



ATEND

Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability

Professor Mary O'Kane
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Higher Education Division
Australian Government Department of Education

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Dear Professor O'Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the University Accord's Interim Report.

Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability (ATEND) commends the boldness of vision expressed in the Interim Report. In particular, it supports the aim to achieve population parity in Australian higher education participation for students with disabilities, and to correct historical underrepresentation of people with disabilities, at all levels in universities, as well as the recognition of the need for specific 'meaningful and achievable interim targets' in achieving this goal.

ATEND also applauds the recognition in the Interim Report that reaching the goal of population parity for students with disabilities will require 'strong scaffolding ... for those requiring academic and other support ... to access, move through and succeed in Australia's tertiary system', and the Report's acknowledgement that 'current equity funding is inadequate', and that 'any new funding system must reflect the additional costs incurred by institutions in teaching particular cohorts of students', and that therefore such a funding system must be based on a 'student-centred, needs-based funding model'.

ATEND also supports the aim to provide 'inclusive and high-quality teaching that embraces technological advancements', in recognition of the increased access that online and hybrid models of learning have allowed for students with disability.

ATEND further agrees with the need outlined in the Interim Report for 'more granular and practice-relevant data to inform policy and track progress' and for 'broadening the adoption of evidence-based approaches to addressing barriers across the student lifecycle' and, in particular, the need for 'institutional and system-level data collection to capture information more effectively on existing and emergent equity cohorts', including for those with disabilities.

The goal of achieving population parity in higher education for individuals with disabilities, which suggests that the percentage of people with disabilities attending universities should match the percentage of people with disabilities in the broader community, is both ambitious and meaningful. It highlights the importance of removing barriers and providing necessary support for individuals with disabilities to access and thrive in higher education. The sentiment expressed in the Interim Report reflects a collective desire for inclusivity and equal opportunities in education.

However, the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing education and employment are complex, as are the broader societal issues that contribute to these challenges. Achieving population parity in universities will be a multi-faceted endeavour which will need to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive practices across multiple areas and systems. It is important that the commitment to raising the participation of people with disability in higher education is matched by properly funded action to implement change and that there are measures for evaluation and accountability. Don't go to people with disabilities and say 'we want you to come to university' without giving them a means to do so successfully. Don't build a dream that increases the struggle and highlights the disadvantage.

Meeting this challenge will require addressing the following problems and barriers:

1. Measures of Population Parity

As the Interim Report acknowledges, there is no currently agreed measure for population parity for people with disability. Metrics for determining population parity need to be developed as a matter of urgency, not only in consultation with the higher education sector but incorporating the lived experience of those with disabilities, in order to ensure that the data and values used for measurement are robust. It is important that such measures are not based simply on the numbers of students who are recruited into degrees, but also examine retention and completion rates and graduate outcomes, including proceeding to postgraduate study and employment. Students with disabilities who do achieve entry into university often find that there are significant barriers to their continued participation.

2. Addressing Lifelong Educational Disadvantage

Creating equitable opportunities for individuals with disabilities is a complex task which may require overcoming years of disadvantage. Creating genuine equity of access involves not only providing additional places in higher education, but also addressing the root causes of inequality that begin earlier in the education system and extend into employment opportunities.

Ensuring that students with disabilities receive appropriate support throughout their educational journey is crucial. Improving the inclusivity and quality of school systems can have a positive impact on students' preparedness for higher education. Many students with disabilities are not entering post-secondary education adequately prepared. Such students are not always confident in advocating for needs in an adult educational environment and not all have support of family members familiar with the tertiary education environments.

Students with disabilities entering University level education often need significant additional support to bridge existing gaps in their education, in order to achieve success at university level. Such supports are not adequately provided by existing HEPP programs but need to be tailored to the specific needs of individual students, including, for example, intensive individual tutoring to bridge gaps in English or maths. Ensuring population parity for students with disability will require both improving access and adequacy of preparation at pre-university level and addressing the failures of current and past educational systems for students once they are enrolled.

3. Financial Barriers

Financial constraints are a major obstacle for students with disabilities pursuing higher education. Addressing this will require examining the additional costs and physical limitations associated with disabilities. . . In order for students with disabilities to achieve population parity in Higher Education, it needs they need to be provided with adequate financial support.

Obtaining suitable part-time employment while studying is particularly difficult and often impossible for students with disability, but university is unaffordable for many students without additional income from employment. Financial stress is a major contributing factor causing students with disabilities to drop out of university, and students with disabilities can carry an additional burden of trying to manage their disability while attempting to juggle the competing demands of work and study.

Compulsory unpaid professional placements required by many courses place additional burden on students with disability. There is often no provision for these to be undertaken on a part-time basis, so that students often have to give up existing jobs to undertake them. Those without work often cannot afford the additional travel and impost such placement requires. To allow students with disabilities to undertake these placements, they need to be paid, and consideration needs to be given to making them more flexible.

To achieve population parity in higher education, students with disabilities will need additional financial support, either in the form of scholarships, bursaries or access to disability support payments so that they can focus on their education and participate on a more equal basis.

4. Flexibility

Providing flexible education and work arrangements, as well as considering the needs of students during placements or internships, can help alleviate some of the considerable challenges faced by students with disabilities. Providing adequate income support to alleviate the need for part-time employment for students with disabilities also works at smashing the barriers for access and allows students spend more time bridging the gaps in previous education along with new study more readily.

5. Employment

The stagnant employment rate for people with disabilities in Australia is a significant concern (AIHW, 2022). This rate has not shown significant improvement over the past 25 years and is among the lowest within the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (Thomas & Vandenbroek, 2023). This situation highlights the persistent challenges and barriers that people with disabilities face when seeking employment. Inability to complete higher education because of inadequate structural, education and financial support contributes to this low employment rate, but also locks people with disability into lower-paid jobs and limits the contributions that they can make to the Australian economy and to society.

Providing students with a disability with the Disability Support Pension for the duration of their study would eliminate barriers not only to participation in higher education but also to employment. I want to share a small insight about when I studied, many years ago, long before it was a thing for students with disabilities to enter study, long before legislation made it a right we could attain. I was refused by my local university just because I was Deaf – they told me such to my face in an interview. I moved states and was supported with a Disability Support Pension for the duration of my degree (this was especially set up for five deaf students, not a usual occurrence). I did not have to stress about money, part-time work or the like and could focus on study alone. Without this, I doubt I would have completed my degree. I left my not-so-well-paid job to move interstate and attend university, I could make the decision because I knew I had income support to do so. If five Deaf students could complete study with this support way back in the mid 80's, what more can many more students with disabilities do? We are working members of the community and contributing taxpayers.

Financially supporting students with disabilities and providing them with flexibility so they are not restricted to fulltime study loads might be initially expensive, but the potential return on investment is huge. This should also assist with retention and completion rates, which are currently dismal. This would likely reduce the economic future burden upon the government since more people with disabilities would be in paid workforce and paying taxes.

There is also a need to implement a targeted graduate support program, beyond the existing Disability Employment Support model, so that graduates with disabilities can be placed in appropriate graduate level jobs which make the best use of their education. Students do not want jobs stacking supermarket shelves

when they have completed an Engineering degree. An unfunded [University Supported Employment Partnership \(USEP\)](#) and [GradWISE](#) program has start to address this in small measure – a federally funded version would likely have significant success.

6. Support Networks

Building strong support networks within universities and communities can help students with disabilities overcome various challenges. Peer mentorship, accessible resources, and counselling services all contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment. Universities need to be funded to do more than produce Access Inclusion Plans. Establishing clubs, peer support networks and developing the confidence of students with disabilities will better equip them to tackle the inequities that exist beyond university and prepare them for success in achieving appropriate graduate employment.

7. Improved systems and Environments

To achieve parity to parity for equity cohorts including students with disability, the university sector needs to align with a social model of disability by addressing systemic barriers and focussing on providing an accessible digital and physical environment. This would require that universities promote and commit to a culture inclusive of people with disabilities and access requirements. Such commitment would be demonstrated through their actions and regularly evaluated against benchmarks determined by consultation with people with lived experience of disability. This would ensure that universities would properly embed accessibility into their standard processes and procedures, include accessibility in the design planning stages of all projects, including information technology and physical campuses, and make it part of all procurement processes. It is also important to implement accessibility consistently across systems, processes, spaces to enhance experience.

A requirement that universities be evaluated against such agreed standards would ensure that they implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) protocols and ensure that user experience is incorporated into processes, in such a way that users are considered experts. This would allow universities to aim for outcomes which deliver supports which would exceed the required minimum standards. Such an approach would provide efficiency in the long term and promote the independence, dignity and respect of people with disability. There is a need for outcomes to be measured and universities to be held accountable on these systemic approaches to inclusion.

8. Long-Term Perspective

While achieving population parity by 2035 might be a challenging goal, setting ambitious targets can drive meaningful progress. It's important to recognize that the process of change is ongoing, and efforts can lead to incremental improvements even if the ultimate goal isn't fully realized within the designated timeframe.

9. Advocacy and Collaboration

Creating change requires collaboration among universities, government agencies, disability organizations, employers, and individuals with disabilities themselves. Advocating for policy changes and raising awareness about the unique needs of people with disabilities is crucial.

Addressing the wide range of challenges highlighted is undoubtedly a complex task that requires ongoing commitment, resources, and a multi-pronged approach. It's heartening to see the dedication of the Universities Accord to making a difference in the lives of students with disabilities, as well as its recognition of the work that

still needs to be done. By continuing to raise awareness, advocate for change, and actively participate in initiatives aimed at improving access and opportunities, you contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Thank you for your time and the ongoing work. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or wish to discuss any of the points made within this submission.



Kind regards

Cathy Easte

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References

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