

University for people with intellectual disability – a national position paper

Who we are

The Centre for Disability Studies, a research affiliate of The [University of Sydney](#), and [Flinders University](#) in South Australia, run inclusive university programs for people with intellectual disability ([Uni2Beyond](#) and the [Up the Hill Project](#)). We have formed a national Community of Practice, involving students/ graduates with intellectual disability, parents, academics, professionals, and advocates. The purpose of the Community of Practice is to promote the sharing of knowledge and resources across programs and universities to support people with intellectual disability at university. Our aim is to advocate for more opportunities for people with intellectual disability to receive a quality university education experience to support their lifelong learning and generate opportunities for success.

The problem

Only 17% of people with disability aged 20 and over, have a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 35% of people without disability ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). Educational attainment has a significant and ongoing impact on workforce participation. People with intellectual disability have particularly high rates of unemployment when compared with other disability groups. Supporting people with intellectual disability to attain university education can further support employment rates ([Lee et al., 2021](#)).

Failure to provide genuinely inclusive post-secondary and university-level options for people with intellectual disability, puts Australia in contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2008, Article 24.5). To exclude people with intellectual disability from university is also in contravention of anti-discrimination legislation ([Disability Standards for Education, 2005](#)).

Australian universities support a diverse range of people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences and needs, through a range of individualised support mechanisms. However, support for people with intellectual disability requires more specialised support services that build off existing services. This requires investment in policy and funding arrangements that begin with a holistic approach to education from Federal, State and Local governments, universities, schools, and community groups that create pathways and supports for targeted programs.

Targeted programs to support people with intellectual disability at university may be considered part of a university's wider disability strategy; yet only two Australian universities have specific programs for people with intellectual disability (The [University of Sydney](#) and [Flinders University](#)). Many universities work closely with State and Territory governments to drive inclusive pathways programs for students that, with appropriate and reasonable supports in place, will meet university learning outcomes required by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency ([TEQSA](#)). However, greater emphasis on developing targeted programs, support networks and opportunities specifically for people with intellectual disability are needed.

Fulfilling Australia's commitment to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability](#) (2008, Article 24.5) requires a holistic approach to supporting people with intellectual disability throughout their lives. This means ensuring appropriate funding arrangements and support mechanisms exist at all stages of a person's educational journey, creating pathways to lifelong learning and education recognition ([Australia's National Disability Strategy 2021-2031](#)). It is crucial for governments, tertiary education providers, and schools to work together to provide an inclusive and accessible education system.

The solution

The Centre for Disability Studies (affiliate of The [University of Sydney](#)), and [Flinders University](#), in collaboration with our Community of Practice members, recommend Australian Governments (Federal, State and Territory):

- **Enhance policy and take a national strategic approach** to engage Australian universities, primary and secondary schools and encourage them to collaborate in design, implementation, delivery and evaluation of programs/pathways to support the learning of people with intellectual disability.

- **Provide funding** to integrate NDIS service providers to support students at university to gain the individual support and other forms of assistance needed, especially if funding does not exist within the university.
- **Create more university pathways and programs** across Australia and within each State and Territory, in addition to the two programs that already exist, to support greater access to tertiary education that is appropriate to each person's capabilities and aspirations. These may include additional incentives for universities, schools and communities to deliver pathways, programs or scholarships.
- **Offer transition planning and supports.** These should typically begin early in secondary school and involve the person with intellectual disability, their family and other supporters. For non-school leavers, alternative models of transition planning should be funded.
- **Develop partnerships and linkages with private sector organisations and graduate programs to enhance employment pathways and networks** of continued support as students with intellectual disability move through their university program/ degree and onwards to employment.

We recommend Australian Universities:

- **Foster institutional and cultural change** to make inclusion of students with intellectual disability a core part of their disability strategy, with specific programs and pathways that support their education journey from high school to tertiary education. All students should be supported to achieve the educational outcomes they desire.
- **Offer more choice, flexibility and support within programs** where reasonable, including formal recognition of student attainment within a program or degree. This may involve emphasising and supporting reasonable adjustments to ensure success and completion for students with intellectual disability, as part of creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment.
- **Foster greater awareness** about inclusive tertiary programs / pathways in high schools and across the wider community. This is especially important for enrolment of mature age students and for people who thought tertiary education, including university, would never be an option when they graduated from high school.
- **Create more education pathways** for people with intellectual disability to move across different tertiary education providers to better support their learning needs, without financially disadvantaging them.
- **Invest in staff training and cultural change** to ensure fully inclusive practices across the university campus, not just in the lecture room.

How we developed this paper

The recommendations in this paper are based on the following:

1. A review of national and international literature.
2. Interviews with students and family members of the only two inclusive programs in Australian universities ([Uni2Beyond](#) – The [University of Sydney](#), and the [Up the Hill Project](#) – [Flinders University](#)).
3. Advice and guidance from an expert advisory committee of people with intellectual disability who have graduated from either [Uni2Beyond](#) or the [Up the Hill Project](#), and family members of past students.
4. Two national roundtable discussions chaired by representatives from The [University of Sydney](#) and [Flinders University](#) eliciting university, provider, individual, family, and alumni perspectives.
5. Advice and feedback from university disability support services and academic staff.

We welcome the opportunity to speak with you about our work. We also welcome opportunities to support change and implementation of our recommendations.

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