

Highlights of VTAC Information Night – 1st September, 2009

JOANNE WEBBER – National Disability Co-ordination Officer - Eastern Melbourne Region

Transition into Tertiary Education

In terms of transition into tertiary education for people with a disability, I think it's an important point to look at how TAFE and universities view disability. First of all, in terms of eligibility for services, there is not the strict funding bands that exist in a secondary school setting. Whether it be Catholic, independent or Government schools, there are quite strict criteria as to how you fit eligibility and what funding dollars are attached to you.

And we do find and in all of the schools that I go out and visit, they all say, probably 60% of the students with disabilities fall outside the funding band. This means they don't get any funding dollars attached to them but still are identified as having some sort of support need. Most of those students tend to be students with behavioural disorders, learning disability, Aspergers and some students with acquired brain injury as well as students with mental health conditions.

At university or TAFE, what we see is the removal of all of those strict funding bands in terms of fitting an eligibility criteria with dollars attached.

It's more about just having some form of evidence of an assessment, a diagnosis a medical report to identify a disability. You fall in to the pool of students with a disability, meet with a disability liaison officer and then have a discussion around what sort of support you think you may need and what sort of support is then offered to you.

And that's a discussion, a negotiation and an agreement that you both come to and can revisit every six months, every semester, every year or it might be weekly depending on what your support needs are. So it's important to keep that in mind, especially for those students who aren't receiving any funding at the moment.

Eligibility

For SEAS and Disability Support If you have a health condition, illness or disability, you will be eligible through the SEAS process under category 9. When you go on to TAFE or university, please flag for a meeting with your disability liaison officer - every TAFE and university within Australia will have a disability liaison unit, an equity unit, a diversity unit - they come under a few different names.

If you seek out the disability liaison officer, arrange for a meeting and you can do that as soon as you get your offer, even before you are enrolled, you can have that meeting to talk about what sort of support you can expect and what sort of support that you need. Those sorts of things are crucial in terms of preparing for that transition on to TAFE and university.

In terms of identifying what sort of support you need, start by looking at what you already get at school. For those of you who don't get a lot of support at school, start by thinking about what sort of support is going to benefit you, whether you have dyslexia and you think maybe reading text is difficult but maybe listening to text and talking about having audio formats is beneficial.

There's a whole suite of freeware and commercial software available that can support people with disabilities in education. And one of the reasons why we promote technology so much is that it becomes an independent tool when you then go on to employment.

And there's a whole suite of funding for all disability groups, as well, when you look at employment and you require technology, whether it's commercial technology or whether you have other support needs as well.

Most of all, learning is a life-long journey. And, for me, I have a vision impairment and know the process of going to disability units to access support and I find it just so important to have that going and froing of that discussion to work out what's most relevant in terms of support needs. Reminding lecturers as well, I find lecturers are a real key link in that communication as well, because they're the ones who you can renegotiate some of your assessment tasks with, independent of disability liaison units as well. So, keep that communication open.

Lecturers

Lecturers are not as scary as you first think they are. I never confronted an academic until I was in my third year of my second degree. But, please don't wait as long as I did. They're definitely not as scary as what you think they are. And what I find is you're actually in a really privileged position as a student with a disability to speak to academics.

They are required to make time to meet with students and when you identify that you have a disability, they tend to have their doors wide open for you. So that communication can become a really open point of contact and you tend to get some extra support and extra access to information. And I know, for me, I've used academics just to find out if I have an incredibly long reading list and only have time to maybe read one or two of the texts or can only get a couple of texts scanned in to an accessible format.

Going to the lecturer and asking them, they'll say, "Don't worry about any of these, have a look at this book instead." OR This is my favourite, "Read number five on the list." Sometimes they can help streamline your learning and time is pretty vital when you're studying, to make the most of time, so you still have free time to meet your friends in the caff and do all those other vital things around learning.

Developing Skills

The other thing I find is the whole skill set around managing disability is pretty crucial and I find sometimes it's a subject in itself. Developing those skills around what technology you use, what communication skills you use, how you disclose? All of those skills are pretty crucial when you start to look at how you're going to manage your disability as you go through education. It's up to you. That's the biggest difference between secondary school and tertiary education is you will be the initiator of the support you get.

So, having those skills means you can initiate whatever support you need, or follow-up, or re-enforce your support requirements so that you can manage and continue on through uni and then those skills become valuable in the workplace.

And it means that transition in to employment is that much easier as well. Please remember - and think of other students that you're aware of as well who may be eligible and who aren't currently receiving support at school – to remind them they are eligible for support at TAFE and university and they can apply through the SEAS process.

ADRIAN BALES and ALEX LUM – VTAC

VTAC is the Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre.

VTAC provides the central point of application for courses, special entry access scheme (SEAS) and scholarships. There is one processing fee only through VTAC. Once the processing fee is paid, you can add and change preferences as often as you like.

About 50% of applicants through VTAC don't change their preferences. Once the processing fee is paid, you can change preferences as often as you like and there are no additional charges.

Fees

The fee for course applications is \$23 until 5pm on 30th September. Processing fees increase after that time.

SEAS and Scholarships - Deadlines

The SEAS program activates after a course application is submitted. There is no additional charges for SEAS and scholarships. You can apply for as many categories of SEAS for which you're eligible and you must submit each category by 5pm Friday, 9th October.

There is a different closing dates for scholarships.

We advise you apply for scholarships after SEAS because all relevant information from your course application flows to SEAS and from SEAS to scholarships. Please be aware of this.

The scholarships program closes at 5pm on Friday 30th October.

VTAC website

In addition to the online VTAC application, all of VTAC's publications can be downloaded from the website, including the VTAC guide. You don't have to download the entire VTAC guide, you can download the VTAC guide in sections and the sections you find most valuable, for example, you can look up the institution that you're most interested in attending.

For parents of Year 12 students, the ABC of Applying is a valuable resource covering the VTAC step by step process from registration to when the offers are released in January.

Course link is valuable for students to compare their VCE program with the courses they would like to do, for example, if you are doing VCE or VCAL or a Certificate of Applied Learning, you can log on to Course Link using your VTAC ID and pin – your VCE program will automatically appear.

Students can then use the sorting function to sort for courses based on location, possible results and interest areas.

Another valuable tool on the VTAC website is samples and demos. Students can go to the VTAC home page - there are sample demonstrations of each program on the left-hand side. There is the application and students can practice the application and registration process. SEAS questions on each category can be answered to prepare for the real applications.

Your practice data is not kept at the end of the process. If you are intending to put in a SEAS application and a scholarship application, the practice application helps to solidify your answers and get familiar with the program.

Another important and really valuable resource from the VTAC website is V News. It's an online bulletin and we encourage all applicants to subscribe to it after you register. Subscribing to V News keeps you up to date with changes to courses in the VTAC guide.

Since the VTAC guide was published and went to print, we've had a number of courses change and a number of courses have been cancelled. New courses are added to the system. A number of institutions have changed the campus to which the course is located. Subscribing to V News means you'll be aware of new courses in the VTAC system.

There's also another link on the VTAC website called Course Search which lists the courses in the VTAC section. In the front there is a menu called New and Cancelled Courses which lists all changes since the VTAC Guide went to print.

Registration

All applicants need to register with VTAC before applying for courses, SEAS and scholarships. Please note, registration does not mean you have applied. Last year VTAC had 15,000 applicants who registered but didn't apply. Once you have registered, you then access "My info" and this becomes your personal information portal through VTAC.

You can apply for course, SEAS, scholarships and you can also apply for an admissions test if you're a non-Year 12 applicant. Personal information can also be updated through My info.

You can check the VTAC guide or website for further information on the fees.

There are two types of courses in the VTAC guide.

One is vocational education and training – VET courses. These are identified with a yellow bar behind the course title in the VTAC guide. The blue bar behind the VTAC course signifies a higher education course.

There are three different types of institutions.

1. TAFE providers and institutes
2. Independent tertiary colleges, and
3. Universities.

TAFE institutes generally offer Certificate 4, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses and also offer a range of degree courses, for example, Box Hill TAFE, offer 11 high education courses through VTAC.

Higher education courses at TAFE providers and private colleges are generally full-fee paying courses, this means they don't attract Government funding.

Fee-HELP

Fee Help is an Australian Government loan program where students can take out a loan to pay their fees off similar to the way students pay through HECS-HELP, that is, through the taxation system, if working full time and earning over roughly \$40,000 per year.

Universities offer Bachelor courses but may also offer Certificate 4, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses, for example, University of Ballarat offers a number of vocational, education and training courses.

VTAC applicants who are 20 and over as at 1st January, 2010, if applying for TAFE or VET courses through VTAC, will be allocated a type 4 code - Fee type determined by the provider.

The institution will decide whether you remain a full fee paying applicant or you become a Government-funded applicant, which has a type 1 course code. These decisions are based on completed qualifications, so if the applicant doesn't have a Certificate 4 or above, the institution will likely allocate a type 1 course code which is a Government-funded place.

The Victorian Government is looking at a new fee structure for TAFE. VTAC is not aware of the fees that are charged under this system, though some TAFE providers have started publishing the cost of some of these courses on their individual websites.

Prerequisites

A prerequisite is a compulsory subject that you must do to be eligible for the course. No matter how good your ENTER score is, if you don't meet the prerequisite for the course, you won't be considered and the institution will rank you at the bottom of the list.

Course preferences

Please do not guess the system. It operates on the principle of what is the highest preference on your list is the course you most want to get in to. If you list five preferences and course preferences, three, four and five want to make you an offer, you will receive an offer from course three. If you accept your third preference, remember, you are still eligible for offers for your first and second preference in round 2.

Extra requirements

These are just as important as prerequisites. These are additional requirements that you need to meet to be considered for a particular course. Extra requirements are compulsory. If you are concerned about undertaking them, contact the institution to explain your concern. All institutions have support areas to assist you.

Double-check your course codes carefully so you don't end up attending the wrong campus or pay the full fee for the course.

Fee-paying courses

If you pick a course code that ends in 2, then you are applying for a full-fee paying course. And if it's higher than a course code ending in 1, then you are liable for the full fees for that course. Be very careful when you're choosing your course codes.

SEAS

SEAS stands for Special Entry Access Scheme – see booklet.

Most tertiary institutions run programs for applicants who have experienced educational disadvantage. Applying through SEAS does not guarantee you a place in a course and SEAS is not a replacement for prerequisites or course requirements. Students still need to meet course requirements and SEAS categories recognise factors that may have had an impact on applicants meeting their full education potential.

SEAS is a VTAC program designed to assist students who have suffered disadvantage and has impacted on their educational outcomes. SEAS is designed to assist students to be treated equitably by institutions, to those who have not suffered any disadvantage.

There are 10 categories of SEAS and you're entitled to apply for any category of SEAS for which you're eligible. Applications can be submitted and edited until 5 pm on 9th October.

Electronic supporting statements

Students can send log in details to their Doctors or other health or education practitioners so that supporting statements can be forwarded to VTAC electronically. This is convenient on two fronts – difficulty obtaining appointments for specialists and doctors and reading doctor's handwriting.

SEAS Categories

Categories 2 and 3, you may be Indigenous or come from a non-English speaking background, including Auslan.

Category 4, difficult family circumstances - can include but is not limited to a range of factors such as long-term illness of a family member, divorce or separation of parents or you may be living away from home. Please refer to the SEAS booklet. There's a comprehensive list of examples that fall under this category - doing the dishes four times a week is not a difficult family circumstance.

Category 5 - If you receive a Centrelink benefit or if you have a Centrelink reference number, Centrelink can send information to VTAC. If you're not in receipt of a Centrelink benefit, then you will need to provide other evidence so you can apply in this category.

Category 7 - you may attend an under-represented school. Your Career Teachers will have information on that from the Universities. An under-represented school is a school that universities recognise they are not getting many students from. Universities compile lists and contact schools. Schools will know if they're under-represented because they would have been contacted by the universities.

Two schemes are featured on VTAC webpage.

There's SNAP - the School Network Access Program.

There's also SALT, which is Special Access La Trobe.

There are cover sheets for these programs that are available through the Course Link program.

Monday, August 3 is the opening time and it is vital you ensure your documentation is up to date to present to the selection authorities. No applications after 5pm on October 9 will be accepted. OK, I'll reiterate these dates the final date there is very important. So get in early. Get your appointments in early and get your documentation together early so you're not rushing at the last minute.

Make sure you're organised with SEAS so you can very comfortably meet that deadline.

Scholarships

There are three different types of scholarships that are available through VTAC.

1. Access and Equity scholarships. All participating institutions have their own eligibility requirements – see page 3 of the booklet which can be downloaded from the VTAC webpage.
2. Merit scholarships are now available through VTAC for three universities – Monash University, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology. If you want to apply to other institutions for merit scholarships, you apply individually to the institutions or directly to those institutions for scholarship programs through them.
3. Commonwealth scholarships – this year available only for Indigenous students.

Following the Federal budget, Centrelink is now responsible for Commonwealth scholarships for all other applicants except Indigenous students. This process is in transition and the Centrelink process is not formalized yet. We have heard that people with a Centrelink reference number will automatically be granted a Commonwealth accommodation scholarship because of their reference number.

Victorian universities provide scholarships to assist students. Scholarships may be awarded to students from low socio economic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and other equity and access groups as defined by each institution. Each year institutions give money back – you have nothing to lose by applying for a scholarship.

Scholarships will be awarded for the highest-achieving students. The highest-achieving student could have an ENTER of 70 or 75, so keep an eye out for all of those scholarships. Universities really want to offer scholarships and often there are not sufficient applicants.

Change of preference

Provided you have paid your processing fees, you can add or change preferences now until 30th October. Probably the more important timeframe for Year 12 students is between November 30 and December 21. Many Year 12 applicants change preferences after the ENTERs are released during the week of the 14th December. At that time, you can list new courses as well, but be aware of the extra requirements. You can reorder your preferences but please be aware of the fee-paying codes, campus locations and extra requirements.

Offers

This year through VTAC there are two offer rounds. The dates are [insert dates]. More than 60,000 offers are made in round 1 and around 7,000 in round 2. So always accept your first offer. Remember, you'll receive an offer for the course that is highest on your preference list and you remain eligible for any course that's higher on your preferences list in round 2. At the end of the first round, you also have an option to take up an irregular offer.

An irregular offer is available to students who changed their mind about the courses they might want to do and an irregular offer gives students the offer, just once, to choose a course that's either lower on their preferences list of the course they've been offered, or not on their preference list at all. So after the first round of offers you can download a form from the VTAC website. You take that form in to the institution and get it signed and the institution will then make you an offer. You will then be taken out of the VTAC system and be made an irregular offer.

Please get irregular offers signed and keep a photocopy. If you don't do that, the next day the selection officer might be in another part of the institution and you may have lost that opportunity.

Supplementary offers

This year for the first time, VTAC is running supplementary offers. At the end of round 2, and up until the end of February, applicants who have not received an offer, that is, applicants who have either accepted an offer, deferred an offer or rejected an offer, will be eligible for a supplementary offer. So if you have received an offer of any kind, you will not be eligible for a supplementary offer.

We encourage all applicants to tick the box in the VTAC application that they want to be eligible for supplementary offers. It is the last opportunity for people to receive an offer through VTAC.

It is a bit different to the normal VTAC ranking system, so a student could potentially receive more than one offer from an institution and they can then decide which offer they want to take up after that.

Published offers

Monday 18 January around 9 o'clock at night, the newspapers will release the offers. You might line up and you might be waiting to see your name. Sometimes you won't see it. Some people ring up and say, "Why isn't my name there?" The reason is they have not ticked the box to have their offers published in the press.

In the supplementary offer process, applicants may get more than one offer and it's outside of the normal VTAC system. If you get an offer in the first week of that 4 week period through February, then you'll be out of the supplementary offer system. VTAC encourages all applicants to make themselves available for supplementary offers.

Questions

Q. How many preferences can you apply for?

A. 12

RMIT Selection Officer - Milly Fels

Why submit a SEAS or equity application

We ask you to put in an equity application because we recognize that access to education is highly competitive and we know also that the sorts of things universities and TAFEs often select on, such as overreliance on ENTER, is not a way of us getting the best students and not a way of recognising students' abilities and capacities. It also doesn't recognise everyone's different pathways that they've taken to get to where they are before they go on to TAFE or university studies.

We know in particular that ENTER can be an indicator of a student's educational privilege and for students with disabilities, that means an ENTER is not going to be reflecting your capacity or potential.

So the Equity application gives us legitimacy to look at you and to give you additional consideration in that selection process. For us as an institution, it's great because it broadens our access to a bunch of really committed, motivated students who will be successful when they come to our institution.

It ensures that our institution reflects the communities that we're situated within. It ensures we're not being discriminatory and that we're having a diverse student population.

As you know we've got a set of institutional obligations and requirements as well around the Disability Discrimination Act and the Education Standards. So it is everyone's right to have that additional consideration as a student with a disability going through a selection process.

Success of students with disability

Now this is something that often comes up around academic success and I want to make sure you understand very clearly that students with disabilities are incredibly successful academically. If you look at participation rates here, these are RMIT figures and they're quite applicable to any institution in Victoria. [ppt slide] The participation rates are 4.4% of our student population, that's a bit above the State national average. We know we need to triple the number of students with disabilities in RMIT, if we are going to adequately represent the population we're situated within.

When we look at the success rate down below, if you look at the 2007 figure, that 0.997 figure is a relationship to the academic success of our total domestic student population.

So again it's showing that students with disabilities have exactly the same academic success as their peers who are coming in with much more educational privilege, with better resources, without having some of the hurdles that students with disabilities face and successfully overcome.

So these are why we have these equity access categories.

Assessing equity applications

Each different category is assessed individually.

So, for instance, if you're eligible as someone from a non-English speaking background, because Auslan is your language and also coming in as a student with a disability, we would encourage you to apply under both categories because it is not a cumulative score process that happens ... it's a score for each one of those categories.

VTAC gets all the applications and they have a panel of assessors that assess them for every university in Victoria. They're highly trained, highly skilled assessors and what they're looking at is to give an impact and duration score.

So looking at the duration of the situation and it's impacts with regard to educational disadvantage. So they're really looking for you to be able to tell them that - OK, I have this condition, this means that I have missed a lot of school or I didn't have appropriate support in the secondary system or that I was on medication that made it hard to maintain my concentration. They need you to give them those examples quite specifically about the impact of the condition and the way it's affected your capacity to participate in education.

And this is what then results in a score that's generated at VTAC and that score then goes as part of your application when selection officers look at your application.

Selection still remains highly competitive but it enables us to look at you and say - OK we want to put this student up here. If that student is a bit below what the "clearly in" score and we want to give them that initial consideration, it's the score from VTAC which enables us to do that.

What do we look for in a SEAS application?

The disability one is a good example. Each different category has its own requirements. I'm sure you're highly skilled already at navigating bureaucratic processes. This is another one for you to conquer.

The first thing is eligibility

The assessors will look that you've met all the requirements, you've indicated that yes, you have a disability or long-term medical condition and you have applied through VTAC for courses at Victorian universities.

The next one is an applicant statement.

We can't stress enough that the way to get the sort of consideration we want you to have is to really focus on the impact of the circumstances or condition and focus on the way that that has impacted on your educational access and participation.

Some examples -

Was your schooling disrupted? Were you able to have appropriate provision and accessible format? Did you have supporter accommodations? We know that for many students in the secondary sector the level of support that you will get is much lower than what you'd get at tertiary institutions and you've struggled through on your own. Was there an impact around treatment? Was the disability of your condition one that was recognised and supported within the secondary system?

That's your statement. We suggest that you write it out beforehand and VTAC has a practice mode that you can go into which is great. Don't think you're going to log on to the VTAC site and start writing your statement. Write it out before hand. It's a really difficult thing to talk about and it's a difficult way for you to have to think about getting access but it would be really helpful to show it to other people and say, "What do you think?" And get your mum or dad to say, "Remember when you missed a whole term of school or think about this as well."

Statement of support

The other bit is that statement of support from an education or health professional. So it can be one, it doesn't have to be everyone who has been involved in the treatment. Someone who can summarise what has gone on. Again, it's very much around that impact on your access and participation in education. Get them to keep it short. They don't need to put in reports or technical information.

The people assessing the application at VTAC will have access to training and support around that but they're not medical practitioners. So it really means that the doctor, or whoever the health professional is, needs to specify what's happened with that condition, and what it has meant for you as a student.

Privacy and disclosure

It's important to know that the SEAS application is only used in the selection process. It would be wrong of us to use that information in any other way and on the whole it will only be the selection officer at that institution who will see it.

This is tricky because then it also means after you get an offer, you then need to contact that institution, that TAFE or university and say, "OK, I am coming, I need some support and I need to set up some accommodations and you'll have to go through everything again. But it means you have complete privacy around your application to study at that institution.

Similarly, it means that teaching staff won't know you have a disability unless you choose to disclose. Now we want you to disclose because that's one way we can provide support for you but that's very much your decision. And we recommend students disclose early but, again, it's up to you.

Really, when you're thinking about the SEAS application, you should first of all think about finding your own passion, following your passion and then doing that SEAS application and then thinking about what you're going to do around your transition.

Researching students' success

The most important thing we find when we do studies that try and track what it is that supports a student's success, we know ENTER at RMIT is a very poor way of identifying students who are likely to be successful and happy in their courses.

We know the best way of identifying something that will lead, when we do our large-scale studies, to a student being both successful and happy is that they're following their passion and their dream, that they're studying a course they're committed to and motivated to do. It's something they want to be doing.

That means also there are multiple pathways that student can take to get to where it is they want to go. So for every area that you might want to study in, there are going to be very different sorts of starting points.

Those starting points, you'll need to do a process of matching them up to where you are now and what is going to suit you? I know for me, I wish that when I left secondary school, that I knew more about TAFE and I've gone in to a TAFE pathway where I would have been in a class of 30 students and had a teacher who knew my name and had a really structured learning environment.

And I probably would have not wasted so much time mucking around and not dealing with the independence of the tertiary learning environment.

We have other students who are just desperate to get out of the secondary system where everything is really regulated and want to go straight in to a very independent university environment where no-one really knows their name, they need to manage all of their own time - they might be in a lecture with 300 people.

It's important for you to think about not just what it is you want to study but the different forms of delivery within our educational system and what's going to suit you best as a learner.