

UWC Dilijan Personalised Learning Policy

Incorporating Special Learning Requirements

Scope

The purpose of a personalised learning policy (PLP) is to define the ways in which any educational institution will respond to the particular requirements of an individual learner. All human beings have learning needs that are particular to them; some have severe difficulties which prevent them from accessing learning opportunities unless they are given particular kinds of specialised help. This document approaches this complex domain by dividing the issues that arise for personal and personalised learning into four categories:

- Everyday personal learning issues that can have a negative impact on learning
- Special Educational Needs that severely inhibit effective access to learning
- Psychological and social issues that can impair progress in learning
- Physical realities which can inhibit or prevent access to educational opportunities

Delineation

Every child is unique, and with that uniqueness comes a set of characteristics that may variously enhance, impede or prevent certain kinds of learning. Unavoidable difficulties will be made worse when the education system is unaware of them, incapable of responding to them, or unwilling to respond to them. Someone who is blind or wheel-chair-bound has very obvious difficulties in accessing certain learning-opportunities; someone who is colour-blind or epileptic has much less obvious difficulties; someone who prefers to learn in an auditory or kinaesthetic rather than a visual way has even less obvious difficulties, not least because they may not be aware that they have a greater capacity to learn in one way than another. That all students seem to be “better at some things than others” may be a consequence of their natures, or their upbringing, or a symptom of failings of the education system. Only the last of these is the subject of this policy.

Responsibilities

An educational institution has a responsibility to ascertain what the personal learning requirements of each student are. It should not restrict the way it discharges that responsibility only to those areas of special educational need that are widely-recognised or high on the current educational agenda. It will know that a student is blind; it will know if a student needs wheel-chair access; it should and probably will know if a student is epileptic or has a severe allergy. It may not as readily attend to less-obvious learning needs. We therefore need to seek to discover whether particular students have strong preferences for one kind of learning mode over another; we need to allow for multiple intelligences as they impact optimal modes of learning; we must tailor the education we provide to the personal characteristics of the students we educate. It is not the responsibility of students to tailor their learning to the way the institution chooses to deliver education, although it is beneficial for students to be able to access as wide a range of educational styles as possible.

UWC Dilijan is determined to respond positively to personal educational needs. Facilitation of that better provision is the purpose of this policy document. By virtue of being more comprehensive, it is longer than most so-called SLR documents, but seeing personal educational needs in the context of each and every student is one way in which we can ensure that [positive] no student is denied access to learning or suitably stimulating challenges by deficiencies in our provision, and no student singled-out as especially different or needy. The policy is therefore self-consciously inclusive and anti-discriminatory and encourages appropriate differentiation.

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Everyday Personal Learning Needs

Where once we had visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning preferences we now have the dimensions of multiple intelligences and a deeper understanding of the preferences that arise from our genetic inheritance and our upbringing. What this amounts to is growing awareness in education of the personal uniqueness of each human individual, and what this points to is the need to accept that each unique individual may have his or her own personal learning preferences and difficulties. *A fortiori*, we all have “special” educational needs, even if some are a great deal more severe and limiting than others.

On the other hand, the notion of “Gifted and Talented” children is misconceived and divisive because it suggests that some children are neither gifted nor talented. That their gifts are not usually those we value or measure, or their talents those we usually notice, does not alter the fact that all children are in some way gifted and in some way talented. Our job is to discover in what respect each of those attributes applies to each and every child we admit to the school.

Language difficulties arising from mother tongues that are not the language of instruction are a good example of personal educational needs that should be met by UWC Dilijan, and we will have a system of ESL and mother-tongue support in place that begins to address it. However, as the *Language Policy* makes clear, we are a school where the number of languages is deliberately large, and it may not be possible to provide support in every case.

Personal Special Educational Needs

There are nonetheless some personal educational needs that are of sufficient severity that left unaddressed they severely inhibit the access of some students to educational opportunities. Sometimes called dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia, there are in fact a myriad such needs that embrace ADHD, forms of autism and Asperger’s Syndrome, and many other things that are not generally recognised as requiring special attention at all.

What is certain is that there is no point at which a person “becomes” dyslexic, dyspraxic or anything else: diagnostic tests reveal a continuous scale of performance that in some cases becomes a serious obstacle to effective learning, not that there are some students with dyslexia and some without. Somehow the continuum of human performance has given way to labelling some as having SLR and others not; in reality, we all have special educational needs that reflect our personal learning preferences and difficulties, and educational institutions should take account of them.

In practice, progress in provision for students with SLR relies upon good data, and one of the best ways to obtain that data is to perform base-line tests on students at the time of admission that are sufficiently sensitive to permit early diagnosis of learning-difficulties that can then be investigated and addressed more thoroughly. The day-to-day observations of teachers are also an important source of information.

It is nevertheless important to note that the detection of SLR is made much more difficult in a multilingual environment, since the ability to differentiate between difficulties that are solely the result of trying to master a second language, many of which may present themselves in ways that



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can be mistaken for such things as dyslexia, requires high levels of specialised skill. UWC Dilijan will consider bringing in suitably-qualified help, from overseas if necessary.

We also need to be sensitive to parental fears about the perceived social stigma associated in the minds of some parents and societies with any kind of diagnosis that appears to say that a child is in some special situation. Parental refusal to acknowledge the presence of a trait requiring special attention can be a major obstacle to progress anywhere in the world.

We will nevertheless strive to generate and analyse baseline testing of sufficient subtlety to identify and address each of the following: dyslexia; dyspraxia; dyscalculia; and we will use the observations of teachers to identify students potentially suffering from attention deficit disorders¹. We will, where possible, identify and employ staff with the skills needed to help children with all kinds of SLR to access the education we provide.

Specific SLR Interventions:

- Scrutiny of admissions assessment data before students arrive to determine whether otherwise bright children exhibit unusually poor results in specific areas, for example where a child with strong visuo-spatial and mathematical ability has a low score in English
- Records from admissions interviews of students for whom English is a potential short-term issue with prescribed remedial help
- Any other intervention that may from time to time be identified as being required in order to assist any student to access the curriculum
- “The curriculum” is to be interpreted inclusively throughout as any aspect of school life to which students are expected to have access, including sport, art, drama, service, CAS, trips and tours, etc. Wherever possible UWC Dilijan will take all reasonable steps to enable all students to access all facets of the curriculum.²

Personal Psychological and Social Needs

Some students have diagnosed psychological conditions, but many others will suffer from circumstances and traits that admit no clear medical diagnosis. Difficulties at home; bad home working-environments; poverty (and wealth); emotional and other forms of deprivation; all these and countless more can create circumstances where children have personal educational needs that merit the attention of the educational institution. In a school where children come from many diverse backgrounds, awareness of possible difficulties originating with the cultural background or their earlier education will play its part in helping UWC Dilijan identify personal educational needs. Children are not only being abused when they come to school covered in bruises: harsh home environments and intolerant and over-ambitious parents can similarly generate conditions in which a child feels alone and lost in an unsympathetic, violent and unforgiving world.

¹ UWC Dilijan is cognizant of concerns about treatment of ADHD symptoms using medication and over-medication, but lacks the professional qualifications and expertise to intervene in such matters where parents deem medication to be the best course of action. However, we will take a view if we believe that a child is being medicated inappropriately and treated as having ADHD when in our view the child is bored, under-stimulated or vulnerable to other sources of risk. It is not, however, our place to intervene if parents make decisions we do not agree with.

² This includes provision of additional financial assistance for children who are on any kind of fee support, although this is not specifically an issue under SLR.

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Personal Physical and Mental Needs

All teachers – indeed, all staff – have a responsibility to care for the students in their school, whether they teach them or know them or not. So we all have a duty to know what to do if a child has an epileptic fit, an anaphylactic reaction to some substance such as peanuts, or a sting from an insect, and although this is not always thought to be a part of an SLR policy, it is certainly part of a personalised learning policy because any known susceptibility to sudden changes of physiological state can severely inhibit a student’s capacity to relax and treat life in a positive, optimistic way. That is why we need an inclusive, comprehensive PLP: because every student has as much right to access the education we provide as any other, and nothing we do should be allowed to prevent or inhibit that.

We have instituted annual basic health checks that have identified students needing corrective glasses for eyesight problems, and we will continue to monitor sight, hearing and speech in order to be able to take steps to provide corrective help. Where students from poor backgrounds have been admitted, we will extend the scope of our financial aid to the provision of spectacles and other aids to physical well-being. All students and staff enjoy the benefits of comprehensive medical insurance.

Conclusion

This policy is at the formative stage, and will evolve. During 2014-15 we will investigate the availability of specialised help in Armenia with the diagnosis of learning-requirements and actively consider the recruitment of staff for the 2015-16 year who have qualifications in the area of SLR.

John Puddefoot

Head of College

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This policy will be reviewed in September/October 2016, 2018, 2020 and republished as necessary.

