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Experiences and challenges of students with disability in Australian universities: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Successful participation in higher education can be life-altering. Although people with disability are attending university globally in increasing numbers, they continue to be underrepresented and have significantly lower retention and completion rates than their peers without disability. This scoping review aimed to examine the most recent studies investigating the experiences and challenges of students with disability in Australian universities. The review identified and summarised five themes: disclosure of disability, student experiences with disability support services, student experiences with academic staff, reasonable adjustments, and the physical environment. The findings indicated that barriers to full inclusion continue to exist and compliance with the mandates of disability legislation for education is incomplete. In response to the findings, universities, academics, and students are offered recommendations to improve the experiences of students with disability in higher education. Although this scoping review focused on Australian higher education, the findings and recommendations are relevant to all countries where barriers to full academic inclusion continue to impede the success of students with disability.

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Higher education; students with disability; disability support services; reasonable adjustments; equity and inclusion

In Australia and other countries, adults with disability have traditionally experienced disadvantage in rates of labour force participation, unemployment, and income compared to adults without disability, and this continues to be the case (Athanasou 2021; Clouder et al. 2016; Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa 2018). Higher education is associated with benefits in employment and earnings for graduates, including those with disability (Zajac et al. 2023). Although people with disability are attending university globally in increasing numbers, they continue to be underrepresented in higher education and have significantly lower retention and completion rates than students without disability (Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017; Horlin, Hronska, and Nordmann 2024; Kilpatrick et al. 2017). Australian census data indicate that, in 2018, 18.4% of adults with disability

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had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 32.8% of those without disability (Athanasou 2021).

The rights of people with disability to access education at all levels (preschool, primary, secondary, and tertiary) in Australia are legislated through the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth) (DSE). A major objective of the DDA is to eliminate discrimination against persons on the grounds of disability in various areas of public life, including education. The DSE was developed to clarify and elaborate the legal obligations of education providers under the DDA. The DSE covers five areas in education: enrolment; participation; curriculum development, accreditation and delivery; student support services; and harassment and victimisation. A key element of, and positive duty imposed by, the DSE is the provision and implementation of 'reasonable adjustments' to enable a student to participate in the educational course or programme and to use the facilities or services 'on the same basis as a student without a disability' (Standard 3.3). In addition to the provision of reasonable adjustments, the DSE addresses the design and development of educational courses or programmes, stating:

The education provider must take reasonable steps to ensure that the course or program is designed in such a way that the student is ... able to participate in the learning experiences ... on the same basis as a student without a disability, and without experiencing discrimination (Standard 6.2 [1]).

The Australian Government conducts a review of the DSE every five years, the most recent being in 2020 (Australian Government 2021). The recurrence of several recommendations in the 2010, 2015, and 2020 reviews indicates a continuing need for meaningful change (de Bruin, Poed, and Jackson 2024). In relation to the higher education sector, the 2015 review of the DSE reported ongoing problems, including a lack of understanding of obligations for compliance with the DSE among the majority of staff and low awareness of barriers to accessing curriculum that is not designed for accessibility to all (Urbis 2015). The 2020 review reiterated that 'awareness of the Standards and educators' obligations was particularly limited in the tertiary sector' (Australian Government 2021, 34). Although higher education institutions have achieved improved levels of inclusion in recent years, generally employ specialist disability support personnel, and provide adjustments to some students with disability, attitudes and understanding of academic staff towards adjustments are reported to be sometimes inadequate (Bunbury 2020; Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018; Sniatecki, Perry, and Snell 2015).

In Australia and other countries, the onus is generally on the student to contact and work with disability support staff to negotiate adjustments, develop an accessibility or learning support plan, and inform or negotiate with individual teaching staff about implementing adjustments (Fossey et al. 2017; Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti 2024). For a range of reasons, many students with disability do not embark on this path or delay doing so for some time. They may choose not to disclose their disability because of fear of stigma, wishing to maintain individual responsibility, or not knowing how to disclose and self-advocate. Students have also reported being deterred by the complexity and sometimes cost of the process required to provide medical evidence of their condition or disability to the university (Couzens et al. 2015; Lindsay,

Cagliostro, and Carafa 2018). Many disabilities are not readily apparent to other people, and some academic staff poorly understand their influence. Couzens et al. (2015) cite specific learning disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as being among the hidden disabilities experienced by a growing number of university students. In addition, universities are experiencing increasing numbers of students with mental health difficulties, who often choose not to disclose despite the potential for support or adjustments to improve their academic success (Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017; Kilpatrick et al. 2017; Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa 2018).

Given the potential benefits to people with disability who complete university degrees and the documented poorer retention and completion rates for students with disability, it is imperative that students with disability experience the best possible conditions to facilitate their success at university. It is therefore important to understand factors that may impede this population's successful completion of university degrees and what could be done further to improve their full academic inclusion. In recent years, the Australian higher education sector has made concerted efforts to increase and enhance participation of equity groups, including people with disability, and these goals have been confirmed and committed to in the recent Australian Universities Accord final report (Australian Government 2024). This scoping review aimed to fill a gap in the literature by examining the most recent studies that have investigated the experiences and challenges of students with disability at Australian universities to ascertain the extent to which previously reported experiences have changed in recent years, particularly since the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government 2021).

Method

A scoping review, rather than a systematic review, was chosen as the most appropriate form for this investigation of the literature. Scoping reviews use similarly rigorous and transparent methods to systematic reviews, but differ from them in their purposes and, at times, in their procedures (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). They are useful when exploring a broad topic, such as the current investigation into the experiences of students with disability in higher education, and where a range of study designs is used. Unlike systematic reviews, critical quality appraisal of available sources is not mandatory for scoping reviews (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Pollock et al. 2022) and was not performed in the current review. However, only articles published in peer-reviewed journals or documents created by reputable organisations such as universities and government agencies were included in the review, ensuring certain levels of quality in the studies included.

Search strategy

The literature review search strategy was designed to gather a range of published materials including peer-reviewed articles, chapters, and grey literature such as reports. The third author, a university research librarian, conducted searches across key academic databases, library catalogue portals (such as Trove and Worldcat), grey

literature repositories, Google Scholar, and the National Centre for Student Equity. Subscription databases searched for this review were: ProQuest One, ERIC and Education Database (on the ProQuest platform); Academic Search Ultimate and Education Research Complete (on the EBSCO platform) and the Australian databases A+ Education and Australian Public Affairs Full-text (on Informit). Search strings used the subject heading fields 'higher education' OR universit*, combined with the truncated keyword disab* and identified keyword phrases 'student experience' OR 'student equity' OR 'education standards' OR 'Disability Standards for Education'. Filters were applied to exclude material published before 2020, material in languages other than English, and material focused on student experiences outside of Australian higher education. Finally, the reference lists of the identified materials were manually searched to ensure the inclusion of all relevant literature.

Inclusion criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Reported empirical research with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches investigating the experiences of students with disability
- Had participant groups consisting wholly or largely of students with disability
- Focused on universities in Australia
- Were peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters or reports from reputable organisations such as universities and government agencies
- Were published from 2020 to the literature search date in November, 2023

Studies were excluded if they had a broad focus on a range of equity groups rather than solely students with disability and did not meet all other inclusion criteria.

The database searches generated 184 articles, with 121 remaining after the removal of duplicates. After reviewing the titles and abstracts of these articles, the researchers excluded 89 that did not meet the review criteria. The first two authors independently read the full text of the resulting 32 documents and, after discussion and agreement, 17 of these were included in the review. [Figure 1](#) shows the search and selection results, including reasons for the exclusion of full-text articles examined.

Data charting and analysis

The following data for each study were extracted and charted in a table: author(s), year of publication, document type, study aims, study design and data collection methods, and participant numbers and characteristics. The Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis coding process involved six key phases: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The first two authors coded each document independently using NVivo software, comparing results through a collaborative and iterative process until consensus on codes and themes was established.

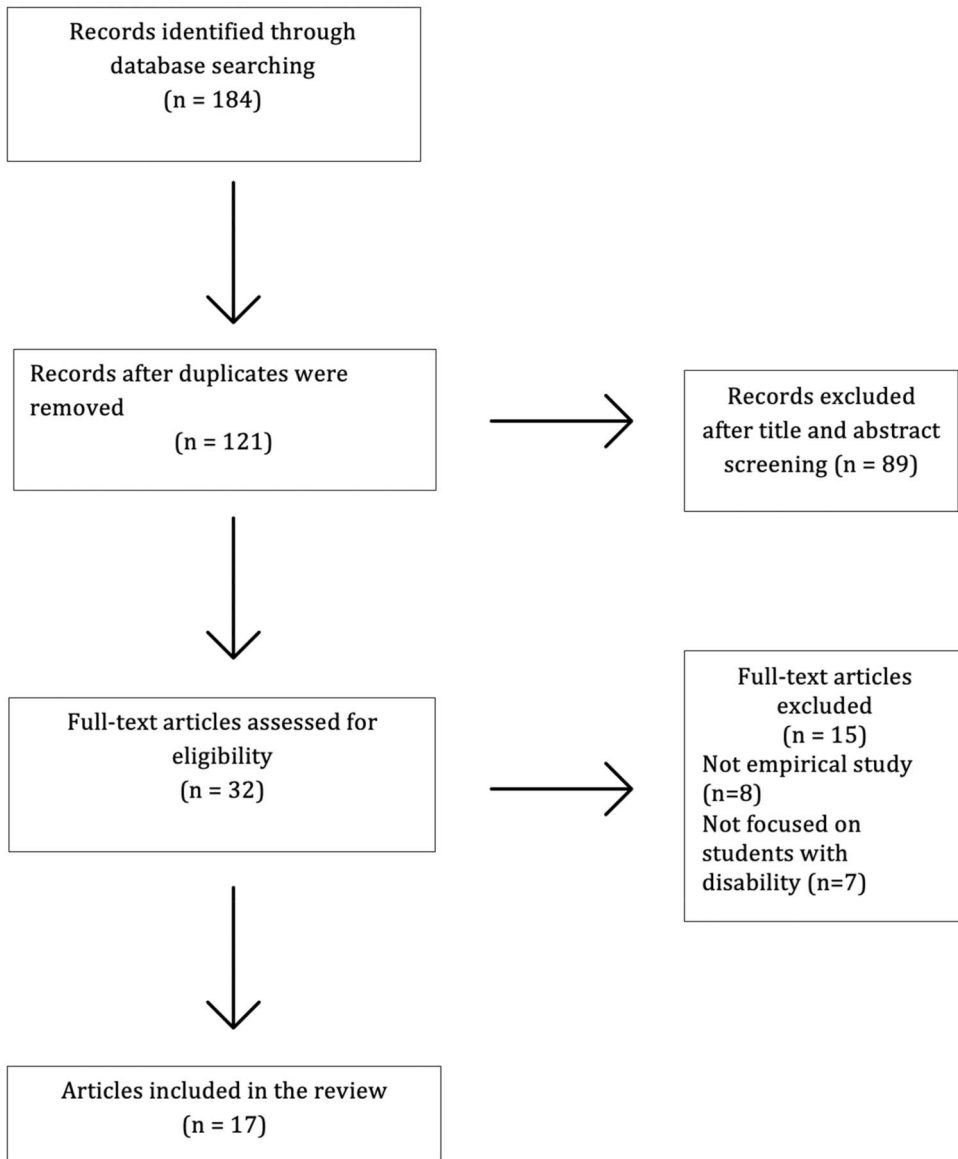


Figure 1. Modified PRISMA flow diagram of article screening and selection.

Results

Study characteristics

The characteristics of the studies included are provided in [Table 1](#). The majority of the studies employed a qualitative or mixed-method design; only two were purely quantitative. Most of the studies using surveys to collect quantitative data also collected qualitative data in the form of open-ended responses or through subsequent semi-structured interviews with a proportion of the survey respondents. Numbers of participants in each study

Table 1. Characteristics of included studies.

Citation	Document type	Study aims	Study design and data collection methods	Participant numbers and characteristics
Anderson, Carter, and Stephenson (2020)	Journal article	To examine student characteristics, experiences, and satisfaction with academic and non-academic supports.	Quantitative. Survey.	102 students (87% in Australia; 88% undergraduate, 12% postgraduate) with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
Baker, Ellis, and Peddle (2022)	Journal article	To explore the learning experiences of undergraduate nursing students with a Learning Access Plan and identify areas for improvement in the process.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews.	6 undergraduate nursing students. Disabilities reported: learning disability, health-related disability, anxiety/depression.
Dollinger et al. (2023)	Journal article	To explore the perceptions and experiences of students with disability in work-integrated learning placements.	Qualitative. Focus groups.	27 students. Types of disabilities not reported.
Dollinger, Finneran, and Ajjawi (2023)	Journal article	To explore the perceptions and experiences of students with disability in work-integrated learning placements.	Qualitative. Analysis of findings from open-ended survey responses.	132 students (106 undergraduate, 22 postgraduate). Disabilities reported in 10 categories.
Edwards et al. (2022)	Journal article	To investigate the experiences of students requiring academic accommodations due to disability and to consider how these could be influenced by Universal Design.	Mixed methods embedded design with an emphasis on qualitative data. Survey; semi-structured interviews.	493 student survey respondents. Interviews with 9 students. Students reported mental, physical, and learning disabilities.
Ellis et al. (2022)	Book chapter	To explore students' experiences of accessing digital technologies at university, specifically in relation to the human rights model of disability.	Survey including open-ended responses.	229 students (majority undergraduate). Disabilities reported: 117 medical, 53 learning, 46 mobility, 19 visual, 18 hearing, 69 other.
Grimes et al. (2020)	Journal article	To explore the experiences, specifically in relation to stigma, of students who did not disclose disability to their institution.	Qualitative. Analysis of findings from open-ended survey responses.	111 undergraduate non-disclosing students. Disabilities reported: 97 mental health issues, 10 learning difficulties, 4 ongoing medical conditions.
Grimes et al. (2021)	Journal article	To explore how learning challenges/disability impacted students' learning.	Qualitative. Analysis of findings from open-ended survey responses.	553 undergraduate students. Disabilities reported: 304 mental health issues, 34 ongoing medical conditions, 17 learning difficulties, 15 physical disabilities, 183 two or more diagnoses.
High and Robinson (2021)	Journal article	To reflect on the experience of being a woman with Down Syndrome who completed a university degree.	Qualitative. Autoethnography.	1 undergraduate student with Down Syndrome.
	Journal article	To investigate the challenges and barriers of		

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Citation	Document type	Study aims	Study design and data collection methods	Participant numbers and characteristics
Nonis and Gibson (2021)		a student with a mobility disability in higher education.	Qualitative. Case study. Open-ended questionnaire.	1 undergraduate student with a mobility disability.
Olave-Encina (2022)	Journal article	To explore the experiences of an international student specifically in relation to assessment and feedback.	Qualitative. Case study; narrative Semi-structured interviews and written response.	1 undergraduate student with a visual disability.
Pitman (2022)	University report	To explore barriers to participating and succeeding in higher education experienced by students with disability.	Mixed methods. National survey of students and staff. Email interviews with students.	1749 student survey respondents from 35 universities. Follow-up interviews with 818 students.
Spier and Natalier (2023)	Journal article	To explore the experiences of disabled research higher degree students' strategies for managing their candidature.	Qualitative. Written narratives; semi-structured interviews.	Six PhD candidates with physical disabilities.
Steele, Banks, and Louis (2022)	University report	To explore the experiences of people with disability as they undertake university study.	Quantitative. Survey with some open-text questions.	79 students (58 undergraduate, 11 postgraduate, 10 did not report). Disabilities reported under 9 functional impact categories.
Tai et al. (2022)	Journal article	To explore students with disabilities' experiences of examinations; to understand ways to transform exam design and practice to be more inclusive.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews; workshops.	51 students (41 undergraduate, 10 postgraduate).
Tai et al. (2023)	Journal article	To explore students with disabilities' experiences of examinations and how sociomaterial arrangements shape the inclusivity of examinations.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews.	51 students (41 undergraduate, 10 postgraduate).
Yerbury et al. (2022)	Journal article	To explore the experiences of students with disability specifically in relation to the classification system inherent in university practices.	Mixed methods. Survey; semi-structured interviews.	200 student survey respondents. Follow-up interviews with 26.

varied from one, in case study or narrative designs, to 1749 in a nationwide survey. In most studies, participants included students with a range of disabilities. Three studies surveyed only students registered with their university's disability support services (Tai et al. 2022, 2023; Yerbury et al. 2022); others widened participant inclusion to students who had not registered or disclosed their disability. Some studies focused on a particular aspect of university study, such as students' experiences of work-integrated learning placements, accessing digital technologies, or examinations.

Of the 17 documents, 13 were articles published in peer-review journals, one was a book chapter, and three were reports: two from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, and one from the University of Queensland Union. In

some cases, two documents reporting on different aspects of the same study met the inclusion criteria. These were Dollinger et al. (2024) and Dollinger, Finneran, and Ajjawi (2023), Grimes et al. (2020, 2021), and Tai et al. (2022, 2023). The experiences of students with disability were the primary focus of all included studies, a majority of which had only students as participants. Three studies included some university staff as participants; however, only the findings from the student participants in these studies were used in this review, which focused on student voice and experiences.

The data analysis generated five major themes related to the experiences of students with disability: disclosure of disability, student experiences with disability support services, student experiences with academic staff, reasonable adjustments, and the physical environment (see Figure 2).

Disclosure of disability

A common theme appearing in almost all the studies was the issue of disclosure or non-disclosure of disability to the university. Many students found it difficult to decide whether, when, and to whom to disclose their disability. Several of the studies reported

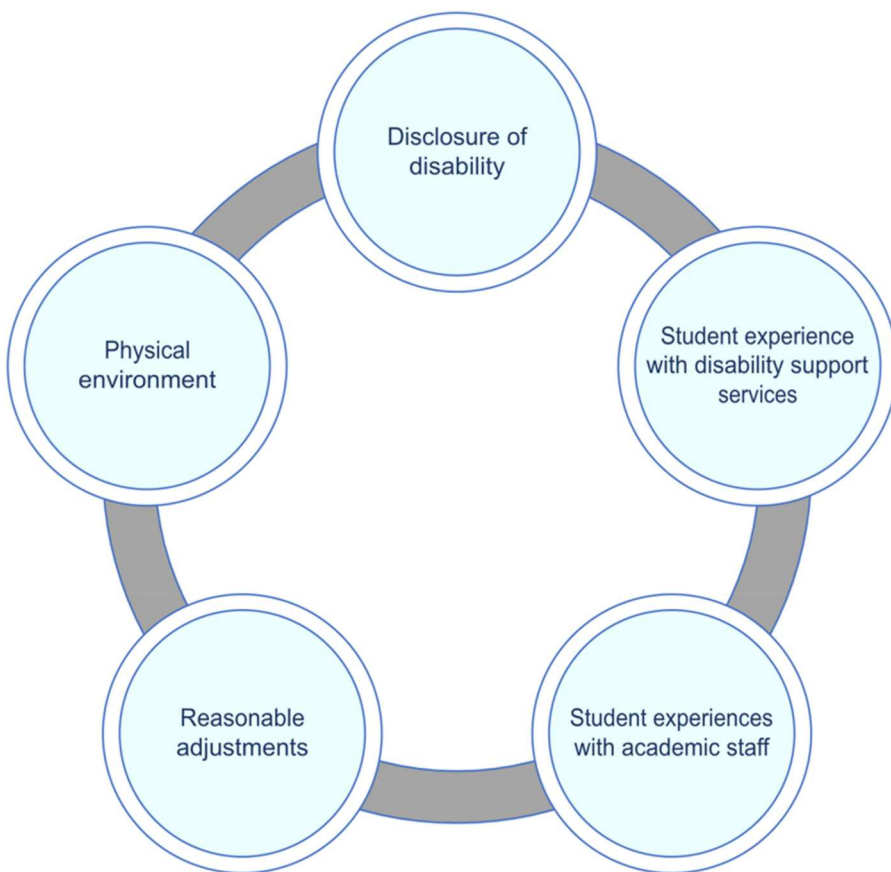


Figure 2. Themes related to the experiences of students with disability.

high proportions of students with mental health conditions or ongoing medical conditions (Dollinger, Finneran, and Ajjawi 2023; Ellis et al. 2022; Grimes et al. 2020; Pitman 2022; Yerbury et al. 2022); these conditions are likely to be invisible to other people and students must make decisions around their disclosure to support services, academic staff, and student peers. Reasons for not disclosing included a lack of awareness of supports or adjustments available, a desire to try to succeed without supports, and a fear of stigma.

The timing of disclosing disability and seeking supports varied. Many students did not disclose on enrolment or in the early part of their studies but did seek out disability support services and adjustments at a later time when they learned about such services or when they were struggling with academic challenges related to their disability. For example, Baker, Ellis, and Peddle (2022) reported that four of the six nursing students in their study had declared on enrolment to the university that they had a disability but had received no contact from the university to inform them of the option of having a learning access plan and potential adjustments. Informal contacts, such as friends, had suggested the path of seeking learning access plans. For these students, 'the trigger to apply for a LAP [Learning Access Plan] was academic and clinical hardship' (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022, 65). Tai et al. (2022) and Pitman (2022) reported similar findings, and in their study of students with autism, Anderson, Carter, and Stephenson (2020) similarly found that participants reported a lack of knowledge of available supports or how to request them, and in some cases a desire to 'manage' at university without them.

A major concern for students around disclosure, particularly those with mental health conditions but also those with learning difficulties or ASD, was the potential effects of encountering stigma and negative attitudes because of their disability. One of the included articles (Grimes et al. 2020) focused on the role of stigma in students' decisions not to disclose. Most of the 111 participants who cited stigma as a factor in their non-disclosure reported mental health conditions as their primary disability. The authors discussed three stigma mechanisms: anticipated, enacted, and internalised stigma. Some participants reported that disclosing their disability to lecturers or course coordinators had resulted in negative experiences, such as being met with suspicion. Such enacted stigma, experienced either at university or during students' lives before university, fed into anticipated stigma and expectations of being treated negatively should academic staff and student peers know of their mental health or learning difficulties. Some participants exhibited internalised stigma in their feelings of shame or embarrassment about their condition. The open-ended survey and interview responses in Yerbury et al. (2022) study cited stigma, embarrassment, and a fear of judgement from academic staff and peers as causing reluctance to disclose disability. Although all the study's participants had registered with their institution's disability support services, the majority chose not to disclose to lecturers and tutors, and only 15% had disclosed to fellow students. Fear of stigma was also reported by Edwards et al. (2022), whose large study of students receiving adjustments due to disability found reluctance to disclose to academic staff.

In their study of students with disability in work-integrated learning environments, Dollinger et al. (2024) and Dollinger, Finneran, and Ajjawi (2023) found that many students chose not to disclose to workplace supervisors due to anticipated stigma, including

fears of being judged as potentially incompetent and not given full opportunities for, or during, placements. Students who did disclose reported varying experiences. Some were pleasantly surprised by supportive responses from supervisors; others encountered negative attitudes and difficulties obtaining adjustments. Participants stated that the responsibility of disclosure and advocating for adjustments in workplace learning environments fell to them; this was also reported by the student with a mobility disability in Nonis and Gibson (2021).

Student experiences with disability support services

Several of the studies found that students who had disclosed to their university's disability support services and had learning access plans reported largely positive experiences with support services staff (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022; Edwards et al. 2022; Pitman 2022; Steele, Banks, and Louis 2022). In Pitman's nationwide study, a majority of survey respondents rated their institution's attitudinal support for students with disability as excellent or above average, and findings from the interview data included many positive examples of disability support staff support. In the context of examinations, Tai et al. (2022, 2023) found that participants highly valued supportive, ongoing relationships with disability support staff.

Nevertheless, problems around disclosing to disability support services and applying for adjustments were described in several of the studies (Edwards et al. 2022; Grimes et al. 2020; Pitman 2022; Tai et al. 2022; Yerbury et al. 2022). Difficulties were often related to the university's administrative procedures, particularly the need for a medical diagnosis and accompanying documentation, which could involve time-consuming and expensive processes for students. While negotiating a learning access plan, some students reported being given a menu of standard adjustments that were not always appropriate for their specific disability requirements (Edwards et al. 2022).

Student experiences with academic staff

As we have outlined, some studies' participants expressed a reluctance to disclose their disability to academic staff. Further, students related that their anticipation of stigma was realised when they did disclose. Participants in several studies (Edwards et al. 2022; Ellis et al. 2022; Grimes et al. 2020; Pitman 2022; Tai et al. 2023; Yerbury et al. 2022) reported negative experiences when they disclosed to, or sought adjustments from, academic staff. For instance, a participant stated 'I told one tutor/lab tech about my ADHD, and they sadly treated me differently after the fact' (Grimes et al. 2020, 28). From a large, Australia-wide study's findings, Pitman (2022, 38) concluded that 'support structures set up by professional disability support staff sometimes did not receive the same level of support in the classroom'. In some cases, students' adjustment requirements were disregarded, causing students to sit exams in inappropriate settings (Tai et al. 2022). Tai et al. (2022, 2023) reported that experiences involving unsupportive academic staff or invigilators who did not uphold adjustments at the time of an examination placed a burden of stress and additional workload on the student; however, participants in that study highly valued academics who were supportive of their reasonable adjustments in examinations. Survey respondents in Steele, Banks, and Louis (2022)

study reported positive experiences with supportive academic staff, as did a student with a mobility disability who described support and understanding received from lecturers and tutors in matters of assessment extensions as well as modifying requirements for physical activities (Nonis and Gibson 2021). However, the requirement for students to approach each academic to notify them of their adjustment requirements was reported as onerous and a barrier to implementation (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022; Tai et al. 2022).

Reasonable adjustments

Students who disclose their disability to their university's disability support services can discuss with those staff their needs for supports, generally in the form of reasonable adjustments, and these may be formalised in a learning access plan. As described in the DSE, a reasonable adjustment is a modification or adaptation to ensure that a person with a disability can participate on the same basis as persons without a disability. A learning access plan (also known, depending on the university, as a reasonable adjustment plan, academic adjustment plan, or student access plan) is a formal agreement between the education provider and the student documenting the required reasonable adjustments and support services.

Many participants discussed their experiences of learning access plans and reasonable adjustments, a large proportion of which were for assessments. Common assessment adjustments included additional time in examinations and time extensions for assignments (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022; Edwards et al. 2022; Grimes et al. 2021; High and Robinson 2021; Pitman 2022; Tai et al. 2022, 2023) and a smaller or private exam room (High and Robinson 2021; Tai et al. 2023). Tai et al. (2022, 2023) also reported examination adjustments such as a scribe to assist with handwriting, the use of speech-to-text software, and access to a more comfortable chair or a standing desk.

The use of mainstream technology, including smartphones, tablets, and software with inbuilt accessibility features, was preferred by many students (Ellis et al. 2022; Tai et al. 2022). Some students reported a need for captioning on videos and lecture materials during live lectures but found it only available on request, i.e. as a negotiated adjustment (Ellis et al. 2022; Pitman 2022). One student's experience illustrates how inadequate this system can be:

Closed captions are offered, but the reality is that they take approx. [*sic*] two weeks to be made available to me as a student, by which time the class has moved on and I cannot be part of any discussions or stay up to date with coursework, including assessments. Therefore, I don't use them and have stopped asking for them (Ellis et al. 2022, 236).

For research higher degree students, managing the interplay between their disability and candidature timelines was a significant additional challenge and they saw the university's policies and procedures as failing to accommodate the challenging, and at times changing, nature of their disability. These PhD candidates reported that the university administration was unaccommodating, with some requests denied (Spier and Natalier 2023). Reasonable adjustments were also denied in clinical placement settings if there was a legal requirement, such as a nursing student completing the mandatory written patient notes (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022).

Some students noted that the adjustments offered in their learning access plan had positively influenced their academic performance (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022), and satisfaction with adjustments provided was expressed in other studies (Pitman 2022; Steele, Banks, and Louis 2022). However, numerous students were unclear about what qualifies as a reasonable adjustment and which accommodations would aid their learning (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022; Pitman 2022; Steele, Banks, and Louis 2022). In addition, failures in the university's implementation of adjustments in a timely way were reported; for example, Steele, Banks, and Louis (2022) found that 58% of survey respondents reported being unable to access course content and 53% had to wait for accessible course materials.

Edwards et al. (2022) reported students' use of special consideration, which differs from reasonable adjustments in that it is used when a student's circumstances change unexpectedly and is, therefore, more reactive in nature than more proactively, pre-planned reasonable adjustments. Many disabilities, particularly mental health and ongoing medical conditions, involve episodic and unpredictable symptoms, and several studies (Ellis et al. 2022; Grimes et al. 2021; Pitman 2022; Yerbury et al. 2022) reported participants' difficulties when such changes caused them to seek adjustments. For example, some students had to wait weeks for an appointment with disability services staff to make alterations to their learning access plan (Yerbury et al. 2022). Pitman (2022) found that students particularly valued plans that had inbuilt flexibility to deal with periodic changes in health conditions.

The physical environment

The physical environment of the university was discussed in several of the documents. Students with mobility and physical disabilities reported barriers to accessibility including elevators being out of operation, the length of time needed to get to back-to-back classes at opposite ends of the campus, and desk heights unsuited to wheelchair users (Edwards et al. 2022; Nonis and Gibson 2021). Higher degree research students with disability reported that standard workspaces and equipment allocated to them were inaccessible and inappropriate and that disability-appropriate parking was at times not available. These barriers had both an immediate and a longer-term negative influence, not only on the academic work on campus of these PhD candidates, but also on their sense of belonging in academia (Spier and Natalier 2023). Barriers to physical access were also reported by participants in work-integrated learning settings (Dollinger et al. 2024; Dollinger, Finneran, and Ajjawi 2023) and in clinical placements for nursing students (Baker, Ellis, and Peddle 2022).

In relation to sensory sensitivities, participants with autism reported that sensory issues affected their ability to study on campus. They recommended the provision of soundproof or quiet rooms, replacing fluorescent lights in lecture theatres, reducing screen brightness in computer labs, and removing bathroom deodorisers (Anderson, Carter, and Stephenson 2020). Students with ADHD valued quiet and semi-private spaces on campus, but these were not always available, as this student described:

As a student with ADHD I find the study environment in the library can be quite overwhelming ... I find I work best when I'm in a private/secluded study space as it feels like I can focus completely on the task [but at my university] I have always really struggled to find suitable rest/study spaces and it has at times led to significant anxiety about going to campus (Pitman 2022, 41).

Discussion

This scoping review was conducted to investigate very recent empirical studies reporting experiences and challenges of students with disability in Australian universities. In light of concerted efforts by government bodies and universities to improve policy and practice around student equity, and of the recommendations given by the 2020 Review of the DSE (Australian Government 2021), we were particularly interested in ascertaining to what extent challenges remain for students with disability and what recent investigations tell us about universities' compliance with Australian disability legislation.

The findings indicate that previously reported challenges continue for students with disability in Australian universities and that barriers to disclosure reported in earlier Australian and global research (e.g. Couzens et al. 2015; Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017; Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carafa 2018), such as fear of stigma or discrimination, lack of awareness of potential supports, and difficulty involved in providing medical documentation, clearly still exist in Australian universities. The high number of students with invisible disabilities such as mental health and ongoing medical conditions or neurodivergence previously reported in many countries (e.g. Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017; Horlin, Hronska, and Nordmann 2024; Kilpatrick et al. 2017) was confirmed in the current review, with many reports of such students being reluctant to disclose or encountering negative attitudes when they did disclose. Decision-making around disclosure is complex for many students and involves weighing potential risks and benefits of disclosure to support services and faculty (Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017). However, without disclosure, reasonable adjustments are not provided, and it is of concern that large numbers of students with undisclosed disability are encountering barriers to full academic inclusion. It is necessary for universities to encourage a culture of understanding and openness to reduce stigma and facilitate disclosure (Hartrey, Denieffe, and Wells 2017).

Students receiving adjustments expressed satisfaction with many of them and clearly valued the input of disability support staff, but there were reports of dissatisfaction with the range of adjustments available and with the lack of timeliness of adjustment provision. Students whose disability effects were episodic and unpredictable reported problems with flexibility of learning access plans and time taken to adjust them. Many of the authors (Edwards et al. 2022; Ellis et al. 2022; Spier and Natalier 2023; Tai et al. 2023) pointed to the need to implement principles of universal design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), or Universal Design for Instruction in higher education. Implementation of UDL principles in teaching methods, materials, and assessments can improve the learning environment for all students and increase access, without the need to seek reasonable adjustments, for students with disability (Center for Applied Special Technology n.d.; Couzens et al. 2015; Schreiner, Rebagay, and Cavendish 2024). Wider implementation of UDL principles in higher education would achieve closer compliance with disability legislation. In addition, findings related to the physical environment indicated that improvements are needed for students with mobility and sensory disabilities, and universal design principles could be more fully incorporated into campus environments.

The current review's findings are consistent with previous research findings that students with disability are not always met with understanding or proper provision of

accommodations from academic staff (Australian Government 2021; Bunbury 2020; Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018; Sniatecki, Perry, and Snell 2015). From our findings it is clear that academics' attitudes and responses, positive or negative, have a strong effect on the experiences of students with disability. The 2020 review of the DSE pointed out that, unlike teachers in primary and secondary education sectors, university educators are unlikely to undergo training or professional development in disability (Australian Government 2021). Many of the studies' authors recommended training for academic staff, with Steele, Banks, and Louis (2022) specifying that training should cover:

... awareness of disability, barriers to education for students with disability, the obligations on the University and its staff to ensure nondiscriminatory access to education, and how to work with the University's specialist disability support staff to implement the Universal Design for Learning principles and Student Access Plans. (xi)

Recommendations

In response to the findings of this scoping review, the following 26 recommendations are offered to universities, academics, and students to improve the experiences of students with disability in higher education and maximise their retention rate.

University policies, procedures and facilities

1. The physical environment is accessible to students with disability.
2. All online platforms, learning management systems, and course materials are accessible to students with disability.
3. Students with disability are provided assistive technologies such as screen readers, speech recognition software, and alternative input devices to access learning and research materials.
4. Course timetables are allocated so that students with physical disability have time to transition through campus.
5. Training for staff in understanding their obligations under disability discrimination legislation is provided.
6. Disability confidence training is mandated for academics and professional staff on how to support students with disability effectively.
7. Universal design for learning training is mandated for teaching academics to make all resources accessible to all students.
8. Flexible attendance policies are implemented for students with disability who may have limitations or obligations related to their disability.
9. The development of learning access plans specifically for use in work-integrated learning settings is facilitated.
10. Scholarships for students with disability are available to assist with the financial burdens associated with disability while enrolled in higher education.
11. Students with disability have regular opportunities to provide feedback about their experiences and the effectiveness of support services.
12. Students have multiple opportunities to disclose their disability.

13. Documentation required for reasonable adjustment plans does not financially burden students.
14. Data on students with disability is collected, analysed, and reported to the university's governing body.

University student support services

15. Information about academic and non-academic support services is communicated effectively and regularly to students and staff.
16. Individualised reasonable adjustment plans are developed in accordance with the Disability Standards for education (Cth) 2005.
17. Peer support programmes are available so students with disability can connect with and receive support from fellow students with similar experiences.
18. Specialist counselling and mental health services are available for students with disability experiencing stress or distress.
19. Self-advocacy training is made available to students with disability.
20. Programme and course decision-making is supported for students with disability to maximise their strengths.

Academics

21. Implement reasonable adjustments in all aspects of all courses without question.
22. Take a proactive approach to the implementation of universal design for learning.
23. Are aware of and know how to refer students with disability to support services.

Students with disability

24. Understand the importance of disability disclosure and know how to disclose their disability.
25. Understand their rights and how to advocate for themselves.
26. Understand and utilise university support programmes and procedures for students with disability.

To operationalise these suggestions, universities must integrate accessibility into all aspects of campus teaching, learning, and social life. They must implement flexible attendance policies, establish clear procedures for reasonable adjustments, and create regular feedback mechanisms for students with disabilities. Policy changes must mandate UDL across all courses, require regular staff training on disability confidence and legal obligations, and ensure that documentation for reasonable adjustments does not impose a financial burden on students. Further research should explore the long-term influence of these recommendations on student retention and success, investigate the effectiveness of specific assistive technologies, and examine the benefits of peer support programmes. Additionally, studies must address the barriers faced by students with disabilities in disclosing their disabilities and accessing support services, providing further insights for improving university policies and practices.

Limitations

Our search criteria included only documents published in a four year time span and so the number of relevant documents and their reported studies is relatively small. However, the review's findings met our primary aim of investigating the most recent situation – from 2020 – for students with disability in Australian universities. The review's focus was only on universities, but research into the experiences of students with disability in other postsecondary settings is also needed. The current review did not include studies that comprehensively examined the intersectionality of disability with other historically underrepresented cohorts, such as First Nations and gender-diverse students, an important area for further research.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities are increasingly enrolling in higher education in Australia and other countries. As higher education has a positive influence on economic participation and thus a flow-on effect of improved quality of life, it is essential that every effort is made to support the retention of students with disability. This scoping review's findings indicate that problems described in reports such as the 2015 and 2020 reviews of the DSE and in earlier research continue to present barriers to success for students with disability in Australian universities. Further, the findings indicate that compliance with the mandates of disability legislation is incomplete. Although our study focused on Australian higher education, the findings and recommendations are relevant to other countries where barriers to full academic inclusion continue to impede the success of students with disability. Addressing these issues will undoubtedly assist students with disability in their potentially life-altering higher education endeavours.

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