Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper. I make this individual submission as a neurodivergent researcher whose research informs about how to make the Australian academy more inclusive of researchers with disability.

Kind regards,

Dr Damian Mellifont

Q38 How can the Accord support higher education providers to adopt sector-leading employment practices?

According to Equal Employment Opportunity reporting, the Australian academy needs to employ more researchers with disability.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even highly qualified researchers with disability can find it challenging to be employed in the academy.[[2]](#footnote-2) This lack of diversity and inclusion means that research about disability in Australia continues to be dominated by researchers without disability. Consequently, academic rigor and quality are diminished in disability studies that fail to value the expertise that accompanies lived experience of disability.[[3]](#footnote-3) This ableist status quo needs to be addressed as a policy priority. The disability inclusion mantra of ‘nothing about us without us’ applies to disability research as much as it does to anything else. The Accord therefore needs to encourage Australian universities to adopt policies, principles and practices that can advance the employment prospects of researchers with disability in a timely manner. I note that that the discussion paper states, “this discussion paper invites input on the kind of higher education system Australia needs in two and three decades’ time.” However, investment in the strong policy actions that can help to employ more researchers with disability in Australian higher education is needed now! One policy measure that can rapidly increase the representation of researchers with disability in higher education is that of quotas.[[4]](#footnote-4) Quotas have been successfully used in other countries to increase the recruitment and retention of people with disability.[[5]](#footnote-5) This measure can ensure not only a greater number of academics with disability are employed in Australian universities, but that more of these people are also promoted into leadership roles. Furthermore, major Australian research funding grants including the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC) need to better recognise and value lived experience of disability among researchers in the assessment of disability research funding submissions.

There is little point employing more researchers with disability in the Australian academy if many of these people are ultimately forced out by unwelcoming, unaccommodating and ableist environments. Negative attitudes towards researchers with disability in the academy are persisting.[[6]](#footnote-6) Neurodivergent researchers have reported encountering negative experiences after disclosing their neurodivergence in higher education.[[7]](#footnote-7) Researchers should be able to proudly and openly disclose their disability in the Australian academy without the fear of negative repercussions. Barriers to a greater disclosure of neurodivergence among staff in higher education include a loss of privacy through unauthorised announcements about their disability, anxiety stemming from uncertainty (e.g.., temporary contracts prevailing over permanent roles and the unavailability of accommodations) and a fear of experiencing discrimination.[[8]](#footnote-8),[[9]](#footnote-9),[[10]](#footnote-10) Researchers with disability should consistently receive their approved accommodations and supports.[[11]](#footnote-11) Leaders in higher education therefore need to be held accountable for any shortfalls in accommodating staff with disability and for a lack of secure lived experience researcher positions. Mandatory anti-ableism education is also needed among higher education staff to help to advance a greater understanding of disability and to redress fears of people with disability.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Australian higher education has an opportunity to address a persisting underrepresentation of researchers with lived experience of disability in studies about disability. By implementing strong and innovative policy measures such as disability employment quotas, redressing ableism through education and greater contact with people with disability, and ensuring that staff with disability are consistently accommodated, higher education in Australia will become more inclusive in a timely manner.

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