

# The Universitas 21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report

Partnering globally to champion change

Part Three: Creating an inclusive community for  
students with disability

June 2025

*Image illustrates the global collaboration of U21 and this project - the image on the title page is a map of the world with orange circle symbols of each member university appearing on the city where they are based.*





Fudan University



Korea University



KU Leuven



Lund University



McMaster University



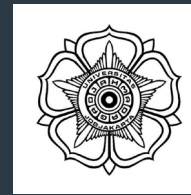
National University of Singapore



Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile



Shanghai Jiao Tong University



Universitas Gadjah Mada



Tecnológico de Monterrey



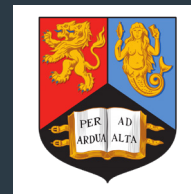
UC Davis



University of Amsterdam



The University of Auckland



University of Birmingham



University College Dublin



University of Connecticut



University of Delhi



The University of Edinburgh



University of Glasgow



The University of Hong Kong



University of Johannesburg



University of Maryland



The University of Melbourne



University of Nottingham



University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



The University of Queensland



The University of Sydney



University of Zurich



UNSW Sydney



Waseda University

# Background

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the Universitas 21 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Working Group undertook the development of a Network-wide framework to guide EDI efforts across member institutions.

As part of this process, the U21 Disability Community of Practice (COP) was consulted during the drafting of the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. Recognising the value of this Framework, the Disability COP sought to support and enhance the leadership of U21 universities in advancing EDI, particularly in the area of disability inclusion.

Building on this momentum, the Disability COP proposed the U21 Disability Policy Mapping Initiative. This initiative invited university leadership to submit all relevant public documents pertaining to the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Each institution was also asked to nominate a contact person to facilitate the provision of these policies and to participate actively in the Disability COP.

Professor Paul Harpur OAM, as co-lead of the Disability COP and with established funding and strong backing from U21, offered to lead a Comparative Interpretive Policy Analysis (CIPA) of the collected documents. This analysis aimed to identify common commitments and best practices across the network, culminating in recommendations for a U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report.

In April 2024, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group formally adopted the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and endorsed the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative. Throughout 2024, the Disability COP received substantial support from the U21 secretariat in finalising and distributing a survey to all thirty universities within the network. The survey was completed, and relevant documents were collected. Additional data collection and analysis were required following the inclusion of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the U21 Network. A dedicated team of staff and students from across the U21 Network contributed to data collection, analysis, and the drafting of this report, with a full list of contributors included in the attached document.

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The above table of contents lists the parts and chapters of the report. Each chapter is authored by staff from across the U21 Network, who may use variations of inclusive language as best matches their experience.

# Introduction to the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Report

Professor Paul Harpur OAM

## Introduction

In this introductory chapter I want to share my personal vision, as well as the vision of many colleagues involved in this journey of change.

I believe universities are a force for good in society. University education opens opportunities to individuals and provides our nations with the workforces they need for economic growth. Universities employ thought leaders who produce research and innovation which grows economies, enhances policy responses, and leads to transformational scientific discoveries. Discoveries which have strengthened food security, the environment, health, modelling and other benefits to society. Highly visible benefits of such research include the development of vaccines, such as for COVID-19 and the HPV viruses, GPS technology, and web browsers.

The universities who feature in this report, the 30 member universities of the Universitas 21 (U21) Network, individually and collectively are enriching, empowering, and enabling the communities they serve. Those communities are stretched over 20 countries, collectively including 1.3 million students, over 220,000 staff, have approaching 2.5 million alumni, and stretch their positive impact into towns, cities and across the globe.

Those of us privileged to work in a U21 Network university, work in an institution that is committed to positive change. For many of us who want to have a positive impact upon the world, when we advance our personal visions, we find we are aligned to the vision of our university. The energy of those involved, along with the support for this report, has already led to impact and to the successful completion of this report.

## Structure of this report

In addition to this introductory part, this report has 5 parts. The parts of this report groups chapters according to most universities' organisational structures. Accordingly, Part 1 addresses university-wide governance on disability inclusion and Part 2 groups chapters concerning key priority of research-intensive universities: research. These chapters introduce new norms pertaining to disability inclusive research and analyse how U21 Network universities are responding. The Report then turns to policies supporting students with disabilities. This part includes chapters where universities are responding to the profound shifts in norms and laws pertaining to disability inclusion. In an often-overlooked area, Part 4 addresses how universities can and should be supporting their staff with disabilities. Finally in Part 5, this report includes chapters on digital, physical, and library services that are used by students, staff, and the wider community. In addition to mapping out policies, each chapter makes recommendations to enhance the impact of this report.



**Although reports generally do not have impact until they are published, the process of producing *this* report has already led to positive impact.**

## Impact

Impactful change occurs when top down and bottom-up inclusion initiatives intersect. This is the reality on disability inclusion in the U21 Network.

The reality is that many of our universities are leading on inclusion, but many others operate in regulatory ecosystems where inclusion is less supported. The U21 Senior Leaders' Group has recognised and responded to the challenges by adopting in April 2024 the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement.

In addition to adopting the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement in April 2024, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group agreed to support the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative. When considering whether they should support this initiative, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group would have been aware that strategic, policy, and practical efforts on disability inclusion in higher education can be mixed. Despite the risk of adverse findings, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group decided to support this initiative and send a message that there is high-level commitment to identifying ways of doing better on disability inclusion.

By supporting the gathering of data from 30 member universities, the U21 Senior Leaders' Group have both sent a message across our communities that disability inclusion matters, plus provided tangible support to the gathering of data which has enabled this overview of current disability inclusion policies to be produced.

This top-down support was heard by people working in U21 Network member universities and has contributed to bottom-up efforts to respond to this opportunity and build lasting collaborations. Therefore, this report acknowledges the PhD staff members who contributed to authoring a thematic chapter.

The thematic groups that have come together have recognised the value in collaborating and thematic sub-groups of the U21 Disability Community of Practice have been proposed.

Already this report is contributing to lasting change.

Lasting change in the policy delivery space has been created by providing examples of workable solutions that exist in U21 Network universities. The U21 Network provides an avenue where universities with identified best practices, can share their experiences directly with other member universities, and thus build stronger responses to inclusion across the U21 Network.

With respect to informing responses, the professional and academic staff involved in this analysis have drawn upon their expertise when analysing the data to help generate a large list of recommendations. The recommendations called for by the authors in this report would profoundly shift the teaching, staffing, service delivery, and research ecosystems in our institutions. Transformation of this magnitude does not occur in the short term; however, reports of this nature occur infrequently, thus some recommendations might be adopted in the short-term, whereas others will take more time.

Often recommendations are grouped by what is possible in the short, medium, and long term. The different situations of universities across the U21 Network, caused by differences in cultures and regulatory environments across over 20 countries and by universities themselves, means that segmenting recommendations by implementation timeframes is not viable. Instead, recommendations are grouped by the domains in the report so that those reviewing their position can more easily identify the recommendations most relevant to their needs.

## Conclusion

To support the U21 Network and its university members to become disability champions of change, this report underscores the transformative potential of universities in fostering disability inclusion. By leveraging the collective strength of the U21 Network, we can drive significant advancements in creating inclusive educational, work and research and innovation eco-systems. This report not only highlights the current state of disability inclusion policies but also provides actionable recommendations to enhance these efforts.

The commitment from both top-down leadership and grassroots initiatives within our universities is crucial for sustained progress. As we continue to share best practices and collaborate across institutions, we can make meaningful strides towards a more inclusive society.

The work presented here is a testament to the power of commitment by those working in U21 Network universities and the U21 secretariat action and the dedication to improving how our universities operate and the lives of persons with disabilities. On disability, our universities train students with and without disabilities, employ staff with and without disabilities and produce research and innovation which can create a more inclusive world.

U21 is a place where we can come together to share, learn, and enhance our collective responses. Those responses will impact upon our universities, our U21 Network, to over 20 countries where our universities are situated and more broadly across the globe.

**// Changing the world for the better starts with a single step. I believe this report is such a step.**

Professor Paul Harpur OAM

Future Fellow (FT210100335), The University of Queensland  
Lead, U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative  
Co-lead Universitas 21 Disability Community of Practice



# Executive summary

**Between 15% and 20% of the world has a disability and in many of our universities more than 10% of our communities live with a disability.**

Universities train the disability leaders of tomorrow, employ the disability leaders of today, and produces research and innovation that leads to a better and more inclusive world. Drawing upon existing policies and practices from Universitas 21 (U21) Network member universities, this report provides a pathway for our universities, separately and collectively through the U21 Network, to more effectively and efficiently realise our missions, and through this, do better at what we do best: **Create and share knowledge for the betterment of all.**

This report was made possible following the adoption of the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and the support from the U21 Senior Leaders' Group to support this initiative. With over 100 U21 staff volunteering, this report involved 30 member universities across over 20 countries, resulting in a comprehensive analysis of disability inclusion within the U21 Network. This report, led by Professor Paul Harpur, aims to support U21 universities in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the disability space.

This report contains 5 main parts, each focusing on a different aspect of disability inclusion in the university setting. While these standalone parts like this one are available for convenience, readers seeking further context and detailed recommendations should refer to the complete report. A consolidated list of recommendations is provided after the Executive Summary.

## Part 1: Disability Governance Norms

This part explores the establishment of new norms on disability governance within the U21 Network. It emphasises the importance of fostering equitable partnerships among member universities and ensuring disability representation in governance structures. The report highlights the need for clear leadership roles, strategic integration, continuous improvement, and adequate funding to support disability inclusion initiatives. Additionally, it addresses the intersectionality of disability with other marginalised identities, such as Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and age-conscious frameworks.

## Part 2: Disability Inclusion and the Research and Innovation Ecosystem

Part 2 examines how U21 universities can align their research and innovation practices with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It underscores the importance of integrating CRPD norms into ethics and grant review processes, enhancing data collection, and implementing co-design methodologies. It also discusses the role of university research groups in championing disability inclusion and the need for comprehensive disability inclusion research and innovation, drawing from the best model at plans of inclusive practices. It calls for increased representation of people with disabilities in research leadership roles and the establishment of formal benchmarks within institutional disability policies. For the sake of this report, the CRPD describes disability in Article 1 to **“include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”**

## Part 3: Creating an Inclusive Community for Students with Disabilities

This part focuses on the transition from reasonable accommodations to universal design and universal design for learning (UDL). It advocates for a proactive approach to designing inclusive educational environments that anticipate and remove barriers to learning. The report highlights the importance of enhanced outreach programs, pre-orientation and orientation programs, and accessible housing options for students with disabilities. Additionally, it addresses the need for clear access to disability support information for international and exchange students and the importance of tailored career counselling and work-integrated learning opportunities to support students with disabilities in their transition to employment.

## Part 4: Universities Support for Staff with Disabilities

Examining the measures adopted by U21 universities to create disability-inclusive workplaces, this part discusses proactive measures to promote the recruitment and retention of staff with disabilities, the implementation of universal design, and the streamlining of reasonable accommodation processes. Part 4 also addresses the challenges faced by staff with disabilities who travel for work and recommends central funding for disability-related travel expenses, mechanisms for non-disclosure, and internal booking systems with accessibility information. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of awareness-raising activities, including mandatory training, inclusive events, and the development of comprehensive resources to support ongoing education and awareness efforts.

## Part 5: University Services and Disability Inclusion

Part 5 explores the role of university services, including libraries and digital and physical spaces, in promoting disability inclusion. It emphasises the importance of integrating accessibility into all library policies and strategic planning, developing physical spaces and assistive technology, and providing ongoing training for library staff. The report also discusses the need for capacity building across university staff to ensure understanding and implementation of digital accessibility standards. It advocates for the development of digital inclusion roadmaps, publicising compliance and monitoring metrics, and partnering with other universities and software vendors to enhance digital accessibility. Additionally, it addresses the importance of establishing design guides and capital works plans for the built environment and creating dedicated positions, such as Campus Accessibility Officers, to oversee accessibility and inclusion initiatives.

# Part 3: Report recommendations

The following consolidated list of recommendations is drawn from and referenced in the chapters of this report.

## Part 3: Creating an inclusive community for students with a disability

### Chapter 3.1. Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design

To support systemic change from reasonable accommodations (medical model of disability) to universal design (social model of inclusion), and in genuine consultation and collaboration with students with disability (*Nothing About Us Without Us*) and other key stakeholders, several actions are recommended for U21 universities.

- a) **Embrace universal design, including universal design of teaching:** In recognition of the benefits of universal design, including universal design for learning (UDL), to complement and reduce overreliance on reasonable accommodations, it is recommended that universities formally commit to institutional adoption of a universal design approach to support the inclusion of students with disability and indeed, broader student diversity noting students' intersecting identities.
- b) **Strengthen implementation of reasonable accommodation processes:** While universal design and UDL will enhance participation and access, it will not address every disabling barrier. As such, it is recommended that universities review and apply best practice to their reasonable accommodation policies and procedures, as well as support emerging policy development by those universities in the earlier stages of their universal design and UDL institutional journeys.
- c) **Leveraging the U21 Network to realise universal design:** It is recommended that universities leverage its network by utilising their collective strengths in learning, research, and innovation to build spaces for shared training, resource development, and joint contributions to scholarship. To illustrate, an executive-level cross-institutional committee/community of practice could be established to develop minimal standards for widespread adoption, such as converting the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines into guidelines explicitly relevant to the development of accessible resources and learning management systems in higher education. Further, it will be essential to consider how the U21 Network supports its member universities who are at the early stages of understanding universal design, noting that there are many universities yet to adopt UDL principles at an institutional level and/or apply broadly to their teaching, learning and assessment environments. Leveraging the knowledge of the U21 community to share learnings and best practice, including optimising access to existing resources and guidance, can accelerate this practice.

### Chapter 3.2. Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university

- a) **Enhanced Outreach Programs:** Working with government and schools, universities should develop specific outreach programs that directly address the needs and concerns of potential students with disabilities. This could include tailored information sessions, workshops, and online resources. These communications should also consider students with specific disabilities who are under-represented in the University sector, such as students with intellectual disabilities. Such efforts should involve partnering with high schools, vocational

training centres and rehabilitation providers to provide early information and support to students with disabilities considering higher education.

- b) **Pre-Orientation and Orientation Programs:** Universities should implement comprehensive pre-orientation programs similar to McMaster University's MacStart, which includes activities like learning study skills, using assistive technology, and mentorship.
- c) **Accessible Housing:** Universities should strive to ensure that all university accommodations have options for all students. The shortage of disability inclusive options should be addressed. Once students are enrolled, universities should provide supports to students with disabilities in finding rooms and checking in. This should include early check-in options for students with disabilities to avoid the rush of Arrivals Weekends.

### Chapter 3.3. Students with disability and student mobility

- a) **Clear access to disability support information:** Universities that provide disability support to international students should explicitly state this on their websites and link relevant pages together. This ensures prospective students understand available support and can make informed decisions before applying. For example, the University of Zurich has a very clear road map about the steps students with disabilities need to make to gain reasonable adjustments, as well as all that is required before commencing their studies. This is very helpful for a new domestic or international student with disabilities and is a good practice that could be implemented by the rest of the U21 Network.
- b) **Prominent website accessibility:** University websites are often the first source of information for international and exchange students. Clear links to disability support resources demonstrate an institution's commitment to inclusion as outlined in its policies.
- c) **Cross-linking webpages:** Webpages for international and exchange students should include sections or direct links to disability support information. Similarly, disability support pages should link back to international and exchange student resources, facilitating seamless navigation.
- d) **Intersectionality:** Send a clear message to website visitors that international students with disabilities are included in your disability inclusion initiatives. Students are often coming from diverse contexts with different legal frameworks, with confusion over their rights as international students versus their domestic peers, and their specific needs due to being at the intersection of disability, language proficiency, and much more.
- e) **Language accessibility:** It is noted that a lack of language variety is available when accessing disability support services, aside from some information in English. It may be worth considering this type of content could be made available in multiple languages to really ensure the relevant students gain access to these supports, even if just in English as an internationally known language, or an auto-translate option.

### Chapter 3.4. Students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities

- a) **Better data:** More robust data is needed to determine whether students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities experience informal exclusion due to accessibility concerns, social stigma, or a lack of accommodations, and determine the actions needed to respond to these.
- b) **Explicitly integrate frameworks into strategic plans:** Universities with extracurricular activities-inclusive strategic plans should explicitly integrate disability-inclusive frameworks, ensuring that participation barriers are identified and addressed proactively.

### Chapter 3.5. Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work

- a) **Individual support:** Students with disabilities will confront additional work challenges compared to students without disabilities. Universities should offer tailored career counselling to help students identify strengths and develop strategies to address employment barriers.
- b) **Facilitating and coordinating inclusion:** Universities should develop and implement policies and programs that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments.
- c) **Enhance collaboration with employers:** Universities should use their privileged positions to advance more inclusive workforces. To strengthen pathways and capacity in employers, universities should develop partnerships with inclusive employers.
- d) **Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements:** Universities should expand access to WIL opportunities by partnering with inclusive employers and by providing on-campus work opportunities to help students gain confidence in a familiar environment.



# List of authors and contributors

The below table includes the names, job titles and universities of all those who have made a tangible contribution to this report, whether as author, part of the Project Management Steering Committee, or as an individual who contributed to the success of the report.

Ms Agnes Yuen, Head, Student Accessibility Unit, National University of Singapore  
Mr Alan Mackay, Deputy Vice-Principal International and U21 Senior Leader, Edinburgh Global, The University of Edinburgh  
Ms Aliisa Mylonas, Senior Educational Designer, Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, The University of Queensland  
Ms Amber Bartlett, Project Manager of the Global Education Strategy, Universitas 21  
Ms Amy Thompson, Principal Project Officer, Planning, Property and Facilities, The University of Queensland  
Mr Andrew Crossbie, Equality Officer, Scottish Qualifications Authority  
Professor Anil Aneja, Head, Department of English, University of Delhi  
Ms Anouk Tso, Senior Policy Adviser International Relations and U21 Senior Leader, University of Amsterdam  
Dr Ashutosh Bhardwaj, Professor and U21 Senior Leader, Department of Physics & Astrophysics, University of Delhi  
Dr Ayu Diasti Rahmawati, Lecturer, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
Dr Belinda Johnston, Associate Director, Accessibility and Inclusion, Office of the Provost, The University of Melbourne  
Mr Benjamin Börner, Deputy Head, Office of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion Switzerland, University of Zurich  
Mr Bernie Ma, Head, Equal Opportunity Unit, The University of Hong Kong  
Professor Bonny Ibhawoh, Senator William McMaster Chair in Global Human Rights and U21 Senior Leader, Centre for Peace Studies, McMaster University  
Professor Brenda Brueggemann, Aetna Endowed Chair of Writing and Co-Editor of Disability Studies Quarterly, Department of English, University of Connecticut  
Mr Brett Crunkhorn, Web Standards Developer, Information Technology Services, The University of Queensland  
Mr Brett Lovegrove, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Global Partnerships), Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement), The University of Queensland  
Ms Brooke Szucs, Research Assistant, T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland  
Ms Caroline O'Mara, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Project Manager, Insight and Operations, University of Birmingham  
Ms Carolyn Novello, Senior Gift Standards Coordinator, Advancement and Community Engagement, The University of Queensland  
Ms Catherine Lemon, U21 Project Manager, Universitas 21  
Professor Cathy Stinear, Pro Vice-Chancellor Equity, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Equity) and Director of the Clinical Neuroscience Laboratory, Department of Medicine, The University of Auckland  
Ms Charlotte Long, Head Student learning and Convenor Student Life Network at International Association of Australia, University of New South Wales  
Ms Claire Shannon, MPhil Student, Academy for Medical Education, The University of Queensland  
Professor Colin Grant, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global) and U21 Senior Leader, University Office of Global Affairs, Division of the Vice Chancellor and President, University of New South Wales  
Professor Colm Harmon, Vice-Principal Students and U21 Senior Leader, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences, The University of Edinburgh  
Mr Dan Moradian, Senior Manager, Information Technology Services (ITS), The University of Queensland  
Dr Danang Sri Hadmoko, Dean and U21 Senior Leader, Faculty of Geography, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
Mr Daniel Smith, Project Manager, Disability Inclusion Action Plan, Diversity and Inclusion, Student Engagement, The University of Sydney  
Dr Danielle Burgess, Lecturer, School of Biomedical Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Dr Deirdre O'Connor, Lecturer and Vice-Principal for EDI, the School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin

Ms Desi Rahma, Researcher, Research Center for Politics and Government (PolGov), Department of Politics and Government, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
Ms Diana Sanabria, Research Assistant, T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland  
Dr Dino Willox, Director, Student Enrichment and Success, The University of Queensland  
Professor Dolores O'Riordan, Vice-President and U21 Senior Leader, Global Engagement, University College Dublin  
Mr Doug Little, Head, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, University of Nottingham  
Ms Elizabeth Hitches, PhD candidate, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland  
Ms Emily Singer Lucio, Coordinator, Office of Diversity & Inclusion, University of Maryland  
Dr Erik Lithander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and U21 Senior Leader, Strategic Engagement, The University of Auckland  
Dr Faith Ong, Senior Lecturer, School of Business, The University of Queensland  
Dr Fina Itriayati, Lecturer of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
Mr Gareth Edwards, Project Manager, Finance Systems, The University of Queensland  
Mr Gerhard Hoffstaedter, Associate Professor, School of Social Science, The University of Queensland  
Dr Gisselle Gallego, Senior Researcher, Centre for Disability Studies, The University of Sydney  
Ms Gloria Liu, Manager, School-University Partnerships Office, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong  
Professor Greg Marston, Director, Centre for Policy Futures, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Dr Gregore Mielke, NHMRC Emerging Leadership Fellow, School of Public Health, The University of Queensland  
Ms Helen Barrow, Senior Disability Support Services Administrator, Disability Support Services, University of Nottingham  
Ms Helen Connick, Director, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Mr Ian Duncan, Senior Program Manager, Information Technology Services, The University of Queensland  
Professor Ian Holliday, Vice-President and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) and U21 Senior Leader, President's Office, The University of Hong Kong  
Ms Imogen Howe, PhD Candidate, Melbourne School of Design, The University of Melbourne  
Professor Jackie Leach Scully, Director, Disability Innovation Institute, University of New South Wales  
Mr Jan Gustav Engmark, Senior Project Officer, Workplace Diversity & Inclusion, Human Resources, The University of Queensland  
Mr Jan Wisgerhof, Senior Manager, IT Research Systems, The University of Queensland  
Dr Jean McBain, Senior Manager, Digital Capability and Student Experience, Research Strategy and Performance, Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), The University of Queensland  
Mr Jeffery Cruz, Director, Library Student Experience, The University of Queensland  
Ms Jemma Short, Communications Officer, Global Partnerships, The University of Queensland  
Professor Jen Smith-Merry, Director, the Centre for Disability Research and Policy, The University of Sydney  
Professor Jenny Dixon, Provost, Universitas 21  
Dr Jenny Povey, Deputy Director (Training), Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland  
Professor Joanna Regulska, Vice Provost and Dean and U21 Senior Leader, Global Affairs, University of California, Davis  
Ms Josepha Dietrich, Senior Communications Officer, Global Partnerships, The University of Queensland

Mr Joshua Hori, Accessible Technology Analyst, Student Disability Center, University of California, Davis  
Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore  
Ms Justine Cawley, Senior Manager, Library Research Services, Scholarly Communication and Repository Services, The University of Queensland  
Professor Kathy Belov, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Global & Engagement and U21 Senior Leader, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, The University of Sydney  
Dr Kathy Ellem, Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, The University of Queensland  
Ms Katie Lee, PhD Candidate & Research Assistant, Frazer Institute, The University of Queensland  
Ms Katja Durkin-Sommerhalder, Head and U21 Senior Leader, Global Affairs, University of Zurich  
Mr Ken Aberdeen, Project Manager, Application Delivery, Information Technology Services, The University of Queensland  
Mr Ky Lane, Principal UX Developer, Research Systems, The University of Queensland  
Ms Lauren Cunningham, Student Administration Officer, Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, The University of Queensland  
Ms Leslie Elliot, Manager, Research Infrastructure, Information Technology Services, The University of Queensland  
Professor Li'an LU, Director and U21 Senior Leader, Office of Global Partnerships, Fudan University  
Professor Liang Guo, Professor and U21 Senior Leader, Department of Marketing, The University of Hong Kong  
Professor Lilian Ferrer, Vice President for International Affairs and U21 Senior Leader, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile  
Mr Lou Johansson, Associate Director, Workplace Diversity and Inclusion, Human Resources Division, The University of Queensland  
Associate Professor Lum Sau Kim, Associate Vice President (Global Relations) and U21 Senior Leader, Department of Real Estate at NUS Business School, National University of Singapore  
Assistant Professor Machiel Kestra, Central Diversity Officer, Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Amsterdam  
Professor Masahiko Gemma, Vice President for International Affairs and U21 Senior Leader, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Social Sciences, Waseda University  
Mr Matthew Campbell, Senior Manager – Governance and Reporting, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), The University of Queensland  
Dr Melanie Hoyle, Senior Lecturer, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Associate Professor Merrill Turpin, Research Fellow, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Professor Michael Wesley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Global Culture & Engagement and U21 Senior Leader, Office Global Culture and Engagement, The University of Melbourne  
Dr Michelle King, Research Fellow, Queensland Aphasia Research Centre, The University of Queensland  
Dr Miriam Moeller, Associate Professor in International Business, Business School, The University of Queensland  
Ms Mirko Varano, Vice Rector for Internationalisation and U21 Senior Leader, International Affairs, Tecnológico de Monterrey  
Ms Morag Kelly, Inclusive Practice and Research Officer, Centre for Disability Studies, The University of Sydney  
Professor Nancy Pachana, Clinical Geropsychologist, School of Psychology, The University of Queensland  
Dr Ngozi Taffe, Associate Vice President, Global Affairs and U21 Senior Leader, University of Connecticut

Mr Nick Yao, Research Assistant, T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland  
Professor Nigel Mongan, Researcher of Oncology and U21 Senior Leader, Biodiscovery Institute, University of Nottingham  
Professor Paul Harpur OAM, ARC Future Fellow, T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland  
Mr Paul Sheeran, Director, Enterprise Technologies, The University of Queensland  
Ms Paula Hearn, Accessibility Program Manager, AccessMac Program, McMaster University  
Professor Peter Lievens, Vice-Rector International, Chair of the Senior Leaders' Group and U21 Senior Leader, KU Leuven  
Ms Rachel Ellison, Senior Manager, Global Partnerships, The University of Queensland  
Ms Rachel Sandison, Deputy Vice Chancellor and U21 Senior Leader, External Engagement, University of Glasgow  
Professor Rhonda Faragher, Director, Down Syndrome Research Program, School of Education, The University of Queensland  
Mr Richard Stenelo, International Director and Deputy Executive Director U21 Senior Leader, Lund University  
Professor Rob Wilton, Researcher on social geographies of disabled people, Faculty of Science and Faculty of Social Science, McMaster University  
Professor Robin Mason, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) and U21 Senior Leader, University of Birmingham  
Mr Rongyu Li, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and U21 Senior Leader, Global Engagement, The University of Queensland  
Dr Ross Lewin, Associate Vice President and U21 Senior Leader, Office of International Affairs, University of Maryland  
Dr Sammy Li, Assistant Director of Student Affairs (Postgraduate and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion), University of Birmingham  
Professor Sang Kee Song, Vice President of International Affairs and U21 Senior Leader, Department of Spanish Language & Literature, Korea University  
Ms Sarah Brown, Associate Director, Research Strategy and Performance, Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), The University of Queensland  
Dr Sarah Reedman, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Queensland Cerebral Palsy Rehabilitation and Research Centre, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Professor Sarah Wallace, NHMRC Emerging Leadership 2 Fellow, Queensland Cerebral Palsy Rehabilitation and Research Centre, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences, The University of Queensland  
Ms Sasha Wells, Senior Manager, Digital Capability and Student Experience, UQ Library, The University of Queensland  
Dr Shiralee Poed, Associate Professor, School of Education, The University of Queensland  
Dr Sophelia Hoi Shan Chan, Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, The University of Hong Kong  
Ms Sophie Derrick, Research Assistant, T.C. Beirne School of Law, The University of Queensland  
Professor T.H. Tse, Honorary Professor, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, School of Computing and Data Science, The University of Hong Kong  
Ms Virginie Lecomte Maloney, Centre Manager, Centre for Disability Research and Policy, The University of Sydney  
Dr Wuri Handayani, Lecturer, Accounting Department at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
Mis Xinyi Yu, Magister of Commerce: Data analytics for business, The University of Sydney  
Professor Ylva Rodny-Gumede, Senior Director of Global Engagement and U21 Senior Leader, Communication and Media Studies, University of Johannesburg

## Individual acknowledgements

We further want to acknowledge the Universitas 21 Network, its members, and individuals who have contributed to the success of this report



## First Nations Acknowledgment

We recognise that due to the impacts of colonisation, Indigenous peoples are more likely to be living with disability and / or chronic illness compared to the wider population. This Review acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which the 30 U21 Network universities are situated, and pays respects to their Elders, past and present.

The status of traditional owners of lands differs across the footprints of the U21 Network's 30 universities, and the lead author Professor Paul Harpur OAM is based at The University of Queensland (UQ) and thus will provide an acknowledgement which is more reflective of the traditional lands on which he and many authors work.

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

The traditional owners acknowledged here include all those who are the traditional owners of the lands on which UQ operates. The UQ main campuses include 3 campuses in or around Brisbane city, being St Lucia, Dutton Park and Herston, as well as a campus at Gatton in the Lockyer Valley. The UQ geographical footprint includes off-campus sites with the Translational Research Institute, marine research stations at Heron and Stradbroke Islands, mineral research centre, seismograph station, veterinary and agricultural science teaching and research centres at Gatton, UQ Business School Brisbane City, social science research at Long Pocket, and teaching hospitals, health centres and other medical research facilities. The University's overseas establishments include UQ's North America office in Washington D.C., and the UQ-Ochsner Clinical School in Louisiana, United States of America.

Most students and staff are based in Brisbane city, which for tens of thousands of years was known by its traditional name, Meeanjin, which means "the place of the blue water lilies." Brisbane is the traditional home of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples. UQ has geographic footprints on the lands of other traditional owners, and thus we also acknowledge:

- Bundaberg Rural Clinical School: Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Taribelang Bunda peoples
- Gatton campus: Yuggera peoples
- Heron Island Research Station: Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Taribelang Bunda peoples
- Hervey Bay: Butchulla people
- Meadowbrook - Yugambah Speaking Peoples
- Moreton Bay Research Station and Redland Hospital - Quandamooka people
- Rockhampton Rural Clinical School - Darumbal People
- Veterinary Practice Dayboro - Kabi Kabi people

# Method and approach

## Paul Harpur and Brooke Szucs

### Planning phase

This report has been made possible by the support of the U21 Secretariat and disability inclusion support within member universities. Efforts to build and strengthen collaboration on disability Inclusion was formalised in 2023 with the establishment of the U21 Disability Community of Practice.

When the U21 Senior Leaders' Group was developing the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement they consulted with the U21 Disability Community of Practice. As part of this process, Professor Harpur proposed to the U21 Disability Community of Practice that he led a policy mapping initiative to advance the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement. After consulting with the U21 Disability Community of Practice, as well as colleagues across the network, it was decided to seek support from the U21 Senior Leaders' Group in their April 2024 meeting in Hong Kong for a U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative.

In their April 2024 meeting, the Senior Leaders' Group reiterated their commitment to advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion by adopting the U21 Framework for Equitable and Inclusive Global Engagement and by agreeing to support the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative to be led by Professor Paul Harpur.

Following approval by the U21 Senior Leaders' Group, Professor Paul Harpur reached out to Mr Paul Sheeran to benefit from his project management expertise. Paul Sheeran formed

an Oversight Project Management Group which provided valuable support to this report's success. In particular, the Oversight Project Management Group assisted in the development of a project management plan to manage a project across 30 universities situated in over 20 countries, spread across all inhabited continents, with language barriers and multiple work groups at each university.

A draft of the project management plan was shared with the U21 Disability Community of Practice, as well as key groups within to gain feedback, including the Disability Collaboratory, the Disability Inclusion Group, and the Disability Inclusion and Advocacy Network. After implementing suggested changes, the project management plan was adopted.

The project management plan called for data to be collected via a survey and through a manual document collection process. To facilitate this, existing networks were used to gather U21 staff members to support in finalising the research tools, and to participate in the data gathering, analysis and writing of this report.

In addition to the Oversight Project Management Group, staff were sorted into teams aligned with the thematic chapters in this report. During the process some staff withdrew, and new staff joined the project. Those who made a substantive contribution to thematic chapters have been named as authors.

## Data collection

### The U21 Disability Policy Mapping survey

A literature review was performed by the project team to identify key themes. Drawing upon this, as well as decades of academic and professional experience, the research team co-designed the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping survey. The survey was piloted tested at and several questions were added which addressed policy questions confronting those who delivered disability inclusion interventions.

The U21 Disability Policy Mapping survey aimed to gather information on disability inclusion policies and practices across the U21 Network of universities. The survey contained 30 questions covering various aspects of disability inclusion. Topics covered included:

1. **Governance:** Structure and evaluation of disability inclusion efforts.
2. **Strategies:** University-wide strategic plans and specific disability inclusion plans.
3. **Research:** Disability inclusion research groups and strategies.
4. **Courses:** Availability of disability studies programs.
5. **Training:** Disability awareness training for students and staff.
6. **Data Collection:** Collection of data on students and staff with disabilities.
7. **Accommodations:** Policies for making accommodations for students and staff.
8. **Support Services:** Support provided by libraries, IT services, and facilities.
9. **Innovative Initiatives:** Examples of innovative disability inclusion initiatives.
10. **Contacts:** Points of contact for sharing findings and participating in the U21 Disability Community of Practice.

The survey sort qualitative responses and relevant documents to inform shared insights and public resources aimed at enhancing disability inclusion across the U21 Network.

Ethical clearance for this project was obtained from UQ under reference number 2024/HE001229. After ethics approval was secured, an invitation to participate in the U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative was shared across the U21 Network along with invitations to complete the survey being emailed by the U21 Secretariat to their contacts within member universities. In addition, the survey was distributed by members of the U21 Disability Community of Practice to colleagues they knew, at their university and others in the U21 Network, who would be well-equipped to respond.

### Manual searching

During the drafting of the survey tool, it was anticipated that the fragmented nature of disability inclusion policies across universities would result in incomplete responses. As anticipated, the fragmented nature of disability inclusion in universities made it challenging for staff members to provide full responses in all areas of the survey. Thusly, researchers from the thematic teams agreed to perform manual searches to ensure the data set was representative.

Often those working on the thematic chapters had engaged in policy searches of university websites for academic or professional purposes and thus were familiar with search protocols. Where this was not the case, the project lead was able to provide support.

In addition to relying upon staff assigned to thematic chapters, efforts were made to reduce challenges created by culture and language across the U21 Network. Professor Harpur used his ARC Future Fellowship funds to retain Ms Brooke Szucs, who speaks Japanese, German and Spanish, and Mr Nick Yao, who speaks all Chinese languages, to analyse documents and make direct contacts with U21 Network universities where these languages were the primary language of communication to elicit additional data.

## Data collected

A total of 22 universities submitted to the survey, contributing data that formed the foundation of the analysis. The data provided in the survey included qualitative responses along with documents that were uploaded to the survey and in other cases links to policy and websites. Where websites were provided, the documents were downloaded. This process elicited over 300 policy artifacts - policy documents and websites that explains processes.

The survey data was gathered and distributed to the teams working on thematic chapters. A preliminary analysis of the data was performed and gaps identified. To fill the gaps identified, manual data was collected from university websites, as well as requesting staff of target universities support in the provision of data.

## Data analysis

With the exceptions of chapters 1.2 and 2.1 which provide analysis of developing disability norms, and of chapter 1.5, on intersectionality, the approach to data analysis was the same in all other chapters. Even though the methods of chapters 1.2, 1.4 align with the method in this method chapter, the authors of those chapters desired to explain their methods in their chapters and thus those chapters include a method section.

The data was shared with the teams and support was provided to help narrow which

documents were most relevant to each thematic team.

To understand how different universities approached disability inclusion in each area, and to help identify innovative and best practices, each team engaged in a comparative policy analysis over the documents. This involved examining how different universities address accessibility and support based upon the qualitative data provided in the survey, as well as in the policies and websites gathered. Those involved in the analysis drew from their personal expertise working in the relevant policy area, as well as drawing upon scholarship and disability norms. Through this process, recommendations were developed for each chapter.

The involvement of multiple authors resulted in some variation of language, due to differing theoretical perspectives, and some slight variation in how chapters are structured. We fundamentally believe that diversity is a strength and decided that these slight variations strengthened the report.

Progress was monitored through regular communications. Ultimately all the thematic chapters were placed in a single document and shared across those who co-authored chapters for comment and updating of their own thematic chapters. This process resulted in this final report that will be presented to the U21 Senior Leaders' Group in May 2025.

# Part 3:

## Creating an inclusive community for students with disability

- Chapter 3.1. Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design**  
*Paul Harpur, Aliisa Mylonas, Elizabeth Hitches, Wuri Handayani, Emily Singer Lucio, and Claire Shannon*
- Chapter 3.2. Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university**  
*Kathy Ellem, Paul Harpur and Sophelia Chan*
- Chapter 3.3. Students with disability and student mobility**  
*Brooke Szucs and Diana Paola Sanabria-Lozano*
- Chapter 3.4. Students with disability and extracurricular activity involvement**  
*Brooke Szucs and Faith Ong*
- Chapter 3.5. Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work**  
*Matthew Campbell, Gloria Liu, Greg Marston, and Paul Harpur*

## Chapter 3.1.

### Systems change: From reasonable adjustments to universal design

Paul Harpur, Aliisa Mylonas, Elizabeth Hitches, Wuri Handayani, Emily Singer Lucio, and Claire Shannon

#### Introduction

Over the past 2 decades, the number of students in higher education globally has more than doubled to approximately 254 million, with numbers expected to double again in the next 10 years<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the number of students with disability in higher education has markedly increased across much of the world.

In Australia, for example, the enrolment numbers of domestic undergraduate students with disability increased from 5% of the total student population in 2011 to 11.6% of the total student population in 2022.<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia, the number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions increased slightly from 7.74% in 2018 to 7.85% in 2024<sup>3</sup>. These figures do not, however, account for the number of students who do not disclose their disability due to, for example, not personally identifying as having a disability, fear of negative repercussions if they do identify, or their undergoing of a medical health diagnosis that is delaying access to support<sup>4</sup>. In some disciplines, the percentage of students with disability remains low whereas in other disciplines, the numbers are nearer one in 5 students.

Although the increase in disability representation in student cohorts is positive for society and for the higher education sector's social capital, this increase requires a shift in how the education of students with disability is approached to ensure inclusive and equitable opportunities for all.

In higher education, a medical model of disability approach is prevalent, where disability legislation and standards foster the legally obligated safeguarding of students' rights and compliance-driven institutional policy and actions. This has led to the implementation of a reasonable accommodation approach to laws and policies that largely focus on the question of inclusion after the system has been developed. Here, students with disability are treated as exceptions or special cases. Accordingly, there is a reliance on students to first be willing to disclose – and in many cases prove – their disability before they can then be considered for reasonable accommodations.

Once the disability is proven and approved, which can be expensive, universities are then legally obliged to provide reasonable accommodations to enable students' more equitable participation in higher education. What the reasonable accommodations approach does not consider is the significant number of students choosing *not* to disclose their disability yet would be entitled to reasonable accommodations should they choose to do so, estimated within the Australian higher education context, for example, to be as high as 50%.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, this approach does not evaluate the effectiveness of accommodations applied, with Weis et al. (2016) reporting that many recommendations for accommodations are "not supported by objective evidence from students'

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1 UNESCO. (2025). Higher Education. <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education>

2 Cadby, G. Pitman, T., & Koshy P. (2024). Students with disability in Australian higher education: An overview. Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success. <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/data-insights-students-with-disability/>

3 Central Bureau of Statistics, Indonesia. (2024). Statistik Pendidikan. Education Stations 2024. <https://www.bps.go.id/id/publication/2024/statistik-pendidikan-2024.html>

4 Grimes, S., Scevak, J., Southgate, E., & Buchanan, R. (2017). Non-disclosing students with disabilities or learning challenges: Characteristics and size of a hidden population. *Australasian Educational Research*, 22, 425-441. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/>

5 Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., Fischer, S., McLennan, D., & Magnussen, K. (2017). Exploring the retention and success of students with disability in Australian higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(7), 747-762. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/13603116.2016.1251980>

history, diagnosis, test data, and current functioning.”<sup>6</sup> This can result in a mismatch between the services, resources and accommodations students require, and what they receive. To enhance participation and inclusion in higher education, therefore, a greater focus on universal design – and as an extension of this, universal design for learning (UDL) which recognises “there is no ‘average’ learner [and] learners come with a variety of prior experiences, abilities, preferences and needs”<sup>7</sup> – is needed.<sup>8</sup> Such an approach moves from more reactive action on a presenting case-by-case basis, to more practice action where barriers to inclusive and equitable learning for a diverse student cohort are anticipated and removed.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting an increased focus on designing out barriers to inclusion, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines universal design, in Article 2, to include a requirement to design products, environments, programs and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.<sup>10</sup> Where disabling barriers cannot be reduced, then the CRPD requires that universities provide students with disability with reasonable accommodations.<sup>11</sup>

In some jurisdictions reasonable accommodations are referred to as reasonable adjustments, such as what occurs across the higher education sector in Australia, defined as the measures or actions taken to assist students with disability to participate in education on the same basis as other students.<sup>12</sup> In Indonesia, for example, Law 8/2016 regarding People with Disabilities states that reasonable adjustments are essential modifications needed to guarantee that people with disabilities can enjoy and exercise all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.<sup>13</sup>

For this chapter, we adopt the CRPD terminology. Here, the test of *reasonableness* in reasonable accommodations is understood as the result of a contextual test that involves an analysis of the relevance and the effectiveness of the accommodation, and the expected goal of countering discrimination.<sup>14</sup> The availability of resources and financial implications is recognised when assessing disproportionate burden, and the duty to provide reasonable accommodation is enforceable from the moment it is approved. In addition to reflecting human rights norms and a social model of inclusion, increasing the uptake of universal design creates efficiencies in the system which can save universities money and reduce workloads on staff.

In 2 parts, this chapter will analyse the need and progression from relying on a reasonable accommodations approach, to an approach which advances universal design where possible, and relies on retrofitting systems where universal design does not meet inclusion needs. This chapter will first explore how U21 Network university policies and websites describe the reasonable accommodation approach. Although reasonable accommodations are critical for inclusion, the

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6 Weis, R., Dean, E.L., & Osborne, K.J. (2016). Accommodation decision making for postsecondary students with learning disabilities: individually tailored or one size fits all? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 49(5), 484-498. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022219414559648>

7 Disability Awareness (2025). [Universal design for learning in tertiary education](#).

8 Edwards, M., Poed, S., Al-Nawab, H., & Penna, O. (2022). Academic accommodations for university students living with disability and the potential of universal design to address their needs. *Higher education*, 84(4), 779-799. <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s10734-021-00800-w>

9 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Accessible IT Group. (n.d.). What is universal design? Accessible IT Group. <https://accessibleit.disability.illinois.edu/universal-design/what-is-universal-design/>

10 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2014). General Comment No. 2: Article 9: Accessibility (11th sess, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/2, 22 May 2014), United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/812025?v=pdf>

11 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern University Law Journal*, 10, 542.

12 Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. (2016). [Reasonable adjustments: disability specific](#).

13 Database Peraturan. (2025). Law (UU) No. 8 of 2016. Persons with disabilities: Main material of the regulation. <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/>

14 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). General Comment No. 4: Article 24: Right to inclusive education. (UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/4, Sep. 2, 2016). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive>

analysis in Part 1 will highlight the need for a more effective system. Part 2 will then explore how U21 university policies are advancing universal design and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

## Part 1. Addressing disabling barriers with reasonable accommodations

Reasonable accommodations are granted on an individual basis and modify the conditions, not academic requirements.<sup>15</sup> For illustration, this could include the provision of assistive technology and training on the use of this technology.<sup>16</sup> Rather than requiring the design and control of systems to be inclusive from the start, the reasonable accommodations model requires end users to attempt to retrofit systems to enable inclusion. Reflecting this approach, university policies require students with disability to take the lead in addressing disabling barriers to their education; as such, this is a model underpinned by self-advocacy and justification of need. As part of this process universities, such as the University of Nottingham, provide students with disability with guides on the steps they must take to arrange reasonable accommodations to enable equitable learning and assessment experiences.<sup>17</sup> Thus, students are usually expected to find and initiate contact with a central support team in their university, such as the Center for Students with Disabilities at the University of Connecticut,<sup>18</sup> the Centre of Development and Resources for Students at The University of Hong Kong,<sup>19</sup> the Disability Office at the University of Zurich,<sup>20</sup> Student Disability Services at the University of Auckland,<sup>21</sup> the Program for the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC),<sup>22</sup> the Student Support and Wellbeing Services at The University of Queensland,<sup>23</sup> or the newly created Disability Services Unit at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia<sup>24</sup>

Higher education institutional policies related to reasonable accommodations usually expect students with disability to commence arranging the accommodation process weeks before they need the supports operational, and the process can be complex.<sup>25</sup> For example, the University of Amsterdam advises students with disability to seek support at least 4 months, or as soon as they can, before the start of their study and for assessment-related accommodations, at least 6 weeks before they have a test or exam.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, KU Leuven advises students to apply and become registered for disability status before the university semester commences.<sup>27</sup> At UGM, new students are expected to disclose their disabilities and conditions during enrolment. Based on this declaration, the Disability Service Unit requires them to complete a self-assessment form via Google Forms, after which a one-to-one interview is arranged to discuss reasonable adjustments. However, such processes across these universities do not account for students who, for example, do not identify as 'disabled' nor can anticipate when their access and participation will be impacted,

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15 Disability Office, University of Zurich. (n.d.). Reasonable adjustments for students. <https://ethz.ch/staffnet/en/>

16 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). [Disability services](#).

17 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). [Disability support services](#).

18 University of Connecticut. (n.d.). Center for students with disabilities. <https://csd.uconn.edu/>

19 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Support for students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). [Undergraduate Handbook](#)

20 Disability Office, University of Zurich. (n.d.). Disability office. <https://www.disabilityoffice.uzh.ch/en.html>

21 University of Auckland. (n.d.). [Student disability services \(SDS\)](#).

22 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (2025). Inclusión: PIANE UC. <https://inclusion.uc.cl/piane-uc/>

23 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Diversity, disability and inclusion overview. <https://my.uq.edu.au/student-support/diversity-disability-inclusion>

24 Universitas Gadjah Mada. (2024). [UGM inaugurates disability services unit](#).

25 Fossey, E., Chaffey, L., Venville, A., Ennals, P., Douglas, J., & Bigby, C. (2017). *Navigating the complexity of disability support in tertiary education: Perspectives of students and disability service staff*. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(8), 822-832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1278798>

26 University of Amsterdam. (n.d.). [Studying with a disability or chronic illness](#).

27 KU Leuven. (n.d.). [Procedure to apply for the disability status - Students with a disability](#).

such as students living with chronic health conditions. Further, some students may only seek support when experiencing a crisis.

To participate in education on the same basis as other students, students with disability are generally required to meet with a Disability Services Adviser to secure support.<sup>28</sup> When seeking accommodations, they need to provide sufficient information to enable the Disability Services Adviser to assess and recommend accommodations. Though we should not expect students to be experts in disability and accommodations, students can be asked to explain how they experience disability, their past use of accommodations (if applicable), as well as their adaptive strategies.<sup>29</sup> Universities will usually ask students to provide documentation of their disability to facilitate this process.<sup>30</sup> To understand what documentation or further information could be required, students can arrange preliminary meetings. For example, students at the University of Maryland can schedule a consultation to discuss their needs and, if needed, receive guidance on obtaining appropriate documentation.<sup>31</sup> This medical evidence is then required before the student's registration meeting.

To support the efficiency of this accommodations process, students can be required to provide medical evidence in a form or process devised by the university. This can be observed at the University of Glasgow,<sup>32</sup> and<sup>33</sup> for example the Korea University's Disability Support Center, which requires students requesting support to first establish eligibility by providing documentation of an impairment that limits a major life activity, including a clear statement of the existence of an impairment, a summary indicating the current functional limitations and their extent, and relevant information regarding student's medical, educational and learning history and current concerns.<sup>34</sup> The information required of students and their medical practitioners is often detailed, involving emotional<sup>35</sup> time<sup>36</sup> and financial resources<sup>37</sup> that operate as barriers to accessing support.

When a student has a condition which will not change over their studies, such as some forms of low vision or blindness, then the requirement to establish disability occurs generally once. In contrast, students who have conditions which may alter throughout their studies can be required to provide updated evidence on a more regular basis. For example, at Waseda University, a medical documentation update is required every semester of study.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the time, effort and cost in scheduling, travelling, and attending a medical appointment, and then lodging forms with their university, students generally fund their medical diagnosis. This can involve multiple specialist

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28 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). [Reasonable Adjustments](#).

29 Association on Higher Education and Disability. (n.d.). Supporting accommodation requests: Guidance on documentation practices. <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>

30 Student Disability Center, UC Davis. (n.d.). [Student disability center](#).

31 Accessibility & Disability Service, University of Maryland. (n.d.). Documentation guidance. <https://ads.umd.edu/getting-started/documentation-guidance>

32 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). MyGlasgow - disability service - get support. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/disability/support/>

33 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). [Student services medical disability information](#).

34 Korea University. (n.d.). *Student Disability Center - KUCSD*. Global Services Center. [https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/service/support\\_center.do](https://gsc.korea.ac.kr/usr/service/support_center.do)

35 Reed, M. J., & Kennett, D. J. (2017). The importance of university students' perceived ability to balance multiple roles: A comparison of students with and without disabilities. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 47(2), 71-86.

36 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., O'Sullivan, K. A., & Ehrich, J. (2024). Leveraging students' voices: understanding ways university support services can strengthen student support. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52, 1-23.

37 Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students: A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2), 5-14. <https://eric.ed.gov/>; Martin, J. M. (2010). Stigma and student mental health in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(3), 259-274. doi/abs/10.1080/07294360903470969

38 Waseda University. (2024). [Guide to the application procedures for reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities](#).

appointments and impose a significant financial burden on students.<sup>39 40</sup>In this regard, the National University of Singapore has a scheme to support students with securing a psychological diagnosis.<sup>41</sup> Here, students who suspect they have a disability can seek funded assessments. However, if no disability is diagnosed, then students are responsible for covering assessment costs and will not be eligible for formal accommodations.

If a student is accepted as having a disability, the Disability Services Adviser will determine what accommodations are reasonable and then liaise with school / faculty staff to make the required changes. The process of a Disability Services Adviser working with each student and their (several) course teachers every semester to understand what is reasonable and unreasonable in relation to each learning and assessment environment requires a considerable investment of time and energy from all parties. With increasing numbers of students with disability enrolling in university studies, this arrangement is unsustainable; further, it can put students' academic success at risk due to delays in having reasonable accommodations finalised and in place by the start of each semester. It is also worth noting that while Disability Advisors liaise directly with students and teaching staff, many centrally funded disability services, such as that offered by The University of Sydney, are not resourced to provide counselling or case management, nor intervene on matters of special consideration, academic appeal or leniency.<sup>42</sup>

Once the accommodation is decided upon, the teaching staff have a significant role in implementing the measures. Some universities, such as The University of Edinburgh and UC Davis, offer training to help their staff support students with disability.<sup>43 44</sup> However, given that these types of professional learning activities are usually not compulsory there is no guarantee, for example, that teaching staff have had any exposure to UDL principles and the benefits of proactively anticipating the diversity of learners to counter a time- and labour-intensive retrospective accommodations system.

With increasing numbers of students with disability who may require support entering university, and a system reliant on individual appointments with a Disability Services Adviser to assess and broker accommodation agreements between faculty and students, our institutional disability support service areas will continue to be under increasing pressure to meet demand. This raises questions as to whether an accommodation system reflecting a medical model of disability is effective or sustainable given the continued growth in the numbers of students identifying as having a disability entering universities, coupled with the knowledge that a large portion of students eligible for accommodations are not disclosing their disability and are therefore not registered with disability services or accessing accommodations. We must also consider whether reasonable accommodations in their current form meet student needs. For example, assumptions can be made about the needs of students who are reluctant or unable to self-advocate for what they need,<sup>45</sup> and standard types of accommodations tend to be widely applied even though students with disability are not a homogenous group.<sup>46</sup> As such, students have reported that their experiences of support

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39 K Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students: A study of strategies for retention. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2), 5-14. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/app/uploads/2013/10/Overcoming-adversity-among-low-SES-students.pdf>

40 Martin, J. M. (2010). Stigma and student mental health in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(3), 259-274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903470969>

41 National University of Singapore. (n.d.). Funded review or new psychological assessments. <https://osa.nus.edu.sg/services-support/accessibility>

42 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). Inclusion and disability. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/health-wellbeing/inclusion-and-disability.html>

43 Student Disability Center, UC Davis. (n.d.). Student disability center. <https://sdc.ucdavis.edu/>

44 The University of Edinburgh. (n.d.). [Supporting students | Disability and Learning Support Service.](#)

45 Sarrett, J. (2018). Autism and accommodations in higher education: Insights from the autism community. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 679-693. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3353-4>

46 Darwin, S. (2021). The changing topography of student evaluation in higher education: Mapping the contemporary terrain. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(2), 220-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1740183>

vary considerably, from positive and effective, to those which placed students under immense stress and did not reduce barriers to their learning and achievement.<sup>47</sup> More recent research also suggests that students' levels of stress in higher education may be statistically similar regardless of whether they have sought support, raising questions as to how effectively unnecessary stressors or barriers in the learning environment are being identified and reduced.<sup>48</sup>

## Part II. Designing out disabling barriers with universal design and universal design for learning.

The reasonable accommodations model requires students, medical practitioners, disability services staff, and academic and other professional staff to all attempt to retrofit systems that have not fully anticipated the institution's diversity of learners. The University of New South Wales, for example, reports that it supports over a thousand students with disability with this process.<sup>49</sup> Rather than waiting for students to ask for help, universal design for learning aims to integrate accessibility/equal access by embedding inclusive design principles in the entire curriculum.

U21 universities are promoting UDL. This trend is evidenced by McMaster University's Accessibility Policy,<sup>50</sup> which recognises that universal design in education and learning extends beyond universal design in the built environment (often fixed and partial). When properly implemented, universal design removes from persons with disability, in the first instance, the burden of navigating onerous accommodation processes, and secondly, negotiating the accommodations and supports needed to act autonomously and independently. Similarly, Waseda University recognises that providing students with disability the best educational experience requires proactive improvement measures, including the promotion and adoption of universal and barrier-free designs, the training and deployment of necessary staff, and the improvement of information accessibility.<sup>51</sup> To create educational ecosystems which are inclusive and accessible by everyone, the University of Zurich aims to systematically remove barriers through embracing UDL.<sup>52</sup> At The University of Melbourne, UDL is used to implement approaches that improve accessibility of curriculum and assessment design.<sup>53</sup> This adoption of universal design is underpinned by a context of growing national and international support, such as in Ireland with the recent release of "ALTITUDE", the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.<sup>54</sup> In the United States of America, universal design is explicitly mentioned in US federal education law<sup>55</sup> along with ongoing refinement of Center for Applied Special Technology or CAST's founding UDL guidelines, now UDL 3.0<sup>56</sup>.

U21 universities adopt a range of means to help realise UDL. For example, Lund University and The University of Hong Kong provide information and resources on their websites on how to implement

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47 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., Manning, A., & Moore, B. (2025). Strengthening student support: Students' voices on what does (not) work in high school and university. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 130, 102529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102529>

48 Hitches, E., Woodcock, S., & Ehrich, J. (2023). Shedding light on students with support needs: Comparisons of stress, self-efficacy, and disclosure. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 16(2), 205. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/dhe0000328>

49 University of New South Wales. (n.d.). [Disability inclusion | Equity, Diversity & Inclusion](#).

50 McMaster University. (n.d.). Accessibility policy. Accessibility policy. <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/accessibility-policy/>

51 Waseda University, Accessibility Resource Center. (n.d.). Policy: Basic principles of Waseda University in relation to the support of students with disability. <https://www.waseda.jp/inst/dsso/en/about/policy/>

52 University of Zurich. (n.d.). Disability office. <https://www.disabilityoffice.uzh.ch/en.html>

53 The University of Melbourne. (2023). [Disability inclusion action plan \(DIAP\) 2023-2026](#).

54 AHEAD. (2024). ALTITUDE: The national charter for universal design in tertiary education. <https://www.ahead.ie/altitude>

55 CAST. (2025). [The UDL guidelines](#).

56 CAST (2025). [The UDL Guidelines](#).

UDL.<sup>57</sup> To realise universal design at The University of Queensland, there has been a broader interest in building staff capability in this approach, including some institutionally-funded teaching grants.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, The University of Melbourne has committed to developing a comprehensive university-wide training program on UDL.<sup>59</sup> This approach is reflected at McMaster University where a university-wide holistic, systemic approach has been advanced.<sup>60</sup> Recognising the value of champions, the University College Dublin has appointed role models to become the University's corps of academic universal design pathfinders.<sup>61</sup>

Universal design extends beyond learning and, illustratively, U21 universities target universal design in services used by students and staff, in recruitment and selection processes, and in other aspects of work.<sup>62,63</sup> Universal design is also promoted in the research ecosystem.<sup>64</sup> At the University of Auckland, universal design is championed to enable barrier-free and equal access to the built environment and digital spaces.<sup>65</sup> The University of Connecticut goes further, mandating accessibility of its digital information, communication, content, and technologies.<sup>66</sup> U21 universities are thus seeing growing interest and implementation of universal design; however, it should be noted that while some universities are at the stage of broadly applying universal design principles, others are just at the beginning of their universal design and UDL journey.

## Recommendations

To support systemic change from reasonable accommodations (medical model of disability) to universal design (social model of inclusion), and in genuine consultation and collaboration with students with disability (*Nothing About Us Without Us*<sup>67</sup>) and other key stakeholders, several actions are recommended for universities.

- a) **Embrace universal design, including universal design of learning:** In recognition of the benefits of universal design, including UDL, to complement and reduce overreliance on reasonable accommodations, it is recommended that universities should formally commit to institutional adoption of a universal design approach to support the inclusion of students with disability and indeed, broader student diversity noting students' intersecting identities.<sup>68</sup>
- b) **Strengthen implementation of reasonable accommodation processes:** While universal design and UDL will enhance participation and access, it will not address every disabling barrier. As such, it is recommended that universities review and apply best practice to their reasonable accommodation policies and procedures, as well as support emerging policy development by

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57 Lund University. (n.d.). *Learning support: Support for students with disabilities*. <https://www.staff.lu.se/research-and-education/education-support/student-support/learning-support>; The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). *Support for students with special education needs support services*. <https://www.cedars.hku.hk/sen-support>

58 The University of Queensland. (n.d. -b). *Disability action plan 2023-2025*.

59 The University of Melbourne. (2023). *Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023-2026*.

60 McMaster University. (n.d.). *Accessibility in teaching and learning roadmap*. <https://provost.mcmaster.ca/teaching-learning/strategy/implementation-plan/>

61 University College Dublin. (2021). *UCD widening participation committee annual report 2020/21*.

62 University of Queensland. (n.d.). *Disability inclusion and reasonable adjustment for staff procedure*. <https://policies.uq.edu.au/>

63 University College Dublin. (n.d.). *UCD supporting the employment of people with disabilities*. <https://www.ucd.ie/equality/>

64 The University of Sydney. (2023). *Call to action: Lived experience-led research at the University of Sydney*.

65 University of Auckland. (2022). *Waipapa Taumata Rau: The University of Auckland disability action plan 2022-2025*.

66 University of Connecticut. (2019). *Information and communication technology (ICT) accessibility policy*. <https://policy.uconn.edu/2019/08/02/info-comm-tech/>

67 Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>

68 Meadows-Haworth, C. (2023). The intersectional disadvantages for disabled women students in UK higher education. *The International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 3(2), 49-70. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/>

those U21 universities in the earlier stages of their universal design and UDL institutional journeys.

- c) **Leveraging the U21 Network to realise universal design:** It is recommended that U21 universities leverage their network by utilising their collective strengths in learning, research, and innovation to build spaces for shared training, resource development, and joint contributions to scholarship. For example, an executive-level cross-institutional committee / community of practice could be established to develop minimal standards for widespread adoption, such as converting the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines<sup>69</sup> into guidelines explicitly relevant to the development of accessible resources and learning management systems in higher education. Further, it will be essential to consider how the U21 Network supports its member universities who are at the early stages of understanding universal design, noting that there are many universities yet to adopt *these* principles at an institutional level and / or apply UDL broadly to their teaching, learning and assessment environments. Leveraging the knowledge of the U21 community to share learnings and best practice, including optimising access to existing resources and guidance, can accelerate this practice.

## Conclusion

The shift from reasonable accommodations to universal design in higher education is essential for creating an inclusive environment for all students, including those with disability. The increasing number of students with disability enrolling in higher education institutions highlights the need for a more proactive and inclusive approach to accessibility, where products, environments, programs, and services are designed to be usable by all people and to the greatest extent possible from the outset, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. In doing so, this approach increases access and inclusion for all students, including those with disability (disclosed or otherwise), while at the same time creating efficiencies that will save universities money and reduce staff workloads. Such an approach would also reduce the burden on students to continually self-advocate, particularly where known and predictable barriers to learning could instead be proactively reduced before students encounter them.

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<sup>69</sup> W3C (2025). Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2. <https://www.w3.org/>

## Chapter 3.2.

### Support provided to students with disabilities transitioning to university

Kathy Ellem, Paul Harpur and Sophelia Chan

#### Introduction

People transition to university from school, vocational training, and from other avenues. In all these transitions, students with disabilities have a more complicated path. Persons with disabilities are often discouraged from higher education or not provided the necessary skills to continue studies beyond K-12 (Kindergarten to Year 12). Once invited to study at a university, a student with a disability encounters a raft of additional challenges before they can start studying not experienced by students who live without a disability. The CRPD provides a right to higher education in Article 24(5) which enshrines a raft of measures to enable persons with disabilities to exercise their right to higher education.<sup>70</sup> Reflecting this, the CRPD Committee explains the right to education in the CRPD entitled persons with disabilities to demand support transition through their education journey from kindergarten / preschool to finishing secondary school, through to university and / or into work.<sup>71</sup>

In 3 parts, this chapter analyses whether the U21 Network universities are providing additional supports to persons with disabilities who are looking to transition to university. The transition process starts when a potential student believes higher education could be for them. The factors which influence potential students to approach universities are numerous, but Part 1 will consider university disability outreach programming. This outreach programming can include activities which inform potential students with disabilities as well as communicating to this cohort that there is a place for them at university by targeted placement programs. Part 2 will then analyse disability specific pre-orientation and orientation programming. Part 3 will analyse the range of supports universities provide to students with disabilities to get them onto campus and ready to commence study.

#### Part 1. Outreach to offer

The fact potential university students can have no direct relationship with universities, such as if they are studying in a K-12 education, means a lot of information provided to potential students comes from government or other sources. For example, the Queensland Government provides a fact sheet which recommends that the person speak to the enrolment officer of the particular university at the time of enrolment regarding accessing support.<sup>72</sup> A list of URL links is provided to relevant web pages of Queensland's universities which summarise each institution's disability support. Similarly, there are resources provided to specific disability cohorts. Illustratively, Think College provides resources, technical assistance and training related to college options for students with intellectual disabilities and manages the only US listing of college programs for students with intellectual disabilities.<sup>73</sup> The institute also undertakes research and evaluation in this space and in 2023 provided a game-based curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities called Future Quest Island Explorations which helps develop awareness on college and career choices.

To encourage potential equity students to apply to university, U21 universities have a range of outreach programs. Sometimes these plans reference disability as one of many cohorts. For

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70 Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Universities as disability rights change agents. *Northeastern University Law review*, 10, 542.

71 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2016). *General comment no. 4 on the right to inclusive education*. (UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/4, Sep. 2, 2016). United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record.pdf>

72 Queensland Government. (n.d.). *Transition to post-school for students with disability: Fact sheet for students and parents/carers*.

73 ThinkCollege. (n.d.). *Institute for community inclusion (what is think college)?* <https://thinkcollege.net/about/what-is-think-college>

example, the University of Birmingham Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 aims to develop outreach programs for a range of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, The University of Queensland's Queensland Commitment aims to provide opportunities for all Queenslanders. Recognising people with disabilities as a vulnerable population, UQ integrates disability inclusion into its initiatives, including flagship programs like the Young Achievers Program (YAP) and Inspire.

Other U21 Network universities have events aimed at potential students with disabilities. The University of Edinburgh runs an on-line transition event for potential students, who have a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum condition, as well as to their families.<sup>75</sup> The University of Edinburgh explains that they understand that the transition to university can be difficult, so the transition event hopes to address questions or concerns.

Whereas outreach programming encourages potential students with disabilities to apply to university, targeted admission schemes take this one step further. For illustration, the University of Auckland's Undergraduate Targeted Admission Schemes (UTAS) is a scheme for eligible applicants who are Māori, Pacific, disabled or from low socioeconomic or refugee backgrounds.<sup>76</sup> UTAS reserves a number of places in University of Auckland's undergraduate programs for applicants who have met the University Entrance standard but have not met the guaranteed entry score for the program of their choice.

These targeted admission schemes can exclusively focus on students who have missed out on an offer at the university. For example, 3% of seats at the University of Delhi are allocated to students who have a physical disability who did not receive an offer.<sup>77</sup>

## Part 2. Orientation before commencing studies

The added complexity experienced by students with disabilities transitioning into university has motivated some U21 Network universities to provide pre-orientation activities. For example, McMaster University in Canada conducts a 2-week program called MacStart: Transition program for students with disabilities.<sup>78</sup> This program provides a range of activities related to learning study skills, using assistive technology, weekly mentorship drop-ins, zoom sessions for parents, family and caregivers, and an asynchronous online course to learn further about academic life. The program is run before existing students with disabilities commence their studies but does not require the student to register their disability with the university. Similarly, the University of Birmingham provides a transition event for students on the spectrum called BeBirmingham.<sup>79</sup> This free and optional 2-day event for enrolled students takes place before the start of Welcome Week, gives students a chance to explore the campus, meet a small group of students and move into accommodation early. Students are invited to bring along a support person if they wish to.

Other U21 Network universities provide disability-specific supports during orientation. In addition to the provision of reasonable accommodations / adjustments, universities can provide targeted supports.<sup>80</sup> For example, students with disabilities commencing at Lund University can arrange preparatory visits.<sup>81</sup> An addition example of support is events for students with disabilities. For

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74 University of Birmingham. (2025). [Access and participation plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#).

75 The University of Edinburgh, Disability and Learning Support Service. (2024). [Transition Event for new students with an autism spectrum condition](#).

76 University of Auckland. (2016). [Undergraduate targeted admission schemes policy and procedures](#). <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en.html>

77 University of Delhi. (n.d.). [Distribution of seats category & course wise for admission to bachelor degree with honours](#). <https://www.du.ac.in/SeatsDistribution.pdf>

78 McMaster University. (2024). [MacStart: Transition program for students with disabilities](#). Student Success Centre. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/>

79 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). [Next steps for applicants with a disability](#). <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/student-experience/advice-support/disability/next-steps>

80 University of Hong Kong. (2024). [Orientation Regulations for Student Societies 2025](#). <https://leaf.cedars.hku.hk/orientation-regulations/>

81 Lunds University. (n.d.). [Inclusive Mobility](#). <https://inclusivemobility.eu/>

illustration, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) hosted a function during orientation for UGM students with disabilities.<sup>82</sup> This event aimed to foster connections between new and returning students and provided them with information about support and facilities available to aid their studies at UGM.

### Part 3. Practical support in transitioning to university

It is common for U21 Network universities to have a disability services office to help students with disabilities. Illustrative examples of such offices can be found at Korea University,<sup>83</sup> Lund University,<sup>84</sup> National University of Singapore,<sup>85</sup> Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile,<sup>86</sup> University College Dublin,<sup>87</sup> University of Amsterdam,<sup>88</sup> University of California, Davis,<sup>89</sup> University of Glasgow,<sup>90</sup> The University of Hong Kong,<sup>91</sup> University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign,<sup>92</sup> University of Johannesburg,<sup>93</sup> and The University of Queensland.<sup>94</sup> Although these offices all provide support, the extent of the details for students transitioning to university for the first time is variable. The University of Maryland is a good example of a disability support page which provides targeted details for students entering university for the first time.<sup>95</sup> The University of Maryland's Transitioning to UMD website provides specific information on the different accommodation processes for high school students, transfer students and graduate students with disabilities.

When it comes to what supports students with disabilities may need to access when transitioning to university, the University of Connecticut's Types of Accommodations page provides helpful detail.<sup>96</sup> This website provides details on the main areas where students with disabilities may require support, including:

- Academic accommodations
- Campus access accommodations
- Residential accommodations

Sorting out academic accommodations / adjustments were analysed in Chapter 3.1 of this report, and access to the built environment covered in Chapter 5.3, thus these issues will simply be noted in this chapter.

Finding a place to live is critical for students with disabilities and presents additional challenges. Beyond the actual accommodation, students with disabilities must consider where there is accessible transport<sup>97</sup> and accessibility of the built environment.<sup>98</sup> To support students with

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82 Agung Nugroho. (2024). UGM's Peduli Difabel holds meeting with new students with disabilities. Universitas Gadjah Mada. <https://ugm.ac.id/en/>

83 Korea University. (n.d.). Korea University Center for students with disabilities. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/support/regi.do>

84 Lund University. (n.d.). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/>

85 National University of Singapore. (n.d.). Accessibility support. Office of Student Affairs. <https://osa.nus.edu.sg/services-support/accessibility-support/>

86 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). Disability and learning support. <https://global.ed.ac.uk/study-work-away/disability-and-learning-support>

87 University College Dublin. (n.d.). Disability support - UCD access and lifelong learning. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

88 University of Amsterdam. (n.d.). [Studying with a disability or chronic illness.](#)

89 University of California, Davis. (n.d.). Student disability center. <https://sdc.ucdavis.edu/>

90 University of Glasgow. (n.d.). Disability service. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/disability/>

91 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Support for students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN). [Undergraduate Handbook](#)

92 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. (n.d.). Disability resources and educational services. <https://dres.illinois.edu/>

93 University of Johannesburg. (n.d.). Disability services. <https://www.uj.ac.za/>

94 The University of Queensland. (n.d.). Diversity, disability and inclusion. <https://my.uq.edu.au/information-and-services/student-support/diversity-disability-inclusion>

95 University of Maryland, Accessibility & Disability Service. (n.d.). Transitioning to UMD. <https://ads.umd.edu/transitioning-umd>

96 University of Connecticut, Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). Types of Accommodations. <https://csd.uconn.edu/accommodations/>

97 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Accessibility and transportation – Students with a disability. <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/stuvo/studentswithadisability>

98 University of Queensland. (2023). [St Lucia Campus 2023 Accessibility Map.](#)

disabilities identifying the availability of accessible rooms, Lund University provides a database.<sup>99</sup> Universities such as KU Leuven<sup>100</sup> and University of Maryland<sup>101</sup> provide students with disabilities advocacy support in assisting them to ensure that they can find residential accommodations and that their living needs are met. Beyond just providing support to find housing,<sup>102</sup> the University of Connecticut extends support to students with disabilities by arranging meal plans that meet their dietary needs.<sup>103</sup>

Additionally, students with certain disabilities can benefit from early access to their accommodation. For example, in addition to ensuring there is room for personal assistants and / or Guide Dogs to live with the student and offering private viewings to ensure accommodation is appropriate, the University of Birmingham offers students with disabilities early check-in to avoid Arrivals Weekend.<sup>104</sup>

## Recommendations

- a) **Enhanced Outreach Programs:** Working with government and schools, universities should develop specific outreach programs that directly address the needs and concerns of potential students with disabilities. This could include tailored information sessions, workshops, and online resources. These communications should also consider students with specific disabilities who are under-represented in the University sector, such as students with intellectual disabilities. Such efforts should involve partnering with high schools, vocational training centres and rehabilitation providers to provide early information and support to students with disabilities considering higher education.
- b) **Pre-Orientation and Orientation Programs:** Universities should implement comprehensive pre-orientation programs similar to McMaster University's MacStart, which includes activities like learning study skills, using assistive technology, and mentorship.
- c) **Accessible Housing:** Universities should strive to ensure that all university accommodations have options for all students. The shortage of disability inclusive options should be addressed. Once students are enrolled, universities should provide supports to students with disabilities in finding rooms and checking in. This should include early check-in options for students with disabilities to avoid the rush of Arrivals Weekend.

## Conclusion

The transition to university for students with disabilities is a multifaceted process that requires comprehensive support systems. This chapter has analysed how U21 Network universities provide support to students who are transitioning to university. This analysis reveals a variety of outreach, pre-orientation, orientation, and practical support programs aimed at facilitating this transition. These initiatives are crucial in ensuring that students with disabilities not only access higher education but also realise their right to higher education set out in the CRPD.

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99 KU Leuven. (n.d.). *Access guide*. <https://www.kuleuven.be/kulag/en#/>

100 KU Leuven. (n.d.). *Housing & living support for students with a physical disability*. <https://www.kuleuven.be>

101 University of Maryland. (n.d.). *Housing accommodations*. <https://ads.umd.edu/accommodations-services/housing-accommodations>

102 University of Connecticut, Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). *Housing accommodations*. <https://csd.uconn.edu/housing-accommodations/>

103 University of Connecticut, Center for Students with Disabilities. (n.d.). *Meal plan modifications*. <https://csd.uconn.edu/meal-plan-modifications/>

104 University of Birmingham. (n.d.). *Accessible accommodation*. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/accommodation/accessible-accommodation>

## Chapter 3.3.

### Students with disability and student mobility

Brooke Szucs and Diana Paola Sanabria-Lozano

#### Introduction

The U21 Network places a strong emphasis on global mobility programs as a cornerstone of its offerings. U21 aims to provide access to intercultural activities that connect its members across 21 countries, primarily through international mobility opportunities for students within the network.

In recent years, the network has placed a particular focus on creating equitable access to these opportunities for students from EDI backgrounds. One notable initiative has been the introduction of online global mobility experiences, which have benefited over 1,500 students who might otherwise have been excluded from traditional mobility programs.<sup>105</sup>

Given U21's commitment to EDI and global mobility, this chapter explores how individual member universities support students with disabilities in this context. A desktop analysis was conducted to examine 2 key areas:

1. How universities support students with disabilities in accessing global exchange opportunities, whether long-term or short-term.
2. How international students with disabilities are accommodated.

In 2 parts, this chapter will give an overview on how the university members of the U21 Network collectively address these questions and strive for the globalisation of their student communities with disability. This chapter will first explore opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in global mobility and will then analyse how policies and websites accommodate international or incoming exchange students with disabilities.

#### Part 1. Students with Disabilities in Global Mobility Opportunities

This section of the study sought evidence of supports available for students with disabilities to participate in exchange programs. It aimed to answer 3 key questions:

1. What supports are available?
2. Are students with disabilities explicitly included?
3. How are these students supported?

The authors found that McMaster University in Canada had an explicit statement regarding the inclusion of exchange students with disabilities. Their webpage 'Incoming exchange students'<sup>106</sup> featured the following statement:

*"If you have any accessibility or accommodation needs, you or your home counsellor should contact [sastransition@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sastransition@mcmaster.ca) and [macincoming@mcmaster.ca](mailto:macincoming@mcmaster.ca)".*

This is useful because students have a clear avenue for gaining support. They do not have to worry about cultural differences when asking for supports, as they are explicitly asked as an incoming exchange student if they require accessibility or accommodation adjustments. More so, they are encouraged to use their home university counsellor who may already be familiar with their needs and supports to help the process, especially when it comes to

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<sup>105</sup> U21. (2024). Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

<sup>106</sup> McMaster University. (2024). Incoming exchange students. Student Success Centre. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/international-students/>

translating these supports to new contexts. This may save time and ensure that students feel prepared for starting their university semester, knowing their adjustments are already in place. This is especially relevant for ensuring equity for students with disabilities who are already using extra time to prepare for their global experiences and more likely to be time-poor than the general student population. This is a very small statement but communicates a lot to students with disabilities looking for exchange programs.

For outgoing students, University College Dublin<sup>107</sup> explicitly offers advice on managing their disability when away, key contacts at the host university, as well as other resources to support these students. Both authors are students with disabilities who have been on global experiences, and the above examples have resonated strongly with them as something desirable for a host university to have.

Lund University included a specific mention for incoming exchange students on their 'Students with disabilities' page<sup>108</sup>. They feature the following statement:

*"If you intend to come to Lund University on an exchange program, you and your coordinator at your home university need to contact us when you apply for exchange."*

There are some benefits to this approach, though the wording may be seen as impacting on the application process. This same page also explains which services the offices provide, specifying that personal assistance is provided by the municipality. They note that this is only available to students whose studies will last more than 12 months, which may exclude exchange and some international students.

While these statements are helpful, only some universities had dedicated services or programs for these students. The Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC Chile) has created an international mobility program for students with disabilities,<sup>109</sup> where partnerships with 5 Spanish universities allows UC to place students with disabilities there as a matter of priority. Not only do these dedicated spaces exist, they are also supported with academic accommodations and other supports and resources for the exchange student with disabilities. This is a great example of taking initiative to remove identified barriers to create equal access to all educational activities, as well as an example of a strategic level direction creating change.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, the University of Birmingham aims to empower disabled students to participate in international exchange programs. Their Student Disability Advisers support outgoing and incoming exchange students during pre-departure preparations, ensuring that support requirements are integrated and communicated with the university or host institutions. The university collaborates with the Go Global and Birmingham Global teams to facilitate smooth exchanges and effective communication with international partners. Additionally, the Student EDI team develops resources to enhance students' confidence and readiness for international travel. Eligible outgoing exchange students with disabilities can also access additional funding through the Turing Scheme to cover support and travel costs.

The University of Hong Kong follows a similar pattern of support with their SEN department facilitating incoming and departing exchange students, especially with an emphasis on communication between the home and the host universities.

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107 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

108 Lund University. (2024). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/student-life/before-you-arrive/students-disabilities>

109 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (2021). UC Chile created the first international mobility program for students with disabilities. <https://www.uc.cl/en/news/>

110 As for Footnote 5.

## Part 2. International Students with Disabilities

This part of the study focused on international students with disabilities, addressing the following questions:

1. Are these students included in strategic considerations?
2. What supports are available for them?
3. Are these supports reflected in policies or strategic plans?

Generally, international students are regarded just as any other student at the university, with the same rights and entitlements as other students. While the supports for students with disabilities may apply equally to both domestic and international students, the way this is communicated to incoming students makes a difference in the real accessibility of these resources. That is, if they are not clearly communicated to incoming students, they may be accessed later than practicable, or not at all - thereby, removing access.

As such, clear statements including international students are important for equal access.

Some universities<sup>111 112</sup> which link international student resource webpages to other student supports included direct links to disability services. Lund University has a website 'The International Desk,'<sup>113</sup> which aims to welcome all international students. It states that it is a point of contact for any practical support, such as 'anything from where to buy a bike, how to find your department or how to get involved in student life is welcome'. This page features a list of relevant student services for international students, including for students with disabilities. The connecting page<sup>114</sup> is also very explicit and clear in instruction, an important part of access.

This was helpful because it signals to students with disabilities that this process is truly inclusive and creates confidence in attending the university. The effect of these types of signals is like that provided by the comment from McMaster University above.

University College Dublin has a section for international students on their 'Disability Support' page.<sup>115</sup> This section clearly states the rights of international students and the legislation and context that governs this. This also provides the benefits of clearly communicating access and including this intersection in their considerations. However, the international student facing pages don't appear to link back to this, which would be ideal for creating a closed loop.

### Limitations

One thing of note is the limit of access to some resources. Multiple universities had resources that were protected by a passcode, which means that new students or prospective students without a login would not have access to this information. What was also of note was that not all websites were fully accessible to someone with a vision impairment, which is an obstacle to access. For example, University College Dublin<sup>116</sup> has an informative and high-quality website for disability support; however, the page for international students and exchange students is not so accessible.

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111 Lund University. (n.d.). *The international desk*.

112 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). *International students*.

113 Lund University. (n.d.). *The international desk*.

114 Lund University. (2024). Students with disabilities. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/>

115 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

116 University College Dublin. (2024). Disability support. <https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/disabilitysupport/>

## Recommendations

- a) **Clear access to disability support information:** Universities that provide disability support to international students should explicitly state this on their websites and link relevant pages together. This ensures prospective students understand available support and can make informed decisions before applying. For example, the University of Zurich has a very clear road map about the steps student with disabilities need to make to gain reasonable adjustments, as well as all that is required before commencing their studies. This is very helpful for a new domestic or international student with disabilities and is a good practice that could be implemented by the rest of the U21 members.
- b) **Prominent website accessibility:** University websites are often the first source of information for international and exchange students. Clear links to disability support resources demonstrate the institution's commitment to inclusion as outlined in its policies.
- c) **Cross-linking webpages:** Web pages for international and exchange students should include sections or direct links to disability support information. Similarly, disability support pages should link back to international and exchange student resources, facilitating seamless navigation.
- d) **Intersectionality:** Send a clear message to website visitors that international students with disabilities are included in your disability inclusion initiatives. Students are often coming from diverse contexts with different legal frameworks, confusion over their rights as international students versus their domestic peers, and their specific needs due to being at the intersection of disability, language proficiency, and much more.
- e) **Language accessibility:** The authors also noted a lack of language variety available when accessing disability support services, aside from some information in English. It may be worth considering this type of content to be made available in multiple languages to really ensure the relevant students gain access to these supports, even if just in English as an internationally known language, or an auto-translate option.

## Conclusion

There is some variety in the offerings for student mobility cohorts; however, there is not a large range of targeted and university backed programs. The mobility program from UC Chile stands as a highlight in this area that other members of the network can strive to emulate.

The authors found all the universities consulted have webpages for international students, exchange students, and disability support information webpages. However, these web pages are not linked to each other directly. So, if a prospective international student with disabilities wants to know about disability support programs they need to make an independent search; and to know if they can access this support, they may have to directly ask the university staff through email or phone call. To actively avoid this, we have made the above recommendations.

We are enthused by the care for student mobility for those with disabilities but look forward to seeing more targeted initiatives in the future.

## Chapter 3.4.

### Students with disability and extracurricular activity involvement

Brooke Szucs and Faith Ong

#### Introduction

The U21 Network positively prioritises professional development through extracurricular activities, such as the Global Citizens Program. This is due to U21's priority to create skilled, interconnected graduates ready for a globalised work future.

Across the network, U21 provides opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities for around 2,000 students a year.<sup>117</sup> This includes via the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition, micro internships, policy leadership, and student projects that focus on the global good.

This is especially pertinent for students with disabilities, as participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to significantly improve their sense of belonging, employability, and academic performance.<sup>118</sup> Given the persistent challenges students with disabilities experiences regarding completion rates and post-graduation employment, it is important to offer opportunities that foster engagement and help mitigate these issues, thereby supporting their academic and professional success.

While the U21 Network on a larger scale is invested in extracurricular involvement, including that of students from underrepresented backgrounds, this study was interested in how the member universities engage with this topic.<sup>119</sup> A desktop analysis was conducted to examine 2 key areas:

1. Do universities include extracurricular involvement in their strategic plans?
2. Does this translate into support for students with disabilities to engage in extracurricular activities?

This chapter will give an overview on how the university members of the U21 Network collectively include students with disabilities in extracurricular activities.

#### Results

Our research examined if extracurricular activities (ECAs) were included in strategic plans, and if this translated to targeted supports for students with disabilities.

Table 1. Shows where universities have included extracurricular considerations.

University Member	Strategic Plan has ECA	Disability Specific ECA
McMaster University <sup>120</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>121</sup>
University of Birmingham <sup>122</sup>	Yes	No
The University of Nottingham <sup>123</sup>	Yes	No

117 Universitas 21. (n.d.). Opportunities. <https://universitas21.com/opportunities/for-students/>

118 Szucs, B., & Harpur, P. (2023). Students with disabilities as ideal graduates: universities' obligations to support extracurricular involvement. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(2), 33-53. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no2art1789>

119 Universitas 21. (n.d.). Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). <https://universitas21.com/collaborative-areas/edi/>

120 McMaster University. (2021). Institutional priorities and strategic framework 2021-2024. <https://Institutional-Priorities-and-Strategic-Framework.pdf>

121 McMaster University. (n.d.). Accessible involvement: Clubs and volunteering. <https://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/accessible-involvement-clubs-and-volunteering/>

122 The University of Birmingham. (n.d.). Birmingham 2030: University strategy. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/our-strategy>.

123 University of Nottingham. (n.d.). University strategy. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/strategy/>

University Member	Strategic Plan has ECA	Disability Specific ECA
<b>University College Dublin</b> <sup>124</sup>	Yes	No
<b>University of Connecticut</b> <sup>125</sup>	Yes	No
<b>University of Glasgow</b> <sup>126</sup>	Yes	No
<b>The University of Queensland</b> <sup>127</sup>	Yes	No
<b>Universitas Gadjah Mada</b> <sup>128</sup>	Yes	No
<b>Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile</b> <sup>129</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>130</sup>
<b>University of Maryland</b> <sup>131</sup>	Yes	No
<b>The University of Hong Kong</b> <sup>132</sup>	No	Yes <sup>133</sup>
<b>The University of Melbourne</b> <sup>134</sup>	No	Yes <sup>135</sup>
<b>The University of New South Wales</b> <sup>136</sup>	No	Yes <sup>137</sup>
<b>Korea University</b> <sup>138</sup>	No	Yes <sup>139</sup>
<b>Waseda University</b> <sup>140</sup>	No	No
<b>Fudan University</b> <sup>141</sup>	No	No
<b>University of Auckland</b> <sup>142</sup>	No	No
<b>Tecnológico de Monterrey</b> <sup>143</sup>	No	No
<b>The University of Sydney</b> <sup>144</sup>	No	No
<b>KU Leuven</b> <sup>145</sup>	No	No
<b>University of Zurich</b> <sup>146</sup>	No	No

## Discussion

This investigation was limited to what was provided and publicly available. There may be some institutional knowledge missing from this list that was inaccessible to the team due to login access requirements or support happening at a personal level.

124 University College Dublin. (n.d.). Rising to the future: UCD strategy. <https://www.ucd.ie/strategy/>

125 University of Connecticut. (2024). University strategic plan. [https://strategicplan.media.uconn.edu/Strategic-Plan\\_FY2024.pdf](https://strategicplan.media.uconn.edu/Strategic-Plan_FY2024.pdf)

126 The University of Glasgow. (n.d.). University strategy. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_792478\\_smx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_792478_smx.pdf)

127 The University of Queensland. (2022). Strategic plan 2022–2025. <https://www.uq.edu.au/UQStrategicPlan2022-2025.pdf>

128 Universitas Gadjah Mada. (n.d.). Rencana strategis UGM tahun 2022–2027. <https://ppid.ugm.ac.id/file/rencana-strategis-ugm-tahun-2022-2027/>

129 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). 2020–2025 new development plan. <https://www.uc.cl/noticias/2020-2025-new-development-plan/>

130 Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. (n.d.). Academic unit: Office of inclusion. <https://www.uc.cl/en/academic-units/office-of-inclusion/>

131 University of Maryland. (n.d.). Fearlessly forward: Strategic plan. <https://strategicplan.umd.edu/fearless>

132 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). Strategic development unit. <https://sppoweb.hku.hk/sd.html>

133 The University of Hong Kong. (n.d.). SEN internship support. <https://www.cedars.hku.hk/cope/sen-support/sen-internship>

134 The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). Advancing Melbourne: University strategy. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/advancing-melbourne>

135 The University of Melbourne. (2023). Disability inclusion action plan 2023–2026. <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/UoM-Disability-Inclusion-Action-Plan-2023-2026.pdf>

136 The University of New South Wales. (n.d.). UNSW strategy. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/strategy>

137 The University of New South Wales. (2022). Disability inclusion action plan. [https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/edi/UNSW-DIAP\\_web\\_July2022.pdf](https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/edi/UNSW-DIAP_web_July2022.pdf)

138 Korea University. (n.d.). Sustainable development study. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/study.do>

139 Korea University. (n.d.). Sustainable development study. <https://kucsd.korea.ac.kr/kucsd/study.do>

140 Waseda University. (n.d.). Waseda vision 150. <https://www.waseda.jp/top/en/about/vision>

141 Fudan University. (n.d.). Strategic planning. <https://www.fudan.edu.cn/en/StrategicPlanning/list.htm>

142 The University of Auckland. (n.d.). Vision 2030 and Strategic plan 2025. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/>

143 Technológico de Monterrey. (n.d.). Strategic plan 2025.

144 The University of Sydney. (n.d.). Sydney in 2032 Strategy. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/about-us/2032-strategy.html>

145 KU Leuven. (n.d.). Strategic plan: Future-oriented education. <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/about-kuleuven/strategic-plan/future-oriented-education>

146 The University of Zurich. (n.d.). University strategy. <https://www.uzh.ch/en/explore/basics/strategy.html>

From this data, several key observations and strategic insights can be drawn:

### **Extracurricular Activities are commonly included in Strategic Plans**

Around half (10 out of 21) of the universities include extracurricular activities in their strategic plans, meaning they recognise ECAs as part of their institutional priorities. However, the presence of ECAs in strategic plans does not guarantee targeted support for students with disabilities. Among the 10 universities that include ECAs in their strategic plans, only 2 (McMaster University and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) have disability-specific extracurricular activities or considerations for students with disabilities.

This suggests that while universities recognise ECAs as valuable, this may not translate into targeted inclusion for students with disabilities.

There are 4 universities that do not have ECAs in their strategic plans but have disability-specific extracurricular activities (The University of Hong Kong, Korea University, The University of New South Wales, The University of Melbourne). This could indicate that universities that do not systemically prioritise ECAs still recognise the need for disability-specific supports at a more targeted or grassroots level; these are measures that could have been spear-headed by passionate individuals. However, not having this articulated in the strategic priorities means is a threat to their long-term sustainability, limiting the number of students they can benefit, or restricting the areas of support offered.

To illustrate, 4 of the 6 that include ECA considerations for students with disabilities focus specifically on internships (The University of Hong Kong, The University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, Korea University). Of the remaining 2, one includes volunteering (McMaster University), and one has its own study abroad program for students with disabilities (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile). This shows that some of the opportunities with the greatest impact on sense of belonging and retention are not as prominently focused upon, such as student mentorship, community engagement, and volunteering in general.<sup>147 148 149</sup>

Meanwhile, the university-wide strategies include a broader variety of listed ECA priorities, such as “global study experiences, internships, student-staff partnership projects, entrepreneurship programs, and industry projects”<sup>150</sup> or employability / career development, sports, cultural activities, and community engagement (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile).

Universities that integrate ECAs into strategic planning might assume that general accessibility provisions suffice, leading to fewer dedicated disability-specific ECA considerations; however, it is unclear if this is the case. It is also easy to make the argument that this doesn’t suffice, due to students with disabilities requiring more targeted support and evidence that they are not participating in ECAs as much as the general student population.<sup>151</sup>

The discrepancy between strategic plans and disability-specific ECAs raises several areas for improvement. In omitting disability-specific ECAs in strategic plans, there may be an assumption from universities that mainstream ECAs are inherently inclusive. Assumptions that another

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147 Luque-Suárez, M., Olmos-Gómez, M. d. C., Castán-García, M., & Portillo-Sánchez, R. (2021). Promoting emotional and social well-being and a sense of belonging in adolescents through participation in volunteering. *Healthcare*, 9(3), 359. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9030359>

148 Palmer, A. N., Elliott, W., & Cheatham, G. A. (2017). Effects of extracurricular activities on postsecondary completion for students with disabilities. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 110(2), 151–158. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/00220671.2015.1058221](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/00220671.2015.1058221)

149 Thompson, L. J., Clark, G., Walker, M., & Whyatt, J. D. (2013). 'It's just like an extra string to your bow': Exploring higher education students' perceptions and experiences of extracurricular activity and employability. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 14(2), 135–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787413481129>

150 The University of Queensland Strategy, page 8.

151 Szucs, B., & Harpur, P. (2023). Students with disabilities as ideal graduates: universities' obligations to support extracurricular involvement. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 14(2), 33–53. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2023vol14no2art1789>

stakeholder has already implemented accessibility measures do not demonstrate accountability by the university.

As part of universities commitment to employability for the social good, students with disabilities should receive targeted support to overcome the additional barriers they face when developing crucial professional skills through ECAs. To be sustainable for the long-term, disability-specific ECAs should be institutionally embedded within broader priorities. The support provided by institutional embeddedness is necessary to strengthen other grassroots movements such as strong student advocacy, the influence of disability support services, or independent faculty-led initiatives.

Without this institutional commitment to disability inclusion in ECAs, students with disabilities risk being left behind in an increasingly competitive job market that values leadership, teamwork, and global engagement.

## Recommendations

- **Better data:** More robust data is needed to determine whether students with disabilities engaging in extracurricular activities experience informal exclusion due to accessibility concerns, social stigma, or a lack of accommodations, and determine the actions needed to respond to these.
- **Universities with extracurricular activities-inclusive strategic plans should explicitly integrate disability-inclusive frameworks**, ensuring that participation barriers are identified and addressed proactively.

## Conclusion

Our findings highlight a gap between strategic planning and targeted disability supports in extracurricular activities (ECAs). While many universities include ECAs in their strategic plans, only 2 extend this to disability-specific ECAs. Conversely, universities that do not include ECAs in their strategic plans are more likely to have disability-specific ECAs. This suggests that while universities recognise the value of ECAs broadly, there is little evidence that this recognition translates into structured, inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities.

This raises concerns about whether students with disabilities are effectively included in general ECAs or whether they face barriers that are unaddressed in institutional strategies. This is an area worth addressing to improve the quality and employability of students with disabilities throughout the U21 Network.

## Chapter 3.5.

### Supporting students with disabilities to transition to work

Matthew Campbell, Gloria Liu, Greg Marston, and Paul Harpur

#### Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) underscores the right to education (Article 24) and work (Article 27). These articles highlight the importance of inclusive education and equitable workplace opportunities. Universities are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional success through targeted initiatives such as work-integrated learning (WIL), skills development, and employer partnerships.

Employability is a critical marker of success in higher education, reflecting the ability of graduates to navigate and integrate into the professional world. For students with disabilities, these processes of engagement, participation and transition are often more complex, requiring specific accommodations and robust support systems. In considering employability and employment within the context of higher education, Tomlinson (2017)<sup>152</sup> offers a framework which presents employability occurring at 3 levels of experience: macro (wider structural, system level), meso (mediated by institutional level processes), and micro (personal constructions and subjectivities). This framing presents as a useful model to explore the opportunities for universities to ensure institutional policies and practices create equitable opportunities for all students in transitioning to work. Adopting these 3 levels of experience, in 3 parts this chapter will outline critical strategies, challenges, and recommendations to support students with disabilities as they transition from education to employment.

#### Part 1. The macro level: shaping structural and system-level employability

Universities are in a unique position to influence broader structural and system-level elements of employment and employability for students with disabilities. At the macro level, universities can engage with policymakers, industry leaders, and advocacy groups to promote inclusive labour market practices, informed by rigorous empirical research. By championing equitable hiring practices, advocating for legislation that supports reasonable accommodations, and contributing to public discourse on social inclusion and human rights, universities can shape the structural conditions that impact employability.

Collaborative efforts with diverse industry sectors and the employment services system to establish clear pathways for students with disabilities into professional roles are essential. This might include forming strategic alliances with organisations that prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and working to ensure that national and regional employment policies align with the principles outlined in the CRPD. University researchers can also work with employment service providers to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions and post-employment support, which will also help to ensure that people with disabilities are offered employment that is a good fit for their interests, skills and knowledge. Employment services frontline staff also need to focus on helping students with disabilities secure better work, not just any job. Good quality work has a number of characteristics including job security, fair pay and benefits, voice and representation, job design and opportunities for progression and peer and management support.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, universities

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<sup>152</sup> Tomlinson, M. (2017). Introduction: Graduate employability in context: Charting a complex, contested and multi-faceted policy and research field. In M. Tomlinson & L. Holmes (Eds.), *Graduate Employability in context: Theory, research and debate* (pp. 1-40). Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>153</sup> Irvine, G. White, D. and Diffley, M. (2018). *Measuring good work: The final report of the measuring good quality working group*. Carnegie UK Trust and RSA. <https://carnegieuk.org/publication/measuring-good-work-the-final-report-of-the-measuring-job-quality-working-group/>

can contribute to research and innovation in assistive technologies and workplace accessibility, thereby influencing broader systemic changes that benefit the employment landscape for all individuals with disabilities.

At the institutional level, universities must embed these structural considerations into their employability strategies. Initiatives such as fostering partnerships with inclusive employers, hosting industry-wide summits on disability inclusion, and developing frameworks for workplace accessibility can have far-reaching impacts. Universities also play a role in educating future employers and leaders on the value of a diverse workforce, thus addressing systemic biases and discrimination and creating a more inclusive economic and social environment.

## **Part 2. The meso level: institutional policy, process and practice**

At the meso level, employability for students with disabilities is shaped by institutional policies and frameworks that mediate their access to opportunities and support. Higher education policies influence how resources are allocated, how staff are trained, and how inclusive practices are embedded into the fabric of the university. For example, policies that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments ensure a unified approach to addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Additionally, policies that require partnerships with employers and stipulate the need for reasonable accommodations during placements and internships create a structured pathway to employment. Universities should use their various resources to help promote inclusive employment practices so that students have meaningful careers. By aligning institutional goals with national and international standards, such as those outlined in the CRPD, universities can act as catalysts for systemic change, ensuring that their graduates are not only prepared but also empowered to succeed in the workforce. This meso-level mediation is crucial in bridging gaps between individual aspirations and broader structural challenges, providing a supportive environment where students with disabilities can thrive.

### **Work-Integrated Learning and Placements**

Placements serve as a concrete example of meso-level processes that mediate employability through institutional frameworks. By coordinating these opportunities, universities act as pivotal intermediaries between the academic and professional worlds, shaping how students with disabilities engage with the workforce. The success of placements depends on policies, structures, and collaborative practices at the institutional level that ensure inclusivity and accessibility. These placements reflect the broader influence of university-driven processes in preparing students with disabilities for meaningful and equitable employment outcomes.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements provide a vital link between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. For students with disabilities, these experiences can be transformative, offering opportunities to do the following:

- Apply classroom learning in professional settings.
- Develop practical skills and build confidence.
- Gain exposure to inclusive workplace environments.

Expanding access to work-integrated learning opportunities is another essential strategy. Universities can partner with inclusive employers to create internships and co-op placements designed to accommodate diverse needs. Providing on-campus work opportunities allows students to gain confidence in a familiar and supportive environment. Training placement supervisors to understand and meet the needs of students with disabilities ensures these experiences are both accessible and effective.

## Institutional Support Before, During, and After Placement

While WIL experiences extend beyond just work placements, the barriers and opportunities for success for students with a disability are most profound in placement settings. Where students with disability can access supportive work-based WIL opportunities they report the greatest employment gains (Jackson, et al, 2024).<sup>154</sup>

Comprehensive support from both universities and host organisations is essential. For example, University College Dublin's Placement Planning Guidelines for Students with Disabilities<sup>155</sup> provides a framework for inclusive placements, covering legislation, policy, and accommodations. Similarly, The University of Sydney's Student Placement and Projects Policy<sup>156</sup> mandates that coordinators ensure external partners implement agreed-upon reasonable adjustments.

Support for students with disabilities is often coordinated among the placement team, career services and disability liaison office, working collaboratively with students and placement providers. At the University of Hong Kong, experiential learning or placement teams<sup>157</sup> at faculties work closely with students, the University's student development and career services as well as its external partners to facilitate tailored supports and reasonable adjustments for students during placement.

### Challenges: Gaps Between Policy and Practice

While policies exist, their implementation is inconsistent due to the following

- Limited resources and training for staff.
- Variable communication with external placement providers.
- Cultural attitudes and stigma surrounding disabilities.

For instance, some coordinators and placement supervisors lack adequate training to understand and support the needs of students with disabilities, leading to misunderstandings and potential discrimination. These gaps can discourage students from disclosing disabilities or seeking necessary accommodations.

## Part 3. The micro level: supporting the individual

At the micro level, employability is deeply rooted in self-identity and subjectivities, reflecting how students with disabilities understand and navigate their unique journeys into the workforce. Universities can support this level of action by fostering self-awareness, confidence, and resilience among students. Tailored career counselling plays a vital role in helping students identify their strengths, understand their career aspirations, and develop strategies to address potential barriers to employment.

Providing opportunities for students to practice self-advocacy, such as through workshops on disclosure and requesting accommodations, empowers them to take control of their employment journey. Peer support and mentorship programs also contribute to the micro level by offering relatable role models and a sense of community. Additionally, personalised feedback and skill development programs, such as mock interviews and resume critiques, help students align their personal goals with professional expectations, bridging the gap between their individual potential and broader employment opportunities.

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154 Jackson, D., Dollinger, M., Gatto, L., Drewery, D., Ajjawi, R., & Fannon, A. M. (2024). Work-integrated learning for students with disabilities: Time for meaningful change. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(7), 1679–1687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2354242>

155 University College Dublin, (2015). [UCD access & lifelong learning placement planning guidelines for students with disabilities](#).

156 The University of Sydney. (2015). [Student placement and projects policy 2015](#).

157 The University of Hong Kong. (2024). Supporting SEN students. <https://www.socsc.hku.hk/internshipweek/2024/>

To bridge the gap between education and employment for students with disabilities, universities must adopt a multifaceted approach. A critical first step is to enhance collaboration between career advisers, employment services and Disability Support Officers (DSOs). These support roles can work together to provide tailored support that meets the unique needs of students with disabilities as they transition to employment. Important capabilities for advisers include understanding workplaces, identifying and acting on support needs and working flexibly with students with disabilities. One-on-one adviser sessions can help students navigate job applications and interviews, while accessible job fairs and employer networking events create direct connections to inclusive opportunities. Workshops on self-advocacy and accommodation requests further empower students to take charge of their employment journey.

The University of Birmingham offers a confidential Report + Support platform<sup>158</sup> for students facing discrimination. Meanwhile, the University of Nottingham's Disability and Accessibility in Careers online course<sup>159</sup> equips students with practical tools and case studies for navigating the job market.

Investing in assistive technology and tools is also crucial. Access to resources like screen readers, speech-to-text software, and ergonomic equipment equips students with the means to thrive in professional settings. Additionally, training students on industry-standard tools further enhances their employability by demonstrating technical proficiency to potential employers.

Mentorship and peer support programs play a vital role in fostering community and guidance for students with disabilities. Alumni mentors who have faced similar challenges can provide inspiration and practical advice, while peer support networks offer a sense of belonging and shared experience. These programs help students build the confidence and resilience needed to navigate their transition into employment.

Finally, addressing discriminatory attitudes and stigma is essential for fostering an inclusive environment. Regular training for university staff and students can help challenge misconceptions about disabilities and encourage open dialogue. By cultivating a culture of inclusion, universities can ensure that students with disabilities feel supported and valued throughout their transition to employment.

## Recommendations

- **Individual support:** Students with disabilities will confront additional work challenges to students without a disability. Universities should offer tailored career counselling to help students identify strengths and develop strategies to address employment barriers.
- **Facilitating and coordinating inclusion:** Universities should develop and implement policies and programs that mandate collaboration between career services, disability support offices, and academic departments.
- **Enhance collaboration with employers:** Universities should use their privileged position to advance more inclusive workforces. To strengthen pathways and capacity in employers, universities should develop partnerships with inclusive employers.
- **WIL and placements:** Universities should expand access to WIL opportunities by partnering with inclusive employers and by providing on-campus work opportunities to help students gain confidence in a familiar environment.

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<sup>158</sup> University of Birmingham. (n.d.). Report and support. <https://reportandsupport.birmingham.ac.uk/>

<sup>159</sup> University of Nottingham. (n.d.). Careers and employability service. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/applications/disability.aspx>

## Conclusion

Supporting students with disabilities as they transition to employment is not only a matter of compliance but also a commitment to fostering equity, human rights and social inclusion. By enhancing policies, improving collaboration with external partners, and addressing direct and indirect discrimination, universities can empower students with disabilities to achieve their professional aspirations. These efforts will not only benefit individuals but also contribute to a more inclusive workforce and society.



# Contact

**The University of Queensland**

**Professor Paul Harpur OAM**

Future Fellow (FT210100335), The University of Queensland  
Lead, U21 Disability Inclusion Policy Mapping Initiative  
Co-lead Universitas 21 Disability Community of Practice

Email: [p.harpur@law.uq.edu.au](mailto:p.harpur@law.uq.edu.au)

