

Transcript

Impact on students with disability with Darlene McLennan

SONAL SINGH: Darlene McLennan is the manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse of Education and Training. The report talks about setting population parity targets for First Nations students, regional and remote students, and maintaining it for people with disabilities. What are your thoughts on this?

DARLENE MCLENNAN: Thanks Sonal.

I must admit that it was very disappointing to read in the report, that the recommendation is to maintain and not grow participants of students with disability. There have been concerns raised across the community of the implications of this for students with disability.

Looking at the data, people kept writing asking where they got it from, how do they come up with these numbers? If we look at the data sets we have available, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identifies that 18% of people in Australia have a disability. Another 22% of people of a long-term health condition.

In reality, one in 4 people experience mental health conditions in any one year, and 50% in a lifetime. This is a stark contrast to the report, it shows that students with disabilities have reached parity at 8.4%.

University students-- University services that support students with a disability use the definition from the Disability Discrimination Act. This definition is very broad and can be experienced as a result of a wide range of impairments or conditions, can be long term or temporary.

Even the government's own data collection identify that participation rate of undergraduates with disability in 2022 was 11.6. We know there has also been a significant increase in the numbers, with some universities now reporting in 2023 that their student cohort from disability is up to 15%.

Much of this increase is accounted for by a large increase of students taking support from disability services, and the highest increase has been from students with mental health conditions, neurodiversity, and medical conditions.

But also there might be a factor relating to the universities assisting students to tick the box on enrolment, as the program funding is linked to the enrolled student. But I also want to reflect that more and more students are needing support, and require adjustment from the university environment.

Although the report identifies a number of times where there are challenges in the data collection and quality, it appears there is no effort to check the accuracy of this data. Conclusions were drawn based on incorrect data. Asserting that the sector has supposedly achieved parity in disability representation at 8.4% is in stark contrast to, at the moment, 24.4% of students in the K-12 school sector receiving adjustments.

Someone put it to me like it was a, barrelling down the road with 24.4% of students with disability coming out of the school system, and suddenly they hit a barrier in the higher education sector, which is quite concerning.

I want to acknowledge that the inaccurate... That collecting data is really difficult. However, it is clear in the accord report that it is incorrect. I would encourage that the report is updated to reflect an aspirational target for students with disability.

But more importantly, and I suppose what has ignited my passion, as I want to reflect on the statement that was provided in reaching a .4% the report identified that the share of Australian population as people with the is an expected enrolment share, estimated by the Department of Education, based on a proportion of -- 15 to 64-year-old population with disability.

This one statement undermines all of the work that people with disability and advocates in advocating for over many years, for equal access to tertiary education.

It also flies in the face of what I thought was the intention of the accord, both through equity-- growth through equity. But only some equity?

Rosemary Kayess is our wonderful Disability Discrimination Commissioner and she summed it up beautifully. Adjusted for the age profiles and profound disability, which is assumed to include participation in higher education and education, and we just assume away the next Stephen Hawking's. I think that statement is so powerful that was stubborn even talking to Graeme Innes, the former Disability Discrimination Commissioner, the door has been shut for him under profound disability. What made me reflect as can you imagine if any other equity group had an exclusionary statement in the report, the fact that this hasn't made the front page news, we have a long way to go in tertiary education past accepting data and parity, it reinforces the negative perception of people with disability accessing higher education.

But in my role, I am saddened to say that it is not just the Accord setting the culture of lower expectations. There is a big piece such as the Royal Commission into violence and abuse and exploitation for people with disability. And they have shown minimal focus on tertiary education. It becomes evident that this culture persists beyond the education sector. Although the question that Sonal asked was about data, I want to briefly talk about the other recommendations at impact.

And Sally mentioned it, it is in regards to the submission by the Tertiary Education Commissioner. And also on a needs-based funding, we have long advocated for funding to support students with disability, the disability support program is inadequate. HU needs -- A true needs-based funding needs to be done right. But also we need a national approach that provides guidance that supports capacity to build guidance and provides advice. We need to ensure that students with disability have access to higher education. I want to put this into perspective, apparently, the Australian Government provides millions of dollars each year to the collections of data to build capacity to provide support for disability.

And ADCET who is a similar, is only funded 170,000 per annum. Let's let that sink in. I want to speak about how we can remove barriers, but I'm aware of the time. I will skip those. I want to quickly mention that the National student union and I, ADCET are calling for a strategy and a roadmap to look at systemic reforms in disability in higher education to ensure that we change things for disability. And just in closing, we needed now more than ever. The absence of data and the approach on how the data is presented, and the lack of attention to disability in the Accord's report is quite concerning. There is a pressing need to address the shortcomings in current approaches and that is the inclusion in higher education.

We need to ensure that the government response to co-design and integrate and involve the students with lived experience with expert advice. I encourage all of us to address these issues and strive for a more inclusive and supportive environment across the education sector, ensuring that students with disability are not left behind. I hope that makes sense. I had to cut a lot of it out. But I do want to keep the conversation going, thank you for letting me start the conversation.