

Diversity Hub for All: An Overview

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Introduction

Caught as we are in a global pandemic that is affecting us all in a myriad of different ways, it is highly likely that most have contemplated the issues that stretch across the globe and the way in which the virus has forced not only personal levels of isolation but also hardened the borders between countries at times, the varying differences in physical health and the risks associated with chronic conditions that make daily life more challenging, and the eventual fallout stemming from the impact that this has had upon the mental health of many. As such, it may seem perfectly natural that we might wish to embark upon a project to draw in all of the positive aspects of diversity to support and celebrate them through the creation of a 'Diversity Hub for All'. This would be a hub for the university and the city, allowing both to reap the rich benefits of inclusion.

A hub such as this could serve both those affiliated with the university, a diverse range of people that includes staff, students, and the members of the new adult community college (i-Design), as well as opening its doors to the surrounding community and truly embracing the diversity of all. Therefore, the initial phase will be to lead by example and ensure that

diversity is an important aspect considered in the university's pre-existing FD programmes to allow for the promotion of diversity related research activities by students, staff and faculty members before branching out to include the population of the city.

Disability Awareness

Disabilities come in many forms, some of which are considered to be invisible and some visible. As such, both categories have issues that overlap when it comes to understanding by the outside population as well as differing needs as varied as the conditions that come under the broader category of a disability.

To serve the needs of both broad categories of disability, a multisensory learning centre will be established. This would be able to provide those with both invisible and visible disabilities with the support that they need, and could serve not only the various members of the university but also the surrounding population who may also have a variety of special needs. This would then serve as a foundation from which to spread the support of many disabilities so that nothing is overlooked or neglected.

Invisible Disabilities

By their very nature, invisible disabilities can be easy to miss and easy to forget about, but for those that struggle with them each and every day they can be a constant barrier to living the life they may wish for. At the point of writing, we are all still stuck in a global pandemic with the fragile hope that an end may be near, but this experience had brought to light the fragility of the services that exist for some. Mental health has suffered from

the need to socially distance, with the stress and lack of social contact hitting those with pre-existing conditions hard and serving as the trigger to cause such issues in others. Those with pre-existing medical conditions that put them in a higher risk category may be acutely aware of the stigma that such an issue causes, with the warring concerns of physical safety, avoidance of stigma, and the looming mental health crisis. Balancing the need for contact and normality with the importance of maintaining safety is an unforgiving task that has no winners.

As it stands, the importance of being able to establish a place in which mental health and learning differences can be discussed without being tarred with the humiliation of stigma that might be otherwise connected to such topics would be highly beneficial for the university and wider area. Ensuring a deep understanding of such issues is present amongst the staff would create an environment in which there is a sense of security and understanding, and these differences can be embraced in a positive light. As a city university, taking the lead and educating the students, staff and community about the varieties of mental conditions that exist so that they are able to adapt to whatever challenges they may face, will allow us to be able to support the city population moving forward and serving the locality in that respect.

A significant factor in the manner in which mental health issues are stigmatized crosses over with the issues prevalent in the LGBT+ community wherein the lack of understanding causes negative perceptions that lead to secrecy and increased internalisation of issues that cause increasing amounts of harm to the internal psyche. Having a supportive network that is easily accessible would help to negate the worst of this stigma and

develop healthy methods of dealing with the myriad issues that many struggle with in silence.

A proven therapy is that of animal therapy (Robino, et al., 2020), and so it would make sense to set up a dedicated rabbit room within the university on the grounds that it would give staff and students who may not otherwise have the chance or opportunity to care for a pet the chance to do so. The act of caring for an animal that is intelligent and capable of interacting with humans with personality can help encourage the act of self-care within those that are struggling to look after themselves. Rabbits, being quiet and litter-trainable, are in many ways an ideal choice given the limits of the university.

Additionally, physical activity with a productive outcome such as gardening and growing vegetables outdoors would also have a positive outcome on mental and physical health (Clatworthy, Hinds, & Camic 2013). Not only would this lead to a gentle amount of social activity without the overt threat of active socialisation, but it would also be a prime opportunity for members of the surrounding community and the student population to interact. It would be an easy first step for many that might be in need of further support to take in addition to all the many health benefits that come from being outside and consuming freshly harvested vegetables.

Visible Disabilities

While visible disabilities are more immediately obvious to onlookers than invisible ones, they are still often overlooked with focus sometimes falling to providing wheelchair access and not fully realising that this does not make a place more accessible for plenty with other disabilities. As such it

is important to ensure that there is a truly barrier free environment in the university that can help inspire the city. This would help staff and students, both current and future, and attract those to whom the facilities might otherwise be an insurmountable barrier.

Working with specialists to create braille resources, audio systems, and tactile paving would open up campus to the blind and partially sighted and allow for their unique insight to be seen by the fully sighted world. This is something that will take careful planning, so the current forecast aims to begin the process of opening up campus for this section of society that has up until now been effectively barred through omission rather than intentional malice in 2023.

Gender

An integral part of moving forward with the promotion of diversity is the encouragement and inclusion of women so that they are able to operate on a level playing field. Creating a safe space in which women are able to study, conduct research and demonstrate the full extent of their abilities in an environment that not only promises to be equal as so many do, but actually lives up to this promise through the nullification of the numerous microaggressions and social expectations that are often unwittingly heaped upon women.

The need to seriously address the safety and security concerns that are held by women on campus including the need for adequate security patrols that are sensitive to the specific requirements and concerns of the women on campus as well as the issue of lighting that leads to sections of the university being deeply inhospitable to all the women that might wish

to use it, therefore decreasing the extent to which women both feel welcomed on campus and that they are able to contribute in any meaningful way to the functionality of the university. Women should be able to feel that they are equal to men in equivalent positions, not unwelcome guests that are tolerated during set hours.

Given the prevalence of sexual harassment and rape within the wider society, it should be assumed that a certain amount of the women that are on campus will have experienced such traumatic events and therefore aiming to reduce the amount of anxiety that they feel would help move towards a more equal society, as well as reducing the likelihood that women who have not yet experienced such things do not do so on campus.

Additionally, the practical needs of many women at the university who have dependents, whether they be children or elderly relatives, needs to be addressed with the establishment of a network to support women in this matter. This would make a massive difference in the quality of life of many women, enriching not only their lives and potential but also the wider community and academia as a whole.

LGBT+

Gender issues often intersect in a multitude of different ways with LGBT+ issues, not least in the field of gender identity and the stigma that homosexuality can carry. Those that fall under this umbrella of identities often face many struggles in their lives that those outside of the community may struggle to realise. There are issues with discrimination and the inability to marry freely, but there has been increasing amounts of awareness and support for LGBT+ issues in the university and this should

be built upon to ensure that campus is a place for everyone.

Pride month is the perfect opportunity to embrace the glorious colours of the LGBT+ rainbow and show support throughout campus. This would include events to both raise awareness of issues but also to educate. The “L” and “G” might be understood to a degree, but the letters beyond that may be more vaguely comprehended and all the other nuanced aspects of the queer identities that exist may be missed. Even within the community there is often elements that are misunderstood by various other groups, and ensuring that open communication is one way to help reduce the stigma and silence that keeps many in the closet.

Branching out from the campus, the university would partner with local organisations to become an active member of the local Pride festivals so that the LGBT+ community can see that university is a safe place for prospective students but also so that the wider community can see the example that is being set for acceptance and therefore normalisation of the existence of LGBT+ people rather than allowing the deeply entrenched stigma to continue unchecked.

Internationalization

The University of Kitakyushu has always been keen and active when it comes to the creation of opportunities to study abroad and forge international connections that are both deep and long lasting. Our partner institutes number over twenty, and the University of Kitakyushu’s Global Education Program was selected by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in September 2012 to receive assistance as part of the “Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development”.

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Increasingly more emphasis is being put on the importance and value of English-language instruction in field-specific courses with the aim of producing globally minded citizens, as well as allowing for increased opportunities available to visiting overseas students both with regards to available classes, but also the diversity of the students they might encounter.

Consequently, this leads to issues and complications when it comes to the expectations of overseas students learning Japanese who may be at different stages in the learning process, so it is important that we continue to be highly aware of the needs and desires they may have when it comes to their study abroad at our university. In order to improve the learning environment for international students it is important to find out exactly what expectations international students have for their study abroad experiences at our university. It is our plan to set up meetings between former international students and incoming students so that we might be able to come up with a definitive list of challenges and then suggest ways to help students adjust to life at a Japanese university.

In order to understand the expectations and challenges faced by international students at our university, it is our plan to set up a network with the study abroad centres of our partner institutions at Oxford Brookes University in the UK, Tacoma Community College in the US, Korea Maritime and Ocean University in South Korea, National University of Ireland Galway in Ireland and Wenzao Ursuline University of Language in Taiwan. Our goal is not only bilateral as we plan to create an interactive hub connecting each international office with our own in order to proactively share information with these universities as their outgoing students make up an important, interactive and diverse group of our campus population.

Collaborative meetings between former international students and incoming students will be facilitated at each partner institution by visiting members of our staff to each institution in order to conduct interviews for this project.

Conclusion

All people are diverse in their own way, and every one of us can benefit from embracing not only ourselves in their entirety but also others that are different from us in a multitude of ways. All change brings difficulties but much like the manner in which the difficulties of study and assignments brings the joyous satisfaction and pride of graduation for our students, the long-term lasting benefits of growing all of our potential in celebration of our diversities outweighs the uncertain stumbling blocks of fear that may have some reluctant to take the first step.

References

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