SPEAKER: So, we're just now moving on to the Collective of Chronically Ill, Neurodiverse, Impaired or Disabled, CANDID, students at La Trobe, making university more supportive because we can, so we should. We are joined by Kathy, Laena and Lyndel and they're going to explain a little bit more about themselves and their roles. Over to you three, thank you.

LAENA D'ALTON: Thanks, darling. Hi, everyone, I’m Laena, I'll kick us off today. We’re really excited to share with you the story of CANDID, Collective of Chronically Ill, Neurodiverse, Impaired and Disabled students at La Trobe. It's a peer support group, making uni more supportive, because we can and so we did. We'll discuss why the group was formed, its vision, how it developed during COVID-19, costs and benefits and what the students say about the group. It became really obvious this year that accessibility, opportunity and inclusion matter. Even little things can make a big difference. I am acutely aware of this as I have been living with a chronic illness myself for over eight years. I'm a PhD student and I love what I do but it can be really tough going and it's easy to feel alone in academia. Sometimes, you just need someone to talk to who really understands what you’re going through. So, the idea of a community and a peer support group was born. I put an advert in our graduate research newsletter back in May and connected with other students at La Trobe over Zoom, including Lyndel who will speak next. About 10 of us got together, including Kathy as a representative of La Trobe Uni’s Accessibility Hub. Everyone thought a peer support group was a great idea and was excited to know that they're not alone, but how to proceed? Students societies can have a lot of overheads in terms of time and energy, which can make it difficult for students who might already be struggling with their health and energy. With support of Kathy and the uni, we settled on forming a group, CANDID, that would be directed by us, the students, but facilitated by the uni itself. We, the students, would have none of the work but all of benefits. We collectively decided on CANDID's vision, that it would enhance student wellbeing and success by centring lived experience, provide support and encouragement through facilitating friendships, providing a safe place to discuss and share resources and helping students to draw strength from this community to then self-advocate. CANDID is directed by us, the stakeholders. This means it's our voice that’s shaping the resources we need, how often do we meet, for how long, where and with what format? CANDID's execution has changed along the way with feedback from students but it has always anchored by the vision of a student led peer support group and Lyndel will talk next about this evolution.

LYNDEL KENNEDY: Thanks, Laena. I was very excited when I saw Laena’s ad in the graduate student newsletter because my PhD is investigating factors contributing to higher education success for neurodiverse students and I'm exploring support offerings as part of my research. My interest in neurodiversity stems from the fact that two of my children are neurodiverse and I’m a long-term volunteer at Asperger’s Victoria, which has been running peer-led support and community services for nearly 30 years. Over the years, I have facilitated hundreds of peer support groups and expert events and we have learnt over time that while expert knowledge is vital, meaningful change occurs more readily when lived experience and practical stories are shared so that people can learn from others who are walking a similar path. So, with that in mind, we held our first planning meetings with just the post graduate students in June and July. This was the forming stage of Tuckman’s Model of Group Processes as we discussed our goals aims, expanded the inclusion criteria to include neurodiversity as well as chronic illnesses and decided on the group structure. As Laena said, we considered registering as a student club but felt that being under the auspicities the Accessibility Hub was a better way to go and certainly involved less overheads. We also conducted polls with the members there to determine preferred meeting times and settled on fortnightly lunch time Zoom meetings during semesters to make it easier for people to attend. Kathy then sent out an invitation to over 1500 students registered with the Accessibility Hub, that’s about seven percent of the student body at La Trobe. We then had the first full meeting and asked everybody what they wanted from the meetings, whether they wanted structured presentations, prepared discussion topics or a more informal support group. While some expressed a preference for discussion topics, as a whole, the group wanted a more informal format, without homework or preparation before attending. The university already offers structured presentations and skills workshops and our members felt that the purpose of the group was about forming connections and sharing those experiences with others who really understand the journey of completing higher education with additional challenges. We didn't have any conflict, really, as we were setting up the group so we skipped the storming part of Tuckman’s Process and moved quickly into the norming stage of group development and that probably took about the first two or three meetings with the whole accessibility student list invited to attend. Now, we’re in that performing stage where we are meeting regularly with attendees and attendees are nominating the topics they'd like to discuss. In recent meetings, we have discussed exam preparation, study methods and managing stress and anxiety. Just this week, we talked about plans for summer, internships, a difficult one about disclosing conditions in interviews and, of course, the impacts of emerging from Melbourne’s lockdown. We have also moved to a monthly meeting schedule outside of semester times as many people are wanting to keep those connections over the summer. Again, with Kathy's help, we established a Microsoft Teams channel with everyone on the accessibility register invited to join us so that we can communicate between group meetings and share resources. Some of our members have been really generous in writing about their strategies for managing assignment planning, exam revision and lecture note taking, for example. This sharing of tools and supports helps students with similar learning needs to consider new ideas. Often, the Accessibility Hub staff will have already shared these ideas with students, but sometimes hearing about others’ experiences encourages them to try new things, advocate for themselves and ask for more when they need it. Knowing that other students are getting certain accommodations and adjustments can help them feel more confident about asking for them too. Obviously, with COVID restrictions, we've conducted all our meetings and we’ve lived our entire lives this year via Zoom and we are waiting to see what we are allowed to do next year. For the moment, it is what it is and we’re making the most of it. While a few people have complained about Zoom fatigue, there are plenty of others who actually prefer it as it removes travel complications and the stresses of managing mobility, energy and sensory issues. You can choose how you participate, via text only if you wish, you can keep your camera off if it’s distracting or you have bandwidth problems, or you can just listen and participate through audio. The online format also enables our regional students and staff to participate as well. Once we’re allowed to meet up on campus next year, we will survey our members to see what they’d like but we think people may prefer a mixed attendance options, with regular groups running via Zoom and just occasional social gatherings on campus. The group guidelines that we have developed are very much focussed on strengths. So, while this is a space where people can talk about the difficulties and challenges of their experiences, we encourage a growth mind set and try to bring those discussions around what we can actually do about the situations we find ourselves in, what are the things that we can do to grow our own skills. ourselves in and, just as importantly, what can we do to help the university improve in the way it supports students with additional needs we. We stress that our meetings are confidential and we respect different opinions and experiences. As we said earlier, it's an informal space with no attendance role no homework or set tasks that people need to do before they can attend. It's social, informal and relaxing. People can come and go as they please, they don't need to RSVP or send apologies. When they do attend, they can contribute as much or as little as they like. Most importantly, as Laena said at the beginning, this is a peer-led space, and while Kathy is providing fantastic support, she's not driving the agenda, it is the students who attend, those with additional needs themselves that are leading the way and making sure that they are getting what they need out of this initiative. Thank you. I will now pass you to Kathy Wilton from the Accessibility Hub, who will talk about the establishment of the group from her perspective. Thank you.

KATHY WILTON: Thanks, Lyndel. Some of this, Lyndel and Laena have already mentioned but I'll just briefly go through it again. Initially, we sent out an email to all students registered with accessibility and we had 35 prompt responses. I was sort of thinking maybe they'll come in in dribs and drabs and we will just see what happens but it was like bang, bang, bang, bang, 35 prompt responses from students saying this is something they're really interested in being part of. So, we had our first formal meeting on the 20th of August and we had 17 attendees. That was, as Lyndel has already talked about, via Zoom. Now, the attendance fluctuates between meetings but that's okay. You know, it doesn't matter how many people are there, it’s the quality of the interaction and what occurs in those meetings that is really important. We have also used break out rooms to help individuals talk about specific topics or some people have wanted to be really focussed on their particular condition, and that's been fine as well. So, we currently have 65 members that receive the email each fortnight and, as Lyndel said, in between that, we have access to the Microsoft Teams, and so we have a whole lot of resources on there. People might go on there just to have a bit of a chat and see what else is happening for people, so that's been a really useful resource. In terms of maintenance and costs, you know, it's been a bit of my time, which I – I’m judging it’s about two hours a fortnight. It was more initially but now that it's set up, it just sort of flows. So, I manage the email and the lists of people, students, I'll send out the invites, set up, facilitate the meeting, keep an eye on the Teams page, although, sometimes, I do forget that but, anyway, that is part of my role, though. Laena and Lyndel's time has been certainly in planning the meetings, facilitation as well and following up with students or with resources that we might want to share more of during the next meeting. Some of the benefits, I think this is the bit that's really exciting. These have been indicated by what students have said. It's not about what we think, it's about what students have said, but they've certainly talked about feeling less alone and feeling really part of a community, that they really enjoyed sharing strategies and, for some students, you know, just going, “I had no idea that that was something I could do or I could use.” It's also increased visibility within the university. One of the benefits - and you'll see this in a slide a bit later - particularly has been about students relying on other students in a positive way rather than relying on me from Accessibility to provide information about how they might be better supported. That's been really important. In terms of future benefits, we can see that there's an opportunity to share some of the strategies that we've collected with teaching staff, that it's building a greater knowledge of conditions within the accessibility team, that we’ve really got a great resource list now for students and staff and that, in the future, we hope it will support disability literature in the future. This next slide is from a student, Annette Pyatt, who has been very happy for us to share this information or resource with this presentation as well as beyond here. She put together a resource for students that have dyslexia based on what she has used. I won’t go into it, you can see it there but it's been fantastic to have this sort of access available. It's been a real privilege to work with students and see what - and to do what they wanted to do. I'll pass on now to Lyndel.

LYNDEL KENNEDY: We asked our members if they’d like to have anything to share with us that we could then bring and share with you today at this conference. Just some of the messages that we received, some of the student to student messages that people were sharing, “If there's anything I can do for you, whether that be a chat, questions over email or link to resources or whatever, let me know.” “Thank you so much for reaching out! It's great to hear from someone who has gone through similar experiences. I’d love to pick your brains a bit and hear about your experiences if you’re happy to share your story.”

SPEAKER: Just five minutes to go.

LYNDEL KENNEDY: “If you’ve got resources, I’d love it if you could send some my way.” Thank you.

LAENA D’ALTON: Some of our students provided quotes about CANDID. Sabina said, “Just knowing that there are other students at La Trobe that I can discuss shared experiences with provides an invaluable multi-layered level of support. I can give a lot or a little, I get to decide how to interact. The group is very diverse and inclusive.” Bec said, “It was both surprising and heartening to see so many students with ADHD in the group. I received my diagnosis last year, so to discuss with students’ strategies that help in academic work was really nice. It validated my feelings that some aspects of academia are quite challenging for those of us with ADHD, and excited me thinking about resources we could create together to make uni life easier for other neurodivergent students.”

SPEAKER: I’ll unmute myself. We’ve just got a couple of short videos now to explain or talk about how students felt within the CANDID group.

VIDEO SHOWN

LANA SVALINA: Hi, my name is Lana Svalina. I just finished my first year of study at La Trobe University and I have Asperger’s Syndrome and OCD. I joined CANDID this year to gain support for my medical conditions and studies. One of the benefits of CANDID support –

VIDEO PAUSED

SPEAKER: That was great.

KATHY WILTON: Did it keep going?

SPEAKER: It did and the sound had improved.

VIDEO

LANA SVALINA: …is that you can meet people who are in similar circumstances and gain advice and support from each other. CANDID is a great way to meet new people and it provides the social aspect that many of us were deprived of during online learning periods. Thank you for listening.

ANNETTE: Hello, my name is Annette, and I’m a person who lives with dyslexia. As a neurodiverse student at La Trobe University, I am grateful for the extra support offered to me by the CANDID peer support group. Being part of CANDID gave me an opportunity to share my dyslexia learning strategies with the group, including my hints and tips with regard to negotiating the La Trobe education system. However, benefiting from the group is two-way. In this sense, I, too, gained from other members’ experiences. CANDID has helped my student wellbeing because it offers me a safe place to discuss anything with other students who, like me, live with unique learning qualities. I like that the meetings are optional, which allows me freedom to attend or not, and so does not add to any stress to my study load. I appreciate the online friendships that CANDID has facilitated for me, engaging with other students that I would normally not have met during mainstream campus classes. Thank you CANDID for supporting me and providing me with a safe place to chat, listen and to discuss topics such as exam preparation with other neurodiverse students. Bye.

VIDEO ENDS

LAENA D’ALTON: Thanks Annette and Lana for those videos. Peer support groups like CANDID are really beneficial for us students, not just for our present circumstances but our future as well because we can find a community and learn invaluable life skills. We wanted to help leave a supportive structure in place that makes it easier for the next generation of students to get through uni, and that’s what we at CANDID have done through this simple initiative that only requires a little bit of time. And with this kind of institutional support from La Trobe, there's a lot of students who we hope will have a more successful, wholesome and brighter time at uni. Thank you to the organisers, interpreters and sponsors for getting this all together and all of you for your attention and the very kind and encouraging comments I see coming through on the chat. Thanks.