to attrition sector-wide, such as being the first in their immediate family to attend university, coming from a low Socio-Economic Status background, speaking another language at home and coming from a Non-English Speaking Background (see James et al. 2010; The Victoria Institute, 2013). As is clear in the research, for the most part the decision to leave is made when a number of difficulties have a compounding effect.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Victoria University, according to available data, has a lower retention rate for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses in higher education than the sector overall. Moreover, the outcomes for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses are lower than across the higher education sector nationally. This situation cannot be allowed to continue in a university that is committed to the principles and practices of equity and justice for its community.

The recommendations for ameliorating the experiences of current students, for retaining students with disabilities and long-term illnesses at VU, and for promoting their engagement in higher education in general have been organised thematically: access to learning, communication, support and services, and on-going engagement.

## **Access for learning**

### **Recommendation 1:**

The University leadership needs to demonstrate commitment to improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses by actively raising the awareness that addressing access not only requires an adjustment of the built environment but also requires programmatic and pedagogical reform and a change in institutional culture.

### **Recommendation 2:**

There is an urgent requirement to identify and rectify physical barriers to accessing the built environment of Victoria University across its campuses. This will include provision of ramps and elevators that are accessible and designed for ease of student use. Access for students with visual impairments needs to be reflected in upgrading University signage. Disability parking provision and location requires urgent attention.

### **Recommendation 3:**

There is a need to upgrade technology to assist students with disabilities and long-term illnesses to access the curriculum and participate in learning programs. This includes adequate provision of hardware and appropriate software programs to support diverse learning requirements. Lectures need to be recorded using Lectopia and made available for students. All courses of study need to provide online lecture and tutorial notes that are consistent with the dates of lectures. Greater flexibility needs to be established in timelines for assessment tasks and in the design and modes of assessable tasks for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 4:**

Accessible library support is required at all campuses at times that suit students. Libraries across the University should provide dedicated study rooms for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 5:**

There is a requirement for flexibility in class and lecture times to ensure that students are able to travel between buildings and classes. More face-to-face time with teaching staff needs to be made available for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 6:**

Opportunities to socialise with and 'get to know' staff and classmates should be expanded as a precondition for developing relationships for learning and teaching. This might be pursued through provision of more extra-curricular activities appropriate for mature age and disabled students. Helpers and carers are required to enable inclusion in extra-curricular activities.

## **Communication**

### **Recommendation 7:**

The Disability Action Plan needs to outline the preconditions for inclusive education and incorporate a clear and widely disseminated University communication for learning plan for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses. Features within the communication for learning plan should include but not be limited to:

- Provision of after-hours contact numbers for tutors or teaching support.
- Improvements of WebCT and portal facilities.
- More information about student representatives and the training of representatives in disability access issues.
- Faster turnaround time for requests to Disability Services.
- Improving phone and online access to Disability Services.
- Updating of webpage information with dedicated pages for Disability Services and support networks information.
- Disability staff to communicate with and educate teaching staff in developing student plans and disability awareness.
- Establishing routine face-to-face time with teaching staff or tutors.
- Ensuring privacy is maintained by changing enrolment forms and data collection.

## **Support and services**

### **Recommendation 8:**

The Disability Services Unit, as a matter of priority, should investigate measures that can be taken to improve the career satisfaction of disability support workers to improve retention and client satisfaction.

### **Recommendation 9:**

The University should sponsor a disability awareness program, including training for support and administrative staff and academics.

### **Recommendation 10:**

Disability support services should be organised that demonstrate the flexibility required for the varying needs of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses, including the provision of dedicated disability support tutors, development of a buddy or peer support program and raising the level and improving the quality of communication with student representatives.

**Recommendation 11:**

The VU website needs to be reviewed to improve information for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses and provide information about disability issues.

**Ongoing engagement****Recommendation 12:**

The University planning and student facilities units should develop benchmarking for disability services and inclusiveness across VU. This should include audits to determine the impact of investment on the quality of the education experience and student outcomes.

**Recommendation 13:**

Appointment of disability ambassadors and liaison officers to schools to support student transitions to higher education.



# INTRODUCTION

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This report presents the findings of a project undertaken by The Victoria Institute with the (then) Office of Student Engagement to explore the experiences of a cohort of students with disabilities enrolled at Victoria University (VU).

This report proceeds from the perspective of the social model of disability and disablement (Oliver 1990, 2009). We understand disability to be a consequence of the social responses to people's differences. In other words, institutions, cultural practices and social discourses, including policy texts, established medical authorities, institutional structures and built environments, more or less exclude or include people with diverse identities. Our social and cultural practices and institutions variously disable or enable. Universities, like other educational sectors, are becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities and recognise the benefits for all learners in developing inclusive education cultures built on principles of universal design.

The goal of the project was to make an assessment of the ways in which the University's support for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses was achieving its aims, and identify enablers and barriers to successful participation in and completion of higher education (including both academic and extracurricular activities) for students with disabilities at VU. As a university with an express mission to meet the needs of students from a wide range of backgrounds, it is of critical concern that the needs of students with disabilities are both heard and responded to. VU has a statistical underrepresentation of students with disabilities within its student population.

The project aims were:

- i. To investigate the experiences of students with disabilities at VU.
- ii. To identify the factors that enable completion of studies for students with disabilities.
- iii. To identify the barriers to completion of studies for students with disabilities.
- iv. To investigate students' views about the factors that could improve retention and success for students with disabilities.
- v. To explore the factors that influence students' decisions to choose VU, and to complete or discontinue their studies.
- vi. To identify whether patterns exist in the current retention rates; for example, whether the retention of students with disabilities is different for different types of disabilities; whether retention is different depending on students' course or subject choices.
- vii. To ascertain whether students who seek formal support through the VU Disability Services Unit are more likely to succeed.

University students are more susceptible than the general population to developing emotional and psychological illnesses. This is partly due to the age of the majority of students, which is between 18 and 23, and partly due to students' experience of stressors that tend to accelerate or heighten

emotional and/or psychological illnesses. Financial pressure also increases the likelihood of these illnesses occurring. As a result, students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds (many of whom work full time) are even more susceptible (Cvetkovski et al. 2013). Of the Australian population in general, 18.5% is identified with having a disability or a chronic illness (e.g. cancer, depression, epilepsy, cystic fibrosis, multiple sclerosis, Chron's disease or diabetes) (AIHW 2013).

# BACKGROUND

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## **VU compared with the Australian higher education sector**

Higher levels of education are associated with many positive life outcomes, including improved employment opportunities, earning capacity, health status, quality of life and lifetime earnings. In recognition of the importance of higher education for both individual and population-based economic development, policy makers have focused on the expansion of higher education. Strategies for expansion aim at broadening the reach of higher education and on the inclusion of formerly excluded groups. However, despite an increase in the access to higher education and an increase in the participation of 'non-traditional' students, significant gaps still exist between the educational outcomes for people with disabilities and those without (Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Commission of Victoria 2013). Data indicates that only 8-14% of all students in post-secondary education in the US, Britain and Australia have disabilities, while over 18% of working age people in these countries are disabled (Ryan 2011; Sachs and Schreuer 2011).

In Australia, as in other OECD countries, governments have implemented legislation and equity programs in education and training targeted at increasing the participation of educationally disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities. In this context, the major legislative and policy documents that relate to university students with disabilities are the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards in Education (2005). In response to these legislative and resulting policy changes, there has been a significant shift in institutional responses to disability issues. Most universities now have policies and strategies that enhance equal opportunity for students with a disability and have professional disability services in place. Notwithstanding the development of the Disability Standards in Education, the Commonwealth Government recently reported that there were low levels of understanding of the disability discrimination legislation, of the Disability Standards in Education, and cited on-going problems of access and inclusion across education (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2013).

Australia is also a signatory state to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) and, accordingly, has specific obligations to people with disabilities and long-term illnesses with regard to education across their lifespan:

Article 24: 1. States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to:

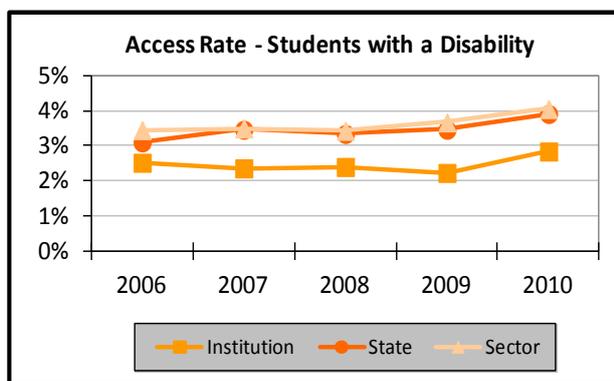
- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

The Convention is unequivocal. Tertiary education needs to develop structures, programs, policies and cultures that are inclusive for all comers:

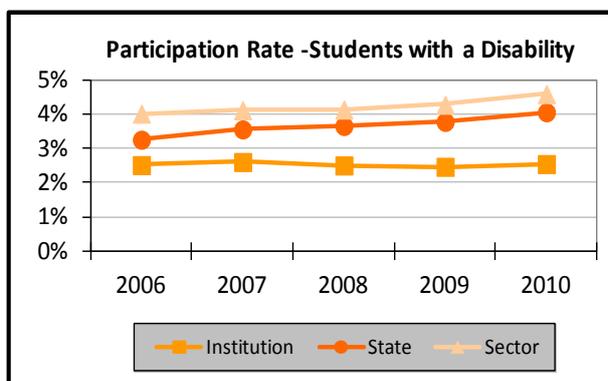
Article 24:5: States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities. (United Nations 2006)

VU’s response to improving education opportunities for people with disabilities includes the development of a Disability Action Plan, which is part of its reporting obligation to the Human Rights Commission. This plan is designed to identify and remove the barriers to access and participation for students with disabilities, and develop new strategies for further improving resources that provide a supportive and inclusive educational experience for students with disabilities. While VU continues to work to attract, support and retain students with disabilities, data from recent audits indicates that the University currently lies below both the state and the national averages for access and participation rates for students with disabilities in higher education, as is shown in the following tables:

**Figure 01: Access rates<sup>1</sup>**



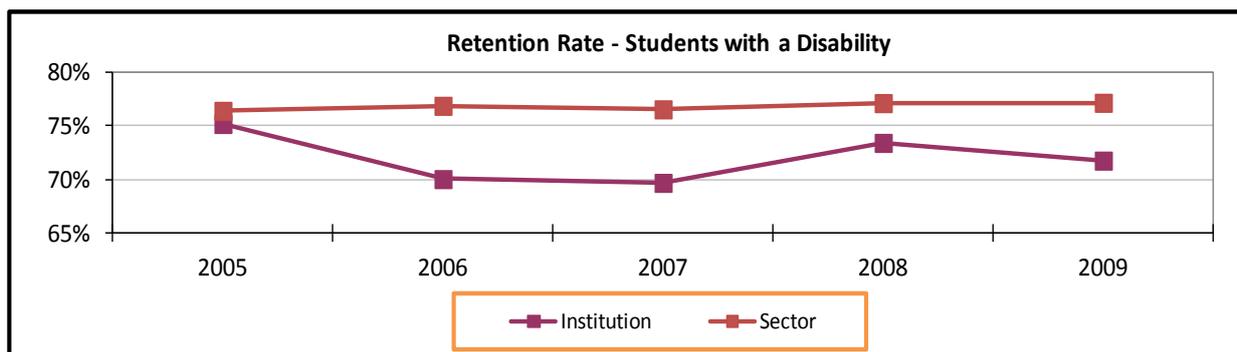
**Figure 02: Participation rates<sup>2</sup>**



VU also has lower retention rates for students with disabilities compared to the retention rate for students with disabilities across the higher education sector:

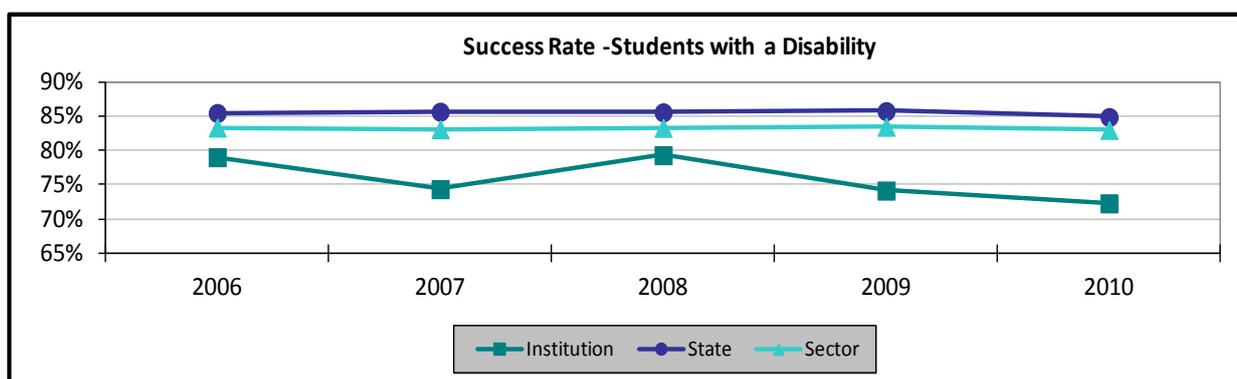
1. The access rate is the proportion of all commencing students who have disabilities  
 2. The participation rate is the proportion of all students who have disabilities. The reference value for the participation ratio is the proportion of persons with disabilities in the general population aged 15 to 64.

**Figure 03 Retention rates<sup>3</sup>**



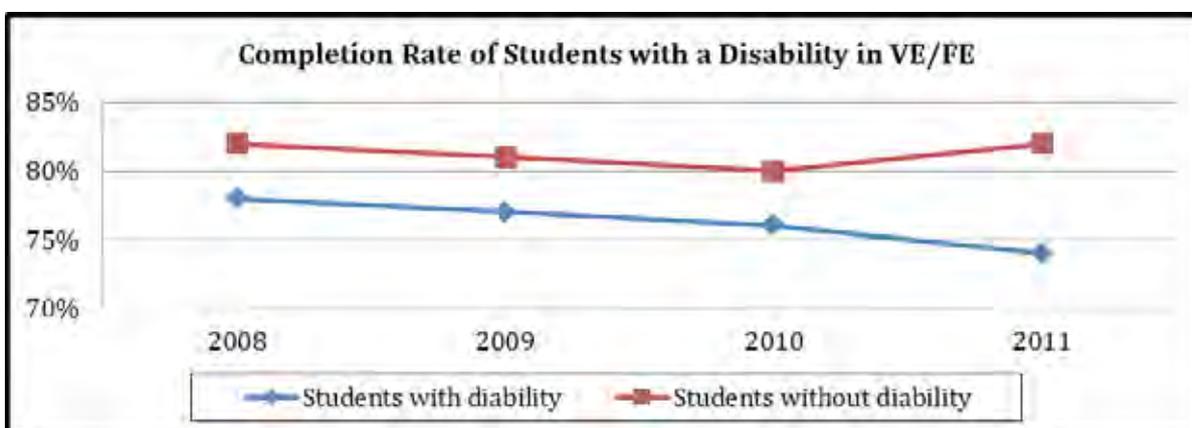
Whilst generally Victorian universities and the higher education sector nationally have similar rates of success for students with disabilities, the data shows that Victoria University falls well below these rates.

**Figure 04 Success rates<sup>4</sup>**



In Vocational and Further Education (VE/FE) at VU there is a significant and growing gap between the completion rate of students with and without a disability:

**Figure 05 Completion rates**



3. The retention rate is the proportion of students with disabilities who were studying in the given year that returned in the following year, excluding those that completed their studies. The reference value for the retention ratio is the retention rate for all other students.

4. The success rate is the EFTSL of units passed by students with disabilities as a percentage of the EFTSL of all units attempted by students with disabilities. The reference value for the success ratio is the retention rate for all other students.

In summary, it is clear from the available data that Victoria University has a lower retention rate for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses in higher education than the sector overall, however, the reasons for this disparity are unknown.

This project sought to explore the experiences of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses currently enrolled at VU; the factors that might contribute to VU's lower retention rate; and how VU can improve the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. In doing so, there was a recognition that within the general field of social inclusion in higher education generated by the 'Widening Participation' agenda of the UK government and the Higher Education Participation and Partnership (HEPPP) strategy used by the Australian government (see Hughes 2014), the needs of students with disabilities are less well attended to (Vickerman and Blundell 2010) than those from other disadvantaged groups.

This is clearly problematic for a number of reasons, but particularly within a policy context where it is seen as increasingly important that the specific needs of this cohort should be determined and shaped by those people with disabilities and long-term illnesses themselves. This is especially the case where the resulting policies will have a direct impact on educational outcomes (Yair 2008). Further, Tinklin, Ridell and Wilson (2004) argue that the sector will remain largely uninformed of the circumstances and support needs of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses unless the cohort is asked to share their perspectives and experiences, as has been the approach to other disadvantaged groups (Devlin 2012)<sup>5</sup>. Taking this stance logically leads to the possibility of a more positive position, whereby the higher education sector is asked to take strategic responsibility for the inclusion levels at their institutions. This moves beyond a model of pity and/or charity; rather, students are asked to adapt — as best they can — to the existing institution through self-advocacy and requests for support (Oliver 2008; Franklin et al. 2004). Of course, improvements in education experiences and outcomes in higher education for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses rely upon changes throughout education generally. Authentic experiences of inclusive education in the school sector are a pre-requisite for improving the rates of enrolment, retention and success in higher education for all students (Slee 2011).

It is in light of these findings that the methodology and focus for this project was built.

### **Support for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses at VU**

Informal discussions with staff at VU's Disability Services Unit suggested that there are difficulties with the process for making support available to students. These include difficulties in accessing staff, inflexible procedures that pose difficulties for some students, inadequate technology, resource allocation problems, record-keeping issues, high staff changeover and changes in protocols and, at times, the implication that students with disabilities were seen by teaching staff as an impost.

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5. Given that the enrolment and retention patterns at universities tend to have a degree of specificity given the varying vulnerability levels of their enrolling cohorts (Archer 2007; Hughes 2014), it is critical to understand the way(s) in which socio-economic factors such as LSES, first in immediate family, NESB, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background or coming from a regional or remote area combine with DLTI combine to create the circumstances where students find it too difficult to persist.

Furthermore, there was some indication that this generated a less than supportive culture, particularly in relation to assessment dates. As other data shows, flexibility in the submission dates of assessment is a critical advantage to disadvantaged students (see Devlin et al. 2012).

In addition it has been suggested that many members of the teaching staff across all Colleges are unaware of the services and support that are available to students with disabilities, whether there are students with disabilities in their classes, how to accommodate their learning requirements and – critically – their obligations under the provisions of disability discrimination legislation, including the Disability Standards for Education.

Informal discussions with disability service providers outside of VU suggest that the disability sector as a whole does not have strong evidence-based practice guidelines or benchmarking criteria. Yet in 2006 the (then) Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (now Universities Australia) produced a set of guidelines for developing the provision of services and support for students with disabilities, which included the following key principles for the sector:

- a. That universities will uphold academic standards such that students graduate with the requisite skills and knowledge associated with the degree conferred.
- b. That universities provide students with a disability with the opportunity to realise their academic and social potential and to participate fully in university life (AVVC 2006: 3).

These general principles were framed in order to provide Australian universities with best practice guidance for the provision of a supportive tertiary culture for students with disabilities within a developing and expanding regulatory framework. Universities are subject to the provisions of State and Commonwealth Equal Opportunity and Anti-Discrimination legislation, most notably the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1992). The AVCC's guidelines attempted to move the sector beyond simply avoiding unlawful discrimination. Yet adhering to the guidelines is voluntary and largely self-regulated, and little is known about the ways in which the sector has responded.

Similarly, another point of criticism that was raised during informal discussion with the Disability Services Unit was the suggestion that one of the barriers to students seeking help is that people with disabilities are continuously required to 'prove' their disability. Some people find the requirement to repeatedly provide documents and records both discourteous and frustrating, and it also has the potential to breach privacy. It was suggested that some people with disabilities dislike providing a diagnosis, which can lead to 'labelling', a loss of individuality and the feeling of being pathologised and, ultimately, objectified.

When undertaking similar projects, Vickerman and Blundell (2010), Green (2007) and Jacoby and Austin (2007) found there was great reluctance on the part of students to disclose their disability due to the fear that disclosure would stigmatise the student, or even reduce their access to activities. It is clear in this current study that 19.3% of the respondents didn't disclose their condition or disability for similar reasons.

A further barrier to seeking help is that services are only available for some types of disabilities and there is ambiguity as to the types of disabilities for which support is available. For example, learning difficulties are not technically classified as disabilities and students with mental health issues have fewer services and support available to them than students with obvious physical disabilities that can be resolved relatively simply with the appropriate equipment or technologies. This issue has particular significance in this project, given the very high rate of students identifying as having a non-physical disability.

Some students with disabilities reported experiencing difficulties in understanding the administrative systems at the University, locating key service centres, and generally negotiating the physical environment. In addition, anecdotal accounts suggest that when support or services were sought, some students experienced a loss of decision-making autonomy and found that their decisions were subsequently made for them.

Our project sought to interrogate some of these anecdotal accounts and, further, to identify whether any patterns exist in the current retention rates; for example, whether the retention of students with disabilities is different for different types of disabilities; whether retention is different depending on students' course or subject choices; and whether students who seek formal support through the VU Disability Services Unit are more likely to succeed.

# METHODOLOGY

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The sample of students surveyed included students who self-identified as having a disability at enrolment by ticking the appropriate box on the enrolment form and students who registered with VU's Disability Services Unit (DSU) without having ticked the box. With the permission of VU's Risk, Legal, Records and Compliance Services Office, a list of self-identified students with disabilities and their email contact information was provided through VU Connect. This list was crosschecked with the DSU to include students that did not identify as having a disability at enrolment but who subsequently registered with the DSU.

Advice was sought from the DSU about the most appropriate way to contact students allowing for their disability. Most students were sent an email with the link to the anonymous online questionnaire. At the advice of the DSU, some students received the questionnaire through the post or in modified formats. The survey is presented in the Appendix.

Students were asked to complete an anonymous 37-question survey, including both forced answer Likert scale questions and open-ended free text questions. Most of the questions required an answer, although the free text comments were generally optional. Many of the questions allowed for more than one answer.

The survey was submitted to the VU Human Research Ethics Committee and was approved. The application number was: HRE13-170.

The survey questions developed for this project were informed by the informal discussions referred to earlier, a review of the literature, and from the contributions of a reference group that included staff from the DSU and the Victoria Institute, and currently enrolled students with disabilities. They were designed to explore the University's broad learning environment for DLTI students without entering the field of teaching and learning<sup>1</sup> per se, nor social relationships<sup>2</sup> per se. This was because we were interested in the ways in which the organisation as a whole might better include DLTI students.

Eighty-three surveys were returned, with 71 completed in full – a 60% return rate. They were returned electronically as well as via mail.

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1. See Holloway 2001; Ryan 2005; Goode 2007; Itteyerah and Kumar 2007.  
2. See Papatotiriou and Windle 2012; Low 1996; Trainor 2008.



# DATA ANALYSIS

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The quantitative data is reported using descriptive statistics. Interpretive content analysis was applied to analyse the free text responses (Ahuvia 2001). Interpretive content analysis involved coding the data to identify major themes and then organising these themes into categories. However, the categories go beyond quantifying the straightforward elements in the text. In this type of analysis the process of coding the text does not treat the coded part as if it existed in isolation from the rest of the text from which it was taken. This, then, entails a holistic approach that considers how the rest of the text would influence the interpretation of the part that is being coded. Because coding rules do not restrict interpretive content analysis, this approach has the flexibility to take the context of the data more fully into account.

Interpretative content analysis (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) was selected as a coding method because it has the potential to provide a data analysis that links the knowledge claims with the context in which they arose. In particular, it facilitates an enriched, speculative approach to the data whilst also situating it within the habitus of the specific university.



# FINDINGS

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The project findings are presented in charts and tables that correspond with the results for each of the survey questions. In addition, illustrative qualitative data is included with the responses for each (Ahuvia 2001). Traditional, interpretive, and reception questions are coded and summarised in the headings below with direct quotes italicised. Square brackets are used to indicate a word or phrase that we have added to clarify a quotation. Numbers in brackets next to quotes identify the response rate for each question. No demographic data is attached to the qualitative data provided in order to facilitate the reporting of responses verbatim, without being assigned to a particular disability, age or sex. It is hoped that in this way the authentic student voice can be communicated to the reader.



# SECTION 1: GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND LONG-TERM ILLNESSES

# 1

## 1.1 The participants

Only students who define themselves broadly as disabled participated in the survey. These include students with physical, psychiatric and emotional disabilities. It also includes a number of students with long-term illnesses who, whilst not conforming to the precise definition of 'disabled', nevertheless consider themselves as at times being incapacitated to some degree and in need of assistance. A total of 83 individuals responded to some or all of the questions.

All enrolling students have the option of identifying themselves as disabled by ticking boxes on the enrolment form, where they may also select a type of disability. The responses for Question 2 of the survey show that most of the students surveyed identified themselves at enrolment as having a disability, however, nearly 20% of the students did not do so.

## 1.2 Do students identify as having a disability, impairment or medical condition?

Participants were asked whether they did, or did not identify as having a disability on the enrolment form. Their responses are presented in Table 1 below.

Interestingly, 35% of the sample either did not identify or cannot remember if they did so. Both responses may point to the lack of identification with the label, but it is also possible that at the point of enrolment the health issue had not yet arisen. This is particularly likely for students with emotional or psychiatric health issues that may be generated by the university environment (see Reavley 2013). However, there are other reasons for non-disclosure. The following section summarises the reasons provided for choosing whether or not to identify as having a disability at enrolment.

### Identifying as disabled has disadvantages

Among the students that did not identify as disabled on the enrolment form, several suggested that they felt they might be disadvantaged or discriminated against if they did so:

*No, because I was afraid of the stigma and it would go against me.*

*I have experienced discrimination after I have told people at work that I have a disability.*

*No, in case of discrimination or insensitivity.*

Responses from a few students suggest that they did not disclose their disabilities because they believed that this would detract from their achievements or make them less meritorious:

*Did not want the illness 'to win'.*

*I have a mental illness that is not immediately obvious in casual contact. I wanted to try being a student on my own merits rather than be regarded as somehow receiving special treatment.*

Some expressed concerns about identifying themselves as disabled because they believed this information would be permanently 'on record' or because their tutors and lecturers would have access to this information:

*[I had] concerns regarding my condition going on permanent record.*

*I did not feel comfortable having to declare my medical matters to my tutors.*

### **Categories of 'real' disability**

A few students suggested that they did not fall into obvious categories of disability; others responded that their type of disability was not recognised as such, or not serious enough to warrant special treatment compared to other disabilities, such as sight impairment or requiring a wheelchair:

*Because I don't come under a certain category of a disability, but clearly I do. I have recommendations to go by, but you [VU] don't recognise them and I'm going to lose how I do my exams and everything at the end of the year. Which is clearly wrong.*

*I knew that I was covered under the Disabilities Act, but I just did not identify with it because I think of people with disabilities as people in wheelchairs, blind or with learning challenges. And I felt like a fake when I had to use the disabled toilets.*

### **Support available**

Among the self-identifying students, most replied that they did so in order to access support:

*I know that there are requirements that I cannot meet without assistance or changes (typing instead of writing, alternative assessments, etc.) and disclosing allows me to have a plan drawn up with alternatives to allow me to complete the course.*

*I listed my disability so as to access disability support.*

*Because I would require some assistance from disability support throughout my studies.*

However, a few students did not realise that there was support available for students that identified as disabled:

*[I] Didn't realise I could access services or it would benefit me to identify myself.*

Some students could not remember whether or not they ticked the box at enrolment, but they found out about the disability support available at VU at a later date:

*Not sure that there a specific question on enrolment forms. I found out about services for disabled students from flyers around campus.*

## 1.3 Nature of students' disabilities

Students were asked to indicate the nature of their disability in order to ascertain the proportion of the sample in each category listed on the enrolment form. This data is, of course, reliant on those self-identifying and as we saw earlier, a significant number of the respondents did not identify at the start of their course. Table 2 offers a breakdown of this data and shows that most of the respondents identified as having a mental health condition, while many also ticked medical and physical disability.

**Table 01**

<b>Which of the following best describes the nature of your disability, impairment or medical condition?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Mental Health Condition	43.4%	36
Medical Condition	30.1%	25
Physical Disability	24.1%	20
Neurological Condition	16.9%	14
Hearing impairment	6.0%	5
Vision impairment	4.8%	4
Learning Disability	12.0%	10
Other (please specify)-free text responses	10.8%	9
Answered question		83
Skipped question		0

Students who ticked 'other' gave the following responses. This group can be seen as falling into the category of long-term illness, rather than as having a disability per se:

- Obstructive sleep apnoea
- Inflammation of lung
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Type one diabetes
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Mild intellectual impairment

The extent to which VU's disability services provided support for students with these conditions is explored later.

## 1.4 Use of VU services

Participants were then asked to indicate whether they had accessed support services and, if so, which ones. Most had accessed VU's DSU and many had also accessed the Counselling Service. Nearly 16% of students had not used any support services.

**Table 02**

<b>Have you used any of the following services or support available to students at VU?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Disability services	66.3%	55
Counselling services	37.3%	31
Library support services	26.5%	22
Careers advisory services	18.1%	15
Student advisory service	18.1%	15
Have not used any of these services	15.7%	13
Student welfare services	10.8%	9
Chaplain	2.4%	2
Free text responses: Please comment on the support or services that you used or why you did not use them.		49
	Answered question	83
	Skipped question	0

The following representative quotes summarise the content and type of comments that students gave about their use of services at VU.

As the responses show, some students used several of the services and support available:

*Counselling to assist with personal crises and for timetabling help. Library support services to help navigate search engines, general search help. Student Advisory service to work out what other services I needed or how to find academic, course advisor etc. Disability service, when my mental health condition ... threatened to derail my studies.*

Many of the respondents made positive comments about the counselling and library services. However, comments about disability services suggest that a lack of staff continuity made it difficult for some students, and that the level of help and support they received from disability services was dependent on the staff member available:

*Counselling – they were friendly and good at what they do.*

*The student advisory service and careers advisory services were not understanding. The counselling services and disability services were more understanding.*

*Library very good, careers is a waste of time in general, disability services good, but always have to chase them.*

*I found that people dealing with disabled students are sympathetic and helpful.*

*Disability services have been great, although there seems to be a high amount of turnover of staff. It depends who [you] meet in front desk and [on] disability services workers.*

*Disability support did not help the first year I used it, but this year it has been far more helpful. I think the person now is more connected and willing to help.*

*Counselling service was great, but since my main person from disabilities has left I no longer feel I get the support I got ... I find the replacement unapproachable.*

Some students reported that there were barriers to accessing disability services and one student suggested that the support services listed in the questionnaire were not available at the Queen Street Campus.<sup>1</sup>

*I looked into the disability services, but it seems to be set up with lots of barriers to prevent access. And I couldn't clearly see how they could help me. Most of these are not available at the Queen Street campus.*

## 1.5 Students' needs

Question 5 asked students to select their level of need from a range of high to low and to comment on their specific needs. Interestingly, the results show that over 80% of students indicated they have low or moderate level needs.

**Table 03**

Which of the following best describes the level of support you need?		
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
Low level of need	47.0%	39
Moderate level of need	39.8%	33
High level of need	7.2%	6
Other	6.0%	5
Please comment: Free text responses		32
Answered question		83
Skipped question		0

Thirty-two students provided comments about their needs, which indicated that many had fluctuating needs. Most of the respondents (identifying as high, moderate or low need) described their needs in terms of requiring support with or extensions for assessment and examinations deadlines:

*Support obtaining extensions is the main area I need help with if my medical conditions affect my ability to get things in on time or complete course work. I found no easily accessed information regarding this on the Internet.*

*I need support with exam and assignment arrangements and general support linking to my disability.*

*Support needed for anxiety mainly through exams and help with concentration and motivation during the semesters.*

Some students described physical needs:

*Could not physically complete a practical assessments because of my disability and this is the main reason I sought help from disability services.*

*I can walk with a stick for balance as long as lift works I'm ok.*

Some students suggested that they felt more comfortable when staff were understanding of their needs:

<sup>1</sup> This student's belief is not accurate — VU disability services and support are available at all of VU's campuses, however there is no disability officer or office at the Queen Street campus. Subsequently the respondent's perception is understandable.

*My condition fluctuates. When I'm doing quite well I do not need so much support. When I'm not coping it's really difficult to front up to school or to 'think' and focus on assignments. Knowing that the teachers understand what's going on and knowing that they will be supportive when I manage to get there makes it feel safer.*

However, one student suggested that it is not always practical to let staff know about their needs:

*I feel that I need a moderate to high level of help as my disability affects my performance. Often it is not practical to tell lecturers or tutors that I have a disability even though I may be struggling in the classroom taking in information and meeting the requirements. Counselling is helpful in sorting out some of the issues.*

# SECTION 2: WHAT VU OFFERS STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

## 2

### 2.1 Does VU accommodate students' needs?

Participants were asked to comment on whether — and the extent to which — the university was able to accommodate their needs. This question was also explored using a Likert scale later in the survey.

The results were cross-tabulated to explore whether there was any difference in VU's ability to accommodate students with higher or lower needs. Based on the results there does not appear to be any association between the students' level of need and positive or negative comments about VU's ability to accommodate students' needs. However, this conclusion is tentative because the number of representative responses is small.

A large number of students' responses suggest that VU is doing well in accommodating students' needs, as illustrated in the comments that follow:

*I've been provided counselling, provided assistive technology like voice recorders and touchpads, allowed to use a computer in the classroom, provided a note taker, had my teachers notified, and been able to arrange things like extensions with my teachers with their support and understanding. I think given the challenges I faced in returning to school, VU has done all that's reasonably expected to accommodate them.*

*VU provides academic support every time I am in class, audio books, large text, my transcription on computers, enlarged A3 size photocopies of all class work and homework.*

*I was very satisfied with the level of support I received from VU's disability services. No hassles, and things were well organised and I was never disappointed.*

A number commented very positively about the support they received from teaching staff and described VU staff as respectful and accommodating:

*Supervisors [are] very understanding ... It's great that this initiative is provided by VU, and makes me feel more comfortable it is there.*

*The tutors and lecturers were very understanding and most were willing to help in any way they could.*

*VU teachers have been really accepting and accommodating. They have encouraged me to keep going and they have granted me extensions so that I can do the work at a later date if need be. The teachers behave in a positive, supportive way and it makes going to school possible. Without this support I would have failed my course in 2011. This experience has meant everything to me and it has enriched my life in ways I never could have imagined.*

One student commented that support was available, but repeated follow-up was needed to get support:

*Has been accommodating thus far, but needed quite a few phone calls and interviews to achieve support.*

Approximately 20% of students suggested that VU did not accommodate their needs and a few students suggested that support for disabled students was not available from all VU staff:

*VU could easily meet my needs if they were flexible and understanding, and if the staff actually read the plan I gave them, but my experience has been negative so far ... Right now I am only deferred from the course and am meant to start back in T1 but I am not confident that VU will treat me well after my recent experience.*

*To some extent, good, but in some cases it has been really hard to get them accommodated for. The teachers (mostly) and the disability staff have been excellent, but the [other departments] have been awfully hard to get to accommodate my needs.*

Some students commented that while they received adequate support for their academic endeavours, they had difficulties with the facilities at VU; for example with mobility and access around the campus:

*I have no problem with the studies; it is the facilities that cause me some grief.*

*They need to provide assistance not just in the campus, but help the student around the campus.*

*My issues revolve around mobility. My issues were mainly parking, and there was no help able to be given. I also struggle with the Footscray Park campus access, but there is nothing that can be done about that.*

Some students within the survey-cohort suggested that they did not know about the support and services available at VU and one student suggested that they were unable to access support because they had missed 'the deadline':<sup>1</sup>

*VU has not been able to accommodate my needs because I was not aware of the disability support service. I heard about this service through a friend that had applied for the same thing, however, it was too late for me to apply.*

## 2.2 Use of outside support

They were asked whether they had used services outside the university to assist them with their studies. Almost half of the respondents indicated that they did so and 33 of the respondents elaborated on this in their commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> There are no deadlines for registering for assistance with VU's DSU, with the exception that students who are seeking special assistance for examinations or assessment tasks are requested to do so one month prior to the examination date. However, exceptions can be made in the case of unexpected incidences or emergencies.

**Table 04**

<b>Did you use any services or support outside of VU to help you to study at VU?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	45.5%	35
No	54.5%	42
Free text responses: Please describe the services that you accessed outside VU.		33
Answered question		77
Skipped question		6

The majority of students listed health professionals, such as general practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, community health centre workers, and also family members as their key supports. Only one student used a tutor to assist with his/her studies.

*The psychologist I see helps me with strategies both related to my studies and also those which help me be able to study*

*... Community Health Centre. They provided counselling, psychiatric support and case workers in one building.*

*Counselling and my GP.*

*Family and friends type assignments.*

Comments also identified programs to assist with learning needs. Two students referred to the Personal Helpers & Mentors Service (PHAMS).<sup>2</sup>

## **2.3 Which institutions are benchmarks?**

We were interested in the perceptions of students about other institutions that provided better support or services for students with disabilities, with the results shown in Table 6. Only 10 students answered 'yes' to this question and 18 provided comments. Highlights from these comments are given below.

<sup>2</sup> This service is available through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. It aims to assist people aged 16 years and over whose ability to manage their daily activities and to live independently in the community is impacted because of a severe mental illness.

**Table 05**

<b>Do you know of another institution that offers better support or services for students with disabilities?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Unsure	48.1%	37
No	39.0%	30
Yes	13.0%	10
Answered question		77
Skipped question		6
Free text: Please tell us about any organisation that you think provides better support and services for students with disabilities and what makes these better.		18

Some commented that, in their experience, VU had provided the best service available for students with disabilities:

*VU has introduced me to many other community organisations and interests both on and off campus. So in this way VU is best. It is also well recognised and is highly regarded by employees. RTOs provide a smaller class size and more one on one time and in this way better supported me to successfully complete my studies.*

*I have previously attended RMIT University and I find the support and community of Victoria University to be far superior.*

Deakin University features in several student responses. A number highlighted features of this university’s services, including liaising with teaching staff on behalf of students, support from the time of enrolment and consistent approaches to disability learning plans:

*Deakin University, they liaise with tutors on behalf of the student, once they have registered their details with the disability services department. Takes pressure off the student having to do this. If tutors have queries they confer with the disability services department not the student in front of other students, improves privacy and removes the feeling that the student is being a burden on others in the class.*

*Deakin University has courses sent out monthly and when enrolling they send support right away to confirm what needs you have.*

One student also commented on differences in staff attitudes and revealed disappointment about his/her experiences at VU compared to Deakin University:

*Deakin University: Learning Access Plans are developed for each student, teaching staff are all aware of LAPs and when given to a Unit Chair/Head Teacher, they make sure they do what is required for the student. Students never have to tell them what the problem is because everything relating to access, educational needs, assessments, etc.; are all detailed in the LAP. At VU, when I gave the teacher in charge a copy of my disability plan, I was asked, “so what is wrong with you?” Privacy is protected at Deakin, but not at VU. At Deakin, a teacher in charge of a course would NEVER shout at a student and make unjust accusations. We are treated as adults at Deakin and treated with respect. Having a disability means I know I can study without being disadvantaged,*

*but at VU, I do feel disadvantaged with regard to my educational needs and the inability of VU to respond appropriately to those needs. In addition, not all VU staff treat students as adults, nor do they all treat students with respect. I am terribly disappointed with my upsetting experience at VU.*

However, one student made negative comments about Deakin University’s services and suggested that support was more readily accessible at VU:

*I used to study at Deakin, and I had no idea about the services they offered. At VU, all I had to do was talk to one of my class teachers, and they told me all about the kinds of help I could get here.*

One student commented that other universities provided services that VU did not provide despite his/her request for these services:

*Other universities provide Live Remote Captioning - a service I have been asking for from VU for some time.*

## 2.4 Why study at VU?

Given Victoria University’s mission to serve the needs and interests of students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, we were interested in the reasons for choosing VU and, in particular, whether the services and support available for people with disabilities was a factor in students decision making. Interestingly, only 11.7% cited support services, with over half choosing VU for its course offerings.

**Table 06**

<b>Why did you choose to study at VU? (choose one or more )</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Choice of courses	51.9%	40
Close to home	41.6%	32
I met the entry requirements	28.6%	22
Other	20.8%	16
Good student support	11.7%	9
Good student services	9.1%	7
My friends enrolled at VU	3.9%	3
Unsure	2.6%	2
Answered question		77
Skipped question		6
Free Text: Please explain your reasons for choosing to study at VU.		43

Some students commented that the choice of institutions for their preferred course was limited:

*Only institution offering my course.*

*The university offered courses in Vocational Education and Training.*

Several students described VU's location as convenient, while for others it was the closest option, which is a key factor in choice of university and retention for many disadvantaged students (see Devlin et al. 2012):

*Easy to access via public transport, not too far away.*

*The campus is extremely far away from my home, yet is still the closest option and is at least easily accessible by public transport.*

One student revealed that s/he studies at VU despite its location and her/his extreme personal hardship:

*This is where I was placed. I sleep in my car a couple nights a week as I live too far away to go home each day. I find it hell but I also like the lecturers.*

Some students commented on VU's flexibility and its ability to cater for their needs as reasons for their choice:

*They had the course I wanted to do and they offered flexible delivery, which I needed because of my condition.*

*The course seemed to meet my needs and I was told prior to enrolling at VU that VU would make sure my needs as a disabled student were met and that I would be eligible for a scholarship from VU.*

*Smaller classes, more course specific support, easy to get to.*

*Caters for very diverse needs. Flexible study environment.*

*I was told that it is a supportive environment for people with chemical sensitivities.*

Several students commented on the friendliness and helpfulness of VU staff and described the campus culture as friendly and inclusive:

*I was impressed by the warmth and helpfulness of the teaching staff at interviews.*

*It is close to home. Got good friendly people and there is a good range of courses.*

*1st year – because the course was recommended to me by a former VU student who spoke highly of VU. In 2012 because I managed what I would never have thought possible in 2011 at VU. The campus culture is one of inclusiveness and acceptance. The education we receive extends beyond the classroom and into the community. This is the thing I'm most grateful for. The contacts I've made through VU and the organisations and people it has connected me with.*





# SECTION 3: THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT VU

## 3

### 3.1 Enablers of study at VU

Question 10 explored the factors that facilitated or enabled students' progress with their studies at VU. This question collected only free text responses. There were 77 responses.

Table 07

What features of VU have helped you to study at VU?	
Answer Options	Response Count
Answered question	77
Skipped question	6

Students listed a variety of factors that helped them to study at VU, including library services, disability services, counselling, the learning hub, the bike hub, the gym, flexible timetables, online learning and friendly staff. These are captured in the following quotes:

*Law library, flexible timetable, the helpful teachers, Disability Support Services/Counselling Services.*

*Some articles I read in 'Platform' magazine made me stick it out when I felt like dropping out. What I read 'normalised' my 'returning to school experience' and made me feel it would get better. I was desperate to leave and desperate to stay and the magazine saved me. The teachers. They are fair and knowledgeable and they encourage you when you need it most. The disability services office, it is approachable, friendly staff. The counselling services and the provisions for 'Special Consideration'. Also, I like the Footscray Park Campus because it has lots of small individual spaces and in this way feels less intimidating. Visible security is good also. The bike hub is amazing because it means everyone can get a shower if they need to and that their bikes are secure for the day. The gym facilities are good with a wide range of classes and a swimming pool. There are many community days or activities with 'social action' groups. There is a leadership day offered to all students for the bargain price of \$10. This gives students an opportunity to gain knowledge in a number of 'life enriching areas'.*

*Rovers at the library.*

*The Bike Hub is awesome because riding to school burns off nervous energy and being able to shower when I get there means that I feel good and clean and tidy when I go to class.*

Flexible delivery modes featured in several student comments, which is in keeping with other data that

reports on the particular needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin et al. 2012):

*Most course content is online so when I am unable to attend class I can keep working at home. (17)*

*Blackboard-posting of lecture notes, recorded lectures & tutorials information online. (24)*

*The co-ordinator and teachers are supportive of extensions and make-up work for times when I'm unwell and can't manage the work or class. (22)*

*The learning centre has been excellent in helping me cope with returning to study as an adult. I was able to get face-to-face time with a teacher. (36)*

Many students describe the support they received from the DSU as necessary and helpful:

*The most important help I receive at Victoria University is the support from the disability services and my disability liaison officer. Without this support and assistance I would never have been able to attend university nor achieve the success I have achieved this far.*

*The disability support services have been fantastic and very supportive.*

*Also the disability office is very approachable and I was looked after very quickly.*

*VU provide me with computers and special aids, modified keyboard mouse, >200 text, USB and a personal academic aid to assist me with reading, writing, communication and mobility.*

A few students referred to VU staff as approachable and helpful, and gave positive comments about the open-learning approaches:

*Clear communication by teachers of academic expectations. Approachability of teaching staff. Availability of support services at Footscray Park Campus. Readiness of VU staff at all levels to assist with queries, especially telephone queries (once you get through the long queue).*

*Counselling; the kindness and understanding and openness of the teaching staff, who never penalised me in any way for my disabilities; my note taker; the ability to use my computer in class; access to a touchpad for use in the computer labs.*

*The open learning access and the support peer learning provided by so many fellow students and the staff within different specialities.*

## **3.2 Barriers to study at VU**

The factors that hindered student participation are equally as important as those that helped students study successfully. Students were asked to choose from a list of possible factors that may have made it difficult for them to study. As presented in Table 9, there is an approximately even spread across the choices offered, with around 20% of students indicating that mobility around campus, parking and lack of staff support have made it difficult for them. Interestingly, 26% of students indicated that they had not experienced any difficulties.

**Table 08**

<b>What features of VU have made it difficult for you to study at VU? (choose one or more)</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
I have not had any difficulties	26.0%	20
Difficulty accessing parking	22.1%	17
Timetable made it hard	20.8%	16
Other	20.8%	16
Lack of support from VU staff	19.5%	15
Difficult getting to classes	18.2%	14
Transport difficulties	18.2%	14
Hard to get around the campus	15.6%	12
Please comment on the things that made it difficult for you to study at VU.		50
	Answered question	77
	Skipped question	6
Free text: Please comment on the things that made it difficult for you to study at VU.		50

Fifty students also provided comments about features that made studying at VU difficult. As captured in the percentages above, parking and difficulties with mobility, and in particular the availability of lifts, feature in the student responses below:

*Parking is a pain in the Footscray area, they are really hard to find.*

*The parking at Nicholson Street is not sufficient.*

*More shuttle buses from Footscray Station to Footscray Park or St. Albans Station to the St. Albans campus would be an improvement.*

*Getting around the Footscray park campus is a nightmare. Parking is very difficult to get. Not everywhere is easily accessible by lift, and if it is, I often have to walk very long distances – days on campus are exhausting.*

*Lack of lifts at Footscray Park Campus, particularly in building C. ... having to walk all the way to building D to get a lift and then walk all the way back to building C has been extremely difficult. This needs improvement. Also, Disabled parking inside the campus (closer to building entrances) is better. They are quite a long way from the buildings I need to go to.*

*St. Albans Campus parking is inadequate and scary if evening lectures are there.*

*Access to building: had to wait nearly six weeks to get a key to access the disability lift. It meant I had to make a mobile phone call (no direct internal facility) to security head office, and get them to contact the security guard on campus to come down to the entry to let me access the building via the disabled lift, meaning I was often delayed getting to class in the morning, and often meant it was not worth going to lunch because I would only have a few minutes because I needed to allow extra time for the security guard to get there to let me out and back in.*

One student suggested the need for a dedicated study room and tutor to facilitate their studies:

*I have found it extremely difficult not having a disability study room at my campus being the Nicholson Street campus. It is also difficult as I am a social work student and my teaching faculty are not on the same campus they are situated at Footscray Park campus, also I have experienced great difficulty with student services tutors as I believe they are not properly trained in how to deal with student with a disability and the timeframe of an hour is extremely insufficient for a student with a disability. Disability support should have their own tutor specially trained to assist students with a disability.*

Another student described difficulties with VU's scholarship application process:

*Despite being told scholarships were available at VU, it seems that the only scholarship available to TAFE students actually closes about five to six weeks before the enrolment date for the TAFE courses ... how ludicrous is that? Other educational institutions ensure scholarships remain open and can be lodged with enrolment application documents. So VU scholarships are apparently there in name only.*

One student suggested the need for smoke-free building entry points:

*When there are smokers out from of the building, right at/next to the doorway, it makes it hard to go past without breathing it in. Sometimes I'll walk around the building but there will be smokers there too. VU needs to make 'Smoke free' entry points to the building, and library areas. Also smoke free eating areas that are outdoors because at the moment I have to go across the road to the Iramoo Indigenous gardens.*

A repeated theme in comments for Question 11 was difficulties in accessing teaching staff, support and/or feedback, as illustrated in the comments below:

*Studying online — lack of contact with lecturer frequently away, overseas, slow to mark assignments and exams, little or no feedback, limited or number of illuminate sessions, lack of forward warning about a random single aluminate session.*

*Some lecturers just don't have time for students. Sometimes it is hard to get time with tutors as they are sessional and their timetable is limited to students.*

*Sometimes I just want to clarify the requirements or get help with a problem and the tutor or lecturer is very busy.*

*Usually it is difficult to get one on one time with a tutor as they are busy and they are usually sessional teachers/tutors and only a little bit of time to help before they are off to their next [class].*

*WebCT is unbearable. I forever have problems getting my notes and it is a real problem.*

A few students also suggested that attitudes towards people with disabilities on campus were not always supportive and sometimes inappropriate:

*There is not education within the university about appropriate behaviour, there are lots of immature sexist, racist and homophobic comments made by students, jokes about people with disabilities and mental health problems, as well as bullying.*

*An incident with library staff where I felt the staff boss implied in front of people that I was a threat to the safety of others. There's so much stigma around mental health and I felt [the staff members'] behaviour at a community event was inappropriate and did not consider 'confidentiality'.*

### 3.3 How is disability a barrier to study?

Students were asked to provide comments about the aspects of their disability or condition that made it difficult for them to study at VU. The point of this question was to explore whether there are additional services or processes that VU could implement to better support students.

Respondents indicated that their medical condition or disability sometimes made it difficult or impossible to attend classes and led them to fall behind in their studies:

*My disability affects my health greatly. Some days I can't get out of bed due to pain and other things along those lines.*

*Mainly that if I get sicker for a few months I get horribly behind in my coursework and then I fail subjects and have to pay for them again the next year and that's depressing and expensive. My illness makes it difficult to study consistently all semester.*

*Sometimes unable to attend classes due to illness.*

Quite a few students referred to feelings of stress and anxiety in relation to their studies, to administrative requirements, communicating and assessment tasks:

*The ability to attend classes when my GI system is playing up. Difficulty concentrating, difficulty initiating work or communication with others. Difficulty with self-directed study, emotional turmoil leading to not being able to keep track of things happening at university.*

*Stresses over admin stuff like my email not working and all the trouble with timetables make it hard to focus at the start and tires me out so I don't have energy to study also just the lack of time to get from class to class and my general mental health and migraines mean I can't always follow schedules I set for myself.*

*Anxiety has made it difficult to go to class, to complete assignments on time and to perform well at exams.*

*Chronic anxiety (GAD) makes it very hard to be motivated, to interact in the classroom, to do and hand in assignments, to concentrate during test situations.*

Several students gave details about how their disability or physical impairment made their experiences difficult. These comments identify problems for students with vision impairment, with back and neck issues, allergies to the presence of aromatic solvents or problems that make sitting in lectures or writing for extended periods of time problematic:

*Vision impairment makes it very difficult for me to read from the board or the teacher's notes without enlargement.*

*Due to my (neck, shoulder to hand) injuries I am not able to physically write exams at normal pace.*

*I have a back problem and sometimes long lectures plus continuous tutorial times after lectures, it provokes pain symptoms.*

*Medical condition affecting short-term memory and affecting ability to write (type slowly with regular breaks).*

*Students wearing spray type products that contain aromatic solvents into the classroom. The*

*aspect of that that makes it difficult to study, breathing it in causes inflammation to my sinus area, gives me a headache, dries out my eyes, and nasal passages, and with prolonged exposure (sitting in it for the whole class) causes fatigue where I cannot connect my thoughts. The more I have contact with a particular product, the more it affects me.*

References were made to mobility issues around the campus and it was suggested that on-campus parking in close proximity to lecture theatres, classrooms, labs and the library would help:

*I also find having the exam at St Albans campus is difficult as it requires 15 to 20 minutes to walk to get to the university from St Albans train station.*

*My medical condition can impact on my mobility; I have struggled with the inclines, lack of lifts particularly in building C. I almost fell down the stairwell in building A ... as there was no lift to take me to the room I needed to go to. Very difficult to get around the campus with the stairs and lack of disabled parking on campus. The parks are across the road or in an adjoining street that has steep inclines, steps and is a long distance from the buildings I need to go to. Students with mobility issues should be able to park on the campus after getting a permit from DSU.*

One student suggested that it would be helpful if disability services provided routine follow-up with their clients:

*Not enough follow-up from disability support, once a month would be great or further encouragement to catch up with disability support.*

### 3.4 General experiences at VU

When asked 'How would you describe your experiences at VU so far?' the vast majority of responses were positive. However, some students had suggestions as to how VU could improve and some were critical about processes at VU, as is captured in the quotes that follow.

#### Positive comments

Many students made positive comments about their classes, teaching staff, fellow students and the support at VU:

*I have over all enjoyed my experiences at VU the teachers are great and I have made great friends.*

*I love the classes they are interesting I enjoy discussions the most and the teachers here really make lectures interesting and make me want to come to class.*

*As a whole, pretty good really. Despite the study problems I have got my life back on track and am headed into having a proper career, not just another casual job. That's what VU can do for a person and that's absolutely priceless. I would also say that the staff at VU is more human and warm than at other universities, and when you are struggling that's so important.*

*Enjoyable and gained much support and understanding from teaching staff who are aware of my impairments, as well as the support staff from services who have helped get me to where I want to be.*

*Wonderful!!! I could not be at the level that I am right now if it was not by the support program that VU offered through different career options.*

*I have really enjoyed my experience at Victoria University and have really appreciated the support I have received from disability services and I enjoyed the smaller campuses and the community-like*

feel at Victoria University and the diversity of students is fantastic.

### Access to Buildings

A few students commented on the physical environment and difficulties in accessing classes:

*I have loved the learning, but I have really struggled in physically being able to get to the buildings I need to. I think that if any DSA registered student with mobility, vision issues, is enrolled in a course, the classroom organisers need to put them in ground floor rooms with close access to parking.*

*Difficult and not supported. I had a severe fall on campus and was offered no support. Student services had no idea where to refer me. I have not had any consideration from my teachers with regards to access, for example, difficult rooms, moving between rooms that are long distances apart.*

*Interaction with staff person in charge of course, issues with access to building and to other services located elsewhere, incorrect fees, etc. ... has been negative (and very upsetting). That said, students and staff (other than staff person in charge of the course) were lovely and a credit to VU.*

### Access to teaching Materials

Some students commented on difficulties in accessing lecture material, or difficulties experienced as online students. One student pointed out problems with exams occurring during offsite placements:

*... was the best lecturer I've ever had for a semester — twice weekly illuminate sessions, always available for contact and to ask questions, quick responses. The other lecturers I've had don't even come close, unavailable except via an email, no regular contact via illuminate sessions, slow to mark essays, assignments, exams, little or no feedback, lazy lecture preparation, simply posting notes online and no back up with live tutorials or lectures via aluminare — with today's technology I think this is appalling, online students should not be left so isolated.*

*I have to do my work for two classes from home, I feel excluded and cut off. The work is not designed to be delivered the way I'm getting it (recordings and notes) so I have to work it out for myself ... So if I could describe it (for this year) in one word: overwhelming. For last year, the year before: rewarding.*

### Exam Times

*TAFE exams and assessments are not structured enough and spread out enough for students with disabilities; for example, last semester I was required to study for exams while on placement and come into and sit exams while on placement which made the experience very stressful.*

### Difficult Experiences

*My experience of enrolment traumatised me and I nearly withdrew from the course. But with support from family and academic staff I have been able to continue.*

*Extremely difficult and unbearable at times. It is definitely not for people with difficulties or challenges. It is a horrible experience most of the time. Not somewhere I talk about or say 'hey I go to VU and it's fantastic'. It's more of a whisper 'I go to VU at St Albans and it's hell on earth'.*

*Quite good. Everybody is very friendly and supportive. Academic staff has been great. Support staff are very nice, but seem married to their bureaucracy — they lack awareness of disability.*

### Room for improvement

One student offered suggestions for areas that could be improved, including links with industry for future employment:

*So many aspects could be improved, more partnerships with industries to get a job, more proactive in helping you get a job, useful career services that are individual, support services need to be more available (get an appointment on the day of calling not a week later), classes to teach common software i.e. Excel and Word.*

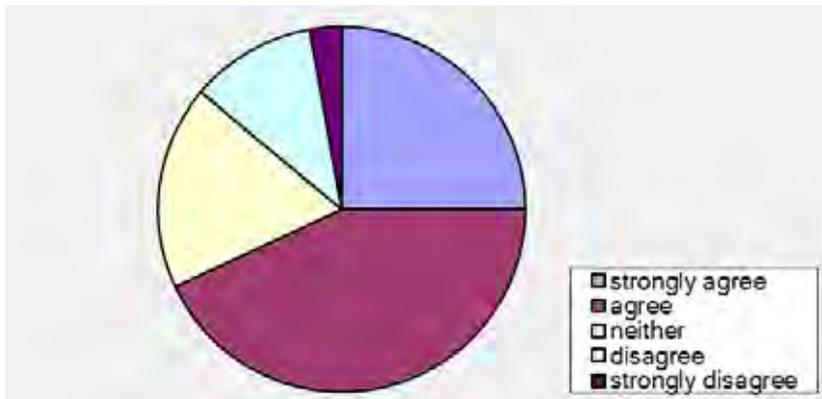
# SECTION 4: DOES VU RESPOND TO STUDENTS' NEEDS?

The following section investigates students' experiences of the services and support provided at VU for students with disabilities and asks whether students feel comfortable approaching staff for assistance or support.

## 4.1 Services provided at VU

As seen below, the majority of students (68%) indicated that they agreed that the services provided at VU were very helpful:

**Figure 06: The services and support provided to me at VU were very helpful.**



**Table 09**

The services and support provided to me at VU were very helpful		
Answer Options	Response Percentage	Response Count
Strongly agree	25.0%	18
Agree	43.1%	31
Neither	18.1%	13
Disagree	11.1%	8
Strongly disagree	2.8%	2
Answered question		72
Skipped question		11
Free text: Please comment on the response you received		27

Twenty-seven students responded to the invitation to provide a free text response and gave both positive and negative feedback. Some of the students observed that staff were friendly and approachable and that their success was only possible because of the support they received:

*Would have dropped out long ago unless these services existed.*

*Counselling, Student Advisory, Retention Officer, disabilities. All aided in mental health and also assist me in finding the more suitable career path.*

*Staff were very willing to help me and friendly.*

A few students had mixed positive and negative comments and explained that some services were better than others:

*My DLO has been very supportive and understanding. The study support has not met my needs because it is very interpersonal and hard to focus in the environment, and not enough time.*

*Services are good with the administration but may not always understand the students individual struggle and how their illness is impacting on their study. Sometimes the data-bases are not centralised so I may go to an appointment at a campus and the counsellor is at another location.*

Several students made negative comments about the services, some of which indicated that there was a lack of follow up:

*A lot of the times disability services did not get back to me as they said they would.*

*Disability services offered support however the support was never received.*

*A bit of token, no follow up, have to fill out forms that are not necessary.*

*The Disability Liaison Officer assumed he knew my needs. The support staff, whilst very nice, are quite incompetent when it comes to disability.*

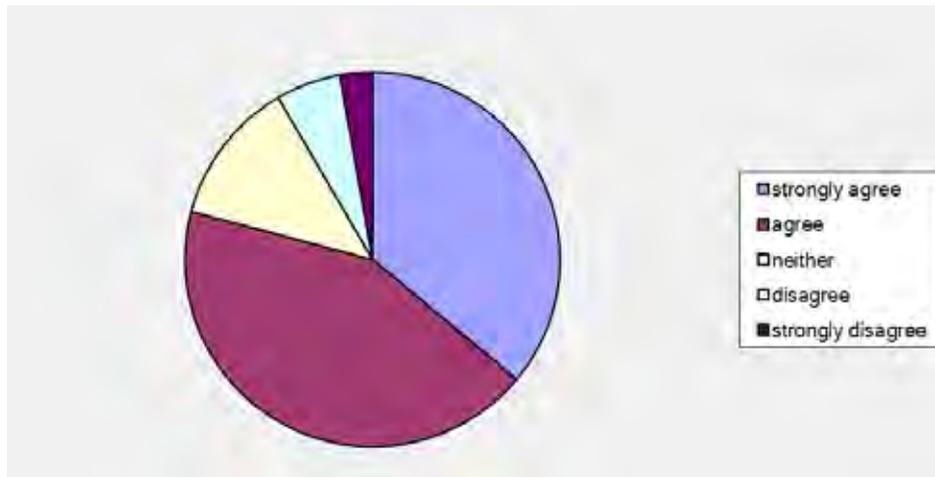
Interestingly, again, a couple of students stated that they did not know about the support available:

*Had no idea of the services and therefore received little support.*

## **4.2 Response from academic staff about student needs**

Participants were asked whether academic staff responded to student needs. The vast majority of students agreed with this proposition:

**Figure 07: The academic staff at VU (e.g. teachers) responded appropriately to my needs.**



When asked to elaborate on their responses to this question about staff responsiveness, 28 students provided comments. A few students disagreed that academic staff had responded to their needs. Unsurprisingly, some students pointed out that some academic staff responded appropriately and in a timely fashion to emails or requests for help, while other staff did not. One student pointed out that s/he did not know who to talk to when s/he had difficulties with one of his/her lecturers:

*Some are too slow in responding to questions or don't answer at all through email. Some are arrogant to those with disabilities.*

*I find that lecturers are often distant and unapproachable this year. In other subjects the lecturer has provided help and this made a huge difference. The lecturer doesn't really have to do much but show concern for the student and provide suggestions for the student to get help. But some lecturers seem to be too interested in their own research. (I apologise but that is how I feel.)*

*I mostly agree, but I have a huge problem with one of my lecturers and I have now just failed that part that ruins next year. I have had no one to see or discuss this with.*

Several students gave positive feedback, describing academic staff as accommodating and supportive:

*Most teachers are always willing to help.*

*Most promptly replied to my emails or were able to address my concerns.*

*The academic staff especially my lecturer and tutorial teachers are extremely helpful, supporting, and responsive to my needs as a disabled student. I feel the teaching staff at Victoria University are more inclusive and understanding of students with disabilities and have gone above and beyond to facilitate my needs during exams and assessment.*

*All teachers were understanding and fully cooperative with my special needs.*

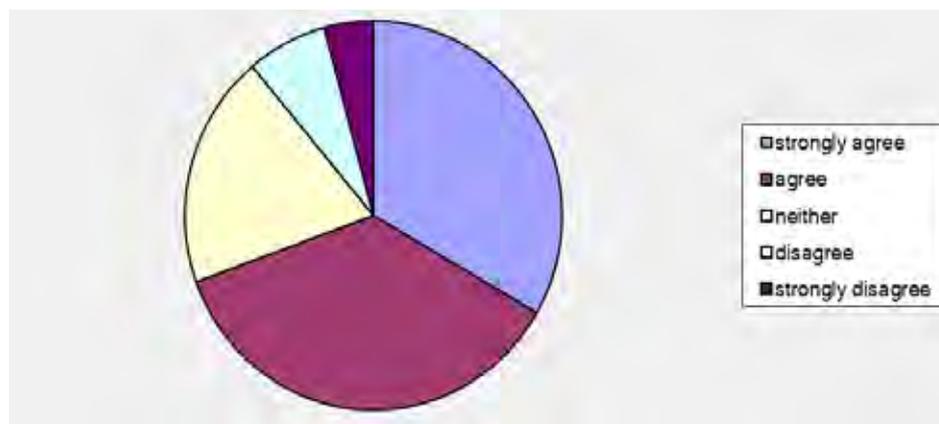
*Academic staff have been very accommodating and supportive.*

*At times I wish I didn't have to answer or describe some of the issues I have been facing and wish for them to just accept my special considerations because it feels like it is invading my privacy.*

## 4.3 Response from support staff

Students were asked to reflect on whether they had received appropriate responses from staff concerned with student welfare, disability services and other support areas at VU.

**Figure 08: The support staff at VU (e.g. student welfare, disability services) responded appropriately to my needs.**



The majority of students who responded to this question (69%) agreed that support staff responded appropriately to their needs. Twenty-seven students shared both positive and negative comments, as illustrated in the following quotes:

### Agree

*The Disability Officer is very efficient. S/he doesn't judge. S/he is very organised and sorts out the application and tells me what the next steps are very quickly. Also s/he saw me straight away when I went to the office distressed and unannounced.*

*Always. I can't say enough positive things about VU's Disability Services. There have been times (this year) when I thought I would have to discontinue my studies, and VUDS have found ways so that I can continue, and for that I'm very grateful.*

*I am impressed with the disability staff at VU. There have been times where I thought I would have to discontinue my studies and leave, but they have found ways to support me.*

### Disagree

A few students suggested that service staff did not provide follow-up or that staff did not understand the nature of the students' needs:

*A lot of the times Disability Services did not get back to me as they said they would.*

*I think that for the first time I did not have an assigned disability counsellor to speak to throughout the year so things got confusing ... I have been struggling and fell though the gaps.*

*When I first registered with Disability Services I was very unhappy. The employee who wrote up my disability plan made it sound as if I had caught something, I expect someone who is writing a "disability plan" for me, to have a full and comprehensive understanding of my disability and be able to assess my needs appropriately. The employee had not done her homework and made me feel "contagious".*

*The support staff, whilst very nice, are quite incompetent when it comes to disability.*

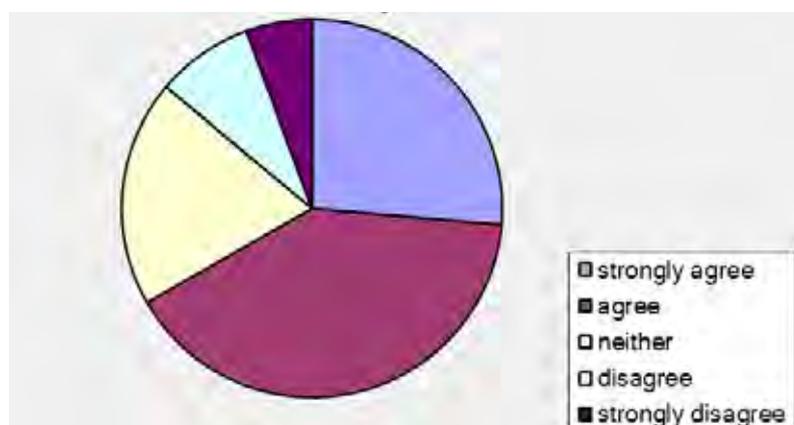
One student pointed out that it is burdensome to have to re-register for support every semester:

*Unfortunately these registrations occur only at the start of the year and at present the only adjustments I have received are alternative end of semester examination venues and environments, therefore in class assistance has been unknown until I speak to my tutors personally. Would prefer if you don't have to re-register every semester and can make adjustments within the semesters.*

## 4.4 Response from administrative staff

Students were given the opportunity to give feedback on the responses they received from staff in administration positions. As shown below, the majority of students agreed that administrative staff responded appropriately to their needs.

**Figure 09: The administrative staff at VU (e.g. help desk, Student Service Centre) responded appropriately to my needs.**



Twenty-two students provided both positive and negative comments about the responses of administrative staff. Amongst the positive comments, some acknowledged that the role of administrative staff is difficult, but that staff had been friendly, understanding and helpful:

*I find these people over-worked, but friendly considering the conditions!*

*Sometimes its hard to get the right answer, but I realise administration is very difficult.*

*They were helpful by offering advice on how to deal with issues and problems.*

*They understand what I say and know where to direct me.*

Others suggested that the administrative staff were not helpful, did not provide support or did not respond in a timely manner:

*Administrative staff at VU are very friendly and want to be helpful, but they are quite incompetent in supporting people with disability.*

*Administrative staff are not accommodating and like to handball everything ... Change of examination time forms are not sent out in a timely fashion.*

*Sometimes rude, long wait times, often make mistakes.*



# SECTION 5: CAN STUDENTS TALK TO STAFF?

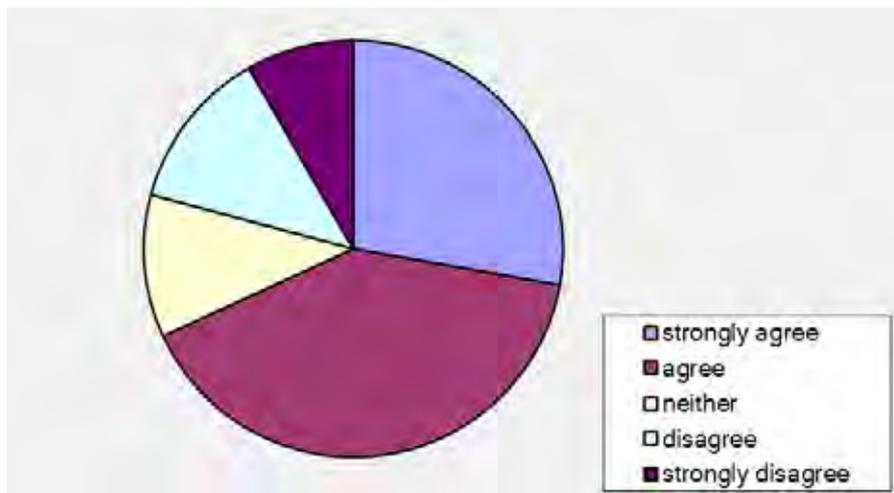
## 5

The following data offers a breakdown of the extent to which students with a disability or long-term illness feel able to talk to a variety of University staff. This is a significant question given its importance in relationship building generally, and in terms of connecting students with the University specifically.

### 5.1 Talking to academic staff

Nearly 80% of respondents indicated that they felt comfortable asking academic staff for help:

**Figure 10: I feel comfortable asking academic staff (e.g. teachers) for help or support.**



Twenty-one students provided comments on this question. The responses vary considerably, from describing academic staff as approachable to suggestions that staff are too busy to assist students:

#### Academic staff are helpful

*Have been most accommodating.*

*My lecturers and tutorial teachers are amazing and I feel extremely confident.*

*The disability support advice document assists with not having to repeat to academic staff, on any occasion when assistance is required, why the help or support is needed.*

*The staff have done everything they could've done to make me feel comfortable. They even stood beside me at the save TAFE rally. If they hadn't I would've been alone and it would have been awful.*

#### Academic staff are variable

*It depends. Some lecturers are not helpful while other lectures are very helpful.*

*Depends, I have felt very put off by asking certain academic staff for help as they come across as too busy.*

*Not much support for mental health issues.*

*Apart from the lecturer who scares me, is unapproachable and arrogant. This is unacceptable and I have him next year.*

*Depending on the tutor, most have been easily approachable. I do want to avoid going into detail of my issues though as it is not something I want to be discussing with every academic staff member.*

### Academic staff not responsive

A few students suggested that they were not comfortable asking for help or that staff were too busy to provide assistance:

*Did not feel staff were responsive as they did not seem to know what a disability plan was and using the plan should mean I don't have to explain to them WHY something needs to be implemented.*

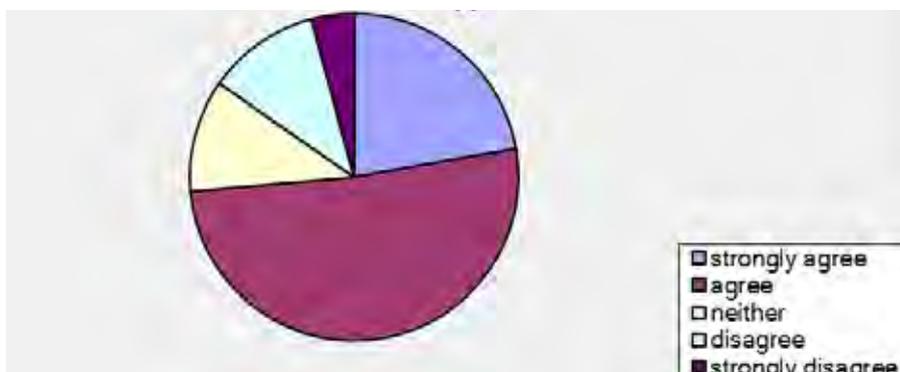
*They are too busy with the prima-donnas — the postgraduates.*

*At the moment I'm on my own. I've told them I feel overwhelmed and one teacher has offered for me to come in for some one on one. I'm doing the work from home and I have to piece together the information from recordings and notes from the note taker. I'm a visual learner so I'm overwhelmed with the work at the moment. There is no clear direction on how to do this; there are no blackboards for these classes; and for one, there was no reader or timeline/timetable, I had to ask for last year's reader.*

## 5.2 Talking to administrative staff

Over 70% of students that responded to the survey agreed that they felt comfortable asking administrative staff for assistance or information.

**Figure 11: I feel comfortable asking administrative staff (e.g. staff at Student Service Centres or help desks) for information, help or support.**



Only 10 students provided comments and these were all positive, with only one exception.

*The quality of the services and support at VU helps minimise my personal hesitation.*

*The administrative staff are approachable.*

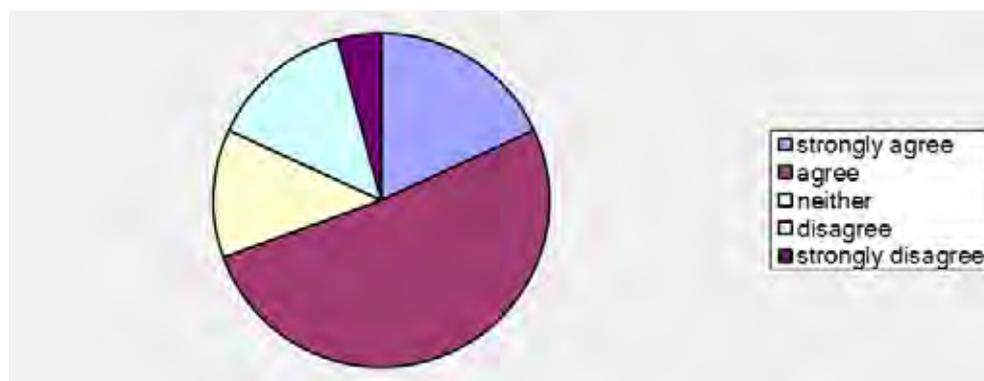
*I have not had any difficulties so this is not causing any problems for me, in that I'm still comfortable asking for assistance.*

*Sometimes rude, long wait times.*

### 5.3 Talking to support staff

Students were asked how comfortable they felt asking support staff for help. The results show that the majority (approximately 70%) agreed with the proposition.

**Figure 12: I feel comfortable asking support staff (e.g. student welfare, careers) for help or support.**



Students provided a number of negative comments about asking support staff for help, including the experience of feeling intimidated, that they were ‘wasting people’s time’, that they felt they were treated in a derogatory way and that no help was provided:

*I was hesitant using the careers support but did anyway. I felt it [was] too intimidating and I wouldn't ask again. I feel they needed to offer a lot more support.*

*Talking about my issues is very hard for me. I feel like I'm wasting people's time.*

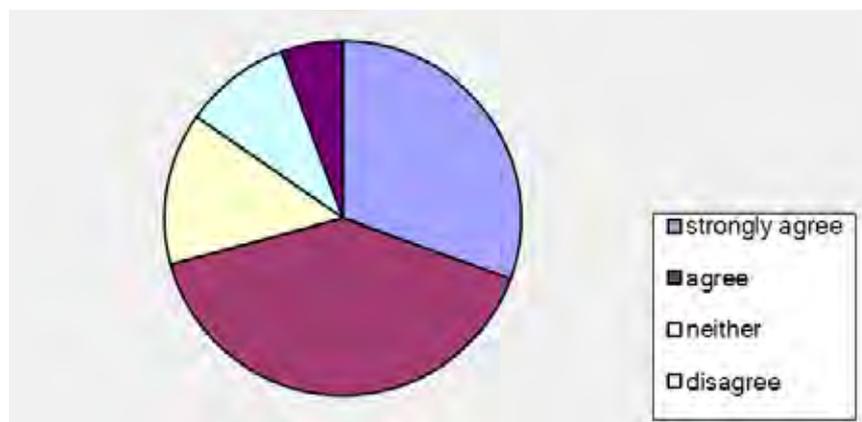
*I am an adult and yet she treated me like I was a 16 year old fresh out of school. I don't think needing help entitles VU staff to treat me like I am stupid and talk to me in a derogatory way. I would never ask VU "support" staff for help again.*

*When I have asked for help it has not been provided despite being told it was within their role to do so.*

## 5.4 Talking to VU's Disability Services staff

In Question 21 students were asked about seeking support from Disability Services staff. Again, the majority of students who responded (approximately 70%) agreed with the proposition.

**Figure 13: I feel comfortable asking VU's Disability Service staff for help or support.**



Below are some of the comments from students about seeking assistance from Disability Services Staff. Some students described staff positively, however others described some negative experiences, including feeling anxious about asking for support and about not receiving any support.

*Yes they are very good and seem genuine.*

*The DLOs are great, but receptionists not the most understanding or patient.*

*I do. I've been anxious about it lately but I do it, as I know that I can get support.*

### Negative comments

*After previous experience I found it a waste of time. I felt I could do a better job and thought of a lot more support that could help students.*

*I get anxious about approaching disability services or try every other avenue before contacting them as I have not received any support from them or have been told they can do it but it does not get done.*

# SECTION 6: IS ACCESS A PROBLEM?

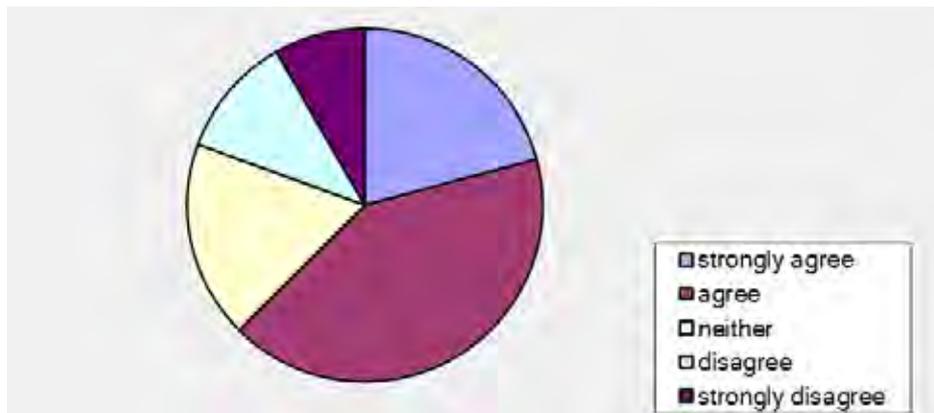
## 6

The following section focuses on student access to services, technology and activities. We were interested in learning whether access created difficulties for students with disabilities.

### 6.1 Access to support

As shown below, approximately 61% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the support and services at VU accommodated their needs.

**Figure 14: I can access all the support I need at VU to help me with my studies.**



Only 16 students provided additional comments for this question. These comments highlighted negative responses or suggestions for additional support, as can be seen in the quotes below:

*As it was lacking in the past I just don't bother anymore.*

*I cannot always get the help I need if I am having difficulty with a subject and this can leave me feeling that unless I can cope alone there won't be assistance available from that particular department. Other subject lecturers have gone out of their way to help me. Often I have sought help from sessional tutors but because their English language skills have not been so strong their help has been limited.*

A few students made comments about the facilities available, for example, that the VU portal is not user friendly, that studying from home can be problematic, and that classroom access is difficult:

*I can't access the classrooms so, yes, I strongly disagree.*

*I have to find my own way around the work that I'm doing as I'm the only one doing it from home.*

*Provide students with free 11 inch MacBook air to help with studies.*

*I don't particularly think that the journal databases section of VU Portal is user friendly. I have found it difficult to access journal articles compared to my last university.*

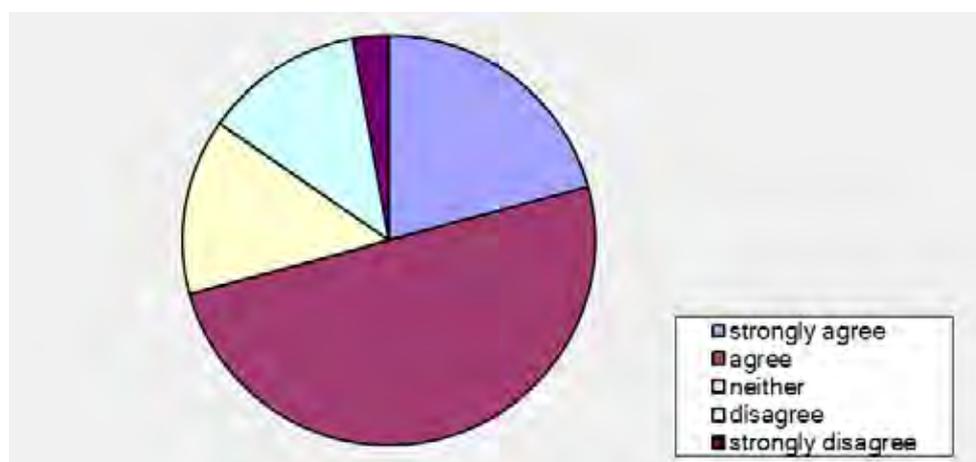
Interestingly one student commented that s/he was not aware of the services and support available at VU:

*I don't know what there is or how to access.*

## 6.2 VU technology

Over 70% of students agreed that VU provided the appropriate technology.

**Figure 15: VU has the technology I need to allow me to study effectively.**



Thirty students elaborated with comments; a few students made positive comments; and one suggested that VU provided everything that was required:

*A touchpad and Bluetooth adaptor was purchased for me so that I could participate in classes in the computer labs. In my experience, if there's something I need that VU doesn't have, they will get it for me.*

Several students suggested that the computer and Internet facilities at VU were not adequate:

*Yes it is very good but the Internet including Wi-Fi is very slow. We need more routers and servers to meet the growing demand.*

*Web CT is a joke.*

*My portal is out-dated and nothing short of useless.*

*Sometimes, it is really hard to get the access that you required especially at the end of semester when all the computer stations are busy.*

*King St campus has no library, limited to nil student services but does have a study area with computers and a printer ... shame the Internet is so slow.*

*Sometimes software is not always available in the library and is only available in the computer lab.*

Several students commented that they had experienced difficulties with the library computers:

*The computers in the library do not all have Internet access and are extremely slow.*

*Computers in library were SO SLOW.*

*The technology is available but the support is quite incompetent when it comes to disability.*

Students suggested some possible improvements, including a dedicated study room for students with disabilities with appropriate technology:

*Provide students with free 11 inch MacBook air.*

*The Nicholson Street campus needs a disability study room with a computer with either Dragon NaturallySpeaking and the JAWS program like they have at the St Albans campus that is private and noise proof.*

Several responses suggested that not all subjects provide online materials or recorded lectures and that the use of teaching technology varies among staff:

*Having accessible online classes would help a lot when I am not up to attending classes.*

*Would be better if all lectures were recorded and enrolments could be done online.*

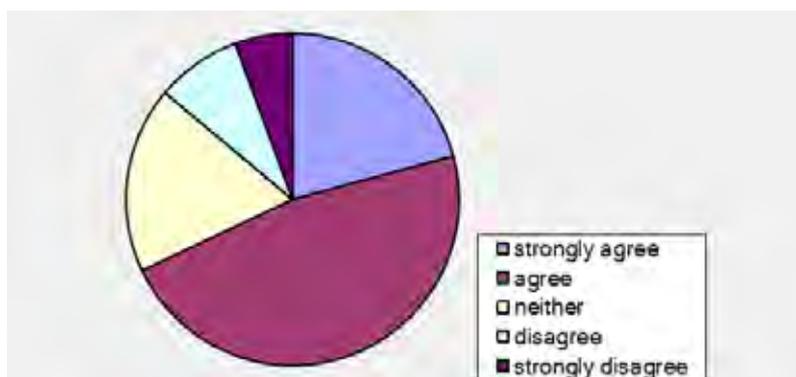
*There is no system in place for the subject I'm doing. There is no blackboard for the subjects I'm struggling with, and they are not available online. Or if there is any information, I can't access it because I don't know where it is.*

*Perhaps they have the technology – but certainly it is not utilised by many lecturers.*

## 6.3 Access to technology

As shown below, most students agreed that they could easily access the technology they needed to complete their studies. Sixteen students provided comments.

**Figure 16: At VU, it is easy for me to access the technology I need to complete my learning and assessment tasks.**



Most of the comments provided were positive and some included a discussion of areas that could be improved, such as access to computers and a study room:

*Other than the equipment in the disability room in the library at St. Albans I find the rest ok.*

*Only the journal databases issue. I love VU Portal. Very efficient.*

*Could do with more computers in the Law library and at City Flinders.*

*Sometimes I can't figure it out and the library staff are 60% helpful. The IT person at the library was not able to help me when my email would not work but the IT people in the other building fixed it in 10 mins.*

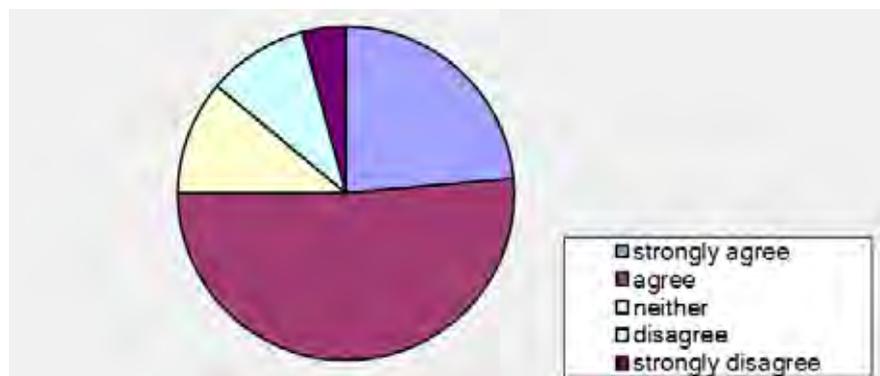
*Very easy and good service.*

*There is access to one room only for disabled.*

## 6.4 Access to teaching material

In Question 25 students were asked about access to teaching material. Approximately 75% of respondents replied that they could easily access these materials.

**Figure 17: I can easily access the lecture notes and teaching material that I need for my studies at VU**



Nineteen students provided comments, many of which focused on access to the WebCT:

*As long as the lecturer puts them up on WebCT regularly.*

*Tried to implement lecture recordings this year but they barely ever work.*

*Half the time WebCT isn't even working.*

*Teachers do not always have WebCT notes ready sometimes for weekend time.*

*This semester the notes did not go on WebCT on time.*

*WebCT is quite often playing up, and lectures never seem to be recorded due to some difficulty or other.*

A few students pointed out that even with online lecture notes they sometimes had difficulty in using the teaching material or matching written material, class work and recordings:

*Sometimes tutors will go through problems and notes (calculations) separate from lecture notes and it is often hard to write these notes down quickly and I often experience this as a real problem.*

*I was unable to get an electronic copy of all hard copy manuals and workbooks, despite my disability plan [stating that] I should be given access to all manuals and workbooks etc., in electronic and hard copy.*

*I have them available but as an example, matching up the right recording file with the right notes from the VU note taker is difficult. And when I listen to a digital recording of the class discussion/work it's not always possible to find the right document to go with it. I have no idea where there are any notes that relate to my subjects that are there, generally, for students to look at. There is no blackboard for PWE writing subjects that are not online subjects (online, which is only about 10% of my course). I have a dropbox that VUDS have kindly set up for me, and I get digital notes and written notes in there; however, it's difficult to piece together what goes with what (meaning, the written notes seem totally abstract and out of context, and listening to the digital ones, I can't always work out what they are discussing, or what papers they have in front of them, it takes several times of playing it back to work this out).*

One student commented that the quality of the material was not optimal and that resources were out-dated:

*Although these are always out-dated and full of typing errors. I have vision impairment and I even notice them! I feel they need to be more professionally laid out and the information up-to-date. This is one factor I find very frustrating as I spend a lot of time wasting finding more updated resources. Sometimes I feel like offering to bring them all up-to-date myself. I have shown other staff members the workbooks who have also voiced their surprise at the lack of, low level and out-dated information supplied to students. It is not related to the times of today.*

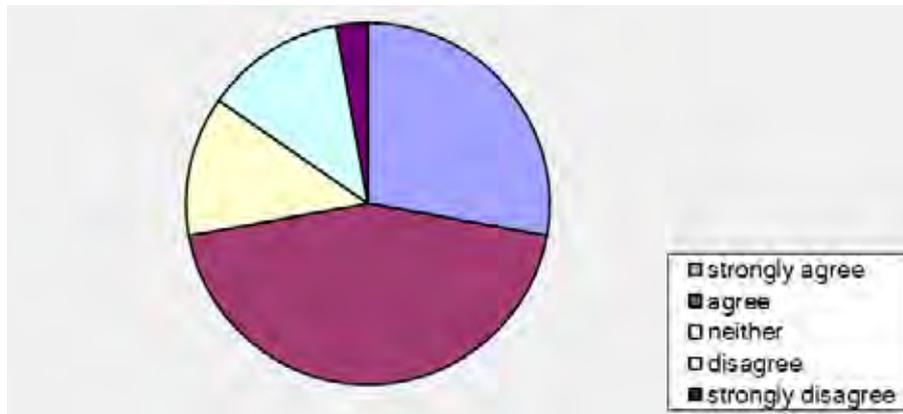
One student suggested that it would be helpful if computers were made available on a short-term basis for printing lecture notes:

*Perhaps more short-term (just for printing lecture notes etc. for example 10 minute use) computers can be made available at the libraries.*

## 6.5 Library access

Just over 70% of students agreed that it is easy to access the library.

**Figure 18: It is easy for me to use the library at VU.**



Most of the comments that were provided in this section focused on computers and library staff. Several students suggested that access to computers in the library could be problematic:

*SOMETIMES. There are not enough computers.*

*Computer access can be an issue at certain times of days, weeks, or the year.*

*Not enough computers.*

However, one student commented that it was easy to book library facilities in advance:

*Very easy to book a PC, room or book.*

Several students commented on library staff and most found them to be helpful and friendly:

*Library staff are very friendly and knowledgeable about data bases.*

*I find the library staff very pleasant and helpful.*

*The library staff are excellent! They are all helpful when you need help with databases.*

One student commented that there were no library staff available to assist, indicating different experiences across campuses:

*This is another sore point. Although there are the resources, the lack of staff or no staff at some campuses is unsatisfactory. There is no assistance as there is no staff.*

One student suggested that s/he was not aware that a study room and special borrowing privileges were available for students with disabilities, however this point is contradicted by another student, which may again suggest variation across campuses:

*Would have been better had I known that I have access to longer borrowing and disability room about 2 years ago.*

*It is extremely hard without a disability study room in the library because I cannot complete any work while on campus without such a room.*

*Extended loans was never set up as advised by disability services that it would be.*

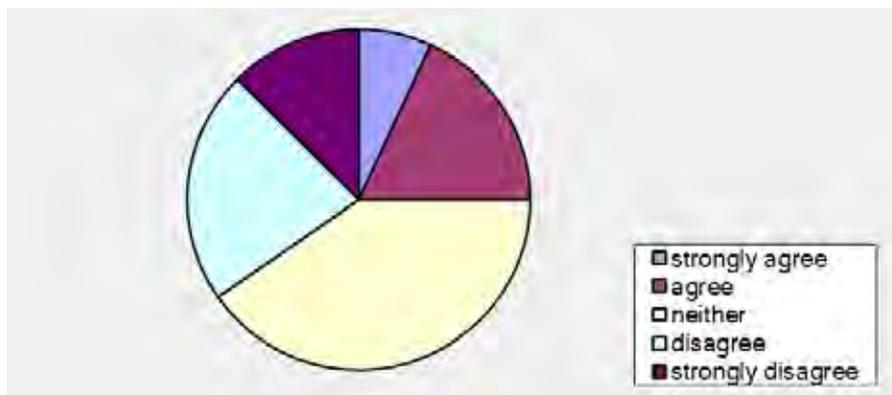
*The Library was not set up with people with disability in mind.*

*It is not always easy to get around the library.*

## 6.6 Extra-curricular activities

Question 27 focused on access to extra-curricula activities on campus. Only 25% of respondents agreed that they could easily join in extra-curricula activities; approximately 35% disagreed; and the majority of students who responded (40%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

**Figure 19: It is easy for me to join in extra-curricular activities at VU.**



Twenty-four students provided comments, and these suggest that many of the respondents were mature age students with conflicting priorities, which made it difficult to engage in extra-curricula activities:

*I am a sole parent of seven, three of them under school age. I would like to be more involved than I am.*

*I am in a Masters course. I haven't had time to brush my hair let alone let it down.*

A few students suggested that the activities offered were not suitable for mature age students:

*Not interested — it is the constant dilemma of Mature Aged Students — our interests and priorities are different.*

*It is hard for me to find mature aged students; I am too old for the young ones.*

*I am adult returning to studying so I prefer to go to the cafe and just chat to people rather than actively seek out social groups. I think it is good to see student representatives around campus but I am not sure if their contribution does help.*

Two students suggested that information about extra-curricula activities, or their location, made it difficult for students to engage:

*At times the communications are late and the links don't work.*

*No activities on my campus — must travel to Footscray or St Albans. Too far for me on a regular basis.*

# SECTION 7: CAN STUDENTS BE HEARD?

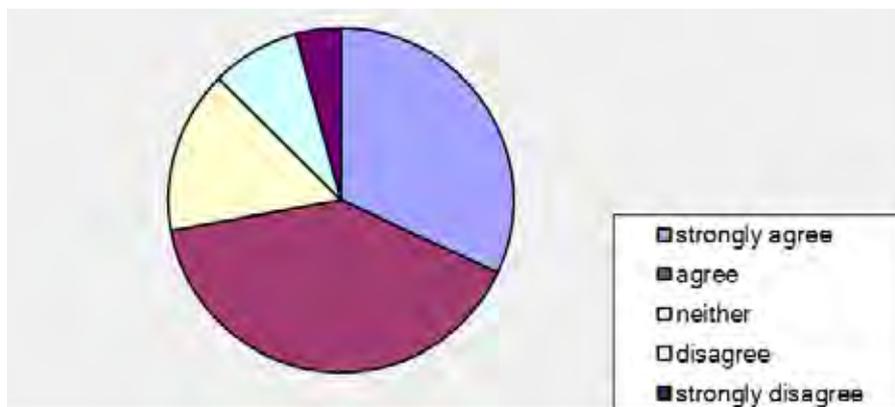
# 7

The next four questions in the survey explored whether students could easily contact support staff or ask for support from their peers. We were also interested in whether students believed that they could give feedback or make complaints.

## 7.1 Contacting Disability Services staff

As shown in the figure and table below, the vast majority of students agreed that they could easily contact support staff at VU.

**Figure 20: I can easily contact the disability support staff at VU.**



Fourteen students provided comments for Question 28. Some of the negative comments suggested that support staff were not available when needed or that response times were not optimal:

*Have to leave a message and wait for a call back.*

*Past experience has proved they are not available when I need them.*

*I do not have a case manager as such and am given whoever is available with an extended wait time.*

One student proposed introducing monthly meetings with staff to review students' progress.

*Maybe introducing a monthly meeting with student to see how everything is progressing.*

Another

*Also the disability service should be more accessible, have less barriers and requirements and be more inclusive of all disabilities. And specifically say they will help with mental health discrimination ... They need to state that they are on our side. I don't want a student equity adviser or to make*

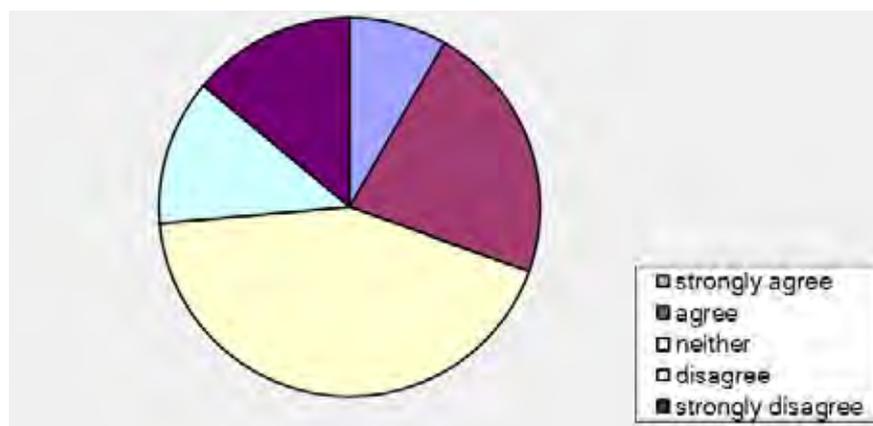
*a complaint, I want disability support that prevents anything happening where I would need to complain! I wouldn't hand over my details on your online form until I could meet some of the disability people and suss out whether they really would help me or if they're just another lengthy bureaucratic process that serves the university but doesn't actually help me. Or worse, create more problems with disclosure. The info on the website also doesn't talk about my privacy or my control of information or processes. I want to be assured that I am in control of any decisions, disclosures and options for assistance. As it stands your disability support appears disempowering and difficult to access.*

## 7.2 Contacting student representatives

Question 29 explored whether students knew how to contact their student representatives at VU.

The figure and table below show that a large number of students neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposition.

**Figure 21: I can easily contact the VU student representatives.**



Only 19 students provided comments and most of these suggest that students did not know that they had student representation; they did not know who their student representatives were nor how to contact them. One student suggested that communication about representatives could be improved:

*Who are they?*

*No I don't know where they are.*

*Not sure who these people are or what their role is.*

*I have met student representatives and they are approachable and discuss important issues like parking not just drinking beers and going to BBQs.*

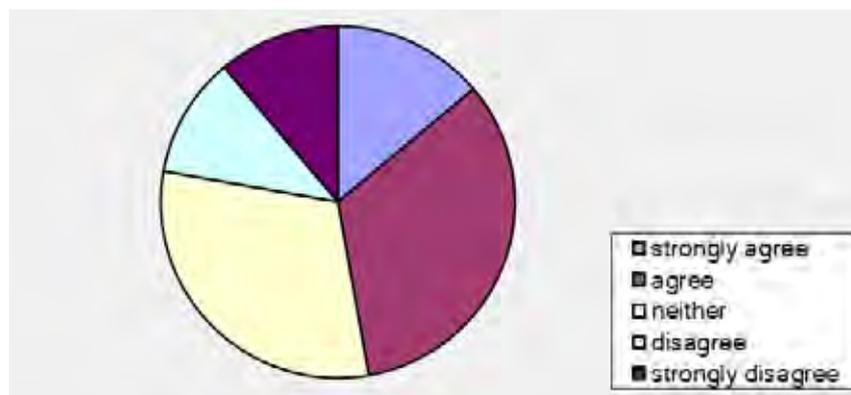
*What student representatives. The SRC is not aware of Disability.*

*Noone on the city campuses know who they are. Need better promotion of the representatives and their avenues of communication.*

## 7.3 Giving feedback and complaints

In Question 30 we explored whether students felt that they could give feedback or make complaints at VU. Figure 17 and Table 30 (below) show that less than 50% of the respondents agreed with the proposition.

**Figure 22: It is easy for me to give feedback or make a complaint at VU.**



Twenty students elaborated with comments, some of which focused on teaching evaluations. A couple of students suggested that the timing of teaching evaluations did not allow for accurate evaluation and that not enough time was provided to complete the evaluations:

*Often students receive forms asking for student feedback about how the subject is taught and sometimes I notice some lecturers bring these forms out in the 3rd week and this does not give the student an opportunity to really assess the lecturer's performance. Often I miss out on filling these forms as I may be unwell that particular day. Sometimes the student is only given a few minutes to fill them out so if you want to write anything serious you are limited by time. I prefer to fill out forms online without the time pressure.*

*No -- often problems arose AFTER we filled out the feedback forms (for example getting grades). Feedback should be done online and several weeks after commencement of unit, not in a class at the end of the semester.*

Two students explained that they had complained in the past but were dissatisfied with the response and therefore felt disinclined to make further complaints:

*I have previously made a complaint against a student services tutor who insulted me and my disability, after making a complaint I was extremely dissatisfied by the action of Victoria University in reprimanding this member of staff, I attended learning support for tutoring once again and was extremely insulted and offended by comment made by the tutor she stated "I think I need Dragon NaturallySpeaking too because I'm a bit retarded" this was emotionally distressing but I did not make a complaint because of the lack of response given to my first complaint. I believe comment of this nature should resolve in dismissal or at least a mark against their name.*

*Feedback was not well received or taken on board. They did not care at all.*

A few students described the procedure for making a complaint as inflexible and burdensome:

*The process is not straightforward to have something changed, and is way too time consuming.*

*Staff members are so caught up in their work and the procedures for completing their tasks that they are not interested. Procedures are bureaucratic and inflexible.*

*The processes are so cumbersome that I gave up trying.*

One student suggested that completing our survey was a way of giving feedback:

*I am doing so right now.*

## 7.4 Asking other students for help

The purpose of Question 31 was to explore the student culture at VU and whether students with disabilities felt comfortable asking for help or support from their peers. As seen in Figure 18, only approximately 50% of students agreed with the proposition.

**Figure 23: I feel comfortable asking other students at VU for help**



### Fellow students are supportive

Only 14 students elaborated on this question with comments and, amongst these comments, some students were very positive about the support they received from fellow students.

*My fellow students are extremely supportive and understanding of my disability. I believe this comes down to the community like environment at Victoria University and the diversity of age and backgrounds.*

*Students at VU are always incredibly friendly and caring towards others.*

### Difficulties with other students.

Some students explained that they studied online, had little to do with other students, or did not expect support from other students. A couple of respondents noted that they had experienced difficulties with other students, including competitiveness in class-room activities:

*I don't always expect students are going to go out of their way and help. I suppose it depends on the students personality some students enjoy helping while other students may not have the time*

*or the ability to assist others.*

*Studying is really competitive and students I find are very discriminating and can be anxious to pick the right students for their teams or group study. So there is a lot of pressure to perform and students need to be confident to join groups. I did not want to join a group because I did not feel that I was confident in that particular subject.*

*I used to but then I had some bad experiences with a few students. I give out a letter at the beginning of the year, asking students to understand and accommodate my needs ... Some students help me, and ask how they can ... others just don't care.*



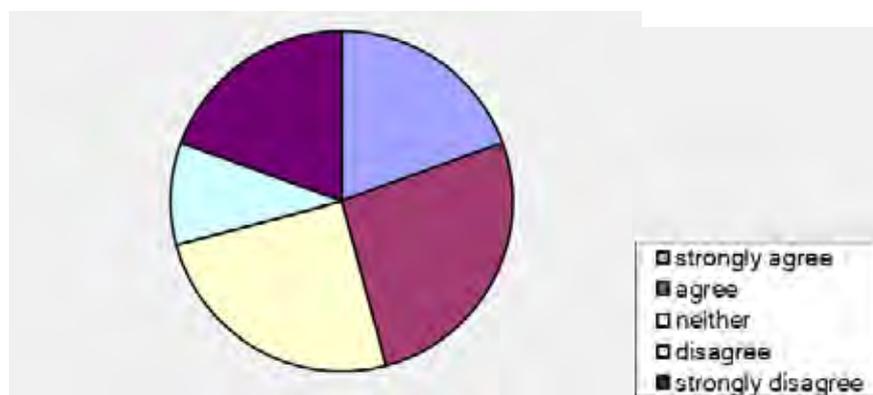
# SECTION 8: SUCCESS AND ATTRITION

## 8

### 8.1 Parity

Question 32 attempted to identify whether students with disabilities believed that their chance of success at VU was equal to that of students without disabilities.

**Figure 24: It is just as easy for students with disabilities to succeed at VU as it is for students without disabilities.**



#### Success depends on support

As seen in the figure above, approximately 30% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this proposition. However, a large number of students (25%) neither agreed nor disagreed, suggesting that success was related to the support available:

*Depending on access issues.*

*If given the right assistance, for example scribes.*

*With the right support from disability support I have achieved great success. I am currently a high distinction level student and am doing just as well and better than my fellow students without a disability, but it all comes down to accurate support and having the aids I need in order to succeed, without this support there is no way I would be able to attend university.*

*Without the appropriate support it is impossible.*

#### Nature of disability

A couple of students explained that the nature of a student's disability might mean that they needed to work harder than students without disabilities. However, one student suggested that all students have difficulties:

*Students with disabilities need to be very focused on their end goal and very highly motivated to*

*complete study at any university. Issues of fatigue and time management made study very difficult.*

*No, we have to work a lot harder.*

*Not having a 'disability' doesn't mean a student will find it easier. We each have our own challenges in life that affect us differently.*

### Level playing field

A few students commented that they believed that VU was doing a good job in 'levelling the playing field' for students with disabilities:

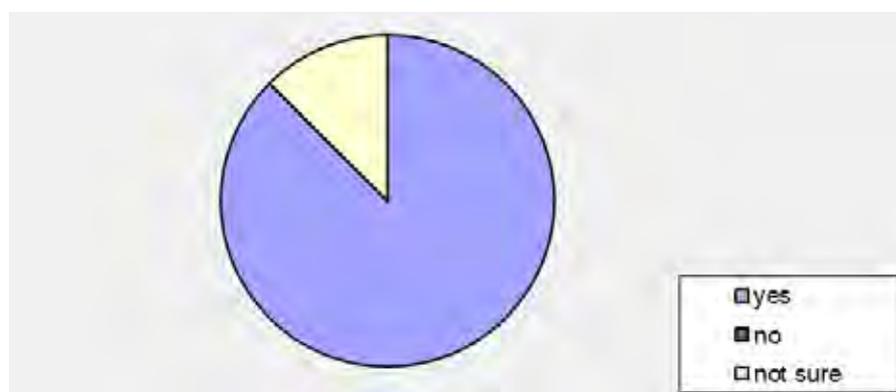
*I believe VU is on the right track. You can put as many policies in place as you like but at the end of the day it's the people, their knowledge and the respect they have for someone who has other things to deal with in life. As I said, my first experience really put me off and I have not wanted to ask for help for fear of how it is managed.*

*I think the question kind of overshadows that reality for students with disabilities. It's harder for us to do well; we have to put more into it. But, I do think VU goes quite a long way to levelling that playing field - it's just that it can never be wholly levelled, in my experience.*

## 8.2 Attrition at VU

In Question 33 students were asked whether they intended to complete their studies at VU. As seen in Figure 20, all of the respondents indicated that they intended to remain at VU. However, as illustrated by the comments, some students believed they had no alternative.

**Figure 25: Based on your experiences at VU, do you intend to complete your studies at VU.**



### Positive comments about VU

Many students described VU as supportive and welcoming and indicated that they would not study elsewhere if given a choice:

*I have started at VU and feel it is like a home in [my] learning experience.*

*I have no intention of going elsewhere: I love my teachers, love my subjects, feel supported, and am doing well.*

*There is no other university I would rather attend than Victoria University.*

Some students suggested that they had not intended to completed their studies at VU but have since

changed their minds because of positive experiences at VU:

*Initially I didn't think so as the reputation is not as good as I would like it to be, however, because of the helpful staff I intend to stay here.*

*I guess my expectations are pretty low! I went to another university before where they were awful when they found out I was unwell. In general I and everyone I've talked to have found they are treated better if they don't disclose. However, I did disclose at VU and I haven't been discriminated against. So I guess it's because VU, at least in my experience, doesn't hate the mentally ill. And that's a major achievement.*

### **Negative Comments**

A few students explained that they would remain at VU because VU offered their preferred study choices or because they were close to graduating. Some students were not happy with their experiences at VU and suggested that they might leave if things did not improve:

*VU is the only university offering my course.*

*Only because I have the strong desire to graduate. I would not take up my studies with them again if I needed to in the future. I would go elsewhere and do not recommend VU to others. If next year is like this one, it won't be possible but I'm hoping I will get a more assertive teacher, more empathic teachers, and a better action plan with VUDS.*



# SECTION 9: CAN VU DO BETTER

## 9

### 9.1 What could VU do to make it easier?

In Question 34 students were given the opportunity to write comments and make suggestions, about how VU could make it easier for students with disabilities to succeed in their studies.

Seventy-two students responded with a range of suggestions.

Table 10

What could VU do to make it easier for you to succeed with your studies?	
Answered question	72
Skipped question	11

A few students suggested that VU was doing well and no improvements were necessary:

*Keep up the good work.*

However, quite a few students suggested that improvements and upgrades to technology would be helpful, as illustrated in the following comments:

*Provide students with free 11 inch MacBook air to help with studies.*

*Improve online studies.*

*More computers and computers and websites that work.*

*Provide Live Remote Captioning.*

*Better programs, this year there has been a lack in upgrading programs such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking. There has been a new version now out for more than six months and yet the disability services have yet to acquire it. Reading and writing Gold 8 is extremely out-dated. I have had the same program since I began studying at Victoria University in 2008. The programs progress significantly and by not having up-to-date programs puts us behind the eight ball.*

*... due to my condition I sometimes find it difficult to go to lectures and I am able to use Lectoria ... unfortunately some subjects do not offer Lectoria which could be a big help for students if they need to clarify ideas.*

As was seen in earlier comments, the following responses suggest that some students would benefit from more flexibility around the timing of courses. One student suggested the need for more formal engagement between staff and students:

*Make the services available more transparent. Allowing me to know exactly what is involved in the process before I am forced to contact anyone.*

*Let me do subjects over two years. Have more formal, measurable engagement between staff and students.*

*Be more flexible with students who are off campus and have a disability with the time constraints for modules.*

Once again, a number of comments suggest that some students were not familiar with the type of support available.

*I should have known initially that I could get a scribe. This was when my disability was at its worst.*

*Provide more information about services available so I can get more help during exam time.*

*More information in regards to how to get help around exams. For example, being able to take things in like food and other drinks other than water due to not being well, needing more time or different consideration [as] to what is going on in people's lives.*

Difficulties with administration and forms were highlighted by a few students:

*Fix admin issues and improve library support people's knowledge. Reduce clashes on timetables.*

*Not so many forms for the disability support service ... I understand that things need to be known and verified but not many GP or specialists have the time and do not want to fill out forms. That is why I have not been able to submit anything.*

*Less mucking about with paperwork.*

Some students highlighted experiencing difficulties with assessment tasks and the modes and timing of assessment:

*Have students with medical conditions sit their exams at their campus rather than the show grounds.*

*Not have all the major assignments due at the same time. Have the option of take-home exams instead of in-house exams available more often.*

*I don't like group work or oral presentations. It would be good if there were alternative assessments.*

As noted in earlier comments, difficulties with parking and the environment at VU were reiterated in the responses to this question;

*I would like easier parking access on campus (without having to wait for people without a disability using the parking temporarily). VU need easier wheelchair access to get to certain class rooms in building 10 near computer area and security station.*

*Make the Footscray Park campus more accessible. Have consideration for students with disabilities when timetabling with regards to the rooms, the times, and the distances to travel.*

*VU could also use fragrance free cleaning products in the building that I, and other chemically sensitive people, use.*

A few students suggested that there was a need for a dedicated room with access to the appropriate technology, to assist students with disabilities with their studies. In addition, one student repeated the need for more time with trained tutors:

*A vacant office with one computer available for study.*

*May be have a room where students can go to do some study.*

*There needs to be a disability study room in all libraries in all campuses with the right equipment. There needs to be professional tutors who have experience with disabled students specifically. There needs to be more time allocated to tutoring students with disabilities. One hour is insufficient and not training tutors just doesn't work, they don't understand disability, and [are] ill-equipped and poorly trained in dealing with students with disabilities.*

The need for additional support from staff is also highlighted in the following comments, which recommend that staff should be available after hours and across campuses. A few students suggested that ongoing relationships between academic and disability support staff and students were important and that they would appreciate being 'checked on' by Disability Services:

*Provide after-hours contact details.*

*Disability support staff available at the CQ Campus. Disability support staff present at Flinders Street on a more regular basis.*

*Support from lecturers is the biggest thing ... I believe when the student sees [that] the lecturer cares [about] how the student is coping with the subject it can make a big difference ... I have found that when a lecturer has shown interest in the student ... then the student has felt the lecturer is approachable and a relationship of trust develops. I have experienced this at VU and I believe that because of these relationships I have been able to grow academically.*

*Keep in touch with [all] those who have ever registered with disability services. Don't assume we are ok because we haven't contacted you for more help.*

*Regular checking in with students to see how things are going for them. Even if this is done by email. Rather than no contact at all after providing DSA document.*

Suggestions for a buddy system were repeated in the responses to this question:

*BUDDY SYSTEM FROM ENROLMENT.*

*Buddy program with staff and student member to help with orientation, integration and staying on track.*

*Create a buddy program.*

In addition, several students suggested that staff required further training in order to understand and respond appropriately to the needs and experiences of students with disabilities:

*Lecturer education on the effects of disabilities on students so that they better understand and can accommodate for us.*

*Having training for staff on meeting the needs of people with disabilities. It is important to raise awareness of staff members that life with disability really sucks, and dealing with my disabilities is a constant and hourly struggle.*

*Offer training to all staff on awareness of disability.*

*I believe that at times the academic teachers [should] be more accessible and understanding – sometimes I've had to go back to the disability services for advice ...*

*Make the lecturers accountable for what they do to the students, as they have a duty of care. ... the lecturer involved doesn't give a damn unless you are young, wear little shorts and skirts and prance around like a school girl. Everyone else he has no time for. He owes me a service, not the other way round.*

*I would have liked the staff to be more helpful and the assistance given when I needed it. There needs to be more empathy to those with disabilities from staff.*

*Employ permanent teachers [who] know what they are doing and how to pass this information to students, instead of what appears sometimes to be people from the street that certainly have good knowledge but have no idea how to give students the information they require ...*

## 9.2 What could be done at VU to make it easier for you to join in extra-curricular activities?

In Question 34 students were asked what could be done to facilitate their participation in extra-curricular activities.

**Table 11**

What could be done at VU to make it easier for you to join in extra-curricular activities?	
<b>Response Count</b>	72
Answered question	72
Skipped question	11

A few students indicated that they were not interested in these activities or did not have time to participate. However, some students made comments about the type of activities available and suggested that they were not relevant or suitable. Several students also suggested that no information was available about these activities, or that they were not well advertised.

*Make more relevant activities for mature-age students ... make them free or really affordable. And tell us about them better. No one reads the student bulletin thingy sent on the email. Put them on the front page of the website or email events separately.*

*More emails, flyers or information available.*

*Fix [the] IT system so students can check out what's happening and get more involved.*

*Have a separate page on [the] website dedicated to university activities and communities/groups.*

*Nothing, as it doesn't relate with me being a mature student.*

*More activity catering for MILDLY/IN BETWEEN disabled students.*

*Structured, short duration, participatory, small group, political activities are more manageable for me.*

*Have extra-curricular activities that are relevant to my interests and don't shut them down even if we only have six or so members.*

A few students suggested that a buddy or carer might facilitate participation in extra-curricular activities, with one student suggesting that perhaps nursing students could undertake this role as part of their clinical placement hours:

*Greater support, the provision of attendant carers would be great. Perhaps nursing students could volunteer to do this at functions ... maybe this could be then credited towards their placement hours as part of their degree?*

*BUDDY.*

*A buddy.*

## 9.3 Ideas for engaging students with disabilities.

Question 36 students invited students to put forward their ideas for encouraging students with disabilities to participate in higher education. Sixty students responded, providing a number of insights and suggestions.

**Table 12**

<b>What ideas do you have for encouraging students with disabilities to engage in further/higher education?</b>	
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Answered question	60
Skipped question	23

A few students made suggestions that related to improving the facilities at VU. These included comments about physical accessibility and the processes at VU, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*Greater inclusion, greater support, improvement of facilities, particularly accessibility ramps and lifts at Footscray campus.*

*ADD is a huge market — someone just needs to tap into it and offer courses that assist the visual learners, team up with ADD and ADHD GP specialists to assist/promote this ...*

Some students highlighted the need for increased flexibility regarding timelines:

*Regardless of degree, students who desire or need to study at a slower pace should be offered that opportunity as some degrees are only offered fulltime.*

*More flexibility in study (for example, can do subjects over several years), more engagement with students (for example staff could be more available, call us to find out how subject is going, have BBQs for all the students and staff).*

Several students made comments about raising awareness and suggested that more could be done to promote the opportunities available to students with disabilities and at an earlier stage in their learning pathways:

*Education at a younger level (i.e. High school) about opportunities that are available.*

*Letting them know more about the support services at enrolment.*

*Educating others about disabilities so that students are able to go on to further education. Have awareness campaigns about particular disabilities, so other students can understand and perhaps help accommodate them. Most disabilities have awareness days ... these could be promoted throughout the campus. You could help encourage them by showing there is a procedure in place that accommodates their needs: it could go on the VU website.*

*An advertising campaign that promotes subject areas as smaller supported groups — that promotes the idea of supported learning, that dispels the myth of the big overwhelming isolating university experience of days gone by and promotes the new community connectedness, coalition-style university experience of today.*

*Just making them aware that they do have access to special consideration and extra support.*

A number of students suggested that peer support groups or a buddy system would help students with disabilities to feel less isolated and would assist in the provision of information and support:

*The creation of a buddy program. Also awareness campaigns promoting exactly what supports are available at VU.*

*I would be interested in SWD [student with disabilities] peer groups! Students who share stories, answer questions, and share in the experience of what it's like to be at VU and have issues that make study challenging — who get together every few weeks or once a month, and maybe buddy up with someone at the start of the year, who show them how to get around and who to see. Sometimes it's pretty weird being the student in the lecture theatre with a note taker — it takes a lot of courage to say that you need help and be visibly different — and I think that sense of belonging and unity would help ... those of us who have some anxiety ... and are feeling isolated.*

Another suggestion was that students with disabilities could act as ambassadors to high schools to promote the opportunities available at VU:

*I think it would be helpful to have students with disabilities help new students with disabilities adjust to university life and help them to see [that] students with disabilities can succeed and achieve, it would also be good to have Victorian University ambassadors with disabilities going to high schools and talk about how they have overcome the diversity of being a student with disabilities and despite your disability you can and will achieve higher education regardless of such a disability.*

## 9.4 Additional comments

The final question of the survey asked for any additional comments and 48 students responded.

**Table 13**

Do you have any other comments about your experiences at VU?	
Answer Options	Response Count
Answered question	48
Skipped question	35

Many of the responses to this question reiterated positive feelings about students' experiences at Victoria University, as illustrated in the following quotes.

A few students said that what made VU special was the attitude within its community:

*I want to say again that it's the humanity and emotional engagement of the people at VU that makes it a beautiful place (even if it's actually mainly concrete!). I think this is VU's biggest asset and it's a feature that's hardly ever seen as important.*

*Discovering that VU has offered me whatever it can to make my life and study easier has been amazing ... It's so much easier than what I was used to just because people are understanding and supportive. It really does make all the difference. Thank you.*

Several students expressed gratitude for the opportunities they were given at VU. One student said that, even if VU did not have the status of older universities in Melbourne, the University had made it possible for the student to achieve his/her goals:

*Overall, it was a pleasure and positive challenge to study at VU. Admittedly, the prevailing viewpoint of fellow Melbournites is that VU seems to offer lower quality higher education, and certainly that exists for numerous reasons. However, after reaching the end of my bachelor degree, I feel that even if I wasn't given the amount of work or intellectual challenges necessary, I was at least given the ability and skills to enact self-guided learning.*

*Thank You VU. VU has given me opportunities and experiences that I never knew were possible.*

*Just to say that even though I've complained a lot in this survey, VU has been the best place I've ever studied and even if I left tomorrow, I'd still be grateful for all that I've learned because it has made it possible for me to follow my dream of getting work as a professional.*

Two students referred to the available support and expressed concerns about the continued funding and provision of these services:

*I believe Victoria University is superior in addressing the requirement of students with a disability. But funding needs to continue at the level it has in the past, for the success to continue ... cutting funding to disability support should be the last measure, because unlike students without a disability we cannot strive or succeed without these services ... they are our only lifeline in accessing higher education ... without them there is no way we could ever attend university, I*

*have seen funding cut this year to disability services. I ask that you continue to contribute and provide accurate funding to continue on with a superior quality of disability services, not for myself but for all students with disabilities.*

*I appreciate the opportunity to study at VU and am also grateful for the available services and support so I hope these continue to be provided.*

Some students added comments about the faculties at VU and gave suggestions for changes that might benefit people with disabilities. These comments included suggestions about the campus facilities, computers, assessment procedures and processes for payment to VU:

*Need to have more friendly access for people with disabilities ... [there are] not many disabled access [points] at the campus. I found out at O-week when I was helping out at the Queen street campus that it was not that user friendly ... even though there was a lift, the girl that I was showing around could not use the lift herself due to the placement of the button to press the lift to come.*

*Provide more resources like iPads and provide students with [a] free 11 inch MacBook Air to help with studies, save paper and time, more computers, more Apple computers in library.*

*Not feeling positive about VU. Even trying to pay VU was a nightmare. I applied for no interest loan from a charity group to pay for materials and cover some of the fees, and was given a cheque made out to VU, but was told I could not make a single payment to cover book shop purchases and course fees because they are different departments. And here I thought VU was a single entity with different departments, but it is different departments which are not linked and cannot communicate at any level ... little wonder there are so many problems.*

*Perhaps assignments could be returned sooner rather than six weeks after hand in ... lecturer to return emails sooner not days or weeks or no response at all.*

One student suggested that disability services needed substantial improvement:

*Disability services need a complete overhaul. I would suggest contacting other more successful university disability services. Don't offer/tell students you will provide support, then not provided it. Learn more about the particular disabilities your students have so you can be empathic and proactive in your support.*

This section presents a discussion of the key messages that were drawn from the responses in the survey.

The findings suggest that most of the students surveyed are generally satisfied with their experience and intend to complete their studies at VU. However, students put forward a number of suggestions for improvements and changes to processes and practices. The information contained in these comments and suggestions can assist VU to attract, support and retain students with disabilities.

## Identifying students

The results from Question 2 and some of the later questions indicate that there is some sensitivity and discomfort for students around identifying themselves at enrolment as ‘disabled’ or as having impairment. Some students expressed concern about the stigma attached to identifying as disabled and about possible negative discrimination or breaches of privacy. Others expressed discomfort about being permanently ‘labelled’ as disabled on their student records.

Most students, however, understood that formal processes needed to be followed in order to access the support and services available at VU for students with disabilities, medical conditions or impairments. A number of the responses show that some students are not aware of the services available or how to access them. In addition, some students said that they only found out about the available services via word-of-mouth or accidentally. Some responses revealed confusion and incorrect beliefs about what support or services were available at the different campuses.

Overall, the findings of the survey suggest that the process of identifying students with disabilities and of raising student awareness about the available services could be improved. Further, students’ concerns about who has access to information about their health or status and breaches of privacy suggest that there is a need to review how information about students is collected and managed:

*I don't want a student equity adviser or to make a complaint, I want disability support that prevents anything happening where I would need to complain! I wouldn't hand over my details on your online form until I could meet some of the disability people.*

A recurring suggestion throughout the responses is for a mentor program or ‘buddy’ system for new students, which would address issues around student awareness of and access to the support and services that are available.

## Services at VU

Most of the respondents indicated that they had used one or more of the services available at VU for students with disabilities, including a high uptake of Disability Services, counselling and library services. It is interesting to note that students predominantly identified as having low or moderate needs and a significant portion of the students who responded identified as having a mental health condition (around 40%). It might be beneficial for VU staff to be made aware of this statistic and to receive training in

how best to support students with mental health conditions. The need for staff training is suggested by several students and recurs in the responses to many of the survey questions. Respondents also stated that support for students with disabilities was not always consistent across staff and campuses.

The responses indicate that many students (approximately 45%) access support outside of VU. Two students referred to the Personal Helpers & Mentors Service (PHAMS).<sup>1</sup> This program is available to support all students over the age of 16 who are impacted by mental ill health. The fact that only two respondents referred to this program suggests that VU could further assist students through raising awareness of and assisting with access to support services outside the University.

In reflecting on the support available at other institutions for students with disabilities, several students referred positively to the services and processes at Deakin University. In particular, students described the way in which their needs were communicated to academic staff through tutors, rather than requiring students to talk to lecturers themselves. These responses suggested that this process caused less embarrassment and discomfort for the student and reduced the potential for a breach of privacy.

*Disability services need a complete overhaul. I would suggest contacting other more successful university disability services.*

### **Experiences at VU**

When asked about their reasons for choosing VU, a number of students suggested that VU has a positive reputation for being flexible, accommodating and friendly towards students with disabilities and impairments. While most students chose to study at VU because of the available courses or its location, there were a number of positive comments about staff and the culture and environment at the University. However, as is evident in the responses to Question 11 and later survey questions, there are also significant barriers at VU for students with disabilities.

Many students referred to experiencing difficulties getting around campus. In particular, there are several references to having issues with the lifts and with parking. Students' ability to access staff and teaching materials when required is also a significant concern. A number of the responses suggested that a dedicated study room, after hours contact numbers, a 'buddy' system or dedicated tutor and the ability to park on campus would ameliorate the difficulties experienced by students with a disability.

A few students highlighted the need for flexible learning modes, assessment tasks and timelines. For example, one student described the need to work at home due to finding it difficult to sit in class for long periods of time. Another student noted that assessment tasks were due when the student was on placement. Such comments imply that the University should offer flexible and individually tailored programs for students with a disability. While this is the aim of developing disability plans with students, several respondents commented that their plans were not followed or that they felt they had to justify the need for special consideration.

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1. This service is available through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. It aims to assist people aged 16 years and over whose ability to manage their daily activities and to live independently in the community is impacted because of a severe mental illness.

While a number of suggestions for improvements to disability services and support were made in the responses to the survey, in general, students described their experience at VU very positively.

### **VU staff**

Most of the students described the staff at VU (incorporating academic, support and administration staff) as friendly and approachable and said that they felt comfortable asking for help or support. On the other hand, a few comments suggested that not all staff were equally approachable or supportive and that the response students receive is dependent on whom they talk to. As such, the University should ensure that all staff are suitably trained and are aware of the needs of students with disabilities. Students also stated that appropriate follow up was an issue, particularly in terms of follow up from Disability Services staff.

*I believe VU is on the right track. You can put as many policies in place as you like but at the end of the day it's the people, their knowledge and the respect they have for someone who has other things to deal with in life.*

### **Access issues**

Students were asked to comment on access to technology and support services. The responses highlighted the fact that some students were not aware of the range of services available to them. Several students referred to encountering problems with the student portal, accessing computers in the library and support programs. Many students referred to problems in accessing teaching materials, lecture notes and electronic versions of manuals and work-books. It became clear that access to technology and teaching materials was not consistent across subjects and campuses. Students also cited a number of difficulties in terms of engaging in extra-curricular activities on campus. These included a lack of or out-dated web information about available activities, and that the activities offered did not cater for the interests of mature age students.

### **Being heard**

Access and ability to talk to staff was investigated and student responses generally suggest that staff are readily available and approachable. However, some students also noted long wait times for appointments and there was a the lack of follow-up by staff. One student suggested that monthly meetings with disability support staff would facilitate better communication and allow for regular student feedback.

The responses to Question 29 show that many students do not know who their student representatives are or how to contact them. Improving student representation and contact between students with disabilities and student representatives might improve the experiences of students with disabilities, especially in light of the comments about the need for mentors or buddies and lack of information and follow up. In addition, several students explained that they studied at home or online and had little to do with campus life or other students. Improved communication with student representatives would provide an avenue for increasing regular feedback about the services and facilities available for students with disabilities and about the procedures for making complaints and suggestions. One student said that s/he considered that the survey was a mechanism for providing feedback. Accordingly, it might be useful to implement similar formal measures for obtaining feedback on a regular basis.

## Improving engagement

Many students made positive comments about their experiences at VU and expressed gratitude for the opportunities that they had been afforded by the University. Many of the suggestions for areas of improvement have been discussed above, however in response to direct questions about improving the engagement of students with disabilities in higher education, a number of ideas were put forward:

*I think it would be helpful to have students with disabilities help new students with disabilities adjusted to university life and help them to see students with disabilities can succeed and achieve.*

One student suggested appointing 'disability ambassadors', who would visit high schools and act as positive role models for students with a disability. A couple of students said that there was a need to raise awareness of disability through education, staff training and 'disability awareness' days on campus. The need for peer support or a buddy system was reiterated on numerous occasions throughout the survey responses.

# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

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# 11

Overall, the results of this survey show that, of the students who responded to the survey, the majority are satisfied with the support and services available at VU for students with disabilities or long-term illnesses. The survey responses also show that most students think that VU has a friendly atmosphere and that staff are approachable and helpful.

In relation to the aims of this project — to investigate factors that might explain the high attrition rate for students with disabilities at VU — responses to questions about students' future intentions indicate that close to 90% of the currently enrolled students who participated in the survey intend to complete their studies at VU.

This finding might indicate a bias in the survey, as it is possible that it only captured the experiences of students that were generally satisfied with VU. However, prior research indicates that survey responses usually contain a negative bias, rather than a positive one. In general, respondents participate in a survey because the topic is important and relevant to them. Therefore, to further understand the reasons behind VU's attrition rate for students with disabilities it might prove useful to survey students who left VU without completing.

Overall, the project has provided insights as to the ways VU can improve its Disability Services and a better understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities. In addition, and given the dearth of research and/or first-hand information about the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education, the project has the potential to inform ongoing research and policy in the education sector as a whole.

## 11.1 Recommendations

Victoria University, according to available data, has a lower retention rate for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses in higher education than the sector overall. Moreover, the outcomes for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses are lower than across the higher education sector nationally. The findings of this project should be used to address this situation and improve VU's approach to students with disabilities.

Recommendations for improving the experiences of current students, retaining students with disabilities and long-term illnesses at VU, and promoting their engagement in higher education in general have been organised thematically, as follows: access for learning, communication, support and services, and on-going engagement.

## **Access for learning**

### **Recommendation 1:**

The University leadership needs to demonstrate commitment to improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses by actively raising the awareness that addressing access not only requires an adjustment of the built environment but also requires programmatic and pedagogical reform and a change in institutional culture.

### **Recommendation 2:**

There is an urgent requirement to identify and rectify physical barriers to accessing the built environment of Victoria University across its campuses. This will include provision of ramps and elevators that are accessible and designed for ease of student use. Access for students with visual impairments needs to be reflected in upgrading University signage. Disability parking provision and location requires urgent attention.

### **Recommendation 3:**

There is a need to upgrade technology to assist students with disabilities and long-term illnesses to access the curriculum and participate in learning programs. This includes adequate provision of hardware and appropriate software programs to support diverse learning requirements. Lectures need to be recorded using Lectopia and made available for students. All courses of study need to provide online lecture and tutorial notes that are consistent with the dates of lectures. Greater flexibility needs to be established in timelines for assessment tasks and in the design and modes of assessable tasks for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 4:**

Accessible library support is required at all campuses at times that suit students. Libraries across the University should provide dedicated study rooms for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 5:**

There is a requirement for flexibility in class and lecture times to ensure that students are able to travel between buildings and classes. More face-to-face time with teaching staff needs to be made available for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses.

### **Recommendation 6:**

Opportunities to socialise with and 'get to know' staff and classmates should be expanded as a precondition for developing relationships for learning and teaching. This might be pursued through provision of more extra-curricular activities appropriate for mature age and disabled students. Helpers and carers are required to enable inclusion in extra-curricular activities

## **Communication**

### **Recommendation 7:**

The Disability Action Plan needs to outline the preconditions for inclusive education and incorporate a clear and widely disseminated University communication for learning plan for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses. Features within the communication for learning plan should include but not be limited to:

- Provision of after-hours contact numbers for tutors or teaching support.
- Improvements of WebCT and portal facilities.
- More information about student representatives and the training of representatives in disability access issues.
- Faster turnaround time for requests to Disability Services.
- Improving phone and online access to Disability Services.
- Updating of webpage information with dedicated pages for Disability Services and support networks information.
- Disability staff to communicate with and educate teaching staff in developing student plans and disability awareness.
- Establishing routine face-to-face time with teaching staff or tutors.
- Ensuring privacy is maintained by changing enrolment forms and data collection.

## Support and Services

### Recommendation 8:

The Disability Services Unit, as a matter of priority, should investigate measures that can be taken to improve the career satisfaction of disability support workers to improve retention and client satisfaction.

### Recommendation 9:

The University should sponsor a disability awareness program, including training for support and administrative staff and academics.

### Recommendation 10:

Disability support services should be organised that demonstrate the flexibility required for the varying needs of students with disabilities and long-term illnesses, including the provision of dedicated disability support tutors, development of a buddy or peer support program and raising the level and improving the quality of communication with student representatives.

### Recommendation 11:

The VU website needs to be reviewed to improve information for students with disabilities and long-term illnesses and provide information about disability issues.

## Ongoing engagement

### Recommendation 12:

The University Planning and Student Facilities units should develop benchmarking for disability services and inclusiveness across VU. This should include audits to determine the impact of investment on the quality of the education experience and student outcomes.

### Recommendation 13:

Appointment of disability ambassadors and liaison officers to schools to support student transitions to higher education.



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# APPENDIX

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Online survey sent to currently enrolled student who self-identified as having a disability.

**We Would Like Your Help**

**How can Victoria University support students with disabilities?**

We would like your feedback

Victoria University is committed to providing inclusive and life-long education to students from all backgrounds and abilities and we need your help to do this.

Victoria University is in the process of reviewing the services and support that it provides for students with disabilities.

We would like feedback from students with disabilities about our services.

You can help us to improve the support we provide for students with disabilities by completing and returning this short questionnaire. (It will take you about 15 minutes to complete this form )

The questions will ask you to comment on your experience at VU and about the services available at VU. We will also ask you for your ideas about how we can support students with disabilities to achieve success at VU.

The questionnaire is anonymous, **no-one will know who answered the questions or who said what**, so feel free to say what you think.

You can return the completed questionnaire in any of the following three ways

1. You can fill in the questionnaire on line now and just press SUBMIT when you reach the end

OR 2. You can print this questionnaire and fill it in manually and send it to us in the mail at the address below

OR 3. You can telephone Giuliana and give your answers over the phone

**PLEASE PASS THIS QUESTIONNAIRE ON TO OTHER VU STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN GIVING FEEDBACK**

If you have any questions please contact Dr Giuliana Fuscaldo, Research Fellow, Victoria Institute P.O Box 14428 Victoria University Melb.Vic., 8001 phone: 99194845 email [Giuliana.Fuscaldo@vu.edu.au](mailto:Giuliana.Fuscaldo@vu.edu.au)

We would appreciate your reply by WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 24th

**1. Do you have a disability, impairment or medical condition?**

- yes
- no

**2. Did you identify yourself as a person with a disability, impairment or medical condition when you filled out your Victoria University enrollment form?**

- no
- yes
- not sure

please explain why/why not?

**3. Which of the following best describes the nature of your disability, impairment or medical condition?**

- Hearing impairment
- Vision impairment
- Physical Disability
- Mental Health Condition
- Learning Disability
- Neurological Condition
- Medical Condition
- Other (please specify)

**4. Have you used any of the following services or support available to students at VU?  
(choose one or more)**

- Chaplain
- student advisory service
- counselling services
- student welfare services
- careers advisory services
- disability services
- library support services
- have not used any of these services

Please comment on the support or services that you used or why you did not use them.

**5. Which of the following best describes the level of support you need?**

- high level of need
- moderate level of need
- low level of need
- other

Please comment:

**6. To what extent was VU able to accommodate your needs?**

**7. Did you use any services or support outside of VU to help you to study at VU?**

- yes
- no

Please describe the services outside VU that you accessed:

**8. Do you know of another institution that offers better support or services for students with disabilities?**

- yes
- no
- unsure

Please tell us about any organisation that you think provides better support and services for students with disabilities and what makes these better:

**9. Why did you choose to study at VU? (choose one or more )**

- close to home
- choice of courses
- good student services
- good student support
- my friends enrolled at VU
- I met the entry requirements
- other
- unsure

Please explain your reasons for choosing to study at VU:

**10. What features of VU have helped you to study at VU?**

**11. What features of VU have made it difficult for you to study at VU? (choose one or more)**

- hard to get around the campus
- difficult getting to classes
- timetable made it hard
- transport difficulties
- difficulty accessing parking
- lack of support from VU staff
- I have not had any difficulties
- other

Please comment on the things that made it difficult for you to study at VU.

**12. What aspects of your disability, impairment or medical condition have made it difficult for you to study?**

**13. How would you describe your experiences at VU so far?**

For each of the following questions choose the answer that best fits how you feel by ticking one box. You can also add a comment in the space provided below.

**14. The services and support provided to me at VU were very helpful**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment on the services or support that you received.

**15. The academic staff at VU (eg teachers) responded appropriately to my needs.**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment on the response you received

**16. The support staff at VU (eg student welfare, disability services) responded appropriately to my needs**

- strongly agree  
 agree  
 neither  
 disagree  
 strongly disagree

Please comment on the response you received

**17. The administrative staff at VU (eg help desk, student service centre) responded appropriately to my needs)**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment on the response you received

**18. I feel comfortable asking academic staff (eg teachers) for help or support.**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**19. I feel comfortable asking administrative staff (eg staff at student service centre or help desks) for information, help or support.**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**20. I feel comfortable asking support staff (eg student welfare, careers) for help or support.**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**21. I feel comfortable asking VU's Disability Service staff for help or support.**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**22. I can access all the support I need at VU to help me with my studies**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**23. VU has the technology I need to allow me to study effectively**

strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment on the technology available at VU:

**24. At VU it is easy for me to access the technology I need to complete my learning and assessment tasks.**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Please comment:

**25. I can easily access the lecture notes and teaching material that I need for my studies at VU**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Other (please specify):

**26. It is easy for me to use the library at VU**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Please comment:

**27. It is easy for me to join in extra-curricula activities at VU.**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Please comment:

**28. I can easily contact the disability support staff at VU.**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Please comment:

**29. I can easily contact the VU student representatives.**

strongly agree    agree    neither    disagree    strongly disagree

Please comment:

**30. It is easy for me to give feedback or make a complaint at VU.**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment

**31. I feel comfortable asking other students at VU for help**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment

**32. It is just as easy for students with disabilities to succeed at VU as it is for students without disabilities.**

- strongly agree     agree     neither     disagree     strongly disagree

Please comment

**33. Based on your experience at VU do you intend to complete your studies at VU?**

- yes  
 no  
 neither

Please explain your answer above

**34. What could VU do to make it easier for you to succeed with your studies?**

**35. What could be done at VU to make it easier for you to join in extra-curricula activities?**

**36. What ideas do you have for encouraging students with disabilities to engage in further/higher education?**

**37. Do you have any other comments about your experiences at VU?**

Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire. If you have any questions or would like to make further suggestions or comments please contact Giuliana, via email: [Giuliana.Fuscaldo@vu.edu.au](mailto:Giuliana.Fuscaldo@vu.edu.au) or phone 99194845



