**Statement on Ableism at Melbourne Law School**

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A general lack of awareness as to what constitutes ableist language and what makes these terms harmful has prompted us to provide explanation on these points.

*Examples and a brief history*

Ableist language creates inaccessible environments for people with disabilities. Disability activists predominantly conceptualise disability as the ‘social model of disability’: This model proposes that it is not the barriers ofmental or physical health that limit people with disabilities from engaging in society. It is the barriers society raises against us that keep us constrained. Language can perpetuate these barriers or help break them down.

Ableist language largely comprises medical terminology for disability which has evolved into degrading slurs. For example, terms like ‘lame’, ‘spas/spastic’, ‘psycho’, and the R-slur.

Using words and phrases that have a degrading meaning effectively degrades people with disabilities. These terms communicate that disability is bad, broken, frightening, or less than.

Language is the most expressive and powerful tool for understanding people’s attitudes and beliefs, and so ableist language has much greater importance than first assumed. People with disabilities cannot engage freely in an environment which communicates to us regularly and relentlessly that we are less than, inferior, or our life isn’t worth living. This language is inaccessible to us. Alternatively, consideration of how we speak about disability, and how we use terms which reference disability, creates access.

It is not just the use of certain disability-specific phrases that causes harm, it is also contextual misuse and trivialisation which contribute to belittlement. For example, incorrectly referring to oneself as ‘disabled’, ‘ADHD’, ‘bipolar’, ‘OCD’, ‘dyslexic’ etc. without understanding the reality of those disabilities undermines, trivialises, and stereotypes people who live these experiences.

A mere comment can succinctly and swiftly communicate one simple idea - Non-disabled people are superior to disabled people**. Regardless of attitude or intent, the use of ableist language actively causes harm and makes disabled people feel excluded from the space where ableist language is used, including MLS classrooms, common areas, and events.**

*What can you do?*

Ableist language has no place in our law school. We ask staff and students to make better language choices for themselves and actively encourage one another to reject ableist language.

Confronting peers and staff who use ableist language can be frightening, but it does not have to be direct. Alternative actions that can be just as powerful include:

* Not reacting positively, or laughing at the ‘joke’;
* Addressing what’s been said by saying something like: ‘that’s not a great word choice’;
* Asking the person to clarify what they mean by saying something like ‘I know you used (slur/inappropriate language*)* to describe this, but are you just trying to tell me it’s (scary/silly/gross/disappointing/etc.)?’.

You will never be out of line for telling someone that ableist language is hurtful. Should you need it, there are staff and student leaders who will always support you and take swift action on your behalf.

Faculty and students here at MLS have worked tirelessly for years to create greater accessibility, inclusion, and opportunity for all those who engage with the school in any manner. *This* is the true culture here at Melbourne Law School. Our language *must* reflect this.