



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**



# NCSEHE FOCUS

Successful outcomes for students with disability in Australian higher education

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication could not be completed without the work of a dedicated team of people and the support of the Australian Government Department of Education and Training and Curtin University.

Thanks go to Mr Paul Farnhill and Ms Nina Thomas for compiling this report, as well as the many people from all institutions involved in conducting the research included in this publication.

All NCSEHE funded research reports are available online at [ncsehe.edu.au](http://ncsehe.edu.au).

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CRICOS Provider Code 00301J

Funded by the Australian Government



# Successful outcomes for students with disability in Australian higher education

**The number of students with disability in Australian higher education have increased rapidly in the last decade, but institutions are often finding it challenging to meet best practice.**

Research sponsored by the NCSEHE has uncovered new issues and challenges, as well as providing solutions for educational institutions to radically improve their performance.

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Between 2008 and 2015 the number of undergraduate students with disability increased by 88.6 per cent, more than double the rate of growth of total undergraduate students nationally, representing 6.2 per cent of the overall undergraduate student body.

**Recent reports by the NCSEHE identified the issues and challenges facing students with a disability**

## *Retention, success and outcomes*

Research highlighted problems with accessing the correct data and information to accurately assess challenges and act upon them, while ‘training the educators’ in disability issues was another challenge.

## *Teaching and institutional cultures*

Major changes were proposed to raise awareness for a more inclusive environment. Educational content delivery was also seen as a significant area for progressive change.

## *Support policies and strategies*

The provision of adequate service delivery and ‘reasonable adjustments’ to facilities and services, as well as improving inherent requirement statements was highlighted.

## **Recommendations for policy and strategy:**

- better data collection and performance indicators on students with disability
- improved inherent requirement statements
- improvements to teaching methods, materials, and technology
- more, and better, disability awareness training
- greater flexibility in self-reported disability
- a more holistic approach to support for students with disability
- more flexible options for support services and study terms.

## **Future research recommendations:**

- analysis of achievement and retention
- disability classifications and characteristics
- teaching and support programs
- inherent requirement statements
- employment outcomes
- recruitment and outreach programs.

## **Achieving better outcomes for students with a disability**

Substantial progress has been made in access, retention, and outcomes for students with disability in Australian higher education.

While a lot more remains to be done, the research reports sponsored by NCSEHE points to future directions for better outcomes for students with disability.

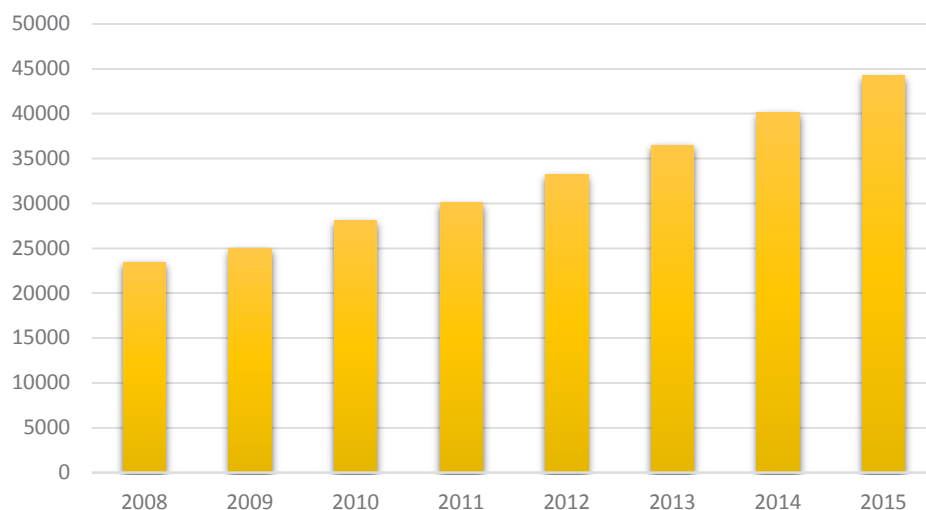
## Trends in disability

**The number of undergraduate students with disability in Australian higher education has increased significantly in recent years, rising from 23,447 in 2008 to 44,210, an 88.6 per cent rise: more than double the growth rate of undergraduate students nationally (34.7 per cent).**

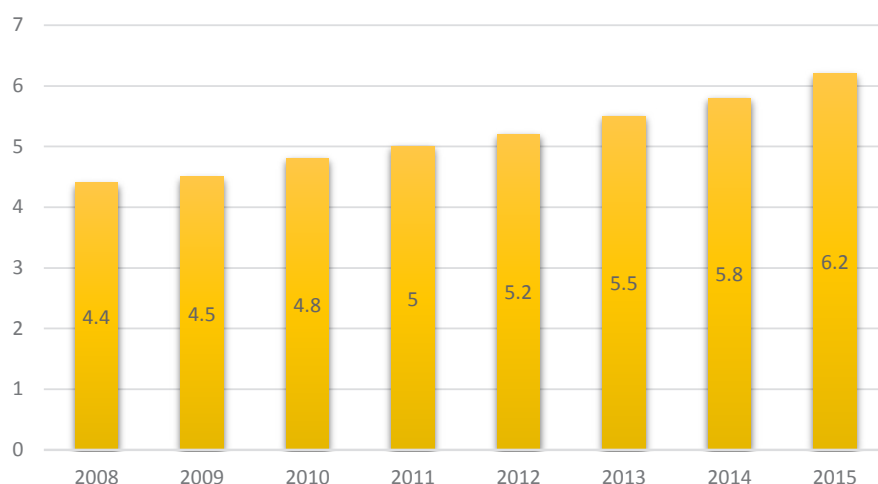
The proportion of students with disability in the overall undergraduate total increased from 4.4 per cent to 6.2 per cent between 2008 and 2015. Students with disability recorded the fastest rate of growth among the six recognised equity groups in Australian higher education.

This rapid expansion is commonly attributed to increasing awareness among institutions of the importance of ensuring that students with disability have access and participation pathways within higher education, as well as an increase in the self-reporting of disability by students.

### Number of students with a disability in Australian higher education



### Percentage of student population



## Reports sponsored by the NCSEHE into issues of disability in higher education.

**Nine reports have been sponsored by the NCSEHE into issues of disability in higher education. Of these, six were specifically focussed on students with disability and three referred to students with disability outcomes in reports with a broader focus:**

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### *Best Practice in Supporting Indigenous Students with Disability in Higher Education (2016) – Associate Professor Michelle Fleming – University of Canberra*

Indigenous students with disability have been shown to face a double disadvantage, however, Disability Units in Australian universities reported limited targeted support or staff cultural competency training.

This report recommended a whole-of-university approach to supporting Indigenous students with disability, with more cultural awareness training for staff in Disability Units and roles for Indigenous people in relevant decision making processes. Recommendations were also made for case management where necessary, and support made available through a variety of mediums including face-to-face contact.

Fleming, M. & Grace, D. (2016). *Best Practice in Supporting Indigenous Students with Disability in Higher Education*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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### *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education (2016) – Dr Cedriwan Owen – University of Tasmania*

An increasing number of students have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their needs are often complex and can be highly idiosyncratic. Drawing from disability support providers and students with ASD, this report advocated holistic disability supports beyond academic skills including self-management of learning in accordance with students' personal needs.

Pedagogical recommendations included the need to develop a greater awareness of ASD among teachers and the facilitation of multiple content delivery methods, while an emphasis was also placed on inclusive campus design solutions.

Owen, C., McCann, D., Rayner, C., Devereaux, C., Sheehan, F. & Quarmby, L. (2016) *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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*The Role of Inherent Requirement  
Statements in Australian Universities.*  
(2016) – Dr Matt Brett – La Trobe University

Inherent requirement statements (IRS) are guidelines and standards that assist students with disabilities by clarifying the skills and capabilities that are required to successfully engage in studies, as well as seeking to prevent discrimination against disability.

This report found that the legal provision for ‘reasonable adjustments’ resulted in inconsistencies between universities in IRS and potentially inadequate information and assistance for students with disability. Recommendations included transparency, clarity and consistency across institutions with closer monitoring of the impact of IRS.

Brett, M., Harvey, A., Funston, A., Spicer, R. & Wood, A. (2016). *The Role of Inherent Requirement Statements in Australian Universities*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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*Exploring the Retention and Success of  
Students with Disability* (2016) - Professor  
Sue Kilpatrick - University of Tasmania

This report looks at the retention and success rates of students by disability types. It also examined how retention and success compare with different types of policy and practice approaches to the provision of adjustments and supports by disability types.

In addition to recommending a nationally consistent approach to categorising students with disability, the report produced adjustments to guiding principles for good practice when developing and implementing strategies and plans for students with disability.

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., McLennan, D., Fischer, S. & Magnussen, K. (2016). *Exploring the Retention and Success of Students with Disability*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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*Resilience / Thriving in Post-Secondary  
Students with Disabilities: An Exploration  
Study* (2015) - Dr Rahul Ganguly -  
University of Southern Queensland

This report examines the contributing factors behind success and thriving for students with disability. The research findings were based on a large web based survey of students with disability, plus interviews with some high achieving students to ascertain reason for their success that may be applicable to others.

The report produced five major findings based on the principle of 'first enable the environment, then enable the student'. The findings centred on academic training; resilience intervention support; flexible support services; online discussion groups; and programs for female students with a disability.

Ganguly, R., Brownlow, C., Du Preez, J. & Graham, C. (2015.) *Resilience/Thriving in Post-Secondary Students with Disabilities*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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### *Access and Barriers to Online Education for People with Disabilities (2016) - Dr Mike Kent - Curtin University*

The report investigated the different kinds of barriers to online education for people with disabilities. A large online survey was developed, plus a series of in-depth interviews. The survey focused on the accessibility of different online platforms.

Each of the eight categories of disability forms separate report within the main report. The research looked at access and technology issues; the acceptance of disability needs across staff; and it proposes new research into what universal design in e-learning should look like.

Kent, M. (2016). *Access and Barriers to Online Education for People with Disabilities*. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

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### *Issues and Trends for Students with Disability: Review of NCSEHE-Funded Research (2016) - NCSEHE*

Key findings, recommendations and future directions for further research for the equity group of students with disability.

Cunninghame, I., Costello, D. & Trinidad, S. (2016). *Issues and Trends for Students with Disability: Review of NCSEHE-Funded Research*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University: Perth.

Read the full report [here](#)

# Current issues and challenges

## The reports unveiled new issues and challenges in the area of disability

Issues and challenges from these six reports can be distilled into three major themes:

### 1. Retention, success and outcomes

There are four key issues in retention, success and outcomes:

#### **Definitions of disability, indicators and data collection**

While the Department of Education and Training recognises six classifications (hearing, learning, mobility, vision, medical, and 'other') it is clear that there are many sub-classifications of disability.

The growth in numbers of students with disability points to the need for more attention to the different, and often highly specific, needs of these students.

Universities have different approaches to disability which includes different data collection systems and different approaches to supporting students with disability.

Greater cooperation and coordination in collecting information and exchanging knowledge of best practice would assist all universities to more effectively support students with disability.

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**We need a broad definition of disability to recognise disability as a whole, but we also need to be aware of often highly specific disability sub groups to address issues of access, retention and successful outcomes.**

A lack of disaggregated data can lead to some disability sub-groups being overlooked.

This is an issue of concern regarding mental illness which comprises large numbers of students, with different mental health issues, all categorised under 'other'.

As one researcher noted:

*"As long as disability indicators remain superficial and poorly aligned with robust theoretical frameworks, an evidence base that might trigger more innovative approaches is absent".*

#### **Adequate support**

Educators, policy makers and equity practitioners may be inadequately prepared to provide support to growing numbers of students with disability.

#### **Retention and success**

Retention and success among students with disability has remained an issue despite significant advances in the numbers represented at university, successful completions and employment outcomes.

Students with disability have a slightly lower success rate and consistently lower retention rate than non-disability students. Students in learning, medical and 'other' categories exhibited consistently lower retention and success rates.

[Moving Beyond 'Acts of Faith': Effective Scholarships for Equity Students](#) by Nadine Zacharias found that scholarship provision resulted in varied retention and success rates for students with disability depending on institution and scholarship type.

#### **Labour market outcomes**

Research shows that students with disability experience significant labour market disadvantage following graduation.

Graduates with disability are less likely to be in work than students without disability



and that disadvantage follows through into employment and careers and is represented in their earning potential.

Some of the characteristics associated with employment include: having a paid job during the final year of studies; females are more likely than males to be employed; and attending a GO8, ATN or IRU university improved employment prospects.

## **2. Teaching and institutional culture**

Four issues in teaching and institutional culture were commonly noted in research:

### ***Support seeking by students***

Research has shown that students who seek support for their disability have greater academic success and their retention and completion rates are comparable to the overall student population.

This points to universities actively encouraging students with disability to seek support if needed. A related concern is that disclosure rates of disability are still under-reported due to stigma continuing to be an issue, so this too is an issue for universities.

### ***Institutional cultures***

Research reports have consistently acknowledged the need for a significant overhaul of institutional culture concerning disability.

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**Current disability standards legislation regarding built environment design tends to be focussed on mobility and physical access, with little attention paid to inclusive design for other disability types.**

Issues continue to arise where academic and administrative staff are not adhering to institutional principles and standards, such as applying reasonable adjustments for students with disability.

### ***Professional development and staff training***

Research reports frequently discussed the need for more training in disability awareness as a core part of institutional business.

It was proposed that disability practitioners should be involved in the training of all staff to ensure that planning, design, administration, and education staff are aware of the impact of their work on students with disability.

Two reports advocated mandatory disability awareness training modules and professional development training in consultation with disability practitioners and support workers as the best means of ensuring institutional standards are adhered to.

One report cited cases in which staff have not provided educational adjustments when provided with appropriate documentation, in potential violation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

### ***Educational content delivery***

Learning spaces, both physical and digital, can represent significant barriers to participation for various disability groups. While e-learning spaces have been touted as particularly beneficial for some students with disability, current tools and platforms do not always have the capacity to address needs of many students with disability.

Examples cited in research included: the problems of hearing-impaired students may be magnified where audio recordings are more common than visual learning aids; and students with Autism Spectrum Disorder can experience barriers when faced with overstimulating online platforms.

## **3. Support policies and strategies**

Three issues in support policies and strategies were highlighted in recent research:

### ***Adequate service delivery***

Some students with disability are unaware of the range of support services available through university services or that support exists at all.

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One commonly raised issue is that support options need to be expanded beyond face-to-face provision in order to accommodate students unwilling to engage with such services as well as online students with disability.

Another issue is that many institutions lack culturally sensitive support services for students from various cultural backgrounds.

Two reports also highlighted that the provision of services for students with non-physical disability represents an area of disability support requiring significant further investment by universities.

### ***Provision of reasonable adjustments***

Course integrity and equality of opportunity are common concerns raised by staff regarding reasonable adjustments and this may indicate a lack of understanding as to the rationale for providing reasonable adjustments.

Related to this, teaching staff at some institutions appear to be unclear as to how and when reasonable adjustments should be provided, especially when applied to students with varying disabilities.

Another finding is that there is an inconsistent approach across institutions regarding the provision of Learning Access Plans as an effective means of applying reasonable adjustments, though most are developed with fundamental principles in mind.

### ***Inherent requirement statements***

Inherent requirement statements have been successfully used to assist students

with disabilities by clarifying the skills and capabilities that are required to successfully engage in studies. However, research has found that the provision of clear details concerning inherent requirement statements appears to be inconsistently dealt with at an institutional level.

Insufficient consideration is given to the potential conflicts between signalling inherent requirements, transparency in their application, compliance with anti-discrimination legislation and serving the best interests of students

# Future directions for policy and strategy in disability

**Research reports sponsored by the NCSEHE have uncovered numerous trends and issues, some of which are major and fundamental, while others are more nuanced.**

Analysis of the issues contained in six substantial reports has produced numerous recommendations, big and small, for future directions in support for students with disability in higher education.

These recommendations have been synthesised from the reports into seven key areas for policy makers and practitioners to enable them to more easily assess priority areas for attention:

**1. Disability related data collection and performance indicators are refined to generate a better understanding of the participation of students with disability in higher education.**

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A number of reports found significant deficiencies in the classification of disability types. Some large groups, such as students who have mental illness, are almost 'statistically invisible' as they are relegated to an 'other' category.

While some form of broader measures of disability are required for the 'integrity' of statistical analysis, there is also a need to focus on sub-groups in disability. The issue is how to appropriately report on disability without fragmenting the area into multitudes of sub-groups that loses sight of bigger picture issues.

Data collection relies heavily on self-identification, acceptance and disclosure of a student's disability and as such this data is highly unlikely to be entirely indicative of the actual representation of students with various disabilities.

Additional identification and data collection methods may need to be considered, particularly for accurately measuring statistics regarding retention, performance and success.

**2. Universities should ensure that inherent requirement statements are clear, transparent and in accordance with the Higher Education Standards Framework, Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2004.**

Inherent requirement statements provide universities with a means to communicate and clarify to students with disability the skills and capabilities that are required to successfully engage in studies.

Legal requirements dictate that no student with a disability may be unfairly excluded from a course of study because of their disability.

Universities need to ensure that inherent requirements are carefully described and revised whenever necessary to ensure full compliance with anti-discrimination legislation. Universities should also monitor the impact of inherent requirements on prospective, enrolled and graduating students.

This would allow universities to ascertain whether inherent requirement statements are providing an effective means of communicating realistic expectations regarding university course content to students with disability, and to measure their effectiveness for the purposes of informing reasonable adjustment provision.

**3. Teaching methods, materials and technology should, wherever possible, adhere to the principles of universal design, and further efforts should be made to provide a variety of options for engaging with learning content and spaces.**

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Given the wide ranging and highly specific nature of disabilities, universities should seek to provide content through a variety of modes in order to ensure that no student with disability is unable to engage with course learning materials.

Additional participation options to address barriers for students with other impairments, such as learning disabilities and mental illnesses, should also be considered to ensure equitable participation in higher education is achievable.

These measures reorient teaching design towards universal and inclusive environments for all students and could reduce the need for additional supplementary interventions at a later date.

A few specific recommendations include: group collaboration is not mandated where it is not required to achieve learning outcome in order to cater for students with mental illness and learning disabilities who may not thrive in such environments; the provision of low sensory stimulation spaces to enable students on the autism spectrum to retreat is advisable; and students should be encouraged to work at their own pace rather than mandating persistent engagement through weekly assessment.

**4. Disability awareness training is made a mandatory component of induction materials and institutional policy training modules for all administrative and academic staff to ensure that staff are competent in their understanding and administration of disability support provisions.**

Lack of communication between Disability Support Units and teaching staff, as well as a lack of knowledge and understanding of disability support provisions, can be significant barriers to the application of policy.

Universities should require completion of disability awareness training to ensure all staff are aware of practices and policies concerning students with disability.

There is also a need to include in disability awareness training extra information on inter-sectional challenges faced by some students who may have multiple equity challenges, for example. Indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds, in addition to students with disability.

**5. Greater flexibility in self-reported disability should be an option to minimise problems associated with disclosure of information.**

Students with disability often have concerns about reporting their conditions due to a fear of stigma associated with it. While this issue can be lessened through awareness training, the way in which disclosure processes are perceived as onerous and confronting are also important.

In environments such as Open Universities Australia where students are engaged at multiple institutions, the necessity for repeated self-disclosure is time consuming and burdensome.

Greater flexibility for students wishing to automatically disclose where necessary should be an option and greater communication concerning disclosure processes and options should be made available.

**6. A more holistic approach to support for students with disability should be developed, providing study and organisational skills in**



**conjunction with Learning Access Plans – and these should be provided in conjunction with other support units such as Indigenous Education Units**

There is a need for partnerships between disability support providers and Indigenous Education Units as part of a whole of university approach to supporting Indigenous students with disability. Cooperation between different student support service units may strengthen their wider understanding of challenges faced by students with disability.

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Ensuring that students with disability and students from Indigenous backgrounds participate in the decision making process for support initiatives may improve both services and the process of accessing them.

**7. Support services and study terms should offer more flexible options for students with disability**

Some disability and health services often only operate on campus during limited days and times. Greater flexibility in the delivery of support services should be considered to adequately address students' needs.

There is scope for more flexibility in study term options to address learning preferences of students with disability. Greater choice in study term intensity and structure should be provided to students when considering course delivery.

## Future research

### Recommendations for further research.

A selected number of areas for further research are cited below, followed by quotes from the principle author of the research report.

### Achievement and retention

Several reports proposed more research to better understand a range of aspects of student achievement and retention.

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*“More research is needed into institutional and other factors that impact on the retention and success of students with a disability, and particularly for different disability types. Such research should adopt a student lifestyle focus incorporating outreach and recruitment, as well as transition out of university, including transition to a vocation or career” (Professor Sue Kilpatrick).*

### Disability classifications and cohort characteristics

Further research might assist in the implementation of greater quality in data collection.

*“Further research should be conducted to identify appropriate methods of disclosure and data collection, including Commonwealth data collection and reporting, to more accurately reflect retention and success statistics for students by disability type” (Professor Sue Kilpatrick).*

Recommendations for further research indicated more detail is needed on specific disability types and cohort characteristics.

*“Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder represent an important growing population of higher education students ... and further*

*research is needed to determine best practices [in pedagogy and support for these students] (Dr Cedriwen Owen).*

*“These two categories [mental illness and medical impairments] to date, also have little or no literature around inclusive design in learning and teaching in higher education, particularly in an e-learning context ... research into this area must be seen as a matter of significant priority” (Dr Mike Kent).*

### Pedagogical approaches and support programs

While proposals on pedagogical approaches and support policy formed the bulk of recommendations, areas for further research were identified, particularly with regard to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

*“Further research on a comparison between mentoring programs, the approaches within institutions that would best supplement this approach, and the effectiveness of the approaches in terms of student experience and academic progression is required” (Dr Cedriwen Owen).*

*“Further research needs to be undertaken to clarify the type of support available to higher education students with ASD under the NDIS” (Dr Cedriwen Owen).*

*“Further research is required to ascertain from academic, teaching, professional and administrative staff their current knowledge, and the types of supports required to increase their skills in working with students with ASD.*

*Moreover, it is important that this is combined with efforts to develop broader public awareness of ASD and foster a culture in which difference is not only recognised but also celebrated” (Dr Cedriwen Owen).*

## Inherent requirements

Inherent requirement statements are an important framework for creating better environments and for communicating intentions, but more work can be done to build on existing policies and practices.

*“Universities are simultaneously seeking to: increase enrolments by promoting the participation of students with disability; provide transparency for all prospective students on essential course requirements and skills; ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for enrolled students as required by legislation; promote the employability of all students; and satisfy the demands of professional and registration bodies, all in an increasingly complex and competitive environment.”*

*The potential tensions between these objectives, and their implications for prospective, enrolled and graduating students require further research and investigation” (Dr Matt Brett).*

*“Further research is required to assess the impact of requirements on potential, enrolled and graduating students, and that particular work is required to capture directly the voices of affected students” (Dr Matt Brett).*

## Employment outcomes

An important measure of success is the extent to which access and support in higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is converted into rewarding, meaningful and relevant jobs.

*“The most pressing priority for research and policy innovation is around employment. It is concerning that the labour market participation statistics for graduates with disabilities are so different from those evident without disability” (Dr Matt Brett).*

## Recruitment and outreach

Students with disability continue to be underrepresented in higher education. In 2015 almost one in five Australians had a disability, but students with disability account for less than six per cent of the student population.

There are few, if any, outreach programs targeted at attracting students with disability to universities.

*“Further research into the impact of relationships between National Disability Coordination Officers and universities on the recruitment of students with disability is recommended ... research should adopt a student lifecycle focus, incorporating outreach and recruitment” (Professor Sue Kilpatrick).*

*“Students in a number of impairment categories suggested that universities actively promote themselves as disability friendly, and more specifically welcoming and accommodating of specific disability communities and impairment types” (Dr Mike Kent).*