

Student Disability Collectives in Australian Universities: A Desktop Review

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Abstract

Student disability collectives (SDCs) are student-led groups which offer representation, social networks, and resources to university students with disability. They are run independently from the university administration. For the first time in published literature, this study has centralised and recorded information relating to the prevalence, nature, and function of SDCs. Desktop research targeting publicly available information about the prevalence, nature, and function of SDCs was undertaken to reveal a rich ecosystem of SDCs across up to 25 Australian universities. This study provides a foundational understanding of what SDCs are and what their existence can illuminate about the strength of student unionist and collectivist cultures across different institutions, for the benefit of student services practitioners and researchers. These findings have implications for future research relating to SDCs and student representation more broadly, as well as for understanding the institutional conditions from which vibrant and organic student representation emerges. Limitations relating to the currency and accuracy of publicly available online information may mediate the reliability of these findings.

Keywords

Student leadership; Disability collectives; Collectivism; Equity and inclusion; Student advocacy.

Introduction

University education represents a crucial developmental period for many students with disability, encompassing their educational, social, and personal growth. During this time, many students with disability explore their disabled identity and societal role (Kimball et al., 2016), develop greater autonomy and take on new responsibilities (Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022), and learn to navigate their conditions independently (Kichler et al., 2023). However, the path through university remains challenging for students with disability. Australian data show lower enrolment and completion rates for students with disability when compared to non-disabled students (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023), along with poorer overall experiences and greater intentions to leave their institutions (Social Research Centre, 2023).

Research by academics and disability organisations has identified multiple contributors to the poorer experiences of disabled students. These include unsuitable curriculum design and delivery, low expectations from university staff and peers regarding the potential of people with disability (Polglaze & Ganon, 2022; Ryan & Struhs, 2004), discrimination linked to disability disclosure (Grimes et al., 2019), inaccessible physical and digital environments, and inadequate support provision (Kilpatrick et al., 2016; Polglaze & Ganon, 2022). Despite these challenges being recognised for at least two decades (Ryan & Struhs, 2004), the gap in university outcomes and satisfaction for students with disability persists. Various institution-led initiatives have sought to enhance staff disability awareness and student capabilities (e.g., Chiang, 2020; Griffin et al., 2016; Hillier et al., 2019; Moriña & Carballo, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Rothwell & Shields, 2021). Yet, ongoing disparities in attendance, achievement, and student experiences suggest these programs have not achieved meaningful change in university inclusion.

Not content to wait for the slow wheels of change to turn, students have taken matters into their own hands. Student disability collectives (SDCs) leverage the collective expertise and advocacy

capabilities of students to offer support, peer connections, and capacity-building opportunities (Student Voice Australasia, n.d.). To date, scholarly research has not engaged at all with SDCs or their potential to influence the experiences of students with disability. This gap is particularly notable given the continuing disparities between disabled and non-disabled university students. This study breaks new ground by documenting the concept of SDCs to provide the foundation for future research examining the experiences of participating students.

Student leadership in Australian higher education

Student organisations, variously known as unions, associations, guilds, and councils, have been key pillars of the university student experience in Australia for decades (Rochford, 2014). They drive student advocacy and activism, hold universities accountable through student representation to university committees and councils, and provide student services ranging from legal assistance to orientation weeks (Michałowska et al., 2023). Student organisations are generally comprised of elected volunteer student representatives and may also retain some paid staff to manage operational and financial matters (e.g., Deakin University Students Association [DUSA], 2024).

Student organisations often appoint office bearers or volunteers responsible for representing cohorts of historically marginalised students. This includes women and/or gender diverse students, the LGBTQIA+ community, students of colour and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with disability (e.g., Australian National University Students' Association, n.d.). These office bearers will commonly be responsible for facilitating advocacy and initiatives which support their cohort, sometimes through a student collective comprised of members from that cohort (e.g., University of Sydney Students' Representative Council, 2024). These collectives form, or collectivise, for the purposes of offering peer support, advocacy, social activities, personal and professional development, and advice on accessing university services and supports (e.g., University of Queensland Union, 2024). Most significantly, these groups are run by students, for students; students have the decision-making power about the group's activities, not the university.

SDCs are one such example of a student collective. However, there is no literature available which attempts to quantify the existence of SDCs in Australian universities or map their structures, objectives, and activities. As a part of the development of this study, a range of journal databases were searched for peer-reviewed articles published at any point in time featuring relevant combinations of “student disability collective”, “Australia”, and “university”, together with appropriate synonyms. Direct mention of SDCs in Australian literature at all is extremely rare: SDCs have only been noted passing in two publications (Polglaze & Ganon, 2022; Steele et al., 2023). Steele et al. (2023) reference an SDC taking part in the development of a measurement tool without a substantive discussion of the group itself. Polglaze and Ganon's (2022) report is not peer reviewed in the academic sense and only refers in passing to the experience of a student with disability engaging with an SDC. This literature gap presents a clear opportunity to undertake some exploratory desktop research to establish the concept of SDCs within the scholarly and professional student services discourse.

Method

Procedure

Data collection

An exploratory web search was undertaken using Google between 16 and 30 April 2024 to investigate the existence of an SDC at each of the 42 public and private Australian universities

listed on the Study Australia website (Australian Government, n.d.). The search strings used for this process (see Table 1) were developed from a series of brief pilot searches to refine the nomenclature and topic areas required to elicit the required results. For example, while an SDC did not always have a retrievable webpage, they sometimes could be identified through a social media page, the constitution or terms of reference belonging to the university's student association, or in disability action plans maintained by the university's administration. All four search strings were executed for each of the 42 universities.

Table 1

Search Strings Used to Retrieve Information about Student Disability Collectives

Search 1	Search 2	Search 3	Search 4
[University name] student disability collective	[University name] disability support	[University name] disability action plan	[University name] disability accessibility network

Data analysis

The target results elicited by these search strings were university and student association websites; university disability action plans; student association governance documents, such as minutes and constitutions; SDC websites and webpages; and Facebook and Instagram account pages. These results were examined for evidence of an SDC at each university. SDCs were identified from the search results using the following criteria:

1. The group has a focus on matters relating to disability or accessibility, signalled in the name or stated purpose of the group.
2. The group is run by students, for students (i.e., as an independent group, or as a subsidiary of an independently run student association or organisation).
3. The group is not administered or administrated by the university (i.e., students retain self-determination over the activities, policy positions, and objectives of the group).

Where an SDC was identified, the search results were examined for any indication of the purpose, scope, or intent of the group; its structure or governance arrangements; and the size or composition of its membership.

Supplementary to the SDC data, additional data points relating to each institution were collected for the purpose of analysis. For each university, the governance arrangements of its student association or student representative mechanism were examined to determine if it was independently (student) run or administered by university staff. This was determined through an examination of any constitution or governing document for each association, union, or committee, as well as an assessment of financial and positional independence. Each university was also designated as a member or non-member of the National Union of Students (NUS), the peak body for student organisations (National Union of Students [NUS], n.d.). In addition to the student representative mechanism governance structure, NUS membership was selected as a proxy variable for the strength of student unionist culture at each institution. The institutional grouping of each university was also assigned as the Australian Technology Network (ATN), Group of Eight (Go8), Innovative Research Universities (IRU), Regional Universities Network (RUN), or not aligned with any institutional grouping, as recorded in Cadby et al. (2024). Institutional groupings of universities are well understood to be reflective of the nature and priorities of each institution. For example, Go8 universities tend to be older, research-focused institutions with strong international reputations (Group of Eight [Go8], n.d.). RUN universities are often universities with multiple regional

campuses with a focus on teaching and delivering value back to their local communities (Regional Universities Network [RUN], 2025). Finally, the proportion of undergraduate domestic students disclosing disability was also collected for each institution (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024a). Due to limitations of the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) protocol, these figures were not available with international or postgraduate students included in the aggregate.

To assess any relationships between university characteristics (institutional grouping, NUS membership, student representative mechanism governance structure) and the presence of an SDC, chi-square tests of independence were conducted ($\alpha = 0.05$), accompanied by Cramér's V calculations to assess effect size (Rea & Parker, 1992). All variables met the assumptions of the chi-square test of independence (categorical variables, independent observations, mutually exclusive categories, and expected frequencies of at least 5 in each cross-category). Due to skewness in the data related to proportion of students with disability, a Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine the relationship between the proportion of undergraduate domestic students with disability and the presence of an SDC.

Results

From the online search of publicly available information, it was revealed that almost half (20 of 42) of Australian universities had an active SDC with a recorded online presence. A further five universities were found to have had an SDC at some point in time, but there was insufficient information available to confirm if these SDCs remained active. For reporting purposes, these 25 universities were designated as institutions with SDCs, and the remaining 17 universities designated as without SDCs. Results are summarised in Appendix A.

SDCs across Australia tend to be engaged in similar pursuits. The most common activities undertaken by the SDCs examined were advocacy, running collective and community events, raising awareness of disability on campus, representing students with disability to university leaders and committees, providing digital and physical spaces for students with disability to connect, and participating in campus-wide events such as orientation week. Limited information was available relating to the specifics of the leadership and structure of SDCs. The available information confirmed that they were generally structured as an autonomous group or department within the student association, or as a student club affiliated either with the student association or the university administrative area responsible for maintaining student clubs. SDC membership was typically limited to students who identified as a person with disability; in some cases, it extended to those who identified as a caregiver to a person with disability.

University characteristics

In terms of institutional groupings, all eight Go8 universities had an SDC, as did the majority of the six ATN (83.3%) and seven IRU institutions (71.4%). Only one of the seven RUN universities had an SDC, and only six of the 14 universities not aligned with one of these groupings had an SDC (see Table 2 for numbers and percentages). The majority of universities which had independently governed student representative mechanisms had an SDC (80%), compared to only 12.5% of institutions with a university-administrated student representative mechanism (the governance arrangements for four universities were unclear; see Table 2). Universities which were NUS members were more likely to have an SDC (90%) than non-NUS member universities (31.8%; see Table 2 for more detailed information).

Table 2

Number and Proportion of Universities with an SDC by Institutional Grouping, Governance Type, and NUS Membership

	No. in group	No. with SDC	% with SDC
Institutional Grouping			
ATN	6	5	83.3
Go8	8	8	100.0
IRU	7	5	71.4
RUN	7	1	14.3
Not aligned	14	6	42.9
Governance Arrangement			
Independent	30	24	80.0
University-administered	8	1	12.5
Unknown or unclear	4	0	0
NUS Membership			
Yes	20	18	90.0
No	22	7	31.8
Overall	42	25	

Students with disability

The proportion of enrolled domestic undergraduate students with disability across all institutions ranged from 2.09% to 20.4%, with a mean of 13.3%. The mean percentage of domestic undergraduate students with disability enrolled at universities with SDCs was 12.35% and 11.35% at universities without SDCs. See Appendix A for more detail.

Statistical tests and significance

Chi-square tests of independence revealed three statistically significant relationships. First, institutional groupings were significantly associated with the presence of SDCs ($\chi^2 = 14.82$, $df = 4$, $p = .005$), with a strong effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.59$). Subsequent pairwise comparisons showed that Go8 universities had significantly higher rates of SDCs compared to RUN institutions ($p = .001$) and non-aligned universities ($p = .018$). ATN universities were also significantly more likely to have an SDC than RUN institutions ($p = .029$). The remaining pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant, and after applying Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, only the difference between Go8 and RUN universities remained significant. Second, universities with independently governed student associations were significantly more likely to have SDCs than were universities with university-administrated student associations ($\chi^2 = 12.79$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with a strong effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.58$). The four universities for whom governance was unclear were excluded from this calculation. Third, the data showed a statistically significant association between NUS membership and the presence of SDCs ($\chi^2 = 14.72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), with a strong effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.59$). Finally, while universities with SDCs had a slightly higher percentage of students with disability on average compared to those without SDCs, a Mann-Whitney U test indicated no significant difference between the proportion of students with disability at universities with and without an SDC ($U = 185.00$, $p = .71$).

Discussion

A basis for future research

This study has uncovered the vibrant inner workings of SDCs to non-members of these largely closed groups in a scholarly setting for the first time. By drawing on the lived experience of SDC

participation of the lead author (RG), the research team was able to produce a unified and coherent summary of disparate, publicly available information on SDCs. The lack of evidence or discussion relating to SDCs in Australian higher education literature is demonstrative of the presently elusive nature of these groups. As previously established, research has tended to focus on student supports and services which are administered by university staff, rather than those which have been conceptualised, designed, and delivered independently by students. This initial work opens a range of opportunities for further research around the potential of SDCs. Opportunities for future research emerging from this work are addressed in the Recommendations section.

Understanding the conditions which foster vibrant and organic student collectivism

What this study has revealed about the nature of SDCs in Australian universities has implications for our understanding of the conditions and cultures which give rise to vibrant and engaged student collectivism through student representation and advocacy. Specifically, analysis of the characteristics possessed by universities and their student bodies provides insight into the conditions from which SDCs commonly emerge. The independence of a student representative mechanism, as well as NUS membership status can be used as proxy measures of strong cultures of unionism and advocacy at institutions. Thus, these findings suggest that groups such as SDCs more commonly emerge from university communities with a stronger culture of independent student advocacy and unionism. This finding highlights the importance of supporting and enabling independent student advocacy and activism on campus in order to see vibrant, student-led communities such as SDCs occurring and thriving. It also indicates a need for further research into governance structures for student representative mechanisms generally; this study indicates that these arrangements might influence student culture more broadly than we currently understand. This may have implications for student voice and representative mechanism design, as these results suggest restricting student advocacy through staff-administrated and institutionally-constrained arrangements, rather than enabling independent student governance, may stifle student culture and collectivism.

Institutions in the RUN grouping and those who are not aligned with a grouping are less likely to see SDCs present on their campuses. The majority of members of these groupings, or those unaligned, are regional, younger, more teaching-focused universities who may have a shorter history or weaker culture of student unionism when compared to other groupings, including Go8 or ATN universities. The RUN and unaligned groupings also feature several regional universities; prior research has established that regional universities may struggle to support the levels of student engagement which may be required to enable the operation of SDCs (Nelson, 2017). This puts students attending these institutions at risk of missing out on the potential benefits of SDCs and the services they provide. Enjoyed by Go8 and ATN students, these include the known benefits from staff–student partnerships in university leadership and decision-making (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019; Ollis & Gravett, 2020). This may be amplifying the differences in student experiences across institutional groupings.

The proportion of domestic undergraduate students with disability at each institution does not appear to be related to the emergence of an SDC. This is surprising, as one might expect that higher proportions of students with disability would be more likely to give rise to an SDC. This finding should be interpreted cautiously, however, due to the limitations of disability data collection at Australian universities (Cadby, 2025; Cadby et al., 2024). There are also many possible relationships between disability numbers and SDC presence which make this a difficult dimension to analyse. For example, it is possible that the lack of an SDC on any given campus is reflective of an absence of a welcoming culture for students with disability, which might also result in lower numbers of students declaring their disability to the university.

Universities and policy makers should take note of these findings and consider how they can more effectively facilitate organic, independent student collectivism and representative mechanisms to ensure that the conditions for student leadership and effective staff–student partnerships in university leadership are enabled. This may have implications for student experience through influence on the presence or absence of the peer support, resources, and advocacy services offered by groups such as SDCs. This is crucial in light of present discussions relating to boosting higher education participation from traditionally marginalised student cohorts (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024b). These authors argue that increased participation should be considered alongside the material improvement of the experiences of these students.

Limitations

Information relating to the existence and nature of SDCs across Australia's 42 universities was gathered through publicly available channels. As such, these results are limited by the extent to which reliable and up-to-date information is published and maintained by SDCs in public-facing forums. To improve the reliability of these findings, it would be beneficial to contact student and staff stakeholders at each university to confirm the existence of an SDC within their institution. Further, the specifics of their leadership and governance structures, funding arrangements, membership size, and any other factors deemed important to studying these groups could be verified. Additionally, the TCSI protocol does not include postgraduate or international students in disability data collection in the reference data used for analysis. Improvement to this protocol is crucial to properly understanding the diversity of student populations across Australia.

Recommendations

Future study should build on this exploratory work which has, for the first time in the Australian context, defined SDCs as an object of study. Further research should explore the experiences of students with disability who partake in SDCs and their activities. This may yield useful insight into how student-led approaches to support and peer connection can enhance the experiences of disabled students at Australian universities. This insight could also enhance staff-led offerings by incorporating lessons from the success of student-led initiatives. In particular, further research could examine if SDCs positively influence the experiences of students with disability, to support broader equity objectives. Exploration of other kinds of student collectives, such as queer collectives and collectives for students of colour, may also yield insight into the question of student support. In addition, the present literature gap on SDCs should be explored through an investigation of SDC awareness level among student support staff and academic staff. Finally, closer attention should be paid to the kind of institutional attributes which foster the development of such student collectives. The indication of a link between the strength of student unionism and collectivism within a given institution and the emergence of SDCs warrants further study, as does the exploration of Australian student representative governance in general.

Conclusion

This study has centralised and documented the prevalence, nature, and function of SDCs in Australian universities, and considered some institutional attributes which may be related to the tendency for these groups to emerge. With SDCs present at just over half of Australian universities, investigation of their purpose, functioning, and activities represents a thus-far untapped opportunity to learn from students' innovative and tailored approaches to supporting their communities. This work lays the foundation for further exploration of the vibrant, organic, and innovative

communities known as SDCs, which, until now, were elusive and unrecognised in scholarly discussion.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

Results Summary of Disability Collectives Desktop Research

University	Institutional Grouping	Student Association (Governance Structure)	NUS?	Disability Collective	% Students with disability
Australian Catholic University	Not aligned	ACU National Student Association (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	9.21
Australian National University	Go8	ANUSA (Independent)	Yes	ANU Disability Students Association (ANU DSA)	18.37
Avondale University	Not aligned	Multiple (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	14.68
Bond University	Not aligned	BUSA (Independent)	No	Not found.	6.84
Charles Darwin University	Not aligned	CDU Students' Council (Independent)	No	Not found.	14.62
Charles Sturt University	RUN	Student Representative Committees (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	10.06
CQ University	RUN	Student Representative Council (Unclear)	No	Not found.	8.39
Curtin University	ATN	Curtin Student Guild (Independent)	Yes	Curtin Student Guild Accessibility Collective	11.24
Deakin University	ATN	DUSA (Independent)	Yes	Deakin Disability Neurodivergency Association & Deakin Geelong Disability Neurodivergency Association	16.41
Edith Cowan University	Not aligned	ECU Guild (Independent)	Yes	Disability Collective (Equity Club) (inactive?)	9.72
Federation University of Australia	RUN	Student Senate (Unclear)	No	Not found.	15.68
Flinders University	IRU	FUSA (Independent)	Yes	FUSA Disabilities Collective	8.29
Griffith University	IRU	Griffith Student Representative Council (Independent)	No	Griffith Accessibility and Disability	12.27

				Support Student Collective	
James Cook University	IRU	JCU Student Association (Independent)	No	Not found.	8.70
Latrobe University	IRU	La Trobe Student Association (University-administrated)	Yes	LTSU Disabilities Department	13.98
Macquarie University	Not aligned	Student Representative Council (Unclear)	No	Not found.	10.64
Monash University	Go8	Monash Students Association (Independent)	Yes	MSA Disability and Carer's Department	10.03
Murdoch University	IRU	Murdoch Guild (Independent)	No	Accessibility Collective (inactive?)	19.35
Queensland University of Technology	Not aligned	QUT Guild (Independent)	Yes	QUT Disability Collective	8.10
RMIT University	ATN	RMIT University Student Union (Independent)	Yes	Disability and Carer's Department	10.83
Southern Cross University	RUN	Multiple (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	10.16
Swinburne University of Technology	Not aligned	Swinburne Student Union (Independent)	Yes	SSU Accessibility Collective (inactive?)	7.89
Torrens University Australia	Not aligned	Student Representative Council (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	2.09
University of Adelaide	Go8	YouX (Independent)	Yes	Disability, Illness and Divergence Association	15.08
University of Canberra	IRU	Student Representative Council (University-administrated)	No	Not found.	8.73
University of Divinity	Not aligned	Not found.	No	Not found.	11.33
University of Melbourne	Go8	UMSU (Independent)	Yes	Disabilities Department	11.01
University of New England	RUN	UNE Student Council (University controlled)	No	Not found.	20.46
University of New South Wales	Go8	ARC (Independent)	Yes	SRC Students with Disabilities Collective	10.36
University of Newcastle	ATN	UNSA (Independent)	No	UNSA Accessibility Guild	19.66
University of Notre Dame	Not aligned	NDSA (Independent)	No	Welfare Collective (inactive?)	11.20

University of Queensland	Go8	UQU (Independent)	No	UQU Disability Collective	15.81
University of South Australia	ATN	USASA (Independent)	Yes	Not found.	19.77
University of Southern Queensland	RUN	UniSQ Student Guild (Independent)	No	Not found.	11.60
University of Sydney	Go8	USU (Independent) + SRC	Yes	Disabilities Collective and Caregivers Network	12.97
University of Tasmania	Not aligned	TUSA (Independent)	No	Disability Collective Society of Students Identifying with Disability at UTAS	9.99
University of Technology Sydney	ATN	UTSSA (Independent)	Yes	Disability Collective	9.64
University of the Sunshine Coast	RUN	USC Student Guild and other multiple groups (Independent)	No	USC Disability and Inclusion Student Group	16.69
University of Western Australia	Go8	UWA Student Guild (Independent)	Yes	UWA Access Department	16.16
University of Wollongong	Not aligned	WUSA (Independent) and other groups	Yes	Not found.	9.96
Victoria University	Not aligned	VUSU (Independent)	Yes	Access (inactive?)	8.50
Western Sydney University	IRU	Western SRC (Independent)	Yes	Disability Collective	5.15