

**Australian Universities Accord
Discussion Paper
SCIA Submission**

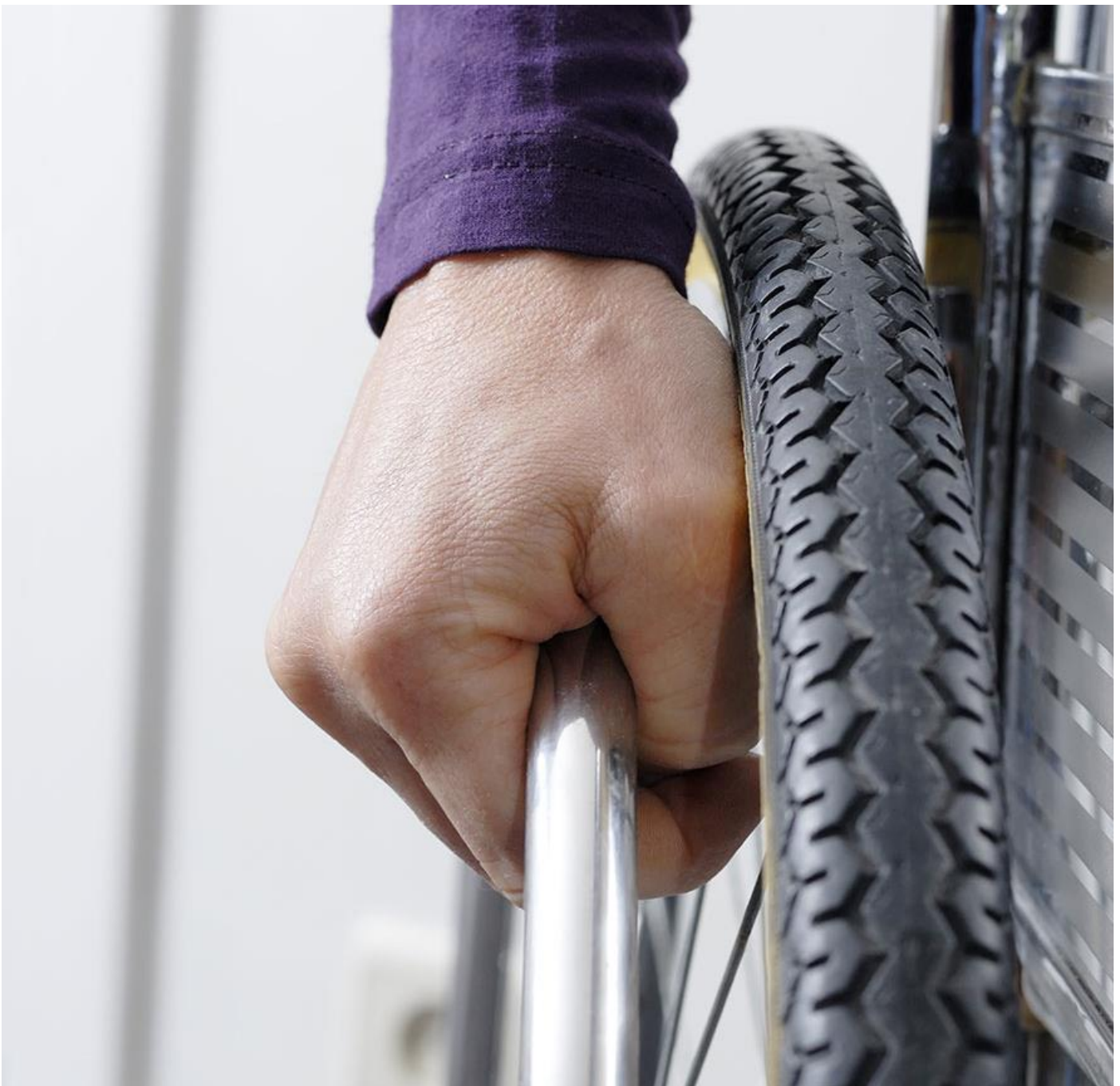


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1. About Spinal Cord Injuries Australia

Spinal Cord Injuries Australia (SCIA) is pleased to provide this submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussions Paper.

SCIA is a dedicated advocacy service for people with spinal cord injuries and similar disability. We currently employ around 200 staff across services nationwide including 14 staff dedicated to our Policy and Advocacy work in New South Wales. Some of our staff provide advocacy services from our regional office in Alstonville in Northern NSW.

SCIA provides specialty knowledge in Spinal Cord Injury and similar neurological conditions, and broader knowledge and experience across physical disability. SCIA was founded in 1967 by people with acquired spinal cord injury and continues to employ many people with spinal cord injury and similar physical disability. Having this representation on our staff creates a vast knowledge base that helps us to meet the individual needs of the people who use SCIA's services.

Alongside the many advocacy services that we provide to people with disability, SCIA actively promotes the rights of people with disability to equal access to the physical environment, transportation and other facilities and services.

2. Introduction / Background

For too long, unfounded, and inaccurate assumptions have been made about people with disability, including assumptions about their productivity and competence. These assumptions have manifested in an undervaluing of university degrees for people with disability which has had a direct impact on the low rates of participation by people with disability in employment.

The talent of people with disability has been squandered, productivity has been undermined, and the nation's economic growth has suffered because our education system has not been inclusive enough to embrace the needs of people with disability¹.

Since the 1990s Australian government policy has wanted to improve the proportional representation of people with disability in higher education. The target set for students with disability was 8% of the student population (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). The groups that were targeted for increased participation included people with hearing, learning, mobility, vision, medical disabilities, behavioural and mental illnesses, and autism spectrum disorders².

The strategy of increasing enrolments by people with disability in higher education was intended to have a direct impact on the participation of people with disability in employment³.

Current ways of working that include flexible working arrangements, a shift to more digital work and transitions to green economies all create opportunities for a more diverse workforce⁴. And now that Australia's unemployment rate is at historically low levels and growing labour shortages are becoming a major challenge for future growth prospects, increasing the number of people with disability in meaningful, full-time employment would make a valuable contribution to the labour force⁵.

While participation and completion of a high school education by people with disability has improved over the last 20-30 years, overall, people with disability leave school at a younger age than people without disability and they have a much lower level of higher or further educational attainment⁶.

Unfortunately, low expectations - a form of passive discrimination - in an education system that does not encourage students with disability to complete high school, let alone transition from school to

¹ Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage in Australia Deborah A. Cobb-Clark, School of Economics, University of Sydney. Institute of Labor Economics (IZA). Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (the Life Course Centre). P31

² QUT Centre for Justice Disability Briefing Paper Series Access to Higher Education Deanna Grant-Smith and Bernard Irmer December 2020 Issue 11 <https://research.qut.edu.au/centre-for-justice/wp-content/uploads/sites/304/2021/02/Briefing-paper-series-December-2020-Issue11.pdf>

³ Ibid

⁴ United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner CRPD/C/GC/8: General Comment No. 8 (2022) on the right of persons with disabilities to work and employment 09 September 2022

⁵ Deloitte Access Economics The economic benefits of increasing employment for people with disability Commissioned by the Australian Network on Disability August 2011

⁶ Ibid

higher education (only 34% of people with disability aged 20 and over have completed year 12 compared to 66% of people without disability⁷), means these opportunities have been missed⁸. If people with disability identify with more than one group – disability and Aboriginality or disability and gender as examples - then they are likely to experience multi-layered discrimination. Intersectionality compounds the level of disadvantage, discrimination and exclusion experienced by people with disability⁹.

And even if students with disability do complete high school, non-inclusive practices by universities discourage their participation in further education. We know that people with disability continue to face significant barriers in Australian higher education¹⁰. Only 18.4% of people with disability have a bachelor degree or higher compared to 32.8% of people without a disability. While the number of people with disability achieving bachelor degrees or higher is increasing, the numbers are not consistent across all jurisdictions or cohorts and still a long way from reflecting the true composition of our society¹¹. For people with a profound or severe disability it's as low as 11%¹².

With limited options for attending university young people are forced into a hostile and discriminatory job market. Currently, 25% of people with disability under the age of 25 are unemployed and another 23% are underemployed. Of those who are employed, they are far more likely to be hired in roles that are unstable, seasonal, and poorly paid.

Research indicates that by taking these roles young people are unwittingly setting themselves up for longer-term unemployment and reduced future wage growth¹³. Their qualifications and suitability to more senior roles are often overlooked because of their disability, and they are denied skill development opportunities that might be a pathway to promotion or greater opportunity¹⁴.

⁷ Australian Government. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare People with disability in Australia Educational attainment Australian Government. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Health of people experiencing homelessness <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/health-of-people-experiencing-homelessness>

⁸ Rillotta, F., Arthur, J., Hutchinson, C., & Raghavendra, P. (2020). Inclusive university experience in Australia: Perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their mentors. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 24(1), 102–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629518769421>

⁹ Australian Federation of Disability Organisations Poverty and Disability Fast Facts 2022 <https://www.afdo.org.au/disability-support-pension/poverty-and-disability-fast-facts/>

¹⁰ Ibid p104

¹¹ ADCET Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training Higher Education Statistics <https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/understanding-disability/higher-education-statistics#:~:text=Of%20persons%20aged%2015%2D64,cent%20for%20individuals%20without%20disability.>

¹² Australian Government. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare People with disability in Australia Educational attainment Australian Government. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/education-and-skills/educational-attainment#Highest%20level%20of%20education>

¹³ CYDA Children and Young People with Disability in Australia Inquiry into the purpose, intent and adequacy of the Disability Support Pension July 2021 Jobs for young people are insecure, precarious and force them into poverty

¹⁴ Crikey.com Disability employment rates haven't shifted in decades – blame discrimination El Gibbs Jan 23, 2023 https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/01/23/disability-employment-rates-discrimination/?utm_campaign=Daily&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter

The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper refers to achieving the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education target of 40% of Australians aged 25-34 being educated to bachelor level or above. SCIA questions why similar goals and ambitions can't be applied to people with disability achieving university degrees.

Surely more inclusive programs could be implemented to provide the flexibility and accessibility required for people with disability to succeed at university especially if these programs are targeted at courses where skill shortages exist.

Inclusive education should overcome the challenges and marginalisation experienced by people with disability to create educational opportunities that are equivalent to the education received by other students. While these programs have existed for decades in the United States and Canada, they are a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia despite the introduction of the Australian Disability Standards for Education in 2005¹⁵.

If these attitudes don't change then intergenerational disadvantage will perpetuate beyond where it is today, and more people will be living in poverty¹⁶.

The disparity between the poverty rate of all people with disability (one in six) compared to the poverty rate of children with disability (one in five) demonstrates the progression of intergenerational disadvantage and poverty. These children are living in poverty because they have a disability, or their parents have a disability, or they live in a household where no one has paid work¹⁷.

The need to address inequality in education and employment for people with disability has now become urgent.

3. Inclusivity in education needs to begin at school

The low participation in higher and further education by people with disability is in part an extension of the failure to either recognise, diagnose, or provide support for a child's disability in early education or at school. Many parents may be, or may have been, unaware of their child's disability, or they may have minimised the impact of their disability. Likewise, schools may have failed to adapt the curriculum to suit the specific needs of children with disability¹⁸.

¹⁵ Rillotta, F., Arthur, J., Hutchinson, C., & Raghavendra, P. (2020). Inclusive university experience in Australia: Perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their mentors. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 24(1), 102–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629518769421>

¹⁶ Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage in Australia Deborah A. Cobb-Clark, School of Economics, University of Sydney. Institute of Labor Economics (IZA). Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (the Life Course Centre). P31

¹⁷ The Conversation 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes March 10, 2022 <https://theconversation.com/i-just-go-to-school-with-no-food-why-australia-must-tackle-child-poverty-to-improve-educational-outcomes->

¹⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission Access to Education for Students with a Disability: Barriers and Difficulties <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/access-education-students-disability-barriers-and-difficulties>

Australia has had many different labels for separating students with disability from students without disability. We have called them special schools, units or classrooms, or schools or classes for children with special needs to name just a couple. Whatever term has applied to the segregation of students with disability, the result has been the same – students with disability are far less likely than students without disability to move into higher education¹⁹.

But now we know that there are significant and long-term consequences to segregated and non-inclusive education, even when the segregation occurs in a child's formative years. Academic achievement, employment pathways, health outcomes, exposure to the juvenile justice system and even life expectancy is impacted by the practice of separating students with disability from mainstream classes. In the short-term, children living in poverty have lower school completion rates and lower scores on national tests like the NAPLAN²⁰.

Access to education is one of the benchmarks used by the Productivity Commission (PC) to measure levels of poverty and disadvantage, alongside access to employment and social opportunities²¹. This measurement - to see poverty as more than just a lack of economic resources - substantiates the high rates of poverty among children. The proportion of people living in poverty is highest among children who experience intersectional and intergenerational disadvantage. One in five children with a disability lives in poverty which is even higher than the overall rate of one in six people with disability living in poverty²².

4. Making universities more inclusive for people with physical disability

Access to higher education is the main determinant to a person's current and future income, living standards, savings, and financial future²³.

SCIA believes that people with disability, given equal opportunity, could make an even greater contribution to Australia's economic, cultural, and social aspirations. We know that there is a strong correlation between the attainment of a university degree or other qualification, and employment for people with disability²⁴. Studies in the United States show that people with disability who leave school,

¹⁹ Everyone can work Employment pathways for people with intellectual disability Inclusion Australia What are the post education outcomes <https://www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/13-the-role-of-university-education-in-employment-and-other-outcomes-for-people-with-intellectual-disability/>

²⁰ ACIE Australian coalition for inclusive education Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia October 2020 p7

²¹ Australian Government Productivity Commission Rising Inequality? A stocktake of the evidence Research Paper August 2018 p34

²² The Conversation 'I just go to school with no food' – why Australia must tackle child poverty to improve educational outcomes March 10, 2022 <https://theconversation.com/i-just-go-to-school-with-no-food-why-australia-must-tackle-child-poverty-to-improve-educational-outcomes-178426#:~:text=About%20one%20in%20six%20children,than%20their%20more%20advantaged%20peers.>

²³ Michelle Maroto, David Pettinicchio; Andrew C. Patterson, "Hierarchies of Categorical Disadvantage: Economic Insecurity at the Intersection of Disability, Gender and Race," 2018.

²⁴ Laura N. Butler*, Kathy Sheppard-Jones, Barry Whaley, Beth Harrison and Michelle Osness Does participation in higher education make a difference in outcomes for students with intellectual disability? Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 44 (2016) 295–298

and attain a higher level of education not only have a higher rate of employment, but they are employed in higher paying jobs²⁵.

But the toll on people with disability trying to gain equal access to the full university or higher education experience is not borne out in data or statistics. Disability type, intersectionality issues like ethnicity, culture, gender, socio-economic variables, and mode of study (part-time or full-time) all factor into the pressure of trying to complete a university degree with a disability²⁶.

SCIA is aware of two programs, the Uni 2 beyond program at Sydney University and the Up the Hill program run by Flinders University where students with disability select areas of study with no assessment so participants can engage in a university environment without the pressure of exams or assessments²⁷. SCIA understands that these programs are enormously beneficial in helping students with social development, developing friendships and relationships, and adapting to university norms with a view to furthering their education later-on. SCIA also understands that these programs are designed for people with intellectual disabilities²⁸.

However, SCIA would like to see more focus on making Universities fully accessible for people with physical disability, especially profound or severe physical disability. If universities are fully accessible, and people with disability have the cognitive ability to engage in their course, they should not need programs to help them adapt to university norms.

Inclusion needs to be entrenched as a priority in the culture and philosophy of all Australian universities. Accessibility requires consideration of the sensory and communication needs of people with disability, access to information as well as mobility, and more²⁹.

In our view, failure by Australian universities to collaborate and co-design with people with disability will perpetuate the kind of exclusion that ignores the needs of people with disability in favour of a one-size-fits-all approach to mobility and accessibility³⁰.

To adopt and integrate inclusion and accessibility into the culture of universities key actions include:

- Inclusion and accessibility in the performance matrix and future reviews of Australian universities.
- Provide a central resource base on disability inclusion and use the resource to promote inclusive practices by all staff, students, and stakeholders.

²⁵ Laura N. Butler*, Kathy Sheppard-Jones, Barry Whaley, Beth Harrison and Michelle Osness Does participation in higher education make a difference in outcomes for students with intellectual disability? *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 44 (2016) 295–298

²⁶ Carol Evans, Xiaoutong Zhu *Times Higher Education* A checklist for making disability inclusion a reality in higher education Cardiff University University of Southampton, University of Lincoln August 2022

²⁷ Inclusion Australia Everyone can work Employment pathways for people with intellectual disability <https://www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/13-the-role-of-university-education-in-employment-and-other-outcomes-for-people-with-intellectual-disability/>

²⁸ Rillotta, F., Arthur, J., Hutchinson, C., & Raghavendra, P. (2020). Inclusive university experience in Australia: Perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their mentors. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 24(1), 102–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629518769421>

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

- Make better use of data to inform disability inclusion and to better understand the diverse needs of all people with disability.
- Build disability inclusion capacity within teams and faculties to improve the support provided to people with disability.
- Capture the lived experience of people with disability. Find a methodology to capture and learn from their experiences.
- Ensure basic access to services and amenities. Ensure the building and landscape design (and alterations if relevant) do not appear as 'add-on' elements or as of secondary importance.
- Information about the location of Accessible Adult Change Facilities (Changing Places Toilets) and existing or new wheelchair accessible toilets is extremely important. All accessible toilets should be well sign posted, included in maps, and registered on the National Toilet Map.
- If the Master Locksmith Association Key (MLAK) accessible toilet system is being used (and it should be), universities will need to ensure a MLAK key is available and in close vicinity when a person with disability requires access to the toilet. Universities should ensure that MLAK information is clearly displayed in accessible formats.
- Disability training should be embedded with other training opportunities and part of any induction or other training processes.
- Simplify what an inclusive curriculum is. To accommodate the diverse needs of people with disability information should be disseminated using: Audio; Braille; Accessible print; Easy read; and Auslan, Video and Multimedia where appropriate and depending on the forum³¹.
- Provide and maintain Assistive technologies. Specific tools and technology should be readily available along with training to maximise the benefits.
- Promote early transitions support. Prepare at school to develop the skills and knowledge required for university or higher education.
- Promote academic and professional mentoring for people with disability. Provide access to academic and social networks to support effective transitions into work or further study.
- Allow, promote, and provide the tools for people with disability to advocate for the removal of barriers to inclusion³².

³¹ Engagement and consultation with people living with disability Inclusive SA: State Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2019-2023 p16

³² Carol Evans, Xiaoutong Zhu Times Higher Education A checklist for making disability inclusion a reality in higher education Cardiff University University of Southampton, University of Lincoln August 2022

