



LivedX Series: What Young People Said Tertiary Education and Learning

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cyda.org.au



Children and Young People
with Disability Australia



Authorised by

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Language

The LivedX working group chose to use a mix of person-first and identity-first language (“person with disability” and “disabled person” respectively) throughout this paper series to reflect author preference and the diversity of preference in the disability community.

Acknowledgements

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.

We would also like to acknowledge the important contributions of our community to our work. This platform draws on the insights and lived expertise of young people who participated in our 2021 LivedX focus group series.

This activity received grant funding from the Australian Government.

Overview

Young people with disability are not accessing education, including university and Vocational Education and Training (VET), on an equal basis to their peers without disability¹. To understand the experiences and perspectives of young people with disability in tertiary education, CYDA hosted two consultations and a one-on-one interview, with a total of 17 participants in September and October 2021. These consultations were co-designed by an internal working group of young disabled people.

Discussions with participants, spanning pre-enrolment activities and course selection through to their time in their course, identified significant barriers to engaging in tertiary education. Young people identified issues such as reduced study and course options, lack of meaningful supports, poor attitudes and misconceptions from professional and academic staff, and overall inaccessibility and inflexibility in the tertiary environment as key limitations to their participation.

Participants also shared ideas and solutions to improve tertiary education access for their cohort. These included improved accountability systems for education providers, additional education and training for staff and peers, universal design approaches to learning and education, and increased holistic supports for young disabled people.

¹ AIHW. (2022). *People with disability in Australia*. Available at: [Engagement in Education \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/engagement-in-education)

Recommendations

1. Tertiary institutions must provide adequate holistic supports for students with disability

This includes:

- Providing individualised and consistent academic and social supports, such as peer mentoring. These supports should create space and support all aspects of students' identities, including disability, gender, sexuality, and culture
- Employing more disabled people, particularly in disability services
- Providing career counselling and supports that understand disability, the systemic barriers in the workforce for employees with disability, and knowledge of services and supports available that support inclusive employment.

2. Tertiary institutions must provide adequate education about disability to staff and students

This includes:

- Equipping staff with knowledge about disability, accessibility, universal design, discrimination, and legal obligations
- Developing compulsory, introductory units for all students on basic disability knowledge and awareness to foster an inclusive education culture.

3. Tertiary institutions must ensure courses are accessible

This includes:

- Taking a universal design approach to teaching to support diverse learning needs and strengths across the student cohort
- Retaining online learning to provide students flexibility in their learning.

4. Tertiary institutions must protect the education rights of students with disability

- Make sure supports are followed through and there is ongoing connection between disability services and educators, so students do not have to continuously advocate for their needs across units and classes. This could be achieved by adopting a case manager approach
- Ensure accessible complaints procedures so students with disability feel safe and confident to report incidents of disability discrimination.

5. The Australian Government must improve pathways and accessibility to tertiary education and learning, in line with Education and Learning Policy Priority 3² of the *Australian Disability Strategy*³

- Ensure tertiary institutions are adequately funded to provide for psychology and disability support services to meet student need
- Ensure there are mechanisms to hold tertiary institutions and educators to account when not meeting the rights of students with disability under the *Disability Standards for Education* and the *Disability Discrimination Act*
- Make sure transition from school to tertiary is smooth and supports can be carried across without administrative burden on the student
- Take a stronger role in convening a nationally consistent approach to supporting students in the VET sector.

² Improve pathways and accessibility to further education and training for people with disability

³ Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). Available at: [Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 \(disabilitygateway.gov.au\)](https://disabilitygateway.gov.au)

About Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has an extensive national membership of more than 5,000 young people with disability, families, and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

Our vision is that children and young people with disability are valued and living empowered lives with equality of opportunity; and our purpose is to ensure governments, communities, and families are empowering children and young people with disability to fully exercise their rights and aspirations.

CYDA's Youth Council is a group of 12 young disabled people that engage in CYDA's projects and provide lived expertise. The primary focus of the council this term has been on its two working groups: LivedX and NDIS In Control My/Our Way. Additionally, the members have undertaken professional development in media and governance.

Background to the LivedX consultations

The LivedX consultations were designed to capture the Lived-Experience and Lived-Expertise of young people with disability on topics and issues they value and deemed important. The series brought together young people from around Australia to share their insights, experiences and ideas for a future that embraces young people with disability and enables them to thrive.

The project is a component of CYDA's Our Voices Our Visions: Youth Advocacy project and is funded by the Youth Advocacy Support Grant from the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

There were seven sessions held over the course of seven months in 2021 covering:

- Inclusion
- Decision making
- Employment
- Tertiary education: university
- Tertiary education: TAFE and Vocational Education and Training
- LGBTQIA+⁴ people with disability: community
- LGBTQIA+ people with disability: healthcare

⁴ LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Aromantic/Asexual, with the '+' being an umbrella for all other gender, sexual, and romantic minorities. Detailed definitions available at: [Your guide to words and definitions in the LGBTQIA+ community \(minus18.org.au\)](https://www.minus18.org.au)

A total of 63 participants attended across the sessions. There was representation from many different disabilities, age (15-29) and all states and territories except Northern Territory. Participants included LGBTQIA+ people, people of colour, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, people who speak a language other than English at home, and people who are living in regional, rural, or remote areas.

These consultations have been synthesised into a series of five papers:

- **Tertiary Education and Learning**
- Financial Security and Employment
- Healthcare Settings for LGBTQIA+ Youth with Disability
- Community Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Youth with Disability
- Inclusion and Decision Making

LivedX has been designed by and for young disabled people. Co-design with young people was integral to this project and consequently LivedX was steered by a working group of the Youth Council.

This policy paper series was written by members of the working group⁵, who also participated in the consultation design, topic selection and facilitation, and conducted the data analysis. The working group was supported by Policy and Research team staff, however as a principle, the decisions were made by the young people involved.

Background on tertiary education and learning for young people with disability

Young people with disability are not accessing tertiary education, including university and Vocational Education and Training (VET), on an equal basis to their peers without disability⁶. While it is encouraging to see that the enrolment rates of students with disability as a whole in tertiary education have increased⁷, the group remains grossly underrepresented when compared with the proportion of people with disability in the general population (Figure 1).⁸

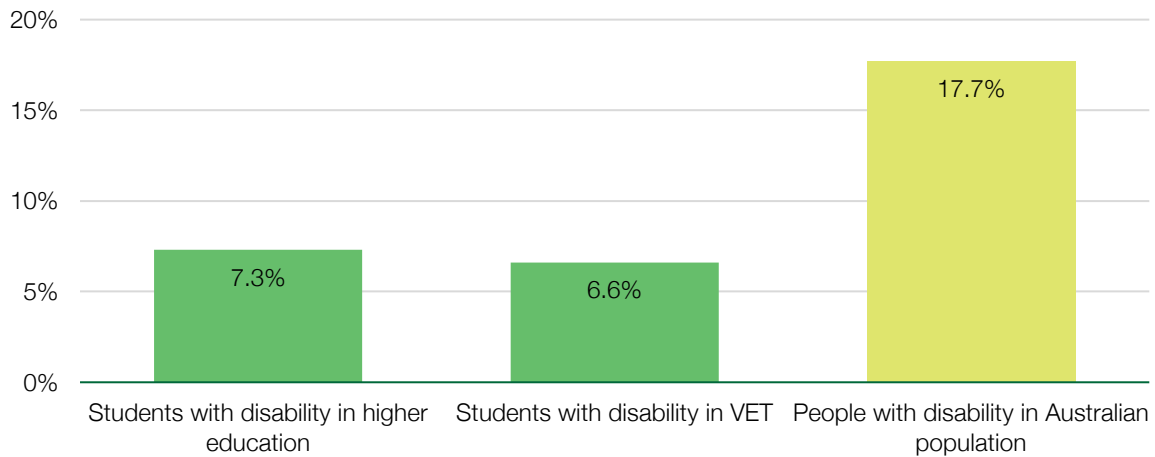
⁵ With the exception of the *Inclusion and Decision Making* paper, which was written by Policy and Research team staff, however, it was shaped and approved by working group members

⁶ See footnote 1

⁷ Koshy, P. (2020). *Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2014–2019*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Perth: Curtin University. Available at: [NCSEHE Briefing Note \(ncsehe.edu.au\)](https://ncsehe.edu.au); Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. (2020). *Higher Education Statistics & VET Statistics*. Available at: [Understanding disability \(adcet.edu.au\)](https://adcet.edu.au)

⁸ *ibid*; ABS. (2018). *Disability, Ageing, and Carers Australia*. Available at: [Summary of findings \(abs.gov.au\)](https://abs.gov.au); Adapted from Ford, E., & Swayn, D. (2021). National Disability Coordination Officer Program: DRAFT tertiary education policy advocacy paper

Figure 1: Proportion of people with disability in tertiary education settings and the proportion of people with disability in the general population



A major barrier preventing students with disability from participating in tertiary education is the inadequate funding and effort allocated to providing educational supports and reasonable adjustments. Despite the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the accompanying *Disability Standards for Education 2005* requiring providers to take reasonable steps to enable students with disability to participate in education on an equal basis as their peers without disability, many students' rights are not being upheld. As this paper will go on to demonstrate, young people tell us that the system places an onus on students to understand their rights, fund the cost of required assessments for supports, self-advocate for supports, and challenge their institution when being treated unfairly.

In addition to this, students with disability who do access tertiary education aren't experiencing improved employment outcomes on an equal basis to their peers without disability. VET graduates with disability were found to be 1.5 times more likely to report no improved employment status after training, and twice as likely to not be employed after training, than those without disability.⁹ Graduates with disability from undergraduate courses were found to be 1.5 times more likely to not be employed, and graduates with disability from postgraduate courses were almost twice as likely to not be employed, than graduates without disability.¹⁰

⁹ VET graduates with disability less likely (37%) to report improved employment status after training than those without disability (58%) and less likely (45%) to be employed after training than those without disability (71%); AIHW. (2020). *People with disability in Australia*. Available at: [Educational attainment \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/education/educational-attainment)

¹⁰ Graduates from: undergraduate courses who reported they had disability (79%) were less likely than those without disability (86%) to be employed, postgraduate coursework courses who reported disability (85%) were less likely than those without disability (92%) to be employed; *ibid*

Young people with disability’s perspective on tertiary education and learning

CYDA has reviewed, analysed, and collated the participants’ ideas into five key themes that emerged throughout the consultations.

Key theme	Theme description
Identity	How young people with disability define themselves
Enablers	The factors that enable or support young people with disability to live the lives they would like to live
Barriers	The factors that inhibit or prevent young people with disability to live the lives they would like to live
Solutions	How organisations, government, and the community can contribute to the greater social movement young people with disability want to see in the world
Social Movement	How organisations, government, and the community can contribute to the greater social movement young people with disability want to see in the world

What young people said

Identity

Although participants were not asked questions specifically related to identity, the topic was raised in relation to other discussions, with participants emphasising the importance of intersectional approaches in tertiary institutions.

“I think basically the gist of this is being better prepared or just more aware of intersectionality in access. At my university we have a program for Indigenous students [...] You go into this foundation course and you're in the cohort of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which is great [...] But we would have our classes on the third floor of this old building, where there was no elevators, no accessibility [...] and especially in Indigenous demographics where the prevalence of physical disability is a lot higher [...]. It was pretty bad, honestly.”

This was echoed by another participant, who highlighted the positive impact made by an intersectional space they had access to at university:

"I think my university has been very good about having spaces for people with intersectional identities with disability. For example, I often attend a queer disabilities collective [...]. I think these spaces are really good because there is a real understanding. You could be a lot more open about your experiences in your life in those kind of areas. It's great."

Enablers

When recalling what had been a positive and enabling experience during their tertiary learning, many young people spoke of supportive, consistent, and person-centred approaches to both teaching and providing accommodations.

"I like how in my uni there's a specific person assigned to my case rather than switching around every time I need help."

"Whenever lecturers make an effort to connect with me individually."

"I've had some staff who have actually checked in when they noticed me struggling and asked what they could do."

One participant explained how a practical assessment supervisor created a safe environment for them to talk about their wheelchair:

"The actual supervisor that did our assessments for how we work with children—and she was brilliant—she spoke to the children about my wheelchair and the safety around it, but also let me tell my story to make it a more safe and accepting environment."

Flexibility and online learning are also key enablers for young people to study, with many participants highlighting the importance of not being penalised for non-attendance and being able to come to campus only when they need.

"[My university] let you be an online student and go into the in-person classes, so you don't have any pressure to go into the in-person classes, which is really great for me."

As one participant put it, "assum[ing] students with disability are always going to be in the room" is key to the success of disabled young people in tertiary settings. Having systems in place to proactively support young people and remove administrative burdens is vital.

“When I started university and approached the correct accessibility teams and boards, organisations, they were able to really quite easily facilitate what I needed, just taking all the information off what you provided the [state accessibility service] back at school. It made it really simple to not have to go and explain the whole situation. It was just really it was one meeting for an hour at the beginning of my university, just exactly saying what provisions I need.”

“The other thing I did really like was the fact that when it came time to exams, I didn't have to do anything. It was really just – they set it up for you. They tell you where to go. You rock up to the room [...] and then they'll say to you, 'Yep, you're in this room at this time with a scribe. This is the scribe.' Really, really simple.”

Barriers

Before students even get a chance to begin studying, their options and prospects are significantly limited by inaccessibility to courses and campuses.

“I had to choose a campus largely due to accessibility purposes and picked my major based on the lack of travel or movement needed as an IT personnel, even if I don't really like the subject myself.”

Just as supportive staff are a key enabler for young people's success and inclusion, unsupportive staff present a considerable barrier.

“We had two teachers for the class, they wouldn't jot down notes for me, or they wouldn't have a small script of what they had gone over in class so I could revise. Which really, really made it hard for me to be able to remember because I couldn't take it in, but I couldn't write it down because I struggle to keep up with my handwriting, having low muscle tone.”

One participant shared that academic staff told them they “couldn't do their course, because of my Tourette's.” Another participant was kicked out of their course once they started using a wheelchair:

“I had a major issue with my first course after I got put into the wheelchair. I was actually kicked out of my course, saying that I couldn't do my course as a disabled person. Because 'you can't do that course from a wheelchair'.”

Work placement services and processes that support tertiary education were flagged by multiple young people as a roadblock in their courses, with students often ending up in inaccessible or ill-suited placements.

“Placement have absolutely no idea what’s going on behind the scenes, and they’re really slack at bridging that information gap, and so ultimately you end up with placement offers that aren’t appropriate.”

Many participants further lamented broken channels of communication causing significant barriers to their learning. Often plans and supports would be set up with the wellbeing officer or disability liaison unit but students wouldn’t see this followed through, as either educators weren’t properly informed of the plan, or the plans were just “never followed”.

Long wait times of three to five weeks were raised by a number of participants, for on campus psychology and counselling services, as well as disability support services.

“It’s not as easy as just calling up. [...] Ninety per cent of the time you won’t even get through or there’s massive backlogs. I think it’s due to understaffing or just massive over demand. But it is very disheartening, and I think because of that, a lot of people who need that support just aren’t getting it.”

Assumptions about what supports someone might need or using one-size-fits-all approaches are unfortunately common. One young person shared that their university insisted on them having a note-taker, despite them stating that not only do they not need one, but that it would be actively “detrimental” to their learning.

Another shared that extra time during assessments felt like a “band-aid measure”, as it meant that the source of the inaccessibility of the assessment was never addressed, and more suitable accommodations were never explored.

Social isolation was another barrier for participants, ranging from a lack of peers to being segregated from the rest of the class.

“I didn’t see myself within my peers. There was no queer people, or out queer people, no vocally disabled people. So, I wouldn’t say that I didn’t feel safe, but I didn’t feel comfortable. I didn’t feel safe to be myself. So, I just didn’t bother with the socialising aspect.”

Participants also indicated that their social isolation was caused by indiscrete and insensitive actions by teaching staff, including one instance where an entire class was asked to raise their hand if they had a learning access plan, and another where a teacher announced that someone had a learning access plan in front of their class.

Although online learning was hailed by some, others noted that it didn't work with everybody's access needs, highlighting the need for flexible approaches.

"Online schooling hasn't been a positive experience for everybody with a disability. I know for me personally it has been hell. [With] executive dysfunction, it's hard to get yourself [to do work] [...] It's even harder with online schooling. I feel like I've learnt nothing this entire semester honestly [...] Even though I know for some people it's been great, for others it has been so horrifically terrible."

Solutions

Education on disability is critical for those who interact with students with disability. Many young people raised that the staff who interact with them should have at least basic knowledge of their disabilities to enable staff to support them properly.

"Research beforehand. If you know that you're going to have a student with some type of disability, research [work] placements for them and what will be inclusive and be prepared."

Participants proposed that staff should also be taught about accessibility generally, to ensure there is a "standardised [level of] accessibility across teachers" rather than the current situation, where the experience as a disabled student is highly dependent on whether a teacher has a personal interest or experience with disability.

Universal design was a significant recurring theme amongst participants when discussing solutions. This included the physical campuses – "the architecture itself should be designed with disability in mind." – to the course delivery:

"Don't make accommodations for students, assume that there are students are going to almost definitely be in those classes. And make it just a part. Always have captions on. Always have signage. Just assume we're going to be there."

Courses should have "different options for assignment formats", and accommodation for different learning paces and styles.

"I think a lot of the supports and accommodations should benefit all [...] not just people with accessibility needs."

Participants stated that accountability is "so important" and that there needs to be clear and well-defined pathways to report teachers and support staff when they "do something wrong", are discriminatory, or are just "not helping".

Personalised and consistent support is crucial to young people to ensure their success:

"Having a one-to-one support staff/advocate would be amazing. Someone who actually has knowledge and expertise about accessibility needs."

Not only that, but young people need choice, control, and flexibility in terms of the supports they receive.

"[I wish staff would] see where I was at with my health when I was sick, and give me options on what I could do, whether that be repeat some of the things, or continue in some way while I was bedridden."

"[Institutions should be] allowing students to come and actually say what they themselves need, instead of universities making these decisions based on assumptions or what not."

Finally, more proactive pathways and support should be available to students with disability, such as "equity scholarships for disabled people" or role-models in their chosen fields.

"If they know a student in their tutorial or in their degree has a particular disability, if they are aware of what that disability is, seeing if they can find a mentor within the career that they've trying to head to, to show, 'Hey, you can do it'."

Social Movement

Leadership by disabled people is key to breaking down the barriers faced by young people in participating in tertiary education. Institutions should be "actively seeking to employ and enrol disabled people and provide support" and "actively consulting with disabled staff, students, prospective students and alumni". There should also be "lived experience [of disability] involved in developing and delivering content".

Positive portrayal of people with disability through awareness and education campaigns is needed to drive attitudinal change.

"If there's greater awareness as to potential disabilities or inabilities that some people may have, that could shape the way that obviously the people are viewed, particularly through tertiary education. To be more open, more understanding."

Young people with disability want to be included and embraced as part of their communities, and that includes their education communities too.

"I got to join a club at my uni. And they've really embraced me into it. I got to run a disability week for my whole university. The club let me run that and it got shared all over my university."

"I've found that everyone at uni won't talk to me. They see the wheelchair and run away, or just stare at me, but in this club, I actually get treated like a person and I've just found that absolutely amazing. There's actually a club that can accept me. I've tried asking any other club and all those ones said no. I've finally found a club who accepted me, and it was amazing."

Where to from here?

Tertiary education opens up opportunities for young people to contribute their skills and talents to society, meet new people, develop new skills, and explore new interests. In line with the perspectives of young people who participated in this consultation, CYDA recommends the following:

1. Tertiary institutions must provide adequate holistic supports for students with disability

This includes:

- Providing individualised and consistent academic and social supports, such as peer mentoring. These supports should create space and support all aspects of students' identities, including disability, gender, sexuality, and culture
- Employing more disabled people, particularly in disability services
- Providing career counselling and supports that understand disability, the systemic barriers in the workforce for employees with disability, and knowledge of services and supports available that support inclusive employment.

2. Tertiary institutions must provide adequate education about disability to staff and students

This includes:

- Equipping staff with knowledge about disability, accessibility, universal design, discrimination, and legal obligations
- Developing compulsory, introductory units for all students on basic disability knowledge and awareness to foster an inclusive education culture.

3. Tertiary institutions must ensure courses are accessible

This includes:

- Taking a universal design approach to teaching to support diverse learning needs and strengths across the student cohort
- Retaining online learning to provide students flexibility in their learning.

4. Tertiary institutions must protect the education rights of students with disability

- Make sure supports are followed through and there is ongoing connection between disability services and educators, so students do not have to continuously advocate for their needs across units and classes. This could be achieved by adopting a case manager approach
- Ensure accessible complaints procedures so students with disability feel safe and confident to report incidents of disability discrimination.

5. The Australian Government must improve pathways and accessibility to tertiary education and learning, in line with Education and Learning Policy Priority 3¹¹ of the Australian Disability Strategy¹²

- Ensure tertiary institutions are adequately funded to provide for psychology and disability support services to meet student need
- Ensure there are mechanisms to hold tertiary institutions and educators to account when not meeting the rights of students with disability under the *Disability Standards for Education* and the *Disability Discrimination Act*
- Make sure transition from school to tertiary is smooth and supports can be carried across without administrative burden on the student
- Take a stronger role in convening a nationally consistent approach to supporting students in the VET sector.

¹¹ Improve pathways and accessibility to further education and training for people with disability

¹² Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). Available at: [Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 \(disabilitygateway.gov.au\)](https://disabilitygateway.gov.au)



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