# Transcript: NCSEHE Student Equity Snapshots Forum

## Disability support in higher education: What our students are telling us

SARAH O’SHEA: Hello everyone. And welcome to our National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education equity forum today. We're just going to wait one minute while everyone enters the Zoom room.

Welcome everyone. We're just waiting, a couple more minutes while everyone enters the Zoom room. Well, thank you for joining us in our fifth Equity Fellows forum. Before we begin, I would like to pay my respects to the country that I'm currently on, today I'm located in the Dharawal Nation and I acknowledge with deep respect the traditional custodians of this land, the Whadjuk people. I pay my respects to Elders past present and emerging and to the Aboriginal community that continue to care for country. I stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history. And a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

Thank you so much for joining us today. As I mentioned this is the fifth of six Fellows forums that we have organised this year. My name is Sarah O'Shea, I'm the director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education which we call NCSEHE for short. NCSEHE is housed at Curtin University and is funded by the Commonwealth Government with a dedicated mission to improve the higher education outcomes that is access, participation, retention, success and completion rates for marginalised and disadvantaged people. We do this through a variety of strategies including research, practice and policy.

One of the key programs that NCSEHE runs is the Equity Fellowship program and today we have the great pleasure of introducing Associate Professor Tim Pitman who was awarded a year-long Equity Fellowship to explore disability support in higher education focusing on what our students are telling us.

As you would be aware, this year has been particularly difficult for our Fellows with many of them experiencing varying levels of lockdown. We have taken a slightly different approach to this presentation and asked each of the Fellows to present a short TED-style talk focusing on a specific element of their research. This is followed by a live 'Q&A' session which today will be facilitated by Louise Pollard who is a leading expert in this field and also one of our previous Equity Fellows.

Before we start, I just have a few housekeeping details. This webinar is being live captioned by Bradley Reporting and will be recorded. The recording will be available on the NCSEHE website in the coming days. To activate the closed captions click on the CC button, either at the bottom or the top of your screen. We also have captions available via browser and Nina will post the link into the chat pod now. If you have any technology difficulties please email ncsehe@curtin.edu.au. Please start the session by going into the chat pod and introducing yourself. We have registrants from all over the country and beyond. Perhaps you too could acknowledge the country that you're currently on. Please choose all panellists and attendees when you do post into the chat pod. If you have a question for the panel and we very much appreciate any questions you might have, please do go into the 'Q&A' box to post your question. We have also received some questions from participants at registration and I know that Tim is currently posting some of those into the 'Q&A' so that he can also answer those during the live panel discussion.

So without further ado, I'm going to unshare my screen, bear with me, sorry, always seems that you can never find the unshare button when you need it. And I'm going to pass over now so we can watch the short video that Tim has prepared. Thank you.

(video plays)

Hello. This recording was made on the land of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation and I pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

Here I want to share a little of what I have learned so far in my Fellowship which explores how universities can better support students with disability in their studies.

A bit of background might help here. There are approximately 75,000 higher education students with disability in Australia, in fact the actual number is certain to be higher because not all students choose to identify, but let’s take that as a starting point. Of those 75,000, around 15,000 are in regional Australia. The most common types of disability recorded are mental health and medical conditions.

Key to my Fellowship has been prioritising the voice of students with disability. There is a saying in disability studies, “Nothing about us without us”, and this has been central to my research design. The findings that I’m about to share with you come directly from the students via a national survey followed up by more detailed conversations. Over 1,700 students participated in the survey and several hundred have taken part in the follow-up stage. The response has been extraordinary.

I am incredibly grateful to all of them. Here’s what they’ve shared with me so far.

One type of support universities can offer is attitudinal. This refers to the way they treat their students with disability — behave around them. Overall, universities score quite well in this regard. They’re seen as open and inclusive environments; however, this is sometimes because we don’t see the disability, either because the student is studying online or, as some of them have described it to me, their disability is invisible.

Universities can also support students with disability by implementing clear processes and procedures to let students know how and where they can receive support. Again, universities score quite well in this regard. Clear, regular and proactive communication is really appreciated. Less appreciated is when this support is impersonal, generic and slow to react.

Technological support is about the software and hardware that universities can employ to assist students with their learning needs. Increasingly, students with disability are bringing their own solutions to universities and they appreciate it when the institution is flexible enough to incorporate them into their own systems. Inclusive design principles are also helpful for many students with disability. For example, if all online lectures are provided with closed captions, then that’s very useful, as opposed to requiring a student with disability to have to make a specific request.

Built environment support is not just about ramps and lifts, it includes low-level noise environments, quiet spaces and appropriate lighting levels. Universities are rated so-so in this respect. A strong theme that is emerging through my discussion with students is a need for more to be done in the area of inclusive design. Rather than make one room or one building or one unit of study in a course accessible, if we can design entire campuses or modes of delivery in this way then all students—not just those with disabilities—will benefit.

Social inclusion is important for students with disability as those without but, unfortunately, here universities are not rated so well. The issue of neurodiversity is mentioned often here in the sense that too many activities or events are organised on the assumption that all participants have equal levels of mobility or react to stressful environments in exactly the same way.

The final type of support universities provide students with disabilities is, it involves how they communicate with them, especially in the delivery of their teaching and learning. Again, the issue of neurodiversity is important here. We know that different students learn more effectively by different types and styles of instruction and communication. This includes things such as successful web designs and alternative modes of content delivery and assessment. Unfortunately, it’s here that universities receive the lowest ratings for support.

There’s a lot more I can, and could, discuss including the particular issues faced by regional students or the effects the coronavirus pandemic has had on students with disability. These topics and more will be included fully in my final report but for now thank you very much for your time.

(video ends)

SARAH O’SHEA: Well, I'm sure you'll agree that was a terrific presentation. Thank you so much Tim. You have provided just so much food for thought there and I'm sure you're going to develop that now in the conversation with Louise so I'm just going to remind everyone that we do have live 'Q&A' so if you have a question for Tim, I know that he'd be really happy to answer it and now I'm going to pass over to Tim and Louise to take it from here, over to you two, guys.

LOUISE POLLARD: Thank you Sarah. We really appreciate the introduction. As Sarah mentioned I am Louise Pollard, I was a 2017 Equity Fellow and I'm the Director of Admissions and Student Services at The University of Notre Dame in Fremantle.

Like Tim I'm standing on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Tim that was a really interesting presentation and I think a really good taster about what we'll be seeing as your research develops and when you present your report and further findings. Can you tell us about what brought you to this topic?

TIM PITMAN: I've been involved in supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds for over 20 years. I’ve been researching it for 10. In the last couple of years I've really been able to focus more and more on students with disability because I've been very fortunate at the university I'm working with — to be working — and have learnt from, a group of critical disability study researchers, a lot of them with lived experience of disability. And they've helped guide me in a way in which this research can be done. I was further supported by a previous Centre fellow Matt Brett who also gave me some key insights.

I needed the opportunity, because in order to do this research properly it needs to be done thoughtfully and as I say it needs to be done in a “nothing about us without us” environment where you can create an environment in which students can and do choose to talk to you. I couldn't have done it without the Centre. That's kind of thing you can't do one day a week in your spare time and only pay it scant attention, and the Centre being able to provide this opportunity to step back from my other work and for a full year embed myself in this. This is why for me this has been a perfect moment.

LOUISE POLLARD: I agree with you about the value of the Fellowship. It is a luxury and a privilege and it's an amazing opportunity. One question has come through. Did students make any comments about placements or internships, how might they be made more inclusive?

TIM PITMAN: The only comments that I've seen were in relation to COVID-19 where students are getting very stressed and worried because of COVID. They were not able to do their placements and internships, so I don’t have any insights into a normal a non-COVID-19 world, what would happen there, so I would not like to may any assumptions. But I am still collecting data. Maybe that is a question I can ask specifically ask of students.

LOUISE POLLARD: Another question has come in — sorry it's been covered by my screen for just a moment — from Lidel, she loves your snapshot. What proportion of your survey respondents said they had neurodiverse conditions? Also there was a question showing interest in the perspectives of neurodiverse students so perhaps you could expand a bit on that.

TIM PITMAN: Neurodiversity is a big issue and it's been a real eye opener for me. Sorry, the reason I'm looking like this is I'm trying wherever possible to find the voice of the students. I do have a couple of quotes because I really do want their voices to come through.

The issue of neurodiversity has been absolutely critical because the students have said when it comes to something like assessments or learning access plans the universities have understood and they realise that there are different learning styles and different environments and they can start to structure and deliver quite good experiences there. But what the students are telling us is that neurodiversity is everywhere. It's the way in which they're treated in social situations, it's just these assumptions that come. It's this hidden disability part of it, that even when there's a learning access plan a lot of rest of the university and it's daily life, it assumes a certain neurotypicality.

I'm just looking at one quote from one student that says it also can spin the other way where assumptions are made. This student didn't disclose to me exactly what disability they had but it was an evident disability. Perhaps it was a physical disability, I’m not sure. But they said that because of that they “found people speaking to me very clearly and exaggerated enunciating as if I'm hard of hearing”.

A couple of other comments students have made is they're either treated as normal or if they disclose some form of disability they're completely not normal. Another student said that “taking biology with a genetic condition is confronting because all the language I’m confronted with in the textbooks includes phrases like ‘mutated’, ‘abnormal’, ‘wrong’, when I see my life as differences, just human variation”. I thought that was really insightful because, not necessarily calling for the textbooks to be changed, but we have to understand and we have to have disability awareness training to understand that a learning access plan is just one thing. It's how we respond and behave to these people and respond to the behaviour of everyone around us and realise there's so much diversity out there. I hope that has gone some way to answering the question.

LOUISE POLLARD: Thank you. You talked a lot about inclusive design in your presentation and I suspect that will be a big theme moving forward. Another question has come in from Karen. “Do you have a sense from universities of their willingness to implement recommendations for change resulting from your study?”

TIM PITMAN: Depends on what the recommendations are going to be and also on who you are asking. There's incredible support from the disability support offices, the DSOs. They're advocates, they’ve been operating in this space and they really want these things to happen. But when you look at the bigger pictures of the things that really need to be done, that's when we'll have to look for a step change and now is a good time to talk about one thing that will be absolutely critical, and that’s to more fully embrace universal design learning processes. So, universal design learning principles say when we design something it can be a building, a path, a course, a mode of instruction a software tool, a hardware tool.

Understand, getting back to the issue of neurodiversity and diversity overall, the different people engage with different things in a different way. Different people learn and respond better in different ways. If we can build those into our systems it means that there will be fewer times when students will have to step out of the day-to-day running and request special accommodations. It won't ever stop completely. There will always be very specific circumstances that students will need special accommodations but the more we can universally design our entire campuses and our ways of teaching, the less students will have to be out of their comfort zone and having to disclose and feel different and feel that they're causing a problem to have these things happen. That's a big one because we're talking about changing the whole infrastructure of universities, but ultimately that's the direction we have to go in.

LOUISE POLLARD: Absolutely. A couple of questions have come in around student assessment, “What are some of the biggest issues in assessment and how did you measure student views on whether assessments themselves are equitable for people with disability?”

TIM PITMAN: The main messages that came around assessment — this is where universities you might have — people might recall from the slides — the things universities score very highly on are procedures. When there is a procedure in place, particularly when that procedure has been directed by and led by the disability support office — very good, relatively high levels of satisfaction, overall. The problem is that assessment has to be delivered by somebody, a lecturer, academic, a scholar, another person and that's where we can start to see fractures because the system is only as good as the person delivering it.

I can give a personal perspective from this. It won't shine highly on me but it really rams this home. It’s got to be 20 years ago now when I first came to university. One of my first jobs was in an exams department and we dealt with a lot of special assessments then and I can remember getting a call from one of the exam venues saying that we have a student with a particular mobility back issue and need an ergonomic food rest, it's not here, it was supposed to be delivered. I went to the storage area, went down very proud of myself because I was sprinting, got there, and I can still remember her saying "that's a book rest, that's not a footrest." Because I didn't know what I was looking for and it vaguely looked right to me. She handled it with incredible grace but it would have been incredibly stressful to her because she's just about to sit down for an exam.

That was an example of there was a process, it has been recorded, there was a need for this but the people delivering the process, including me, fell down. That's one problem. The second problem is that disability support officers generally are — the students report they're incredibly supportive and understanding, but then the lecturer in the class is — effectively is transmitting with their body language and sometimes outwardly actively discriminating and saying "I don't think you should have this, this is an unfair advantage, I think this is wrong," which leads to a second thing —­­ we need mandatory disability awareness training. We don't need people to be experts in understanding how to support students with a disability, that’s what the DSOs can do, but everyone needs to understand that at least 75,000 students in our system have disability and we need to be aware of, and empathetic to, their needs — not sympathetic but empathetic to their needs.

LOUISE POLLARD: Matt Brett is appreciative of the shout-out you gave him. His question is, “is inclusive design an educator's abstraction or well understood by students you have spoken to. Either way, how might we partner with students to make inclusive education design the starting point rather than an after-thought?”

TIM PITMAN: I hate you because you ask the questions I feel I can't answer! That’s a very good question. The first part I don't feel I yet have an understanding. It is, I suspect what you're talking about there and there is an intellectual understanding of what inclusive and universal design is, but we don't necessarily implement it. In terms of the students, the two things the students can give us, we absolutely need to incorporate them into the design and here we need to incorporate all students because it needs to be student- and learner-centric. So it’s basically, how do we build this so that you get the best learning outcomes? That's both for students with and without disability. We can only do that in partnership with them. We can start off with external abstractions of, I would imagine a universal design system would look like this, but a design process by its nature would have to get the students and say let's partner with you and work through the system because you’ll be able to say you thought that was going to work and it doesn't. That kind of links to a second thing they I highlighted in the slide about technology. When universities 25 years ago started thinking about supporting students with disability they imagined themselves as the solution makers, they imagined themselves as the experts and the technological experts that they would build the machines and equipment that would solve the students’ problems. We're now living in 2020 and the students increasingly are coming with their own solutions because often the market out there would deliver those solutions for them better and what we need to do is say that we’re not going to build a solution for you to let you study and learn better and feel more comfortable in our institution. You’ve already got the solution, we need to make our system adapt to incorporate that solution.

LOUISE POLLARD: Thank you. A question has been submitted on the 'Q&A' and I encourage others to do so. Some people did submit them previously and they're being added on. Any other questions coming in, please do so. Just type them in there and also feel free to vote for questions as well. The question is — “I know that people with people with disabilities are often hesitant to participate in research and you had over 1,700 students participate in your research. Do you have any insights into who was most willing or able to participate?”

TIM PITMAN: The demographics of the students exactly matched the demographics you get with statistics from the government in terms of whether they fall into groups of students with physical mobilities, learning difficulties, medical conditions. So, the simple answer is just overwhelmingly they’d agree to participate. The survey participant statistics or demographics match up exactly with the national ones. It hasn't been that a particular group of students have engaged with this, they just all have. That would probably be the thing. I don't think there's been a particular group of students and I have been overwhelmed by the response. I feel this is something they really want to have their voices heard and this has given them the opportunity.

LOUISE POLLARD: Another pre-submitted question, “I'm particularly interested in the differences between student experiences for those with less visible mental health learning challenges and visual impairment or wheelchair?”

TIM PITMAN: There is some stuff coming through. I’ll just bring up a couple of quotes. Actually, before I get to the quotes, the interesting thing because this mentions students with the more visible disabilities, including visual impairment. The visual impairment group is quite interesting because the Government recently published completion rate data and across the whole student population completion rates are around 73 per cent so about 73 per cent of students complete their course in a given time. For students with disability, that drastically plummets down to 66 per cent; however, the low vision blind category is also at 73 per cent. They’re a standout of a group, who for a very long time, advocated for support and engaged with universities and the DSOs and the external advocacy to say that you need to deliver education in a way that we can access it. That's an example partly of a group I feel getting together and being — having a really strong advocacy model but also, I'm trying to use words of advantage and disadvantage because that's very subjective but that's one consequence of your disability being apparent, in other words people can't overlook it, they can't deny it or pretend it's not there.

That presents two challenges, that's very good from a group perspective, so the group of students who identify as low vision or blind because they can rally around this and make action and change happen, but individual students within that group — and this is where it comes out — they regularly say that they're sick and tired of having to be the advocate at their university, of having to be that person, so students with obvious disability can sometimes find it incredibly draining and tiring because they can't escape that.

The flip is true of being invisible — in many cases it does give you extra agency and some choice. You can choose the time and the place in where to disclose, as I said the flipside is because it is not apparent to neurotypical people that you have disability, when you do suddenly ask for a learning assessment plan or an accommodation there can be some resistance to that and some sense of, “you don’t need this, what's going on?” I think that's the main difference is that — I think that having, from the feedback it would seem that, having apparent disability can be very strong and powerful at the group level but incredibly challenging and draining for individuals within that group.

LOUISE POLLARD: You just mentioned there about some students providing you with feedback that they regretted their disclosure to the university because of discriminatory attitudes. Can you speak of the characteristics of these circumstances?

TIM PITMAN: I can't speak to the characteristics because they're incredibly individual and I have to say, made at times for very confronting and emotional reading. I want to tie in something — when you’re going through the slides, and when you speak to somebody who is not understanding or really engaged in the student with disability area, the visual take home is you go, "80 odd per cent of students are happy with these kinds of supports that they get.” Sure, I’d be good if you were at McDonald's and are looking at, are people happy with my service, or you're buying a car or a smartphone, but we need to remember even a very small percentage of students who are dissatisfied — within that group we are talking about, in many cases, absolutely discriminatory behaviour, stuff that contravenes the Disability Discrimination Act at times and that can be destroying. I won't talk them at here because they are very confronting. There's a couple of case studies I'll put in the report verbatim. What that shows — what one shows — I'll speak from memory because I don't want to use this language because it is very personal for this kind of talk — the first one describes a really cascading situation where things start well and again you think about the DSO as being the centre and as the students the effect of the learning access plan radiates out and out and the people further away from the DSO become more and more engaged then less and less able to understand the situation, the pressure starts to accumulate on the student and this is the paradox. The DSOs have specific training, they understand these things, they can put into place very good plans but they're reliant on the academics, teaching staff, the admin staff to support the students and they're the ones without the experience. One situation can then cause an incredible stress and anxiety. It then triggers an event in the student and adds to their stress and anxiety which requires them to modify their learning access plan which then generates within the academic even more suspicion and, “really, I think you’re now trying it on,” and it becomes this vicious cycle. Then what happens, in the particular case, is the student, for self-preservation, to look after themselves, withdraws, looks after their mental health, then reengages and then they are told that you failed the unit, you passed the deadline date. This triggers a next level of cascading anxiety. They miss another assessment and at this point the university says that you need to withdraw from the course. That can be incredibly confronting there.

I have another case, this is a rarity, but there is another case where a student clearly is describing systemic failure. The whole system from the DSO out fails. Like I say, the thing about these situations are — and this is the thing we need to do at the university level. For example, if I can present this — if this podcast is recorded and say sent to someone very senior at a university, they have two choices. They can look at those statistics I presented at start and go, "Eight out of 10 students are happy, I think we're doing a good job here, business as usual" or they can look at the specific cases where the system has failed and been discriminatory and say, "No we need to change."

LOUISE POLLARD: The student voice is incredibly powerful. But it can be very distressing, some of those experiences. But in many ways we need an appreciation of those stories if we want change to happen. Especially going back to Karen’s question around universities be willing to implement recommendations for change. There is a comment in the chat just talking about being worried that access plans are an invitation for conscious and unconscious bias. Another question about the researching of participants, “Were many higher degree by research students, as those are often forgotten about — this is often a forgotten group of students?

TIM PITMAN: HDR students are in many ways a forgotten group. There have been some responses from HDR students and I don't know if this is necessarily typical of the HDR but I found a couple of them said they feel being a mature age person and being a second degree learner makes them feel more isolated from the campus than having disability, because they're seeing all these undergraduates, I’m pretty sure one used the expression, “bright and bushy tailed,” undergraduates running around and they feel that separates them more. I can't give you any specific insights into that. There have been some responses from HDR students but the actual things they're talking about mirror the same issues that the undergraduate students are talking about — connectivity, both technological and social at their institutions for example.

LOUISE POLLARD: Another pre-submitted question was regarding the experience of regional students. I want to broaden that to regional and remote students, but before answering that question there's such diversity within regional and remote students engaged in higher education —online students as well as students relocating or studying in a Regional University Centre. How did you find with the online students, were many students studying online from regional and remote areas engaged in your research?

TIM PITMAN: Yes, I had specific questions and I asked them to contextualise that. As you say, there's three ways of looking at regionality. I’ll just say regional to encompass regional, remote and rural —it’s just easier to say. You can be a regional student living in regional Australia and studying at a regional university. you can be a regional student living in regional Australia but studying online at a metropolitan university, and you can be a regional student relocating, and each of them have specific issues.

One of the few times I'll talk to the stats — looking at the stats, regional students with disability — you have a gradation. For example, in the overall student population there's a slight bias towards female enrolments. For students with disability, the bias is slightly stronger and for regional students with disability, even more so. Exactly the same for mature age students with disability. Slightly more tend to be mature age than the overall population. Regional even more so. The same for part-time and the same for online. In terms of types of disability, exactly the same profile. In terms of satisfaction, those slides that I started off with, exactly the same profile.

But then we move to the specific issues. And looking at the responses that we got around this and looking at thematically, the main issue was lack of access or travel for specialist care services — that is a big thing. Here is a quote from one student that is very typical. “I can travel up to two hours one way to attend specialist appointments based in metro Australia, up to two times a month. Having a disability is time consuming enough but then you add in the extra time and it’s even more of a setback trying to match that with my university and work commitments. Universities can sometimes think that has nothing to do with us. That's specialist services, that's the NDIS and, in some ways yes it is, but again getting back to the notion of universal design learning principles you have to accept that this student has these massive commitments and it’s not just the two hours there and two hours back. It’s then the exhaustion that follows that and the disruption to their life. We have to be more aware that students that live in regional Australia, many of them have to expend significant resources to access the services they need.

The second thing — the digital divide — and here a couple have made specific mention of how important the Regional University Centres have been. I was listening to the webinars throughout week and Nicole and talked about this and Janine talked about this, these are a boon and a godsend to some students. Another issue that people may not consider because they think "oh, you have a regional university next to us" but most regional universities do not have the same choice of courses that the metro universities do. That gives that student two options — one to study online. We can have whole conversations about online/offline — for some students that works really really well and that’s actually their preference. But for other students that’s incredibly challenging for other reasons, many related to their disability. Some of them, if they're really passionate about a particular course, they then have to relocate to metropolitan Australia and that brings in a whole range of support issues.

The final thing that I found really interesting, with one notable exception, was overall the students said that the sense of community in regional Australia and the regional universities was really important to them. Helped them stay grounded. Helped them feel that they could engage in their study much­ — with much less anxiety. One student said “An advantage of studying at a regional university is there's fewer students to the staff are able to return my calls or emails promptly and they have time to meet with me when it suits me. Another advantage is that there's relaxed atmosphere on campus at my uni. I really appreciate this because there is nothing worse than feeling pressure to attend certain events or to get involved in activities when you’re having a particularly difficult day or week.” That quote there was typical of quite a few students. One notable exception was one student did say that they hated being in regional Australia because they'd grown up in this small community and has been stereotyped and typecast as ‘that kid’ and felt that they wished they weren't from there, but that was an exception.

LOUISE POLLARD: It would be remiss of me not to mention it, but for those in more remote area, even getting access to those Regional University Centres can be quite difficult. Especially in places like Western Australia with the tyranny of distance the way it is, there's a lot of places where it's not necessarily as easy to put in one of those hubs. Saying that, going to a symposium that the Centre hosted last year, or the year before with the regional university like the new study hubs, it's amazing what’s been happening when it's driven by the university, by the community themselves. I digress. Jacinta had a young student with mental health issues who did not want to register with disability service due to the word ‘disability’. In your interviews, or from what you read, or from the students you’ve spoken to, is there a movement to rename disability services, so for example, accessibility services?

TIM PITMAN: I've not seen any evidence of that. That said, it wasn’t a specific question I asked. Like I say, all you can do is be consistent. In terms of this whole way in which I understand this methodology it was very clear from the beginning that with the students I would use the expression 'student with disability' and the participants locked in “OK that's how Tim is talking about it” and there's incredible resilience obviously within this community of people who are used to being spoken to in a certain way. So, I don’t know. It wasn't a particular question that I asked so I couldn't be sure.

As an aside here, there's some interesting stuff happening also within these groups, when they look at the responses from other people they're saying that they wouldn't have classified that as a disability necessarily or have looked at it this way. That gets back to this constant desire to typecast and classify and categorise. A world of social scientists that I've come from, because that’s how policy works — let's identify a group and test the bejesus out of them and make policy changes and increasingly people are saying “don’t talk about classification and labels and things, just talk about functional environments. Like, this is how I learn best. This is the environment in which I'm least anxious. Create this environment for me. Can I just quickly slightly digress, only because I've been half tracking the questions, I notice that some person asked whether there were any insights on people with disability completing a degree, then the university providing support for employment. The next podcast, my colleague David Eckstein — that's his entire Fellowship. Tune in just over an hour and you should get a wealth of information on that.

LOUISE POLLARD: Very nice promo for David. Thank you. Talking about employability. Nadine has pointed out that WIL is very big at the moment with universities investing significantly in WIL and have it as a huge priority. You spoke before about university staff. Regardless of what area they're in, having training and a greater understanding of providing appropriate support, how do we engage as a sector with employers in that space when we're encouraging students to engage in WIL. Did that come up at all? Have you had any insights into that?

TIM PITMAN: That is — by way of background and methodology, just so you know, again my colleague David is presenting after this one — as I said it's been an incredible privilege hearing these voices from these students and we don't want to go out, and I don't want to want to ask these students all this information and a week later David reengages with them and asks. So we did a joint survey. All that stuff I have deliberately not looked at because he's the expert on it. So I'm not dodging it, I’m just saying David will be able to cover this.

Separate to the survey and separate to what David will say later around that, I was really having a very interesting conversation with another person who has been fantastic in guiding me, Darlene McLennon from the University of Tasmania — she’s integral to ADCET — and she was helping me work through the complexities of the NDIS and its engagement with universities, and it's convoluted. It's that point at which — because generally speaking the NDIS is imagined as outside the university, this is all the support you get and then you come to the university and that's when the university becomes responsible but WIL is an area where there is that grey area because the student is not really in there and it can be great incredibly bureaucratic and complex. If there's a placement at this place and, um, all our students are required to go there, then the NDIS can pay for that student's taxi vouchers because— in this situation the person can get support from the NDIS but in a different situation, um, if the university just structures the WIL in a different way the NDIS no longer counts and even the universities can get confused about is it our responsibility or the NDIS?

LOUISE POLLARD: Um, OK. Time for one or two more questions. A question about COVID-19. You mentioned that a lot of survey questions were being asked around May through to July. Is that right? A pivotal time and a great difference in experience across the country. Any themes emerge from that, positive and negative impact on classes, on teaching and learning, and assessments being online?

TIM PITMAN: Here are the clear themes that came out. Here is a few of them, not necessarily in order because I mix them around in my head. A constant theme that came out was students saying “For years I've been asking to be able to study online because it's much better for my particular circumstances and the universities have said it's not possible. Suddenly it became possible.” So, it comes back to that earlier question: What do we require? God forbid that we require a pandemic to make universities move but sometimes it requires that meta-crisis for universities to suddenly go, "Hey this is possible". That said, the students, just sticking currently with the method of instruction, it's almost split down the line. There have some students who have said, “This suits me,” and have said, “I was studying this way anyway so it was business as usual for me.” Others were saying it has now improved. For every one student that says that, there's another that is really missing the structure and engagement.

The key themes are that it's more flexible; however, it's less structured and harder to say motivated. Those things are, I think even with students with and without disability would say the same. More specifically on disability, some really interesting stuff. I love this quote by this person, they said, “I chose to study on campus as a form of exposure therapy. I have PTSD, I have symptoms of anxiety. I deliberately chose to study on campus to potentially put myself in situations to cause anxiety.” Incredible self-agency there. “This allows me the opportunity to utilise the coping strategies that I've been learning through my therapy and then COVID-19 came long and I have lost all those opportunities, so I’m desperate to get back to put myself under my controlled pressure again.” It was really interesting, not necessarily typical but very interesting.

The other main — the next main thing coming through is that in terms of moving online because of COVID-19, the overwhelming general response from the students participating have said, the universities moved more or less very well and they did a really good job and the students are quite sympathetic. They really just realised you had to do this so quickly. However, as it's gone on, it's been quite clear that there's not the systems in place to maintain this and they're starting to see their service fracture and fragment and start to break down. The students have been very complimentary of the initial response to COVID-19 but the longer it's going, the more it's showing this is not a long-term solution. Back to that design learning. If we actually embedded it systemically it would work better.

The final thing that came out is, it's not directly related to universities but universities need to be aware of this because it makes such an impact, is for many student, a lot of students have — they're really high risk groups, they have auto-immune conditions, they're trapped in their houses so even as other parts — other students are starting to reengage more they feel incredibly pressured and still locked away. Obviously, Victoria itself has been a big challenge for a lot of students with disability. They're saying, access to specialist services and being worried about going out this is all increasing their anxiety and stress and universities need to be aware. It's not just them —their change, their process — that is being stressful for students, but there's this massive amount of stress flowing around the system.

LOUISE POLLARD: Absolutely and how did you find that COVID-19 impacted your research because this was all set up pre-COVID-19. There was a research plan, you would have had thoughts about how you were going to do it. How did that change?

TIM PITMAN: The major thing it change is I wanted the design to be as inclusive as possible. For instance, emails work very well for some students; however, for others face-to-face is much more preferred and that opportunity was lost to me and the reality is, within the time frame and in the current world COVID-19 is lingering; unfortunately the opportunity is probably going to be lost now. That's a real shame. I'm aware that even while I'm privileging and prioritising student voices, I acknowledge and accept that there are other student voices who couldn't engage because email was not appropriate for them. In some limited cases, I tried to do Zoom but in a couple of cases they said, “My whole life is Zoom, I don't want to do another one with you” and other have said, “it really stresses me”. In terms of the number of responses, I've been overwhelmed and gratified but acknowledge and recognise that there are certain groups of students in disability who have lost out because of COVID-19.

LOUISE POLLARD: Thank you. And the final one from Matt, “From what you have clean gleaned so far, what additional research questions are emerging from the work? What's next for you and the broader range of people interested in this domain?”

TIM PITMAN: There's a couple of things. As I said, I'm intrigued about how we take universal design learning to the next stage, about how we embed and incorporate this in a whole way. I personally believe the way forward there is to not make it an issue about students with disability but to make it a universal issue about how universities of the 21st century can be the most flexible and adaptive and respond to a wide range of student learning styles and needs and then everyone benefits from that. That's the first one.

The second one is we need to work out how we can systemically provide disability awareness training for all staff at universities and make sure that that training is properly designed, understood in a way and that they'll engage with it. It can't just be a tick box that every staff member does this module. It has to be something that engages them and makes them understand. The final thing — and I was again a little bit stunned going into this — I thought it would be quite easy to understand how much universities spend supporting students with disability. It was really hard to find out because it impacts on so many areas. There's some parts which are really obvious. For example, requests that universities make to the Government to get refunds on specialist equipment they've purchased but that's only a fraction of it and you could quantify how many disability support officers there were in your university and what their salaries were but that doesn't — it’s everything from the library to catering to landscaping to everything, so trying to work out exactly how much this costs is really important because we need to get that out there to make people understand how important this is.

LOUISE POLLARD: It's amazing that it's been so challenging to find but it make sense. Any final thoughts, what do you want participants here to take away? What were the final messages that you’d like people to take from this webinar?

TIM PITMAN: I think I have covered it. Let's just focus on two things — let's — speaking to the university community here — let's embed and make mandatory disability awareness training for everyone so that we understand everyone has at least a passing knowledge or a basic understanding of how to be — how — basically how to understand the situation, that's the first one and let's start having some serious conversations around university universal design learning principles.

LOUISE POLLARD: Thank you. When do you think we'll be able to see the next stage of your findings from are your research this year? Very much hope to submit them by the end of the year, that will be one of the reports submitted to the Government and through the Centre and I'm looking forward to engaging and continue to engage with the Centre all throughout next year to get out that message, so start saying who needs to hear the message? What part of the message do they need to hear? What is the format in which they need to hear that? I'm really looking forward to next year.

TIM PITMAN: Excellent. I don't think you're alone in looking forward to next year by the way! Thank you so much Tim. I found that really insightful. There's a lot of food for thought for me, and I hope everyone listening is able to take something away from it. Sarah, over to you.

SARAH O’SHEA: Thank you so much Louise and Tim. Wow. That was a huge 'Q&A' there. We had some terrific engagement from everyone, all the participants and Louise well done for dealing with those questions because for anyone who has ever hosted a webinar it is tricky. You have questions coming in and then people voting for them, all up I think you managed to get through about 18 or 20 questions so well done and well done to you Tim for answering them all as well and doing so well in presenting your research.

I'm conscious of time but just before we finish, I just want to remind everyone that more details of the fellows are available on the NCSEHE webpage and for those of you who aren't familiar with our website, I am just putting up the details of the website here. Our email, Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Please do remember that Tim's research will also be published towards the end of the year and we open to have his report available in early 2021. As Tim mentioned as well, we do have David Eckstein coming up in our next and final webinar of the week and David's webinar will be facilitated by Matt Brett who I know is also in the audience today. So again thank you both so much for taking the time today to come and participate in the Equity Snapshots Forum and I look forward to seeing some of your at our next session later on in the day. Thank you Tim and Louise.

(webinar ends)