



Media Press Release

Joint Position Statement & Research Report on Disability & Higher Education

RELEASE DATE: Nov 14, 2022

Report Title: [‘Disability & Higher Education in Australia’](#)



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STUDENTS'
ASSOCIATION

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For embargoed release

Monday 14th November 2022

Media release: Peak student bodies calls for systemic reforms in disability and higher education in Australia following chronic lack of action

TW: SASH, Ableism

Media release:

The National Union of Students (**‘NUS’**), Australian Law Students’ Association (**‘ALSA’**) and the Australian Medical Students’ Association (**‘AMSA’**) have joined forces to demand the higher education sector to take strong measures to address discrimination experienced by people with disability in Australia.

The joint position statement and research report from ALSA, AMSA, & NUS — titled *‘Disability & Higher Education in Australia’* — leverages case studies, stakeholder consultations, and interdisciplinary research to scrutinise and investigate the extent of structural ableism within Australia’s higher education sector.

Endorsed by more than thirty bodies including People with Disability Australia (**‘PWDA’**), National Ethnic Disability Alliance (**‘NEDA’**), Women With Disabilities Australia (**‘WWDA’**), First Peoples Disability Network (**‘FPDN’**), Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (**‘AFDO’**), and the Grace Tame Foundation, this landmark report marks the first time in many years that the voice of disabled staff & students have been meaningfully heard within higher education.

The report’s findings illuminate the urgency of the need for systemic reform: discrimination facing disabled staff and students are noted to be systemic, with only 17 per cent of disabled Australians attaining a Bachelor’s degree compared with 35 per cent of non-disabled Australians.

Australia’s anti-discrimination laws are broken. Following a Federal Court case known as [Sklavos](#), it has been noted that disability discrimination claims are “near on impossible to prove under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) — or *‘DDA’*.”

Disabled staff & students are experiencing a broken system to access reasonable adjustments and reasonable accommodations, with universities experiencing little to no consequences with non-compliance with legislation.



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Rescheduling of classes on short notice are barring disabled students and staff from accessing their education. Inaccessible classrooms and inconsistent policies on assistance animals — as well as heightened rates of sexual assault and harassment ('SASH'), harassment and vilification against disabled people on campuses — are also reported.

“The National Student Safety Survey showed Disabled students were more than twice as likely to experience SASH on campus, consistent with the numbers seen through the Disability Royal Commission,” said **NUS Disabilities Officer** Georgie McDaid. “This is a duty of care problem, and it’s simply not good enough.”

Among calls to action in the report is a request that the Albanese Government should raise the level of financial support offered by AUSTUDY, ABSTUDY and the Disability Support Pension above the Henderson Poverty Line, as well as undertaking urgent reform of Australia’s anti-discrimination laws — especially the *DDA*.

The research report is also calling upon government bodies — such as the Australian Human Rights Commission ('**AHRC**') — to conduct investigations into structural ableism and SASH on university campuses experienced by disabled students.

Universities must address inaccessible campus infrastructure, lack of understanding of systemic ableism, and offer options for both online (WFH) and in-person learning in recognition of the disadvantages facing disabled staff and students.

“Our higher education system is physically locking out students barring them from opportunities,” said **NUS President** Georgie Beatty.

Action is long overdue and the higher education sector must now listen, reflect and take action to ensure meaningful access to education and opportunity.

“The current legislation is negatively impacting student wellbeing,” said **ALSA President** Annabel Biscotto.

“Enough is enough. It is time that students with disabilities feel as comfortable and accommodated within the classroom as their neurotypical peers,” said **ALSA Vice President (External)** Theo Totsis. “Denying us such liberties causes us to spiral and suffocate. Even I, being in my 6th year and diagnosed with autism and ADHD 18 years ago, have still not been made to feel otherwise.”

You can read the joint research report ('*Disability & Higher Education in Australia*') and the recommended amendments as a [PDF](#).



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ENDORSEMENTS

The research report is endorsed by the following organisations and individuals, who recognise the systemic neglect experienced by disabled students and disabled academics — from universities and regulatory bodies such as TEQSA and ASQA — and therefore seek urgent reform to not only the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) ('DDA') but also the higher education sector at large.

ENDORSERS

- ❖ National Union of Students ('**NUS**')
- ❖ Australian Law Students' Association ('**ALSA**')
- ❖ Australian Medical Students' Association ('**AMSA**')
- ❖ Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association ('**SUPRA**')
- ❖ University of Sydney Students' Representative Council ('**USYD SRC**')
- ❖ Sydney University Law Society ('**SULS**')
- ❖ Sydney University Medical Society ('**SUMS**')
- ❖ Sydney Arts Students' Society ('**SASS**')
- ❖ Children and Young People with Disability Australia ('**CYDA**')
- ❖ National Ethnic Disability Alliance ('**NEDA**')
- ❖ Women With Disabilities Australia ('**WWDA**')
- ❖ First Peoples Disability Network ('**FPDN**')
- ❖ People With Disability Australia ('**PWDA**')
- ❖ Disabled People's Organisations Australia ('**DPOA**')
- ❖ Australian Federation of Disability Organisations ('**AFDO**')
- ❖ Centre for Disability Research and Policy at the University of Sydney ('**CDRP**')
- ❖ Centre for Law and Social Justice at the University of Newcastle ('**CLSJ**')
- ❖ All Means All: Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education ('**All Means All**')
- ❖ Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education ('**ACIE**')
- ❖ Family Advocacy (NSW)
- ❖ Imagine More (ACT)



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- ❖ Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby ('**TDERL**')
- ❖ Community Resource Unit Ltd. ('**CRU**')
- ❖ JFA Purple Orange
- ❖ The HIV/AIDS Legal Centre ('**HALC**')
- ❖ People With Disability Western Australia ('**PWDWA**')
- ❖ ANU Disability Students' Association ('**DSA**')
- ❖ Family Advocacy (NSW)
- ❖ Imagine More (ACT)
- ❖ The Antipoverty Centre
- ❖ The Grace Tame Foundation
- ❖ Grace Tame
- ❖ Dr Dinesh Palipana
- ❖ Dane Luo
- ❖ Dr Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes
- ❖ Dr Katherine Hepworth
- ❖ Rebecca Galdies
- ❖ Nicole Wedgewood
- ❖ Kylie Lunghusen
- ❖ Akii Ngo