



## Students with disabilities as ideal graduates: universities' obligations to support extracurricular involvement

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### Abstract

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) and their impact on student employability has become a focus of the higher education sector, with a recent emphasis on experiences such as global exchange and skill acquisition that prepares graduates for the workforce. Despite the initiatives and effort put into supporting the general student population, students with disabilities are underrepresented in these opportunities. This causes such students to have less access to employability opportunities that set them apart from their peers and leads to a distinct disadvantage when seeking to enter the workforce. The literature suggests that there are various benefits of participating in extracurricular activities for university students, including some literature about students with disabilities. However, there is a distinct lack of focus on how the scarcity of support for participation in these programs fails to address equality and discrimination legal obligations, as well as the failure of disability specific initiatives to include these activities as essential to their core mission. This paper aims to examine how Australian University strategic plans addressing disability inclusion and supports for students with disabilities extend to the extracurricular space, and what more can be done to include these students in all aspects of campus life. Through a search and policy analysis of University Strategic Plans, Disability Action Plans, and scholarships for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities, it was revealed that this issue is not being sufficiently addressed through university strategic responses to disability inclusion. This paper provides practitioners and universities with recommendations to improve their compliance with antidiscrimination measures and address this deficit to improve student outcomes.

### Keywords

Disability, extracurricular activities, graduate outcomes, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), higher education, universities, students

### Introduction

The research available emphasises the positive, and even vital, aspects of extracurricular participation for university students, especially regarding their career and personal development, as well as their sense of belonging and well-being on our campuses (Burke et al., 2005; Clark et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2011). However, how ECA participation impacts students with disabilities has not been similarly scrutinised, with the few studies focusing on this issue highlighting the positive impacts of participation at the high school level (O'Shea et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2017; Wehman et al., 2014). There is also little evidence of previous studies that examine how decisions made at the strategic and policy level reflect the importance of the employability skills taken from these opportunities for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are often supported through their curricular studies by initiatives that allow for adjustments to their assessment and classroom experiences (Grimes et al., 2018; Kent et al., 2018). However, these supports are often not extended to the ECA space, in which the needs of students with disabilities may differ from the classroom, resulting in further barriers (Harpur & Stein, 2018). With the recent emphasis on universities supporting their graduates through university-wide strategic plans and policies, and employability enhancement programs aimed at providing and facilitating work experience and ECA involvement to improve graduate employment rates, not allowing for targeted disability supports in this area can leave students with disabilities at a disadvantage (Stuart et al., 2011). This becomes increasingly problematic if these activities are also not included in strategic Disability Action Plans (DAPs) or equivalent plans, which serve as a baseline for the action that takes place to support those with disabilities within the university community. This paper aims to highlight this strategic oversight, as well as encourage universities and those who create DAPs to ensure that student employability is prioritised and actioned through their efforts.

The focus of this study on ECA participation's impact on student employability is relevant as people with disability have lower employment outcomes than those without. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2020) reports that in 2018 '53.4% of people with disability were in the labour force, compared with 84.1 % of people without disability' (Key Statistics section). In the context of higher education, university graduates with a disability are 10% less likely to gain full-time employment than their peers without a disability (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), 2021). Indeed, only 17% of adults with a disability have a bachelor's degree, compared to 35% of their peers (Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (AIHW), 2022c). With such a significant discrepancy in employment and graduate outcomes, there is a real opportunity for universities to make changes that support people with disability to participate in employment.

We argue that the university sector is failing their legal obligations to provide students with disabilities equitable opportunities and outcomes, proven by the lack of consideration of ECAs in their strategic and policy responses aimed at this cohort. Specifically, the obligations placed upon tertiary education providers by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards), as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These obligations require all students to have full access to all aspects of student life, explicitly including ECAs (Nationally Consistent Collection of School Students with Disability (NCCD), 2022). As a result of failure to meet these obligations, universities contribute to the poor representation of people with disabilities in the workforce, specifically, as graduates with disabilities' CVs may be negatively judged by their level of participation in enrichment opportunities.

This study explores whether universities' policy and outputs provide evidence of commitments to fully support the participation of all students, specifically:

- 1) whether university strategies demonstrating compliance with legal obligations under commonwealth and federal laws to their students with disabilities in the ECA space;
- 2) are universities providing equal opportunity to these students compared to the general population within policy? and
- 3) what evidence is there that students with disabilities are financially supported in ECA participation?

To respond to these questions, the authors will firstly provide context about the impact and relevance of ECAs for students, universities' legal obligations in this space, and the state of existing financial supports. Then, the method for searching strategic plans and scholarships, as well as the justification for the corpus and methodology will be provided. This will be followed by a summary and analysis of the findings of the search of strategic university plans. Finally, this paper will provide a discussion of these findings and potential solutions to improve student access to ECAs.

## Background and context

It is imperative that universities and practitioners understand the background that informs the importance of participation in ECAs and some of the barriers that exist to accessing these activities. This section will explore the impact of ECA participation on tertiary students in general, and then focus on the disability-specific context. Then, universities' legal obligations to provide access to ECAs will be explained. A theoretical framework for understanding how students are understood as 'ideal' graduates will also be provided. Finally, the unviability of relying on existing resources for students with disabilities to participate in ECAs will be explained.

### Defining ECAs

ECAs are defined as any activity outside of the expected scope of studies, usually without academic recognition (Merriam Webster, 2022). In the case of universities, there are widely expected and celebrated activities such as internships, volunteering, and studying abroad. There are also emerging fields such as entrepreneurship, as well as less formalised opportunities such as peer mentoring or student society participation. All activities outside of the classroom but still linked to university life and provided or facilitated by the institutions, such as the above, will be considered in the definition of ECAs in this paper. Although there are different types of ECAs for the under and post-graduate cohorts, the emphasis on ECAs is relevant to both cohorts.

### ECAs and the general student cohort

To understand the importance of ECA involvement for students with disabilities, it is important to understand the benefits recognised by the literature. These benefits for university and college students are well recognised within the industry, being seen as a positive factor on CVs when communicated efficiently, and fundamental to skill development (Clark et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2016). ECAs are also increasingly emphasised by employers as a way of proving 'cultural fit' and commitment, and to distinguish between candidates alongside grades (Stuart et al., 2011). Indeed, there is also evidence that participation in ECAs actively improves the skills of participants that are then transferable to their future employment (Burke et al., 2005; Milner et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2013). Most graduates who participated in ECAs during their studies report that these experiences improved their employment rates and ability to perform their jobs, meaning there are long lasting consequences of participation (Clark et al., 2015).

Additionally, there is evidence of the positive impact that ECA participation has on the sense of belonging to the university community (Thompson et al., 2013). ECAs are also shown to improve personal development and personal identity (Stuart et al., 2011). These impacts are particularly important to the creation of their identity as a student, a member of the community, and as an 'ideal' student (Thompson et al., 2013). Engagement in ECAs was reported to be core to university engagement, well-being, and confidence for students internationally (Luque-Suarez et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2017). Furthermore, King et al. (2021) suggest that these benefits are especially relevant to students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds.

However, the pressure to engage in ECAs can negatively impact on students without appropriate support. Some students may not be able to engage with ECAs due to necessary activities such as caring responsibilities, study commitments, and paid work (Milner et al., 2016; Paull et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2013), and also lack of time, financial constraints, or social capital. Students that need to work report the most difficulty in accessing ECAs due to their financial need to be in paid employment (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007; King et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2011). As a result, some students may not be able to be involved in activities that have a higher value regarding future employability (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007; King et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2011).

## ECAs and students with disabilities

The benefits of ECA participation are relevant to students from diverse backgrounds, such as those with a disability (O'Shea et al., 2021; Stuart et al., 2011). Involvement in ECAs as early as secondary education has been shown to positively impact students with disabilities, especially their postsecondary educational success, with minor differences between the disability types (Palmer et al., 2017; Wehman et al., 2014). Wehman et al. (2014) establish that engagement in ECAs during secondary education impacts autistic students' graduation rates, academic achievements, and personal development as well as providing enriching perspectives to those that engage with them, an opportunity to display talents, and improve their social skills. Additionally, Palmer et al. (2017) demonstrate that high school students with disabilities who participate in various ECAs demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging in a learning environment, contribution, and increased academic performance with a similar study.

However, there is little other academic literature on the direct impact of ECA involvement for university students with disabilities, with papers on other diverse student groups including those from low socio-economic status backgrounds, international students, those who are first-in-family, and mature-aged students (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007; King et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2011).

Organisations that provide support to Jobseekers and university students with disabilities, such as the Australian Network on Disability (AND), also cite the importance of ECAs on the future employment outcomes. AND specifically runs the 'Stepping into Internship' program for university students for this purpose (AND, n.d.). The advertising materials for this program emphasise the positive impacts and outcomes of extracurricular participation for their target group. For example, AND provides the following quote to illustrate their mission: 'The best predictor for young people with disability having lifelong work is whether they had a summer job' (AND, 2017, p. 2). This is supported by evidence from AND's Annual Report (AND 2022), where they present that 91% of participants of their 'Stepping Into' internship program felt more prepared for entering the workforce, and 87 of 296 were able to secure employment directly as a result of their involvement.

Despite these disability specific and general benefits, Harpur and Stein (2018) report that students are often excluded from such activities due to the lack of support from universities outside of the curricular space. Harpur and Stein (2018) provide the example that physical access for wheelchair users is clearly expected for classes and other curriculums but isn't guaranteed for ECAs. This is despite barriers experienced by students in the curricular space, such as needing reworded instructions or alternative arrangements in the case of fluctuating chronic illnesses, still being relevant to their access. ECAs are also generally not included in the descriptions of Student Access Plans or similar supports that allow student participation in curricular activities (University of South Australia, n.d.). One example of the impact of this absence is shown by statistics provided by the University of Queensland Student Employability and Enrichment Development Unit (personal communication, December 19, 2022). The statistics show that 2% (44/2133) of participants in UQ's Get Involved employability program identified as having a disability, far fewer than the 7% of the university's population.

Additionally, students with disabilities report lower satisfaction rates for their university experience, and a 10% lower graduate employment rate than their peers without a disability (69% compared to 59% respectively) (QILT, 2021). For example, when compared against students without a disability, students with disabilities can encounter greater challenges in developing social connections and networks across university (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). This sense of isolation has ramifications for student retention, as well as gaining job opportunities that arise from university networks (Bennet et al., 2017).

The emphasis on extracurricular involvement for enhancing the employability of graduates means that those who do not participate will be at a disadvantage to their peers who have no disability and are more enabled to fully participate in ECAs (Clark et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2016). Minocha et al.'s (2017) comparative study of higher education institutions' publicly available graduate employability data

suggests that, because students with disabilities are less represented in ECAs, they are less likely to have traditional CVs and face career progression challenges as a direct result. As students who have traditionally been excluded from higher education in Australia (including those with a disability) are less likely to take on managerial or professional roles than their peers, the lack of support can further aggravate their post-graduation career difficulties and proximity to the 'ideal' leader or worker prototype. This is further compounded by intersectional considerations, as Indigenous peoples have a higher percentage of disability within the Australian population (AIHW, 2022a). People with a disability are also more likely to be of low socioeconomic status, so the previously mentioned financial barriers are particularly relevant to this group (AIHW, 2022b). O'Shea et al. (2021) report that such students from underrepresented backgrounds are less likely to be perceived as competitive in the job market should they have lesser proof of involvement with ECAs. This can often be the result of inaccessible opportunities, lack of social capital or knowledge, as well as competing responsibilities. Ultimately, these students are placed in an 'uneven playing field' when they are not considered when providing such opportunities (O'Shea et al., 2021).

### Legal obligations

All persons with a disability in Australia have the expectation of equal rights when it comes to work and education. These are provided for with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (the Standards), which seek to support persons with disability's participation in society and eliminate discrimination (Department of Education, 2022; Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), n.d.c). A common way for universities to fulfill legal requirements dictated by the *DDA* (1992) and the Standards (2005) is the implementation of a Disability Action Plan (DAP) or equivalent strategy (to be referred to as DAPs). These plans are commonly used to guide university diversity and inclusion efforts and can be filed directly with the AHRC in order to confirm their commitment to becoming more disability courageous. Indeed, most of these plans aim to exceed base-level compliance obligations.

Although these plans are important for supporting student, staff, and visitor access and success, activities outside of the classroom and physical accessibility are rarely considered. This is despite the fact the Standards specifically provide the right of students to participate in 'all aspects of their education on the same basis as other students' (NCCD, 2022, para. 2), and specifically includes ECAs (NCCD, 2022). Meanwhile, even if ECAs fall outside the educational relationship for anti-discrimination laws, the *DDA* (1992) provides that 'it (is) unlawful to discriminate in the provision of goods, services or facilities (including by tertiary education institutions) against people on the basis that they have, or may have, a disability' (AHRC, n.d.a, para 1).

At a normative level, the United Nations Convention of Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) also calls for universities to facilitate participation in ECAs provided to the wider student body. Indeed, the CRPD Committee, the UN body charged with interpreting the CRPD, advises that according to article 24, paragraph 1, State parties must ensure the realization of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, 'including ... extracurricular and social activities' (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016, para 2). Meanwhile, courts have 'accepted that student's education would sustain irreparable harm' (Harpur & Stein, 2018, p. 565) if they were not provided the opportunity to participate in ECAs. As this paper is concerned with ECAs provided and facilitated by universities, such as on-campus volunteering and overseas entrepreneurship placements, compliance with Australian disability laws and UN CRPD obligations clearly depend on the inclusion of ECAs in strategic responses.

### Prototypical students and graduates (a framework)

Prototype theory, as described by Rosch (1973) and Lakoff (1987), proposes that members of any given category are judged by how closely they embody group norms and ideals, where the ideals serve as a framework to position members on a graded scale. In this case, a category can include any group of objects, that are perceived as sharing characteristics. For example, 'university graduates', 'current

university students', and 'not university educated' can all be separate categories of people when comparing educational attainment. 'Ideal' or 'central' members are the primary and most prevalent members of a category, and are recognised as being most exemplary of any given category (that is, closest to the prototype). Meanwhile, 'peripheral' members may be considered as a part of a category, but further away from the expectations and ideals of other more central members, with other members on a spectrum between the two extremes. To illustrate, when one is asked to name a type of pet, one is most likely to name a type of dog or cat, as this is central to the prototype. Then they may provide examples such as mice, fish, or barnyard animals. They are unlikely to name a creature such as a tiger or an elephant, which, although they may be kept as exotic pets throughout the world, do not represent the expectations most of society has for a 'pet'. As a result, these are peripheral members, who are considered outliers and less relevant or commonly desired as 'pets'.

Regarding humans and society, people are deemed to be respected and desirable leaders due to how close they are to any given prototype. For example, a business leader is typically imagined as a heterosexual white male from a financially privileged background and a good education (Samdanis, & Ozbilgin, 2019). Meanwhile, an atypical leader is "rarely associated with leadership positions" and often comes from a disadvantaged or unusual (for the society) demographic background, and may have trouble gaining respect and recognition as a result of this peripheral status (Alter, 2017: 88; Samdanis, & Ozbilgin, 2019).

In the case of graduate outcomes, prototypically ideal students would have cultural capital demonstrated through ECAs and employment experience, strong educational credentials, entrepreneurial spirit, and global acumen, such as a gap year or other travel (Ingram & Allen, 2018). This is also relevant to gaining access to competitive opportunities, such as the New Colombo Plan, which explicitly request evidence of sustained leadership and community engagement as a criterion (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). Accordingly, an individual graduate's outcomes will be dictated by how central they are to the prototypical 'ideal' of the category of 'university graduate'. Employers search for students that represent this ideal to fill their employment gaps and are less likely to offer such opportunities to peripheral members who do not embody the 'best' example of their peer group due to the perception that such people are 'inferior' workers (Ingram & Allen, 2018). As such, students with disabilities may be peripheral to the category of 'graduate' when judged by potential employers on their engagement in ECAs as proof of real-world impact. This can also apply to how they are socially accepted by their peers who may perceive peripheral students as undesirable companions.

### **Existing supports: Centrelink and the National Disability Insurance Scheme**

An example of the ways that students with disabilities may need unique considerations is financial support. Many students with disabilities are supported by Centrelink and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding to support their participation in Higher Education and compulsory curricular activities associated with their studies (NDIA, 2022). However, these sources have limited or no funding to support students to participate in ECAs. For example, both funders have strict rules about receiving payments when leaving the country. Although the NDIS and Centrelink allow for students to continue receiving payment when overseas for completion of an element of an Australian-based course (such as a semester exchange), the guidelines are unclear as to how this would apply to other activities abroad (NDIA, 2021). As such, overseas internships, volunteering or entrepreneurship opportunities that last longer than six weeks may not be eligible for continued funding despite the added costs of carer travel, guides, or occupational therapist consultations. Even if a student with disability was to receive a scholarship, such as the prestigious New Colombo Plan Scholarship, there are no extra considerations to cover disability related expenses referenced (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

Furthermore, although the NDIS is a vital support for Australians with a Disability, it is limited. For example, challenges to general participation by persons with disabilities in the NDIS are well-known, especially when considering intersectionality and the barriers to gaining a diagnosis (Cortese et al.,

2021). In fact, the University of Queensland Union (student union) Disability Collective (2022) reports that less than 10% of their surveyed students access NDIS support. This is compounded by the fact that not all disability types are equally supported by or have equal access to the NDIS. For example, the percentage of NDIS recipients with psychosocial disabilities is considerably lower than those with physical and intellectual disabilities (Mellifont et al., 2022). Those that do manage to gain access to the system then may find themselves unable to access appropriate support. This is especially relevant to universities which can expect one of four of their shared 1.4 million students to experience mental health concerns in any one year (Orygen, 2017). The NDIS also does not cover expenses when it is reasonable to expect the university to do so, further placing the onus on universities (NDIA, 2022). This difficulty with securing funds, along with the reported barriers to accessing the system, may be enough to prevent students from considering support through this avenue and not involving themselves in such activities during their studies.

Additionally, Centrelink financial supports aimed at students such as Austudy and Youth Allowance have considerations for disability, but require students to study full-time, and places restrictions on income and activities (Services Australia, 2022). Indeed, it is recognised that most students who rely on these supports may still be exposed to poverty and food-insecurity (Baglow & Gair, 2019). There are gaps in the available support mechanisms that render students with disabilities at universities financially vulnerable and consequently exposed to further risk factors that limit ECA participation. Therefore, universities should look to provide access, resources, and support so that all students can participate in such beneficial opportunities, particularly as graduate employment outcomes have become a factor in university rankings and already disadvantaged students are not yet fully engaged in this aspect of employability at universities (King et al., 2016; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021; Stuart et al., 2011).

With the context that support is inadequate in this area, despite the clear advantages for universities and students when considering graduate outcomes and student experience, it is in all parties' best interests to improve or prove compliance with legal obligations. As mentioned, one way of demonstrating this is to include ECAs in a DAP, which will be explored in the next section.

## Method

This study explores 1) whether universities are upholding their legal obligations under commonwealth and federal laws to their students with disabilities in the extracurricular space; 2) whether universities providing equal consideration to these students compared to the general population, and 3) what evidence there is that students with disabilities are supported into ECA participation. To answer these questions, the research was divided into three data sets.

These three data sets consist of publicly available, institutional data collected in an initial desktop search, a policy analysis of DAPs and Strategic Plans, and a targeted scholarship search. Websites were chosen as a medium for the content review due to the availability of information, and the public facing nature of the information provided there and how the messages included in such content reflects the public priorities of the university (Bennett et al., 2017). The data from the policies was then subject to a policy analysis that searches for gaps and 'silences' that are present in institutional decisions regarding Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policy (Bacchi, 1999; Van Deventer Iverson, 2007). Specifically, we looked for areas that were institutionally excluded or overlooked.

All universities with campuses operating within Australia were included in the search. The list of universities was extracted from the Australian government sponsored Study Australia (n.d.) website. This allows us to understand how they are operating under the same national and commonwealth legal frameworks. The authors acknowledge that the campuses of overseas institutions operate under different protocols and expectations but have been included in order to understand the overall experience of students with disabilities within the country.

## Analysis of DAPs and Strategic Plans

To respond to Research Question 1, all the 43 listed universities were searched through Google's online search function for DAPs and equivalent documents. First, by searching the university name and 'disability action plan'. For example, 'university of Adelaide disability action plan'. If this failed to produce current results, another common variation of DAP was searched: Disability Inclusion and Access Plan. If this term also then failed to produce results, the university's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (or equivalent) pages, and Disability specific pages, were searched for mentions of such a plan. These pages were located via the search of the university name and equity, diversity and inclusion/disability. For example, 'university of the Southern Cross disability'. The results of this search were then cross-referenced with the list of those submitted to the AHRC (n.d.b). This resulted in a smaller sample than the initial 43 listed universities, with only twenty-four universities providing publicly accessible DAPs, listed in Table 2. Some plans were located but unable to be accessed without a staff login, created before 2016 and/or expired earlier than 2020. Out of date strategic plans were outside the scope of the study, which concerns itself with current and available versions.

In response to Research Question 2, the same process was followed for the discovery of university-wide Strategic Plans that are focused on the overarching aims of the university (rather than smaller strategic targets such as internationalisation, teaching and learning, or employment), which are not centrally located on a site such as the AHRC. These were searched using the term 'university name strategic plan', such as 'University of Newcastle strategic plan', which provided results to the university wide strategic plans in question. Almost all universities listed a public plan and were up-to-date (n=41), listed in Table 1. Names for this type of document varied, so they are hereon referred to as 'Strategic Plans'.

Once the availability of the plans was confirmed, they were searched for mentions of ECAs. This search used the browser search feature to locate mentions of the terms: volunteer, extra, extracurricular, extra-curricular, intern (also shows international), internship, exchange, work, work experience, entrepreneurship, co-curricular/curriculum. These words were then analysed in context to ensure relevance. For example, instances of these words relating to ECAs, for example, 'students participating in international experiences' were recorded. Conversely, unrelated uses of these words were not. For example, 'international recognition of our institution'. Related terms like 'work experiences' often referred to the feedback and complaints system, rather than support and access, so such mentions were excluded. 'Opportunities' was searched, but excluded from the final results, due to the term's irrelevancy to ECAs. For example, 'people with disability should have the opportunity to study'.

The Strategic Plans and DAPs were then analysed for how and if they incorporated ECAs into their considerations. These findings were then compared to evidence of a university's commitment to disability inclusion in this area: in this case, disability and ECA specific scholarships. These plans were also quantitatively compared for how they reflected the universities priorities for the general cohort and if this reflected in DAPs.

## Targeted scholarship and funding search

To respond to Research Question 3, all universities with website pages dedicated to scholarships were searched via Google with the term 'university name scholarship', such as 'Monash University scholarships'. This search provided results for all included universities websites that list all available scholarships for current and potential students. These websites were then searched for mentions of specific funding that supported persons with disabilities into ECAs. When available, filters that allowed for defining the search by diversity areas were used, otherwise the full list of scholarships was manually analysed for relevance. Scholarships that included reference to disability inclusion in ECAs were then recorded.



## Results and analysis

This section provides the results of the online search conducted in January of 2022. Firstly, by showcasing the mentions of ECAs in Strategic Plans (Table 1), then DAPs (Table 2), and then by listing the relevant scholarships found.

### Strategic Plans

Twenty plans out of the 41 accessed (Table 1) mentioned ECA involvement as a key point for students. This represents almost half. The most common reference to ECAs was to the traditional type, including the importance of participation in internships, work experience, and global exchange for graduate outcomes. For example, the La Trobe University Strategic Plan 2020-2030 states that they will '...continue to develop graduate researcher support and expand industry placements, internships and scholarships with our strategic partners to enable graduate researchers to move freely between industry and university' (La Trobe University, 2020, pg. 8). Similarly, the University of Western Australia affirms '[w]e will create accomplished and global leaders by offering international and real-world experiences to every student, including work-based learning opportunities, internships and service learning' (University of Western Australia, 2020, pg.12).

**Table 1. List of all University Strategic Plans Accessed**

University	Plan name
Australian Catholic University	ACU Strategic Plan 2023: Impact through Empathy
Australian National University	ANU Strategic Plan 2021-2025
Bond University	2023 - 2027 Bond University Strategic Plan
Carnegie Mellon University	Not available
Central Queensland University	Strategic Plan 2019-2023
Charles Darwin University	Charles Darwin University Strategic Plan 2021-2026
Charles Sturt University	University Strategy 2030
Curtin University	Curtin 2030 Strategic Plan
Deakin University	Deakin 2030 Ideas to Impact (2021)
Edith Cowan University	ECU Strategic Plan 2022-2026: Towards the University of the Future
Federation University	Strategic Plan 2021-2025
Flinders University	The 2025 Agenda
Griffith University	Strategic Plan 2020-2025
James Cook University	Strategic Plan 2018-2022
La Trobe University	La Trobe University Strategic Plan 2020–2030
Macquarie University	University Operating Plan 2020–2024
Monash University	Monash University Strategic Plan 2021–2030
Murdoch University	Strategy 2023-2030: Building a Brighter Future, Together. Ngala Kwop Bididi
Queensland University of Technology	Connections – the QUT Strategy 2023 to 2027
RMIT University	Knowledge with Action RMIT's Strategy to 2031
Southern Cross University	Southern Cross University Strategy 2030
Swinburne University of Technology	2025 Strategic Plan: Swinburne Horizon 2025
Torrens University	Not available
University of Adelaide	Strategic Plan - Future Making
University of Canberra	Connected: A Decadal Strategy   2023-2032
University of Divinity	Strategic Plan 2025
University of Melbourne	Advancing Melbourne
University of New England	Future Fit 2021 – 2030
University of New South Wales	2025 Strategy: Update

University of Newcastle	Looking Ahead: The University of Newcastle Strategic Plan 2020-2025
University of Notre Dame Australia	2022-2026 Strategic Plan
University of Queensland	Toward 2032 UQ Strategic Plan 2022-2025
University of South Australia	Enterprise 25: UNISA's Strategic Plan 2018 - 2025
University of Southern Queensland	2019-2021 Student Success and Retention Strategy
University of the Sunshine Coast	USC Strategic Plan 2021-2024
University of Sydney	2032 Strategy
University of Tasmania	University of Tasmania Strategic Plan 2019-2024
University of Technology Sydney	UTS 2027
The University of Western Australia	Strategic Plan 2020-25
University of Wollongong	2020 - 2025 Strategic Plan
Victoria University	Strategic Plan 2022–2028
Western Sydney University	Western Sydney University Strategic Plan: Sustaining Success 2021-2026

Some universities highlighted the importance of 'entrepreneurialism' in their graduates, and highlighted that this needed to be encouraged through supported experiences:

*Provide an extensive range of options for students looking to develop their innovation and entrepreneurship skills through curricula and co-curricula opportunities./In particular, our Griffith Beacons will contribute to undergraduate teaching through curriculum, internships, or workshops... Ensure that every undergraduate has a capstone experience that is work-related (such as an internship, international mobility experience, research project, or participation in a national or international competition) (Griffith University, 2020, pg. 12).*

The University of NSW 'is committed to developing successful entrepreneurs, assisting them from initial exploration to execution and expansion of their businesses' (University of New South Wales, 2020, pg. 27).

Many Strategic Plans dictated that involvement in ECAs of any form was essential to graduate outcomes, and included this aspect in their Key Point Indicators and Measures of Success. Curtin University suggests that studying there 'will include an engaging, high-quality learning experience supported by a variety of extracurricular activities designed to help prepare our students for their lives and careers' (Curtin University, 2022, pg. 5); whereas Edith Cowan University 'will offer a comprehensive range of curricular and extracurricular activities to provide graduates with the skills and confidence they need, and to deliver a step change improvement in graduate employment outcomes' (Edith Cowan University, 2022, pg. 12). The University of Queensland notes that '[A key measure of success is:] 50 % of bachelor's graduates will have completed an entrepreneurship, global, volunteering or leadership experience' (University of Queensland, 2022, pg. 8).

All mentions of ECAs showed that they are considered important to the student experience at all degree levels and are prioritised by the institutions who mention them.

### Disability Action Plans

Table 2 shows which university plans were accessed, as well as the state of their main campus location, and university grouping. All groupings of universities were represented here, however some are more than others. For example, while six of the Go8 universities have plans that are openly accessible, IRU and NUW Alliance only provide two results each. This leads to questions about how all Australian students are supported by strategic plans, which is outside of the scope of this study.

**Table 2. List of Accessed DAPs, Including their University Alignment and State.**

University	Grouping	State	DAP
Australian National University	Group of Eight (Go8)	ACT	Australian National University Disability Action Plan 2020-2024
Central Queensland University	Regional Universities Network (RUN)	QLD	Central Queensland University Disability Action Plan 2016-2021
Charles Sturt University	RUN	NSW	Charles Sturt University Accessibility Action Plan 2020-2023
Curtin University	Australian Technology Network (ATN)	WA	Curtin University Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2022–2030
Deakin University	ATN	VIC	Deakin University Creating Inclusive Futures Together: Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2021-2025
Edith Cowan University	NA	WA	Edith Cowan University Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) 2016-2021
Griffith University	Innovative Research Universities (IRU)	QLD	Griffith University Disability Action Plan 2018 – 2020
La Trobe University	IRU	VIC	La Trobe University Universal Design and Inclusion Action Plan 2022-30
Macquarie University	NA	NSW	Macquarie University Access and Inclusion Plan 2020–2023
Monash University	Go8	VIC	Monash University Staff and Students with Disability, ongoing Medical or Mental Health Condition Action Plan 2018 – 2021
Murdoch University	RUN	WA	Murdoch University and our Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2022-2025
University of Adelaide	Go8	SA	University of Adelaide Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2020 – 2024
University of New England	RUN	NSW	University of New England Accessibility Action Plan June 2020–June 2021
University of New South Wales	Go8	NSW	University of New South Wales Disability Action and Inclusion Plan 2022-2025
University of Queensland	Go8	QLD	University of Queensland Disability Action Plan 2018-2021
University of Southern Queensland	RUN	QLD	University of Southern Queensland Disability Action Plan 2017–2020
University of the Sunshine Coast	RUN	QLD	University of the Sunshine Coast Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2021-2024
University of Sydney	Go8	NSW	University of Sydney Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2019-2024
University of Tasmania	NA	TAS	University of Tasmania Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2022 – 2024
University of Technology Sydney	ATN	NSW	University of Technology Sydney Access and Inclusion Plan 2020-2024
University of Western Australia	Go8	WA	University of Western Australia Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2020–2025
University of Wollongong	NUW Alliance	NSW	University of Wollongong Accessibility Action Plan 2019 – 2021

Victoria University	NA	VIC	Victoria University Student Accessibility Action Plan 2021-2023
Western Sydney University	NUW Alliance	NSW	Western Sydney University's Accessibility Action Plan 2018-2020

A limited number of DAPs were located (n=24). Of these, only five universities mentioned extracurricular involvement in any form: Swinburne University of Technology, The University of Adelaide, the University of New South Wales, La Trobe University, and The University of the Sunshine Coast. While almost half of University-wide Strategic Plans had ECAs as a key note of importance, the fact that less than one quarter of DAPs even mention the concept immediately demonstrates a gap in priorities. The University of the Sunshine Coast placed emphasis on the importance of equal access to all extracurricular aspects of university life by noting that '[s]tudents with disabilities are able to access USC equitable and inclusive extra-curricular activities (including sport, recreation, volunteering, social engagement and international study)' (University of the Sunshine Coast, n.d.). This example is the most relevant to this paper, as it includes the full spectrum of activities that are considered core to the university experience and shows that this is possible as a DAP inclusion.

Meanwhile, Swinburne University prioritised career orientated experiences by stating that they will 'develop strategies, guidelines and resources to establish paid internships and other flexible industry-based learning opportunities for students living with disability, and carers, through collaboration with Swinburne Alumni and industry partners' (Swinburne University of Technology, n.d., p. 8).

This is an area that is of need and is cited as the justification for the Australian Network on Disability's internship program (AND, 2017). This is especially relevant to ensuring prototypically 'ideal' graduates. Swinburne's DAP encouraged focused action towards student voice initiatives, saying that 'relevant student bodies and student representatives will actively engage, support and encourage students living with a disability, and carers, including engagement in leadership and volunteering roles in the Swinburne community' (Swinburne University of Technology, n.d., pg. 6).

The University of New South Wales and La Trobe mentioned promotion of external opportunities which would support students. UNSW's position was that they would 'promote PACE (Positive Action Towards Career Engagement) and Stepping Into programs, career mentoring and internship programs for students with disability (University of New South Wales, 2022, pg. 23). La Trobe would

*[p]romote the Australian Network on Disability 'Stepping Into' and 'PACE Mentoring Opportunities' for students with disability Run annual forums on internships and graduate pathways for students with disability and other diverse backgrounds Launch Neurodiversity Placements Program with tailored supporting resources to support students and placement providers (La Trobe University, 2022, pg. 12).*

This serves as an example of a different approach, where the university provides connections with external opportunities that are deemed to provide adequate support.

The University of Adelaide mentioned the concept of a full university life in wider terms:

*Students and staff with disability are significant contributors to the University's diverse community. The University is committed to providing, where practicable, equal access. Wherever possible the University will provide reasonable adjustments to enable all staff and students to fully participate and enjoy the university experience and reach their potential. For students, this experience should include a first-class education and the social, developmental and career opportunities that this affords (University of Adelaide, 2020, pg.3).*

Although this last example does not mention ECAs specifically, it can be comfortably extrapolated that involvement in such activities provides students with access to social, developmental, and career opportunities. As such, it will be interpreted as including ECAs, and again acknowledges that students should expect all of these core aspects in their experiences.

It is notable that none of these quotes are in reference to Key Point Indicators, Measures of Success, or other measurable or clearly actionable items, which were found in the university wide Strategic Plans.

## Scholarships

No scholarships were found that specifically targeted students with disabilities to engage in ECAs, however, such students were included in the target groups for the following:

**Table 3: Scholarships Available**

Name of Institution and Scholarship	Link
University of Melbourne, Exchange Enabling Scholarship	<a href="https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/awards/faculty-of-arts-exchange-enabling-scholarship">https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/awards/faculty-of-arts-exchange-enabling-scholarship</a>
Monash University, Peer mentoring scholarship	<a href="https://www.monash.edu/study/fees-scholarships/scholarships/find-a-scholarship/dominos-leadership-5765F?international=true">https://www.monash.edu/study/fees-scholarships/scholarships/find-a-scholarship/dominos-leadership-5765F?international=true</a>
Monash University, Global Equity grant (for student exchange).	<a href="https://www.monash.edu/study/fees-scholarships/scholarships/find-a-scholarship/monash-global-equity-grant-4508?international=true">https://www.monash.edu/study/fees-scholarships/scholarships/find-a-scholarship/monash-global-equity-grant-4508?international=true</a>

All of these scholarships included provisions for students who are ‘experiencing social, educational or financial disadvantage’ (University of Melbourne, n.d., Eligibility section) within a wider range of diversity areas, such as low socioeconomic status or a rural background. However, there were no disability specific, or disability preferred, options found in our search.

Meanwhile, awards such as the University of Queensland’s Internships and Global Experiences Grants list other diversity areas (that is, Indigenous and low socio-economic) but excludes disability (University of Queensland, n.d.a). This is consistent with meeting *Higher Education Support Act 2003* and resulting Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding, which also excludes disability considerations and leaves a funding gap for this disadvantaged group (Department of Education, 2023).

From these three different data sets, it can be understood that: firstly, ECA considerations that are more focused towards the wider cohort in university wide Strategic Plans are not as apparent in plans aimed at supporting students with disabilities. Secondly, that financial supports for students with disabilities to participate are not apparent in the search for scholarships, despite the documented barriers for these particular students.

## Limitations

The lack of availability of DAPs was a limiting factor in this study, as updated or privately held DAPs may have more awareness of ECA involvement than is described here. There is also the issue of the lack of reporting about students with disabilities participation rates in ECAs, which could be a worthwhile future research project. One aspect that limited the study was the reliance on publicly available data. A future study could reach out to universities to access any information that is not listed on their public websites to gain a more accurate understanding of the situation. It was acknowledged that not all annually available scholarships are always listed and some live scholarships are not available without an institutional login.

Another consideration is that some of the weaknesses in policy and funding appear to be symptoms of disability not being included in higher level priority areas, such as government HEPPP funding. Further investigation into how universities respond to government or sector-wide body (Universities Australia) policy would give further insight into the cause and future improvements. These findings also only related to the Australian legal landscape, so do not broadly apply to other jurisdictions.

The resulting data set from the DAP and scholarship searches was small. As all universities in Australia were included in the sample, the data set was anticipated to be much larger. The lack of results in these areas may provide evidence as to whether the participation of students with disabilities in ECAs is well considered or enacted by Australian universities. However, searching for other forms of evidence for disability inclusion in ECAs, such as specific programs and internships or student facing disability services policies in support of students in ECAs, would provide a more complete picture of Australian universities compliance and should be considered for future research.

## Discussion and suggestions

### Strategic responses

The DAP and scholarship data sets presented in this paper are small, demonstrating the lack of realisation of the importance of fulfilling legal obligations and supporting students with disabilities by our institutions. While it is possible that individuals within these institutions are making efforts to support this cohort, without a strategic and structured response, it is not possible to support students in a consistent manner in line with their obligations.

This concerning lack of resources or goals pertaining to the involvement in ECAs in DAPS compared to general Strategic Plans is alarming, as it is symptomatic of a system that does not prioritise the full participation of all community members and excludes some students from the necessary opportunities that others access. From the lack of acknowledgement of the importance of ECAs in the policy and supports that are aimed at students with disabilities, there is insufficient emphasis on supporting their success and development as graduates. This is despite the fact that universities are clearly expected to provide equal access to all.

A lack of policy support results in less efficient, evidenced, and prioritised responses to supporting students, as those working within the area are unaware of their responsibilities and how to gain support should they require it. Including ECAs in DAPs will allow for easier access to resources to ensure that universities are fulfilling their requirements in this area. For example, university-based volunteer coordinators may not be equipped, or know how, to support a neurodivergent volunteer's communication style. Without knowing there will be support for such disability related matters, many students may opt out of ECAs as they feel like a burden and that staff don't have to include them, as these activities are not curricular. Staff may also share these sentiments if they are not aware of their obligations and how to react to or pre-empt such situations.

Targeted strategic support could also allow for more organised responses, as currently disability inclusion in ECAs can be reliant on ad hoc behaviours and passionate individuals who take the initiative to be inclusive. This has weaknesses as the onus is on this individual and may not continue should they no longer be involved with their role. This would also help to support the complexity of disability found in our institutions, as the functional impacts for different community members can vary significantly and may not be understood by the individual supporter.

If ECAs are prominent in Strategic Plans but not DAPs, then it leaves the question of: why aren't students with disabilities given the same strategic support?

### Are students with disabilities central to the prototype of an 'ideal' graduate?

When considering our imaginary of an 'ideal graduate' provided earlier in this paper, it is clear that there is a space where students with disabilities are vulnerable to becoming peripheral. When members of a category are peripheral, they are juxtaposed to the members that are central to the ideal, constantly expected to be more central, and deemed to not be desirable as other such members. As a result, they can be subject to discrimination and othering. In this case, that means they are less likely to be considered even 'good' students, and more likely to be perceived as lazy, unmotivated, or uninterested students. When employers look at ECAs on resumes to prove drive and interest, they can use this as justification to not hire a candidate. This is especially relevant if candidates with a disability

decide not to disclose during the hiring process, thus providing a lack of context. Effectively, employers can inadvertently discriminate against persons with a disability on these grounds. That is, not because they are disabled, but because they lack some of the qualities that define an 'ideal' graduate because their disability and participation was not supported in this space.

To illustrate, in a paper by Booth et al. (2009), the authors were able to show that identical resumes were more or less likely to be accepted to the interview stage based on the perceived ethnicity of the name on the resume. This demonstrated that our biases disadvantaged resumes of identical quality based on the name alone, and some researchers recommend changing to English sounding names or removing names from resumes to ensure equality in this context (Adamovic, 2020; Oreopoulos, 2011; SBS, 2013). ). An Australian-born Muslim woman tells employers to 'hire people for their skills, not their name' (SBS, 2013). However, if students with disabilities have resumes lacking in ECAs, removing the names or information identifying that they have a disability will not allow for more hiring equality, as these vital criteria will be intrinsically lacking. This experience inequality is also referenced by AND (2017) as the purpose of their Stepping Into Internship Program.

### **Supporting advocacy**

Many students or staff may find the process of self or collective advocacy overwhelming and not know where to begin their search, their rights, or what they are expected to reasonably provide to students. These aspects need to be made clear and easy to understand in order to be met. If involvement in ECAs is mandated in the DAP, then there should be some inclusion of information that allows for easy access and implementation for providers of these services. This is especially relevant for articulating rights and expectations to students, where some disabilities can be associated with poor self-advocacy skills and may be helped by having strong guidelines to rely on (Santhanam & Bellon-Harm, 2022).

DAPs should prioritise making it easy for staff who provide ECAs to access resources and information about how they are expected to make adjustments and support students with disabilities. Including representatives from an Employability Office for the creation of any DAPs will help ensure that the relevant support is included in this resource.

### **Consequences for student belonging and retention**

As ECAs on campus are considered a positive factor in promoting student well-being and belonging, not encouraging students with disabilities to engage could be a contributing factor in the low retention rates from this group. As involvement with on-campus life and activities is encouraged and expected of central members of the prototype, students who do not fulfill these requirements can be considered peripheral, with consequences for overall success rates. This is acknowledged in some of the Strategic Plans as a reason for encouraging and creating ECAs for the general student cohort, but not provided within DAPs. Prototype theory also provides the explanation that those who are peripheral to a category can be looked down upon and often considered outsiders. In the case of university students, it is possible that the implications of being peripheral to this social category impacts how students are perceived, and perceive themselves, as members of this group. If such students themselves do not perceive themselves to be 'good' students, or, as 'good' as everyone else, the lack of sense of belonging to this environment can cause a decline in retention. ECAs also provide practical ways in which students can mingle and meet new people, especially in a well-structured and recurring manner. Attending such sessions would allow students to form relationships outside of their classes while feeling that they are contributing to their wider community.

### **Lack of financial support as a symptom of a lack of policy**

One symptom of the lack of consideration is that disability is not well represented within the scholarships that are available to support ECAs. This is despite the fact that managing a disability can be costly, especially when in an unfamiliar environment and needing individualised supports such as a guide, and transportation supports are not well-covered by the NDIS or Centrelink. One can consider how expenses such as having an occupational therapist consult about a student's participation can

become burdensome. In the case of an external provider such as a charity, the intended recipient of volunteering may be reasonably expected to pay for such supports. In which case, this may act as a deterrent to students who feel that their engagement will be a financial burden and make their contributions less meaningful. As such, it is important that universities consider financial supports to improve participation.

Funding participation is also a well-documented challenge for staff with disabilities who wish to engage in extra activities such as conferences and training and has resulted in initiatives such as the UQ Staff with Disability Travel Fund (University of Queensland, 2022). This funding is crucial to the provision of equitable access to opportunities for staff who may have added costs due to difficulty in food-procurement, the inability to take public transport, and so on. If such funding is considered necessary for staff, then such supports should be considered for equitable access for all community members. This funding model should be considered best practice and part of business-as-usual proceedings. For students, this type of support is especially relevant to studying abroad and conferences, but also extends to professional development and other opportunities.

### **Advice for DAP inclusion**

Simply including ECAs in DAP considerations is a positive change that will have long reaching implications for graduate outcomes. Here we present some suggestions on how to meaningfully engage with this issue.

#### **Targeted programs**

This paper focuses on including such students in the already established offerings through inclusion in DAPs, though there is also an opportunity to address other specific challenges for students through creating ECAs for and by the community. For example, creating opportunities for students with disabilities to serve their community via targeted student-staff partnership efforts or peer mentoring could be a way to encourage students into ECAs while also addressing some of their other documented struggles in the curricular space. Examples of such partnerships include the creation of online resources and communities for neurodivergent students, overcoming student barriers to student participation in ECAs, or peer mentoring (University of Queensland, n.d.b). There is even room to invite representatives from student union disability collectives to consult or provide insight into the experiences of this cohort at teaching and learning or administrative meetings, providing them with opportunities for professional development and connections.

#### **Addressing external opportunities**

Opportunities provided directly by universities are not the only ECAs that students could and should engage with, and it is common for university departments to advertise external opportunities to their students on official communication channels (such as emails, student boards, etc.). These opportunities can lead to a wider network and range of experiences, so should be encouraged. However, some students with disabilities can find the barriers to engaging in off-campus activities extremely high. For example, a neurodivergent student may not feel comfortable applying to an unfamiliar organisation due to their self-advocacy skills in a new environment. Although universities are not directly involved in these opportunities, ensuring that resources that could support these students are readily available will improve access. One such resource is provided by the Autism CRC, where they provide an individualised report to support the transition into Work Experience/Employment for Autistic students (McDonald et al., 2016). Supplying student engagement staff and disability advisors with such materials will take these efforts to above compliance.

Some DAPs also promoted participation in the specialised programs offered by the Australian Network on Disability, especially the Stepping Into Internship Program (AND, n.d.). As this program offers students payment and a supportive environment, it is a good place to start when supporting students.



## Personalised responses

Future research could aim to collective quantitative/qualitative data that further explores the reasons for lower group participation in this space and allow for more targeted responses. This could even be held at the individual institution level to ensure that targeted responses are relevant to the cohort.

## Conclusion

This study explored publicly available scholarships and strategic documents to explore whether universities are upholding their legal obligations under commonwealth and federal laws to their students with disabilities in the extracurricular space, to what extent universities are providing equal considerations to these students compared to the general population within policy, and what evidence there is that students with disabilities are supported into ECA participation. Through an examination of 41 strategic plans, 24 Disability Action Plans, and the 43 scholarship website pages, little evidence of ECA considerations for students with disabilities were found. Specifically, twenty of 41 strategic plans for the general cohort listed ECAs as a key area of strategic focus, while only 5 DAPs mentioned ECAs in any capacity. No specific scholarships were found as evidence of policy translating to results, and only three ECA scholarships included disability as a preferred trait. This demonstrated not only a gap between the considerations provided for the general student cohort and the cohort with disabilities, but also a lack of practical supports in this area.

Universities need to be doing more to support students with disability to participate in ECAs. Failure to do so leaves these students at a distinct disadvantage to their peers who have more access to opportunities that develop their employability and resumes. This disparity means that universities are not fulfilling their requirements to provide equal access to all, with negative consequences for graduate outcomes. Particularly, by not supporting students with disabilities to develop into prototypically ideal candidates, universities are not prioritising their graduate outcomes. Our search for specific financial supports to allow access to ECAs showed these were rare and reflected the absence of this area on DAPs and strategic priorities. Especially when considered the extra financial burdens faced by this cohort. This lack of consideration in activities that are crucial to student retention, belonging, and student success is disabling students, not their conditions. Changing our strategic approaches to disability inclusion is likely to improve student experiences and graduate outcomes.

This paper has presented a path to greater equality, with ramifications for the employment rates and success of your graduates with a disability. Your institution only has to take it.

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