

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)'s submission to the Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers Consultation

“Ensure there are mechanisms to hold tertiary institutions and educators to account when not meeting the rights of students with disability ...”

(What Young People Said, LivedX Series: Tertiary Education and Learning)

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Children and Young People
with Disability Australia

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A note on terminology:

Throughout this submission, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) uses person-first language, e.g., person with disability. However, CYDA recognises many people with disability choose to use identity-first language, e.g., disabled person.

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 and present. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.



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Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Place students with disability at the centre of reform

- **Embed student voice** through co-design in revisions to the Higher Education Standards Frameworks.
- **Introduce a positive duty** requiring universities to proactively ensure access, participation and inclusion of students with disability across all aspects of student life.
- **Mandate public disclosure** of accessibility and inclusion indicators to drive accountability and transparency.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen TEQSA's powers to enforce disability standards in higher education

- **Require annual reporting** on institutional Disability Action Plans and outcomes achieved.
- **Embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles as a baseline requirement across all accredited courses.
- **Grant TEQSA authority** to pause or withhold course accreditation where professional body requirements or engagement with university staff result in exclusionary pathways for students with disability.

Recommendation 3: Elevate curriculum standards in high-impact programs

- **Mandate minimum requirements** for disability-related content across programs including, but not limited to Teaching, Medicine, and Social Work.
- **Develop a more capable and responsive workforce** by producing graduates with practical expertise in disability inclusion, awareness and rights.
- **Standardise public disclosure** of information of student outcomes from these courses to support assessment and effectiveness of the investment into disability inclusion and awareness education in these fields.

Recommendation 4: Drive a joined-up systems approach across education pathways

- **Align standards and oversight** across the VET and higher education sectors.
- **Strengthen pathways** that promote progression and lifelong learning opportunities for students with disability.

Introduction

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 extensive national networks of 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 in Australia will fully exercise their rights, realise their aspirations and thrive in all communities. We do this by:

- Raising community attitudes and expectations
- Championing initiatives that promote the best start in the early years for children with disability, and their families and caregivers
- Leading social change to transform education systems to be inclusive at all points across life stages
- Advocating for systems that facilitate successful life transitions to adulthood
- Leading innovative initiatives to ensure the sustainability and impact of the organisation and the broader sector

CYDA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's powers* consultation.

This submission builds on our previous work, highlighting the ongoing need for higher education providers, and the associated regulatory bodies to address both immediate needs and invest in long-term capacity building to ensure universities adequately include students with disability and raise achievement and completion levels.

[Media Release – Universities Accord](#)

[Media Release – Youth in Crisis](#)

[Jobs and Skills Australia Workplan Submission](#)

[LivedX Series: What Young People Said - Tertiary Education and Learning](#)

This submission is guided by lived experience of staff at CYDA and grounded in both the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and Disability Standards for Education, as well as the Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031. These instruments set out a strong commitment to enhancing the experiences of education for students with disability, through the elimination of discrimination and enabling access on the same basis as non-disabled peers.

Despite these commitments, we continue to see students with disability facing barriers to accessing and engaging in post-secondary education, with lower levels of

satisfaction in our higher education institutions, and poorer pathways to subsequent employment.

Data demonstrates that more needs to be done to proactively support students with disability within the higher education sector:

- As of 2018, 17% of people aged 20 and over with disability had a bachelor's degree or higher (compared with 35% without disability) ¹
- In 2023, only 13% of students undertaking undergraduate degrees and only 3.9% of VET students had disability²
- Student satisfaction ratings in the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey have been consistently lower for students with disabilities than those without since 2017.³

Submission structure

The submission is structured in four parts, responding to the four areas for potential amendments in the consultation paper. Each part leads with our recommendations and is followed by a more detailed response.

Part 1 addresses **Questions 1 and 3** from the consultation paper, addressing the potential for a regulatory **system that puts students first**.

Part 2 addresses **Questions 12 and 13** from the consultation paper, relating to potential reform of TEQSA as a modern regulator with **powers to address emerging and systemic challenges**.

Part 3 addresses **Question 15** from the consultation paper, relating to opportunities to **streamline regulation for universities and other higher education providers**.

Part 4 addresses **Questions 16 and 16a** from the consultation paper, relating to a system that supports a **joined-up tertiary system**.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), [People with disability in Australia - Educational attainment](#)

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025), [Education and learning](#)

³ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) (2024), [Student Experience Survey](#) page iv



Part 1: A system that puts students first.

Recommendation 1: Place students with disability at the centre of reform

(Response to Questions 1 and 3 of the Consultation Paper)

- Amend the TEQSA Act to explicitly reference students, ensuring that **reforms are designed with and for students**, with a clear focus on students with disability.
- **Embed student voice** through co-design in revisions to the *Higher Education Standards Framework*.
- **Introduce a positive duty** requiring universities to proactively ensure access, participation, and inclusion of students with disability across all aspects of student life.
- **Mandate public disclosure** of accessibility and inclusion indicators to drive accountability and transparency.

The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey (SES) has reported that student experience ratings have been consistently lower for students with a reported disability. It is disappointing that this trend has persisted since 2017. The SES report highlights this as an area where institutions could focus improvement efforts.⁴

CYDA recommends that the TEQSA Act be amended to **explicitly reference students, embedding students with disability at the centre of reforms.**

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”.⁵

Through embedding students in the Act, the associated threshold standards and policy reviews could proceed with **genuine commitment to embedding student voice** through co-design processes.

CYDA recommends the introduction of a **positive duty in the TEQSA Act**. Currently, discrimination within the higher education system is addressed reactively, and only in the case that complaints are raised. Placing obligations on duty holders to take

⁴ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) (2024), [Student Experience Survey](#)

⁵ CYDA (2022), [LivedX Series: What Young People Said \(Tertiary Education and Learning\)](#) page 12

proactive steps to adhere to the threshold standards (in the Higher Education Standards Framework), would have benefits in supporting students across higher education settings.

The current threshold standards only briefly address supports for students with disability, through section 2.2 'Diversity and Equity'. Following reform to the TEQSA Act, further reform in the Threshold Standards could directly address areas of access, participation and inclusion for students with disability. With these reforms and a positive duty, higher education institutions would be better aligned with the Disability Standards for Education and be **compelled to continue to improve the experience of student with disability at their institution.**

To further support placing students at the centre of reform, it is recommended that TEQSA mandates the **public disclosure of accessibility indicators** to drive accountability and transparency. It is currently possible to compare Higher Education Institutions on student experience measures, skills development, and employment outcomes⁶. An accessibility and inclusion matrix developed from a combination of student experience and performance against institutional Disability Access Plans would support students with disability to make informed decisions about their preferred institution prior to engaging in studies.

⁶ [ComparED - Compare](#)



Part 2: Powers to address emerging and systemic challenges

Recommendation 2: Strengthen TEQSA's powers to enforce disability standards in higher education

(Response to Questions 12 & 13 of the Consultation Paper)

- **Require annual reporting** on institutional Disability Action Plans and outcomes achieved
- **Embed Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles as a baseline requirement across all accredited courses
- **Grant TEQSA authority to pause** or withhold course accreditation where professional body requirements or engagement with university staff result in exclusionary pathways for students with disability
- **Strengthen action in response to complaints** by enabling transfer of the review, investigation and enforcement action between TEQSA, National Student Ombudsman, Department of Education and the Australian Human Rights Commission

The Disability Standards for Education (DSE) are currently not overseen or enforced across the higher education sector by any one regulatory body. The implementation and monitoring of the DSE should sit with TEQSA as the sector's quality and standards agency.

Two suggested avenues for ensuring implementation and ongoing adherence to the DSE are as follows:

- First, a requirement from TEQSA of reporting from registered institutions regarding the progress and outcomes of the institution's Disability Action Plan.
- Second, reforms to the TEQSA Act requiring Positive Duty Threshold Standards to be upheld would also support implementation and adherence to the DSE. Standards that support students with a disability to access and engage in all areas of student life, and subsequent systemic change to course delivery to supporting this. **Embedding the principles of universal design for learning**

(UDL) as a baseline requirement for all accredited courses has the additional benefit of being supportive of the entire student cohort.⁷

Embedding UDL within course delivery will **improve efficiency of delivery**, enabling students to engage with course content in the way that best suits their learning, and has the potential to reduce the need for additional, often costly adjustments and accommodations by removing **existing barriers** to participation within the course delivery. Investment in courses to provide more accessible engagement with content is **not only beneficial to all students but may also be a cost-saving measure** over time.⁸

CYDA recommends that the TEQSA Act is broadened to enable transfer of the review, investigation and enforcement action between TEQSA, National Student Ombudsman (NSO), Department of Education and the Australian Human Rights Commission. We recommend the addition of specific provisions to the TEQSA Act that address the needs of students with disability as enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA).⁹

“Don’t make accommodations for students, assume that...students (with disability) 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” (YPWD, LivedX Series)¹⁰

Grant TEQSA authority to pause or withhold course accreditation where professional body requirements or engagement with university staff result in exclusionary pathways for students with disability.

Australian university disability practitioners have long been aware of exclusionary pathways and practices that have been implemented in higher education systems through relationships and requirements of external professional registration bodies. It is acknowledged that inherent requirement statements in Australia arose from higher education institution responses to disability discrimination legislation.

To ensure universities are not gate-keeping university level knowledge and discriminating against students with disability, it is recommended that **inherent requirements and the communication of these is outlined more clearly in the threshold standards** under the TEQSA Act. Inherent requirements must be communicated prior to enrolment, considering **the tertiary institution’s role in deeming someone unsuitable for a job role – post-graduation** particularly in relation to potential ‘unacknowledged requirements’.¹¹

⁷ Pitman (2020), [Supporting Persons with Disabilities to Succeed in Higher Education](#)

⁸ Jwad, O’Donovan et al. (2022), [Universal Design for Learning in Tertiary Education](#)

⁹ ATEND (2024), [Ableism in the Universities Accord](#)

¹⁰ CYDA (2022), [LivedX Series: What Young People Said \(Tertiary Education and Learning\)](#) page 11

¹¹ Brett, Harvey et al (2016), [The Role of Inherent Requirement Statements In Australian Universities](#)

In Australia a Customised Employment approach has been recommended as a pathway to support people with disabilities – focusing on **strengths, interests and abilities** and essentially shaping a job to fit the individual, rather than fitting the individual into a job role. Therefore, if an individual chooses to pursue a university degree, with appropriate supports and adjustments, they should not be disadvantaged simply because professional registration may not be available to them for the credential earned.¹²

¹² National Disability Service (2024), [Customised Employment](#)



Part 3: Streamlined regulation for providers

Recommendation 3: Elevate curriculum standards in high-impact programs

(Response to Question 15 of the Consultation Paper)

- **Embed disability content** to ensure graduates enter the workforce with the knowledge and skills to advance inclusion.
- **Mandate minimum requirements** for disability-related content across high impact programs including but not limited to Teaching, Medicine, and Social Work
- **Develop a more capable and responsive workforce** by producing graduates with practical expertise in disability inclusion, awareness and rights.
- **Standardise public disclosure** of information of student outcomes from these courses to support assessment and effectiveness of the investment into disability inclusion and awareness education in these fields.

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 sets out to enshrine and elevate the ideals of respect, inclusivity, and equality to ensure people with a disability can participate as equal members of society and we continue to work towards creating an inclusive community.¹³ It includes a policy priority for **key professional workforces improving understanding of disability**.

The current consultation, and future higher education reforms **present an opportunity for the TEQSA Act to elevate curriculum standards** within high-impact programs. Students in programs with high levels of interaction and engagement with people with disability in their professions would benefit from disability awareness and practical inclusion expertise throughout accredited courses, **contributing to a more inclusive society**.

Rolling out elevated curriculum standards across high-impact programs, alongside standardised public disclosure regarding outcomes from these courses, will have the greatest chance of **visible real-world impact** once graduates take their practical inclusion expertise into their professional lives.

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2024), [Australia's National Disability Strategy 2024 update: Building a more inclusive Australia](#)

“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.” (YPWD, LivedX Series)¹⁴

Through CYDA’s recent work in South Australia (SA Roadmap to Inclusive Education – to be published early 2026), we have seen a **significant response through our community consultation from teachers – calling for further disability and inclusion education to be embedded within university study** and offered as ongoing professional development to support their work. By embedding disability and inclusion education through accreditation of courses, the TEQSA Act and related higher education policies would align with Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 and support the progression of a truly inclusive education system in Australia.

¹⁴ CYDA (2022), [LivedX Series: What Young People Said \(Tertiary Education and Learning\)](#) page 12



Part 4: A joined-up tertiary system

Recommendation 4: Drive a joined-up systems approach across education pathways

(Response to Question 16 and 16a of the Consultation Paper)

Provide a clear and cohesive pathway to support students with disability to access the VET and higher education sectors through:

- **Aligned standards and oversight** across the VET and higher education sectors through the development of a national framework for inclusive education and training pathways.
- **Strengthened pathways** that promote progression and lifelong learning opportunities for students with disability

CYDA calls for TEQSA to address reforms to align standards and oversight across the VET and higher education sectors, supporting a **joined-up system** for post-secondary education pathways.

Tertiary education attainment supports improved employment rates and income. Improving access to and participation in post-school education and training assists people with disability to achieve their full potential and access the same opportunities as Australians without disability. – Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031¹⁵

We recommend the tertiary education sector, including VET and higher education institutions work together to develop a **national framework for inclusive education and training pathways**. A national framework for inclusive education and training pathways would support **consistent standards** for accessibility, support and reasonable adjustments to enable **equitable access** to post-secondary education and improve employment outcomes for students with disability.

Australia's Disability Strategy has policy priorities in both the Education and Learning, and Employment and Financial Security outcome areas that would be addressed through the development of a national framework, **improving pathways and accessibility to further education** and training and **improving the transition of young people with disability from education to employment**.

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2024), [Australia's National Disability Strategy 2024 update: Building a more inclusive Australia](#) page 34

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