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A disability-led disability inclusion strategy for the higher education sector

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the Disability Royal Commission, the Universities Accord Panel has failed to promote a pathway that will realise equality as envisaged in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We argue that achieving equality for persons with disabilities in higher education requires the introduction of an enduring systemic framework that will last beyond government changes, with the capacity for continual innovation and improvement. Building upon disability norms, this article maps a framework for a co-created national disability-led inclusive higher education strategy and governance processes informed by empirical research (anonymous short-qualitative survey and focus groups) with 222 people in universities (students and staff), of which 76% identify as having a disability. We argue a disability-led Disability Inclusion Action Plan for Higher Education should be implemented, monitored, and resourced. This is critically important so students with disabilities can study and work in higher education without discrimination.

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Introduction

Australia's higher education system stands at a pivotal moment; the policy decisions made now will either advance or leave behind disability rights and inclusion. The Universities Accord Panel was charged in their Terms of Reference to increase 'access to higher education, across *teaching*, learning and research' for 'people with a disability' (Australian Government, 2022, p. 116). This charge extended to fully opening the opportunities of higher education to those who are not participating in higher education, as well as to existing students and staff with a disability. Despite accepting this responsibility and direction in their Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, the Interim Report adopted a more muted vision, where it called for 'increasing the higher education participation of Australians from under-represented groups', including people with a disability (Department of Education, 2023a, 2023b). Similarly, the Universities Accord Final Report further reduced disability inclusion

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through its approach to ‘profound’ disability and in failing to advance an Australian disability inclusion agenda for higher education (Department of Education, 2024).

The Universities Accord Final Report determined that students with ‘profound’ disabilities should not be included in the higher education enrolment share, as outlined in Department of Education (2024, p. 115): ‘Note: Share of the Australian population for people with disability is an expected enrolment share estimated by the Department of Education, based on the proportion of the 15 to 64-year-old population with disability, adjusted for age profile and profound disability’. Based on this approach, an implied participation parity has been reached for people with disabilities, with no increase in targets recommended only to maintain participation level (The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES], 2023, p. xvii). The concern with taking such an approach to disability participation in higher education is the inherent ableist assumption that underpins it – that is people with profound disabilities are not enrolling so should not be included in the targets.

In practice, the Department of Education’s definition of disability consists of 3 key elements. First is the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), which is used to calculate a relative rate of disability in the overall Australian population. Second is the rate of disability in the higher education reference share. Third is an age weighting. Even though the exclusion of people with ‘profound’ disabilities from this calculation may have a less significant impact than the weighting for age, the decision to exclude ‘profound’ disability was viewed as sending a negative message to persons with disabilities about their place in higher education (Gordon, 2024). The concept of ‘profound’ disability is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to include those who need ‘help or assistance in one or more of the three core activity areas of self-care, mobility and communication, because of a disability’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In other words, if the proposed exclusion was adopted, many current and former university students with disabilities would have their presence excluded from the enrollment share data.

In addition to excluding many current and former students with disabilities from data collection, out of the 47 recommendations in the Final Report, only 3 address disability.

Recommendations 13(a), 40 (g) and 41(g.i) deal with funding for all diversity groups, including specifically mentioning disability, without addressing the underlying causes of inequality or proposing frameworks to achieve disability equity and inclusion (Department of Education, 2024). Recommendation 10(a) effectively creates a hierarchy of attributes where disability is the least advanced attribute. Recommendation 10 (a) recommends setting no aspirational targets to advance the participation of students with a disability. Yet it sets targets on increasing the percentage of the total student population: First Nations participation by 0.9%; students from the lowest quartile SES backgrounds by 5%; regional, rural and remote by 4.2%. Instead of calling for an increase in the participation of students with a disability, the Universities Accord Panel recommended ‘maintaining’ the current enrolment levels, despite persistent scholarship noting the current system does not realise ability equality (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2023; Harpur & Stein, 2019; Harpur & Szucs, 2023; Inckle, 2018; Jacobs, 2023; Kent et al., 2017; Mellifont, 2021; Merchant et al., 2019; Pionke, 2019; Powell, 2021). Urgent work is required to ensure the window for higher education reforms does not close without adopting measures that will lead to improvements for people with a disability.

The failure of the Accord Review to set a pathway towards disability equity and inclusion in higher education, is in steep opposition to the vision and need for equality

presented in the Disability Royal Commission and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Disability Royal Commission, 2023; Harpur & Stein, 2018). In this article, we call for a sector-wide Disability Inclusion Strategy in Higher Education to address systemic disparities experienced by people with a disability, propelling equity and inclusion in higher education as learning spaces and workplaces. This article draws on international norms, disability scholarship, and empirical research to contend that a co-created disability-led disability inclusion strategy for the higher education sector would provide workable solutions to advance a more universally designed university sector. We begin by reviewing the literature outlining current scholarship and policy trends calling for the leadership of people with a disability in the development, implementation, and monitoring of strategies to achieve inclusion. We then outline and explain the research design and methods for our empirical research with 208 people (198 anonymous open-ended survey participants and 10 focus group participants) of which 76% identified as having a disability. Third, we present the findings of the research, including the tension points currently in the sector as well as the identified key needs and a pathway for how a disability inclusion strategy for the higher education sector can be co-created.

Literature review

One in five Australians have some form of disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In Australia, there are 1.6 million university students, 9% or 144,000 of which live with a disability (Department of Education, 2023b). Knowledge about the number of staff with a disability in Australian universities is less known due to a lack of robust data collection (Department of Education, 2024).

Rights to higher education as a student and staff member

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has introduced a new normative framework which imposes new obligations upon States and higher education providers to provide persons with disabilities access to higher education, work, and employment opportunities, how research and innovation is advanced, as well as ensuring access to digital and physical spaces (Anna, 2018; Harpur & Stein, 2019; Jacobs, 2023; Lord & Stein, 2018). In addition to including a right to lifelong learning in article 24, the UN Convention includes other rights relevant to the higher education sector, including a right to work and employment (article 27) and to participate in culture (article 30), as well as imposing specific obligations upon States to support research to advance disability inclusion (Harpur & Stein, 2018, 2019; United Nations, 2016, 2018, 2022). The UN Convention has influenced the development of the Sustainable Development Goals, which includes targeting access to technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university Goal 4.3 'Inclusive education for all' (Harpur & Stein, 2019).

When analysing higher education, other scholars have looked beyond education to include a consideration of both students and staff with a disability (Morgan, 2023). Scholars have noted that recognition of rights alone does not lead to conditions that realise the right to education and work for people with a disability (de la Torre et al., 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023; Mellifont, 2021; Merchant et al., 2019; Pionke, 2019). Scholars focusing upon the right to work observe that higher education systems are not built for staff with a disability (Brown &

Leigh, 2018; Katzman & Kinsella, 2018; Stafford, 2019). Ableism in the academy manifests in cultures that discount the careers of staff with a disability (Powell, 2021). Further, people with a disability working in higher education require considerable unpaid overtime to cope in a system that is not built for their abilities (Inckle, 2018).

Systematic change is needed in higher education; however, a disability equity and inclusion policy cannot be created unless people with a disability are at the leadership tables. This is reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where drafters embraced the ‘nothing about us without us’ mantra. This was taken a step further in its implementation when States and the disability community adopted a more empowering model, that is ‘nothing about us unless it is led by us’ (Harpur & Stein, 2022b). Operationalised through a participatory dynamic, the UN Convention has created a normative framework that requires States and other actors to empower people with a disability to fully and effectively be involved in all decision-making and strategies that impact their communities (Harpur & Stein, 2022a; United Nations, 2018). This participatory dynamic applies to education, work and research in universities (Harpur & Stein, 2022a).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities framework requires that States have integrated disability strategies at the national level, along with supporting strategies that deal with specific rights contained within the Convention. States parties ‘must adopt and implement a national educational strategy which includes provision of education at all levels for all learners, on the basis of inclusion and equality of opportunity’ (United Nations, 2016).

Research design

Guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the sustained scholarship and advocacy that made this new normative framework possible, this research was designed, led, and undertaken by three academics with disabilities. The research design adopted a qualitative inductive approach to best allow for understanding to be derived from the diversity of participants with disabilities experiences and identified needs. Guiding the design was a voluntary strategic advocacy group of academics and staff with a disability Universities Enable, of which the researchers were also a part. The research design and protocol were approved by the lead university research ethics committee (2022/HE000723).

Methods

Two main methods were used in this research – a short qualitative survey and focus groups. These methods provide mechanisms to gain insights and understanding into students and staff with disabilities’ experiences and how inclusion can be promoted. 222 people participated in this research - Table 1 outlines participant roles in the University sector from students to professional and academic staff or other.

Table 1. Breakdown of participant roles.

	%	n
University student	42.3%	94
Professional staff	35.6%	79
Academic staff	14.9%	33
Other	7.2%	16
Total	100%	222

Anonymous qualitative survey

Drawing from our lived experiences, advocacy, and existing research, we drafted an online anonymous qualitative survey consisting of 5 demographic questions and three open-ended questions to gain wide-ranging disability perspectives on the current experiences (barriers and enablers) and the changes needed in the higher education sector to inform advocacy regarding the Universities Accord review. Furthermore, the use of prompts/context in the open-ended questions acted as a specific accessibility approach for some people with disability. These three questions were:

- (1) Please describe up to three challenges you face working or studying in higher education? These challenges could be caused by a university, government policies or practices, laws, industry, family or other actors.
- (2) Can you describe up to three things that are enabling students and staff with disabilities to succeed in higher education? This could be a practice, supports, access, a policy/law or other factors.
- (3) Can you share what you think is needed to improve higher education experiences for people with a disability. This could include systems, supports, pathways, digital and physical accessibility, policies/laws etc.

Recruitment. We adopted a snowball approach to recruitment and distributed the survey through social media channels, LinkedIn, email contacts and a raft of senior leaders, academics, professional staff, students, and others re-sharing this survey across the country. Due to the imperative to respond before submissions to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper closed, the survey ran for 16 days, opening on 21 April 2023.

Participants/responses. We received 198 qualitative responses to the survey. 76.3% of respondents had a disability, and 23.7% did not. This included 5.6% of respondents from regional and rural areas and a spread across Australian jurisdictions. Those who participated in the survey held a range of roles, from senior executives to students.

Focus groups

In April 2023, 3 semi-structured focus groups were undertaken with people with a disability. Participants were grouped by whether they worked in the Chancellery (such as vice-chancellor, Deputy vice-chancellor, provost etc), professional staff (director or EDI officer), or academics. The same open-ended questions used in the survey were used to prompt discussions in the focus groups.

Recruitment. Participants for the focus groups were recruited through direct contact and snowballing.

Participants. Again, using purposeful sampling 10 participants across three focus groups were drawn from capital, regional and rural universities and included participants from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia.

Analysis

The large qualitative data set from the survey and focus groups was analysed using NVIVO, and inductive analytical process. Triangulation was applied to develop a holistic understanding of the experience derived from the data of the two methods. This was undertaken using multiple steps commencing with de-identifying transcripts from the focus groups and the large number of open-ended responses from the survey. The analytical process began with an individual coding analysis of each data type first, moving to the merging step of the different data type findings, through to thematic saturation. The emergent themes arrived out of this rigorous staged coding process, including multicoders aiding qualitative inter-rater reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Findings

In this section, we present the key tension points and challenges identified from participants' responses in higher education, followed by what's needed – the pathway forward.

The lived realities: challenges and tensions

Core challenges and tensions emerged, offering important insights into the intersecting structural and cultural blocks to inclusion and participation.

Universities are often not inclusive or safe places

Universities were considered unsafe and exclusionary to many people with a disability due to entrenched attitudinal and cultural prejudice. The harms to students and staff, flowing from entrenched ableism, stigma, neurotypical systems, and structures in universities, were identified in over 95% of participant responses across the focus groups and survey responses. These disabling barriers were reported to have negatively impacted upon decisions to apply to university, and on experiences throughout participants' journeys through under-graduate and higher degree studies and working in the sector.

Part of the prejudice is linked to how disability is perceived.

In my university, that also is related to the attitude issue . . . , I've been spoken to by more than one department that I couldn't use the word disability. 'It's a bad word'. So marketing, the research office at one point, my dean of research, people don't like the word disability. . . . , so there's a lot of euphemism going on to which I don't think helps us if we're trying to establish any kind of pride movement around, you know, culture and community. And it's a challenge. You know that coming straight from the top, you don't use the word disability. (Participant from Academic focus group)

Students and staff from the focus groups and surveys, including those in the chancellery, tenured academics, professional staff, and students, from higher degree researchers through to under-graduates, reported fear in disclosing their disabilities due to risks to their careers and how they have been treated in the past in higher education, and how they anticipate being treated in the future if they are openly a person with a disability. Participants from the Chancellery Focus Group and multiple survey respondents gave examples of where belittling jokes were made about their disability following their

disclosure. These included comments on how their disability will impact their careers now disclosed, and suggestions for casual workers not to disclose, as having a disability will impact getting secure work.

This fear from prejudice impacts people with a disability beyond their employment relationship. For example, there is a perception that the grant process shows bias against people with a disability. Participants from the Academic Focus Group reported being concerned, and warned by research staff, about how they discuss their disability. There is concern that if people with a disability include how their disability has impacted negatively upon their careers, then this could lead grant reviewers to wonder if the person could complete the grant if awarded it. One participant, from the Academic Focus Group, reported they were told not to include too much detail on their disability in grants as it would create a perception that they cannot do the work, so they lie about their disability now to avoid bias in the system. Another participant, also from the Academic Focus Group, was told to alter how they described their disability to make it sound less complex for reviewers.

Even when people with a disability disclose their disability, explain its impact, and have reasonable adjustments in place, they still encounter university staff who are not resourced to make the adjustments pushing back on staff or students with a disability. A staff member with a disability, from the Professional Focus Group, gave the example of challenges in attending meetings at certain times of the day due to their disability. They explained their disability, its impact and had formal approval for these adjustments. They recounted in the focus group an example of their supervisor telling them they just had to be present at the meetings, even though at this time it was not possible.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

Participants in the focus groups and respondents to the survey provided examples of non-compliance with government legislation requiring universities to meet accessibility compliance, including the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth), and related codes, including the *Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010* and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Examples of this non-compliance came from multiple participants in all focus groups and over a third of all survey responses highlighted either inaccessibility within the built environment (such as stairs, or inaccessible bathrooms) and/or software and technology. Inaccessibility was perceived to be the leading challenge to working and studying in higher education. Likewise, accessibility was the most common factor cited that enabled students and staff in succeeding.

More funding [is needed] for staff to do access work/make things accessible.

[We need] better tech set up to enable hybrid participation – my faculty has only two meeting rooms that are zoom enabled.

Respondents offered a consistent desire for more accessible and inclusive technology, and application of Universal Design principles across the built environment, learning approaches, and university policies.

Additionally, multiple-survey respondents reflected on the lack of suitable working and learning environments. This included 5 survey respondents who identified open working spaces as problematic, as they are not sensory or neurodivergent friendly, yet such spaces are not traditionally classified as ‘inaccessible’. Moreover, respondents noted that while accessibility was considered in the built environment, it was often poorly implemented or managed. A student with a disability survey respondent noted:

[The] facility [is in] disrepair and [there is a] general lack of accessibility. What I mean by this is bathrooms [are] in inaccessible locations or only on select floors of buildings, [or] lifts not working for months on end. [There is a] lack of accessible parking/parking in general.

Studying and working in a sector where inequality is accepted was a concern noted across the survey and focus group responses. Participants, from the Professional Focus Group, noted that while anti-discrimination laws have been in place for decades, employment and education for persons with disabilities has seen little progress over this time. Over one-third of survey respondents noted that a lack of understanding by either university staff or management was the most challenging part of being a student or staff member with a disability. A survey respondent, who is a university student with a disability, noted:

[I experience] discrimination by university staff, [and witness a] lack of willingness to accommodate disabilities from university staff [as well as a] lack of training about disabilities for university staff.

Relatedly, a survey respondent, who worked in the chancellery, noted:

[There is a] lack of sufficient resources to support growing numbers of students with disabilities, particularly those with mental health challenges, [and a] lack of understanding and/or commitment of some staff to inclusive design of learning materials.

The negative consequences from the lack of disability equity and inclusion in higher education was articulated by a professional staff member with a disability survey respondent, explaining that:

Supervisors [are] not understanding [of] how well I can work when I am supported and inspired. Instead, I have experienced years of bullying, limited support and sadly no understanding from my managers. They all see me as slow and useless but I am clever and very capable, I just need support and understanding.

The findings also highlighted that access and inclusion when considered by universities, is often associated with narrow understandings of ‘disability’ – generally from a medical model approach. Rarely are the diversity of disabilities, needs and continuum well understood from a social model of disability perspective.

The burden of negotiating access

The need to fight to gain digital and physical equality sends a message that disability is not fully welcome in the higher education sector. Findings found that students and staff with disabilities need to negotiate inaccessible systems, support services, and complicated funding regimes simply to execute the same tasks that people without a disability do. This was reinforced by an academic and two executive administrators with disabilities who

noted that lost in the debates around equality was the additional work negotiating access imposes upon students and staff and how this must be factored into evaluation systems.

Students and staff with a disability are held to account against the same work as students and staff without a disability. Unlike students and staff without a disability, students and staff with a disability need to continually devote energy and resources to advocating for access and equality. A person without a disability can enter space knowing it is built for them; a person with a disability enters the same space knowing that it is almost never built for them. An academic participant pointed out that the 'lack of inclusion makes no sense'. This aligns with what Kent et al. (2017) observed, that modifying digital and physical spaces is almost always more expensive than just getting it right in the first place.

The constant need to seek changes to systems represented an ongoing challenge. Often, these administrative processes seemed pointless, described by a professional staff member survey respondent with a disability as 'senseless bureaucracy'. Relatedly, a majority of student respondents with a disability noted the need to constantly advocate for change added a significant administrative and mental load.

A paradigm shift and a pathway forward

The participants' responses in the focus groups and survey revealed important changes needed to address the extensive discrimination they experience in Australian universities. Common themes centred around the need for the co-creation of strategic actions, where leaders with a disability in the sector work with leaders of the sector, who may or may not have a disability.

A disability-led disability inclusion strategy

The concept of a co-created disability-led disability inclusion strategy for the sector gained strong support across all groups. The strength of the support for disability leadership throughout the process was demonstrated by the rapid and strong response by persons with disabilities in this study. Survey respondents noted the positive impact lived experience led activities had on their universities. When asked to name the top three factors that enhanced the higher education sector, over 10 mentioned peer networks, over 10 mentioned communities of practices, and again over 10 mentioned the important role of disability committees which work with university leadership. The positive role of disability champions and empowering persons with disabilities to be advocates/self-advocates was mentioned in just over 5% of responses. Respondents identified that these benefits included being role models, direct support and enhancing university and sector-wide systems to create a more inclusive experience.

Participants from the Chancellery Focus Group noted that creating leadership opportunities for persons with disabilities will lead to mutually beneficial outcomes, provided it is resourced and is truly mutually beneficial. Participants from the Academic Focus Group observed that students and staff who were known to have a disability had been repeatedly asked to support their universities, yet those same universities are not recognising these time commitments or providing leadership pathways. Echoing the need for

a strategy, multiple respondents to the survey called for pathways from education into work and leadership.

Emphasising the importance of disability-led leadership, participants from the Academic and Chancellery Focus Groups referenced the ‘nothing about us without us’ mantra and called for those with lived experience of disability to be granted leadership roles at sector-wide and university levels. Speaking on sector-wide options, an academic survey respondent with a disability called for:

Strategy, policy, procedure, and operationalisation led by senior staff, academic professional staff, and students with history out and proud’ on their lived experience of disability.

Performance targets

The need to set and report against targets gained strong support. Accessibility was the most common factor cited by survey participants that enables students and staff to succeed and would improve higher education experiences for people with a disability. This led to considerable support for setting performance targets on disability at the national level. These should then be cascaded into universities to those who could coordinate and resource the implementation of such targets, and then report back on the extent to which such targets are met. Illustratively, an academic participant involved in equity committees from the academic focus groups noted:

we’ve continually seen all metrics go backwards, . . . we’ve got a massive investment in Indigenous professoriate actually as well as a residential college that will be built as well. But every time I used to bring up on the . . . {university-wide} Equity and Diversity Committee that . . . the disability figures and students and staff were going backwards, I just got a - so that they’ll put it on the agenda next time around so there’s that lack of proactiveness within strategic approaches.

Respondents in the Academic and Professional Focus Groups, as well as participants from the survey, recommended universities’ performances against disability inclusion targets should be made public. A participant in the professional focus group noted:

Okay, well, universities love their rankings. So we should create one for this. Relatedly, a participant from the Academic Focus Group noted:

This is about disability rights. It is about reframing it. I know we’ve talked about rights for a long time. But we’ve got to be bolder about it here, . . . there are now really great targets and a strong policy around gender and Indigenous students and staff in the sector, but there’s just nothing that covers that for disability, that’s one of the big pieces of work that’s missing.

Improved university diversity governance and leadership appointments for people with a disability

While several survey respondents believed that legislation aided in removing barriers and widening opportunities in universities for persons with disability, most respondents felt reducing discrimination required a comprehensive pivot to the new human rights paradigm. This included creating pathways for undergraduate students to transition into post-graduate and the transition of staff with a disability through to senior ranks. Examples from survey respondents included:

[Universities should advertise for] roles that name lived experience of disability or chronic health conditions as essential/desirable criteria; accessibility in the job application and interview process; quotas for hiring people with disability in universities, particularly in leadership, academic, or higher paying positions.

[We need] representation of disability and neurodiversity in leadership for aspiring leaders with disabilities.

Likewise, survey respondents emphasised that one of the most enabling factors for students and staff was leadership in equity – often through individual ‘champions’ and advocates:

Champions – be they equity and disability units, or staff in faculty who raise their voices and are active in supporting people with a disability – are central [to enabling] people with disability.

The need for disability training for staff and an increase in disability education more broadly

An explicit, tangible suggestion made by almost one-third of survey participants was the need for disability training for staff and an increase in disability education more broadly. Ideas for disability training included:

Biannual Mandatory Disability Awareness training for all academic and professional staff at the higher education institutions.

Requiring all students to take a short compulsory module in the beginning of their enrolment regarding all kinds of disabilities and how we can be a good friend for those with disabilities.

Higher education teachers must complete training to raise their disability awareness, understand legal obligations, and competently design inclusive learning and assessment experiences. (including WIL[work integrated learning])

Participants in the academic focus group also observed that disability education in universities should also address disability in the curriculum.-

Disability is not normalised across course content. Sometimes this is caused by a lack of attention, while in other situations it is an economic issue that requires changes to how courses are valued and funded.

Furthermore, responses across the survey and focus groups suggest that mandatory training in universities is critical to ensuring legal compliance, but also in changing culture:

Mandatory anti-ableism education can also help in removing ignorance. Open minds are needed to acknowledge that work can be done in different ways to the ‘normal’ and expected ways.

Create an inclusive culture

The importance of an inclusive culture was noted consistently across survey and focus group responses. Overwhelmingly, participants believe that a more inclusive, empathetic, caring and respectful culture is a key enabling factor for staff or students with a disability.

What we need is to create is a culture that's, . . . , safe and inclusive. And we need people that are actually championing that, not just us. (Participant from academic focus group)

Participants emphasised the positive impact that disability has upon university research, teaching, and governance. This was reinforced by the academic focus groups, where all the academics in the focus group had major research grants, published, and played leadership roles in disability within their university communities. They noted that their disability meant they had lived experience, and that lived experience enabled them to provide benefits to their university. Accordingly, these participants wanted the positive aspects of lived experience of disability to be emphasised to counteract negative and disabling prejudice.

Reduce the burden of always navigating barriers to access and invest in a sector-wide set of scalable inclusive universal design campus guidelines

Students and staff across all the focus groups and the survey consistently voiced the constant struggle when digital, physical and policy spaces were not fully inclusive.

And I feel like what is left out of that discussion quite often is the experience of students with disability, and what we need to be thinking about specifically to retain those students. And then how that filters down into the support, so they're receiving teaching practice. And in my work generally we have a lot of conversations with staff about how they make the teaching materials inclusive, and that kind of thing. But making that broader, so that universal design for learning is really built into curriculum would be really amazing. (Participant from professional focus group)

About 10% of survey respondents proposed a form of universal design measures be developed, mandated, and monitored. Combined with suggestions from focus group participants, these recommendations called for investment and commission of inclusive Universal Design Campus Guidelines that are scalable for the various universities in the sector to guide in fulfilling their responsibility and best practice to enhance equity and inclusion in universities for persons with disabilities, illness and circumstances. These guidelines would help address the wide gap in knowledge in the sector while helping to address the significant physical, sensory, cognitive, and digital accessibility barriers that currently exist in tertiary education and employment in the tertiary sector for persons with disabilities.

The Inclusive Universal Design Campus Guidelines would set a framework for new and renewal projects on campuses and seek to:

- Provide clarity on what inclusive approach and Universal Design is, and how it benefits everyone while upholding human rights and university responsibilities.
- Bring awareness and integration of digital and physical environments together to create inclusive campus experiences and universal design learning outcomes.
- Provide good practice and performance-based solutions to address legacy issues of physical and digital barriers, and address compliance thinking barriers in planning, design and building standards and regulations (Stafford, 2022).

Ensure disability leadership positions in the sector

Our research found that connected with the need to have inclusive governance and leadership is the need to have disability leadership positions in the sector. However, significant disparities in employment of persons with disabilities continues to exist in Australia, and for persons with disabilities in senior executive leadership roles, it is even worse.

A participant from the Academic Focus Group observed that the Higher Education Support Act 2003 provides university funding for students with a disability but does not set targets for numbers in higher education, nor staff with disability employment targets or their transition into leadership (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024a).

The pathway to university leadership is especially challenging for persons with disabilities, as a leader. But it's also really, really frustrating as a mentor and a role model to other people. Because I'm trying to say to the people who come to me for career advice yes, you can be successful in the university sector. Yes, you can achieve the things you want to achieve, and it's really hard to show them examples of that working, you know, and that to me is where we really need to be changing things. (Participant from Chancellery Focus Group)

This lack of attention in promoting the leadership of persons with disabilities can be contrasted with the approach to promoting Indigenous leadership. They suggested that the recommendation by Harpur and Szucs (2023), of linking disability student funding to disability executive appointments, should be adopted.

Funding bodies should fund the actual cost of creating inclusive university experiences

Participants in the three focus groups paid particular attention to how disability is funded in universities. They discussed how students and staff with a disability sometimes need to study or work part-time due to their disability and the current regulatory frameworks often struggle to accommodate these needs. For example, when speaking about the funding a university receives for a part-time student, a participant in the Chancellery Focus Group noted:

... we're paid by the amount of study the student does. But just because you're already doing four subjects in a year doesn't mean you only need half a person's support for your physical or mental or social, or whatever support needs that go along with you ... all of those associated support costs they scale with the, with the individual, not with the number of subjects, and this is a particular issue for regional universities, where the average student is doing about half a full-time load. It's camouflaged at larger, regional, larger metropolitan universities, where the average student is doing sort of about 80 per cent of a full-time load. On average.

The discussions from the focus groups recommended that the government should introduce a framework that determines the appropriate value of the equity loading. The state should then fund this equity loading and require universities to report on how they are devoting funds earmarked for equity to their intended purposes. Universities that are not using funds appropriately should face sanctions.

Discussion

The Universities Accord Panel's Recommendation to 'maintain' student with disability enrolment levels encourages policy makers to maintain a system which is failing people with a disability to enact their human rights – the right to education and employment. The decision to also exclude persons with 'profound' disabilities from the higher education enrolment share risks making them invisible within higher education reform while reinforcing deep ableist prejudices (Gordon, 2024). When considering if such concerns are justified, it is important to note that if the same approach to data collection was adopted earlier into education policy, it would have resulted in one of the authors to this paper, as well as Professor Stephen Hawking, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt being excluded from the higher education enrolment share estimate due to the presence of disabilities that would be classified as 'profound'.

Business as usual will not address the disabling barriers identified by respondents in this study, nor respond to the recommendations which have been proposed. Respondents provided a raft of recommendations to address disablement in higher education, including setting robust targets – including culture change, employment, representation in leadership appointments, and universal design – and then reporting on these targets publicly.

The disabling barriers identified by the focus groups participants and respondents of the qualitative survey presented in this study echo concerns previously raised in disability education scholarship. For illustration, Collins et al. (2019) and Couzens et al. (2015) have identified how relying on adjustments is failing those with a disability and the sector. Additionally, many of the recommendations raised by focus group participants and survey respondents to the survey are reflected in Pitman's report (Pitman, 2022). Pitman recommended greater requirements around universal design of learning, sector-wide standards for accessible web design, awareness training, strengthen the standards and address employment equity in higher education. Our findings also offer important new insights and identifies a significant need that is currently missing in university accord report and associated strategies – that is disability led strategic leadership and sector-wide disability-led strategic plans to help overcome the systemic and wide-ranging barriers to education and employment currently experienced in the tertiary sector by people with disabilities.

It is beyond the capacity of our discussion to analyse and synthesise all the disabling barriers and recommendations raised in this paper in full. Instead, we focus on its strengths in relation to existing scholarship and its uniqueness being a disability-led project. This includes the rich breadth of experiential data from the voices of students and staff with a disability, the insights gained including how the voices of people with a disability can be more effectively and efficiently incorporated in responses to disability inclusion in higher education, and the findings and policy implications on disability-led strategic leadership and sector-wide disability inclusion strategy to address these barriers identified in our and existing research to realise the rights of people with a disability. Furthermore, any such policy and strategies must be co-created – e.g., the co-creation of a disability-led disability inclusion strategy.

Despite most universities in Australia having some form of plan or strategy on addressing disability inclusion, in contrast to Indigenous leadership, attempts to create sector-wide responses by leaders with disabilities currently lacks resourcing and commitments by government and universities (Harpur & Szucs, 2023). Beyond being promoted by respondents to this study, heavily theorised by disability scholars and now through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the notion of attribute leadership can also draw from the rich scholarship from the Indigenous space. For illustration, Trudgett et al, have noted the importance that ‘Indigenous people become integral architects in designing the future Australian higher education sector (2022)’

Conclusion

When compared against other marginalised minorities, the Universities Accord Panel has struggled to advance an agenda to shift entrenched ableism in the Australian higher education sector and failed to promote a pathway which will realise equality in education for people with a disability. Unfortunately, the Universities Accord Panel’s approach to disability went from a visionary call for change, in the Terms of Reference and Discussion Paper, to excluding persons with profound disabilities, no increased targets for students with disability, and three unhelpful recommendations in the Final Report.

Drawing from the vision for disability leadership and inclusion in higher education set out in the Disability Royal Commission and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this article has set out a reform agenda that can create enduring change and help create a higher education sector that is inclusive for all.

Being informed by the authors’ experiences as students and academics with disabilities, as well as 222 research participants, this paper contends that the expertise of those who work in higher education can be harnessed to realise the paradigm shifts mandated by the UN Convention.

Empowering university staff with a disability at the university level is critical; however, our research also reinforces that realising sector-wide reforms requires a disability-led sector-wide disability inclusion strategy that will last beyond government changes, with the capacity for continual innovation and improvement.

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