One in five Australians live with a disability, yet only 6.91% of students commencing higher education in an Australian university in 2020 indicated that they had a disability, impairment or long term medical condition that may affect their studies (DESE, 2021). Australia is currently sitting well behind international counterparts; the UK has seen an increase of 47% over five years (Hubble and Bolton, 2021) with 17.3% of all local students in 2020 disclosing a disability. The USA is also experiencing a positive trend with 19.5% of students disclosing disability in 2016 (NCES, 2019). A National Disability Coordination Officer program (NDCO) working party completed an overview of recent widening participation (WP) theory investigated current practice and delivered recommendations for strengthening approaches to increasing participation of people with disability in Australian universities. The project identified that current federal funding structures aimed at increasing the participation of priority cohorts are prohibiting the delivery of WP activities aimed specifically to meet the unique requirements of Australians with disability. That only two disability specific programs were identified is indicative of the impact that poor policy is contributing to low uptake of tertiary studies by this cohort. WP of disabled Australians is not being prioritised by universities who have little external incentive or accountability to do so. Only 26% of Australian universities have current publicly available Disability Action Plans (DAP) and of the 37 with registered University Access and Participation Plans (UAPP), only 12 include the word disability, only three with regards to the pre-access phase of the student journey (DESE, 2020). Lack of strategic accountability has led to low numbers of disability focussed WP programs which rely on finite good will, are driven by individual staff members, are reliant on unsustainable grant funding sources, and therefore do not attract sustainable support at the executive level of individual institutions. The report “Widening Participation of Disabled People in Australian Universities” provides analysis of the current situation, provides examples of best practice and delivers recommendations including further investigation by the Australian Government to consider:

* Inclusion of disabled people as a priority cohort within Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
* Increased funding and strengthening of accountability for widening participation activities under the Disability Support Program
* Setting targets for increasing the participation of people with disability and requiring institutions to document strategies and outcomes within the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF)
* Requiring institutions to deliver and maintain up to date Disability Action Plans that consider the whole student lifecycle
* Providing best practice guidelines and sector support to deliver effective WP program development that is designed in partnership with disabled people
* Explore alternative methods for driving institutional provision of targeted WP activities at a strategic level, examples may include through university ranking systems or required reporting within institutional Annual Reports

Australia must take action to improve the participation of disabled people in further education. Our country has fallen behind in securing the systems and delivery of programs to ensure that disabled people can access higher education as a basic human right. Until disabled Australians are encouraged to participate in a system that meets their needs, they will not be afforded the opportunities to secure meaningful economic participation or to have the same opportunities to choose and control their own career pathways as any other Australian. Please contact Amii at if you would like to receive a full copy of the report