



## **DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

### **MEETING OF MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY'S DISABILITY INCLUSION GROUP**

*Tuesday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

*2:00 – 4:00 pm*

*Engineering Building Boardroom (EN4002), Memorial University*

This document summarizes the discussions that took place at the fourth meeting of Memorial University's Disability Inclusion Group (DIG-MUN), held on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The meeting was chaired and facilitated by Barbara Neis (NL Provincial Co-Lead for the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy). The following is a complete list of attendees, presented in alphabetical order by surname:

- Stephen Bornstein (NL Provincial Co-Lead, CRWDP)
- Patti Bryant (Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee, MUN)
- Emily Christy (Executive Director, Coalition of Persons with Disabilities NL)
- Gordon Cooke (Associate Professor, Faculty of Business Administration, MUN)
- Jason Dalton (Occupational Therapist, Universal Design Network of Canada)
- Bernard Doyle (Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee, MUN)
- Jason Geary (Teaching Consultant, Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, MUN)
- Kathy Hawkins (Manager of Employer Supports and Services, Empower NL)
- Nicole Helwig (Manager, Centre for Social Enterprise, MUN)
- Tina Hickey (Employment Equity Officer, Department of Human Resources, MUN)
- Dana Howse (CRWDP Post-Doctoral Fellow, MUN)
- Leah Lewis (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, MUN)
- Barbara Neis (NL Provincial Co-Lead, CRWDP)
- Kelly Neville (Director, Student Wellness and Counselling Centre, MUN)
- Mandy Penney (Training Support Facilitator and Inclusion Crew Coordinator, Empower NL)
- Jodi Penney (Employment Outreach Specialist, Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work)
- Tracey Pittman (Academic Labour Relations Officer, Office of Faculty Relations, MUN)
- Yirong Qin (Research and Policy Officer, Coalition of Persons with Disabilities NL)
- Colleen Quigley (Division Head and Manuscripts Librarian, QEII Library, MUN)
- Amy Sheppard (PhD Student and CRWDP Student Fellow, MUN)
- Chrissy Vincent (NL Provincial Coordinator, CRWDP)
- Gabrielle Young (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, MUN)

## **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The meeting opened with a brief welcome from Dr. Barbara Neis followed by a round of introductions. We were pleased to welcome seven individuals who were new to DIG-MUN – Patti Bryant, Jason Dalton, Bernard Doyle, Kelly Neville, Mandy Penney, Jodi Penney, and Colleen Quigley.



#### **PRESENTATION: SENSE OF BELONGING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN NL**

COD-NL's Emily Christy and Yirong Qin gave a short presentation (originally given at the People, Place and Public Engagement Conference in St. John's) on a piece of research that they recently undertook. The research was done in partnership with Dr. Kimberly Maich, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University, and was funded by a grant from the Government of NL's Disability Policy Office. The primary purpose of the project was to collect some baseline information on sense of belonging among people with disabilities in the province. The Government of NL has just implemented a new inclusion strategy and thought that the results from such a piece of research would be helpful in establishing a benchmark for use in assessing the strategy's future success.

The research team conducted a total of 21 interviews with people with disabilities in the province. Nine were done by phone, another nine were done in person, and three were done by e-mail correspondence. Participants ranged from 35 to 77 years old and had a variety of disabilities, including physical disabilities, vision loss, hearing loss, and mental health disabilities. Several different themes were identified in the participants' responses, including the following:

- 1) The importance of technology in facilitating communication, participation, and accessibility;
- 2) The experience of having abilities or needs judged solely on the basis of outward appearance;
- 3) The feeling of having a "good enough" life, despite being viewed as "not good enough" by others and despite available supports frequently being ineffective and "not good enough";
- 4) Expectations to "prove" the existence of non-visible disabilities, and the experience of having the need for support or accommodation for such disabilities constantly challenged; and
- 5) The experience of social isolation and being "left out" largely because of barriers in the physical environment (such as a lack of adequate transportation, particularly in winter).

The major take-away message from this research is that there is an opportunity gap with regard to social participation and belonging among people with disabilities in this province, and that the problem does not lie with the individuals who are experiencing the challenges. Rather, the problem is due to the systematic physical and social barriers that surround them.

The research team is interested in broadening and deepening this research, in part by reaching out to more individuals in rural communities and incorporating their experiences and views. They are in the process of re-applying to SSHRC for a Partnership Engage Grant to fund these future efforts.

#### **PRESENTATION: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EDUCATION**

Jason Geary (Teaching Consultant, Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, MUN) gave a short presentation (also originally given at the People, Place and Public Engagement Conference in St. John's) on the topic of social justice and education with a focus on how to make learning spaces more accessible for everyone, including individuals with disabilities. He began by pointing out that the traditional way in which post-secondary institutions tend to deal with disability is by conceptualizing it as a deficiency within an individual that needs to be specifically addressed or accommodated, and that this is highly problematic. It requires that students with disabilities self-identify with the institution in order to receive the necessary accommodations. Research shows, however, that less than half of post-secondary students with disabilities actually do so. This means that many students never receive the appropriate supports to help ensure their success.



A better approach would be to design courses and learning spaces according to the principles of universal design for learning. The underlying premise of this is that there is really no such thing as an average learner. All learners are unique, so curriculum and assessment should be designed with learner variability in mind. This means offering multiple means of representation, engagement, action, and expression, so that all learners are able to uptake material and demonstrate their learning in ways that are best suited to them.

Creating this kind of flexibility is not easy. It requires a lot of hard work, but the benefit to students in terms of the depth and richness of their learning makes it more than worthwhile. It also helps level the playing field for all learners, including those with disabilities who choose not to self-identify.

#### UPDATES FROM ATTENDEES

Following the two presentations, other meeting attendees were given an opportunity to report on any activities related to disability inclusion with which they have been recently involved.

- **Kathy Hawkins** reported that she and Ailsa Craig (Department of Sociology) recently presented together as part of a carousel panel on curricular design at the People, Place and Public Engagement Conference in St. John's. The presentation was titled "Nothing about us without us: Engaging communities in course design" and focused on the new Sociology of Disability course (Sociology 3311) developed by Ailsa. It is a participatory action research course and is presented in such a way that the professor does not serve as the primary knowledge base. Instead, it is community partners who serve as the experts on the course material. Kathy is one of those community partners and has been involved in both the review of the syllabus and in speaking/presenting to students during the course. In designing the course, Ailsa was also cognizant of the principles of universal design for learning, so the course allows students some flexibility in terms of the nature of their assessment.
- **Tina Hickey** reported on the work being done by the Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee at Memorial University. It has recently submitted a three-year Employment Equity and Diversity Action Plan to the Memorial University Vice-Presidents' Council for their approval. As a part of the process of developing this plan they held open consultations with stakeholders, both internal and external to the university, in order to gain better insight into how Memorial might attract and retain more diverse employees, including those with disabilities. The result is an employment-focused plan that addresses multiple facets of accessibility including facility accessibility, web accessibility, organizational culture, and engagement. There is also a built-in monitoring component within the plan. Once it is approved, the Committee will review annual status reports on its progress and provide appropriate advice. The plan should be made publicly available by mid-December.
- **Gabrielle Young** reported on what has been happening in the curriculum offerings of Memorial University's Faculty of Education. They currently offer a Bachelor of Special Education program that is available to students who already hold a prior degree in education. It is a 36 credit hour professional program that can be completed through either part-time or full-time study and it is aimed at teachers who want to specialize in accommodating all types of learner diversity and exceptionality in the school system. This includes gifted learners and learners with mental health issues as well as those with physical, intellectual, and learning disabilities. The program incorporates a strong focus on universal design for learning.



- **Leah Lewis** spoke about the Faculty of Education's Counselling Psychology program. Although that program does not currently have a dedicated course focused on disability, content is being expanded to help foster the competency of graduating counsellors in understanding experiences of disability. She also spoke about arts-based approaches to disability inclusion, which are currently gaining some attention nation-wide. The National Arts Centre (NAC) has recently created a coalition of artists and scholars who are working together to address issues related to accessibility for artists experiencing disability and who are writing about the arts as a tool for knowledge mobilization with respect to disability inclusion.
- **Patti Bryant** reported that this past January, Memorial University's Faculty of Medicine released a five-year strategic plan called Destination Excellence. Within this plan, better accommodation for all types of learners is included as a teaching/education goal.
- **Colleen Quigley** spoke about *Check It Out!*, an initiative created by Memorial University Libraries that aims to engage with multiple communities including the public, students, staff, faculty, and alumni in new and meaningful ways while advocating for libraries and showcasing their services, collections, expertise, resources, and space. *Check it out!* was launched in 2013 and has since held over 20 events featuring an array of performers, scholars and librarians. One recent event, a panel discussion called "Reframing disABILITY", included three nationally acclaimed performers with disabilities – Luka "Lazylegz" Patuelli (a dancer), Erin Ball (a circus performer), and Paul Power (an actor and director) – who described their experiences and triumphs overcoming adversity in the arts. Colleen also spoke about the assistive technology resources that are available at Memorial University Libraries. The QEII library currently has five assistive technology stations, plus an entire room that is solely devoted to assistive technology. Absolutely anyone is free to book and use these assistive technology spaces, and there is a wide variety of technology available including text-to-speech programs, screen readers, smart pens, iPads, and hand-held scanners. There are also library staff members who have expertise in using these technologies, and tutorials and peer-to-peer help are readily available to anyone who needs it.
- **Kelly Neville** reported that Memorial University's Student Wellness and Counselling Centre has recently introduced a new gaming room that is aimed at providing a safe space on campus for students with autism spectrum disabilities to spend time relaxing and playing games with their peers. All students are free to use this space, meaning that it is not necessary for students to disclose a particular disability in order to access it. The Centre also provides peer-to-peer tutoring, as well as academic and behavioural support, to students who need it and has a system in place for tracking students and engaging in weekly check-ins in cases where that is necessary or desired.

#### CURRENT GAPS AT MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Following these updates on some of the positive things that have been happening at Memorial University, the discussion turned to identifying some of the gaps that currently exist with respect to Memorial's approach to disability inclusion. These include the following:

- There are currently no physical accessibility guides/maps available for the various rooms, buildings, and facilities at the university, and it is unclear who could even be contacted to provide such information. (Interestingly, the Memorial University website indicates that such a physical accessibility guide actually does exist. The link that is provided, however, does not work.)



- Obvious discrepancies exist between the minimum standards for accessibility laid out in existing building codes and the building practices that would be necessary in order to properly incorporate the principles of universal design. Ideally, the university should consult with the Universal Design Network to conduct accessibility audits of both its existing structures (so that necessary changes can be made) and its plans for new builds (so that universal design can be used from the very beginning). This is not currently being done.
- Issues involving safe and reliable transportation to and from Memorial University for individuals with mobility-related disabilities are not currently being adequately addressed. Memorial is now in the planning stages of a new Universal Transit Pass (U-Pass) program that would see it partnering with Metrobus to offer expanded and more affordable bus transportation to and from the university. As far as meeting attendees were aware, however, there has not yet been any mention of including Go-Bus service as a part of this program. This is unfortunate, as it has been determined that the belting mechanisms provided by Metrobus for use by individuals with mobility devices are incorrectly installed. This means that travel by way of regular Metrobus buses is actually unsafe for these individuals.
- To date, there has been no analysis of Memorial University's graduation rates for students with self-disclosed disabilities as compared to those for the rest of Memorial's student population, or as compared to students with self-disclosed disabilities at other universities in Canada. This sort of data would provide crucial information with respect to how well the needs of Memorial's students are actually being met.
- Some faculties at Memorial University – even those that one might expect to be quite inclusive – do not always have particularly accommodating attitudes toward faculty members with disabilities. They will sometimes use excuses like, “Since ours is a faculty that is involved in a lot of fieldwork, it's not possible for us to accommodate a person with a disability.” There seems to be a great deal of fear associated with the possibility of changing a program to accommodate someone's needs.
- Although there are some supports available for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities at Memorial University, there seems to be very little support offered to those who do not personally have a disability but are acting as a caregiver for someone who does. The needs of caregivers are important and deserve consideration, too.
- There should be more attention given to issues of accessibility in relation to online course content. It is important to ensure that all learners, including those with various types of disabilities, have an equal opportunity for engagement with online courses.
- Since everything at Memorial University is governed by policies, it is necessary for all of these policies to be evaluated in order to ensure that the principles of inclusiveness, accessibility, and universal design are firmly embedded within them. As far as meeting attendees were aware, this is something that has not yet been systematically done.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD**

After identifying some of the most obvious gaps in Memorial University's approach to disability inclusion, attendees were asked how they thought DIG-MUN could best move forward to help address one or more of these problems. The following suggestions were put forward:





- We could conduct a physical accessibility audit of the buildings and facilities on campus (or least a few of the main ones) to identify some of the primary barriers with respect to physical accessibility that currently exist. We could also seek feedback from students, faculty, and staff with lived experience on how physical accessibility could be improved (and perhaps even on what types of changes could be made on campus to better support individuals with non-physical disabilities as well). Following this, we could develop a campus physical accessibility map/guide. We could also select a handful of changes that would not be too difficult or costly to make, and make them.
- We could systematically analyze the policies and procedures/protocols currently in place at Memorial University – not just those specifically governing accessibility, accommodation, diversity, and equity, but also those governing issues such as space, capital projects, purchasing, and so on. From this, we could identify ways in which these policies could be changed or amended to promote better access and inclusion in relation to all activities taking place on campus.
- We could conduct a comparative analysis of graduation rates between students at Memorial University who have self-disclosed as having a disability, and those who have not. We could also compare these rates to the graduation rates for students with and without disabilities at other institutions across the country. This could provide us with some good base information on how well we're currently doing with respect to supporting students with disabilities, and could also help us pinpoint institutions that are doing better than we are. We might want to look to such institutions for ideas on ways in which we could improve our approach.

It was also proposed that, regardless of which of the above suggestions we choose to pursue, we might want to consider seeking funding from a source such as Memorial University's Public Engagement Accelerator Fund. Information on how to apply for that funding can be found [here](#).