

## Supporting success of students on the autism spectrum: what are we learning?

The first ever World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED) was on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2018. All over the globe, events were held to discuss access to higher education, as well as issues concerning equity, inclusion and diversity. In Tasmania, the UTAS Social Inclusion Community of Practice (Social Inclusion CoP) and the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) Tasmanian Chapter hosted an afternoon for academic and professional staff to increase awareness of the experiences of university students on the autism spectrum and of effective support programs.

Located in the immersive studios (on the Cradle Coast, Newnham and Sandy Bay campuses), staff and students were linked across the state. Project Officer, Debbie Hindle, commenced the afternoon with an overview of UTAS's pilot specialist peer mentoring program, SPEERMENT. This program connects mentees (students on the autism spectrum) with peer mentors (current students). The mentors assist the mentees for an hour a week with time management, organisation and keeping on track with assessment tasks. Trust, patience, acceptance and belief underpin this model of support. Mutual learning takes place with the mentees benefiting from their peers' expertise as students, and the mentors learning from the mentees.

Next up was the student panel; students on the autism spectrum, along with their mentors, shared their experiences at UTAS, the challenges and obstacles, and also their successes and tips for staff! Speaking in public is a monumental effort at any time for the mentees, not to mention presenting to an audience of staff and in packed rooms! They dedicated time and effort over several weeks to be well prepared for their presentations, and they were outstanding, thought-provoking and inspiring. The students' efforts were much appreciated; staff gained insights that they simply would not gain from each other.

We finished the WAHED event with a presentation about a new online support program at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) for students with autism, by Amelia Dowe and Associate Professor Charlotte Brownlow, who was visiting from (USQ). This link with USQ will hopefully be the start of some future collaborations.

Implicit in our WAHED event was the importance of inclusive practices and universal design for learning. What is good practice for students with autism, is often good practice for all students!

If you missed this event, but would like information about how to better support students with autism, look out for the online resource, *An inclusive toolkit for UTAS staff: enhancing the teaching and learning experience for students with disability*, which will be launched in early 2019, and includes a section on autism.

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