

# The Universitas 21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report

Partnering globally to champion change

June 2025

*Image illustrates the global collaboration of U21 and this project - the image on the title page is a map of the world with orange circle symbols of each member university appearing on the city where they are based.*





Fudan University



Korea University



KU Leuven



Lund University



McMaster University



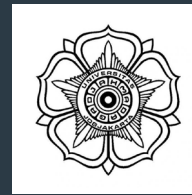
National University of Singapore



Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile



Shanghai Jiao Tong University



Universitas Gadjah Mada



Tecnológico de Monterrey



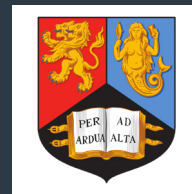
UC Davis



University of Amsterdam



The University of Auckland



University of Birmingham



University College Dublin



University of Connecticut



University of Delhi



The University of Edinburgh



University of Glasgow



The University of Hong Kong



University of Johannesburg



University of Maryland



The University of Melbourne



University of Nottingham



University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



The University of Queensland



The University of Sydney



University of Zurich



UNSW Sydney



Waseda University

# Background

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the Universitas 21 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group undertook the development of a Network-wide framework to guide EDI efforts across member institutions.

As part of this process, the U21 Disability Community of Practice (COP) was consulted during the drafting of the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. Recognising the value of this Framework, the Disability COP sought to support and enhance the leadership of U21 universities in advancing EDI, particularly in the area of disability inclusion.

Building on this momentum, the Disability COP proposed the U21 Disability Policy Mapping Initiative. This initiative invited university leadership to submit all relevant public documents pertaining to the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Each institution was also asked to nominate a contact person to facilitate the provision of these policies and to participate actively in the Disability COP.

Professor Paul Harpur OAM, as co-lead of the Disability COP and with established funding and strong backing from U21, offered to lead a Comparative Interpretive Policy Analysis (CIPA) of the collected documents. This analysis aimed to identify common commitments and best practices across the network, culminating in recommendations for a U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report.

In April 2024, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group formally adopted the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and endorsed the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative. Throughout 2024, the Disability COP received substantial support from the U21 secretariat in finalising and distributing a survey to all thirty universities within the network. The survey was completed, and relevant documents were collected. Additional data collection and analysis were required following the inclusion of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the U21 Network. A dedicated team of staff and students from across the U21 Network contributed to data collection, analysis, and the drafting of this report, with a full list of contributors included in the attached document.

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The above table of contents lists the parts and chapters of the report. Each chapter is authored by staff from across the U21 Network, who may use variations of inclusive language as best matches their experience.

# Introduction to the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report

**Professor Paul Harpur OAM**

## Introduction

In this introductory chapter I want to share my personal vision, as well as the vision of many colleagues involved in this journey of change.

I believe universities are a force for good in society. University education opens opportunities to individuals and provides our nations with the workforces they need for economic growth. Universities employ thought leaders who produce research and innovation which grows economies, enhances policy responses, and leads to transformational scientific discoveries. Discoveries which have strengthened food security, the environment, health, modelling and other benefits to society. Highly visible benefits of such research include the development of vaccines, such as for COVID-19 and the HPV viruses, GPS technology, and web browsers.

The universities who feature in this report, the 30 member universities of the Universitas 21 (U21) Network, individually and collectively are enriching, empowering, and enabling the communities they serve. Those communities are stretched over 20 countries, collectively including 1.3 million students, over 220,000 staff, have approaching 2.5 million alumni, and stretch their positive impact into towns, cities and across the globe.

Those of us privileged to work in a U21 Network university, work in an institution that is committed to positive change. For many of us who want to have a positive impact upon the world, when we advance our personal visions, we find we are aligned to the vision of our university. The energy of those involved, along with the support for this report, has already led to impact and to the successful completion of this report.

## Structure of this report

In addition to this introductory part, this report has 5 parts. The parts of this report groups chapters according to most universities' organisational structures. Accordingly, Part 1 addresses university-wide governance on disability inclusion and Part 2 groups chapters concerning key priority of research-intensive universities: research. These chapters introduce new norms pertaining to disability inclusive research and analyse how U21 Network universities are responding. The Report then turns to policies supporting students with disabilities. This part includes chapters where universities are responding to the profound shifts in norms and laws pertaining to disability inclusion. In an often-overlooked area, Part 4 addresses how universities can and should be supporting their staff with disabilities. Finally in Part 5, this report includes chapters on digital, physical, and library services that are used by students, staff, and the wider community. In addition to mapping out policies, each chapter makes recommendations to enhance the impact of this report.



**Although reports generally do not have impact until they are published, the process of producing *this* report has already led to positive impact.**

## Impact

Impactful change occurs when top down and bottom-up inclusion initiatives intersect. This is the reality on disability inclusion in the U21 Network.

The reality is that many of our universities are leading on inclusion, but many others operate in regulatory ecosystems where inclusion is less supported. The U21 Senior Leaders' Group has recognised and responded to the challenges by adopting in April 2024 the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement.

In addition to adopting the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement in April 2024, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group agreed to support the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative. When considering whether they should support this initiative, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group would have been aware that strategic, policy, and practical efforts on disability inclusion in higher education can be mixed. Despite the risk of adverse findings, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group decided to support this initiative and send a message that there is high-level commitment to identifying ways of doing better on disability inclusion.

By supporting the gathering of data from 30 member universities, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group have both sent a message across our communities that disability inclusion matters, plus provided tangible support to the gathering of data which has enabled this overview of current disability inclusion policies to be produced.

This top-down support was heard by people working in U21 Network member universities and has contributed to bottom-up efforts to respond to this opportunity and build lasting collaborations. Therefore, this report acknowledges the PhD staff members who contributed to authoring a thematic chapter.

The thematic groups that have come together have recognised the value in collaborating and thematic sub-groups of the U21 Disability Community of Practice have been proposed.

Already this report is contributing to lasting change.

Lasting change in the policy delivery space has been created by providing examples of workable solutions that exist in U21 Network universities. The U21 Network provides an avenue where universities with identified best practices, can share their experiences directly with other member universities, and thus build stronger responses to inclusion across the U21 Network.

With respect to informing responses, the professional and academic staff involved in this analysis have drawn upon their expertise when analysing the data to help generate a large list of recommendations. The recommendations called for by the authors in this report would profoundly shift the teaching, staffing, service delivery, and research ecosystems in our institutions. Transformation of this magnitude does not occur in the short term; however, reports of this nature occur infrequently, thus some recommendations might be adopted in the short-term, whereas others will take more time.

Often recommendations are grouped by what is possible in the short, medium, and long term. The different situations of universities across the U21 Network, caused by differences in cultures and regulatory environments across over 20 countries and by universities themselves, means that segmenting recommendations by implementation timeframes is not viable. Instead, recommendations are grouped by the domains in the report so that those reviewing their position can more easily identify the recommendations most relevant to their needs.

## Conclusion

To support the U21 Network and its university members to become disability champions of change, this report underscores the transformative potential of universities in fostering disability inclusion. By leveraging the collective strength of the U21 Network, we can drive significant advancements in creating inclusive educational, work and research and innovation eco-systems. This report not only highlights the current state of disability inclusion policies but also provides actionable recommendations to enhance these efforts.

The commitment from both top-down leadership and grassroots initiatives within our universities is crucial for sustained progress. As we continue to share best practices and collaborate across institutions, we can make meaningful strides towards a more inclusive society.

The work presented here is a testament to the power of commitment by those working in U21 Network universities and the U21 secretariat action and the dedication to improving how our universities operate and the lives of persons with disabilities. On disability, our universities train students with and without disabilities, employ staff with and without disabilities and produce research and innovation which can create a more inclusive world.

U21 is a place where we can come together to share, learn, and enhance our collective responses. Those responses will impact upon our universities, our U21 Network, to over 20 countries where our universities are situated and more broadly across the globe.

**// Changing the world for the better starts with a single step. I believe this report is such a step.**

Professor Paul Harpur OAM

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Lead, U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative  
Co-lead Universitas 21 Disability Community of Practice



# Executive summary

**Between 15% and 20% of the world has a disability and in many of our universities more than 10% of our communities live with a disability.**

Universities train the disability leaders of tomorrow, employ the disability leaders of today, and produces research and innovation that leads to a better and more inclusive world. Drawing upon existing policies and practices from Universitas 21 (U21) Network member universities, this report provides a pathway for our universities, separately and collectively through the U21 Network, to more effectively and efficiently realise our missions, and through this, do better at what we do best: **Create and share knowledge for the betterment of all.**

This report was made possible following the adoption of the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and the support from the U21 Senior Leaders' Group to support this initiative. With over 100 U21 staff volunteering, this report involved 30 member universities across over 20 countries, resulting in a comprehensive analysis of disability inclusion within the U21 Network. This report, led by Professor Paul Harpur, aims to support U21 universities in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the disability space.

The report is divided into 5 main sections, each covering different aspects of disability inclusion in the university context.

Detailed recommendations appear in each chapter and a consolidated list of recommendations from all 5 parts follows this Executive Summary.

## Part 1: Disability Governance Norms

This part explores the establishment of new norms on disability governance within the U21 Network. It emphasises the importance of fostering equitable partnerships among member universities and ensuring disability representation in governance structures. The report highlights the need for clear leadership roles, strategic integration, continuous improvement, and adequate funding to support disability inclusion initiatives. Additionally, it addresses the intersectionality of disability with other marginalised identities, such as Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and age-conscious frameworks.

## Part 2: Disability Inclusion and the Research and Innovation Ecosystem

Part 2 examines how U21 universities can align their research and innovation practices with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It underscores the importance of integrating CRPD norms into ethics and grant review processes, enhancing data collection, and implementing co-design methodologies. It also discusses the role of university research groups in championing disability inclusion and the need for comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation, drawing from the best model at plans of inclusive practices. It calls for increased representation of people with disabilities in research leadership roles and the establishment of formal benchmarks within institutional disability policies. For the sake of this report, the CRPD describes disability in Article 1 to **“include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”**

## Part 3: Creating an Inclusive Community for Students with Disabilities

This part focuses on the transition from reasonable accommodations to universal design and universal design for learning (UDL). It advocates for a proactive approach to designing inclusive educational environments that anticipate and remove barriers to learning. The report highlights the importance of enhanced outreach programs, pre-orientation and orientation programs, and accessible housing options for students with disabilities. Additionally, it addresses the need for clear access to disability support information for international and exchange students and the importance of tailored career counselling and work-integrated learning opportunities to support students with disabilities in their transition to employment.

## Part 4: Universities Support for Staff with Disabilities

Examining the measures adopted by U21 universities to create disability-inclusive workplaces, this part discusses proactive measures to promote the recruitment and retention of staff with disabilities, the implementation of universal design, and the streamlining of reasonable accommodation processes. Part 4 also addresses the challenges faced by staff with disabilities who travel for work and recommends central funding for disability-related travel expenses, mechanisms for non-disclosure, and internal booking systems with accessibility information. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of awareness-raising activities, including mandatory training, inclusive events, and the development of comprehensive resources to support ongoing education and awareness efforts.

## Part 5: University Services and Disability Inclusion

Part 5 explores the role of university services, including libraries and digital and physical spaces, in promoting disability inclusion. It emphasises the importance of integrating accessibility into all library policies and strategic planning, developing physical spaces and assistive technology, and providing ongoing training for library staff. The report also discusses the need for capacity building across university staff to ensure understanding and implementation of digital accessibility standards. It advocates for the development of digital inclusion roadmaps, publicising compliance and monitoring metrics, and partnering with other universities and software vendors to enhance digital accessibility. Additionally, it addresses the importance of establishing design guides and capital works plans for the built environment and creating dedicated positions, such as Campus Accessibility Officers, to oversee accessibility and inclusion initiatives.

# Consolidated report recommendations

The following consolidated list of recommendations is drawn from and referenced in the chapters of this report.

## Part 1: Disability governance norms

### Chapter 1.1. New norms on disability governance

Universities should ensure that their policy responses to disability inclusion reflect disability human rights norms set out in the CRPD.

### Chapter 1.2. Disability inclusion and the Universitas 21 Network

- a) **Foster equitable partnerships:** the U21 Network should continue to foster equitable partnerships among its member universities, recognising historical and contemporary power dynamics. Participatory knowledge sharing should be encouraged to support collective engagement and mutual learning.
- b) **Ensuring disability representation:** U21 EDI Committee to integrate disability inclusion throughout the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. This should be achieved by first realising disability inclusion in Principle 3 on leadership. Specifically, by ensuring disability representation from across the network in governance and stakeholder groups that encourage diverse insights.
- c) **Develop a disability inclusion action plan:** Similar to the approach adopted by Universities Australia on advancing Indigenous inclusion, the U21 disability leaders should be encouraged to explore how an U21 disability inclusion action plan could be developed and advanced, so that disability inclusion across the U21 Network can be advanced consistently and sustainably.

### Chapter 1.3. University-wide disability governance

- a) **Establish clear leadership roles on disability governance:** Universities should create clear disability governance leadership structures. This should include leadership on diversity generally, through a dedicated Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) or Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) role that is supported by authority and resources. Additionally, universities should appoint a senior executive specifically targeting disability inclusion across the university. Universities should strive to appoint individuals with lived experience of disability to lead disability governance and to be employed within the team to operationalise the university's disability inclusion strategy. This role could include activities across all areas of the university operation. This role should have clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and well-defined responsibilities to ensure accountability and progress.
- b) **Strategic integration and support:** Inclusion should be prioritised in the strategic agenda and specifically included in plans to operationalise the university's strategic plan, such as through disability action plans. This ensures that disability inclusion responsibilities are distributed across the institution, not just placed on one individual or unit. The distribution of responsibility will require KPIs placed on those who have disability inclusion responsibility across the university. These KPIs should form part of existing reporting and performance appraisal processes to maximise accountability and compliance.

- c) **Funding and staffing disability inclusion governance:** Universities must provide adequate funding and staffing to enable disability diversity initiatives to be implemented. This includes central funding for accessibility improvements and resources for compliance activities, program development, and network building. Ideally this includes the establishment of a support framework and unit within the university to assist the EDI lead in fulfilling their mission. This ensures that the diversity inclusion lead is not overwhelmed and can effectively drive change.
- d) **Collecting data on staff with disability and continuous improvement on disability governance:** the university should continuously seek feedback from the university community, including collecting data on staff with disabilities and the barriers they experience, and adapt disability strategies and practices accordingly. This ensures that initiatives remain relevant and effective in addressing the needs of diverse groups.

#### Chapter 1.4. Universities enabling and empowering

- a) **Visibility of disability leadership:** It is important for groups that represent disability interests to clearly state whether they are disability-led in their outward-facing communications, such as on their websites and promotional materials.
- b) **Develop disability led groups:** Further attention should also be given to encouraging the establishment of new disability-led groups within universities that currently lack them.
- c) **Knowledge sharing:** To support the formation of new groups, universities could facilitate knowledge-sharing opportunities between institutions with well-established disability networks and those seeking to develop their own.

#### Chapter 1.5. Disability and Intersectionality

- a) **Leverage existing diversity programs:** Leverage existing diversity programs (e.g. Athena SWAN, Age-Friendly Universities) to establish structured, intersectional frameworks that ensure coordinated responses across marginalised groups. Members can consider if joining is right for their needs.
- b) **Indigenous and First Nations perspectives:** Incorporate Indigenous and First Nations perspectives by engaging with Indigenous leaders, scholars, and disability advocates to develop culturally appropriate policies and services that use decolonisation strategies to reframe and reassess language, assumptions, ways of being, doing, and knowing.
- c) **LGBTIQA+:** Strengthen LGBTIQA+ inclusion within disability strategies by ensuring accessibility of queer spaces, recognising the unique challenges faced by disabled LGBTIQA+ individuals, and fostering collaborations between disability and queer student organisations and units.
- d) **Age conscious:** Apply an age-conscious framework to disability policies by considering how disability needs change across life stages and integrating insights from initiatives like the Age-Friendly University program.
- e) **Benchmarking:** Develop formal benchmarks for intersectionality within institutional disability policies, ensuring that intersectional perspectives are embedded in strategic plans, KPIs, and institutional commitments.



## Part 2: Disability inclusion and the research and innovation ecosystem

### Chapter 2.1. Understanding when university research and innovation is and is not compliant with disability human rights norms

- a) **Integrate disability norms into ethics and grant review processes:** Universities should incorporate CRPD norms into their internal ethics and grant review processes to ensure that all research proposals are evaluated for compliance with disability human rights standards.
- b) **Enhance data collection:** Universities should systematically collect data on the representation of persons with disabilities across the research and innovation ecosystem. This includes tracking their roles in leadership positions, research projects, and specific disability-related research.
- c) **Implement co-design methodologies:** Universities should encourage the use of co-design methodologies in research projects to ensure that persons with disabilities are actively involved in all stages of the research process. This approach not only aligns with CRPD norms but also enhances the quality and relevance of research outcomes.

### Chapter 2.2. University research groupings as champions of disability inclusion

- a) **Support the operation of disability research groups:** The CRPD has shifted how research on disability is performed. To reflect new norms, and the opportunities it presents, universities should support the formation and operation of groups of researchers to form disability research groups.
- b) **Make disability research groups more visible:** The U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report was supported by U21 universities and involved academics scanning websites to identify disability research groups. Despite these resources, it was challenging to identify all disability research groupings and disability led research for this chapter. Difficulty in identifying disability research groups and leaders hindered collaboration and research commissioning efforts. The challenges encountered when people sought to report on the disability research groupings and disability led research within their own university and across the U21 Network, illustrates a need to provide additional resources to coordinate and facilitate profiling of what activities are currently being undertaken across the U21 Network.
- c) **Universities should listen to their own disability inclusion expertise:** An analysis of the existing research groupings illustrates the benefits where universities harness their own research expertise to improve how they operate. To expand such benefits, it is recommended that university administrators should harness the disability inclusive expertise that research groups based in their universities contain. To harness this potential, processes to enable university researchers to inform operations and policies should go beyond ad hoc projects and should instead be formalised. This formalisation process should include administrative support, institutional commitment to support research which spans academic and operational groupings and recognising these activities in academic and professional workload allocations.

### Chapter 2.3. The power of university-wide research plans to champion disability inclusion

- a) **Adopt comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation plans:** Universities should develop and implement comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation plans that align with their overall strategy. These plans should include clear institutional commitments to change and be integrated into the university's broader research ecosystem.
- b) **Monitoring and KPIs:** Establish KPIs to monitor progress and ensure accountability. Regularly review and report on these KPIs to track the effectiveness of disability inclusion initiatives.
- c) **Capacity building:** Invest in capacity building for researchers with disabilities. This includes providing training, resources, and support to enable them to engage in research on an equitable basis with their peers.
- d) **Resourcing and support:** Allocate sufficient resources to support disability inclusion initiatives. This includes funding for reasonable accommodations, accessible infrastructure, and support services for researchers with disabilities.
- e) **Leadership and representation:** Increase representation of people with disabilities in research and innovation leadership roles within the university generally as well as supporting their collective activities through a research community of practice, group or network. This helps address power imbalances and ensures that the voices of people with disabilities are heard and valued in decision-making processes.



### Chapter 3.1. Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design

To support systemic change from reasonable accommodations (medical model of disability) to universal design (social model of inclusion), and in genuine consultation and collaboration with students with disability (*Nothing About Us Without Us*) and other key stakeholders, several actions are recommended for U21 universities.

- a) **Embrace universal design, including universal design of teaching:** In recognition of the benefits of universal design, including universal design for learning (UDL), to complement and reduce overreliance on reasonable accommodations, it is recommended that universities formally commit to institutional adoption of a universal design approach to support the inclusion of students with disability and indeed, broader student diversity noting students' intersecting identities.
- b) **Strengthen implementation of reasonable accommodation processes:** While universal design and UDL will enhance participation and access, it will not address every disabling barrier. As such, it is recommended that universities review and apply best practice to their reasonable accommodation policies and procedures, as well as support emerging policy development by those universities in the earlier stages of their universal design and UDL institutional journeys.
- c) **Leveraging the U21 Network to realise universal design:** It is recommended that universities leverage its network by utilising their collective strengths in learning, research, and innovation to build spaces for shared training, resource development, and joint contributions to scholarship. To illustrate, an executive-level cross-institutional committee/community of practice could be established to develop minimal standards for widespread adoption, such as converting the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines into guidelines explicitly relevant to the development of accessible resources and learning management systems in higher education. Further, it will be essential to consider how the U21 Network supports its member universities who are at the early stages of understanding universal design, noting that there are many universities yet to adopt UDL principles at an institutional level and/or apply broadly to their teaching, learning and assessment environments. Leveraging the knowledge of the U21 community to share learnings and best practice, including optimising access to existing resources and guidance, can accelerate this practice.

### Chapter 3.2. Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university

- a) **Enhanced Outreach Programs:** Working with government and schools, universities should develop specific outreach programs that directly address the needs and concerns of potential students with disabilities. This could include tailored information sessions, workshops, and online resources. These communications should also consider students with specific disabilities who are under-represented in the University sector, such as students with intellectual disabilities. Such efforts should involve partnering with high schools, vocational training centres and rehabilitation providers to provide early information and support to students with disabilities considering higher education.
- b) **Pre-Orientation and Orientation Programs:** Universities should implement comprehensive pre-orientation programs similar to McMaster University's MacStart, which includes activities like learning study skills, using assistive technology, and mentorship.
- c) **Accessible Housing:** Universities should strive to ensure that all university accommodations have options for all students. The shortage of disability inclusive options should be addressed. Once students are enrolled, universities should provide supports to students with disabilities in

finding rooms and checking in. This should include early check-in options for students with disabilities to avoid the rush of Arrivals Weekends.

### Chapter 3.3. Students with disability and student mobility

- a) **Clear access to disability support information:** Universities that provide disability support to international students should explicitly state this on their websites and link relevant pages together. This ensures prospective students understand available support and can make informed decisions before applying. For example, the University of Zurich has a very clear road map about the steps students with disabilities need to make to gain reasonable adjustments, as well as all that is required before commencing their studies. This is very helpful for a new domestic or international student with disabilities and is a good practice that could be implemented by the rest of the U21 Network.
- b) **Prominent website accessibility:** University websites are often the first source of information for international and exchange students. Clear links to disability support resources demonstrate an institution's commitment to inclusion as outlined in its policies.
- c) **Cross-linking webpages:** Webpages for international and exchange students should include sections or direct links to disability support information. Similarly, disability support pages should link back to international and exchange student resources, facilitating seamless navigation.
- d) **Intersectionality:** Send a clear message to website visitors that international students with disabilities are included in your disability inclusion initiatives. Students are often coming from diverse contexts with different legal frameworks, with confusion over their rights as international students versus their domestic peers, and their specific needs due to being at the intersection of disability, language proficiency, and much more.
- e) **Language accessibility:** It is noted that a lack of language variety is available when accessing disability support services, aside from some information in English. It may be worth considering this type of content could be made available in multiple languages to really ensure the relevant students gain access to these supports, even if just in English as an internationally known language, or an auto-translate option.

### Chapter 3.4. Students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities

- a) **Better data:** More robust data is needed to determine whether students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities experience informal exclusion due to accessibility concerns, social stigma, or a lack of accommodations, and determine the actions needed to respond to these.
- b) **Explicitly integrate frameworks into strategic plans:** Universities with extracurricular activities-inclusive strategic plans should explicitly integrate disability-inclusive frameworks, ensuring that participation barriers are identified and addressed proactively.



### Chapter 3.5. Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work

- a) **Individual support:** Students with disabilities will confront additional work challenges compared to students without disabilities. Universities should offer tailored career counselling to help students identify strengths and develop strategies to address employment barriers.
- b) **Facilitating and coordinating inclusion:** Universities should develop and implement policies and programs that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments.
- c) **Enhance collaboration with employers:** Universities should use their privileged positions to advance more inclusive workforces. To strengthen pathways and capacity in employers, universities should develop partnerships with inclusive employers.
- d) **Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements:** Universities should expand access to WIL opportunities by partnering with inclusive employers and by providing on-campus work opportunities to help students gain confidence in a familiar environment.




## Part 4: University support for staff with disabilities

### Chapter 4.1. Universities support for staff with a disability

- a) **Proactive measures to promote staff with disabilities:** Universities should implement proactive measures to address the inequalities experienced by staff with disabilities. This includes targeted recruitment initiatives and the promotion of staff with disabilities to ensure they are represented at all levels of the institution.
- b) **Universal design implementation:** More efforts are needed to remove disabling barriers through universal design. Universities should ensure that all facilities, services, and resources are accessible to everyone, including staff with disabilities.
- c) **Streamlined reasonable accommodation processes:** The process for requesting and receiving reasonable accommodations/adjustments should be streamlined. Funding for these accommodations should come from a central fund to separate the decision-making process from budgetary constraints.
- d) **Enhanced recruitment and promotion practices:** Universities should adopt more inclusive recruitment and promotion practices. This could include setting quotas for hiring staff with disabilities and ensuring that promotion criteria are inclusive and equitable.

### Chapter 4.2. Staff that travel for work

- a) **Central funding:** This builds on the funding structures that currently exist within various universities. The disparate forms of funding at departmental, faculty, and university levels result in a confusing landscape for users. A centralised funding system to cover additional costs borne by staff with disabilities when they travel for work is essential to consolidating the requirements for funding. This centralised university funding should be designed as an initial port of call rather than as a last resort to be approached only after all other funding sources have been exhausted; taking this view would significantly reduce the invisible labour of tracking and revealing unsuccessful applications to other funding sources. Consistency in funding policies and administration can also alleviate stressors related to time complications resulting from different funding applications.

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- b) **Mechanisms for non-disclosure:** Centralised funding structures can also facilitate the mechanisms to access to the fund without disclosure of disability to direct supervisors and / or managers. Such mechanisms would provide psychological safety to staff with disabilities. They eliminate the need for disclosure which can create situations where staff with disabilities could be unduly judged by their disability instead of by their performance. This disclosure can also be recorded in confidential systems, eliminating the need for staff with disabilities to repeatedly disclose any conditions, unless there has been a change in circumstances. The emotional labour of disclosure is another form of invisible labour, which can be reduced through considerate administrative design.
  - c) **Internal booking systems:** Recommendations to improve the experience for staff travelling for work emphasises the inclusion of specific information related to a range of considerations for staff with disabilities in any internal booking systems. Accessibility policies of transport and accommodation providers can be appended to internal booking systems so that staff with disabilities can make travel decisions and arrangements independently.
  - d) **Network for travel with disability:** Beyond internal systems, a network of travel agents specialising in accessible travel can be established by the university to encourage flexibility. Such networks can facilitate better information flows from travel experts familiar with accessibility needs and staff who need to access them. Once again, this reduces the need for discussion and disclosure with intermediaries uninvolved in the travel process (such as direct supervisors) while recognising the agency of the staff with disabilities in tailoring their travel according to their needs.

### Chapter 4.3. Awareness raising and disability inclusion

- a) **Expand mandatory training:** Universities should consider expanding mandatory disability awareness training to all staff and students. These should be a baseline understanding and commitment to inclusion across the institution.
- b) **Promote inclusive events:** Organise events such as Disability Inclusion Week, Neurodiversity Celebration Week, and conferences on disability rights to raise awareness and celebrate diversity.
- c) **Develop comprehensive resources:** Create and disseminate resources like tip sheets, allyship guides, and multimedia content to support ongoing awareness and education efforts.
- d) **Integrate into curriculum:** Incorporate disability awareness into the curriculum through dedicated courses, minors, or modules. This can ensure that all students graduate with an understanding of disability issues.
- e) **Support research and innovation:** Encourage research on disability awareness and inclusion and recognise innovative practices through awards and recognition programs.
- f) **Engage in global networking:** Encourage participation in global networks and communities of practice to share best practices, success stories, and resources. This can help universities learn from each other and continuously improve their training programs.

### Chapter 5.1. Libraries as opening access to information for persons with disabilities who are students, staff, or in the community

- a) **Policy integration:** Embed accessibility into all library policies and strategic planning, aligning with institutional and national frameworks.
- b) **Physical space design:** Develop physical spaces and assistive technology in a connected way to provide the most benefit to persons with disabilities.
- c) **Assistive technology:** Increase the availability and accessibility of assistive technology in libraries, ensuring that these resources are well-publicised and easily accessible to those who need them.
- d) **Staff training:** Provide ongoing training for library staff to ensure they are knowledgeable and responsive to the needs of clients with disabilities.
- e) **Collaboration:** Foster close collaboration with clients with disabilities to ensure that services and spaces meet their actual needs.

### Chapter 5.2. University Digital Spaces Becoming Disability Inclusive Spaces

- a) **Capacity building:** U21 Network universities should look at capacity building across their staff bodies. Investing in the uplift of general awareness of digital technologies that can assist in higher education across staff will ensure understanding is embedded and a cultural norm. Whether this is best achieved via targeted training sessions, professional development programs or workshops should be assessed by each institution.
- b) **Commitment and target to publicise compliance digital inclusion and monitoring metrics:** Given the variations across U21 Universities in history, number of Faculties, Schools or departments, and number of staff and students, different targets and compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) may be appropriate. There should be however, a clear commitment and target to publicise compliance and monitoring metrics. Transparency in these efforts will foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.
- c) **Digital inclusion road maps:** Where there is an aspiration to WCAG compliance or a higher level of WCAG, strategies and roadmaps must be developed to underpin and support the target. Strategies and roadmaps should be realistic and devoid of tokenism. Milestones, resourcing, and performance metrics should be included. Irrespective of target compliance, there needs to be a culture of universal design applied to digital spaces. A novel measure could involve creating a bug bounty program similar to those commonly used for security issues. Such an initiative would likely require funding to implement, but it could reward users who report replicable and fixable accessibility issues in digital spaces.
- d) **Partnering:** Universities have a unique opportunity to partner not only with one another, but with the public, members of disability community, and software vendors to enact these – and other – changes. Partnering should include inter-university collaboration, where successful strategies and tools for digital accessibility can be shared, as well as fostering relationships that can contribute to improvements. As universities produce research, these collaborations can also feed into joint research and development activities. Further, resource pooling can reduce costs and increase the efficiency of accessibility initiatives. As to public engagement, community involvement can provide valuable insights and feedback. In addition, awareness activities on digital inclusion can help advance the mission of universities to be a force for doing good for society. Finally, partnerships with software vendors can aid the development and

implementation of accessibility features in digital tools and platforms. Universities may bring communities and skills together via such relationships, and by portraying people with disabilities as major clients, universities can use their buying power to motivate vendors to develop and implement commitments on inclusion.

### Chapter 5.3. Property and facilities opening the doors of opportunity to persons with disabilities

- a) **Design guides or briefing documents:** Establish policies and design guides or briefing documents aimed at built environment professionals that set clear objectives and standards for designers to strive for. These could establish protocols, such as co-design and consultation with staff and students with disability, and benchmark projects, either existing successful projects on campus or others the institution aspires to. If foundational expectations are not established and communicated, any building works run the risk of missing the mark and not being fit for purpose or flexible for further advancements and future social change. By not embedding aspirations beyond the building codes in briefing documents and policies from the very beginning of project initiation, universities are likely to have those design aspirations thwarted due to cost-cutting.
- b) **Disability capital works plan:** Establish a capital works plan for upgrades with a dedicated budget and urgent timeframe that is not dependent on major projects. A full and comprehensive cost-benefit analysis should underpin this, accounting for the value brought about by making the campus and infrastructure inclusive of people with disabilities. Such improvements benefit everyone, not only those for whom the upgrades are designed. Two striking examples are kerb cuts and voice activation software (i.e. Siri).
- c) **Consider disability broadly:** While many strategies focus on physical accessibility of the built environment, aspirations to enhance accessibility and inclusion need to consider a broader range of needs. While some gains in this area are being made, more needs to be done. For example, the provision of information about the noise levels and crowd density of various environments could make university campuses more inclusive.
- d) **Review reasonable adjustment funding:** Review approaches to funding allocation for adjustments for students and staff with disabilities and apply an equity framework to ensure minimisation of systemic discrimination.
- e) **A dedicated position:** Create a dedicated position such as a Campus Accessibility Officer to oversee and advocate for consideration of accessibility and inclusion in the built environment. This role would promote co-design throughout the whole process of addressing concerns and developing solutions and facilitate communication across different sectors of the university. For example, in the case of digital wayfinding and navigation, real change occurs when several departments have a deep understanding of the impacts of the maps on the wider community through stakeholder engagement with those directly involved as primary and secondary users of the platform. Opportunities for universities to collaborate and develop accessible wayfinding standards should be considered strongly, and such a position could be instrumental in promoting these.

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## Individual acknowledgements

We further want to acknowledge the Universitas 21 Network, its members, and individuals who have contributed to the success of this report



## First Nations Acknowledgment

We recognise that due to the impacts of colonisation, Indigenous peoples are more likely to be living with disability and / or chronic illness compared to the wider population. This Review acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which the 30 U21 Network universities are situated, and pays respects to their Elders, past and present.

The status of traditional owners of lands differs across the footprints of the U21 Network's 30 universities, and the lead author Professor Paul Harpur OAM is based at The University of Queensland (UQ) and thus will provide an acknowledgement which is more reflective of the traditional lands on which he and many authors work.

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

The traditional owners acknowledged here include all those who are the traditional owners of the lands on which UQ operates. The UQ main campuses include 3 campuses in or around Brisbane city, being St Lucia, Dutton Park and Herston, as well as a campus at Gatton in the Lockyer Valley. The UQ geographical footprint includes off-campus sites with the Translational Research Institute, marine research stations at Heron and Stradbroke Islands, mineral research centre, seismograph station, veterinary and agricultural science teaching and research centres at Gatton, UQ Business School Brisbane City, social science research at Long Pocket, and teaching hospitals, health centres and other medical research facilities. The University's overseas establishments include UQ's North America office in Washington D.C., and the UQ-Ochsner Clinical School in Louisiana, United States of America.

Most students and staff are based in Brisbane city, which for tens of thousands of years was known by its traditional name, Meeanjin, which means "the place of the blue water lilies." Brisbane is the traditional home of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples. UQ has geographic footprints on the lands of other traditional owners, and thus we also acknowledge:

- Bundaberg Rural Clinical School: Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Taribelang Bunda peoples
- Gatton campus: Yuggera peoples
- Heron Island Research Station: Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Taribelang Bunda peoples
- Hervey Bay: Butchulla people
- Meadowbrook - Yugambah Speaking Peoples
- Moreton Bay Research Station and Redland Hospital - Quandamooka people
- Rockhampton Rural Clinical School - Darumbal People
- Veterinary Practice Dayboro - Kabi Kabi people

# Method and approach

## Paul Harpur and Brooke Szucs

### Planning phase

This report has been made possible by the support of the U21 Secretariat and disability inclusion support within member universities. Efforts to build and strengthen collaboration on disability Inclusion was formalised in 2023 with the establishment of the U21 Disability Community of Practice.

When the U21 Senior Leaders' Group was developing the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement they consulted with the U21 Disability Community of Practice. As part of this process, Professor Harpur proposed to the U21 Disability Community of Practice that he led a policy mapping initiative to advance the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. After consulting with the U21 Disability Community of Practice, as well as colleagues across the network, it was decided to seek support from the U21 Senior Leaders' Group in their April 2024 meeting in Hong Kong for a U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative.

In their April 2024 meeting, the Senior Leaders' Group reiterated their commitment to advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion by adopting the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and by agreeing to support the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative to be led by Professor Paul Harpur.

Following approval by the U21 Senior Leaders' Group, Professor Paul Harpur reached out to Mr Paul Sheeran to benefit from his project management expertise. Paul Sheeran formed

an Oversight Project Management Group which provided valuable support to this report's success. In particular, the Oversight Project Management Group assisted in the development of a project management plan to manage a project across 30 universities situated in over 20 countries, spread across all inhabited continents, with language barriers and multiple work groups at each university.

A draft of the project management plan was shared with the U21 Disability Community of Practice, as well as key groups within to gain feedback, including the Disability Collaboratory, the Disability Inclusion Group, and the Disability Inclusion and Advocacy Network. After implementing suggested changes, the project management plan was adopted.

The project management plan called for data to be collected via a survey and through a manual document collection process. To facilitate this, existing networks were used to gather U21 staff members to support in finalising the research tools, and to participate in the data gathering, analysis and writing of this report.

In addition to the Oversight Project Management Group, staff were sorted into teams aligned with the thematic chapters in this report. During the process some staff withdrew, and new staff joined the project. Those who made a substantive contribution to thematic chapters have been named as authors.

## Data collection

### The U21 Disability Policy Mapping survey

A literature review was performed by the project team to identify key themes. Drawing upon this, as well as decades of academic and professional experience, the research team co-designed the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping survey. The survey was piloted tested at and several questions were added which addressed policy questions confronting those who delivered disability inclusion interventions.

The U21 Disability Policy Mapping survey aimed to gather information on disability inclusion policies and practices across the U21 Network of universities. The survey contained 30 questions covering various aspects of disability inclusion. Topics covered included:

1. **Governance:** Structure and evaluation of disability inclusion efforts.
2. **Strategies:** University-wide strategic plans and specific disability inclusion plans.
3. **Research:** Disability inclusion research groups and strategies.
4. **Courses:** Availability of disability studies programs.
5. **Training:** Disability awareness training for students and staff.
6. **Data Collection:** Collection of data on students and staff with disabilities.
7. **Accommodations:** Policies for making accommodations for students and staff.
8. **Support Services:** Support provided by libraries, IT services, and facilities.
9. **Innovative Initiatives:** Examples of innovative disability inclusion initiatives.
10. **Contacts:** Points of contact for sharing findings and participating in the U21 Disability Community of Practice.

The survey sort qualitative responses and relevant documents to inform shared insights and public resources aimed at enhancing disability inclusion across the U21 Network.

Ethical clearance for this project was obtained from UQ under reference number 2024/HE001229. After ethics approval was secured, an invitation to participate in the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative was shared across the U21 Network along with invitations to complete the survey being emailed by the U21 Secretariat to their contacts within member universities. In addition, the survey was distributed by members of the U21 Disability Community of Practice to colleagues they knew, at their university and others in the U21 Network, who would be well-equipped to respond.

### Manual searching

During the drafting of the survey tool, it was anticipated that the fragmented nature of disability inclusion policies across universities would result in incomplete responses. As anticipated, the fragmented nature of disability inclusion in universities made it challenging for staff members to provide full responses in all areas of the survey. Thusly, researchers from the thematic teams agreed to perform manual searches to ensure the data set was representative.

Often those working on the thematic chapters had engaged in policy searches of university websites for academic or professional purposes and thus were familiar with search protocols. Where this was not the case, the project lead was able to provide support.

In addition to relying upon staff assigned to thematic chapters, efforts were made to reduce challenges created by culture and language across the U21 Network. Professor Harpur used his ARC Future Fellowship funds to retain Ms Brooke Szucs, who speaks Japanese, German and Spanish, and Mr Nick Yao, who speaks all Chinese languages, to analyse documents and make direct contacts with U21 Network universities where these languages were the primary language of communication to elicit additional data.

## Data collected

A total of 22 universities submitted to the survey, contributing data that formed the foundation of the analysis. The data provided in the survey included qualitative responses along with documents that were uploaded to the survey and in other cases links to policy and websites. Where websites were provided, the documents were downloaded. This process elicited over 300 policy artifacts - policy documents and websites that explains processes.

The survey data was gathered and distributed to the teams working on thematic chapters. A preliminary analysis of the data was performed and gaps identified. To fill the gaps identified, manual data was collected from university websites, as well as requesting staff of target universities support in the provision of data.

## Data analysis

With the exceptions of chapters 1.2 and 2.1 which provide analysis of developing disability norms, and of chapter 1.5, on intersectionality, the approach to data analysis was the same in all other chapters. Even though the methods of chapters 1.2, 1.4 align with the method in this method chapter, the authors of those chapters desired to explain their methods in their chapters and thus those chapters include a method section.

The data was shared with the teams and support was provided to help narrow which

documents were most relevant to each thematic team.

To understand how different universities approached disability inclusion in each area, and to help identify innovative and best practices, each team engaged in a comparative policy analysis over the documents. This involved examining how different universities address accessibility and support based upon the qualitative data provided in the survey, as well as in the policies and websites gathered. Those involved in the analysis drew from their personal expertise working in the relevant policy area, as well as drawing upon scholarship and disability norms. Through this process, recommendations were developed for each chapter.

The involvement of multiple authors resulted in some variation of language, due to differing theoretical perspectives, and some slight variation in how chapters are structured. We fundamentally believe that diversity is a strength and decided that these slight variations strengthened the report.

Progress was monitored through regular communications. Ultimately all the thematic chapters were placed in a single document and shared across those who co-authored chapters for comment and updating of their own thematic chapters. This process resulted in this final report that will be presented to the U21 Senior Leaders' Group in May 2025.

# Part 1:

## Disability governance norms

Chapter 1.1.      **The application of disability norms on representation in higher education**

*Paul Harpur*

Chapter 1.2.      **Universities acting collectively to champion disability inclusion**

*Paul Harpur and Wuri Handayani*

Chapter 1.3.      **University-wide disability governance**

*Deirdre O'Connor*

Chapter 1.4.      **Universities enabling and empowering**

*Brooke Szucs and Gerhard Hoffstaedter*

Chapter 1.5.      **Disability and Intersectionality**

*Brooke Szucs, Paul Harpur, Dino Willox, and Nancy Pachana*

## Chapter 1.1.

### The application of disability norms on representation in higher education

Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)<sup>1</sup> was drafted on the mantra of “nothing about us, without us”.<sup>2 3 4</sup> Reflecting this new paradigm, the strategies, policies and operational information analysed across the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report evinces efforts by universities in the U21 Network to become disability champions of change.

In 2 parts, this chapter will analyse where efforts to become a disability champion of change can be undermined by misunderstanding and misapplying disability norms.

First, the CRPD has created clarity over who can claim to have lived experience of disability and guidance is provided on best practice in implementing such measures.

Secondly, this chapter will address the definition of when a group or organisation can be said to represent persons with disabilities according to international disability norms.

#### Part 1. Representations of lived experience

Disability is a social construct associated with impairment, denial of rights and disadvantage. Although disability is usually associated with negative outcomes, there are situations where lived experience of disability attracts benefits and opportunities. People may misrepresent the extent of their medical condition to gain social security or workers compensation benefits, to compete in a more favourable category in the Paralympics,<sup>5</sup> to gain a reasonable accommodation or adjustment they are not entitled too or to take advantage of measures aimed to reverse disadvantage, such as committee appointments, on grants or in employment.

When championing disability inclusion, universities rightly empower people who have lived experience of disability. Who though has lived experience of disability? The CRPD in Article 1 provides a description which is informative: however, definitions differ across jurisdictions, and then between regulatory interventions in such jurisdictions. Then there are differences between how disability groups may define who can represent the disability community. Practically, universities should comply with international disability norms but also look to how disability is defined in their local laws and reach out to people in their communities who are currently accepted as representing the disability community for guidance.

Beyond engaging with persons with a disability, often others in the community seek to represent the disability community. How should such measures treat people who have previously identified with having a disability, people who have a disability who prefer not to identify as having a disability, people

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1 United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities>

2 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2017). *The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities as a global tipping point for the participation of persons with disabilities*. Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics.

3 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern Law Journal*, 10, 542.

4 Harpur, P. (2021). *Universities as Disability Champions of Change*. TEDx. <https://youtu.be/ehHVY95sn04?si=rYplFpSlop8l8jgk>

5 Schultz, J. (2024). *When Paralympic athletes fake the extent of their disability*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/when-paralympic-athletes-fake-the-extent-of-their-disability>

who have no disability themselves, but have a family member with a disability, or are simply allies keen to advance inclusion?

Universities desire to utilise the resources they have to maximise outcomes, yet universities need to ensure structures and language aligns with best practice. A failure to do so can create risks, including:

- When universities call people out as leaders of the disability community. If the disability community within the university and more broadly, alumni, media or government disagree with that assessment, then this will lead to reputational damage and the initiative may fail.
- Beyond reputational damage, erroneous claims can create funding challenges. If lived experience is erroneously claimed in a publication or funding application, then reviewers who recognise the importance of lived experience will view such claims as problematic or even fatal. Further, if lived experience is a condition precedent of the funding or philanthropy, then an intentional falsehood or accidental misrepresentation could result in a breach of contract.
- Additionally, if opportunities aimed at persons with disabilities are being exploited by people without a disability, then this unfairly excludes some of the most disadvantaged members of the university community from opportunities that they should be benefiting from. Although some of these opportunities are limited to people with lived experience of disability, in other situations lived experience of disability can amount to a competitive edge. Illustratively, during 2024 in Australia, the National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability offered PhD Scholarship Opportunities which apply to all U21 Australian universities.<sup>6</sup> Even though lived experience of disability is not necessary, having lived experience of disability or having a person with a disability in the applicant's family would provide the applicant with a competitive edge.

The authority on disability norms globally, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee), in its interpretative guidance in General Comment 7 has clarified who can claim the mantle of lived experience of disability.<sup>7</sup>

General Comment 7 elevates persons with disability as the primary actors in the disability movement, while providing an important secondary role for those who have family members who live with a disability, while also encouraging allies to champion change. This position is illustrated in General Comment 7, where it observes that the positive impact on decision-making processes of the involvement and participation of persons with disabilities... [should be recognised], notably because of their lived experience and best knowledge of rights to be implemented.<sup>8</sup> General Comment 7 draws a distinction between those who have lived experience of disability and family members who have lived experience of supporting persons with lived experience of disability.<sup>9</sup>

In providing a role for family members and allies, General Comment 7 explains that these actors should not "undermine" the voices of persons with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting this position, General Comment 7

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6 National Centre of Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health. (2024). *PhD scholarship opportunities*. <https://www.3dn.unsw.edu.au/PhD-scholarship-opportunities-April-2024.pdf>

7 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2018). *General comment No. 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention: Committee on the rights of persons with disabilities*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/pdf>

8 ID, at 12.

9 ID, at 75(i)

10 ID, at 37

provides examples where family members will be involved in speaking for persons with disabilities. Illustratively, General Comment 7 recognises that persons with certain levels of intellectual disability may require stronger involvement from parents to ensure the voices of the persons with disabilities are included in debates.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, where there are children with disabilities, then their parents have a stronger role in representing their interests.<sup>12</sup>

## **Part 2. When should a university represent a group as representing persons with disabilities?**

Similar to lived experience, there is a distinction between groups that provide support to persons with disabilities or research on persons with disabilities or on impairment, and those groups which can be held out as representing the disability community. Risks surrounding misrepresentation can arise:

- Where the university develops external partnerships with groups that hold themselves out as representing persons with disabilities, but in fact they do not meet this criterion. Beyond reputational damage, this mistake could misdirect well-intentioned initiatives.
- Internally, universities develop voicing structures and research groupings to advance representation of persons with disabilities. If these groups do not meet the definition of a representative organisation, then this can reduce the positive impact of such initiatives.

In General Comment 7, the CRPD Committee provides guidance on when a group or organisation can be said to be representative of the disability community. The Committee highlights the importance of “distinguishing between organizations ‘of’ persons with disabilities, which are composed of and controlled/led by persons with disabilities, and organizations ‘for’ persons with disabilities, which are any organization established to provide service to and for persons with disabilities”.<sup>13</sup> Although both types of groups play an important role, it is important to understand when a group can claim the mantle of a disabled persons organisations (DPOs) to ensure each group is assigned the appropriate role in activities. Disability led networks, steering groups or research groups within a university are a helpful resource on understanding the disability landscape.

### **Conclusion**

The elevation of individuals with disabilities within the disability movement mirrors similar struggles in other areas of social justice. It is crucial to accurately apply disability norms to ensure the success of initiatives aimed at inclusion. Misrepresentation of lived experiences and the improper designation of representative organisations can lead to reputational damage, funding challenges, and the exclusion of those who genuinely need support. By adhering to international disability norms and engaging with local communities, universities can become true champions of change, fostering an environment where the voices of persons with disabilities are authentically represented and valued. This approach not only aligns with best practices but also maximises the positive impact of inclusion efforts.

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<sup>11</sup> ID, at 14(d)

<sup>12</sup> ID, 14(e)

<sup>13</sup> ID, at 15

## Chapter 1.2.

### Universities acting collectively to champion disability inclusion

Paul Harpur and Wuri Handayani

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the positive role universities working together can have on promoting disability inclusion. To advance a shared interest, universities can act collectively through an ad hoc arrangement or through forming and funding an ongoing association, consortia or network. Groups, such as Universitas 21 (U21),<sup>14</sup> the European University Association,<sup>15</sup> or Universities Australia,<sup>16</sup> include a corporate structure, recognisable brand, joint activities, and a directorate and secretariat to coordinate and facilitate member collective activities. Through pooling resources, creating a collective voice and through shared expertise and knowledge creation, member universities achieve more collectively than they could acting alone.

In 4 parts this chapter will analyse how universities acting collectively through networks can advance disability inclusion. First, this chapter will illustrate the need for collective action with a case study. Part 1 will provide a case study on how a new member university in the U21 Network, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), one of the leading research-focused universities in Indonesia, aims to benefit from collective action on disability inclusion. Second, this chapter will explore how U21 has taken steps to adopt an EDI framework and is forming a governance structure to ensure this framework is realised. Third this chapter will explore interventions by the European University Association and illustrate the limitation of project-based funding. Finally, this chapter will use Universities Australia's Indigenous governance strategy and framework to illustrate how lasting changes can be achieved by resourcing, committed individuals and effective governance frameworks.

#### Part 1. A case study on Universitas Gadjah Mada: How collective action can change lives

UGM, one of the leading research-focused universities in Indonesia, became a U21 member as of 1 August 2023. Whereas other U21 universities have operated in higher education regulatory and policy environments that have advanced disability inclusion for decades, universities in Indonesia operate in an environment where disability inclusion is more recently gained regulatory and policy attention.

Indonesia has increased attention on advancing disability inclusion in higher education. Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia affirms the right of every citizen to education. This is further reinforced by Law No. 20 of 2003, also known as the National Education Law, which recognises the rights of all citizens to education, inclusive of individuals with disabilities, and mandates the provision of special education resources in both inclusive and specialised educational settings<sup>17</sup>. In addition, the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture promulgated Regulation No. 70 of 2009 concerning inclusive education, which requires all educational institutions to accept students with disabilities and to offer them equitable learning opportunities through the development of inclusive educational practices<sup>18</sup>. Following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Indonesia enacted Law No. 8 of 2016, which guarantees the right to inclusive

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<sup>14</sup> Universitas 21. (n.d.). <https://universitas21.com>

<sup>15</sup> European University Association. (n.d.). <https://www.eua.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> Universities Australia. (n.d.). <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/>

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO. (n.d.). *Indonesia - Inclusion*. <https://education-profiles.org/eastern-and-south-eastern-asia/indonesia/-inclusion>

<sup>18</sup> INOVASI. (2022). *Policy brief 6: Inclusive education in Indonesia (2011-2019)*. <https://www.inovasi.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Policy-Brief-6-Inclusive-2011-2019.pdf>

education for every citizen<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, educational institutions are obligated to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to ensure their equal enjoyment of educational rights. Practically, the Indonesian government also established Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020, addressing reasonable accommodations within education and other sectors. This regulation mandates that schools and universities furnish assistive technologies, ensure accessible facilities, and develop inclusive curricula.

Specifically for higher education institutions, the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture issued Regulation No. 46 of 2017 regarding inclusive education, which recommends the establishment of disability service units within higher education facilities. Furthermore, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) released guidelines to support services for students with disabilities in higher education in 2017<sup>20</sup>.

Although the regulations offer a comprehensive framework, numerous challenges persist, particularly within the realm of higher education in Indonesia. Firstly, merely 2.8% of individuals with disabilities have attained a higher education degree (National Socio-Economic Survey, 2020)<sup>21</sup>. This low percentage underscores the barriers faced by students in pursuing higher education, which include limited access, insufficiently accessible facilities, inadequate support services, and prevalent social stigma.

Furthermore, the prevalence of Disability Service Units (DSUs) within Indonesia's higher education landscape is markedly low. As of May 2024, approximately 115 universities or 2.88% of more than 4,000 higher education institutions in Indonesia have established DSUs<sup>22</sup>. This statistic highlights that the overwhelming majority of universities and colleges have yet to implement such units, which are essential for facilitating inclusive education and providing support for students with disabilities. For example, UGM in Yogyakarta inaugurated its DSU on December 20, 2024, thereby demonstrating its commitment to fostering an inclusive campus environment.

As a newly established institution, DSU UGM faces a multitude of challenges. Firstly, it is imperative for UGM to formulate a policy regarding individuals with disabilities that reflects a commitment to fostering diversity, equality, and the eradication of discrimination in its practices, policies, and procedures. Secondly, there exists a significant lack of awareness concerning disability among faculty members and non-disabled students. Thirdly, the limited accessibility of infrastructure may hinder the provision of comprehensive services to students with disabilities. Therefore, it is essential to collaborate and exchange knowledge with other universities, particularly those within the U21 Network, to learn best practices. Specifically, we must seek to understand how to implement reasonable adjustments, develop inclusive policies, and embrace universal design in learning.

## Part 2. U21 on EDI and disability inclusion

U21 brings 29 leading global universities together to share excellence, knowledge, and experiences on areas including EDI and disability inclusion. This part explains how U21 is facilitating its members to advance a more inclusive world.

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19 UNESCO. (n.d.). *Indonesia - Inclusion*. <https://education-profiles.org/eastern-and-south-eastern-asia/indonesia/-inclusion>

20 Ministry of Research and Technology/National Agency for Research and Innovation. (n.d.). *Service guidance for students with disabilities in university - general directorate of learning and student affairs*. <https://www.its.ac.id/sustainability/Service-Guidance-for-Students-with-Disabilities-in-University-General-Directorate-of-Learning-and-Student-Affairs-Ministry-of-Research-and-TechnologyNationa.pdf>

21 Barnum, M. (2024). *Report: Almost all disabled students lack access to college readiness programs*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/report-almost-all-disabled-students-lack-access-to-college-readiness-programs/>

22 Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. (n.d.). *Unit layanan disabilitas [Disability services unit]*. <https://ptinklusif.kemdikbud.go.id/unit-layanan-disabilitas>

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the U21 EDI Working Group developed a Network-wide framework on EDI. In April 2024, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group adopted the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement.<sup>23</sup> This framework aims to amplify the U21 Network's positive impact across the globe by championing initiatives that promote and embed EDI.

Through realising 3 principles, the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement aims to create a globally interconnected network of universities where member institutions value and promote equity, celebrate diversity, and champion inclusion and belonging in all internationalisation and network initiatives and programs. The first principle fosters equitable partnerships among universities that recognises historical and contemporary power dynamics, while fostering participatory knowledge sharing to support collective engagement. The second principle commits the Network to ensuring that global education and connections are universally accessible, so that their transformative potential should be extended to every member of the U21 Network. Finally, Principle 3 commits the U21 Network to championing diverse and inclusive leadership in all the Network's programs and activities and ensuring equitable representation from across the network in governance and stakeholder groups that encourage diverse insights. This third principle includes ensuring that the policies and practices of the U21 Secretariat foster EDI at all levels of organisational decision-making.

To help advance the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement, and also in the April 2024 meeting, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group commissioned the U21 Disability Community of Practice to perform a U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report. The U21 Disability Community of Practice had been formed by Professor Robert Greenberg from the University of Auckland and Professor Paul Harpur from The University of Queensland in 2023.<sup>24</sup> The U21 Disability Community of Practice aims to address policies and approaches relevant to issues such as how members promote awareness of the capacity and success of academic, professional and administrative staff with disabilities, and how universities support the career pathways of university staff as they seek to advance through the ranks to levels such as director, professor, dean, and other senior leadership roles.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond a standalone report on disability inclusion, the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement now has an oversight group. To implement this framework, the U21 EDI Working Group has expanded and formed a U21 EDI Committee. At the time of writing, the expressions of interest for this committee had been received' however, the governance documents and appointments to this committee were still being finalised. It is the hope that the U21 EDI Committee should learn from other university collective efforts, including the European University Association and Universities Australia.

### **Part 3. Disability Inclusion and the European University Association**

The European University Association is the collective voice of the universities of Europe.<sup>26</sup> For over 2 decades, the European University Association has played a key role in building university communities across the whole of Europe and creating a coherent system for European higher education and research. The European University Association is a community of over 900 members and affiliates. It represents universities and national rectors' conferences in 49 European countries, as well as affiliated organisations and networks based both in and beyond Europe.

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<sup>23</sup> Universitas 21. (n.d.) EDI. <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

<sup>24</sup> Universitas 21. (2024). *Disability champions of change*. <https://universitas21.com/news/disability-champions-change/>

<sup>25</sup> Universitas 21. (n.d.) EDI. <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

<sup>26</sup> European University Association. (n.d.). <https://www.eua.eu/>

The European University Association champions a range of ongoing initiatives on diversity. For illustration, the European University Association supports attention to and more consistent application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, whereby signatories commit to “develop engaged with higher education institutions and support organisations that support populations with a refugee(-like) background.”<sup>27</sup> This includes direct measures to support this population, and at the policy level, advocating for access for at-risk academics and existing students, and for the creation of new EU grants and fellowship programs.

In contrast to other diversity areas, the European University Association does not have any ongoing disability inclusion initiatives published on their website. Rather than a dedicated program of work with resourcing, disability inclusion is advanced on an ad hoc basis where they advertise and support workshops, funding opportunities, and research reports. The European University Association workshops can provide a platform for externally funded research. For example, the 2024 AccessibleEU: Accessibility and [Higher Education Working](#) together to build a more accessible European Union for persons with disabilities workshop includes a presentation on the Erasmus funded project European Network of Inclusive Universities.<sup>28</sup> The EUni4all-Network project produced a network of European universities working for the inclusion of students with disabilities web platform.<sup>29</sup> The web platform collected and presented data and ratings on 42 universities across 15 European countries across the European University Association. This included star ratings on universities such as Charles University,<sup>30</sup> Cyprus University of Technology,<sup>31</sup> Trinity College Dublin,<sup>32</sup> the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens,<sup>33</sup> Stockholm University,<sup>34</sup> University of Eastern Finland,<sup>35</sup> University of Lorraine,<sup>36</sup> University of Porto,<sup>37</sup> and University of Seville.<sup>38</sup> These universities were rated against a criteria including policies and accessible buildings, digital spaces, activities and teaching. Even though the website remains live, updating ended more than 2 years ago, in 2022, when the funding ended.

European University Association funding on disability appears to be directed on projects which include disability as one of all diversity attributes. For example, the 2019 diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions: results from the INVITED Project collected data from 159 universities and included disability.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, other initiatives promoted by the European University Association have been funded by other bodies. For example, the European University Association publicised a sports scholarship opportunity for up to 20 students with disabilities as a

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27 European University Association. (n.d.). *At-risk academics and students*. <https://www.eua.eu/our-work/topics/at-risk-academics-and-students.html>

28 European University Association. (2024). *Agenda and concept note for 2024 annual conference*. [https://www.eua.eu/AGENDA\\_AND\\_CONCEPT\\_NOTE\\_acc.pdf](https://www.eua.eu/AGENDA_AND_CONCEPT_NOTE_acc.pdf)

29 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *Inclusive universities network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/>

30 Fundación ONCE. (2022). *Charles University (Univerzita Karlova) – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/charles-university-univerzita-karlova>

31 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *Cyprus University of Technology – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/cyprus-university-of-technology>

32 Fundación ONCE. (2022). *Trinity College Dublin – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/trinity-college-dublin>

33 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *National and Kapodistrian University of Athens – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/national-and-kapodistrian-university-of-athens>

34 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *Stockholm University – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/stockholm-university>

35 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *University of Eastern Finland – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/university-of-eastern-finland>

36 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *University of Lorraine – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/university-of-lorraine>

37 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *University of Porto – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/university-of-porto>

38 Fundación ONCE. (n.d.). *University of Seville – EUni4ALL Network*. <https://inclusive-universities-network.fundaciononce.es/universities/university/university-of-seville>

39 European University Association. (n.d.). *Diversity, equity, and inclusion in European higher education institutions*. <https://www.eua.eu/equityandinclusionineuropeanhighereducationinstitutions.pdf>

result of the partnership between European University Sports Association (EUSA), European Universities Games Zagreb – Rijeka 2016 (EUG 2016), Cotrugli Business School (CBS), and the European Paralympic Committee (EPC)<sup>40</sup>

#### **Part 4. Universities Australia as a best practice example on diversity governance: A sector-wide Indigenous strategy and lived experience governance committee**

Even though Universities Australia (UA) has not published initiatives focusing on disability, Australian universities have acted to collectively advance Indigenous inclusion in higher education. The Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017-20 was the first sector-wide initiative that brought all member universities together to achieve common goals to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education.<sup>41</sup> During the implementation of this strategy, and in the lead up to the next strategy, in February 2021 the Universities Australia Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) / Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) Indigenous Committee was established.<sup>42</sup> The Committee is comprised of either the DVC or PVC Indigenous from each member university, or where that university does not have a DVC or PVC Indigenous, the most senior Indigenous staff member in an Indigenous-specific role. The DVC / PVC Committee was integral in the development of the new Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 and is central in its implementation providing essential advice to UA.

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<sup>40</sup> European University Sports Association. (n.d.). *Education and sports for people with disabilities*. <https://www.eusa.eu/whats-up-education-and-sports-for-people-with-disabilities>

<sup>41</sup> Universities Australia. (n.d.). *Indigenous higher education*. <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/policy-submissions/diversity-equity/indigenous-higher-education/>

<sup>42</sup> Universities Australia. (n.d.). *Indigenous higher education*. <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/policy-submissions/diversity-equity/indigenous-higher-education/>

The new UA Indigenous Strategy 2022–25 shifts the focus from aspiration to implementation with actionable commitments outlined under 5 key themes.<sup>43</sup>

1. Student success
2. Staff success
3. University responsibility for Indigenous advancement
4. Racism and cultural safety
5. Recognising the value Indigenous people and knowledges bring to the university and embedding Indigenous value systems and knowledges into university structures.

The development and implementation of this Strategy is led by Indigenous leaders in universities through the DVC / PVC Indigenous Committee. Overall, the approach UA has taken to advancing Indigenous inclusion in higher education has been transformational and operates as a best practice guide to how inclusion could be advanced for disability by UA and other university networks.

## Recommendations

- a) **Foster equitable partnerships:** the U21 Network should continue to foster equitable partnerships among its member universities, recognising historical and contemporary power dynamics. Participatory knowledge sharing should be encouraged to support collective engagement and mutual learning.
- b) **Ensuring disability representation:** this chapter recommends that the U21 EDI Committee integrate disability inclusion throughout the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. This should be achieved by first realising disability inclusion in Principle 3 on leadership. Specifically, by ensuring disability representation from across the network in governance and stakeholder groups that encourage diverse insights.
- c) **Develop a disability inclusion action plan:** similar to the approach adopted by UA Australia on advancing Indigenous inclusion, the U21 disability leaders should be encouraged to explore how an U21 disability inclusion action plan could be developed and advanced, so that disability inclusion across the U21 Network can be advanced consistently and sustainably.

## Conclusion

Drawing from the development of U21s EDI initiatives, the experiences from the European University Association, Universities Australia, and more broadly from this U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report, this chapter concludes, while project-based initiatives can enhance knowledge and drive progress, such measures risk becoming outdated without continuous updates and sustained efforts. Further, individual universities acting alone can struggle to identify economies of scale when it comes to disability inclusion policy development. This chapter has highlighted the importance of collective action among universities to champion disability inclusion.

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<sup>43</sup> Universities Australia. (2022). *Indigenous strategy 2022-2025*. <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/publication/indigenous-strategy-2022-25/>

## Chapter 1.3.

### University-wide disability governance

Deirdre O'Connor

#### Introduction

Drawing upon the responses to the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Survey, this chapter will review disability governance arrangements for disability inclusion across U21 member universities. Specifically, survey respondents were asked to describe the structures that have been adopted to govern disability inclusion within their institutions; report the extent to which disability is identified as a priority within their overall university strategic plans or university-wide EDI plans; report whether specific university-wide disability inclusion plans are in place and identify the extent to which such plans are linked to policies to advance disability inclusion; identify the mechanisms used within their institutions to collect and report qualitative and quantitative data on staff and students with disabilities. The survey feedback provided by the U21 member universities is summarised below along with commentary on the overall / collective picture generated by the responses.

#### Method

The U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Survey asked respondents to describe the structures that are in place to govern disability inclusion across their universities. Responses were received from 18 member universities with varying degrees of detail. The data variability might stem from the survey respondent's lack of access to or awareness of their university's data.

#### Summary of Governance, Planning Arrangements and Data Collection Measures for Disability Inclusion

A summary of the data received to the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Survey is contained in the table below.

Institution	Governance of Disability Inclusion	University / EDI-wide Strategic Planning Focus	Disability-specific Planning Focus	Disability Data Collection / Reporting
University of Auckland	Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity provides leadership on fulfilling the University's commitment to broad issues of equity, diversity and inclusion in employment and education. Unclear how specific issues on disability inclusion are addressed at this level.	Responded that accessible, equitable lifelong higher education opportunities are mentioned in its strategic plan, but that disability is not specifically addressed.	Responded that the University's Disability Action Plan describes how the vision and principles of the University are brought to life in partnership with people with disability.	The University reported a disabled student count of 4,299 (9%) and a disabled staff count of 902 (7%) in 2023.

Institution	Governance of Disability Inclusion	University / EDI-wide Strategic Planning Focus	Disability-specific Planning Focus	Disability Data Collection / Reporting
University of Birmingham	Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee is chaired by the University Provost. The Accessibility Oversight Group (AOG) is chaired by the Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor for EDI and feeds into the EDI Committee.	Response points to the University's Strategic Framework document which references their commitment building a culture which is supportive and inclusive. The document does not contain any direct reference to disability.	Responded that University has signed up to the Disability Confident Scheme, a government scheme designed to encourage employers to recruit, retain and develop disabled people and those with health conditions. The University has also published an Access and Participation Plan (APP) with the Office for Students (OfS) that defines its commitment to widening participation. New Equality Strategy 2025-2028 currently under consultation has a greater focus on disability and accessibility.	Reported that in August 2023, 6.0% of staff declared a disability of any kind. Data on the proportions of disabled staff in different roles/at different grades is also available. With respect to students, 14.4% of students declared having one or multiple forms of disability. A detailed breakdown of the student disability statistics is also available.
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile	Reported that they have a Program for Inclusion for Students with Special Needs. The governance arrangements are unclear. No mention of structures relevant for staff.	The response references their University Strategy, identifying measures aimed at eliminating barriers to entry, progression and participation in university life. There is no specific reference to disability.	Not available	Not available
University of Connecticut	Survey response received but no information on governance provided.	Survey response received but no information on strategic planning provided.	The University has a Policy statement relating to People with Disabilities, setting out its commitment to achieving equal educational and employment opportunity and full participation for persons with disabilities, ensuring the same access to programs, opportunities, and activities at the University as all others.	Survey response received but no data provided.
University College Dublin	University Management Team (UMT) established the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) to promote an inclusive and diverse work and study environment for all. Disability inclusion is a core component of its remit. The EDI group is chaired by the Vice President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion who is a member of the University Management Team.	Response notes that its most recent Strategy to 2030 cites inclusion as one of the core values underpinning all its activities but does not specifically refer to disability.	Response notes that the University has an EDI Strategy and Action Plan which includes specific references to Disability. It also has a policy for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities.	Reported that data on students with disabilities are collected via its annual Widening Participation Report and via the national Higher Education Authority Equal Access Survey on new entrants into Higher Education in Ireland. Data on staff and students who identify as being neurodivergent was reported in the recent UCD-wide survey on Neurodiversity. Data on staff with disabilities are collected via the annual EDI Survey. Data from 2023 show that 12% of staff consider themselves to have a disability. Further detail by staff role is not available publicly but is available on request from the University's EDI Unit.

Institution	Governance of Disability Inclusion	University / EDI-wide Strategic Planning Focus	Disability-specific Planning Focus	Disability Data Collection / Reporting
The University of Edinburgh	Reported on a range of networking and support initiatives aimed at staff, students and their carers, some of which are linked in with the University's HR Division. Unclear on how these initiatives are linked in with the relevant governance structures.	No information received	Response indicated that there is a detailed Action Plan on Disability but not easily accessible, so it was not possible to report on its contents.	No information received
University of Glasgow	The University has a Disability Equality Champion who is connected to the Equality and Diversity Strategy Committee (EDSC), the University Principal and other senior managers. The role of the University's (EDSC) includes advising and making recommendations to the University's Court, Senate and the Senior Management Group.	Response notes that there are some mentions of EDI generally in their strategic planning documents, but nothing disability specific.	No information received	No information received
The University of Hong Kong	Reported that it has implemented a comprehensive governance structure to ensure disability inclusion. The key governing bodies are the Council and the Senate. Council is responsible for overall compliance with employment laws, including Disability Discrimination legislation. Senate is responsible for providing for the welfare of students, including those with disabilities.	The response is that its strategic plan contains a commitment to embracing equality, ethics, inclusivity, diversity, and transparency in all its activities. They suggest that while there is no explicit reference to disability, it is addressed indirectly via this statement.	Responded that the University has established an Equal Opportunity Policy to safeguard the inclusion of all staff and students on campus, including those with disabilities.	Reported that regarding data collection on disabilities, staff are required to disclose disabilities. No data available re staff. Re students, for the academic year 2023/24, 516 students declared their disabilities/SEN conditions, comprising 1.3% of the total student population.
KU Leuven	Reported that all disability resources are connected to Disability Officers. The governance arrangements are unclear.	The response is that the situation is unknown due to lack of access to the relevant documentation.	Reported that it has a diversity policy and plan, but they do not contain any measures specific to disability. The diversity policy/plan are not generally available for consultation. Access is restricted to staff and students only.	Reported that these statistics are unavailable.
Lund University	Survey response received but no information on governance provided.	Survey response received but no information on strategic planning provided.	No information available.	Reported that in 2023, 2800 students were granted study support measures due to a long-term disability. There is no precise way to express these numbers as a proportion of the student population since the systems are not built to handle this.  Data are not collected regarding staff.

Institution	Governance of Disability Inclusion	University / EDI-wide Strategic Planning Focus	Disability-specific Planning Focus	Disability Data Collection / Reporting
University of Maryland	Disability Summit was established in 2016 as a forum for dialogue and collaboration across types of disability and institutions. No information provided on the governance of this structure.	Survey response received but no information on strategic planning provided. Response indicates that accessibility of courses is discussed, but no detail provided.	The response indicated that there are policies and procedures in place but not a plan. It is not clear if these relate specifically to disability or EDI more generally.	Reported that 3,414 students are registered with their Accessibility and Disability Service (ADS) in 2023 which represents 8.4% of the student body.  No information available regarding staff.
McMaster University	Feedback provided on governance of accessibility. Key structure is McMaster Accessibility Advisory Council. Unclear how this is linked to wider relevant governance structures.	The response provided points to its Institutional Priorities document, in which the issues related to disability inclusion and accessibility are specifically highlighted.	The response identified a number of high-level plans and associated guidelines, most of which related to accessibility.	At McMaster University the following areas collect data related to persons with disabilities: - Employment Equity Census - Student Accessibility Services collects robust internal data on students with disabilities - Equity and Inclusion Office collects data related to any human rights complaints or consultations submitted by persons with disabilities.
The University of Melbourne	The University's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Sub-Committee (DEISCo), has oversight of its Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP). The DEISCo reports directly to the University Executive which is the most senior management committee of the University.	Institutional Strategy doesn't mention disability directly but does address inclusivity broadly. Institutional Diversity and Inclusion Policy mentions disability specifically.	Disability Action Inclusion Plan overseen by University's DEI Sub Committee.	Reported that approximately 10% of students identify as people with disability. Reliable data on the proportion of staff with disability is currently not available and has been identified as an area to be addressed.
Tecnológico de Monterrey	Reported that it has an advisory committee on persons with disabilities which is overseen by the University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Unclear how these arrangements are linked to wider University governance structures.	The response notes that the institution's strategic plan has a focus on EDI in general but does not mention disability specifically.	The response indicated that there is a general inclusion policy but nothing specific to disability.	No response received
University of Nottingham	Pro-Vice Chancellor for EDI sits on the University Executive Board. A steering group for staff and students focused on disability equality sits on the University's Intersectionality and Inclusion Oversight Group. Not clear how these structures are linked into wider governance arrangements.	The response notes that disability inclusion is not directly mentioned in its overall Strategy document, but it does feature in its institutional-wide equality, diversity and inclusion priorities.	Disability Equality Action Plan was launched in October 2024.	Reported that in 2023/24, 24% of undergrad students shared information about a disability, as did 13% of taught postgrads and 22% of research postgraduates. No information on staff provided.

Institution	Governance of Disability Inclusion	University / EDI-wide Strategic Planning Focus	Disability-specific Planning Focus	Disability Data Collection / Reporting
The University of Queensland	Key structure is the University Senate Sub-Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (SCEDI). The SCEDI provides oversight of all diversity issues, including disability. Under the SCEDI, a EDI Management Committee is chaired by the Deputy Provost which includes the leads of each EDI plan, including the chair of the Disability Inclusion Group.	The response provided notes that disability is not directly mentioned in the UQ Strategic Plan 2022-2025. However, diversity and promoting the University's engagement with the Brisbane 2032 Paralympics are referenced.	The response noted that the University has had various iterations of a university-wide disability inclusion strategy in the form of Disability Action Plans since 1999. The current Disability Action Plan 2023-2025 includes a vision and operational activities assigned to actors across the university, including in teaching, human resources, property and facilities, the library, marketing, research capacity building, and more.	The University of Queensland reported that approximately 7% of the student population but reported that they were unable to find the source of this data. No data on staff were reported.
The University of Sydney	Disability inclusion initiatives are monitored by the University's Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) Implementation group which reports regularly to the University Executive.	The response provided notes that disability is directly mentioned in its Sydney in 2032 Strategy as one of a range of diversity factors that they aim to support.	The response noted the that the University has a Disability Inclusion Action Plan which has been extended to 2025.	Reported that data on staff and students with disabilities is collected through self-identification measures in student records system and HR system respectively. Data on different staff categories who are disabled is available. With respect to student data, in 2023-2024, almost 11% of undergraduates identified as disabled, as did 6% of postgraduates undertaking coursework and 10% of those undertaking Higher Degrees by research.
Waseda University	Reported that its Office for Promotion of Equality and Diversity provides disability support for students, amongst other key diversity areas. Governance of this structure is unclear.	The response provided was that disability is not mentioned in its strategic planning documents.	The response noted that the University has a policy in place but not a plan. It is not clear whether the policy refers specifically to disability or not.	The response provided was that these statistics are unavailable to the person completing the survey.
University of Zurich	There is a position in the Vice-Rectorate that deals with disability inclusion at a strategic university-wide level.	The response provided is that the institution's diversity policy is committed to ensuring that all members, including people with disabilities, can participate in the university without discrimination. However, there is no official strategy addressing the barriers to participation experienced by people with disabilities in the institution, so the topic is addressed only indirectly.	The response pointed to the University's UZH Accessible Project which has the goal of identifying and removing barriers for people with disabilities over the long term.	Response not provided

## Analysis

### Governance of disability inclusion

The results from the survey show a mixed picture in terms of the extent to which university-level governance structures address disability issues specifically. In some cases, governance of disability inclusion is subsumed under the governance of EDI more generally, while in other cases, respondents reported that governance arrangements are unclear or unknown. Having said that, there are some cases where the structures and levels of governance specific to disability inclusion are more clearly and easily identifiable. These institutions include the University of Birmingham, University College Dublin, University of Glasgow, The University of Hong Kong, The University of Melbourne, The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney and the University of Zurich.

### Strategic Planning Focus

Respondents were asked to report the extent to which disability inclusion is identified as a priority within their universities' overall strategic plans or within university-wide EDI plans. They were also asked to identify the extent to which such plans are linked to university policies to advance disability inclusion. Responses were received from 15 universities.

Again, the results show a mixed picture in terms of level of detail available and the extent to which disability is mentioned directly or indirectly in university strategic planning documents. Most responses received indicated that disability inclusion is not named specifically as a priority area for planning and associated policies and developments, but more typically, it is subsumed under broader EDI planning initiatives. McMaster University and The University of Sydney were exceptions in this regard, as disability inclusion is named specifically as an area of focus in their university-level strategic planning arrangements.

### Disability-Specific Planning Focus

Respondents were asked to report on the extent to which their universities have a specific institution-wide disability plan or strategic document – over and above their previously discussed university-wide strategic plans. They were also asked to identify the extent to which such plans are linked to relevant policies and procedures.

Responses were received from 16 universities. The data provided by respondents varied widely in terms of the detail provided and the level of specificity / relevance to the question asked. In some instances, respondents pointed to detailed Disability Action Plans and their associated guidelines / procedures for implementation (University of Auckland, University of Birmingham, University of Connecticut; University College Dublin; McMaster University; The University of Melbourne; The University of Queensland; The University of Sydney; University of Zurich); others reported on disability policies which existed in the context of broader EDI policies (The University of Hong Kong; Tecnológico de Monterrey), and in some cases plans were not provided by the respondent (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, University of Glasgow, Lund University).

### Collection and Reporting of Disability-related Data

Respondents were asked about the mechanisms by which their institutions collect qualitative and quantitative data on students and staff with disabilities. They were also asked to provide such data for a wide range of student and staff categories. Responses were received from 14 universities.

In general, sources of student data were more readily identifiable and available, while the picture in relation to staff data was more mixed. Some institutions were in a position to report on the numbers and proportions of students and staff in different roles who were identified as disabled (University of Auckland, University of Birmingham; University College Dublin; The University of Hong Kong; The University of Sydney). Others reported on student data only (Lund University; University of Maryland;

The University of Melbourne), while others the respondent did not provide any relevant data sources (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, The University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, KU Leuven; Tecnológico de Monterrey, Waseda University; University of Zurich).

## Recommendations

- a) **Establish clear leadership roles on disability governance:** Universities should create clear disability governance leadership structures. This should include leadership on diversity generally, through a dedicated DVC or PVC role that is supported by authority and resources. Additionally, universities should appoint a senior executive specifically targeting disability inclusion across the university. Universities should strive to appoint individuals with lived experience of disability to lead disability governance and to be employed within the team to operationalise the university's disability inclusion strategy. This role should include activities across all areas of the university operation. This role should have clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and well-defined responsibilities to ensure accountability and progress.
- b) **Strategic integration and support:** Inclusion should be prioritised on strategic agendas where relevant and must be specifically included in plans to operationalise the university's strategic plan, such as through disability action plans. The complementing of strategic plans with operational plans ensures that disability inclusion responsibilities are distributed across the institution and not solely placed on one individual or unit. The distribution of responsibility will require KPIs placed on those who have disability inclusion responsibility across the university. These KPIs should form part of existing reporting and performance appraisal processes to maximise accountability and compliance.
- c) **Funding and staffing disability inclusion governance:** Universities must provide adequate funding and staffing to enable disability diversity initiatives can be implemented. This includes central funding for accessibility improvements and resources for compliance activities, program development, and network building. Ideally this includes the establishment of a support framework and unit within the university to assist the EDI lead in fulfilling their mission. This ensures that the diversity inclusion lead is not overwhelmed and can effectively drive change.
- d) **Collecting data on staff with disability and continuous improvement on disability governance:** Universities should continuously seek feedback from the university community, including collecting data on staff with disabilities and the barriers they experience, and adapt disability strategies and practices accordingly. This ensures that initiatives remain relevant and effective in addressing the needs of diverse groups.

## Conclusion

The survey responses from U21 member universities reveal a diverse landscape of disability governance and inclusion practices. While some institutions have established clear and dedicated structures for disability governance, others integrate these responsibilities within broader EDI frameworks. The strategic prioritisation of disability inclusion varies, with only a few universities explicitly naming it in their strategic plans. Specific disability action plans are more common, though their linkage to broader policies and procedures is mixed. Data collection on disability appears more robust for students than for staff, with several respondents able to provide detailed statistics on disabled student populations.

## Chapter 1.4.

### Universities enabling and empowering

Brooke Szucs and Gerhard Hoffstaedter

#### Introduction

The U21 Network operates across diverse cultural and social contexts worldwide. Each of the 21 countries in which member universities are based has distinct social and historical approaches to disability inclusion, which shape how accessibility and leadership manifest within university environments. This variation is apparent in the realm of disability leadership, particularly in areas that directly impact the access and inclusion of disabled students, staff, and community members.

Historically, decision-making on disability-related issues has been led by non-disabled individuals, particularly within the medical and social work sectors, who have determined policies and support mechanisms without necessarily consulting or including those directly affected. However, sustained advocacy from disability rights movements has shifted this paradigm, leading to the principle of 'Nothing about us, without us,' which emphasises the necessity of involving disabled individuals in decision-making processes that affect them.

Recent scholarship by Harpur and Stein<sup>44</sup> has further developed this expectation, advocating for 'Nothing about us, unless it is led by us'. This approach underscores the importance of disabled individuals not only being included but actively leading efforts to shape policies, programs, and institutional structures. Within the university context, this principle calls for disabled individuals to lead accessibility committees, disability employee resource groups, and student-led disability organisations.

This chapter examines how this principle is enacted within disability groups across the U21 Network by addressing the following key questions:

1. What disability-focused groups exist within U21 member institutions?
2. Do these groups explicitly claim and demonstrate disability-led leadership?

Through this analysis, the chapter aims to assess the extent to which disability leadership is embedded within institutional structures, highlight best practices, and identify areas for further development to ensure meaningful representation and leadership by disabled individuals across the network.

#### Method

##### Types of Disability Inclusion Groups in U21 Institutions

A variety of disability inclusion groups exist within universities, ranging from faculty-based disability subcommittees to social groups and condition-specific support networks. Given the diversity of these groups, we selected 3 key types for analysis due to their consistency across institutions and their level of representation within university structures:<sup>45</sup>

1. **University-Wide Disability Committees (committees):** These committees operate at an institutional level and play a formal role in consulting on policy, strategic direction, and

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44 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. (2022). *The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities as a global tipping point for the participation of persons with disabilities*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/>

45 Harpur, P., & Szucs, B. (2024). Disability and mobilization work. In O. Branzei and A. Zeyen (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to disability and work* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003350781dx>

university-wide decision-making regarding disability inclusion. Broader EDI committees were excluded from our analysis due to the challenge of accurately assessing disability representation within them.

2. **Student Advocacy Groups:** Typically affiliated with student unions, these groups represent disabled students in university decision-making, advocating for accessibility, inclusion, and community-building. Their primary role is both advocacy-based and social, providing a space for students with disabilities to connect while ensuring their voices are heard in institutional processes.
3. **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Staff disability networks function similarly to student disability organisations by fostering a sense of belonging and advocating for the needs of disabled employees. These groups often liaise with university leadership to promote inclusive workplace policies and practices.

By focusing on these 3 categories, this study aims to assess how institutions formally integrate disability leadership and advocacy across different stakeholder groups within the U21 Network.

### Data collection method

To evaluate the presence of disability leadership across the U21 Network, we examined explicit references to leadership by disabled individuals within disability-focused groups at member universities. This approach aligns with the framework established in using the new disability human rights paradigm to create higher education leadership opportunities, which emphasises the principle of *'Nothing about us, unless it is led by us'*. Our analysis categorised leadership status into 3 categories:

1. **Explicit leadership:** Groups that explicitly stated that they were led by disabled individuals were categorised as Yes. This classification required a direct acknowledgment of disability leadership within the group's public materials.
2. **Potential leadership:** Groups that did not explicitly mention disability leadership but contained indicators suggesting it could be inferred were placed in this category. This distinction is important because, while some groups may be disability-led in practice, the absence of explicit acknowledgment limits transparency, accountability, and the visibility of disabled leaders.
3. **No indication of leadership:** Groups for which there was no explicit or implicit evidence that they were led by disabled individuals were categorised as such.

By structuring our analysis in this way, we aimed to assess the extent to which the *'Nothing about us, unless it is led by us'* principle is upheld across the U21 Network. This distinction is crucial in understanding not only the presence of disability leadership but also the extent to which it is publicly recognised and institutionalised within university structures.

## Findings

32 disability groups were located:

### Explicit Leadership

6 groups were found to have explicit leadership.

Table 1. List of university groups with explicit leadership.

Group Name	Group Type	Explicit Leadership Reason
<b>University of Nottingham Disabled Students Network</b> <sup>46</sup>	Student Advocacy Group	Explicit about disability leadership in FAQs.
<b>The University of Queensland Disability Inclusion Group</b> <sup>47</sup>	Committee	Explicit requirement of up to 8 members with disabilities, with chair exclusively open to persons with disability.
<b>The University of Queensland Disability Inclusion Advocacy Network</b> <sup>48</sup>	ERG	Explicit on website with name and lived experience type of leadership.
<b>The University of Edinburgh Neurodiversity Society</b> <sup>49</sup>	Student Advocacy Group	Explicitly run by and for those with disabilities.
<b>The University of Melbourne Staff Disability Inclusion Network</b> <sup>50</sup>	ERG	Established by those with lived experience.
<b>The University of Melbourne Disabilities Department</b> <sup>51</sup>	Student Advocacy Group	Only students with disabilities are eligible for leadership.

For example, the UQ Disability Inclusion Group (UQ DIG) includes the following in their Terms of Reference (ToR):

### **Composition**

*The Disability Inclusion Group shall be composed of:*

- *Chair (senior UQ staff member with a disability)*
- *A minimum of 5 UQ staff members via EOI, who:*
  - *have a disability OR*
  - *have carer responsibilities for a person(s) with disability OR*
  - *have a strong interest in disability or are working in the disability space (maximum of 2 staff members can nominate for this category).*

Meanwhile, the University of Nottingham Disabled Students Network states: “We are run by disabled students for disabled students” (Page 1).

46 University of Nottingham Students' Union. (n.d.). *Disabled students' network*. <https://su.nottingham.ac.uk/activities/view/disabled-students>

47 The University of Queensland. (2022). *Terms of reference: UQ disability inclusion group (DIG)*. [https://staff.uq.edu.au/UQDIG\\_updatedMarch2022.pdf](https://staff.uq.edu.au/UQDIG_updatedMarch2022.pdf)

48 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). *UQ Disability Inclusion Advocacy Network (UQ DIAN)*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/human-resources/diversity-and-inclusion/disability/uq-disability-inclusion-advocacy-network-uq-dian>

49 Edinburgh University Students' Association. (n.d.). *Neurodiversity society*. <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/activities/view/euneurodiversitysoc>

50 The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). *Launch of the staff disability inclusion network*. <https://mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/diversity-and-inclusion/news-and-events/launch-of-the-staff-disability-inclusion-network>

51 The University of Melbourne Student Union. (n.d.). *Disabilities department*. <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/communities/disabilities/>

## Potential leadership

10 groups were possibly disability led, but not explicitly so.

Table 2. Table showing the groups that were classified with potential inclusion and the explanation.

Group Name	Group Type	Potential Leadership Reason
<b>McMaster University Disability, Inclusion, Madness, Accessibility, Neurodiversity (DIMAND) Working Group</b> <sup>52</sup>	Committee	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>University of Nottingham Disabled Staff Network</b> <sup>53</sup>	ERG	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>University of Nottingham Neurodivergent Network</b> <sup>54</sup>	ERG	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>The University of Sydney Disability at Work Network</b> <sup>55</sup>	ERG	No ToR or other references to disability leadership, but further investigation into the leaders implies it may be disability led.
<b>The University of Sydney Disabilities Collective</b> <sup>56</sup>	Student Union Group	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>The University of Queensland Disability Collective</b> <sup>57</sup>	Student Union Group	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>The University of Edinburgh Disabled Staff Network</b> <sup>58</sup>	ERG	Not all members need have disability and no mention of leadership requirements.
<b>The University of Edinburgh Disabled Student's Campaign</b> <sup>59</sup>	Student Union Group	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.
<b>University of Maryland Queers with Disabilities</b> <sup>60</sup>	Student Union Group	Membership open to all interested.
<b>The University of Auckland Disabled Staff / Staff with Disabilities Network</b> <sup>61</sup>	ERG	Members have 'lived experience' but not explicit to leadership.

The majority of groups in this category, particularly Student Advocacy Groups and ERGs, restrict membership to people with disabilities. However, they often fall short of explicitly identifying themselves as disability led. In some cases, leadership can be inferred - such as an ERG that does not state disability leadership outright but features photos of a wheelchair user as the lead in official materials. We will not name this university to protect the privacy of the individual.

While these examples strongly suggest disability leadership, the absence of explicit confirmation means they cannot be definitively categorised as such. This highlights the importance of clearly articulating disability leadership in public-facing materials to ensure transparency, representation, and trust within the community.

52 McMaster University. (n.d.). *Disability, inclusion, madness, accessibility, neurodiversity (DIMAND)*. <https://pacbic.mcmaster.ca/about-page/tab-page/>

53 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). *Staff Networks at the University of Nottingham*. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/staff-networks/index.aspx>

54 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). *Staff Networks at the University of Nottingham*. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/staff-networks/index.aspx>

55 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). *Progress and achievements: Disability action plan*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/diversity/disability-action-plan/progress-and-achievements.html>

56 University of Sydney Students' Representative Council. (n.d.). *Disabilities collective*. <https://srcusyd.net.au/get-involved/join/disabilities/>

57 The University of Queensland Union. (n.d.). *Disability collective*. <https://uqu.com.au/uqu-collectives/disability-collective/>

58 The University of Edinburgh. (n.d.). *Disabled staff network*. <https://equality-diversity.ed.ac.uk/edi-groups/disabled-staff-network>

59 The University of Edinburgh Students' Association. (n.d.). *Disabled students campaign*. <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/activities/view/DisabledStudentsCampaign>

60 Pride Alliance Maryland. (n.d.). *Welcome to the pride alliance*. <https://prideallianceumd.carrd.co/>

61 University of Auckland. (n.d.). *Disabled staff/staff with disabilities network (DSN)*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/equity-at-the-university/equity-information-for-staff/staff-with-disabilities-and-impairments/staff-with-disabilities-and-impairments-network.html>

## No indication of leadership

15 groups were located with no indication of disability leadership.

### McMaster University

- McMaster Accessibility Advisory Council (Committee)<sup>62</sup>
- Maccess (Student Union Group)<sup>63</sup>
- Employee Accessibility Network (ERG)<sup>64</sup>

### University of Birmingham

- Disabled Students Contribution Group (Student Union Group)<sup>65</sup>
- Enabling Staff Network<sup>66</sup>.

### The University of Sydney

- Disability Inclusion Action Plan Implementation Group (Committee)<sup>67</sup>

### University College Dublin (Ireland)

- CHAS Disability Working Group (Committee)<sup>68</sup>
- UCD Neurodiversity Group (Committee)<sup>69</sup>

### University of Connecticut

- Committee on Access and Accommodations (Committee)<sup>70</sup>

### University of Glasgow

- Disability Equality Group (Committee)<sup>71</sup>
- Disabled Students Society (Student Union Group)<sup>72</sup>

### University of Maryland

- Disability: Identity, Culture, and Education (Student Union Group)<sup>73</sup>
- Delta Alpha Pi International Honor Society (Student Union Group)<sup>74</sup>

### University of Auckland

- Disability Action Plan Reference Group (Committee)<sup>75</sup>
- Disabled Students Association (Student Union Group)<sup>76</sup>

This took a variety of forms. For example, committees like the McMaster University Accessibility Advisory Council and the University College Dublin Neurodiversity Working Group only reference consulting staff / people with disability<sup>77,78</sup>. Meanwhile, the University of Maryland student advocacy

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62 McMaster University. (n.d.). *McMaster accessibility advisory council*. Accessibility McMaster. <https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/legislation/mcmaster-accessibility-council/>

63 McMaster University Students Union. (n.d.). *Maccess*. McMaster Students Union. <https://msumcmaster.ca/service/maccess/>

64 McMaster University. (n.d.). *Employee accessibility network*. Accessibility McMaster. <https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/services/employee-accessibility-network/>

65 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). *Disabled students' contribution group*. <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/equality-and-diversity/accessibility/disabled-students-contribution-group.aspx>

66 Provided in qualitative survey, no online source found.

67 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). *Consultation and evaluation: Disability action plan*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/diversity/disability-action-plan/consultation-and-evaluation.html>

68 University College Dublin. (n.d.). *CHAS disability working group*. <https://www.ucd.ie/chas/about/committees/equalitydiversityandinclusion/chasdisabilityworkinggroup/>

69 University College Dublin. (n.d.). *UCD neurodiversity group*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/groups/neurodiversitygroup/>

70 University of Connecticut. (n.d.). *Committee on access and accommodations*. <https://equity.uconn.edu/committee-on-access-and-accommodations/>

71 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). *Disability equality group*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/equalitydiversity/structure/groups/#disabilityequalitygroup>

72 University of Glasgow Students' Representative Council. (n.d.). *Disabled students' society*. <https://www.glasgowunisc.org/organisation/disabledstudents/>

73 DICE. (n.d.). *Disability: Identity, culture, and education*. <https://terplink.umd.edu/organization/dice>

74 Delta Alpha Pi International Honor Society. (n.d.). *Maryland*. <http://deltaalphapihonorociety.org/delta-alpha-pi-international-dapi-chapters/elementor-1642/>

75 University of Auckland. (n.d.). *Disability action plan reference group*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/equity-at-the-university/about-equity/a-safe--inclusive-and-equitable-university/disability-action-plan/>

76 University of Auckland. (n.d.). *Disability action plan reference group*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/equity-at-the-university/about-equity/a-safe--inclusive-and-equitable-university/disability-action-plan/get-involved.html#dap-reference>

77 McMaster University. (2022). *McMaster accessibility advisory council*. <https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/legislation/mcmaster-accessibility-council/>

78 University College Dublin. (2024). *UCD neurodiversity group*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/groups/neurodiversitygroup/>

group is open to anyone with an interest in disability advocacy, not just with lived experience, and does not clarify if this translates to the leadership<sup>79</sup>.

## Other findings

The Tecnológico de Monterrey mentions the existence of student and staff groups working on disability but does not provide names or the nature of said groups<sup>80</sup>.

One finding of note was that the U21 member University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign did not have a dedicated disability committee, while another University of Illinois campus which is not a member of the U21 Network did.<sup>81</sup>

## Recommendations

a) **Visibility of disability leadership:** It is important for groups that represent disability interests to clearly state whether they are disability-led in their outward-facing communications, such as on their websites and promotional materials.

When assessing the visibility of disability leadership within the U21 Network, our initial approach was to classify groups using a binary 'yes' or 'no' indicator. However, we introduced a third category, 'unknown', for groups that suggest disability leadership but provide no explicit confirmation. While we assume that many of these groups are indeed disability-led, we recommend that they clearly state this in their outward-facing communications, such as on their websites and promotional materials. There are several key reasons why this is beneficial:

- **Increased confidence and engagement:** Anecdotally indicated that individuals with disabilities are more likely to feel comfortable and empowered in groups that are explicitly disability-led. Clearly communicating this leadership structure can encourage greater participation and trust within the disability community.
- **Improved visibility and representation:** Representation matters and highlighting disability leadership can create clear role models and pathways for students and staff with disabilities. This visibility not only fosters a sense of belonging but also demonstrates institutional commitment to meaningful inclusion.
- **Inclusive language for leadership disclosure:** We acknowledge that not all individuals may feel comfortable publicly disclosing their disability status, often due to concerns about stigma or discrimination. Institutions can navigate this by adopting language that signals disability leadership without requiring personal disclosure. Both explicit leadership examples provided in the findings achieve this without naming or connecting to individuals. This phrasing effectively communicates disability leadership while respecting personal privacy.

By adopting these practices, universities can reinforce their commitment to disability inclusion and ensure that leadership by individuals with disabilities is both recognised and valued within their communities.

b) **Develop disability led groups:** Further attention should also be given to encouraging the establishment of new disability-led groups within universities that currently lack them.

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79 DICE. (n.d.). *Disability: Identity, culture, and education*. <https://terplink.umd.edu/organization/dice>

80 University of Monterrey. (2018). *Diversity & inclusion*. <https://tec.mx/2020-06/>; Tecnológico de Monterrey. (n.d.). *Los Espacios de Escucha que Buscan Mayor Representatividad en el Tec*. <https://tec.mx/es/noticias/nacional/institucion/los-espacios-de-escucha-que-buscan-mayor-representatividad-en-el-tec>

81 University of Illinois Chicago. (n.d.). *Chancellor's committee on the status of persons with disabilities*. <https://ccspd.uic.edu/>

While a significant number of such groups exist across the U21 Network, some institutions still do not appear to have their own dedicated disability inclusion committees, ERGs, or student advocacy bodies.

- c) **Knowledge sharing:** To support the formation of new groups, universities could facilitate knowledge-sharing opportunities between institutions with well-established disability networks and those seeking to develop their own.

Knowledge sharing could include mentorship programs, collaborative workshops, or structured information exchanges that allow emerging groups to learn from best practices and challenges faced by their counterparts. To enhance knowledge exchange, a U21 resource folder for best practices seems to be a simple solution to share information and information on how to set up student / staff advocacy groups.

By fostering these connections, universities can strengthen disability leadership across the network and ensure that staff and students with disabilities have access to structured representation, advocacy, and community support.

## Conclusion

The analysis of disability leadership within the U21 Network reveals significant strides towards inclusive practices yet highlights areas for further development. The principle of *'Nothing about us, unless it is led by us'* is increasingly being adopted, with several institutions demonstrating explicit disability leadership. However, many groups still lack clear acknowledgment of such leadership, which is crucial for transparency, accountability, and fostering trust within the disability community.

## Chapter 1.5.

### Disability and Intersectionality

Brooke Szucs, Paul Harpur, Dino Willox, and Nancy Pachana

#### Introduction

The U21 Network comprises 30 member institutions from a diverse range of countries and regions, striving to ensure that more diverse students are encouraged to engage with the network. To achieve this, U21 actively works to remove barriers to participation and promote increased access to opportunities for more students. In alignment with this commitment, U21 aims to enhance inclusivity for groups identified as underrepresented within higher education institutions across its member regions.

As part of these efforts, the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group was established to proactively foster inclusivity through various initiatives, including online programs and global mobility grants. As well as its relation to research, such as how and why certain areas are researched and how EDI is included in these initiatives. This commitment to advancing EDI has been recognised internationally, with U21 receiving a Highly Commended award at the PIEoneer Awards for its contributions to championing diversity and inclusion in higher education<sup>82</sup>.

The specific groups engaged with under the framework of EDI vary across countries, reflecting the diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which U21 operates<sup>83</sup>. While a broad range of diversity groups is considered, they are often addressed as separate categories rather than in an intersectional manner. This approach overlooks how individuals who embody multiple marginalised identities may experience unique and compounded challenges at the intersection and overlap of these identities.

Intersectionality refers to the concept that individuals who hold multiple marginalised identities experience a cumulative and unique combination of these characteristics. For example, the experience of a white gay man differs from those of an Indigenous gay man, or a lesbian woman, as factors such as sexuality interact with gender and race in distinct ways.

In the context of U21's EDI efforts, the recognition of and response to intersectionality by member universities is crucial. For instance, queer disabled students may face additional barriers accessing LGBTIAQ+ student spaces due to a lack of physical accessibility. Similarly, Indigenous staff with disabilities may find that existing disability support services do not adequately address their cultural needs, creating further exclusion. Research into dementia may fail to take into consideration the lived experience of trans or gender diverse people, resulting in incomplete outcomes or recommendations. Addressing these intersecting challenges requires a more nuanced and inclusive approach to EDI initiatives.

Building on U21's active initiatives to enhance access for marginalised groups, this chapter examines how member universities address intersectionality in their engagement with staff, students, and community members with disabilities.

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82 Universitas21. (2024). *U21 and common purpose success at the PIEoneer awards 2024!* <https://universitas21.com/news/u21-and-common-purpose-success-at-the-pioneer-awards-2024/>

83 Universitas 21. (n.d.). *Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)*. <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

This analysis was conducted using 2 desktop research methods:

1. A review of all policy and strategic documents related to the inclusion of community members with disabilities.
2. An examination of member university websites to assess the extent to which intersectionality is incorporated into their online presence.

Based on the findings, this chapter evaluates and highlights successful implementations of intersectional practices within U21 members' policies and strategies, with a particular focus on disability inclusion within broader EDI frameworks. The goal is to identify best practices and provide actionable recommendations for their adaptation and dissemination across the U21 Network. By doing so, this chapter aims to support member universities in benchmarking their efforts and collaboratively advancing intersectional approaches to inclusion.

## Methodology

This chapter employs 2 desktop analysis methods to examine the implementation of intersectional considerations across the U21 Network as they relate to disability. A systematic search was conducted to identify explicit mentions of intersectionality within institutional policies, assessing how intersectional factors—such as age, gender, race, and other dimensions—are incorporated into disability policies to address overlapping needs and barriers.

### 1. Structured Policy Review Methodology

Following the primary methodology of this study (see Methodology), we conducted a structured review of officially adopted policies and strategies, with a particular focus on Disability Action Plans (DAPs) and equivalent frameworks across the network. This approach enabled us to analyse how intersectionality is conceptualised and applied at the strategic and policy levels to support the university community, as outlined by Harpur et al<sup>84</sup>. By examining these documents, we aimed to evaluate the extent to which intersectional considerations are embedded in disability-related policies and identify areas for improvement.

To assess the visibility of intersectionality within disability inclusion efforts, we conducted a systematic website search across participating U21 member institutions. This involved 2 search methods:

1. **Internal search:** University website search functions were used to identify explicit mentions of intersectionality within institutional webpages, policies, and public statements.
2. **External search:** A Google search was conducted using the university's name along with the term "intersectionality" to capture any relevant content that might not have appeared in internal searches.

Both searches focused on explicit references to intersectionality and related terms<sup>85</sup>, to determine how disability inclusion intersects with other marginalised identities. When no terms were found through the search function, likely areas to provide results were manually searched.

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84 Harpur, P., Szucs, B., & Willox, D. (2023). Strategic and policy responses to intersectionality in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(1), 19-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2022.2144790>

85 LGBTQIA+, LGBT, Indigenous, First Nations, carers, diversity, equity, inclusion, women, gender, and sex.

## Research Questions

Our analysis was guided by the following key questions:

- **Is intersectionality considered, and how is it included?**
- **Does intersectionality appear explicitly, or is it embedded through the inclusion of other marginalised groups in disability-related initiatives?**
- **Which groups are considered in intersectional approaches to disability?**
- **Are any key marginalised groups missing from the discussion?**

## Data Categorisation and Analysis

To assess the extent and depth of intersectionality within disability-related policies and public communications, mentions and inferences of intersectionality were catalogued and classified into 3 categories:

1. **Meaningful enactment:** Intersectionality is substantively engaged with and integrated into actionable measures. Examples include:
  - a. Policies available in multiple languages for international students with disabilities.
  - b. Cross-departmental collaboration between disability services and other equity groups to implement joint initiatives.
2. **Purposeful mention:** Intersectionality is explicitly acknowledged with a strong commitment statement or emphasis, but without corresponding action items or policy measures.
3. **Course Content:** Some instances of disability and intersectionality were identified as part of university course content. These were categorised separately, as their primary purpose was academic instruction rather than institutional policy or strategic initiatives.

This classification framework allowed us to evaluate how deeply intersectional considerations are embedded within U21 institutions' disability inclusion efforts and to identify areas for improvement.

## Results

### Policy

Of the strategies and plans provided (see Methodology) we discovered the following, which included intersectional considerations:

*Table 1. This table shows the names of the plans at all universities with intersectionality included, as well as the ranking of how well this was integrated.*

University Member	Plan Name	Intersectionality Type	Intersections
<b>The University of Auckland</b>	Waipapa Taumata Rau The University of Auckland Disability Action Plan 2022-2025	Meaningfully enacted.	Māori (Indigenous).
<b>McMaster University</b>	Accessibility Policy	Purposeful mention.	Not applicable.
<b>University of Birmingham</b>	Equality Diversity and Inclusion Scheme 2021-24	Purposeful mention.	Age, disability, gender identity, experiences of being a parent or carer, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
<b>The University of Queensland</b>	Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan 2024-2026	Meaningfully enacted.	Language diversity, gender, religion, ethnic or other status.

University Member	Plan Name	Intersectionality Type	Intersections
The University of Queensland	Disability Action Plan 2023-2025	Meaningfully enacted	People with disabilities who also belong to other marginalised and / or under-represented groups, such as those who have a disability and identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and LGBTQIA+.

### Meaningful Enaction

Four meaningful instances of enaction were identified in the strategic plans of the University of Birmingham, and the University of Auckland, as outlined in Table 1. For example:

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

Two strategic priorities and the DAP

*“Our ambitions for disabled learner success align with Taumata Teitei: The University of Auckland Vision 2030 and Strategic Plan 2025. Taumata Teitei articulates our commitment to te ao Māori principles, our Vision, and our Values.*

*We are guided by principles of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and kaitiakitanga...”*

Waipapa Taumata Rau, The University of Auckland Disability Action Plan 2022-2025, Page 7.

#### UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Support intersectional initiatives that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.	Work collaboratively with colleagues across the university to promote intersectional approaches to equity, diversity and inclusion across the research enterprise.	Deputy Provost	Q4 2024
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Figure 1. This image presents an intersectional Key Performance Indicator (KPI) from Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan (2024-2026, p. 11), University of Birmingham.

Another example of meaningful enaction can be seen in Figure 1, as this KPI explicitly assigns responsibility to a senior executive, demonstrating institutional accountability in embedding intersectional considerations into disability inclusion strategies.

These examples illustrate how principles of intersectionality are actively incorporated into outcomes, KPIs, and key strategic considerations across institutional planning. By analysing these best practices, we can identify successful approaches that U21 members may adopt to enhance their own intersectional frameworks.

### Purposeful Mention

We found 2 instances of purposeful mentions, at the University of Birmingham and McMaster University (see Table 1).

To illustrate, the University of Birmingham Equality Diversity and Inclusion Scheme 2021-24 (page 8) included the following values statement:

*“Many intersecting factors shape the individual identities and experiences of our University community. This includes age, disability, gender identity, experiences of being a parent or carer, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. We recognise, however, that diversity does not in itself guarantee equity or inclusion. As an institution, we need to be proactive in celebrating and harnessing our diversity...”*

While this is a strong statement that shows a clear commitment to the value of intersectionality, this is not reflected in the action items or other key areas throughout the

document. It also does not further examine the intersections mentioned. As such, it is classed as a purposeful mention.

No other mentions, explicit or implicit, were located.

### Intersecting Identities

Our third research question asked which groups were listed as intersecting with disability, so mentions of other marginalised areas were collected. Within the strategies, the intersecting groups<sup>86</sup> identified through this process were:

<b>Indigenous</b>	1 mention
<b>Age</b>	2 mentions
<b>Sex</b>	2 mentions
<b>Carer status</b>	1 mention
<b>Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM)</b>	4 mentions
<b>Religious affiliation</b>	2 mentions
<b>LGBTIAQ+ status</b>	2 mentions
<b>Care leaver status</b>	1 mention
<b>Language diversity</b>	2 mentions
<b>Regional</b>	1 mention
<b>Low socio-economic status</b>	1 mention

### General Search

This section shows the results of the search for intersectionality outside of strategic plans. Namely, websites and other documents, for a view of how the intersection of disability and other areas are included outside of the strategic priorities. Our search yielded the following:

Table 2. This table shows the universities who included intersectionality in their non-strategic materials, such as websites and the qualitative responses.

University Member	Item Name	Intersectionality Type	Intersections
<b>The University of Melbourne</b>	CRE-DH Impact Evaluation Report 2016 – 2022	Purposeful mention.	“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, those with psychosocial disability, and people experiencing housing and financial insecurity;” p.7.
<b>The University of New South Wales</b>	Building effective system-wide disability research capacity in Australia	Purposeful mention.	Gender, race, diversity.
<b>University College Dublin</b>	UCD Widening Participation Committee Annual Report 2020/21	Meaningful enactment.	Low income, Disability, Mature, Part-time, QQI-FET [Quality and Qualifications Ireland – Further Education and Training], Sanctuary.
<b>University College Dublin</b>	Making UCD a Neurodiversity Friendly Campus	Meaningful enactment.	Neurodiversity, gender, race and socio-economic status.
<b>University College Dublin</b>	MSc in Disability	Course content.	Not applicable.
<b>KU Leuven</b>	Diversity and Intersectionality	Course content.	Gender & sexuality, race & ethnicity, class, ableism.
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	The Disabling Society SOCIO5031	Course content.	Not applicable.

### Meaningful Enaction

There were 2 instances of meaningful enaction at University College Dublin. For example:

<sup>86</sup> Terms used and groups considered marginalised change from context to context, so have been consolidated under these broad terms by the research team.

*“Optimal outcomes can only be achieved with standardised, feasible, and costed interventions demonstrated to achieve efficacy across the full range of intersectional considerations in higher education settings globally. There is an immediate need to prioritise this research focus.”*

*Making UCD a Neurodiversity Friendly Campus Report, page 30.<sup>87</sup>*

This example showed a thorough understanding of the different groups intersecting with a specific disability and what this means for those individuals. This statement is followed by practical responses to this knowledge and further investigation of the intersections.

Another showed that intersectionality was clearly included in the research design and data was properly collected:

*“While universal measures were identified as helpful, they were deemed insufficient in addressing all individual needs with a clear requirement for augmented supports and strategies identified. In addition, the amplified challenges caused by intersectional disadvantage such as neurodiversity, gender, race and socio-economic status was emphasised.”*

*Making UCD a Neurodiversity Friendly Campus, page 95.<sup>88</sup>*

### **Purposeful Mention**

There were 2 instances of a purposeful mention at the University of New South Wales and The University of Melbourne. For example:

*“All service systems have failed to respond to people experiencing intersecting disadvantage such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, those with psychosocial disability, and people experiencing housing and financial insecurity. The service systems must find ways to respond better to the most disadvantaged people with disability; otherwise, they risk permanently entrenching inequities in health and other outcomes between people with disability who are extremely disadvantaged and other Australians.”*

*The University of Melbourne, CRE-DH Impact Evaluation Report 2016 – 2022, page 7.*

This acknowledged a gap and need for support, and implied planned future engagement in this area, but no further analysis or information was provided on next steps or inclusion. In addition, 2 courses focusing on disability with an intersectionality lens were found.

1. University College Dublin Master of Science in Disability and University of Glasgow ‘The Disabling Society’ course both mentioned understanding of the intersection of disability and other marginalisations were intended learning outcomes.
2. KU Leuven in Belgium then offers the ‘Diversity and Intersectionality’ course, which explicitly includes, “Discussing its entanglement with, among others, concepts of gender & sexuality, race & ethnicity, class, ableism”. Showing that disability and intersectionality are clearly a focus of this course.

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<sup>87</sup> University College Dublin. (2025). Making UCD a neurodiversity friendly campus report. UCD Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/support/neurodiversity/report/>

<sup>88</sup> University College Dublin. (2025). Making UCD a neurodiversity friendly campus report. UCD Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/support/neurodiversity/report/>

The general search revealed some variation in how different groups intersected with disability:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (AUS)	1
Age	1
Sex	3
Culturally and racially marginalised	4
LGBTIAQ+	1
Low socio-economic status	1
Part-time	1
Sanctuary / Asylum	1
Alternative entry	1

Please note, member universities may have other areas where they include intersectionality; however, this project is only interested in those pertaining to the intersection of disability with other marginalisations.

For example, the Tecnológico de Monterrey Diversity and Inclusion Report<sup>89</sup> page 48 displays the following:

Figure 1. This image from the report shows a meaningful enactment through an event held to focus on the intersectional anti-racist and feminist struggle of women of colour in Mexico and Spain.



Figure 2. Re-tracing the identity of Mexican women

With the goal of talking about the *intersectionality* of race and gender in Hispanic and Mexican communities in the country, the He-ForShe student group at the San Luis Potosí Campus organized this conversation, which was attended by about 50 people, including students from Tec de Monterrey and other universities. The focus was on the anti-racist and feminist struggle of women of color in Mexico and Spain. The topics addressed were:

- Anti-racism in the feminist movement in Mexico
- The Afro-Mexican woman
- The Indigenous woman
- The Asian-Hispanic Woman
- Diverse Mexicanity, alliance, and sisterhood.

Examples like this were not included in the analysis due to not connecting with disability, but worth mentioning they do exist, and it is worth celebrating as well as further investigation.

### Discussion

Our findings show that intersectionality is beginning to be recognised and enacted by the members of the network, though there are some areas for attention and growth if we wish to create more equitable universities.

### Limited Consideration of Intersectionality

The findings indicate a low number of explicit mentions and meaningful enactments of intersectionality within disability policies and strategies across U21 member institutions. This is a concern, as intersectionality is crucial in addressing the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups. By neglecting these intersections, policies risk being ineffective or even exclusionary, ultimately failing to serve diverse disability communities adequately.

### Which Groups Are (and Aren't) Included?

A key observation is the type of representation of intersectional considerations across different identity groups. While some institutions acknowledge the need for intersectionality in disability inclusion, the groups considered vary widely due to the cultural, historical, and colonial contexts.

89 Tecnológico de Monterrey. (2023). *Reporte de diversidad, equidad, inclusión y pertenencia 2022-2023*. <https://tec.mx/reporte-diversidad-inclusion-2022-2023.pdf>

One surprising finding is the lack of intersectionality with Indigenous and First Nations communities. This is particularly concerning given global trends indicating that Indigenous populations are more likely to experience disability than the general population<sup>90,91</sup>. However, cultural sensitivities and differing traditional understandings of disability can make mainstream disability services ineffective or culturally unsafe<sup>92</sup>. Without targeted efforts to address these challenges via decolonisation systems, Indigenous individuals with disabilities may remain underserved by institutional support systems.

Another major intersection that is underrepresented is the LGBTIAQ+ community, with only 3 references across the institutions analysed. Individuals with disabilities in these communities face significant challenges, such as intersectional microaggressions<sup>93</sup>, yet this issue is largely overlooked in institutional priorities.

Additionally, age-based intersectionality is not centred, despite the well-documented ways in which disability prevalence and experiences shift across different life stages. The absence of this perspective suggests an area for further development.

### Geographic and Institutional Trends

The institutions that actively engage with intersectionality tend to be in Western countries i.e. Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, UK, Belgium, and Canada, which may be attributed to broader social and cultural movements prioritising DEI and broader colonial attitudes. Additionally, universities that demonstrate higher levels of intersectional engagement are often involved in external diversity initiatives, such as:

- Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) a gender equity program or related programs – Member universities: The University of Melbourne, The University of New South Wales<sup>94</sup>, The University of Glasgow, The University of Birmingham<sup>95</sup>, University College Dublin<sup>96</sup>, and McMaster University.<sup>97</sup> (Please note, these are all but one of the universities included in this chapter)
- Age-Friendly University Global Network – Member universities: University College Dublin, McMaster University.<sup>98</sup>

This suggests that participation in structured equity programs may encourage or facilitate intersectional approaches within disability inclusion policies. Especially as Athena SWAN's program

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90 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Indigenous persons with disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: An identity without a home? *International Human Rights Law Review*, 7(2), 165-200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131035-00702002>

91 Daniels-Mayes, S., Harpur, P., & Ashley, M. (2023). Are Indigenous people with disability. In S. Robinson & K. R. Fisher (Eds.), *Research handbook on disability policy* (p. 402). Edward Elgar Publishing.

92 Daniels-Mayes, S., Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2023). Strategic human rights-based policy reforms for making Australian universities equally accessible to students, staff, and faculty who are Indigenous people with disability. In S. Robinson & K. R. Fisher (Eds.), *Research handbook on disability policy* (pp. 402-417). Edward Elgar Publishing.

93 Miller, R. A., & Smith, A. C. (2020). Microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ students with disabilities. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 58(5), 491-506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2020.1835669>

94 SAGE. (2024a). *SAGE subscribers and Athena Swan awardees*. <https://sciencegenderequity.org.au/sage-accreditation-and-awards/sage-subscribers-and-athena-sw-an-awardees/>

95 AdvanceHE. (n.d.). *Athena Swan charter members*. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-sw-an-charter/members>

96 University College Dublin. (2024). *UCD awarded Athena Swan institutional silver award*. <https://www.ucd.ie/newsandopinion/2024/september/ucdawardedathenaswaninstitutionalsilveraward/>

97 McMaster University. (2019). *Increasing equity, diversity and inclusion in research*. <https://science.mcmaster.ca/increasing-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-research/>

98 Age Friendly Universities. (n.d.). *Members*. <https://www.afugn.org/afugn-members>

guide explicitly calls for intersectional approaches as a main principle and provides details on how to meaningfully enact this concept.<sup>99</sup>

However, we will note that both age and gender were not the most represented areas for intersectionality, so there is also room for the participating groups to lean further into the guidance of these programs.

## Recommendations

For U21 member universities seeking to improve their intersectional approaches to disability inclusion, the following strategies are recommended:

- a) **Leverage existing diversity programs:** Leverage existing diversity programs (e.g. Athena SWAN, Age-Friendly Universities) to establish structured, intersectional frameworks that ensure coordinated responses across marginalised groups. Members can consider if joining is right for their needs.
- b) **Indigenous and First Nations perspectives:** Incorporate Indigenous and First Nations perspectives by engaging with Indigenous leaders, scholars, and disability advocates to develop culturally appropriate policies and services that use decolonisation strategies to reframe and reassess language, assumptions, ways of being, doing, and knowing.
- c) **LGBTIQ+:** Strengthen LGBTIQ+ inclusion within disability strategies by ensuring accessibility of queer spaces, recognising the unique challenges faced by disabled LGBTIQ+ individuals and fostering collaborations between disability and queer student organisations and units.
- d) **Age conscious:** Apply an age-conscious framework to disability policies by considering how disability needs change across life stages and integrating insights from initiatives like the Age-Friendly University program.
- e) **Benchmarking:** Develop formal benchmarks for intersectionality within institutional disability policies, ensuring that intersectional perspectives are embedded in strategic plans, KPIs, and institutional commitments.

By adopting these recommendations, U21 member universities can move beyond isolated acknowledgments of intersectionality and implement more meaningful, systemic changes that benefit diverse disability communities.

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<sup>99</sup> SAFE. (2024b). *New and improved intersectionality guidance*. <https://sciencegenderequity.org.au/resources/blog/intersectionality-in-sage-athena-swan/>

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the importance of incorporating intersectionality into disability inclusion efforts within the U21 Network. By examining the policies and practices of member universities, it is evident that while some institutions are making meaningful strides, there is still significant room for improvement. The analysis reveals that intersectionality is often acknowledged but not always substantively enacted, leading to gaps in addressing the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals with multiple marginalised identities.

To create more equitable and inclusive environments, universities must move beyond isolated acknowledgments and integrate intersectional perspectives into their strategic plans, policies, and practices. This includes engaging with Indigenous and First Nations communities, strengthening LGBTIQ+ inclusion, and applying age-conscious frameworks. Leveraging existing diversity programs and developing formal benchmarks for intersectionality can further support these efforts.

By adopting these recommendations, universities generally can enhance their disability inclusion strategies, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their intersecting identities, have equitable access to opportunities and support. This commitment to intersectionality will not only benefit diverse disability communities but also contribute to the overall advancement of equity, diversity, and inclusion within higher education.



## Part 2:

# Disability inclusion and the research and innovation ecosystem

Chapter 2.1.      Understanding when university research and innovation is and is not compliant with disability human rights norm  
*Paul Harpur*

Chapter 2.2.      University research groupings as champions of disability inclusion  
*Jennifer Smith-Merry and Paul Harpur*

Chapter 2.3.      The power of university-wide research plans to champion disability inclusion  
*Paul Harpur, Helen Connick, Sarah Brown, Jean McBain, and Michelle King*

## Chapter 2.1.

### Understanding when university research and innovation is and is not compliant with disability human rights norm

Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

This part of the report maps how U21 universities are researching disability and uses the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),<sup>100</sup> as well as the jurisprudence from the UN body charged with interpreting the CRPD, the CRPD Committee, as a benchmark to help inform best practice in disability research. In addition to calling for data collection, policy evaluations, and research in areas including architecture, business, engineering, health, law, policy, psychology, technology, and more, the CRPD transforms how research on disability should occur. This chapter builds upon the analysis of CRPD norms in Chapter 1.1 of this report and applies those norms to research and innovation. This chapter analyses when university research and innovation is compliant with new disability human rights norms.

The CRPD has profoundly altered disability norms and practices.<sup>101</sup> <sup>102</sup>This paradigm shift has transformed how States and higher education providers should perform disability related research.<sup>103</sup> Thus to be compliant with international norms, researchers and research ecosystems should follow a disability human rights-based disability research methodology.<sup>104</sup> A failure to understand these new norms can create reputational risks and could jeopardise ongoing funding.

U21 universities have recognised the importance of the CRPD and reference this convention as a guide. This can be seen in university-wide disability action plans at the University of NSW,<sup>105</sup> The University of Melbourne,<sup>106</sup> The University of Queensland,<sup>107</sup> and The University of Sydney,<sup>108</sup> as well in university equity plans, such as the plan at the University of Zurich.<sup>109</sup> The CRPD also features as a normative guide in university-wide research plans, such as Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan,<sup>110</sup> as well as being used to set research directions at the University of Birmingham's Disability, Sport and Social Activism program,<sup>111</sup> the University of

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100 UN General Assembly. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol*. United Nations.

101 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern University Law Journal*, 10, 542.

102 Nilsson, A., & Broström, L. (2019). *Participation in research and the CRPD*. *International Journal of Mental Health and Capacity Law*, 25, 3-25.

103 Durham, J., Brolan, C. E., & Mukandi, B. (2014). The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities: A foundation for ethical disability and health research in developing countries. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(11), 2037-2043. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302006>

104 Arstein-Kerslake, A., Maker, Y., Flynn, E., Ward, O., Bell, R., & Degener, T. (2020). Introducing a human rights-based disability research methodology. *Human Rights Law Review*, 20(3), 412-432.

105 University of NSW (2022). *Disability inclusion action plan 2022-2025*. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/edi/disability-inclusion-action-plan>

106 University of Melbourne. (2023). *Disability inclusion action plan 2023-2026*. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/diversity-inclusion/disability-inclusion>

107 University of Queensland. (2023). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*. <https://research.uq.edu.au/strategy/disability-inclusion>

108 University of Sydney. (2019). *Disability inclusion action plan 2019-2024*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/vision-and-values/diversity/disability-action-plan.html>

109 University of Zurich. (n.d.). *Equality for people with disabilities at the University of Zurich*. <https://www.uzh.ch/en/explore/basics/responsibility/disability.html>

110 The University of Queensland. (2024). *Champions of change: The university of Queensland disability inclusion research and innovation plan 2024-2026*. chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcjpcgclcfndmkaj/https://research.uq.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/disability-inclusion-research-innovation-plan-design-version.pdf

111 University of Birmingham, School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences. (n.d.). *Disability, Sport and Social Activism: Developing social justice through sport*.

Nottingham's Mental disability and law group,<sup>112</sup> The University of Sydney's Centre for Disability Studies<sup>113</sup> and The University of Melbourne's Melbourne Disability Institute.<sup>114</sup>

The first 2 parts of this chapter will analyse CRPD norms on disability research and apply them to U21 university practices. The CRPD has introduced new terminology, expectations and methodologies. Part 3 will shift from research methods which advance disability human rights, to analyse where the CRPD defines certain research methodologies as violating human rights.

## **Part 1. The roles of persons with disabilities, their families, and allies in research under new disability human rights norms**

The CRPD fundamentally alters the role of persons with disabilities in society – including their role in research.<sup>115</sup> For most of human history persons with disabilities had their voices discounted and had their lives controlled by family members, experts or the State. Consequently, persons with disabilities were subjects of research but rarely if ever leading the research or research ecosystems or having their names appearing on publications or grants. The disempowerment of persons with disabilities led to advocacy and the catch cry of “nothing about us, without us”.<sup>116</sup> The CRPD has enshrined the “nothing about us, without us” paradigm in articles 4(3) and 33(3) and through its implementation.<sup>117</sup>

The CRPD has altered the role of persons with disabilities in society and in research. From its drafting into the convention and in its implementation, the CRPD process empowers persons with disabilities to speak for themselves. In addition to requiring the support and empowerment of disability led groups to represent disability communities, discussed in this report at Chapter 2.2, and the formation of plans to make this happen, discussed in Chapter 2.3 of this report, the CRPD explains how disability should be approached.

In addition to ensuring the structures empower persons with disabilities to participate and that they are remunerated for their efforts, the CRPD requires equal representation, which translates to roles as researchers, as leaders of that research, on research committees, leading research groups and in formal roles, such as deans of research.

Data collection is critical throughout this process. CRPD article 31 creates a requirement and framework for counting who has lived experience. Persons with disabilities for this count are described in article 1 to “include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Even though family members and allies cannot claim to have lived experience of disability, they have valuable experiences and roles that can contribute to creating a more inclusive world. For example, parents of children with disabilities bring lived experience as parents of children with disabilities.<sup>118</sup> Best practice is to recognise the important role of persons with disabilities and carers / parents. For

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112 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). Mental disability and law. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/diversity-and-inclusion-research-hub/mental-disability-and-law.aspx>

113 Centre for Disability Studies. (n.d.). [About CDS](#).

114 University of Melbourne. (2019). Melbourne Disability Institute: Building the evidence for transformation strategic plan 2019-2021. <https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/about>

115 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2017). The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities as a global tipping point for the participation of persons with disabilities. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

116 Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press.

117 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2022). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the global south. *Yale Journal of International Law*, 47, 75.

118 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2018). *General comment No. 7(2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention (UN Doc. CRPD/C/GC/7)*. United Nations.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record.pdf>

illustration, as there is a Disability Inclusion Advocacy Network<sup>119</sup> and a Network for carers of children with special needs and / or serious chronic illnesses.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, allyship is important to advancing the disability research agenda and should be supported. See for an example of this allyship resources at the Disability Resources and Educational Services, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.<sup>121</sup>

## Part 2. Close consultation, active participation, and the “nothing about us, without us” paradigm

Although persons with disabilities should be included in decision-making processes around research and innovation ecosystems, the CRPD process ensures those who are asked to represent the disability community are able to represent that community. Thus, the CRPD includes both requirements to include persons with disabilities in policies and practices and mandates that frameworks are in place to make this happen. Reflecting this position, the CRPD Committee stated in General Comment No. 7, that if “participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-time event”.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to ensuring that disability representation is a formalised process, to ensure the effective participation of persons with disabilities, the CRPD ensures that those who are called upon to speak for the disability community, can in fact speak for that community. Beyond including persons with disabilities, the CRPD requires that those persons with disabilities are connected to their communities they purport to represent and have relevant expertise to speak on the subject matter. Thus, articles 4(3) and 33(3) require the participation of disability person representative organisations, which are both disability-led, and funded, so that those represented and representing are appropriately informed, benefit from capacity building activities, and administrative support to ensure a sustained collective group on an ongoing basis.

Developing disability representative expertise within universities is critical to advancing disability inclusive research and innovation ecosystems and projects. The need for internal disability expertise is illustrated by considering how U21 Network universities engage in co-design processes. Co-design involves the inclusion of persons with disabilities across the entire research and innovation process, including through conceptualising, designing, implementing, reviewing and benefiting (both in terms of financially and recognition as authors). Co-design is used by universities, such as in the development of its strategic plan to include all stakeholders,<sup>123</sup> and McMaster University<sup>124</sup> and the University of Auckland to target all diversity groups.<sup>125</sup> Most relevantly for this chapter, disability specific co-design is advanced in the research and innovation eco-systems at U21 universities, including at The University of Melbourne,<sup>126</sup> ,<sup>127</sup> and The University of Sydney.<sup>128</sup> Beyond

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119 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Disability - Current staff. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/human-resources/diversity/disability>

120 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). [Work and caring responsibilities - Current staff.](#)

121 University of Illinois. (n.d.). [Disability allyship resources.](#)

122 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2018). *General comment No. 7(2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention (CRPD/C/GC/7)*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>

123 The University of Queensland. (2024). *Toward 2032: UQ Strategic Plan 2022-2025*. <https://www.uq.edu.au/UQStrategicPlan2022-2025.pdf>

124 McMaster University. (n.d.). [Home - Co-Design VP Hub.](#)

125 University of Auckland. (n.d.). [Auckland Co-design Lab.](#)

126 University of Melbourne. (n.d.). [Faculty of Education Disability Research Collaboration.](#)

127 The University of Queensland. (2024). [Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan 2024-2026.](#)

128 Centre for Disability Studies. (n.d.). [About CDS - Centre for Disability Studies.](#)

being best practice, using co-design is arguably a necessary part of disability inclusive methodologies.<sup>129</sup>

The CRPD Committee has explained that the co-design process must involve those who can represent the disability community.<sup>130</sup> Universities seeking to use co-design can sometimes include representatives from external charities; however, managing and funding such involvement can create challenges. Beyond the risks inherent in creating research and innovation strengths in external actors, universities generally prefer to build internal research strengths rather than constantly renumerating external providers. Instead of outsourcing disability expertise, universities can utilise their own research and innovation expertise and build disability research groups and plans. The operation of disability research groups and research and innovation plans is the subject of the next 2 chapters of this report.

### Part 3. When is disability research opposed by the CRPD

The imperative to strengthen internal disability research and innovation expertise and practices is intensified by CRPD article 15. CRPD article 15(1) provides that medical and scientific experimentation, without appropriate consent, constitutes a violation of the right to be free from torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. To ensure, inter alia, persons with disabilities are giving their “free consent to medical or scientific experimentation”, CRPD article 15(2) requires States Parties to take all effective legislative, administrative, judicial or other measures.

States have not always taken appropriate measures. For illustration, the CRPD Committee in its Concluding Observation on the Netherlands raised concerns how the regulatory framework did not appropriately protect persons with disabilities to medical or scientific experimentation without their consent.<sup>131</sup> To redress similar concerns in the Concluding Observation on Israel, the CRPD Committee recommended the establishment of procedures to ensure that persons with disabilities under guardianship express their free and informed personal consent concerning medical treatment and medical or scientific experimentation, with appropriate accessible information and support for decision-making.<sup>132</sup> The CRPD Committee went further in its Concluding Observation on Malawi, and recommended that engaging in medical, scientific or social experiments on persons with disabilities without their consent should amount to a criminal offense.<sup>133</sup>

An additional challenge for States and universities is that the CRPD process has altered what is meant by free consent and alters the process for determining systems. The concept of consent and who can give it, was considerably altered by CRPD article 12. The importance of capacity is reflected by the fact article 12 formed the basis of the CRPD Committee’s first General Comment<sup>134</sup> and has attracted considerable normative attention by the CRPD Committee, law makers, ethicists and scholars.

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129 Strnadová, I., Dowse, L., & Garcia-Lee, B. (2022). Doing research inclusively: Co-production in action. Disability Innovation Institute, UNSW Sydney. [www.disabilityinnovation.unsw.edu.au/UNSW\\_DIIU\\_CoProductionInAction\\_FA\\_Web.pdf](http://www.disabilityinnovation.unsw.edu.au/UNSW_DIIU_CoProductionInAction_FA_Web.pdf)

130 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2022). Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of New Zealand (UN doc CRPD/C/NZL/CO/2-3, 26 September 2022, Para. 18(d)). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org>

131 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2024). Concluding observations on the initial report of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (CRPD/C/NLD/1, 12 August–5 September 2024, Para. 35(a)). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org>

132 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2023). Concluding observations on the initial report of Israel (CRPD/C/ISR/CO/1, CRPD/C/ISR/CO/1, 9 October 2023, Para. 35(d)). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org>

133 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2023). Concluding observations on the combined initial and second periodic reports of Malawi (CRPD/C/MWI/CO/1-2, 5 October 2023, Para. 32(b)). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org>

134 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2014). General Comment No. 1 (2014): Article 12: Equal Recognition Before the Law (11th sess. UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/1, 19 May 2014). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/no-1-article-12-equal-recognition-1>

This can lead to a situation where universities may violate human rights even though they are complying with local laws and their internal policies. Thus, universities could be compliant with national laws and practices yet still find their medical and scientific research impugned as violating human rights norms. Rather than seeking regulatory compliance, universities should ensure that their practices align with disability human rights norms.

## Recommendations

- a) **Integrate Disability Norms into ethics and Grant Review Processes:** Universities should incorporate CRPD norms into their internal ethics and grant review processes to ensure that all research proposals are evaluated for compliance with disability human rights standards.
- b) **Enhance Data Collection:** Universities should systematically collect data on the representation of persons with disabilities across the research and innovation ecosystem. This includes tracking their roles in leadership positions, research projects, and specific disability-related research.
- c) **Implement Co-Design Methodologies:** Universities should encourage the use of co-design methodologies in research projects to ensure that persons with disabilities are actively involved in all stages of the research process. This approach not only aligns with CRPD norms but also enhances the quality and relevance of research outcomes.

## Conclusion

The CRPD has fundamentally transformed the landscape of disability research and innovation, setting new norms and expectations for how research is conducted. This chapter has highlighted the importance of universities setting their policies to ensure their research and innovation ecosystem adheres to these norms. The involvement of persons with disabilities in research processes, the emphasis on co-design, and the need for proper consent mechanisms are critical components of this new paradigm. Failure to align with these norms not only poses reputational risks but also jeopardises ongoing funding and reputation of providers.

## Chapter 2.2.

### University research groupings as champions of disability inclusion

Jennifer Smith-Merry and Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

Disability research groups represent a powerful means to both advance disability involvement and leadership in research and research on the needs of persons with disabilities. Further, disability research groups represent a means through which States and universities can advance their obligations under the CRPD. In addition to doing research in accordance with disability human rights norms, the CRPD sets the norm that persons with disabilities must be producers of research as well as the subjects of its aims.<sup>135</sup> <sup>136</sup>This includes Article 4(1), which emphasises the need to ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind. It includes the obligation to undertake or promote research and development of universally designed goods, services, equipment, and facilities. This includes research and research environments, including universities. Disability research itself is also integral to the goals of the CRPD. Illustratively, CRPD Article 31 mandates the collection of appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable the formulation and implementation of policies to give effect to the Convention.

In 3 parts this chapter will reflect on current practices and unpack the potential of disability inclusion research groups located within universities to benefit society. The lead author of this chapter is Jennifer Smith-Merry, former Director of the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at The University of Sydney (2018-2024) and reflections on the place of this centre are included in the chapter as an example of current practice.

#### Part 1. Data from the survey responses km

In the survey we asked the following questions of the U21 members:

*Please list the research groups which focus on disability inclusion / rights with the following information:*

1. *A few lines explaining the nature of the group/s;*
2. *Whether those groups reflect the 'nothing about us without us' paradigm and have persons with disabilities in their leadership team;*
3. *Are there measures to help promote the research careers of persons with disabilities within the group;*
4. *Provide a link to the research group's website or other profiles.*

U21 Universities not referenced below either did not respond to the survey or provided no information in response to the question. A brief summary of the information provided by each of the other universities is provided in the table below, with a focus on universities where there was a dedicated research centre or research grouping focused on disability.

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<sup>135</sup> Ellem, K., Harpur, P., Hardy, F., Stein, M. A., & Schormans, A. F. (2024). Young people with cognitive disability in transition to adulthood: Stories of survival, aspiration and systemic failures. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009408721>

<sup>136</sup> Nilsson, A., & Broström, L. (2019). Participation in research and the CRPD. *International Journal of Mental Health and Capacity Law*, 25, 3-25. <https://portal.research.lu.se/>

Table 1. This table shows the universities where there was a dedicated research centre or research grouping focused on disability.

Name of University	Summary of response
<b>McMaster University</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No research centre.</li> <li>2. Large research project: Inclusive Design for Employment Access (IDEA) Social Innovation Laboratory</li> <li>3. Individual researchers working in disability</li> <li>4. Did not respond about promoting research careers or research leadership.</li> </ol>
<b>Lund University</b>	<p>Disability research centre: Certec – Rehabilitation Engineering and Design research centre.</p> <p>Did not provide any other information about promoting research careers or research leadership.</p>
<b>University of Birmingham</b>	<p>Several disability-focused research centres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER)</li> <li>• Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching And Research (VICTAR)</li> <li>• Disability Inclusion and Special Needs (DISN)</li> <li>• Institute for Mental Health</li> <li>• U21 Autism Research Network led by Dr Sophie Sowden-Carvalho (the Network involves researchers from several universities across several countries)</li> </ul> <p>Also provided a list of individual researchers working in the field.</p> <p>Did not provide information about promoting research careers or research leadership.</p>
<b>University of Nottingham</b>	<p>Only responded in relation to the question about promoting research careers. Stated there are no targeted programs but have processes to ensure that internal calls have proportional numbers of disabled staff.</p>
<b>The University of Sydney</b>	<p>Several disability-focused research centres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Centre for Disability Research and Policy</li> <li>• The Centre for Disability Studies</li> <li>• The Brain and Mind Centre</li> </ul> <p>There are also other initiatives and schools mentioned that don't directly focus on disability.</p> <p>The Centre for Disability Research and Policy prioritises lived experience of disability in all of its researcher recruitment. Did not discuss university wide programs about promoting research careers or research leadership.</p>
<b>The University of Queensland</b>	<p>Informal research grouping: Disability Community of Practice, which is disability led. The UQ's Champion of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan, launched in September 2024, commits UQ to forming a university-wide research network to facilitate and coordinate disability related research.<sup>137</sup></p> <p>No measures to help promote the research careers of persons with disabilities or research leadership.</p>
<b>Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.</b>	<p>States that the answer to these questions is 'not known'.</p> <p>Provides link to the profiles of some researchers working in inclusion however the link focuses more on inclusion at the university not research on inclusion / disability.</p> <p>They did not respond to the question about promoting the careers of researchers with disability or research leadership.</p>
<b>University College Dublin</b>	<p>Lists several disability-related research centres / groupings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centre for Disability Studies</li> <li>• Inclusive Design Research Centre</li> <li>• Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Group on Neurodiversity</li> </ul>
<b>University of Connecticut</b>	<p>Provides a link to the 'Collaborative on Postsecondary Education and Disability'. This is both a research centre and an education provider for people with disability through the Postsecondary Disability Training Institute.</p>
<b>University of Glasgow</b>	<p>Their research centre is the 'Centre for Disability Research'. It is both a research and teaching centre.</p> <p>They did not respond to the question about promoting the careers of researchers with disability or research leadership.</p>
<b>The University of Edinburgh</b>	<p>Interdisciplinary research group on disability called 'Disability Research Edinburgh'. They have a focus on career development, but this looks to be for everyone, and not specifically for researchers with disability. Did not discuss research leadership.</p>

<sup>137</sup> The University of Queensland. (2024). [Champions of change disability inclusion research and innovation plan 2024-2026](#).

Name of University	Summary of response
KU Leuven	The response provides a link to 'Disability studies: <i>Research into the history of persons with disabilities</i> '; however, this appears to not be a research centre, but a single researcher with a research team working with them. They did not respond to the question about promoting the careers of researchers with disability or research leadership.
The University of Hong Kong	They have a 'Disability Rights Resource Network' which is a research grouping. It does not employ any people with disability. There is also a research grouping focused on disability within the Department of Social Work and Social Administration. There are no specific practices that promote the research careers of researchers with disability or leadership in research.

As can be seen in the responses in the table above, most responses did not provide the required information, with a majority of respondents only partially responding to each of the questions. This may be because there was no way for central university to understand whether there were any research groups or career development within the university focusing on disability rather than there not being any. This is a finding that shows that disability research is not prioritised within most U21 universities.

Eight universities had dedicated research centres or research groups focusing on disability. These were split between general research centres or groups and those that focused on specific programs of work, for example in research related to design or education. Other research tended to focus on the work of individual researchers and their research teams. This is a less stable way of ensuring disability as a research priority because it can just fall away if that researcher leaves the university or moves on to other priorities.

Only one university commented on prioritising researchers with disability within research positions (discussed further below in example from The University of Sydney 'Centre for Disability Research and Policy'). No universities responded to whether the research groups reflect the 'nothing about us without us' paradigm and have persons with disabilities in their leadership team.

## Part 2. Drawing on additional information to reflect on disability research groups

Additional information was gathered from university websites and provided by universities on request. Combined with the data gathered from the survey, the range of disability research centres across universities more broadly fit into the following categories:

- **General focus on disability** – such as the 'Centre for Disability Research' at the University of Glasgow, which engages with disabled people and their organisations to carry out research that is relevant to the lives of people with a range of impairments and advances the rights of disabled people.<sup>138</sup> Some of these research groupings, such as The University of Melbourne's 'Melbourne Disability Institute',<sup>139</sup> focus on all aspects of disability, whereas some, such as The University of Melbourne's 'Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health',<sup>140</sup> focuses upon one aspect of the disability experience – in this case health.
- **Focus on a single area impacting on disability inclusion** – such as The University of Melbourne's 'Faculty of Education Disability Research Collaboration', which works to transform the lifelong educational experiences of people with disability through collaborative co-designed research.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>138</sup> University of Glasgow. (n.d.). Centre for Disability Research. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/centrefordisabilityresearch/>

<sup>139</sup> The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). Melbourne Disability Institute. <https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/>

<sup>140</sup> The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). CRE-DH – Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health. <https://crehd.org.au/>

<sup>141</sup> The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). [Faculty of Education Disability Research Collaboration](#).

- **Focus on an aspect of disability inclusion but not broadly disability focused** – such as the ‘Disability, Sport and Social Activism’ Birmingham<sup>142</sup> and The Queensland ‘Centre for Olympic and Paralympic Studies’<sup>143</sup> which both includes a focus on the Paralympics but has a wider focus beyond disability. Similarly, the University of Nottingham’s ‘Diversity and Inclusion Research Hub’ focuses on projects impacting various minority groups and includes disability specific projects within this wider mandate.<sup>144</sup>
- **A point of focus within or across universities bringing together everyone focusing on disability for shared projects** – examples include the Collaborations in the Advancement of Research on Disability<sup>145</sup> and (dis)Ability Design Studio at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign which supports interdisciplinary design research centered around the lived experiences of people with disabilities<sup>146</sup> and the UC Davis and Yale Disability Collaboratory which brings together academics and collaborators from across communities, all to consider the intersection of research and advocacy concerning disability and chronic illness.<sup>147</sup>

Are centred around a particular large funding grant, for example:

- IDEA grant – the Canadian Government funded grant, at McMaster University, which works as a central hub for disability research at the university because of the funding available and activity that flows from the funding.<sup>148</sup> The IDEA project brings in researchers from other universities locally and internationally as well, for example being connected with the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at The University of Sydney and the Melbourne Disability Institute at The University of Melbourne.
- The Australian Research Council University of Queensland funded project ‘Normalising Ability Diversity through Career Transitions: Disability at Work’.<sup>149</sup> This project, because of its topic, also highlights the employment of people with disability within universities.
- While most projects focus on disability generally, some will focus particular attention on 1 type of disability. Many of these are long established and grew out of advocacy around particular disability types. Examples of this include the Down Syndrome Research Program within The University of Queensland’s School of Education which has been running since the 1970s<sup>150</sup> and the Centre for Disability Studies at The University of Sydney, which focuses on intellectual disability and has been running since 1997.<sup>151</sup>

142 University of Birmingham, School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences. (n.d.). Disability, sport and social activism: Developing social justice through sport.

143 The University of Queensland, School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences. (n.d.). Research Networks | The Queensland Centre for Olympic and Paralympic Studies. <https://hmns.uq.edu.au/qcops/research>

144 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). Diversity and inclusion research hub. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/diversity-and-inclusion-research-hub.aspx>

145 University of Illinois. (n.d.). Collaborative Working Group – Collaborations in the Advancement of Research on Disability. <https://card.ahs.illinois.edu/collaborative-working-group/>

146 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, College of Applied Health Sciences. (n.d.). Beckman, Dres Collaboration Launches (Dis)Ability Design Studio. <https://ahs.illinois.edu/2023-mf-bleakney>

147 Rogers, N. (2024). Communal knowledge: an experiential understanding of chronic illness. Yale News. <https://news.yale.edu/2024/02/01/communal-knowledge-experiential-understanding-chronic-illness>

148 McMaster University, MacPherson Institute. (n.d.). IDEAS grant (inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility and sustainability).

149 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Normalising ability diversity through career transitions: Disability at work.

150 The University of Queensland, School of Education. (n.d.). Down Syndrome research program.

151 Centre for Disability Studies. (n.d.). About CDS - Centre for disability studies. <https://cfs.org.au/>

### Part 3. U21 University case study – the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at The University of Sydney

The Centre for Disability Research and Policy was established in 2013 under the initiative of Professor Gwynnyth Llewellyn who was previously Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health and who was the first Director of the Centre until 2018. Since 2021 the Centre has received ongoing core funding for administration and a small operational budget from the Faculty of Medicine and Health who have prioritised the Centre as one of its 'Impact Centres' which are funded as areas of existing research strength.

The Centre has always had 3 core intertwined foci:

1. Disability focused research
2. Impacting policy and practice design within Australia
3. Improving disability inclusion at The University of Sydney

It is the latter goal here that separates it from many of the other research centres described above, but it is this goal that is probably the most important from the perspective of institutional change within the sector. This goal enables the Centre leadership to become involved in strategies such as the University's Disability Inclusion Action Plan<sup>152</sup> and its implementation and through this disability research is in turn recognised and supported by the University executive. This deals with the problem of a lack of visibility of disability research to the University, noted in our reflections on the survey responses above.

The Centre focuses on lived experience of disability in all facets of its research and leadership. This is enabled through the following strategies:

- Career development post-doctoral positions which fund researchers with disability. They have the aim of enabling the establishment of academic careers given the difficulties that many disabled researchers have in being competitive for early-career grants.
- Performance indicators that are linked to the numbers of staff employed with disability, the number of people with disability included in research teams and the number of publications that include authors with disability.
- A recruitment strategy in collaboration with the broader School of Health Sciences which prioritises the employment of people with disability in academic continuing positions, thereby boosting the number of people with disability employed in the school more broadly.

Over a number of years this has enabled a strong leadership team to emerge which is inclusive of people with disability as this was recognised as a gap in the Centre. In 2024 Professor Smith-Merry stepped down as Centre Director and Associate Professor Shane Clifton was appointed as the new Centre Director. Shane has lived experience of disability, and the Centre is now led by someone with disability for the first time. This was the culmination of many years of strategic work to ensure disability leadership and a supportive environment for that to happen.

### Recommendations

- **Support the operation of disability research groups:** The CRPD has shifted how research on disability is performed. To reflect new norms, and the opportunities it presents, universities should support the formation and operation of groups of researchers to form disability research groups.

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<sup>152</sup> The University of Sydney. (2019). Disability inclusion action plan 2019-24. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values/diversity/disability-action-plan.html>

- **Make disability research groups more visible:** the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report had support from those within U21 universities and had academics scanning websites. Despite these resources, it was challenging to identify all disability research groupings and disability led research for this chapter. The difficulties in identifying disability research groups and disability leaders reduces the ability of those keen to collaborate or commission research to do so. The challenges encountered when people sort to report on the disability research groupings and disability led research within their own university and across the U21 Network, illustrates a need to provide additional resources to coordinate and facilitate profiling of what activities are currently being undertaken across the U21 Network.
- **Universities should listen to their own disability inclusion expertise:** An analysis of the existing research groupings illustrates the benefits where universities harness their own research expertise to improve how they operate. To expand such benefits, universities should harness their disability inclusion expertise. This includes academics, research on disability inclusion, professional staff, who provide services but may not be in a specific equity role, and all staff and students, who may have experience with a disability or family member with a disability or some other connection within the disability community.
- **This formalisation process should include administrative support, institutional commitment to support research** which spans academic and operational groupings and recognising these activities in academic and professional workload allocations.

## Conclusion

The CRPD has transformed how universities should engage in research on disability. This includes in supporting disability leadership and facilitating research which advances disability rights. Although some of the disability research groupings referenced in this chapter reflect the disability human rights research paradigm, this is not uniform, and it appears not all universities are supporting disability research groups or disability leadership in those groups.

It is recommended that universities take steps to ensure their research activities align to the new disability human rights paradigm.

## Chapter 2.3.

### The power of university-wide research plans to champion disability inclusion

Paul Harpur, Helen Connick, Sarah Brown, Jean McBain, and Michelle King

#### Introduction

The undertaking of research that leads to new knowledge and original creative endeavour, along with research training, represents a fundamental and defining feature of universities.<sup>153</sup> In Australia, universities must comply with the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Cth).<sup>154</sup> The Higher Education Standards Framework, created under section 58(1) of the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth), requires that universities engage in research. Specifically, to maintain status as a university, the institution must deliver doctoral degrees, demonstrates systematic support for scholarship and demonstrates scholarly activities and outcomes. The Threshold Framework requires that these research activities are conducted in accordance with a research policy framework that is designed to achieve ethical conduct of research and responsible research practices.

Even though universities have a sustained history of promoting research and innovation ecosystems, these ecosystems are not commonly disability inclusive. Persons with disabilities have been *subjects* of research, but rarely have they been research *producers*. These power imbalances in university research mean those *without disabilities* have decided what research questions are asked: leading, designing, publishing and financially benefiting from research about those with disabilities.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD)<sup>155</sup> has responded to the disempowerment of persons with disabilities and swept in a disability inclusive research paradigm which requires States and other actors, including universities, to take strategic measures to transform how research is performed. This transformation includes how researchers with disabilities can be trained and employed as researchers and leaders of research, how research questions are determined, as well as how research is designed, implemented and published.

In 2 parts, this chapter analyses how the U21 Network universities are transforming their research and innovation ecosystems to become disability inclusive. Universities are championing the importance of disability inclusion research, and researchers living with disability, within their overall research endeavours. Part 1 illustrates how these changes in university practices reflect shifting norms in society and human rights. Part 2 advocates for university-wide inclusive research and uses the Disability and Inclusion Action Plan as a case study. The chapter concludes with recommendations to help champion transformative change for inclusive university research.

#### Part 1. Universities promoting a disability inclusive research environment

U21 Network universities have adopted a range of measures to create a more disability inclusive research and innovation environment. Some universities adopt measures which address one aspect of the research endeavour, for example, KU Leuven's focus on encouraging research on the

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<sup>153</sup> TEQSA. (2004). [Guidance note: Research requirements for Australian universities](#).

<sup>154</sup> Department of Education, Australian Government. (n.d.). [Higher Education Standards Framework](#).

<sup>155</sup> Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2007). *Human rights, 2515 U.N.T.S 3, entered into force generally May 3, 2008*. United Nations. <https://treaties.un.org/>

disablement of persons with disabilities.<sup>156</sup> Universities also seek to reduce the disabling impact of research environments through providing reasonable accommodations / adjustments. The University of Glasgow's Equality and Diversity Policy, for example, applies to research and requires Heads of School, Directors of Research Institutes or Heads of Service, with support from the appropriate Human Resources Manager, to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for disabled employees.<sup>157</sup>

However, more comprehensive responses are required. The University of Melbourne's Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023 – 2026, for example, includes a commitment to develop "an approach to support researchers, graduate researchers and staff with disability to engage in research on an equitable basis with their peers".<sup>158</sup> Similarly, The University of Sydney's Centre for Disability Research and Policy and Faculty of Medicine and Health Impact Centre, supported by The University of Sydney Disability Inclusion Action Plan presented the first university-wide forum on Lived Experience-led Research.<sup>159</sup> The resulting Call to Action - Lived Experience-led Research at The University of Sydney includes calls for increased attention to enabling academics and staff members with disabilities to produce lived experience-led research, and to address the lack of opportunities for academics, staff, and students with lived experience of disability in educational and research institutions. Similarly, participants in a University of New South Wales Public Service Research Group workshop identified that changes to university systems, structures and processes are necessary to realise disability inclusive research.<sup>160</sup> Participants identified needs for building effective system-wide disability research capacity that include:

- The need for senior champions and sponsors within universities, who advocate, and provide opportunities for people with disability. For example, appointing a Pro or Deputy Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Disability, responsible for overseeing the education and engagement of people with disability (similar to the appointment of PVC Indigenous Engagement).
- The need for greater disability representation in leadership roles, particularly to help address inherent power imbalances.
- The need for greater accessibility, including physical accessibility to buildings and workstations; accessible information technology such as screen readers, captioning services, accessible websites and databases, and facilitating participation in seminars, tutorials, meetings, etc on applications such as Zoom or Teams; and other reasonable adjustments to enable performance.
- The need for psychological safety for students and researchers with disability.
- The need for affirmative action measures, such as quotas.
- The need for dialogue regarding ableism in universities and how it manifests, such as in performance expectations regarding funding and publications, collegial attitudes and perceptions of research quality.

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<sup>156</sup> KU Leuven. (n.d.). *Research unit education, culture and society*. <https://ppw.kuleuven.be/ecs/english>

<sup>157</sup> University of Glasgow. (2019). *Equality and diversity policy*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media.pdf>

<sup>158</sup> The University of Melbourne. (2023). *Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023 – 2026*.

<sup>159</sup> The University of Sydney. (2023). *Call to action - Lived experience led research at the university of Sydney*. [https://www.sydney.edu.au/faculty-of-medicine-and-health/centres-institutes-groups/centre-for-disability-research-and-policy-calls\\_to\\_action\\_lived\\_experience\\_research.pdf](https://www.sydney.edu.au/faculty-of-medicine-and-health/centres-institutes-groups/centre-for-disability-research-and-policy-calls_to_action_lived_experience_research.pdf)

<sup>160</sup> University of New South Wales Public Service Research Group. (2022). *Building effective system-wide disability research capacity in Australia*. <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/>

- The need to facilitate “crip time” for researchers with disability: this involves accepting and supporting researchers with disability to operate within the limits of what their minds and body can do.
- The need for more disability specific PhD scholarships and postdoctoral fellowships, with top-ups available if required, to provide sufficient time to complete research (i.e. 3-5 years).
- The need for unconventional and non-traditional career pathways that enable people with disability to enter, and remain in, academia. This would enable more representation of people with disability in research teams.

The need to actively include persons with disabilities can also be found in documents approved by university leadership. For example, The University of Melbourne’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023–2026 has been approved by the university executive (2023). Clause 3.5 of this plan calls upon the university to facilitate expert advice on university projects. A Community of Practice was recommended as one measure to facilitate collaboration. This Community of Practice is intended to enable internal disability experts to promote innovation and lead practice across the university and assist in developing a university-wide culture of inclusive research.

## Part 2. The adoption of a university-wide research and innovation plan: Champions of Change – Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan 2024-2026

The University of Queensland (UQ) *Disability Action Plan 2018-2021* contained a commitment that the University would support disability inclusion research which advanced its disability inclusion initiatives.<sup>161</sup> UQ’s *Disability Action Plan 2018-2021 End of DAP Report*<sup>162</sup> identified that UQ should expand its efforts to promote disability inclusive research and should, *inter alia*, create a disability inclusion research community of practice.

UQ’s *Disability Action Plan 2022-2025* contains a commitment to create a university-wide research plan and university-wide disability research group to help advance this agenda.<sup>163</sup> To meet these commitments, UQ is co-designing a university-wide comprehensive disability inclusion research plan: the *Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan*.<sup>164</sup>

The *Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan* is a blueprint for enabling disability research, and researchers, across the University. It includes 24 actions aimed at supporting researchers with disabilities, enabling partnerships to support disability research, and driving research excellence. The measures in the Plan include commitments on specific actors in the university to achieve outcomes. In addition to a disability-led disability research network supporting the Plan, the Plan includes reporting through the University’s standard key performance indicators for research initiatives. This includes providing additional support to postgraduate research degree students and staff with disabilities, such as promoting universal design, and improving support for researchers with disability in evidencing research achievements in grants applications. The Plan also deals with how knowledge is created in the University. It includes a commitment to promote best-practice in co-design and co-production of knowledge. These (and other) measures aim to transform the University’s entire research and innovation endeavour to one

<sup>161</sup> The University of Queensland. (2018). *Disability action plan 2018-2021*. <https://www.capa.edu.au/libraryfile/university-queensland-disability-action-plan-2018-2021/>

<sup>162</sup> The University of Queensland. (2022). *Disability action plan 2018-2021 end of DAP report*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/disability-action-plan-2018-2021-end-of-DAP-report.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> The University of Queensland. (2023). *Disability action plan 2022-2025*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/DisabilityActionPlan.pdf>

<sup>164</sup> The University of Queensland. (2024). *Champions of change: The University of Queensland disability inclusion research and innovation plan 2024-2026*. [disability-inclusion-research-innovation-plan-design-version.pdf](https://staff.uq.edu.au/disability-inclusion-research-innovation-plan-design-version.pdf)

that champions disability inclusion and realises the vision set out in the CRPD's disability inclusive research paradigm.

To support the facilitation and growth of cross-disciplinary collaborations, the *Champions of Change Disability Inclusion Research and Innovation Plan* commits the University to establish a disability inclusion research network. Resources were provided to support staff and students with disabilities, those with disabilities in their families, and disability allies to come together to co-design a research network. Between October 2024 and January 2025, over 100 staff and students explored how this research network should be structured and branded to use the University's research and innovation strengths to help create a more disability inclusive world.

## Recommendations

- a) **Adopt Comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation plans:** Universities should develop and implement comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation plans that align with their overall strategy. These plans should include clear institutional commitments to change and be integrated into the University's broader research ecosystem.
- b) **Monitoring and KPIs:** Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor progress and ensure accountability. Regularly review and report on these KPIs to track the effectiveness of disability inclusion initiatives.
- c) **Capacity Building:** Invest in capacity building for researchers with disabilities. This includes providing training, resources, and support to enable them to engage in research on an equitable basis with their peers.
- d) **Resourcing and Support:** Allocate sufficient resources to support disability inclusion initiatives. This includes funding for reasonable accommodations, accessible infrastructure, and support services for researchers with disabilities.
- e) **Leadership and Representation:** Increase representation of people with disabilities in research and innovation leadership roles within the University generally as well as supporting their collective activities through a research community of practice, group or network. This helps address power imbalances and ensures that the voices of people with disabilities are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

## Conclusion

**Universities should produce the research and innovation which promotes and enables the creation of a more disability inclusive world. To realise this vision, university research cultures and systems must embrace the CRPD's disability inclusive paradigm to truly champion transformative change. Ad hoc and disjointed measures will not suffice in delivering the capacity for universities to be leaders in disability inclusive research. Comprehensive and strategic approaches are essential to ensure that research and innovation ecosystems are inclusive, equitable, and supportive of researchers with disabilities.**

# Part 3:

## Creating an inclusive community for students with disability

- Chapter 3.1.**      **Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design**  
*Paul Harpur, Aliisa Mylonas, Elizabeth Hitches, Wuri Handayani, Emily Singer Lucio, and Claire Shannon*
- Chapter 3.2.**      **Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university**  
*Kathy Ellem, Paul Harpur and Sophelia Chan*
- Chapter 3.3.**      **Students with disability and student mobility**  
*Brooke Szucs and Diana Paola Sanabria-Lozano*
- Chapter 3.4.**      **Students with disability and extracurricular activity involvement**  
*Brooke Szucs and Faith Ong*
- Chapter 3.5.**      **Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work**  
*Matthew Campbell, Gloria Liu, Greg Marston, and Paul Harpur*

## Chapter 3.1.

### Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design

Paul Harpur, Aliisa Mylonas, Elizabeth Hitches, Wuri Handayani, Emily Singer Lucio, and Claire Shannon

#### Introduction

Over the past 2 decades, the number of students in higher education globally has more than doubled to approximately 254 million, with numbers expected to double again in the next 10 years<sup>165</sup>. At the same time, the number of students with disability in higher education has markedly increased across much of the world.

In Australia, for example, the enrolment numbers of domestic undergraduate students with disability increased from 5% of the total student population in 2011 to 11.6% of the total student population in 2022.<sup>166</sup> In Indonesia, the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions increased slightly from 7.74% in 2018 to 7.85% in 2024<sup>167</sup>. These figures do not, however, account for the number of students who do not disclose their disability due to, for example, not personally identifying as having a disability, fear of negative repercussions if they do identify, or their undergoing of a medical health diagnosis that is delaying access to support<sup>168</sup>. In some disciplines, the percentage of students with disability remains low whereas in other disciplines, the numbers are nearer one in 5 students.

Although the increase in disability representation in student cohorts is positive for society and for the higher education sector's social capital, this increase requires a shift in how the education of students with disability is approached to ensure inclusive and equitable opportunities for all.

In higher education, a medical model of disability approach is prevalent, where disability legislation and standards foster the legally obligated safeguarding of students' rights and compliance-driven institutional policy and actions. This has led to the implementation of a reasonable accommodation approach to laws and policies that largely focus on the question of inclusion after the system has been developed. Here, students with disability are treated as exceptions or special cases. Accordingly, there is a reliance on students to first be willing to disclose – and in many cases prove – their disability before they can then be considered for reasonable accommodations.

Once the disability is proven and approved, which can be expensive, universities are then legally obliged to provide reasonable accommodations to enable students' more equitable participation in higher education. What the reasonable accommodations approach does not consider is the significant number of students choosing *not* to disclose their disability yet would be entitled to reasonable accommodations should they choose to do so, estimated within the Australian higher education context, for example, to be as high as 50%.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, this approach does not evaluate the effectiveness of accommodations applied, with Weis et al. (2016) reporting that many recommendations for accommodations are "not supported by objective evidence from students'

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165 UNESCO. (2025). Higher Education. <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education>

166 Cadby, G. Pitman, T., & Koshy P. (2024). Students with disability in Australian higher education: An overview. Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success. <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/data-insights-students-with-disability/>

167 Central Bureau of Statistics, Indonesia. (2024). Statistik Pendidikan. Education Stations 2024. <https://www.bps.go.id/id/publication/2024/statistik-pendidikan-2024.html>

168 Grimes, S., Scevak, J., Southgate, E., & Buchanan, R. (2017). Non-disclosing students with disabilities or learning challenges: Characteristics and size of a hidden population. *Australasian Educational Research*, 22, 425-441. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/>

169 Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., Fischer, S., McLennan, D., & Magnussen, K. (2017). Exploring the retention and success of students with disability in Australian higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(7), 747-762. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/13603116.2016.1251980>

history, diagnosis, test data, and current functioning.<sup>170</sup> This can result in a mismatch between the services, resources and accommodations students require, and what they receive. To enhance participation and inclusion in higher education, therefore, a greater focus on universal design – and as an extension of this, universal design for learning (UDL) which recognises “there is no ‘average’ learner [and] learners come with a variety of prior experiences, abilities, preferences and needs”<sup>171</sup> – is needed.<sup>172</sup> Such an approach moves from more reactive action on a presenting case-by-case basis, to more practice action where barriers to inclusive and equitable learning for a diverse student cohort are anticipated and removed.<sup>173</sup>

Reflecting an increased focus on designing out barriers to inclusion, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines universal design, in Article 2, to include a requirement to design products, environments, programs and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.<sup>174</sup> Where disabling barriers cannot be reduced, then the CRPD requires that universities provide students with disability with reasonable accommodations.<sup>175</sup>

In some jurisdictions reasonable accommodations are referred to as reasonable adjustments, such as what occurs across the higher education sector in Australia, defined as the measures or actions taken to assist students with disability to participate in education on the same basis as other students.<sup>176</sup> In Indonesia, for example, Law 8/2016 regarding People with Disabilities states that reasonable adjustments are essential modifications needed to guarantee that people with disabilities can enjoy and exercise all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.<sup>177</sup>

For this chapter, we adopt the CRPD terminology. Here, the test of *reasonableness* in reasonable accommodations is understood as the result of a contextual test that involves an analysis of the relevance and the effectiveness of the accommodation, and the expected goal of countering discrimination.<sup>178</sup> The availability of resources and financial implications is recognised when assessing disproportionate burden, and the duty to provide reasonable accommodation is enforceable from the moment it is approved. In addition to reflecting human rights norms and a social model of inclusion, increasing the uptake of universal design creates efficiencies in the system which can save universities money and reduce workloads on staff.

In 2 parts, this chapter will analyse the need and progression from relying on a reasonable accommodations approach, to an approach which advances universal design where possible, and relies on retrofitting systems where universal design does not meet inclusion needs. This chapter will first explore how U21 Network university policies and websites describe the reasonable accommodation approach. Although reasonable accommodations are critical for inclusion, the

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170 Weis, R., Dean, E.L., & Osborne, K.J. (2016). Accommodation decision making for postsecondary students with learning disabilities: individually tailored or one size fits all? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 49(5), 484-498. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022219414559648>

171 Disability Awareness (2025). [Universal design for learning in tertiary education](#).

172 Edwards, M., Poed, S., Al-Nawab, H., & Penna, O. (2022). Academic accommodations for university students living with disability and the potential of universal design to address their needs. *Higher education*, 84(4), 779-799. <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s10734-021-00800-w>

173 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Accessible IT Group. (n.d.). What is universal design? Accessible IT Group. <https://accessibleit.disability.illinois.edu/universal-design/what-is-universal-design/>

174 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2014). General Comment No. 2: Article 9: Accessibility (11th sess, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/2, 22 May 2014). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/812025?v=pdf>

175 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern University Law Journal*, 10, 542.

176 Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. (2016). [Reasonable adjustments: disability specific](#).

177 Database Peraturan. (2025). Law (UU) No. 8 of 2016. Persons with disabilities: Main material of the regulation. <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/>

178 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). General Comment No. 4: Article 24: Right to inclusive education. (UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/4, Sep. 2, 2016). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive>

analysis in Part 1 will highlight the need for a more effective system. Part 2 will then explore how U21 university policies are advancing universal design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

## Part 1. Addressing disabling barriers with reasonable accommodations

Reasonable accommodations are granted on an individual basis and modify the conditions, not academic requirements.<sup>179</sup> For illustration, this could include the provision of assistive technology and training on the use of this technology.<sup>180</sup> Rather than requiring the design and control of systems to be inclusive from the start, the reasonable accommodations model requires end users to attempt to retrofit systems to enable inclusion. Reflecting this approach, university policies require students with disability to take the lead in addressing disabling barriers to their education; as such, this is a model underpinned by self-advocacy and justification of need. As part of this process universities, such as the University of Nottingham, provide students with disability with guides on the steps they must take to arrange reasonable accommodations to enable equitable learning and assessment experiences.<sup>181</sup> Thus, students are usually expected to find and initiate contact with a central support team in their university, such as the Center for Students with Disabilities at the University of Connecticut,<sup>182</sup> the Centre of Development and Resources for Students at The University of Hong Kong,<sup>183</sup> the Disability Office at the University of Zurich,<sup>184</sup> Student Disability Services at the University of Auckland,<sup>185</sup> the Program for the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC),<sup>186</sup> the Student Support and Wellbeing Services at The University of Queensland,<sup>187</sup> or the newly created Disability Services Unit at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia<sup>188</sup>

Higher education institutional policies related to reasonable accommodations usually expect students with disability to commence arranging the accommodation process weeks before they need the supports operational, and the process can be complex.<sup>189</sup> For example, the University of Amsterdam advises students with disability to seek support at least 4 months, or as soon as they can, before the start of their study and for assessment-related accommodations, at least 6 weeks before they have a test or exam.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, KU Leuven advises students to apply and become registered for disability status before the university semester commences.<sup>191</sup> At UGM, new students are expected to disclose their disabilities and conditions during enrolment. Based on this declaration, the Disability Service Unit requires them to complete a self-assessment form via Google Forms, after which a one-to-one interview is arranged to discuss reasonable adjustments. However, such processes across these universities do not account for students who, for example, do not identify as 'disabled' nor can anticipate when their access and participation will be impacted,

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179 Disability Office, University of Zurich. (n.d.). Reasonable adjustments for students. <https://ethz.ch/staffnet/en/>

180 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). [Disability services](#).

181 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). [Disability support services](#).

182 University of Connecticut. (n.d.). Center for students with disabilities. <https://csd.uconn.edu/>

183 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Support for students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). [Undergraduate Handbook](#)

184 Disability Office, University of Zurich. (n.d.). Disability office. <https://www.disabilityoffice.uzh.ch/en.html>

185 University of Auckland. (n.d.). [Student disability services \(SDS\)](#).

186 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (2025). Inclusión: PIANE UC. <https://inclusion.uc.cl/piane-uc/>

187 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Diversity, disability and inclusion overview. <https://my.uq.edu.au/student-support/diversity-disability-inclusion>

188 Universitas Gadjah Mada. (2024). [UGM inaugurates disability services unit](#).

189 Fossey, E., Chaffey, L., Venville, A., Ennals, P., Douglas, J., & Bigby, C. (2017). *Navigating the complexity of disability support in tertiary education: Perspectives of students and disability service staff*. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 21(8), 822-832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1278798>

190 University of Amsterdam. (n.d.). [Studying with a disability or chronic illness](#).

191 KU Leuven. (n.d.). [Procedure to apply for the disability status - Students with a disability](#).

such as students living with chronic health conditions. Further, some students may only seek support when experiencing a crisis.

To participate in education on the same basis as other students, students with disability are generally required to meet with a Disability Services Adviser to secure support.<sup>192</sup> When seeking accommodations, they need to provide sufficient information to enable the Disability Services Adviser to assess and recommend accommodations. Though we should not expect students to be experts in disability and accommodations, students can be asked to explain how they experience disability, their past use of accommodations (if applicable), as well as their adaptive strategies.<sup>193</sup> Universities will usually ask students to provide documentation of their disability to facilitate this process.<sup>194</sup> To understand what documentation or further information could be required, students can arrange preliminary meetings. For example, students at the University of Maryland can schedule a consultation to discuss their needs and, if needed, receive guidance on obtaining appropriate documentation.<sup>195</sup> This medical evidence is then required before the student's registration meeting.

To support the efficiency of this accommodations process, students can be required to provide medical evidence in a form or process devised by the university. This can be observed at the University of Glasgow,<sup>196</sup> and<sup>197</sup> for example the Korea University's Disability Support Center, which requires students requesting support to first establish eligibility by providing documentation of an impairment that limits a major life activity, including a clear statement of the existence of an impairment, a summary indicating the current functional limitations and their extent, and relevant information regarding student's medical, educational and learning history and current concerns.<sup>198</sup> The information required of students and their medical practitioners is often detailed, involving emotional<sup>199</sup> time<sup>200</sup> and financial resources<sup>201</sup> that operate as barriers to accessing support.

When a student has a condition which will not change over their studies, such as some forms of low vision or blindness, then the requirement to establish disability occurs generally once. In contrast, students who have conditions which may alter throughout their studies can be required to provide updated evidence on a more regular basis. For example, at Waseda University, a medical documentation update is required every semester of study.<sup>202</sup> In addition to the time, effort and cost in scheduling, travelling, and attending a medical appointment, and then lodging forms with their university, students generally fund their medical diagnosis. This can involve multiple specialist

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192 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). [Reasonable Adjustments](#).

193 Association on Higher Education and Disability. (n.d.). Supporting accommodation requests: Guidance on documentation practices. <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>

194 Student Disability Center, UC Davis. (n.d.). [Student disability center](#).

195 Accessibility & Disability Service, University of Maryland. (n.d.). Documentation guidance. <https://ads.umd.edu/getting-started/documentation-guidance>

196 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). MyGlasgow - disability service - get support. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/disability/support/>

197 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). [Student services medical disability information](#).

198 Korea University. (n.d.). *Student Disability Center - KUCSD*. Global Services Center. [https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/service/support\\_center.do](https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/service/support_center.do)

199 Reed, M. J., & Kennett, D. J. (2017). The importance of university students' perceived ability to balance multiple roles: A comparison of students with and without disabilities. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 47(2), 71-86.

200 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., O'Sullivan, K. A., & Ehrich, J. (2024). Leveraging students' voices: understanding ways university support services can strengthen student support. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52, 1-23.

201 Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students: A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2), 5-14. <https://eric.ed.gov/>; Martin, J. M. (2010). Stigma and student mental health in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(3), 259-274. doi/abs/10.1080/07294360903470969

202 Waseda University. (2024). [Guide to the application procedures for reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities](#).

appointments and impose a significant financial burden on students.<sup>203</sup> <sup>204</sup>In this regard, the National University of Singapore has a scheme to support students with securing a psychological diagnosis.<sup>205</sup> Here, students who suspect they have a disability can seek funded assessments. However, if no disability is diagnosed, then students are responsible for covering assessment costs and will not be eligible for formal accommodations.

If a student is accepted as having a disability, the Disability Services Adviser will determine what accommodations are reasonable and then liaise with school / faculty staff to make the required changes. The process of a Disability Services Adviser working with each student and their (several) course teachers every semester to understand what is reasonable and unreasonable in relation to each learning and assessment environment requires a considerable investment of time and energy from all parties. With increasing numbers of students with disability enrolling in university studies, this arrangement is unsustainable; further, it can put students' academic success at risk due to delays in having reasonable accommodations finalised and in place by the start of each semester. It is also worth noting that while Disability Advisors liaise directly with students and teaching staff, many centrally funded disability services, such as that offered by The University of Sydney, are not resourced to provide counselling or case management, nor intervene on matters of special consideration, academic appeal or leniency.<sup>206</sup>

Once the accommodation is decided upon, the teaching staff have a significant role in implementing the measures. Some universities, such as The University of Edinburgh and UC Davis, offer training to help their staff support students with disability.<sup>207</sup><sup>208</sup> However, given that these types of professional learning activities are usually not compulsory there is no guarantee, for example, that teaching staff have had any exposure to UDL principles and the benefits of proactively anticipating the diversity of learners to counter a time- and labour-intensive retrospective accommodations system.

With increasing numbers of students with disability who may require support entering university, and a system reliant on individual appointments with a Disability Services Adviser to assess and broker accommodation agreements between faculty and students, our institutional disability support service areas will continue to be under increasing pressure to meet demand. This raises questions as to whether an accommodation system reflecting a medical model of disability is effective or sustainable given the continued growth in the numbers of students identifying as having a disability entering universities, coupled with the knowledge that a large portion of students eligible for accommodations are not disclosing their disability and are therefore not registered with disability services or accessing accommodations. We must also consider whether reasonable accommodations in their current form meet student needs. For example, assumptions can be made about the needs of students who are reluctant or unable to self-advocate for what they need,<sup>209</sup> and standard types of accommodations tend to be widely applied even though students with disability are not a homogenous group.<sup>210</sup> As such, students have reported that their experiences of support

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203 K Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students: A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2), 5-14. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/app/uploads/2013/10/Overcoming-adversity-among-low-SES-students.pdf>

204 Martin, J. M. (2010). Stigma and student mental health in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(3), 259-274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903470969>

205 National University of Singapore. (n.d.). *Funded review or new psychological assessments*. <https://osa.nus.edu.sg/services-support/accessibility>

206 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). *Inclusion and disability*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/health-wellbeing/inclusion-and-disability.html>

207 Student Disability Center, UC Davis. (n.d.). *Student disability center*. <https://sdc.ucdavis.edu/>

208 The University of Edinburgh. (n.d.). *Supporting students | Disability and Learning Support Service*.

209 Sarrett, J. (2018). Autism and accommodations in higher education: Insights from the autism community. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 679-693. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3353-4>

210 Darwin, S. (2021). The changing topography of student evaluation in higher education: Mapping the contemporary terrain. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(2), 220-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1740183>

vary considerably, from positive and effective, to those which placed students under immense stress and did not reduce barriers to their learning and achievement.<sup>211</sup> More recent research also suggests that students' levels of stress in higher education may be statistically similar regardless of whether they have sought support, raising questions as to how effectively unnecessary stressors or barriers in the learning environment are being identified and reduced.<sup>212</sup>

## Part II. Designing out disabling barriers with universal design and universal design for learning.

The reasonable accommodations model requires students, medical practitioners, disability services staff, and academic and other professional staff to all attempt to retrofit systems that have not fully anticipated the institution's diversity of learners. The University of New South Wales, for example, reports that it supports over a thousand students with disability with this process.<sup>213</sup> Rather than waiting for students to ask for help, universal design for learning aims to integrate accessibility/equal access by embedding inclusive design principles in the entire curriculum.

U21 universities are promoting UDL. This trend is evidenced by McMaster University's Accessibility Policy,<sup>214</sup> which recognises that universal design in education and learning extends beyond universal design in the built environment (often fixed and partial). When properly implemented, universal design removes from persons with disability, in the first instance, the burden of navigating onerous accommodation processes, and secondly, negotiating the accommodations and supports needed to act autonomously and independently. Similarly, Waseda University recognises that providing students with disability the best educational experience requires proactive improvement measures, including the promotion and adoption of universal and barrier-free designs, the training and deployment of necessary staff, and the improvement of information accessibility.<sup>215</sup> To create educational ecosystems which are inclusive and accessible by everyone, the University of Zurich aims to systematically remove barriers through embracing UDL.<sup>216</sup> At The University of Melbourne, UDL is used to implement approaches that improve accessibility of curriculum and assessment design.<sup>217</sup> This adoption of universal design is underpinned by a context of growing national and international support, such as in Ireland with the recent release of "ALTITUDE", the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.<sup>218</sup> In the United States of America, universal design is explicitly mentioned in US federal education law<sup>219</sup> along with ongoing refinement of Center for Applied Special Technology or CAST's founding UDL guidelines, now UDL 3.0<sup>220</sup>.

U21 universities adopt a range of means to help realise UDL. For example, Lund University and The University of Hong Kong provide information and resources on their websites on how to implement

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211 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., Manning, A., & Moore, B. (2025). Strengthening student support: Students' voices on what does (not) work in high school and university. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 130, 102529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102529>

212 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., & Ehrich, J. (2023). Shedding light on students with support needs: Comparisons of stress, self-efficacy, and disclosure. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 16(2), 205. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/dhe0000328>

213 University of New South Wales. (n.d.). [Disability inclusion | Equity, Diversity & Inclusion](#).

214 McMaster University. (n.d.). Accessibility policy. Accessibility policy. <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/accessibility-policy/>

215 Waseda University, Accessibility Resource Center. (n.d.). Policy: Basic principles of Waseda University in relation to the support of students with disability. <https://www.waseda.jp/inst/dsso/en/about/policy/>

216 University of Zurich. (n.d.). Disability office. <https://www.disabilityoffice.uzh.ch/en.html>

217 The University of Melbourne. (2023). [Disability inclusion action plan \(DIAP\) 2023-2026](#).

218 AHEAD. (2024). ALTITUDE: The national charter for universal design in tertiary education. <https://www.ahead.ie/altitude>

219 CAST. (2025). [The UDL guidelines](#).

220 CAST (2025). [The UDL Guidelines](#).

UDL.<sup>221</sup> To realise universal design at The University of Queensland, there has been a broader interest in building staff capability in this approach, including some institutionally-funded teaching grants.<sup>222</sup> Similarly, The University of Melbourne has committed to developing a comprehensive university-wide training program on UDL.<sup>223</sup> This approach is reflected at McMaster University where a university-wide holistic, systemic approach has been advanced.<sup>224</sup> Recognising the value of champions, the University College Dublin has appointed role models to become the University's corps of academic universal design pathfinders.<sup>225</sup>

Universal design extends beyond learning and, illustratively, U21 universities target universal design in services used by students and staff, in recruitment and selection processes, and in other aspects of work.<sup>226,227</sup> Universal design is also promoted in the research ecosystem.<sup>228</sup> At the University of Auckland, universal design is championed to enable barrier-free and equal access to the built environment and digital spaces.<sup>229</sup> The University of Connecticut goes further, mandating accessibility of its digital information, communication, content, and technologies.<sup>230</sup> U21 universities are thus seeing growing interest and implementation of universal design; however, it should be noted that while some universities are at the stage of broadly applying universal design principles, others are just at the beginning of their universal design and UDL journey.

## Recommendations

To support systemic change from reasonable accommodations (medical model of disability) to universal design (social model of inclusion), and in genuine consultation and collaboration with students with disability (*Nothing About Us Without Us*<sup>231</sup>) and other key stakeholders, several actions are recommended for universities.

- a) **Embrace universal design, including universal design of learning:** In recognition of the benefits of universal design, including UDL, to complement and reduce overreliance on reasonable accommodations, it is recommended that universities should formally commit to institutional adoption of a universal design approach to support the inclusion of students with disability and indeed, broader student diversity noting students' intersecting identities.<sup>232</sup>
- b) **Strengthen implementation of reasonable accommodation processes:** While universal design and UDL will enhance participation and access, it will not address every disabling barrier. As such, it is recommended that universities review and apply best practice to their reasonable accommodation policies and procedures, as well as support emerging policy development by

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221 Lund University. (n.d.). *Learning support: Support for students with disabilities*. <https://www.staff.lu.se/research-and-education/education-support/student-support/learning-support>; The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). *Support for students with special education needs support services*. <https://www.cedars.hku.hk/sen-support>

222 The University of Queensland. (n.d.-b). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*.

223 The University of Melbourne. (2023). *Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023-2026*.

224 McMaster University. (n.d.). *Accessibility in teaching and learning roadmap*. <https://provost.mcmaster.ca/teaching-learning/strategy/implementation-plan/>

225 University College Dublin. (2021). *UCD widening participation committee annual report 2020/21*.

226 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *Disability inclusion and reasonable adjustment for staff procedure*. <https://policies.uq.edu.au/>

227 University College Dublin. (n.d.). *UCD supporting the employment of people with disabilities*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/>

228 The University of Sydney. (2023). *Call to action: Lived experience-led research at the University of Sydney*.

229 University of Auckland. (2022). *Waipapa Taumata Rau: The University of Auckland disability action plan 2022-2025*.

230 University of Connecticut. (2019). *Information and communication technology (ICT) accessibility policy*. <https://policy.uconn.edu/2019/08/02/info-comm-tech/>

231 Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>

232 Meadows-Haworth, C. (2023). The intersectional disadvantages for disabled women students in UK higher education. *The International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 3(2), 49-70. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>

those U21 universities in the earlier stages of their universal design and UDL institutional journeys.

- c) **Leveraging the U21 Network to realise universal design:** It is recommended that U21 universities leverage their network by utilising their collective strengths in learning, research, and innovation to build spaces for shared training, resource development, and joint contributions to scholarship. For example, an executive-level cross-institutional committee / community of practice could be established to develop minimal standards for widespread adoption, such as converting the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines<sup>233</sup> into guidelines explicitly relevant to the development of accessible resources and learning management systems in higher education. Further, it will be essential to consider how the U21 Network supports its member universities who are at the early stages of understanding universal design, noting that there are many universities yet to adopt *these* principles at an institutional level and / or apply UDL broadly to their teaching, learning and assessment environments. Leveraging the knowledge of the U21 community to share learnings and best practice, including optimising access to existing resources and guidance, can accelerate this practice.

## Conclusion

The shift from reasonable accommodations to universal design in higher education is essential for creating an inclusive environment for all students, including those with disability. The increasing number of students with disability enrolling in higher education institutions highlights the need for a more proactive and inclusive approach to accessibility, where products, environments, programs, and services are designed to be usable by all people and to the greatest extent possible from the outset, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. In doing so, this approach increases access and inclusion for all students, including those with disability (disclosed or otherwise), while at the same time creating efficiencies that will save universities money and reduce staff workloads. Such an approach would also reduce the burden on students to continually self-advocate, particularly where known and predictable barriers to learning could instead be proactively reduced before students encounter them.

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<sup>233</sup> W3C (2025). Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2. <https://www.w3.org/>

## Chapter 3.2.

### Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university

Kathy Ellem, Paul Harpur and Sophelia Chan

#### Introduction

People transition to university from school, vocational training, and from other avenues. In all these transitions, students with disabilities have a more complicated path. Persons with disabilities are often discouraged from higher education or not provided the necessary skills to continue studies beyond K-12 (Kindergarten to Year 12). Once invited to study at a university, a student with a disability encounters a raft of additional challenges before they can start studying not experienced by students who live without a disability. The CRPD provides a right to higher education in Article 24(5) which enshrines a raft of measures to enable persons with disabilities to exercise their right to higher education.<sup>234</sup> Reflecting this, the CRPD Committee explains the right to education in the CRPD entitled persons with disabilities to demand support transition through their education journey from kindergarten / preschool to finishing secondary school, through to university and / or into work.<sup>235</sup>

In 3 parts, this chapter analyses whether the U21 Network universities are providing additional supports to persons with disabilities who are looking to transition to university. The transition process starts when a potential student believes higher education could be for them. The factors which influence potential students to approach universities are numerous, but Part 1 will consider university disability outreach programming. This outreach programming can include activities which inform potential students with disabilities as well as communicating to this cohort that there is a place for them at university by targeted placement programs. Part 2 will then analyse disability specific pre-orientation and orientation programming. Part 3 will analyse the range of supports universities provide to students with disabilities to get them onto campus and ready to commence study.

#### Part 1. Outreach to offer

The fact potential university students can have no direct relationship with universities, such as if they are studying in a K-12 education, means a lot of information provided to potential students comes from government or other sources. For example, the Queensland Government provides a fact sheet which recommends that the person speak to the enrolment officer of the particular university at the time of enrolment regarding accessing support.<sup>236</sup> A list of URL links is provided to relevant web pages of Queensland's universities which summarise each institution's disability support. Similarly, there are resources provided to specific disability cohorts. Illustratively, Think College provides resources, technical assistance and training related to college options for students with intellectual disabilities and manages the only US listing of college programs for students with intellectual disabilities.<sup>237</sup> The institute also undertakes research and evaluation in this space and in 2023 provided a game-based curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities called Future Quest Island Explorations which helps develop awareness on college and career choices.

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234 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern University Law review*, 10, 542.

235 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). *General comment no. 4 on the right to inclusive education*. (UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/4, Sep. 2, 2016). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record.pdf>

236 Queensland Government. (n.d.). *Transition to post-school for students with disability: Fact sheet for students and parents/carers*.

237 ThinkCollege. (n.d.). *Institute for community inclusion (what is think college)?* <https://thinkcollege.net/about/what-is-think-college>

To encourage potential equity students to apply to university, U21 universities have a range of outreach programs. Sometimes these plans reference disability as one of many cohorts. For example, the University of Birmingham Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 aims to develop outreach programs for a range of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities.<sup>238</sup> Similarly, The University of Queensland's Queensland Commitment aims to provide opportunities for all Queenslanders. Recognising people with disabilities as a vulnerable population, UQ integrates disability inclusion into its initiatives, including flagship programs like the Young Achievers Program (YAP) and Inspire.

Other U21 Network universities have events aimed at potential students with disabilities. The University of Edinburgh runs an on-line transition event for potential students, who have a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum condition, as well as to their families.<sup>239</sup> The University of Edinburgh explains that they understand that the transition to university can be difficult, so the transition event hopes to address questions or concerns.

Whereas outreach programming encourages potential students with disabilities to apply to university, targeted admission schemes take this one step further. For illustration, the University of Auckland's Undergraduate Targeted Admission Schemes (UTAS) is a scheme for eligible applicants who are Māori, Pacific, disabled or from low socioeconomic or refugee backgrounds.<sup>240</sup> UTAS reserves a number of places in University of Auckland's undergraduate programs for applicants who have met the University Entrance standard but have not met the guaranteed entry score for the program of their choice.

These targeted admission schemes can exclusively focus on students who have missed out on an offer at the university. For example, 3% of seats at the University of Delhi are allocated to students who have a physical disability who did not receive an offer.<sup>241</sup>

## Part 2. Orientation before commencing studies

The added complexity experienced by students with disabilities transitioning into university has motivated some U21 Network universities to provide pre-orientation activities. For example, McMaster University in Canada conducts a 2-week program called MacStart: Transition program for students with disabilities.<sup>242</sup> This program provides a range of activities related to learning study skills, using assistive technology, weekly mentorship drop-ins, zoom sessions for parents, family and caregivers, and an asynchronous online course to learn further about academic life. The program is run before existing students with disabilities commence their studies but does not require the student to register their disability with the university. Similarly, the University of Birmingham provides a transition event for students on the spectrum called BeBirmingham.<sup>243</sup> This free and optional 2-day event for enrolled students takes place before the start of Welcome Week, gives students a chance to explore the campus, meet a small group of students and move into accommodation early. Students are invited to bring along a support person if they wish to.

Other U21 Network universities provide disability-specific supports during orientation. In addition to the provision of reasonable accommodations / adjustments, universities can provide targeted supports.<sup>244</sup> For example, students with disabilities commencing at Lund University can arrange

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238 University of Birmingham. (2025). [Access and participation plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#).

239 The University of Edinburgh, Disability and Learning Support Service. (2024). [Transition Event for new students with an autism spectrum condition](#).

240 University of Auckland. (2016). *Undergraduate targeted admission schemes policy and procedures*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en.html>

241 University of Delhi. (n.d.). *Distribution of seats category & course wise for admission to bachelor degree with honours*. <https://www.du.ac.in/SeatsDistribution.pdf>

242 McMaster University. (2024). *MacStart: Transition program for students with disabilities*. Student Success Centre. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/>

243 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). *Next steps for applicants with a disability*. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/student-experience/advice-support/disability/next-steps>

244 University of Hong Kong. (2024). *Orientation Regulations for Student Societies 2025*. <https://leaf.cedars.hku.hk/orientation-regulations/>

preparatory visits.<sup>245</sup> An addition example of support is events for students with disabilities. For illustration, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) hosted a function during orientation for UGM students with disabilities.<sup>246</sup> This event aimed to foster connections between new and returning students and provided them with information about support and facilities available to aid their studies at UGM.

### Part 3. Practical support in transitioning to university

It is common for U21 Network universities to have a disability services office to help students with disabilities. Illustrative examples of such offices can be found at Korea University,<sup>247</sup> Lund University,<sup>248</sup> National University of Singapore,<sup>249</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile,<sup>250</sup> University College Dublin,<sup>251</sup> University of Amsterdam,<sup>252</sup> University of California, Davis,<sup>253</sup> University of Glasgow,<sup>254</sup> The University of Hong Kong,<sup>255</sup> University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign,<sup>256</sup> University of Johannesburg,<sup>257</sup> and The University of Queensland.<sup>258</sup> Although these offices all provide support, the extent of the details for students transitioning to university for the first time is variable. The University of Maryland is a good example of a disability support page which provides targeted details for students entering university for the first time.<sup>259</sup> The University of Maryland's Transitioning to UMD website provides specific information on the different accommodation processes for high school students, transfer students and graduate students with disabilities.

When it comes to what supports students with disabilities may need to access when transitioning to university, the University of Connecticut's Types of Accommodations page provides helpful detail.<sup>260</sup> This website provides details on the main areas where students with disabilities may require support, including:

- Academic accommodations
- Campus access accommodations
- Residential accommodations

Sorting out academic accommodations / adjustments were analysed in Chapter 3.1 of this report, and access to the built environment covered in Chapter 5.3, thus these issues will simply be noted in this chapter.

Finding a place to live is critical for students with disabilities and presents additional challenges. Beyond the actual accommodation, students with disabilities must consider where there is

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245 Lunds University. (n.d.). Inclusive Mobility. <https://inclusivemobility.eu/>

246 Agung Nugroho. (2024). UGM's Peduli Difabel holds meeting with new students with disabilities. Universitas Gadjah Mada. <https://ugm.ac.id/en/>

247 Korea University. (n.d.). Korea University Center for students with disabilities. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/support/regi.do>

248 Lund University. (n.d.). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/>

249 National University of Singapore. (n.d.). Accessibility support. Office of Student Affairs. <https://osa.nus.edu.sg/services-support/accessibility-support/>

250 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). Disability and learning support. <https://global.ed.ac.uk/study-work-away/disability-and-learning-support>

251 University College Dublin. (n.d.). Disability support - UCD access and lifelong learning. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

252 University of Amsterdam. (n.d.). [Studying with a disability or chronic illness.](#)

253 University of California, Davis. (n.d.). Student disability center. <https://sdc.ucdavis.edu/>

254 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). Disability service. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/disability/>

255 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). *Support for students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN).* [Undergraduate Handbook](#)

256 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. (n.d.). Disability resources and educational services. <https://dres.illinois.edu/>

257 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). Disability services. <https://www.uj.ac.za/>

258 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Diversity, disability and inclusion. <https://my.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/student-support/diversity-disability-inclusion>

259 University of Maryland, Accessibility & Disability Service. (n.d.). Transitioning to UMD. <https://ads.umd.edu/transitioning-umd>

260 University of Connecticut, Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). Types of Accommodations. <https://csd.uconn.edu/accommodations/>

accessible transport<sup>261</sup> and accessibility of the built environment.<sup>262</sup> To support students with disabilities identifying the availability of accessible rooms, Lund University provides a database.<sup>263</sup> Universities such as KU Leuven<sup>264</sup> and University of Maryland<sup>265</sup> provide students with disabilities advocacy support in assisting them to ensure that they can find residential accommodations and that their living needs are met. Beyond just providing support to find housing,<sup>266</sup> the University of Connecticut extends support to students with disabilities by arranging meal plans that meet their dietary needs.<sup>267</sup>

Additionally, students with certain disabilities can benefit from early access to their accommodation. For example, in addition to ensuring there is room for personal assistants and / or Guide Dogs to live with the student and offering private viewings to ensure accommodation is appropriate, the University of Birmingham offers students with disabilities early check-in to avoid Arrivals Weekend.<sup>268</sup>

## Recommendations

- a) **Enhanced Outreach Programs:** Working with government and schools, universities should develop specific outreach programs that directly address the needs and concerns of potential students with disabilities. This could include tailored information sessions, workshops, and online resources. These communications should also consider students with specific disabilities who are under-represented in the University sector, such as students with intellectual disabilities. Such efforts should involve partnering with high schools, vocational training centres and rehabilitation providers to provide early information and support to students with disabilities considering higher education.
- b) **Pre-Orientation and Orientation Programs:** Universities should implement comprehensive pre-orientation programs similar to McMaster University's MacStart, which includes activities like learning study skills, using assistive technology, and mentorship.
- c) **Accessible Housing:** Universities should strive to ensure that all university accommodations have options for all students. The shortage of disability inclusive options should be addressed. Once students are enrolled, universities should provide supports to students with disabilities in finding rooms and checking in. This should include early check-in options for students with disabilities to avoid the rush of Arrivals Weekend.

## Conclusion

The transition to university for students with disabilities is a multifaceted process that requires comprehensive support systems. This chapter has analysed how U21 Network universities provide support to students who are transitioning to university. This analysis reveals a variety of outreach, pre-orientation, orientation, and practical support programs aimed at facilitating this transition. These initiatives are crucial in ensuring that students with disabilities not only access higher education but also realise their right to higher education set out in the CRPD.

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261 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Accessibility and transportation – Students with a disability. <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/stuvo/studentswithadisability>

262 University of Queensland. (2023). [St Lucia Campus 2023 Accessibility Map](#).

263 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Access *guide*. <https://www.kuleuven.be/kulag/en#/>

264 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Housing & living support for students with a physical disability. <https://www.kuleuven.be>

265 University of Maryland. (n.d.). Housing *accommodations*. <https://ads.umd.edu/accommodations-services/housing-accommodations>

266 University of Connecticut. Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). Housing *accommodations*. <https://csd.uconn.edu/housing-accommodations/>

267 University of Connecticut. Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). Meal *plan modifications*. <https://csd.uconn.edu/meal-plan-modifications/>

268 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). Accessible accommodation. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/accommodation/accessible-accommodation>

## Chapter 3.3.

### Students with disability and student mobility

Brooke Szucs and Diana Paola Sanabria-Lozano

#### Introduction

The U21 Network places a strong emphasis on global mobility programs as a cornerstone of its offerings. U21 aims to provide access to intercultural activities that connect its members across 21 countries, primarily through international mobility opportunities for students within the network.

In recent years, the network has placed a particular focus on creating equitable access to these opportunities for students from EDI backgrounds. One notable initiative has been the introduction of online global mobility experiences, which have benefited over 1,500 students who might otherwise have been excluded from traditional mobility programs.<sup>269</sup>

Given U21's commitment to EDI and global mobility, this chapter explores how individual member universities support students with disabilities in this context. A desktop analysis was conducted to examine 2 key areas:

1. How universities support students with disabilities in accessing global exchange opportunities, whether long-term or short-term.
2. How international students with disabilities are accommodated.

In 2 parts, this chapter will give an overview on how the university members of the U21 Network collectively address these questions and strive for the globalisation of their student communities with disability. This chapter will first explore opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in global mobility and will then analyse how policies and websites accommodate international or incoming exchange students with disabilities.

#### Part 1. Students with Disabilities in Global Mobility Opportunities

This section of the study sought evidence of supports available for students with disabilities to participate in exchange programs. It aimed to answer 3 key questions:

1. What supports are available?
2. Are students with disabilities explicitly included?
3. How are these students supported?

The authors found that McMaster University in Canada had an explicit statement regarding the inclusion of exchange students with disabilities. Their webpage 'Incoming exchange students'<sup>270</sup> featured the following statement:

*"If you have any accessibility or accommodation needs, you or your home counsellor should contact [sastransition@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sastransition@mcmaster.ca) and [macincoming@mcmaster.ca](mailto:macincoming@mcmaster.ca)".*

This is useful because students have a clear avenue for gaining support. They do not have to worry about cultural differences when asking for supports, as they are explicitly asked as an incoming exchange student if they require accessibility or accommodation adjustments. More so, they are encouraged to use their home university counsellor who may already be familiar with their needs and supports to help the process, especially when it comes to

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269 U21. (2024). Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

270 McMaster University. (2024). Incoming exchange students. Student Success Centre. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/international-students/>

translating these supports to new contexts. This may save time and ensure that students feel prepared for starting their university semester, knowing their adjustments are already in place. This is especially relevant for ensuring equity for students with disabilities who are already using extra time to prepare for their global experiences and more likely to be time-poor than the general student population. This is a very small statement but communicates a lot to students with disabilities looking for exchange programs.

For outgoing students, University College Dublin<sup>271</sup> explicitly offers advice on managing their disability when away, key contacts at the host university, as well as other resources to support these students. Both authors are students with disabilities who have been on global experiences, and the above examples have resonated strongly with them as something desirable for a host university to have.

Lund University included a specific mention for incoming exchange students on their 'Students with disabilities' page<sup>272</sup>. They feature the following statement:

*"If you intend to come to Lund University on an exchange program, you and your coordinator at your home university need to contact us when you apply for exchange."*

There are some benefits to this approach, though the wording may be seen as impacting on the application process. This same page also explains which services the offices provide, specifying that personal assistance is provided by the municipality. They note that this is only available to students whose studies will last more than 12 months, which may exclude exchange and some international students.

While these statements are helpful, only some universities had dedicated services or programs for these students. The Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC Chile) has created an international mobility program for students with disabilities,<sup>273</sup> where partnerships with 5 Spanish universities allows UC to place students with disabilities there as a matter of priority. Not only do these dedicated spaces exist, they are also supported with academic accommodations and other supports and resources for the exchange student with disabilities. This is a great example of taking initiative to remove identified barriers to create equal access to all educational activities, as well as an example of a strategic level direction creating change.<sup>274</sup>

Similarly, the University of Birmingham aims to empower disabled students to participate in international exchange programs. Their Student Disability Advisers support outgoing and incoming exchange students during pre-departure preparations, ensuring that support requirements are integrated and communicated with the university or host institutions. The university collaborates with the Go Global and Birmingham Global teams to facilitate smooth exchanges and effective communication with international partners. Additionally, the Student EDI team develops resources to enhance students' confidence and readiness for international travel. Eligible outgoing exchange students with disabilities can also access additional funding through the Turing Scheme to cover support and travel costs.

The University of Hong Kong follows a similar pattern of support with their SEN department facilitating incoming and departing exchange students, especially with an emphasis on communication between the home and the host universities.

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271 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

272 Lund University. (2024). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/student-life/before-you-arrive/students-disabilities>

273 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (2021). UC Chile created the first international mobility program for students with disabilities. <https://www.uc.cl/en/news/>

274 As for Footnote 5.

## Part 2. International Students with Disabilities

This part of the study focused on international students with disabilities, addressing the following questions:

1. Are these students included in strategic considerations?
2. What supports are available for them?
3. Are these supports reflected in policies or strategic plans?

Generally, international students are regarded just as any other student at the university, with the same rights and entitlements as other students. While the supports for students with disabilities may apply equally to both domestic and international students, the way this is communicated to incoming students makes a difference in the real accessibility of these resources. That is, if they are not clearly communicated to incoming students, they may be accessed later than practicable, or not at all - thereby, removing access.

As such, clear statements including international students are important for equal access.

Some universities<sup>275 276</sup> which link international student resource webpages to other student supports included direct links to disability services. Lund University has a website 'The International Desk,'<sup>277</sup> which aims to welcome all international students. It states that it is a point of contact for any practical support, such as 'anything from where to buy a bike, how to find your department or how to get involved in student life is welcome'. This page features a list of relevant student services for international students, including for students with disabilities. The connecting page<sup>278</sup> is also very explicit and clear in instruction, an important part of access.

This was helpful because it signals to students with disabilities that this process is truly inclusive and creates confidence in attending the university. The effect of these types of signals is like that provided by the comment from McMaster University above.

University College Dublin has a section for international students on their 'Disability Support' page.<sup>279</sup> This section clearly states the rights of international students and the legislation and context that governs this. This also provides the benefits of clearly communicating access and including this intersection in their considerations. However, the international student facing pages don't appear to link back to this, which would be ideal for creating a closed loop.

### Limitations

One thing of note is the limit of access to some resources. Multiple universities had resources that were protected by a passcode, which means that new students or prospective students without a login would not have access to this information. What was also of note was that not all websites were fully accessible to someone with a vision impairment, which is an obstacle to access. For example, University College Dublin<sup>280</sup> has an informative and high-quality website for disability support; however, the page for international students and exchange students is not so accessible.

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275 Lund University. (n.d.). *The international desk*.

276 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). *International students*.

277Lund University. (n.d.). *The international desk*.

278 Lund University. (2024). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/>

279 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

280 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

## Recommendations

- a) **Clear access to disability support information:** Universities that provide disability support to international students should explicitly state this on their websites and link relevant pages together. This ensures prospective students understand available support and can make informed decisions before applying. For example, the University of Zurich has a very clear road map about the steps student with disabilities need to make to gain reasonable adjustments, as well as all that is required before commencing their studies. This is very helpful for a new domestic or international student with disabilities and is a good practice that could be implemented by the rest of the U21 members.
- b) **Prominent website accessibility:** University websites are often the first source of information for international and exchange students. Clear links to disability support resources demonstrate the institution's commitment to inclusion as outlined in its policies.
- c) **Cross-linking webpages:** Web pages for international and exchange students should include sections or direct links to disability support information. Similarly, disability support pages should link back to international and exchange student resources, facilitating seamless navigation.
- d) **Intersectionality:** Send a clear message to website visitors that international students with disabilities are included in your disability inclusion initiatives. Students are often coming from diverse contexts with different legal frameworks, confusion over their rights as international students versus their domestic peers, and their specific needs due to being at the intersection of disability, language proficiency, and much more.
- e) **Language accessibility:** The authors also noted a lack of language variety available when accessing disability support services, aside from some information in English. It may be worth considering this type of content to be made available in multiple languages to really ensure the relevant students gain access to these supports, even if just in English as an internationally known language, or an auto-translate option.

## Conclusion

There is some variety in the offerings for student mobility cohorts; however, there is not a large range of targeted and university backed programs. The mobility program from UC Chile stands as a highlight in this area that other members of the network can strive to emulate.

The authors found all the universities consulted have webpages for international students, exchange students, and disability support information webpages. However, these web pages are not linked to each other directly. So, if a prospective international student with disabilities wants to know about disability support programs they need to make an independent search; and to know if they can access this support, they may have to directly ask the university staff through email or phone call. To actively avoid this, we have made the above recommendations.

We are enthused by the care for student mobility for those with disabilities but look forward to seeing more targeted initiatives in the future.

## Chapter 3.4.

### Students with disability and extracurricular activity involvement

Brooke Szucs and Faith Ong

#### Introduction

The U21 Network positively prioritises professional development through extracurricular activities, such as the Global Citizens Program. This is due to U21's priority to create skilled, interconnected graduates ready for a globalised work future.

Across the network, U21 provides opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities for around 2,000 students a year.<sup>281</sup> This includes via the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition, micro internships, policy leadership, and student projects that focus on the global good.

This is especially pertinent for students with disabilities, as participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to significantly improve their sense of belonging, employability, and academic performance.<sup>282</sup> Given the persistent challenges students with disabilities experiences regarding completion rates and post-graduation employment, it is important to offer opportunities that foster engagement and help mitigate these issues, thereby supporting their academic and professional success.

While the U21 Network on a larger scale is invested in extracurricular involvement, including that of students from underrepresented backgrounds, this study was interested in how the member universities engage with this topic.<sup>283</sup> A desktop analysis was conducted to examine 2 key areas:

1. Do universities include extracurricular involvement in their strategic plans?
2. Does this translate into support for students with disabilities to engage in extracurricular activities?

This chapter will give an overview on how the university members of the U21 Network collectively include students with disabilities in extracurricular activities.

#### Results

Our research examined if extracurricular activities (ECAs) were included in strategic plans, and if this translated to targeted supports for students with disabilities.

Table 1. Shows where universities have included extracurricular considerations.

University Member	Strategic Plan has ECA	Disability Specific ECA
McMaster University <sup>284</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>285</sup>
University of Birmingham <sup>286</sup>	Yes	No
The University of Nottingham <sup>287</sup>	Yes	No

281 Universitas 21. (n.d.). Opportunities. <https://universitas21.com/opportunities/for-students/>

282 Szucs, B., & Harpur, P. (2023). Students with disabilities as ideal graduates: universities' obligations to support extracurricular involvement. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(2), 33-53. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no2art1789>

283 Universitas 21. (n.d.). Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

284 McMaster University. (2021). Institutional priorities and strategic framework 2021-2024. <https://Institutional-Priorities-and-Strategic-Framework.pdf>

285 McMaster University. (n.d.). Accessible involvement: Clubs and volunteering. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/accessible-involvement-clubs-and-volunteering/>

286 The University of Birmingham. (n.d.). Birmingham 2030: University strategy. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/our-strategy>.

287 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). University strategy. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/strategy/>

University Member	Strategic Plan has ECA	Disability Specific ECA
<b>University College Dublin</b> <sup>288</sup>	Yes	No
<b>University of Connecticut</b> <sup>289</sup>	Yes	No
<b>University of Glasgow</b> <sup>290</sup>	Yes	No
<b>The University of Queensland</b> <sup>291</sup>	Yes	No
<b>Universitas Gadjah Mada</b> <sup>292</sup>	Yes	No
<b>Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile</b> <sup>293</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>294</sup>
<b>University of Maryland</b> <sup>295</sup>	Yes	No
<b>The University of Hong Kong</b> <sup>296</sup>	No	Yes <sup>297</sup>
<b>The University of Melbourne</b> <sup>298</sup>	No	Yes <sup>299</sup>
<b>The University of New South Wales</b> <sup>300</sup>	No	Yes <sup>301</sup>
<b>Korea University</b> <sup>302</sup>	No	Yes <sup>303</sup>
<b>Waseda University</b> <sup>304</sup>	No	No
<b>Fudan University</b> <sup>305</sup>	No	No
<b>University of Auckland</b> <sup>306</sup>	No	No
<b>Tecnológico de Monterrey</b> <sup>307</sup>	No	No
<b>The University of Sydney</b> <sup>308</sup>	No	No
<b>KU Leuven</b> <sup>309</sup>	No	No
<b>University of Zurich</b> <sup>310</sup>	No	No

## Discussion

This investigation was limited to what was provided and publicly available. There may be some institutional knowledge missing from this list that was inaccessible to the team due to login access requirements or support happening at a personal level.

288 University College Dublin. (n.d.). Rising to the future: UCD strategy. <https://www.ucd.ie/strategy/>

289 University of Connecticut. (2024). University strategic plan. [https://strategicplan.media.uconn.edu/Strategic-Plan\\_FY2024.pdf](https://strategicplan.media.uconn.edu/Strategic-Plan_FY2024.pdf)

290 The University of Glasgow. (n.d.). University strategy. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_792478\\_smx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_792478_smx.pdf)

291 The University of Queensland. (2022). Strategic plan 2022–2025. <https://www.uq.edu.au/UQStrategicPlan2022-2025.pdf>

292 Universitas Gadjah Mada. (n.d.). Rencana strategis UGM tahun 2022–2027. <https://ppid.ugm.ac.id/file/rencana-strategis-ugm-tahun-2022-2027/>

293 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). 2020–2025 new development plan. <https://www.uc.cl/noticias/2020-2025-new-development-plan/>

294 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). Academic unit: Office of inclusion. <https://www.uc.cl/en/academic-units/office-of-inclusion/>

295 University of Maryland. (n.d.). Fearlessly forward: Strategic plan. <https://strategicplan.umd.edu/fearless>.

296 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Strategic development unit. <https://sppoweb.hku.hk/sd.html>

297 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). SEN internship support. <https://www.cedars.hku.hk/cope/sen-support/sen-internship>

298 The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). Advancing Melbourne: University strategy. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/advancing-melbourne>

299 The University of Melbourne. (2023). Disability inclusion action plan 2023–2026. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/UoM-Disability-Inclusion-Action-Plan-2023-2026.pdf>

300 The University of New South Wales. (n.d.). UNSW strategy. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/strategy>.

301 The University of New South Wales. (2022). Disability inclusion action plan. [https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/edi/UNSW-DIAP\\_web\\_July2022.pdf](https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/edi/UNSW-DIAP_web_July2022.pdf)

302 Korea University. (n.d.). Sustainable development study. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/study.do>

303 Korea University. (n.d.). Sustainable development study. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/study.do>

304 Waseda University. (n.d.). Waseda vision 150. <https://www.waseda.jp/top/en/about/vision>

305 Fudan University. (n.d.). Strategic planning. <https://www.fudan.edu.cn/en/StrategicPlanning/list.htm>

306 The University of Auckland. (n.d.). Vision 2030 and Strategic plan 2025. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/>

307 Tecnológico de Monterrey. (n.d.). Strategic plan 2025.

308 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). Sydney in 2032 Strategy. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/2032-strategy.html>

309 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Strategic plan: Future-oriented education. <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/about-kuleuven/strategic-plan/future-oriented-education>

310 The University of Zurich. (n.d.). University strategy. <https://www.uzh.ch/en/explore/basics/strategy.html>

From this data, several key observations and strategic insights can be drawn:

### **Extracurricular Activities are commonly included in Strategic Plans**

Around half (10 out of 21) of the universities include extracurricular activities in their strategic plans, meaning they recognise ECAs as part of their institutional priorities. However, the presence of ECAs in strategic plans does not guarantee targeted support for students with disabilities. Among the 10 universities that include ECAs in their strategic plans, only 2 (McMaster University and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) have disability-specific extracurricular activities or considerations for students with disabilities.

This suggests that while universities recognise ECAs as valuable, this may not translate into targeted inclusion for students with disabilities.

There are 4 universities that do not have ECAs in their strategic plans but have disability-specific extracurricular activities (The University of Hong Kong, Korea University, The University of New South Wales, The University of Melbourne). This could indicate that universities that do not systemically prioritise ECAs still recognise the need for disability-specific supports at a more targeted or grassroots level; these are measures that could have been spear-headed by passionate individuals. However, not having this articulated in the strategic priorities means is a threat to their long-term sustainability, limiting the number of students they can benefit, or restricting the areas of support offered.

To illustrate, 4 of the 6 that include ECA considerations for students with disabilities focus specifically on internships (The University of Hong Kong, The University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, Korea University). Of the remaining 2, one includes volunteering (McMaster University), and one has its own study abroad program for students with disabilities (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile). This shows that some of the opportunities with the greatest impact on sense of belonging and retention are not as prominently focused upon, such as student mentorship, community engagement, and volunteering in general.<sup>311 312 313</sup>

Meanwhile, the university-wide strategies include a broader variety of listed ECA priorities, such as “global study experiences, internships, student-staff partnership projects, entrepreneurship programs, and industry projects”<sup>314</sup> or employability / career development, sports, cultural activities, and community engagement (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile).

Universities that integrate ECAs into strategic planning might assume that general accessibility provisions suffice, leading to fewer dedicated disability-specific ECA considerations; however, it is unclear if this is the case. It is also easy to make the argument that this doesn’t suffice, due to students with disabilities requiring more targeted support and evidence that they are not participating in ECAs as much as the general student population.<sup>315</sup>

The discrepancy between strategic plans and disability-specific ECAs raises several areas for improvement. In omitting disability-specific ECAs in strategic plans, there may be an assumption from universities that mainstream ECAs are inherently inclusive. Assumptions that another

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311 Luque-Suárez, M., Olmos-Gómez, M. d. C., Castán-García, M., & Portillo-Sánchez, R. (2021). Promoting emotional and social well-being and a sense of belonging in adolescents through participation in volunteering. *Healthcare*, 9(3), 359. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9030359>

312 Palmer, A. N., Elliott, W., & Cheatham, G. A. (2017). Effects of extracurricular activities on postsecondary completion for students with disabilities. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 110(2), 151–158. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/00220671.2015.1058221](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/00220671.2015.1058221)

313 Thompson, L. J., Clark, G., Walker, M., & Whyatt, J. D. (2013). ‘It’s just like an extra string to your bow’: Exploring higher education students’ perceptions and experiences of extracurricular activity and employability. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 14(2), 135–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787413481129>

314 The University of Queensland Strategy, page 8.

315 Szucs, B., & Harpur, P. (2023). Students with disabilities as ideal graduates: universities’ obligations to support extracurricular involvement. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(2), 33–53. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no2art1789>

stakeholder has already implemented accessibility measures do not demonstrate accountability by the university.

As part of universities commitment to employability for the social good, students with disabilities should receive targeted support to overcome the additional barriers they face when developing crucial professional skills through ECAs. To be sustainable for the long-term, disability-specific ECAs should be institutionally embedded within broader priorities. The support provided by institutional embeddedness is necessary to strengthen other grassroots movements such as strong student advocacy, the influence of disability support services, or independent faculty-led initiatives.

Without this institutional commitment to disability inclusion in ECAs, students with disabilities risk being left behind in an increasingly competitive job market that values leadership, teamwork, and global engagement.

## Recommendations

- **Better data:** More robust data is needed to determine whether students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities experience informal exclusion due to accessibility concerns, social stigma, or a lack of accommodations, and determine the actions needed to respond to these.
- **Universities with extracurricular activities-inclusive strategic plans should explicitly integrate disability-inclusive frameworks**, ensuring that participation barriers are identified and addressed proactively.

## Conclusion

Our findings highlight a gap between strategic planning and targeted disability supports in extracurricular activities (ECAs). While many universities include ECAs in their strategic plans, only 2 extend this to disability-specific ECAs. Conversely, universities that do not include ECAs in their strategic plans are more likely to have disability-specific ECAs. This suggests that while universities recognise the value of ECAs broadly, there is little evidence that this recognition translates into structured, inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities.

This raises concerns about whether students with disabilities are effectively included in general ECAs or whether they face barriers that are unaddressed in institutional strategies. This is an area worth addressing to improve the quality and employability of students with disabilities throughout the U21 Network.

## Chapter 3.5.

### Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work

Matthew Campbell, Gloria Liu, Greg Marston, and Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) underscores the right to education (Article 24) and work (Article 27). These articles highlight the importance of inclusive education and equitable workplace opportunities. Universities are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional success through targeted initiatives such as work-integrated learning (WIL), skills development, and employer partnerships.

Employability is a critical marker of success in higher education, reflecting the ability of graduates to navigate and integrate into the professional world. For students with disabilities, these processes of engagement, participation and transition are often more complex, requiring specific accommodations and robust support systems. In considering employability and employment within the context of higher education, Tomlinson (2017)<sup>316</sup> offers a framework which presents employability occurring at 3 levels of experience: macro (wider structural, system level), meso (mediated by institutional level processes), and micro (personal constructions and subjectivities). This framing presents as a useful model to explore the opportunities for universities to ensure institutional policies and practices create equitable opportunities for all students in transitioning to work. Adopting these 3 levels of experience, in 3 parts this chapter will outline critical strategies, challenges, and recommendations to support students with disabilities as they transition from education to employment.

#### Part 1. The macro level: shaping structural and system-level employability

Universities are in a unique position to influence broader structural and system-level elements of employment and employability for students with disabilities. At the macro level, universities can engage with policymakers, industry leaders, and advocacy groups to promote inclusive labour market practices, informed by rigorous empirical research. By championing equitable hiring practices, advocating for legislation that supports reasonable accommodations, and contributing to public discourse on social inclusion and human rights, universities can shape the structural conditions that impact employability.

Collaborative efforts with diverse industry sectors and the employment services system to establish clear pathways for students with disabilities into professional roles are essential. This might include forming strategic alliances with organisations that prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and working to ensure that national and regional employment policies align with the principles outlined in the CRPD. University researchers can also work with employment service providers to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions and post-employment support, which will also help to ensure that people with disabilities are offered employment that is a good fit for their interests, skills and knowledge. Employment services frontline staff also need to focus on helping students with disabilities secure better work, not just any job. Good quality work has a number of characteristics including job security, fair pay and benefits, voice and representation, job design and opportunities for progression and peer and management support.<sup>317</sup> Furthermore, universities

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316 Tomlinson, M. (2017). Introduction: Graduate employability in context: Charting a complex, contested and multi-faceted policy and research field. In M. Tomlinson & L. Holmes (Eds.), *Graduate Employability in context: Theory, research and debate* (pp. 1-40). Palgrave Macmillan.

317 Irvine, G. White, D. and Diffley, M. (2018). *Measuring good work: The final report of the measuring good quality working group*. Carnegie UK Trust and RSA. <https://carnegieuk.org/publication/measuring-good-work-the-final-report-of-the-measuring-job-quality-working-group/>

can contribute to research and innovation in assistive technologies and workplace accessibility, thereby influencing broader systemic changes that benefit the employment landscape for all individuals with disabilities.

At the institutional level, universities must embed these structural considerations into their employability strategies. Initiatives such as fostering partnerships with inclusive employers, hosting industry-wide summits on disability inclusion, and developing frameworks for workplace accessibility can have far-reaching impacts. Universities also play a role in educating future employers and leaders on the value of a diverse workforce, thus addressing systemic biases and discrimination and creating a more inclusive economic and social environment.

## **Part 2. The meso level: institutional policy, process and practice**

At the meso level, employability for students with disabilities is shaped by institutional policies and frameworks that mediate their access to opportunities and support. Higher education policies influence how resources are allocated, how staff are trained, and how inclusive practices are embedded into the fabric of the university. For example, policies that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments ensure a unified approach to addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Additionally, policies that require partnerships with employers and stipulate the need for reasonable accommodations during placements and internships create a structured pathway to employment. Universities should use their various resources to help promote inclusive employment practices so that students have meaningful careers. By aligning institutional goals with national and international standards, such as those outlined in the CRPD, universities can act as catalysts for systemic change, ensuring that their graduates are not only prepared but also empowered to succeed in the workforce. This meso-level mediation is crucial in bridging gaps between individual aspirations and broader structural challenges, providing a supportive environment where students with disabilities can thrive.

### **Work-Integrated Learning and Placements**

Placements serve as a concrete example of meso-level processes that mediate employability through institutional frameworks. By coordinating these opportunities, universities act as pivotal intermediaries between the academic and professional worlds, shaping how students with disabilities engage with the workforce. The success of placements depends on policies, structures, and collaborative practices at the institutional level that ensure inclusivity and accessibility. These placements reflect the broader influence of university-driven processes in preparing students with disabilities for meaningful and equitable employment outcomes.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements provide a vital link between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. For students with disabilities, these experiences can be transformative, offering opportunities to do the following:

- Apply classroom learning in professional settings.
- Develop practical skills and build confidence.
- Gain exposure to inclusive workplace environments.

Expanding access to work-integrated learning opportunities is another essential strategy. Universities can partner with inclusive employers to create internships and co-op placements designed to accommodate diverse needs. Providing on-campus work opportunities allows students to gain confidence in a familiar and supportive environment. Training placement supervisors to understand and meet the needs of students with disabilities ensures these experiences are both accessible and effective.

## Institutional Support Before, During, and After Placement

While WIL experiences extend beyond just work placements, the barriers and opportunities for success for students with a disability are most profound in placement settings. Where students with disability can access supportive work-based WIL opportunities they report the greatest employment gains (Jackson, et al, 2024).<sup>318</sup>

Comprehensive support from both universities and host organisations is essential. For example, University College Dublin's Placement Planning Guidelines for Students with Disabilities<sup>319</sup> provides a framework for inclusive placements, covering legislation, policy, and accommodations. Similarly, The University of Sydney's Student Placement and Projects Policy<sup>320</sup> mandates that coordinators ensure external partners implement agreed-upon reasonable adjustments.

Support for students with disabilities is often coordinated among the placement team, career services and disability liaison office, working collaboratively with students and placement providers. At the University of Hong Kong, experiential learning or placement teams<sup>321</sup> at faculties work closely with students, the University's student development and career services as well as its external partners to facilitate tailored supports and reasonable adjustments for students during placement.

### Challenges: Gaps Between Policy and Practice

While policies exist, their implementation is inconsistent due to the following

- Limited resources and training for staff.
- Variable communication with external placement providers.
- Cultural attitudes and stigma surrounding disabilities.

For instance, some coordinators and placement supervisors lack adequate training to understand and support the needs of students with disabilities, leading to misunderstandings and potential discrimination. These gaps can discourage students from disclosing disabilities or seeking necessary accommodations.

## Part 3. The micro level: supporting the individual

At the micro level, employability is deeply rooted in self-identity and subjectivities, reflecting how students with disabilities understand and navigate their unique journeys into the workforce. Universities can support this level of action by fostering self-awareness, confidence, and resilience among students. Tailored career counselling plays a vital role in helping students identify their strengths, understand their career aspirations, and develop strategies to address potential barriers to employment.

Providing opportunities for students to practice self-advocacy, such as through workshops on disclosure and requesting accommodations, empowers them to take control of their employment journey. Peer support and mentorship programs also contribute to the micro level by offering relatable role models and a sense of community. Additionally, personalised feedback and skill development programs, such as mock interviews and resume critiques, help students align their personal goals with professional expectations, bridging the gap between their individual potential and broader employment opportunities.

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318 Jackson, D., Dollinger, M., Gatto, L., Drewery, D., Ajjawi, R., & Fannon, A. M. (2024). Work-integrated learning for students with disabilities: Time for meaningful change. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(7), 1679–1687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2354242>

319 University College Dublin, (2015). [UCD access & lifelong learning placement planning guidelines for students with disabilities](#).

320 The University of Sydney. (2015). [Student placement and projects policy 2015](#).

321 The University of Hong Kong. (2024). Supporting SEN students. <https://www.socsc.hku.hk/internshipweek/2024/>

To bridge the gap between education and employment for students with disabilities, universities must adopt a multifaceted approach. A critical first step is to enhance collaboration between career advisers, employment services and Disability Support Officers (DSOs). These support roles can work together to provide tailored support that meets the unique needs of students with disabilities as they transition to employment. Important capabilities for advisers include understanding workplaces, identifying and acting on support needs and working flexibly with students with disabilities. One-on-one adviser sessions can help students navigate job applications and interviews, while accessible job fairs and employer networking events create direct connections to inclusive opportunities. Workshops on self-advocacy and accommodation requests further empower students to take charge of their employment journey.

The University of Birmingham offers a confidential Report + Support platform<sup>322</sup> for students facing discrimination. Meanwhile, the University of Nottingham's Disability and Accessibility in Careers online course<sup>323</sup> equips students with practical tools and case studies for navigating the job market.

Investing in assistive technology and tools is also crucial. Access to resources like screen readers, speech-to-text software, and ergonomic equipment equips students with the means to thrive in professional settings. Additionally, training students on industry-standard tools further enhances their employability by demonstrating technical proficiency to potential employers.

Mentorship and peer support programs play a vital role in fostering community and guidance for students with disabilities. Alumni mentors who have faced similar challenges can provide inspiration and practical advice, while peer support networks offer a sense of belonging and shared experience. These programs help students build the confidence and resilience needed to navigate their transition into employment.

Finally, addressing discriminatory attitudes and stigma is essential for fostering an inclusive environment. Regular training for university staff and students can help challenge misconceptions about disabilities and encourage open dialogue. By cultivating a culture of inclusion, universities can ensure that students with disabilities feel supported and valued throughout their transition to employment.

## Recommendations

- **Individual support:** Students with disabilities will confront additional work challenges to students without a disability. Universities should offer tailored career counselling to help students identify strengths and develop strategies to address employment barriers.
- **Facilitating and coordinating inclusion:** Universities should develop and implement policies and programs that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments.
- **Enhance collaboration with employers:** Universities should use their privileged position to advance more inclusive workforces. To strengthen pathways and capacity in employers, universities should develop partnerships with inclusive employers.
- **WIL and placements:** Universities should expand access to WIL opportunities by partnering with inclusive employers and by providing on-campus work opportunities to help students gain confidence in a familiar environment.

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<sup>322</sup> University of Birmingham. (n.d.). Report and support. <https://reportandsupport.birmingham.ac.uk/>

<sup>323</sup> University of Nottingham. (n.d.). Careers and employability service. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/applications/disability.aspx>

## Conclusion

Supporting students with disabilities as they transition to employment is not only a matter of compliance but also a commitment to fostering equity, human rights and social inclusion. By enhancing policies, improving collaboration with external partners, and addressing direct and indirect discrimination, universities can empower students with disabilities to achieve their professional aspirations. These efforts will not only benefit individuals but also contribute to a more inclusive workforce and society.

# Part 4:

## Universities support for staff with a disability

Chapter 4.1. **Universities support for staff with a disability**

*Paul Harpur and Jenny Povey*

Chapter 4.2. **Staff with a disability that travel for work**

*Faith Ong*

Chapter 4.3. **Awareness raising and disability inclusion**

*Gloria Liu, Gisselle Gallego, Bernie Ma, Danielle Burgess, and Paul Harpur*

## Chapter 4.1.

### Universities support for staff with a disability

Paul Harpur and Jenny Povey

#### Introduction

Despite being a significant proportion of the population, unemployment rates for persons with disabilities remain high. For illustration, approximately 1 in 5 Australians live with disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Australians with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to Australians without a disability.<sup>324</sup>

Despite this trend, there is growing evidence that employing persons with disabilities is good for business. For example, Accenture's 2018 report *Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage*, found organisations that embrace leading practices for employing people with disability have 28% higher revenue, twice the net income, and 30% higher profit margins than their peers not implementing best practice.<sup>325</sup> This report also found organisations which are good disability employers are 2 times more likely to have higher shareholder returns than those which are less disability inclusive.

Whereas students with disabilities benefit from a specific right to higher education in the UN CRPD in article 24(5), staff with disabilities receive protection from the right to work and employment in article 27.<sup>326</sup> Article 27 requires States to take various measures to realise an inclusive labour market. Furthermore, Article 27 is supported by the CRPD Committee's interpretative guidance in General Comment 8<sup>327</sup> and Concluding Observations on States. Broadly disability norms now expect that laws and policies will include: 1. Measures which address the inequalities experienced by persons with disabilities; 2. Measures to implement universal design to remove disabling barriers; and 3. Reasonable accommodation / adjustments where universal design does not achieve ability equality.

When compared against students with disabilities, staff with disabilities receive less regulatory and policy attention. For example, the University of Auckland's university-wide disability plan focuses upon students and only benefits staff indirectly.<sup>328</sup> Similarly, despite first lodging a disability action plan with the Australian Human Rights Commission in 1994, the latest The University of Melbourne Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023 – 2026 is the first plan which encompasses students and staff within its remit.<sup>329</sup> Beyond just being included in equality measures, changes in disability norms and laws have contributed to the employment of staff with disabilities becoming a strategic priority. For example, The University of Queensland's disability action plan 2023–2025 sets out a vision for a better world and achieves this by employing the disability leaders of today, training the disability leaders of tomorrow, and producing research and innovation that makes the world more inclusive.<sup>330</sup>

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324 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). [People with disability in Australia](#).

325 Accenture, & American Association of People with Disabilities. (2018). [Getting to equal: The Disability inclusion advantage](#).

326 United Nations. (2006). Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

327 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2022). General comment No. 8 on the right of persons with Disabilities to Work and Employment (UN doc CRPD/C/GC/8 CRPD/C/GC/8, 9 September 2022). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3995378?v=pdf>

328 University of Auckland. (2022). *Waipapa Taumata Rau - The University of Auckland disability action plan 2022-2025*.

329 University of Melbourne. (2023). Disability inclusion action plan 2023 – 2026. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/UoM-Disability-Inclusion-Action-Plan-2023-2026.pdf>

330 University of Queensland. (2023). Disability action plan 2023-2025. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/DisabilityActionPlan.pdf>

This action plan highlights that the employment of staff with disabilities is regarded as forming part of the University's mission to change society for the better.

This chapter will analyse U21 Network's universities policies to create disability inclusive workplaces. This analysis will comprise 3 parts. Part 1 analyses U21 Network universities' measures aimed at increasing their recruitment of persons with disabilities. Part 2 analyses how university policies take proactive measures to support staff with disabilities once they are employed at U21 Network universities. Part 3 analyses how reasonable accommodation / adjustment policies aim to support staff with disabilities where disabling barriers exist. Finally, this chapter will conclude and make recommendations.

## Part 1. Measures aimed at increasing recruitment of Persons with Disabilities (PWD)

The measures adopted by U21 Network universities to advance disability inclusion at work range from inexpensive through to more resource intensive interventions. The inclusion of anti-discrimination statements in job advertisements, such as that at the Waseda University, represents an effective means of encouraging job applicants with a disability to apply.<sup>331</sup> In addition to including a commitment to disability inclusion, The University of Sydney Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2019-24 commits to providing a barrier free and inclusive recruitment process.<sup>332</sup> To attract and recruit people with disabilities, the Disability Action Plan includes a commitment to develop inclusive recruitment practices and to routinely evaluate the accessibility of recruitment activities.<sup>333</sup>

Beyond making the recruitment process disability inclusive, universities adopt measures to create targeted employment opportunities. When creating such positions, has a process to facilitate targeted recruitment and retention measures.<sup>334</sup> Targeted employment options can arise through capacity building activities. For example, the University of Auckland's Waipapa Taumata Rau - The University of Auckland Disability Action Plan 2022-2025 commits to investigating good practices for increasing employment opportunities for students with disabilities, including employment at the University of Auckland.<sup>335</sup>

## Part 2. Supporting staff once employed through proactive measures

Recruiting staff with disabilities will lead to lasting change only if retention and promotion measures are in place. Incidental benefits can arise from general interventions, such as disability-inclusive event guides at the University of Glasgow<sup>336</sup> and Tecnológico de Monterrey<sup>337</sup> or inclusive meeting guides at The University of Queensland.<sup>338</sup>

Universal design measures for students can also benefit staff with disabilities, as shared resources create additional support.

In addition to incidental benefits, universities have adopted retention and promotion interventions specifically targeting staff with disabilities. These interventions range from measures that have a limited focus, to larger systems change. Examples of measures of a more limited nature include the

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331 Universitas 21. (n.d.). *Spotlight on EDI: Waseda University*. <https://universitas21.com/news/spotlight-on-edi-waseda-university/>

332 University of Sydney. (2019). *Disability inclusion action plan 2019-2024*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/disability-inclusion-action-plan-2019-24>

333 University of Queensland. (2023). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/DisabilityActionPlan.pdf>

334 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *UQ Guide to increasing under-represented staff through targeted recruitment and retention measures*. <https://www.uq.edu.au/Guide-to-Increasing-under-represented-staff.pdf>

335 University of Auckland. (2022). *Waipapa Taumata Rau - The University of Auckland disability action plan 2022-2025*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/html>

336 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). *Accessible events policy*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/equalitydiversity/policy/accessevents/>

337 Tecnológico de Monterrey (2021). *Diversity and inclusion report 2021*. <https://Diversity-Inclusion-Report-2021>.

338 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *UQ guide to inclusive meetings and committees*. <https://www.uq.edu.au/GuidetoInclusiveMeetingsandCommittees.pdf>

commitments from The University of Queensland<sup>339</sup> and The University of Melbourne<sup>340</sup> to celebrate and promote the individual achievements of staff with disabilities – this can include grant success, research outputs, or teaching prizes.

System-change measures can be driven by regulatory interventions. Illustratively, pursuant to section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (2010) public sector bodies, including universities, are required to adopt positive conduct. Accordingly, U21 Network universities in the United Kingdom, such as the University of Glasgow,<sup>341</sup> have adopted Impact Assessment processes to ensure compliance. The public sector equality duty has also motivated universities to participate in the Disability Confident Employer Scheme to gain external accreditation of their practices. The Disability Confident Employer Scheme includes a process through which employers become accredited at certain levels, including level 1. Disability Confident Committed; level 2 Disability Confident Employer; and level 3 Disability Confident Leader.<sup>342</sup> Each level is associated with differing levels of above compliance activities to create inclusive workplaces. The University of Birmingham,<sup>343</sup> University of Nottingham,<sup>344</sup> and University of Glasgow<sup>345</sup> all participate in the Disability Confident Employer Scheme to help as part of their efforts to build an inclusive culture. Although The University of Edinburgh has not signed up to the Disability Confident Employer Scheme,<sup>346</sup> they do hold Athena SWAN Institutional Silver, Stonewall Diversity Champion Scotland, and Carer Positive.<sup>347</sup> Although some of these other schemes do include disability, they are not disability specific.

Similar to the United Kingdom, laws in Canada and Ireland require positive conduct to promote the inclusion of staff with disabilities. For example, laws in Canada and Ireland require all employers, including universities, to implement measures to advance universal design. Accordingly, McMaster University has responsibilities to remove barriers to accessibility under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and its related regulations and standards, as well as having duties to combat disability discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code. To fulfil these regulatory obligations, McMaster University has created an Access Hub managed by a group called AccessMac.<sup>348</sup> AccessMac's Portfolio includes:

- ensuring that the University is meeting its statutory compliance obligations;
- advising and working collaboratively to create accessible and inclusive programs, services, classrooms and workplaces;
- providing workshops and training opportunities on accessibility, the duty to accommodate, McMaster University's Accessibility Policy and statutory access obligations; and,
- facilitating connections to disability-related groups and activities within the university.

The employment of university staff with a disability are regulated in Ireland by laws, including the Employment Equality Act 1998-2015, Disability Act 2005, Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014,

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339 University of Queensland. (2023). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/DisabilityActionPlan.pdf>

340 University of Melbourne. (2023). *Disability inclusion action plan 2023-2026*. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/UoM-Disability-Inclusion-Action-Plan-2023-2026.pdf>

341 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). *Equality and diversity unit's EIA policy and guidance*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/equalitydiversity/policy/eias/>

342 United Kingdom Department for Work and Pensions. (n.d.). *Disability confident employer scheme*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/>

343 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). *Jobs at the University of Birmingham*. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/jobs>

344 The University of Nottingham. (n.d.). *Disabled staff*. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/edi/characteristics/disability-staff.aspx>

345 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). *Disability*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/equalitydiversity/staff/disability/>

346 United Kingdom Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *Disability confident list of employers*. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/disability-confident-list-of-employers.xlsx>

347 University of Edinburgh. (2024). *Equality, diversity and inclusion: reasonable adjustments policy and guidance*. <https://equality-diversity.ed.ac.uk/disabled-staff-support/guidance-disabled-staff-support>

348 McMaster University. (n.d.). *AccessMac – accessibility hub*. <https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/accessmac/>

and Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. The University College Dublin's Supporting the Employment of Persons with Disabilities Policy provides the operational framework to realise these regulatory obligations – the obligation on universal design.<sup>349</sup>

Whereas most jurisdictions do not expressly mandate universal design, the Disability Act 2005 requires a statutory obligation to in so far as practicable take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of persons with disabilities. This includes obligations to ensure that buildings and services are universally accessible to employees, students and visitors with disabilities. Under the Disability Act 2005, 'universal design' means the design and composition of an environment, electronic systems, any electronics-based process of creating products, services or systems so that it may be accessed, understood and used by persons of any age or size or having any particular physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual ability or disability.

Although phrased differently, the positive duties in Ireland have also led to proactive measures in Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005; positive duties also exist under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 universities must ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of all their employees. This extends to ensuring that places of work, where necessary, are organised to take account of persons at work with disabilities, in particular as regards doors, passageways, staircases, showers, washbasins, lavatories and workstations used or occupied directly by those persons. Whereas most jurisdictions do not contain positive duties in equality laws to realise universal design, all jurisdictions where U21 Network universities operate have statutory similar to those found in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Thus, the response to managing these similar statutory obligations has wider implications. University College Dublin's Supporting the Employment of Persons with Disabilities Policy encourages staff with disabilities to disclose their impairments to their human resource Partner or the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit who will then liaise with the Safety, Insurance and Risk Compliance Office so that any attendant risks can be appropriately assessed.

When disabling barriers are framed as risks to health and safety, then a failure to realise universal design is regarded as a breach of occupational, safety and health (OSH) laws. Whereas a breach of equality laws is survivor enforced with small compensation, OSH laws are State enforced and attract compensation and criminal sanctions.

Even where laws do not include positive duties, all jurisdictions where U21 Network universities operate have OSH laws, also referred to as occupational health and safety (OHS) and work health and safety (WHS) laws. Constructing a failure to realise universal design as a breach of OSH laws is a powerful means to achieve equality outcomes.<sup>350</sup> OSH laws contain positive duties which require universities to take all practical steps to ensure the safety of their employees, students and visitors. These obligations are reasonably similar to universal design found in equality regimes. Although the nature of the duties are similar, there are considerable differences with enforcement. Whereas equality laws are survivor enforced with limited damages, OSH laws are State enforced and include criminal sanctions, which includes fines and potential imprisonment. Accordingly, health and safety departments have far larger budgets and compliance measures when compared with disability inclusion. Thus, when universities who coordinate their responses to these regimes can create better policy outcomes.

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<sup>349</sup> University College Dublin. (2022). *Supporting the employment of persons with disabilities policy*.

<sup>350</sup> Harpur, P., & Stafford, L. (2025). Leveraging universal design and work health and safety laws to promote and progress SDG 11.7: Access to public spaces for people with disabilities. In J. Dolley, K. Hardy, & T. Matthews (Eds.), *Public space and the sustainable development goals* (pp. 30–44). Edward Elgar Publishing.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035322411.00008>

Beyond increasing compliance, OSH laws extend obligations to all parties who can reasonably and practicably impact upon health or safety. Thus designers, manufacturers and suppliers all attract duties. Similar to OSH, equality interventions can extend disability inclusion measures beyond the employer / employee relationship. For example, The University of Queensland's Disability Action Plan 2023-2025 includes an expectation on suppliers to enable the University to meet its commitment to best practice.<sup>351</sup> This procurement process aims to ensure the university uses disability-inclusive suppliers where possible and all purchases are made with accessibility options as a consideration.

### Part 3. Supporting staff once employed through reasonable accommodations / adjustments

University policies on reasonable accommodation / adjustments are guided by workplace disability discrimination laws.<sup>352,353</sup> Sometimes the adjustment process focusses on a particular aspect of the university.<sup>354</sup> See for example Korea University's home delivery for books from the library if users are unable to physically attend the library.<sup>355</sup> Addition to measures targeting one aspect of a university, workplace reasonable accommodation / adjustment policies can be found at a significant number of U21 Network universities, including University of Auckland,<sup>356</sup> University College Dublin,<sup>357</sup> University of Johannesburg,<sup>358</sup> University of Connecticut,<sup>359</sup> The University of Queensland,<sup>360</sup> and University of NSW.<sup>361</sup> The reasonable accommodation / adjustment process can do the following:

- make existing facilities readily accessible and usable;
- restructure the job to eliminate non-essential job functions;
- grant a leave of absence or partial leave of absence (reduction in time);
- modify the employee's work schedule or work location;
- acquire or modify equipment, devices or software;
- provide qualified readers or interpreters;
- reassignment to an available alternative position for which the employee is qualified.<sup>362</sup>

To access reasonable accommodation / adjustment policies, staff must request the help and can be asked to provide evidence of disability.<sup>363</sup> To understand these processes, staff with disabilities can also access support from networks, such as The University of Edinburgh's Disabled Staff Network.<sup>364</sup> The process of applying for reasonable accommodation and adjustment can be complex for some staff, as well as time consuming; therefore, efforts to simplify it are important. Thus the University

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351 University of Queensland. (2023). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*. <https://staff.uq.edu.au/DisabilityActionPlan.pdf>

352 University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). *HKU's equal opportunity policy*. <https://www.eounit.hku.hk/images/content/about-us/Equal-Opportunity-Policy.pdf>

353 Lund University School of Economics and Management. (n.d.). *Swedish policy and regulation on disability and work*.

354 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). *Policies and legislation*. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studentservices.aspx>

355 Korea University. (n.d.). *Home-delivery service*. <https://library.korea.ac.kr/disabled/en>

356 University of Auckland. (2018). *Staff with disabilities policy*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/staff-disabilities-policy.html>

357 University College Dublin. (2020). *Reasonable accommodation*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/support/disability/reasonableaccommodation/>

358 University of Johannesburg. (2020). *Accommodation policy for people with disabilities*. <https://www.uj.ac.za/sdg-impact/sdg-10-reduced-inequalities/>

359 University of Connecticut School of Health. (n.d.). *Americans with disabilities act compliance and accommodations*.

360 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *Disability inclusion and reasonable adjustment for staff procedure*. <https://policies.uq.edu.au/>

361 University of NSW. (2011). *Reasonable adjustment guidelines for managers of staff and potential staff with disabilities*. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/governance/policy/2022-01-policies/reasonableadjustmentguidelines.pdf>

362 UC Davis Human Resources. (n.d.). *Accommodation process*. <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/departments/elr/dms/accommodationprocess>

363 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Office for Access and Equity (OAE). (n.d.). *Accessibility and accommodations*. <https://oae.illinois.edu/>

364 University of Edinburgh. (n.d.). *Support for disabled staff - Disability and learning support service*. <https://disability-learning-support-service.ed.ac.uk/staff/disabled-staff>

of Nottingham streamlines reasonable accommodation / adjustment implementation through a passport.<sup>365</sup> This passport is an optional document that is intended to be a live record of any adjustments agreed between the employee and their line manager. It details any impact or issue that can arise due to the interaction between an impairment, condition or other disadvantaging circumstance and the barriers that exist in the workplace that can create a disability or disadvantage at work.

## Recommendations

- **Proactive measures to promote staff with disabilities:** Universities should implement proactive measures to address the inequalities experienced by staff with disabilities. This includes targeted recruitment initiatives and the promotion of staff with disabilities to ensure they are represented at all levels of the institution.
- **Universal design implementation:** More efforts are needed to remove disabling barriers through universal design. Universities should ensure that all facilities, services, and resources are accessible to everyone, including staff with disabilities.
- **Streamlined reasonable accommodation processes:** The process for requesting and receiving reasonable accommodations/adjustments should be streamlined. Funding for these accommodations should come from a central fund to separate the decision-making process from budgetary constraints.
- **Enhanced recruitment and promotion practices:** Universities should adopt more inclusive recruitment and promotion practices. This could include setting quotas for hiring staff with disabilities and ensuring that promotion criteria are inclusive and equitable.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the policies and measures adopted by U21 Network universities to create disability-inclusive workplaces. This chapter has highlighted the disparity in regulatory and policy attention across jurisdictions and universities. The analysis revealed that while some universities have made significant strides in inclusive recruitment, retention, and reasonable accommodation / adjustment policies, there is still much work to be done to achieve true inclusivity.

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<sup>365</sup> University of Nottingham. (n.d.). *Reasonable-adjustments-passport-guidance*. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/edi/reasonable-adjustments/reasonable-adjustments-passport-guidance.docx>

## Chapter 4.2.

### Staff with a disability that travel for work

Faith Ong

#### Introduction

Universities' efforts have primarily focused on environments over which they have control such as workplace adjustments, campus design, university policies and procedures. These are typically tempered with knowledge of local circumstances and levels of disability awareness and accommodation in each locality. Travel presents a different challenge to universities as the multiplicity of approaches to accessibility development, coupled with a lack of control over the environment, add layers of complexity.

#### Part 1. Barriers to Travel

From a user perspective, staff with disabilities who travel for work often face barriers with this aspect of their work compared to their nondisabled counterparts. Barriers include policies that have not taken their needs into consideration, negative attitudes, lack of suitable service options, inaccurate service delivery and a lack of consultation for how these services can be obtained or delivered.<sup>366</sup> When systems are designed without the flexibility of responding to disabilities, this creates additional burden at various parts of the process for staff whose work requires travel. These start prior to the act of travelling, such as risks arising from disclosing disability to direct supervisors and sourcing adequate accessibility information at various destination levels (typically state, national or international) as well as acquiring appropriate services at the destination itself.<sup>367</sup> At the destination, they also include experiencing varying levels of service provision just to travel to and around the work location. The management of factors typically involve staff with disabilities performing substantial invisible labour to approximate the reasonable work travel experiences that their colleagues without disabilities expect.<sup>368</sup>

#### Part 2. Current Policies

Several U21 universities have put in place policies that enable travel for staff with disabilities, and these policies have mostly been part of disability action plans.<sup>369</sup> A few universities – such as The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney and University of Birmingham – have committed to bearing the costs of enabling accessibility for work travel at a university-wide or faculty / department level. The University of Hong Kong considers applications for disability-related special expenses incurred during work-related travel in line with their policies, though the provisions are not explicitly outlined. Such cost coverage enables staff with disability to carry out their work obligations outside their typical campus or university environments, contributing beyond individual universities. Other universities' policies have extended such policies to specific areas (such as use of private vehicles for travel due to disability-related necessity at University of Auckland and

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366 Williams, V., Tarleton, B., Heslop, P., Porter, S., Sass, B., Blue, S., Merchant, W., & Mason-Angelow, V. (2018). Understanding disabling barriers: A fruitful partnership between disability studies and social practices. *Disability & Society*, 33(2), 157–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1401527>

367 Karl, M., Pegg, S., & Harpur, P. (2024). Exploring constraints in business travel for disabled workers: An ecological systems perspective. *Disability & Society*, 39(3), 767–790. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2088333>

368 Katzman, E. R., & Kinsella, E. A. (2018). 'It's like having another job': The invisible work of self-managing attendant services. *Disability & Society*, 33(9), 1436–1459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1497949>

369 Karl, M., Pegg, S., & Harpur, P. (2024). Exploring constraints in business travel for disabled workers: An ecological systems perspective. *Disability & Society*, 39(3), 767–790. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2088333>

extension of workplace accommodations to students in work experience roles at University of Maryland).

Only supplied evidence of a disability-specific work travel funding program ('The Disability Travel Support Fund'). Beyond typical justification to qualify the work trip as being related or essential to the university, which would apply to university-funded work travel across all staff, this application also required applicants to demonstrate that the adjustments were required and that existing funding sources (internal and external to their operating unit) were inadequate.

It is pertinent to note the policies noted above still require substantial administrative work to be undertaken by the utilising staff, most of which is not central to their core job function. Such additional work includes sourcing of suitable accessibility providers and shouldering the burden of proof that other funding sources have been exhausted before approaching the university. Having to prove the latter requires a long lead time for applications, dissemination of outcomes, and a constant pulse on the disparate funding sources (internal and external) that could fund work travel. The onus of this invisible labour remains squarely on the shoulders of staff with disabilities but could be alleviated.

## Recommendations

Taking the view that the role of universities as an employer is to enable their employees to perform the function for which they are hired, there are several areas which could be strengthened by universities. The following suggestions build on the existing work championed by the universities outlined above and apply research findings from various authors in this area.

- (a) **Central funding:** The first suggestion builds on the funding structures that currently exist within various universities. The disparate forms of funding at departmental, faculty and university levels result in a confusing landscape for users. A centralised funding system to cover additional costs borne by staff with disabilities when they travel for work is essential to consolidating the requirements for funding.<sup>370</sup> This centralised university funding should be designed as a first port of call rather than as a last resort to be approached only after all other funding sources have been exhausted; taking this view would significantly reduce the invisible labour of tracking and revealing unsuccessful applications to other funding sources. Consistency in funding policies and administration can also alleviate stressors related to time complications resulting from different funding applications as identified above.
- (b) **Mechanisms for non-disclosure:** Centralised funding structures can also facilitate this second suggestion with mechanisms in place to access the fund without disclosure of disability to direct supervisors and / or managers. Such mechanisms would provide psychological safety to staff with disability.<sup>371</sup> They eliminate the need for disclosure which can create situations where staff with disability could be unduly judged by their disability instead of their performance. This disclosure can also be recorded in confidential systems, eliminating the need for staff with disabilities to repeatedly disclose any conditions, unless

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370 Pegg, S., Karl, M., & Harpur, P. (2021). Negotiating work-based travel for people with disabilities. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(14), 1945–1951.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1801605>

371 Karl, M., Pegg, S., & Harpur, P. (2024). Exploring constraints in business travel for disabled workers: An ecological systems perspective. *Disability & Society*, 39(3), 767–790.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2088333>

there has been a change in circumstances. The emotional labour of disclosure is another form of invisible labour,<sup>372</sup> which can be reduced through considerate administrative design.

- (c) **Internal booking systems:** Relatedly, recommendations to improve the experience for staff travelling for work emphasise the inclusion of specific information related to a range of considerations for staff with disability in any internal booking systems.<sup>373</sup> Accessibility policies of transport and accommodation providers can be appended to internal booking systems so that staff with disabilities can make travel decisions and arrangements independently.
- (d) **Network for travel with disability:** Beyond internal systems, a network of travel agent(s) specialising in accessible travel can be established by the university to encourage flexibility.<sup>374</sup> Such networks can facilitate better information flows from travel experts familiar with accessibility needs and staff who need to access them. Once again, this reduces the need for discussion and disclosure with intermediaries uninvolved in the travel process (such as direct supervisors) while recognising the agency of the staff with disability in tailoring their travel according to their needs.

The creation of a central travel fund for staff with disabilities, reduction of disclosure burdens and broadening of enabling systems work in tandem to empower staff with disabilities to better perform their core job functions. By reducing the energies expended on the administrative burden of travel, universities can provide a safe space that enables achievement and advancement.

## Conclusion

Universities have made significant strides in creating accessible environments on their campuses, but work-related travel for staff with disabilities remains a policy gap at many universities. The barriers experienced by staff with disabilities include inflexible policies, negative attitudes, lack of suitable services, and the burden of invisible labour required to manage their travel needs. While some universities have implemented policies to support accessible travel, these remain the exception rather than the norm.

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372 Katzman, E. R., & Kinsella, E. A. (2018). 'It's like having another job': The invisible work of self-managing attendant services. *Disability & Society*, 33(9), 1436-1459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1497949>

373 Pegg, S., Karl, M., & Harpur, P. (2021). Negotiating work-based travel for people with disabilities. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 24(14), 1945-1951. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13683500.2020.1801605>

374 Karl, M., Pegg, S., & Harpur, P. (2024). Exploring constraints in business travel for disabled workers: An ecological systems perspective. *Disability & Society*, 39(3), 767-790. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2088333>

## Chapter 4.3.

### Awareness raising and disability inclusion

Gloria Liu, Gisselle Gallego, Bernie Ma, Danielle Burgess, and Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

Awareness-raising plays a crucial role in creating a more inclusive society and in the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>375</sup> (CRPD). Reflecting this, Article 8 of the CRPD requires States and other actors to raise awareness of disability inclusion through adopting measures including public awareness campaigns, using the education system to foster an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities, using media to promote acceptance of new disability norms, and promoting awareness training programs regarding persons with disabilities and the rights of persons with disabilities. The CRPD Committee, the United Nations body charged to interpret the CRPD in participating countries, has applied Article 8 against universities. For example, in the CRPD Committee's concluding observations on Kazakhstan, the Committee recommended involving universities in public education awareness programs,<sup>376</sup> and in the Concluding Observation on El Salvador, the Committee recommended promoting disability education as a cross-cutting theme in university courses.<sup>377</sup>

U21 Network universities should and do play an important role in creating a culture of disability inclusion. In 3 parts, this chapter will analyse how U21 Network Universities help raise awareness in their own organisations and in society. This chapter first explores the role of culture and disability. Drawing from university responses to the survey which accompanied this report, part 2 will explore how U21 Network universities described their staff-focused awareness training. Although training is an important awareness raising measure, disability rights norms expect States and other actors to engage in a broad range of other measures. Part 3 will analyse how U21 Network universities advance such measures.

#### Part 1. Creating cultures of disability inclusion

For any awareness training to be effective, it needs to recognise the intersectionality of culture and disability. Different cultures view health, illness and disability differently,<sup>378</sup> and therefore it is important that awareness training takes cultural factors into account. Culture, as [defined by UNESCO](#), is “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”.<sup>379</sup> Some cultures view disability positively as part of human diversity, while others perceive it as limitations or inferiority. Also, some cultures tend to see disability through a biomedical lens, whereas some cultures attribute the presence of disability to a spiritual perspective, attributing the causes of disability to things such as the will of God or Allah, karma, evil spirits or punishment for parental wrongdoing or ancestral sin.<sup>380</sup> The different

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375 United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Social Inclusion. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

376 United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2024). *Concluding observations on the initial report of Kazakhstan: Advance unedited version* (CRPD/C/KAZ/CO/1). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4044522?ln=en&v=pdf>

377 United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2013). *Concluding observations on the initial report of El Salvador* (CRPD/C/SLV/CO/1). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767048?v=pdf>

378 Ravindran, N., & Myers, B. J. (2012). Cultural influences on perceptions of health, illness, and disability: A review and focus on autism. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 21(2), 311-319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-011-9477-9>

379 International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) UNESCO. (n.d.). *Cultures*. <https://policytoolbox.iiep.unesco.org/glossary/cultures/>

380 Caring for Kids New to Canada. (n.d.). *Developmental disability across cultures*. <https://kidsnewtoCanada.ca/mental-health/>

perceptions of disability can lead to different attitudes ranging from shame, stigmatisation and marginalisation to acceptance, inclusion and empowerment.<sup>381</sup>

Although the ultimate goal of disability inclusion does not alter, the process of reaching this objective needs to be tailored to the culture and organisation in question. Therefore, it is important for awareness training in disability inclusion to incorporate different beliefs and perceptions and to recognise that some cultures are more open to having a conversation about disability while others might need a more gradual and sensitive approach. This is especially important given the diversity of our campuses with students and staff from many culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Such cultural sensitivity means that awareness training should be designed to help us better understand how the culture we live in shapes our beliefs and attitudes towards disability. For example, training can involve self-reflection on our strengths and limitations in our understanding, helping us to challenge any assumptions or biases in our culture and identify opportunities for growth and improvement.

The effectiveness of awareness training is also closely linked to our cultural competence, which enables us to understand different perspectives and embrace the unique strengths and qualities each person or community brings regardless of their disability, race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. Essential to cultivating this competence is the opportunity to interact with people from other cultures through global networking, such as through engaging with the communities of practice within U21 to discuss challenges and opportunities, share stories of success and change and leverage our resources and connections.

Culture is dynamic; it can evolve and change over time through contact with new ideas and perspectives. For instance, a culture that traditionally associates disability with shame may begin to see it as part of being human (as indeed an estimated 1.3 billion people live with disabilities, constituting 16% of the world's population<sup>382</sup>). The exchange of ideas through networking will enable us to learn from one another and shape the narratives of disability to create more inclusive and accessible institutions and society.

Organisational culture also plays a critical role in the effectiveness of awareness training. Organisations that embrace a culture of learning and collaboration in their values are generally more creative and productive, engaging diverse stakeholders.

Learning about disability inclusion among students, staff and partners can be achieved by setting aside time for self-paced online modules and in-person sessions for everyone, with or without disability, to learn, share and collaborate.

As we come together, whether in a meeting to discuss policy or during a water cooler chat, we help shape attitudes and actions. Our collective efforts and wisdom will create ripple effects, advancing our mission and promoting the richness of talents. Harnessing this power of collaborative learning will also positively impact other areas of university operations and strategies, fostering a virtuous cycle of excellence and a strong sense of belonging that enable us all to flourish together.

## Part 2. Disability awareness training

Disability awareness training varies between U21 universities from mandatory to voluntary or from comprehensive to *ad hoc*. There is heterogeneity in terms of the content, who is trained (staff, students, support, administrative), how it is provided (online, self-paced, webinars or face to face),

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381 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). (2017). *Toolkit on disability for Africa: Culture, beliefs and disability*.

<https://www.un.org/esa/disability/Toolkit/Cultures-Beliefs-Disability.pdf>

382 World Health Organization. (n.d.) *Disability*. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1)

the resources available or if – it is provided by an external body. What follows below is first, the summary from the 12 universities that completed the online survey. Following this we include an analysis from a scan of the websites of the 30 U21 Network universities websites.

### **From the survey**

McMaster University, the university of Birmingham and the University of Nottingham have mandatory training. At McMaster training is mandatory for all staff, student-staff, faculty and volunteers and focuses on human rights as well as the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). At Birmingham staff are required to undertake an online mandatory training course under the Equality and Diversity banner. Hence disability is part of diversity rather the sole focus; disability and disability awareness training are provided within this training. At Nottingham disability training is also under the equity, diversity and inclusion (DEI) training. This is not only provided to new staff members but also staff are asked to complete it every 3 years.

McMaster University, the University of Birmingham and the University of Nottingham also have voluntary training. At McMaster this focuses on Accessible Education Training for Instructional Staff, Accessible Digital Content Training, Employment Equity Training and Strategic department or subject-specific (customised) training is also provided upon request. The University of Nottingham offers voluntary training on disability which explore disabilities in greater depth.

Voluntary training is perhaps most common at Australian Universities. At The University of Melbourne and at The University of Sydney training is provided on an opt-in basis to staff. There are several modules available which include: disability confident workforces, managers and supervisors and recruiters (facilitated by the Australian Disability Network). As well as how to support students with disability, self-paced online learning is offered around inclusion and disability services, digital accessibility for content creators and the hidden disability sunflower lanyard. The document analysis shone a light on other initiatives such as a Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) that described the establishment of a “Disability Awareness Training Framework”. This framework includes targeted training for supervisors and managers, academic and professional staff supporting students with disability and an online module that provides an introduction to disability inclusion at the University.

Voluntary disability awareness training is provided through the Disability Inclusion Advocacy Network. This training includes an online Disability Inclusion Course and a masterclass. As well as working with students who have academic adjustments, supporting workers with disabilities and awareness of digital accessibility, a disability inclusion course (self-paced- online) is also available.

European universities also offer voluntary training. The University College Dublin Ireland provides voluntary training to staff on disability awareness with 2 training modules one open to all staff and another focusing on leading disability inclusive teams offered only to managers. The University of Zurich provides regular training on digital accessibility. It also runs a leadership development program where managers learn about inclusive leadership and accessible leadership styles.

Similarly, the University of Birmingham offers voluntary online short courses called the HR- EDI Session Disability and HR- EDI Session Neurodiversity. Their student EDI team at student services has developed what was described by the university as a “sector-leading EDI online training course for students”. It includes a module titled, Access and Success, to educate students on inclusive practices for accessibility to help promote an inclusive campus culture for all. The course also has other modules with relevant resources, such as international travel and EDI tips for disabled students who travel abroad on university business. Moreover, the student EDI team partners with a local National Health Service (NHS) Trust to offer neurodiversity awareness and student support training to student-facing staff.

Universities can also provide ad hoc training to support disability inclusion measures. For example, at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile there is an “inclusion program” labelled as “Inclusive program for student with special needs” or PIANE for their acronym in Spanish. The focus of the PIANE is to support academic units and staff and offer guidance and advice at any time during the semester. Their professional team is available to help them apply these guidelines according to the particular characteristics of their course.

### From the website scan

The scan identified more detail around awareness training as well as highlighting a range of other initiatives that U21 Network universities are advancing to create a more inclusive society. With respect to awareness training, McMaster University identified that such training could enhance understanding with regulatory obligations.<sup>383</sup> Whereas, The University of Edinburgh observed that awareness training enhances awareness of specific disabilities and learning differences.<sup>384</sup> Similarly, Korea University<sup>385</sup> and the University of Hong Kong<sup>386</sup> noted awareness training benefits all students and creates a more inclusive culture.

Targeted Awareness training can also provide benefits in particular relationships. For illustration, at The University of Queensland, Higher Degree Research (HDR) advisors receive training in relation to supporting HDR candidates living with disability,<sup>387</sup> and at University College Dublin, those involved in recruitment processes receive specific training on disability inclusion.<sup>388</sup>

Related to training is the development and provision of resources to facilitate awareness activities. An example of such a resource can be found on the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. It provides web resources on disability allyship, including Disability Allyship Resources pages.<sup>389</sup> These pages include general information on disability, such as disability oppression, civil rights, and disability identity, as well as information on specific disabilities and processes for self-engagement and engaging with others. Similarly, Disability Services at the University of Johannesburg, have developed tip sheets on hearing disabilities,<sup>390</sup> physical disabilities,<sup>391</sup> speech impairments,<sup>392</sup> and visual disabilities.<sup>393</sup>

## Part 3. Awareness activities beyond training

### Celebrating inclusion

Beyond training and informing, universities also engage in activities to celebrate ability diversity. Illustratively, events aimed at enhancing awareness and inclusion include, for example, [Equal](#)

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383 McMaster University. (n.d.). *AODA and human rights code training*. <https://accessibility.mcmaster.ca/training/aoda-and-human-rights-code-training/>

384 University of Edinburgh. (2024). *Training for staff | disability and learning support service*. <https://disability-learning-support-service.ed.ac.uk/staff/training-for-staff>

385 Korea University. (2023). *Insights - support for students with disabilities starts with enhanced awareness*. <https://www.korea.edu/en/>

386 University of Hong Kong. (2021). *Equal opportunity policy*. <https://www.eounit.hku.hk/images/content/about-us/Equal-Opportunity-Policy.pdf>

387 University of Queensland. (2024). *Champions of change disability inclusion research and innovation Plan 2024-2026*. <https://research.uq.edu.au/2024-09/disability-inclusion-research-innovation-plan-design-version.pdf>

388 University College Dublin. (2022). *UCD policy supporting the employment of persons with disabilities policy*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/>

389 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. (n.d.). *Disability allyship resources - disability resources and educational services*. <https://dres.illinois.edu/disability-allyship/>

390 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). *Disability services tip sheet: hearing impairments support*. [https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/psycad-tip-sheet\\_hearing-impairments.pdf](https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/psycad-tip-sheet_hearing-impairments.pdf)

391 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). *Disability services tip sheet: physical disabilities - people in wheelchairs*. [https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/psycad-tip-sheet\\_physical-disabilities.pdf](https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/psycad-tip-sheet_physical-disabilities.pdf)

392 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). *Disability services tip sheet: speech impairment guide*. [https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/psycad-tip-sheet\\_speech-impairment.pdf](https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/psycad-tip-sheet_speech-impairment.pdf)

393 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). *Disability services tip sheet: visual impairment support*. <https://www.uj.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/psycad-tip-sheet-visual-impairment.pdf>

[Opportunity Festival](#) at the University of Hong Kong,<sup>394</sup> [Disability Inclusion Week](#) at The University of Sydney,<sup>395</sup> [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#) at the University of Birmingham,<sup>396</sup> [International Conference on Disability Rights \(ICDR\)](#) at Universitas Gadjah Mada.<sup>397</sup>

Awareness raising activities also utilise universities' media and communications strengths. An example, which is not specifically addressing disability, can be found at the the University of Amsterdam. The University of Amsterdam has a social safety awareness campaign.<sup>398</sup> The social safety campaign is aimed at raising awareness of, and helping to recognise and name undesirable behaviour, for and by everyone in the organisation. The social safety awareness campaign includes campaign messages with quotes, for example for social media posts, newsletters, posters and screens that refer to a campaign page. Additionally, the campaign includes a webpage on the University of Amsterdam website with help on how to recognise undesirable behaviour and unsafe situations and how to make them open for discussion.

Other multimedia assets are used by universities,<sup>399</sup> including using university newsletters. Examples of university newsletters promoting awareness can be illustrated by news items at Fudan University,<sup>400</sup> University of Queensland,<sup>401</sup> and Universitas Gadjah Mada.<sup>402</sup>

## Using teaching to raise awareness

Universities can go beyond promoting awareness of disability inclusion and build this into core activities like teaching and research. At The University of Melbourne there is an attempt to raise disability awareness by auditing courses with the aim of ensuring every student graduates with an understanding of disability.<sup>403</sup> Students' awareness and understanding of disability is enhanced at McMaster University by facilitating a reading group for students on disability.<sup>404</sup>

Although having courses on disability is not normally regarded as awareness raising activities, the presence of such courses does provide an avenue for increasing understanding of disability. Reflecting this benefit, this chapter will note that some universities, such as the University of Maryland,<sup>405</sup> have a minor in disability studies, whereas others, such as the University of Auckland,<sup>406</sup> The University of Queensland,<sup>407</sup> The University of Melbourne,<sup>408</sup> and The University of Sydney, have single courses.<sup>409</sup>

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394 The University of Hong Kong. (2024). *Equal opportunity festival 2024*. <https://www.eounit.hku.hk/en/news-and-events/eo-festivals/763-equal-opportunity-festival-2024>

395 University of Sydney. (2023). *5 things to do at Disability inclusion week*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/study/student-life/>

396 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). *Neurodiversity celebration week 2025 events schedule*. <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/events>

397 Universitas Gadjah Mada. (2023, November 28). *UGM hosts Australia Indonesia disability conference, emphasizes disability rights*. <https://ugm.ac.id/ugm>

398 University of Amsterdam. (n.d.). *About the social safety awareness campaign*. <https://www.uva.nl/en/campaign/about-the-campaign.html>

399 University of New South Wales. (2022). *Disability inclusion action plan 2022-2025*. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/edi/>

400 Fudan University. (2024). *Graduation ceremony will be held the day after tomorrow, blind girl Zhu Lingjun will graduate* (translated). <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/>

401 University of Queensland. (2021). *Visionary educator wants universities to be disability champions*. <https://www.uq.edu.au/news/>

402 Nugroho, A. (2024). *UGM graduate with hard of hearing and minor cerebral palsy thrives despite obstacles*. <https://ugm.ac.id/en/news/>

403 University of Melbourne Disability Institute. (2019). *Strategic plan 2019-2021*. <https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/MDI-Strategic-plan.pdf>

404 McMaster University. (2019). *Crippling graduate school: a disability and mad studies reading group* (renewal). <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/>

405 University of Maryland College of Education. (n.d.). *Disability studies, minor*. <https://education.umd.edu/programs/undergraduate/disability-studies-minor>

406 University of Auckland. (n.d.). *Disability studies*. <https://www.calendar.auckland.ac.nz/en/faculty-of-education-and-social-work/disability-studies.html>

407 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *Foundations for social work practice in disability (SWSP3076)*. <https://programs-courses.uq.edu.au/>

408 University of Melbourne. (n.d.). *Disability human rights law (LAWS90087)*. <https://handbook.unimelb.edu.au/2025>

409 University of Sydney. (n.d.). *EDUF3046: Empowering learners across the lifespan*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/units>

University of Sydney. (n.d.). *OLET1135: Disability awareness and inclusivity*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/units>

## Using research and innovation to raise awareness

Universities are knowledge creators and can use their research and innovation strengths to advance disability awareness. This can include human resource prizes for innovative or leadership on disability awareness, such as those at UC Davis,<sup>410</sup> as well as more traditional academic research. At the University of Connecticut, for example, their A.J. Pappanikou Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Services commissioned the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut to conduct a study of undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>411</sup> The purpose of this project was to assess current awareness of disability issues and the impact on student and faculty interactions with students with disabilities. The study sought to better understand the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty at the University of Connecticut regarding disability-related issues and to provide recommendations to make the campus more hospitable for all students.

## Recommendations

- (a) **Expand mandatory training:** Universities should consider expanding mandatory disability awareness training to all staff and students. These should be a baseline understanding and commitment to inclusion across the institution.
- (b) **Promote inclusive events:** Organise events such as Disability Inclusion Week, Neurodiversity Celebration Week, and conferences on disability rights to raise awareness and celebrate diversity.
- (c) **Develop comprehensive resources:** Create and disseminate resources like tip sheets, allyship guides, and multimedia content to support ongoing awareness and education efforts.
- (d) **Integrate into curriculum:** Incorporate disability awareness into the curriculum through dedicated courses, minors, or modules. This can ensure that all students graduate with an understanding of disability issues.
- (e) **Support research and innovation:** Encourage research on disability awareness and inclusion, and recognise innovative practices through awards and recognition programs.
- (f) **Engage in global networking:** Encourage participation in global networks and communities of practice to share best practices, success stories, and resources. This can help universities learn from each other and continuously improve their training programs.

## Conclusion

Disability norms and U21 Network university policies emphasise the importance of disability awareness measures. Training is recognised as a vital component in fostering an inclusive and respectful environment within universities. The diverse approaches taken by U21 Network universities highlight the importance of tailoring training to cultural contexts and organisational needs. Effective awareness training not only enhances understanding and compliance with regulatory obligations but also promotes a culture of inclusion and respect for diversity.

By integrating disability awareness into various aspects of university life, from mandatory and voluntary training to media and communications, to celebrations of ability diversity, inclusion in curricular, in research and in university prizes, universities can significantly contribute to the creation of a more inclusive society.

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<sup>410</sup> UC Davis Human Resources. (2022). *Disability awareness recognition awards*. <https://hr.ucdavis.edu/news/disability-awareness-recognition-awards>

<sup>411</sup> University of Connecticut. (n.d.). *Disability awareness at the University of Connecticut*. <https://uconnuconnedd.org/disability-awareness/>

## Part 5:

# University services and disability inclusion

**Chapter 5.1.**      **Libraries as opening access to information for persons with disabilities who are students, staff or in the community**

*Sasha Wells and Justine Cawley*

**Chapter 5.2.**      **University Digital Spaces Becoming Disability Inclusive Spaces**

*Brett Crunkhorn, Carolyn Novello, Joshua Hori, Ky Lane, and T.H. Tse*

**Chapter 5.3.**      **Property and facilities opening the doors of opportunity to persons with disabilities**

*Amy Thompson, Danielle Burgess, Imogen Howe, and Merrill Turpin*

## Chapter 5.1.

### Libraries as opening access to information for persons with disabilities who are students, staff or in the community

Sasha Wells and Justine Cawley

#### Introduction

Libraries and library staff have a long-standing commitment to promoting equity, inclusion and accessibility within their collections, services and spaces to best meet the needs of their communities<sup>412</sup>.

In 2 parts, this chapter will analyse the positive impact libraries have on individuals with disabilities within these communities. By examining responses to the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Questionnaire and exploring the library policies and websites of U21 Network universities, we can gain insights into academic library efforts and best practice related to library and information access for persons with disabilities.

#### Part 1. Policies, goals and commitments in support of people with disabilities – examples of good practice from U21 libraries.

Generally, the current state of publicly available policies at the library or institutional level that formally dictate support services for persons with disabilities is inconsistent. Many U21 organisations show their commitment to disability and inclusion support by sharing strategies, goals, and services on their library websites, even in the absence of formal policies. These services often include access to assistive technology, accessible study spaces, book retrieval and alternative format services. Among these are some exemplars of good practice.

The University of Glasgow is an example of a U21 Network university with their own library-specific policy to ensure equal access to services and collections for people with disabilities.<sup>413</sup> The library's disability policy is separate to but informed by the University's Equality and Diversity Policy and strengthened by its alignment with national legislation (the *Equality Act 2010*).<sup>414</sup> In addition to demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusion, the policy explicitly outlines practical accommodations and supports to create clarity and certainty for library users with disabilities. The library has a Disability Co-ordinator as a clear point of contact and the policy's inclusivity extends to welcoming assistance dogs and carers. Additionally, the policy includes a commitment to frontline staff training to ensure staff are knowledgeable and responsive.

Another positive example is The University of Queensland's Library, which demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring equitable access to library spaces and resources for clients and community members with disabilities.<sup>415</sup> This includes providing accessible facilities such as height-adjustable desks and low stimuli spaces (low-light, quiet and soundproof) options. The Library also supports obtaining alternative formats for learning resources and offers personalised assistance from library staff with tasks like wayfinding and book retrieval. Additionally, the Library participates in the Hidden Disability Sunflower program, signalling to their community that staff recognise and support clients with invisible disabilities, therefore fostering a more inclusive library environment.

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412 Ashiq, M., Ur Rehman, S., & Warraich, N. F. (2023). A scientometrics analysis of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) literature in library and information science profession. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-12-2022-0298>

413 University of Glasgow Library. (n.d.). *Disability policy*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/about/disabilitypolicy>

414 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). *Equality and diversity policy*. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/equalitydiversity/policy/equalitypolicy>

415 University of Queensland Library. (n.d.). *Support for clients with disability*. <https://web.library.uq.edu.au/study-and-learning-support/support-clients-disability>

Similarly, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) Library and Archives makes a positive statement to their communities by providing a range of accessible facilities such as wheelchair ramps, accessible toilets and dedicated disability rooms.<sup>416</sup> On their website, UGM highlights their alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)<sup>417</sup> particularly Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequality.

These examples demonstrate that aside from formal policies, organisational goals and strategies can effectively drive progress relating to inclusion in libraries. They provide a framework for positive action and can lead to delivering initiatives that benefit communities in ways that policy alone might not specify.

## Part 2. Assistive technology spaces in U21 libraries

In recent years, libraries worldwide have increased efforts to be inclusive of the communities they serve and provide more equitable access, recognising their own potential to help break down barriers for people with a disability by providing access to assistive technology in purpose-specific spaces within their locations.

Among U21 questionnaire respondents, more than half are providing their communities with access to specific assistive technology spaces, although in some cases the library is not the location for this. Commonly, use of these rooms is restricted to students who are registered with appropriate support services at the institution. In addition to assistive technology rooms, some libraries provide low sensory spaces for clients with disabilities although in many cases these are separate spaces, rather than combined.

The University of Nottingham's libraries have created multiple assistive technology hubs across their campuses, ensuring that students have access to necessary tools regardless of which library they use. Their approach includes dedicated quiet spaces with assistive technology and bookable individual study rooms with specialised equipment.

McMaster University Library's Campus Accessible Tech Space (CATS) is an example where sensory and accessibility needs are both met.<sup>418</sup> As well as compliance with physical accessibility and assistive technology provision, these spaces incorporate features to assist with sensory overwhelm that can occur in busy library spaces. Features include being scent-free, located in a quiet section of the library with sound-dampening furniture, and equipped with access to games and activities to assist with stress management. To help meet demand and provide support McMaster University Library employs a coordinator and assistant specifically for their accessibility services.

The University of Connecticut's library has addressed sensory requirements of their community with the creation of "Quiet Floor" spaces that go beyond traditional silent study areas to include features designed for users with sensory sensitivities, including blocking mobile phone reception.

## Recommendations

- (a) **Policy integration:** Embed accessibility into all library policies and strategic planning, aligning with institutional and national frameworks.
- (b) **Physical space design:** Develop physical spaces and assistive technology in a connected way to provide the most benefit to persons with disabilities.

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<sup>416</sup> Universitas Gadjah Mada Library. (n.d.). *Disability-friendly facilities make everyone happy*. <https://lib.ugm.ac.id/en/disability-friendly-facilities-make-everyone-happy/>

<sup>417</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Sustainable development goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/>

<sup>418</sup> McMaster University Library. (n.d.). *Library accessibility services: Campus accessible tech space (CATS)*. <https://library.mcmaster.ca/campus-accessible-tech-space-cats>

- (c) **Assistive technology:** Increase the availability and accessibility of assistive technology in libraries, ensuring that these resources are well-publicised and easily accessible to those who need them.
- (d) **Staff training:** Provide ongoing training for library staff to ensure they are knowledgeable and responsive to the needs of clients with disabilities.
- (e) **Collaboration:** Foster close collaboration with clients with disabilities to ensure that services and spaces meet their actual needs.

## Conclusion

Academic libraries are making significant strides in improving accessibility for persons with disabilities within their communities, providing substantial benefits to their institutions. Successful approaches combine policy frameworks with practical support services, clearly articulated strategies, and commitments to ongoing improvements.

The future of library accessibility will likely see increased integration of new technologies and continued development of inclusive spaces and services. Achieving success in this area requires ongoing commitment, regular assessment, updating of services, and close collaboration with clients with disabilities to ensure that services meet actual needs.

## Chapter 5.2.

### University Digital Spaces Becoming Disability Inclusive Spaces

Brett Crunkhorn, Carolyn Novello, Joshua Hori, Ky Lane, and T.H. Tse

#### Introduction

The digital world we live in, and the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen a proliferation of digital spaces adopted in the higher education sector. However, not all digital spaces are created equally. Drawing upon the responses provided by the U21 Network universities to the survey, and upon the contacts and personal experiences of the authors, this chapter aims to do the following:

- Explore the current state and extent to which universities are resourced to make their digital spaces accessible and inclusive.
- Analyse both qualitative data and strategic documents provided by U21 Universities, including adherence to accessibility guidelines.
- Identify gaps and provide recommendations for maximising digital accessibility in the higher education sector.

#### Part 1. Specialist Staff Supporting Digital Spaces

The approach to resourcing varies across U21 Universities. Multiple institutions have dedicated web or digital accessibility officers employed within their Information Technology (IT) team. The presence of these dedicated roles indicates a recognition of the importance of digital accessibility and a commitment to ensuring it is addressed by specialist staff. While these dedicated roles are likely beneficial, it might also indicate that other staff members are not sufficiently trained or aware of digital accessibility issues. This risks over-reliance on a few individuals and potentially limits the overall effectiveness of these resources.

U21 institutions show that they overcome this risk by adopting either collaborative or distributed approaches to resourcing. The collaborative approach described by University of Birmingham and The University of Sydney may help ensure that digital accessibility is integrated across the universities. The University of Hong Kong adopts a distributed approach, with tasks disseminated among the Equal Opportunity Unit, IT Services, the Centre of Development and Resources for Students, and various academic schools and departments. Similarly, McMaster University has a comprehensive support system that spans multiple departments. The distributed approach may lead to more effective and coordinated efforts, although it risks fragmented support. University of California, Davis further supports its resourcing efforts by using collaborative procurement to lower costs of training and tools.<sup>419</sup>

Overall, these examples suggest that U21 Universities see the value in digital accessibility and are taking structured approaches to ensure it is implemented and available.

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<sup>419</sup> It's worth noting the inherent challenges of any reliance on third party-products that are externally controlled and who may not always share or continue to commit to the same accessibility targets.

## Part 2. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

“Web accessibility isn’t just for people with disabilities, it is an initiative to improve the quality of the internet for every user.”<sup>420</sup> This messaging is a key principle of universal design.<sup>421 422</sup> The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) aim to create “a single shared standard for web content accessibility that meets the needs of individuals, organisations, and governments internationally.”<sup>423</sup> This global standard includes testable success criteria with universities often setting target levels for compliance or having their compliance driven by government policies.<sup>424</sup>

Many U21 Universities indicate they are committed and actively working towards meeting WCAG. Aspirational levels of compliance and support among U21 institutions vary, ranging from developing a strategy to align with WCAG standards, to achieving A, AA, and AAA levels. It would be interesting to understand the differences in approach to compliance testing. To measure compliance, many U21 Universities seem to favour automated testing over practical or direct functional testing. Although the distinction is subtle, it reflects the maturity and accuracy of compliance efforts.

The ideal would be for all institutions to achieve AAA compliance; however, it’s important to recognise that WCAG is just one measure of accessibility and universal design. A lower level of WCAG commitment or adoption, when viewed in isolation, may not accurately reflect a university’s overall dedication and commitment to accessibility. It is essential to consider other factors, such as equitable access and digital literacy training to fully assess overall inclusivity of a digital environment. For example, The University of Queensland has launched a project aimed at achieving universal design. While it is committed to meeting WCAG compliance, UQ’s broader goal is to create products and environments that are accessible and usable by everyone, regardless of individual differences.

## Part 3. Public Accountability

Having open forum assurance on how closely a digital environment aligns with a desired WCAG target is preferable as it likely represents a high level of maturity, dedication and empathy towards the target.

The levels of maturity and approaches to assurance and accountability of desired WCAG targets vary in U21 Universities. For example, University of Birmingham and University of California, Davis use accessibility and quality assurance platforms, while McMaster University conducts annual surveys. The University of Hong Kong assures the WCAG targets through accessibility policies for web development by internal departments and external vendors. While The University of Sydney indicated it participates in assurance activities. Curiously, none of the responses indicate that any U21 Universities publish results of assurance activities publicly.

While there is excellent work being done to comply and align with WCAG, assurance is not transparent. This is a missed opportunity in ensuring that digital accessibility is not only being met but also continuously improved.<sup>425</sup> Further, publicising this information can build trust with the disability community.

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420 Filipe, F., Pires, I. M., & Gouveia, A. J. (2023). Why web accessibility is important for your institution. *Procedia Computer Science*, 219, 20–27.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.01.259>

421 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD)*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/>

422 Nielsen, E., & Pedersen, S. (2022). Enabling spaces: rethinking materiality and the invitational character of institutional environments. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(9), 5577. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19095577>

423 Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). (n.d.). *WCAG 2 overview: world wide web consortium (W3C)*. WCAG 2 Overview | Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) | W3C

424 Both the University of Glasgow and The University of Queensland refer to government policy driving compliance and minimum levels.

425 McMaster, C. & Whitburn, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Disability and the university: A disabled students' manifesto* (1st ed.). Peter Lang Publishing.

## Recommendations

- (a) **Capacity building:** Universities should look at capacity building across their staff body. Investing in the uplift of general awareness of digital technologies that can assist in higher education<sup>426</sup> across staff will ensure understanding is embedded and a cultural norm. Whether this is best achieved via targeted training sessions, professional development programs or workshops should be assessed by each individual institution.
- (b) **Commitment and target to publicise compliance digital inclusion and monitoring metrics:** Given the variations across universities in history, number of faculties, schools or departments, and number of staff and students, different targets and compliance with WCAG may be appropriate. There should be however, a clear commitment and target to publicise compliance and monitoring metrics. Transparency in these efforts will foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.
- (c) **Digital inclusion road maps:** Where there is an aspiration to WCAG compliance or a higher level of WCAG, strategies and roadmaps must be developed to underpin and support the target. Strategies and roadmaps should be realistic and devoid of tokenism. Milestones, resourcing, and performance metrics should be included. Irrespective of target compliance, there needs to be a culture of universal design applied to digital spaces. A novel measure could involve creating a bug bounty program similar to those commonly used for security issues. Such an initiative would likely require funding to implement, but it could reward users who report replicable and fixable accessibility issues in digital spaces.
- (d) **Partnering:** U21 Universities have a unique opportunity to partner not only with each other, but with the public, members of disability community and software vendors to enact these – and other – changes. Partnering should include inter-university collaboration, where successful strategies and tools for digital accessibility can be shared, as well as fostering relationships which can contribute to improvements. As universities produce research, these collaborations could also feed into joint research and development activities. Further, resource pooling can reduce costs and increase the efficiency of accessibility initiatives. With respect to public engagement, community involvement can provide valuable insights and feedback. Additionally, awareness activities on digital inclusion can help advance the mission of universities to be a force for good in society. Finally, partnerships with software vendors can aid in the development and implementation of accessibility features in digital tools and platforms used by universities. Universities bring communities and skills to such relationships, and as major clients, universities can use their buying power to motivate vendors to develop and implement commitments on inclusion.

## Conclusion

University digital spaces becoming disability inclusive spaces is achievable but arguably not yet fully embedded in institutional culture and practices, and certainly not approached consistently across U21 Universities. The findings above provide confidence that university digital spaces are striving towards disability inclusive spaces. The variations in progress of digital spaces becoming disability inclusive spaces may be natural, due to the uniqueness of each institution. However, with a concerted effort towards capacity building, transparency, and strategic planning, universities can create more inclusive digital environments for all users.

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426 Degtyareva, V. V., Nikitenko, E. V., & Degtyareva, T. N. (2024). Requirements and principles of designing online course for students with disabilities in the modern digital space of the university: theoretical analysis. *Perspectives of Science and Education*, 6(7(1)), 388–403. <https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2024.1.21>

## Chapter 5.3.

### Property and facilities opening the doors of opportunity to persons with disabilities

Amy Thompson, Danielle Burgess, Imogen Howe, and Merrill Turpin

#### Introduction

In contemporary tertiary education, the importance of both physical and digital accessibility of university campuses cannot be overstated. These dimensions intersect to shape the overall inclusivity and experience of the higher education and research environments in which people participate in university life, study, work, research and academic opportunities. Physical accessibility, encompassing the design of buildings, classrooms, and other campus facilities including transportation services, is vital for equity for staff and students with disability. Similarly, digital applications to aid navigation and wayfinding, which are increasingly used to support campus navigation in addition to physical signage, are essential for cultivating a culture of inclusion that reflects the diverse needs of all. This chapter explores the vital role that the built and digital environments play in shaping a truly inclusive tertiary experience and discusses best practices for implementation in these areas, with examples from U21 universities.

#### Part 1. Inclusivity and accessibility of the built environment

The breadth of student / staff experiences must be considered when addressing the built environment, with the aim of promoting inclusion and equitable experiences for all people, regardless of abilities. U21 universities are clearly committed to accommodating students and staff with disability. Most universities express this as a commitment to teaching and learning; however, universities do more than just teach. In addition to teaching, universities are major employers, produce research and innovation and provide buildings and other resources which are used by the general public. One institution emphasised the importance of providing support for 'living' and 'independence', beyond simply teaching and learning. This is a salient point when considering the human rights for persons with disability, including the right to participate equally in daily life. It is crucial for universities to consider what constitutes 'daily life' for university students and staff and the fundamental experience of being at a university for study, work or as a visitor. University life can be about friendship and extracurricular activities as well as research, work, networking and collegial collaboration. The built environment can powerfully contribute to positive experiences of university.

When reviewing policies relating to the built environment, one significant issue identified is the lack of specificity regarding language and expectations for inclusion. For example, the way words such as 'access' and 'accessibility' are defined and used is not consistent. Legal definitions of accessibility tend to suggest that accessibility means the extent to which an individual can access and use an environment without barriers. While this language clarifies the rights of an individual, it is not helpful in determining the specifications for building design because it is too broad and vague – built environments are rather concrete, literally. What constitutes 'accessibility' for one person might not be 'accessible' for another. Something that facilitates use for one individual might prohibit use for another. 'Accessibility' for a building surveyor or certifier may simply mean compliance with the legislated building codes and accessibility standards referenced within those. Such codes are highly proscriptive but also restricted. As such, when universities include aspirations for 'accessibility' of the built environment in their strategic planning documents, it is critical to establish parameters to guide built environment professionals toward what they hope to achieve.

Building codes are important when providing information regarding disability access requirements and / or adherence to universal design principles to staff and contractors responsible for

construction of new builds and refurbishment of existing buildings, access ways, and the landscaped environment. Most U21 universities indicate having policies and protocols in place to address the disability access requirements of any such projects and identify that contractors are required to adhere to legislation that establishes minimum standards for accessibility such as building codes, anti-discrimination legislation and design standards for accessibility or neurodiversity. McMaster University cites the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) in all procurement documentation with vendors and contractors. The Ontario Building Code must also be adhered to with reference to the accessibility requirements, and the pending McMaster University Accessible Design Standards will provide further guidance for building and facility work related to accessible infrastructure. In the UK, the University of Nottingham requires consultant design teams and contractors to design new buildings and refurbishment projects in accordance with UK Building Regulations, British Standards and UK legislation. However, this university allows for best practice evolution through identification on a case-by-case basis of exceeding the standards where additional needs or more complex issues are required to be addressed.

Some universities have developed design guides which establish the expectations for minimum standards in construction. For example, the University of Birmingham has an Inclusive Design Guide to support accessibility design principles. The University of Nottingham has a neurodiversity design guidance document available to contractors and design teams. However not all U21 universities have included accessibility or inclusion standards beyond statutory compliance within these guides. This is important because building codes and standards are minimum requirements usually set at a national scale and do not account for the nuances of university occupants or the core values of the institution. Furthermore, building codes do not account for the full variety of disabilities represented in society, generally focussing on mobility or visible disabilities.

Two Australian universities, The University of Sydney and The University of Queensland, follow specific codes and Australian Standards (AS1428.1) to address accessibility at their campuses. The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) is referred to for all construction projects. However, it is worth noting that compliance with the DDA does not mean the environment is accessible to all and this is where Australian universities would benefit from lessons learned in the overseas institutions where a position exists for the purpose of advocating for true accessibility, and not merely code compliance.

Some U21 universities report appointing specific individuals to champion accessibility and disseminate information to contractors. For example, the University College, Dublin, has a Campus Accessibility Officer and Working Group on Campus Facilities. The University of Birmingham utilises an Estates Accessibility Officer position to provide guidance and information to staff and contractors responsible for campus construction. This position belongs to the Accessibility Oversight group which provides feedback ahead of project implementation. These examples demonstrate how universities can implement small changes to governance frameworks within the construction departments to facilitate accessibility for most campus attendees.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Creating Inclusive University Built Environments**

A shortcoming reported by U21 universities is the limited roll out of campus improvements. It appears that, while accessibility is prioritised in principle, the implementation of substantive changes to established built environments remains slow and somewhat superficial and is perhaps not as progressive or comprehensive as necessary to fully accommodate the needs of all individuals with disabilities.

Some universities report a barrier created by siloing in the sources of funding available for different areas of accommodations for students and staff with disabilities. For example, if the accommodation or adjustment required is related to teaching and learning, then funding might be

allocated from a school or department budget. However, if the adjustment required relates to the estate, then the funding might come from a different budget (e.g. capital works). Where funding is allocated at the local level, while accommodations will be targeted to specific needs, the availability of accommodations will be limited. In contrast, centralised funding may mean that solutions implemented at a local level may be able to be deployed elsewhere, so that the benefits are shared across the university. However, such solutions may not always be relevant or appropriate more broadly. A major problem with centralisation is that it often results in additional levels of bureaucracy. While solutions are likely to be more robust, permanent and benefit more people, these processes are often excruciatingly slow. This compromises the timeliness for the individuals who desperately need them.

### **Co-design**

One strategy for addressing accessibility and inclusion is co-design. This refers to involving people with disability in the entire process from initiation to completion of solutions. For example, the Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) supports the notion of having someone in a position of influence for accessibility consultation and ensures that co-design is engaged with through persons with disabilities being involved in the entire project process to enhance equitable access for all. The modifications described by U21 universities, which include the installation of ramps, handrails in elevators, improvements to toilet facilities, and the increased provision of Braille instructions, suggest a foundational approach to accessibility, one which is already established in legal requirements. Co-design with members of the university community with disability can help to set benchmarks and clarify goals for inclusion – not just compliance.

## **Part 2. Digital access to the built environment**

Universities use a range of digital approaches to aiding navigation and wayfinding for individuals with various disabilities, with some implementing or developing robust systems for accessible navigation. For example, the University of Zurich is exploring comprehensive smartphone-supported indoor navigation options. It uses a web portal containing specific information about the accessibility of individual university buildings. McMaster University offers an online map featuring details such as marked parking and accessible entrances. In the UK, several universities provide campus maps online and through mobile apps in collaboration with AccessAble. The University of Sydney employs the MazeMaps platform, which is accessible to all users and regularly updated from the university's master space database to ensure it remains current. Several universities report providing their maps as PDFs online. However, online PDFs often have small fonts that can be difficult to read, potentially causing time consumption, stress, and emotional distress. It is worth noting that the ability to provide real-time updates is dependent on the effective and efficient management of data being delivered to system users through clear feedback loops and data integrations. McMaster reported displaying changed access due to building works, reducing the navigational distress and time required to self-redirect. However, the limitation to all probable solutions is the quality of the input and data. Without effective and efficient data management systems, map updates cannot reflect the real world, whereby the lived experience of map users and those navigating a campus is incongruent.

Three commonly used digital navigation platforms are AccessAble, MazeMaps and NaviLens. AccessAble is a platform that provides information to users about the accessibility of venues located in the UK and Ireland. Several UK-based universities have provided accessibility information of their campuses to be included on the platform.

MazeMaps is a platform used by several Group of 8 (Go8) universities in Australia and further afield. This platform is limited in its wayfinding for accessible pathways and is engaged in a project with a focus on co-design to support advancements in accessibility and digital wayfinding. A core

limitation to this platform relates to turning on the “avoid stairs” function to make the pathways accessible. The issue is that it only relates to the physical environment and does not take into consideration the experience of the person with a disability navigating the sometimes-challenging topographical elements of traversing a campus. In contrast, effort-based mobility mapping could be utilised by universities to allow individuals to make decisions with a greater understanding of the expected effort required to get from point A to point B, thus reducing ambiguity and distress.

NaviLens is an example of technology that gives agency back to the user. It is an app designed for visually impaired people that allows the user to scan a simplified code from up to 15 meters away without needing to know precisely where they are placed. They simply hold up their phone and move it around. The information is then contextualised into directions, and users have described this as “like having someone to guide you.”<sup>427</sup> The app is stylistically minimalist to support ease of use and is 100% user friendly.

The experience of most universities is that there is a strong disconnect between having the data available in a map and the accuracy of this data. While some maps highlight wheelchair-friendly paths, not all do, reflecting varying levels of accessibility. Despite these advancements, challenges persist in maintaining the accuracy of these maps, and the inclusion of all necessary details to ensure they meet the diverse needs of the community. As with the built environment, some universities have advocated for or appointed a Campus Accessibility Officer to oversee initiatives. This person can work alongside the departments responsible for map data (i.e. Information Technology and Property and Facilities) to provide universities with a dedicated advocate who can utilise co-design principles in platform development. At The University of Queensland, a project officer undertakes this responsibility within the Property and Facilities team.

## Physical Signage

In addition to digital maps, physical signage is also important. Wayfinding and campus navigation extends to the individual rooms that students, staff and visitors need to find, often in short timeframes (e.g. navigating from one side of the campus to the other to attend a lecture). Identification of what technology exists inside a room is key for those with visual and auditory impairments. Signage for hearing loops with Braille embedded in the sign is a good example of wayfinding that extends beyond the 2-dimensional field.

High contrast signage and large fonts enhance accessibility and inclusion on campus. Implementing signage and wayfinding design standards ensures equitable use of appropriate signage across campus.

## Recommendations

- **Design guides or briefing documents:** Establish policies and design guides or briefing documents aimed at built environment professionals that set clear objectives and standards for designers to strive for. These could establish protocols, such as co-design and consultation with staff and students with disability, and benchmark projects, either existing successful projects on campus or others the institution aspires to. If foundational expectations are not established and communicated, any building works run the risk of missing the mark and not being fit for purpose or flexible for further advancements and future social change. By not embedding aspirations beyond the building codes in briefing documents and policies from the very beginning of project initiation, universities are likely to have those design aspirations thwarted due to cost-cutting.

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<sup>427</sup> NaviLens. (2019, March 1). *Introduction and user testimonials NaviLens* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcCGxnqAqcw>

- **Disability capital works plan:** Establish a capital works plan for upgrades with a dedicated budget and urgent timeframe that is not dependent on major projects. A full and comprehensive cost-benefit analysis should underpin this, accounting for the value brought about by making the campus and infrastructure inclusive of people with disabilities. Such improvements benefit everyone, not only those for whom the upgrades are designed. Two striking examples are kerb cuts and voice activation software (i.e. Siri).

While many strategies emphasise physical accessibility of the built environment, enhancing accessibility and inclusion requires addressing a broader range of needs. Despite some progress, more efforts are needed. Providing information on noise levels and crowd density can make campuses more inclusive.

- **Review reasonable adjustment funding:** Review approaches to funding allocation for adjustments for students and staff with disabilities and apply an equity framework to ensure minimisation of systemic discrimination.
- **Create a dedicated position:** Create a dedicated position such as a Campus Accessibility Officer to oversee and advocate for consideration of accessibility and inclusion in the built environment. This role would promote co-design throughout the whole process of addressing concerns and developing solutions and facilitate communication across different sectors of the university. For example, in the case of digital wayfinding and navigation, real change occurs when several departments have a deep understanding of the impacts of the maps on the wider community through stakeholder engagement with those directly involved as primary and secondary users of the platform. Opportunities for universities to collaborate and develop accessible wayfinding standards should be considered strongly, and such a position could be instrumental in promoting these.

## Conclusion

As this chapter illustrates, the creation of accessible and inclusive university environments is a commonly held aspiration. To be truly accessible is to be attentive to the needs of all and committed to developing teams that plan, monitor, report, and act on changes. Co-design is crucial for understanding what needs to be included in these systems and the risk of spending unnecessary money, time and resources without engaging with the correct stakeholders is one that universities should take seriously. After all, the core business of a university is to provide an environment where students, staff and visitors can feel safe, welcomed and included.



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