

17 October 2025

Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council
Parliament of New South Wales

Submitted via [Inquiry webpage](#)

Dear Committee

Inquiry into the New South Wales University Sector

People with Disability Australia (PWDA) welcomes this opportunity to provide comment on the NSW Parliamentary [Inquiry into the New South Wales University Sector](#).

PWDA is a national disability rights and advocacy organisation made up of, and led by, people with disability. We have a vision of a socially just, accessible and inclusive community in which the contribution, potential and diversity of people with disability are not only recognised and respected but also celebrated.

Our work is grounded in a human rights framework that recognises the United Nations [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) and related mechanisms as fundamental tools for advancing the rights of people with disability.

We are funded to provide cross-disability systemic advocacy on behalf of people with disability in NSW under the Department of Communities and Justice's *Disability Advocacy Futures Program*.

People with disability continue to experience discrimination and poorer life outcomes across all life domains when compared with those without disability (Kayess & Sands, 2020; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). 2022 data shows 5.5 million Australians have a disability, around 21.4% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

This is an increase from 17.7% in 2018. In NSW the most recent 2018 data shows 16.9% of the population have a disability, equivalent to 1,346,200 residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Terms of reference

This submission is responding to ToR (f)(i):

“The ability for current legislative and governance arrangements to support the accessibility of university education and derive public benefit, in particular:

- *Supporting diversity, inclusion and access for disadvantaged groups.”*

Students with disability have a poor experience of higher education

The number of undergraduate students in Australia reporting a disability has steadily increased. In 2022 it was estimated at 11% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). Other recent sources indicate that in 2023 students with disability had risen to 12.7% of the undergraduate cohort (Cadby et al, 2024).

However, since 2017 at least, undergraduate and postgraduate students with disability have consistently rated their overall educational experience lower than those students without disability (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p. 11). They have similarly rated their experience lower than students without disability across all five specific focus areas measured by the National Student Experience Survey (Skills development; Peer engagement; Teaching quality and engagement; Student support and services; and Learning resources) (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p.11).

The most recent 2024 Student Experience Survey also looked at specific aspects of the educational experience beyond the key five areas. One of these is a student’s **‘sense of belonging’** which has been a standalone item in the survey since 2023. ‘Belonging’ in an educational space is important as it is linked to things such as academic achievement and personal well-being. Again, undergraduate and postgraduate students with disability rated their sense of belonging lower than students without disability, with a percentage point gap of around 5.3 (undergraduate) to 5.6 (postgraduate) (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p. 30).

A critical result of this dissatisfaction is that despite increasing representation, students with disability have significantly lower retention and completion rates than students without disability (Punch et al, 2025, p. 1).

Students have reported numerous specific and practical barriers, including the proper provisions of adjustments and a general lack of understanding of disability (Punch et al, 2025, p. 3; Harpur et al, 2025, p. 375). These apparently inherent ableist institutional attitudes and responses to disability are critical to understanding the experience of students with disability. As Harpur, Stafford and Ellis found in their research, “[u]niversities were considered unsafe and exclusionary to many people with disability due to entrenched attitudinal and cultural prejudice” (Harpur et al, 2025, p. 373). Similarly, Punch, Duncan and Talbot-Stokes found from their scoping review that, “[I]t is clear that academics’ attitudes and responses, positive or negative, have a strong effect on the experiences of students with disability” (Punch et al, 2025, p. 14).

Governance structures must reflect lived experience

It is recognised that simply having rights ‘recognised’ does not lead to the actual realisation of those rights. This is the case for both students and staff with disabilities at Australian universities (Harpur et al, 2025, p. 370). Similarly, an institutions disability, equity and inclusion policy is of little practical value if the document is underpinned by ableist assumptions given approval by its governing body. If university governance arrangements are to meaningfully promote accessibility, achieve public benefit, and support diversity, inclusion and access for disadvantaged groups, systemic change in governance is required (Harpur et al, 2025, p. 371).

This must start with people with disability for example being in key leadership positions, most crucially of which, are the university governing councils. It has been long noted that there is a significant lack of diversity within the leadership of Australian universities (Hill, 2023; Harpur et al, 2024; Devlin, 2021; Law & Croucher, 2020). This homogeneity – white, mostly male, wealthy, and largely from business and industry – reflects an outdated view of the public purpose of higher education and is not reflective of the wider community.

It is extraordinary that there is no legislative requirement that university governing bodies must reflect community diversity and ensure direct lived experience informs decision-making. For people with disability this is explicitly contrary to the aims and purpose of the CRPD and the mantra of ‘nothing about us without us.’

We note the current Australian Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into *Quality and governance at Australian high education providers*. The **Interim Report** was released on 19 September 2025. In the context of this submission, PWDA is generally supportive of these recommendations from the Interim Report:

- **Recommendation 1**, to improve transparency and accountability of governing bodies.
- **Recommendations 5 and 6**, to ensure people on governing bodies have proper public administration and higher education expertise/skills, and that governing bodies contain staff and undergraduate and postgraduate students on governing bodies.
- **Recommendation 12**, to require universities to improve complaints processes.

We note that the Interim Report contains additional comments and recommendations from the Australian Greens. In the context of this submission, we are supportive of **Greens Recommendation 5** that:

[A]ll higher education provider governing bodies reflect the community's diversity including First Nations peoples, Culturally and Racially Marginalised people, and people with disabilities.

Yours sincerely



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