Visible Students, Invisible Barriers: Disability Inclusion in Tertiary Education

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The last decade has seen a marked increase in the proportion of students with disability in Australian and New Zealand tertiary education. Notwithstanding substantial differences across each tertiary system, there are strong parallels between observed participation rates for students with disability. Between 2016 and 2025, the participation rate for students with disability across both systems nearly doubled from 6% to over 12% (Department of Education, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2026). Yet, rising participation coincides with poor outcomes across several indicators. Australian data, for example, highlight that students with disability are the least likely of all equity groups to agree that they are free from discrimination, harm and hatred (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES], 2025).

While the Australian Universities Accord afforded limited aspiration for students with disability (Department of Education, 2024), more recent developments have created positive shifts through increased funding, governance and accountability. In both Australia and New Zealand, an optional discretionary focus on disability has been replaced with mandated requirements. At this critical inflection point, these developments create the opportunity for structural change.

Across tertiary education, the barriers encountered by students with disability persist and remain underexamined. The next phase of disability inclusion requires an intentional and sustainable institutional approach. It must move beyond opening the door to education and making adjustments one student at a time, towards proactively removing barriers unrelated to learning and creating the conditions that enable all students to succeed. Accessibility and inclusive design should be developed as institutional capabilities and measures of institutional and service quality.

Responsibility for accessibility therefore belongs within learning support, libraries, careers and employability, admissions, digital services, facilities, marketing teams, teaching staff and across the broader student experience. This opinion piece situates current reforms within 50 years of the social model of disability, considers the opportunities and risks ahead, and proposes priorities for student services and institutions as disability inclusion strategies are developed.

A changing policy environment

This year marks two important milestones in the global history of disability. The social model of disability was formally published 50 years ago (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation & Disability Alliance, 1976) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) was first ratified by the United Nations 20 years ago. These seminal developments shifted understanding of disability from a problem located in the individual towards the attitudinal and environmental barriers that restrict participation, and affirmed the rights of people with disability to participate fully and equally in society.

Yet, the principles of the social model and the commitments embedded in the Convention have not been fully or consistently translated into tertiary education. The Convention sets out high-level objectives for full participation across a range of domains, including education. However, when it comes to the pinnacle of higher education achievement, tertiary education, the Convention softens its expectations. Signatories will ensure that reasonable adjustments are provided. This focus on adjustments rather than on inclusive attitudinal or learning environments has permeated Australian and New Zealand tertiary education policy and contributes to core challenges confronting the tertiary education systems on both sides of the Tasman.

The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) set an aspirational vision for a transformed tertiary education sector, yet rendered a cohort of students with disability politically invisible. Participation targets for equity groups were recommended, but for students with disability, it recommended only maintaining current participation and excluded people with "significant disability" from its calculation. In a joint response, disability peak bodies and sector networks described this omission as ableist and reproducing low expectations of people with disability (Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability [ATEND] et al., 2024). They called for the same ambition shown to other equity groups, including aspirational targets, accountability for outcomes and a genuine voice of people with disability in shaping the reforms that followed.

More recent reforms have created a foundation for change. Australia's Disability Support Program provides supplemental Commonwealth Government funding to eligible universities to support students with disability to access, participate and succeed in higher education. Program funding has increased, and amended guidelines have broadened the eligible activities and strengthened institutional oversight. Eligible activities now extend beyond individual student supports to include institution-wide approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), dedicated disability support staffing, and the purchase of institutional information and communications technology (ICT) licenses.

Universities must also establish governance arrangements that give people with disability a meaningful role in institutional decision-making and oversight. This can be achieved through a disability inclusion committee comprising a majority of people with disability or a Disability Outcomes Plan endorsed by people with disability and staff who provide disability services. These arrangements must provide transparent oversight of disability education and workforce inclusion strategies and expenditure under the Disability Support Program, and include formal engagement with the university governing body. Similar requirements are in place in New Zealand, where providers in receipt of $5 million or more in funding from the Tertiary Education Commission are required to have a Disability Action Plan in place and report on progress annually.

The changes to the Disability Support Program sit alongside the introduction of Needs-based Funding, from which students with disability are excluded. The Disability Support Program operates at a lower funding level per individual student (Austin et al., 2026), and with higher levels of regulation and conditions on the ways funds can be used.

The reforms represent important progress, particularly in relation to lived experience leadership. Institutional capacity to sustain an inclusion model built on case-by-case adjustments, however, is reaching breaking point. New paradigms of inclusion are required, potentially straddling traditional emphasis on adjustments, with whole-of-institution approaches to ensure learning, digital and social environments, pedagogy and assessment, student support and student administration, technology and systems are inclusive by design.

What growth in participation does and does not tell us

The reforms arrive as participation has grown remarkably consistently across two different systems. In 2016, the proportion of students with disability in New Zealand tertiary education was 6.90% (Ministry of Education, 2026), compared with 6.04% among domestic students in Australian higher education (Department of Education, 2026). By 2025, these proportions had risen to 12.35% and 13.21%, respectively. Greater understanding and acceptance of disability, legislative and policy reform, improvements in support across schooling, definitional changes and increased incidence of mental health concerns have all contributed to this growth (Cadby et al., 2024).

These data reflect only students who have shared that they have disability, not every student who experiences disability-related barriers or who accesses disability services. Higher education has systematically misrepresented disability for decades (Pitman et al., 2023). As such, the true proportion of students with disability is likely to be higher.

The composition of students with disability in higher education has also shifted. Acknowledging differing categorisation and reporting criteria, the "physical" impairments that gave rise to the social model of disability are increasingly a minority. Physical disability constitutes 10% of New Zealand university students with disability (Tertiary Education Commission, 2025) and 6% of Australian students with disability (ACSES Data Program, 2025). Sensory categories for hearing and vision are at 3% to 4% across both systems. The most common categories of disability across both countries constitute mental health conditions, neurological conditions (including autism and ADHD) and medical conditions.

While the sector records disability types, students *experience* the tertiary education system through their interactions with course requirements and learning, placement and student service environments. Students within the same disability type may experience different effects on participation, encounter different barriers and require different adjustments. Two fifths of students with disability in Australia have multiple disability types (ACSES Data Program, 2025). A focus on disability category alone risks treating students with disability as a homogenous group and provides institutions with limited insight on the types of support most likely to enable success (Pitman et al., 2023).

Across Australia and New Zealand, students with disability consistently describe a coalescence of environmental and attitudinal barriers creating experiences of exclusion in tertiary education (Punch et al., 2026; Smith, 2024). The New Zealand Let's Get Accessible research, for example, found that student events were often inaccessible or that accessibility information was rarely proactively provided, leaving students feeling unsafe attending events that their student fees had often helped fund. These barriers restricted access to opportunities where peer or industry relationships develop, contributing to feelings of isolation and exclusion from the wider student experience (Smith, 2024).

In the current system, individual adjustments are the primary reactive response to barriers. Access to adjustments may be a right under Australian and New Zealand legislation, but the process by which adjustments can be accessed is subject to tremendous variation (McLennan, 2026). Different institutions will adopt differing interpretations of what is "reasonable" across what might be considered identical education needs. This variation may also be evident within single institutions, where students may gain an adjustment within one unit of study, but have a similar request rejected for another unit of study (McLennan, 2026; Smith, 2024).

As the number of students has grown, the systemic effects of inaccessible and high-friction adjustment processes have become more observable. Australia's Student Experience Survey highlights that students with disability are the least likely of all equity groups to feel a sense of belonging; least likely to agree that they are free from discrimination, harm and hatred; and least

satisfied with their educational experience (ACSES, 2025). Moreover, students with disability have lower completion and employment rates than their non-disabled peers (Department of Education & Social Research Centre, 2026). Regulators are paying attention to these statistics and proving to be more inclined to intervene.

In efforts to enhance success, retention and belonging, common questions asked of disability services or data teams are: "How many students with disability are enrolled?" and "What disability types are represented among students at our institution?" While well-intentioned, this framing centres on counting and categorising students, highlighting the deeply embedded medicalisation and legacy associations around disability and providing limited guidance for institutional action. In contrast, the "attitudinal and environmental barriers" that define disability in the Convention remain largely uncounted. Rarely is the question asked, "What barriers are students encountering that we could remove?"

An opportunity for transformation, or compliance

As universities ready for implementation, with drafting or reviewing of strategies, outcomes plans and governance arrangements, there is risk that progress will not be made if action is delivered as a one-off compliance exercise in response to legislative change. Investment may understandably be directed to under-resourced disability services; however, expanding the current model would continue reactive support one student at a time. Arguably more difficult to shift and to measure, but what is required, is a focus on culture and environment.

A Disability Stocktake (Brett et al., 2026) undertaken by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) sought to systematically measure environmental barriers in Australian higher education, providing a tangible starting point for all Australian higher education providers. There are codified standards against which university inclusion could be assessed, including web accessibility standards and access to premises standards. There are, however, no codified standards by which university environments could be assessed for their inclusion on mental health or neurodivergent grounds.

Notwithstanding the bias in what could be assessed as environmental factors, universities reflect the legislative and policy assumptions of the environments within which they were embedded. The Disabilty Stocktake found that every Australian university had a policy of one form or another that mediated the provision of reasonable adjustments. This is a clear and unambiguous requirement that universities are able to satisfy. The challenges of inclusion were more evident as one delved deeper into university environments.

Nearly all Australian universities' internet home pages had an error rate that was below the global education domain average. However, not a single university was able to publish a trilogy of key documents (strategic plan, annual report, and disability action plan) in a format that met document accessibility standards. Whilst not critical to learning, this statistic was positioned as a proxy for the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of documents produced by universities on an annual basis. Students who require access to accessible information are pushed by this logic to requesting accessible information as a reasonable adjustment rather than having this available on demand.

And while every Australian university may have a policy on reasonable adjustments, not a single reasonable adjustment policy commits to evaluating or quality assuring these adjustments. This reflects an immaturity in evaluative capacity across the sector, and a needed focus within disability inclusion strategies.

The absence of accessibility in practice is understood further through the principal quality frameworks for Australian universities. The *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)*, which sets the minimum requirements for every higher education provider in Australia,

has not explicitly named disability or accessibility, or provided clarity on the responsibility of staff (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2026). Recent amendments (July 2026) update the standards to mention disability once in reference to student support services, while references to accessible learning use the dated language of "special needs". In contrast with other recent amendments which explicitly address specific forms of exclusion and harm, disability discrimination is subsumed within "other discriminatory conduct" and compliance with "any other legislative instruments". Predominantly implicit references to accessibility and disability perpetuate an underemphasis on the learning environment, when accessibility and inclusive environments could be positioned as essential dimensions of educational quality. In addition, regulator cyclical assessments of providers' compliance with the higher education standards have not included assessment of disability standards. Even where disability is positioned as a regulatory requirement, compliance has not been monitored (Brett & Harvey, 2022).

Governance requirements in the reforms represent critical progress and also carry their own risk. The new governance pathways prioritise lived experience-led governance and seek to provide people with disability a role in institutional decision-making. The transformative potential lies in the connection between lived experience leadership in guiding priorities and resource allocation, and overseeing progress for institutional accountability. Formal governance arrangements, however, should not be taken to constitute meaningful engagement with people with disability across all aspects of tertiary education. Institutions have a responsibility to embed disability inclusion across their operations, supported by appropriately recognised and remunerated disability and lived experience expertise (Harpur et al., 2025).

The creation of a plan, committee meetings held, and uptake of professional development are all important visible indicators of activity, but are insufficient in understanding the creation of a proactively inclusive and accessible education environment or in understanding the student experience.

Enacting a cultural shift

Government funding streams and reporting frameworks often separate students into discrete equity categories. While useful reference points for strategy and policy, these categories do not adequately reflect student circumstances or how they experience tertiary education. Students with disability have diverse identities, life roles and patterns of study. Their disability identities and experiences are contextually shaped and "fundamentally intertwined with other social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality" (Kimball & Thoma, 2019, p. 682). For institutions and student services, a focus on the whole student and experience is necessary.

Strategic action, supported through funding across government streams, has the potential to build an equity culture and address the institutional practices across student services that create structural barriers (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). There are useful models to guide institutions in systematically establishing equity and inclusion by default across the university (see, for example, ALTITUDE – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education; ALTITUDE Project, 2024).

Institutional change does not occur only through positional authority or top-down decisions. Leadership studies are often fixated on the "leader", underplaying the complexity of social systems represented by education institutions and the important role of knowledge flows within these systems (Lakomski, 2005). Staff at every level of tertiary education can play a role in contributing to improved experiences and outcomes for students with disability. Student services staff are particularly well-placed to advance change as they see how institutional practice creates friction and barriers. Disability should be considered as an opportunity for innovation (Ebersold, 2008), with student services staff at the forefront of identifying and responding to these opportunities.

As disability inclusion education and workforce strategies are developed, we offer priorities for translating opportunity into practice at the institutional and/or service level.

Design equity-capable student services

Across the sector, there is considerable innovation and excellence in how providers are breaking new ground in creating environments that allow students with disability to thrive and succeed. The next step is to make this responsibility mainstream. This requires student services to work in partnership with disability expertise and lived experience for systemic improvements so that adjustments are not the primary mechanism for addressing barriers.

Institutions must examine how their core service models enable or constrain equitable participation and opportunities for success. Equity-capable student services provide a framework for doing so.

Equity-capable student services are those which:

- Recognise diversity as the norm, with multiple ways of engaging, participating and learning;
- Embed accessibility, universal design and equity within their service purpose, design and delivery;
- Apply person-centred and strengths-based approaches that value students' expertise;
- Use student experience and data to identify and address systemic barriers;
- Build sustained staff capability through tailored, evidence-informed professional development; and
- Work collaboratively across institutional boundaries, sharing expertise, resources and responsibility. (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Hansen et al., 2025)

This requires looking beyond whether support exists to examine how students experience the service as a whole, including who can use services without needing to share disability information. Where do processes assume a particular way of communicating or processing information? Which students must undertake additional administrative and emotional labour to receive the same opportunity as others?

An equity-capable model does not remove the need for disability expertise within institutional structures. Equity-capable student services bring students with disability, disability services and expertise together as essential partners in building institutional capability. Such partnership models ensure student services are created with, not for, students with disability, expanding our understanding of whose knowledge is valued and who has influence in student service design and decision-making.

Focus on barriers across the institution (and in your own service)

Understanding the cohorts of students with disability at your university is important, but counting students does not address the entrenched barriers that stand in the way of access and success. The Disability Stocktake demonstrates how institutions can systematically examine their institutional environments through standardised indicators of accessibility (Brett et al., 2026). Combined with institutional information on adjustment requests, complaints and student feedback, it is possible to address recurring barriers across digital, administrative, learning and student service environments.

UDL is a useful starting framework within the learning environment, and can be progressed within a whole-of-university approach through Needs-based Funding (Austin et al., 2026). Extending universal design and accessibility across university services will contribute to a more consistently inclusive experience at every stage of the student journey.

Each service can consider how the principles of universal design apply:

- Do our standard operating procedures include accessibility?
- Who might be excluded by the way this service, process, system or environment is currently designed?
- How are accessible options proactively communicated and made available to all students as standard practice?

Universal design, however, should not be read as a panacea. A focus on systems and barriers can reduce the frequency of negotiating access one student at a time, and reduce the burden on students with disability. But it will not eliminate the need for adjustments and specialist disability expertise.

Measure what changes for students, not activity

The culture of a university contributes to success and retention for students with disability (Couzens et al., 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2017). Accessibility must therefore be included as a core dimension of institutional and educational quality (Aquino & Lalor, 2025), not a compliance requirement or specialist disability initiative. An inaccessible resource, booking system or process does not become less problematic because a student can request an adjustment.

Institutions and student services should ask:

- How is accessibility reviewed and reported alongside other measures of quality?
- What would change if accessibility was a core measure of service quality?

While the Disability Stocktake (Brett et al., 2026) provides a framework for measuring some aspects of the learning environment, further measures of social and attitudinal environments are needed to more fully understand if disadvantage is being reduced.

Ultimately, the success of both institutional and sector efforts should be measured by the extent to which students with disability advise of meaningful improvements in their experiences of tertiary education, their sense of belonging and inclusion, and their ability to thrive. Measures of progress and success should be developed and evaluated by and with students with disability.

Turning reform into lasting change

A half century of the social model and two decades of the Convention encourage deep reflection on the journey taken to arrive at this point, and critical thought about how we can shape our tertiary education systems to be more inclusive of people with disability well into the future. Although disability is understood as produced through the interaction between people and environments, the tertiary education system consistently captures only part of the picture.

Increased funding and stronger, lived experience-led governance come at a critical time. Whether these reforms will change outcomes remains to be seen. What we do know is that removing barriers at their source benefits every student and lasting change requires a whole-of-institution approach, where accessibility is embedded across teaching, services, systems and culture as a core dimension of institutional and educational quality.

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Please cite this paper as:

Navin, F., McLennan, D., & Brett, M. (2026). Visible students, invisible barriers: Disability inclusion in tertiary education. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, *34*(3), 290–299. https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2026-3-09



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