Submission to the review of the Australian Disability Strategy (ADS)

# Introduction

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the review of the Australian Disability Strategy (ADS). ADCET provides national leadership in the inclusion of people with disability in tertiary education through providing information and professional development for disability practitioners, educators and support staff.

ADCET is committed to promoting inclusive education and training environments for students with disability in Australia, across both university and Vocational Education and Training (VET) settings. We recognise the significant role the ADS plays in shaping the educational outcomes of individuals with disability as the primary vehicle for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) in Australia. We believe that the current strategy can be strengthened to ensure it support the full implementation of the UNCRPD, particularly Article 24, in Australian higher education settings.

# Strengthening the Education and Learning Outcome Area

The current ADS refers to universities and VET settings under Policy Priority 3 & 4 (PP3 & PP4) under the umbrella of ‘tertiary education’ within the Education and Leaning Outcome Area. The focus of PP3 and PP4 is access and pathways to these educational settings. However, given the evolving landscape of higher education, as highlighted by the Australian Universities Accord, **it is essential that these areas are expanded to address not only educational access, but also to encompass the provision of equitable and accessible educational experiences and outcomes.**

Presently, the ADS suggests a focus on headcount (e.g. number of students with disability attending tertiary settings) and capacity building for individual students as mechanisms by which to address educational inequities. For example, PP3 is focused on “supporting students with disability in high school with career and transition planning”. This takes an individualistic view of student success and does not acknowledge the environmental and systemic factors which drive tertiary educational outcomes from students with disability. PP3 and PP4 will only succeed if the existing priorities are accompanied by an equal focus on eliminating the significant systemic barriers to tertiary education access, equity, and success which face students with disability. The ADS must reflect the priority of addressing environmental, attitudinal, and systemic barriers, with sufficient strategic guidance to support reforms which enable the following:

* **Improved student experience and satisfaction rates for students with disability:** The positive and equitable experiences of students with disability are paramount to achieving true educational equity, alongside the pursuit of increased enrolments and completions.
* **Support for the aspirations of students with disability to attend and complete tertiary education:** Societal attitudes and low expectations for students with disability are a significant barrier to the success of this cohort. The ADS currently reflects the low priority which has been placed to-date on tertiary sector inclusion for people with disability: early, primary, and secondary educational settings often dominate the conversation around educational equity, at the expense of emphasis on tertiary settings. Significant attitudinal change, both within the tertiary sector and beyond, is required to make the vision of educational equity a reality.
* **Enhanced funding models to support equity and accessibility for students with disability:** Tertiary institutions must be effectively resourced and held accountable for supporting students with disability.
* **Implementation of fully accessible physical and digital infrastructures:** Existing legislation has so far been insufficient to ensure that all students with disability can acquire fully accessible physical and digital infrastructures and services (such as disability advisors, adaptive technologies, and mental health support) regardless of the institution they attend.

# Realising Article 24 of the UNCRPD

Article 24 of the UNCRPD emphasises the right to inclusive education at all levels. It is well-understood that there remains a significant gap in educational equity for students with disability, and that work so far towards closing this gap has been minimally successful. Through ADCET’s networks, past projects, and subject-matter expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of what is needed to ensure full educational equity. We suggest that the following measures must be incorporated within the strategic focus of PP3 and PP4 for Article 24 to be fully realised:

* **Promotion of universal design for learning (UDL):** The ADS should strategically position the widespread adoption of UDL principles in higher education and VET as a priority. This ensures that curricula, teaching methods, and assessments are designed to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners from the outset.
* **Enhanced professional development:** The ADS should strategically incentivise ongoing professional development of educators and administrators in inclusive practices, ensuring that staff across all levels are equipped to support students with disability effectively.
* **Collaboration with disability organisations:** The ADS should encourage partnerships between educational institutions and disability organisations to co-design and implement programmes that support students with disability, ensuring that their voices are central to decision-making processes.

# Enhancements to the Outcomes Framework

To realise authentic change in the Education and Learning outcome area of the ADS, it is crucial to incorporate metrics into the Outcomes Framework that go beyond attendance and completion rates. While these are important indicators of access, they do not fully capture the lived experiences of students with disability in tertiary education.

We propose the following measures for inclusion in an updated version the Education and Learning area of the Outcomes Framework:

* **Student satisfaction:** Understanding student satisfaction can help identify specific areas where institutions succeed or fail in providing an inclusive learning environment. Student satisfaction is currently collected through the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveys including the Student Experience Survey (SES) and Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS). These surveys also collect disability status, so this data can be easily disaggregated for ADS purposes.
* **Learning environment accessibility:** Ensuring a barrier-free learning environment is essential for students with disability to fully participate and succeed in their studies. The Outcomes Framework should include a metric which reflects the extent to which educational institutions provide accessible learning environments. This includes physical accessibility, access to adaptive technologies, and the availability of accessible digital content.
* **Engagement and belonging:** A strong sense of belonging is closely linked to academic success and retention, making it a vital area of focus for enhancing educational outcomes. Engagement and belonging are currently collected through the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveys including the Student Experience Survey (SES): this survey also collects disability status, so this data can be easily disaggregated for ADS purposes.
* **Graduate outcomes:** The ultimate goal of education is to prepare students for successful and meaningful futures; therefore, tracking these outcomes ensures that education systems are truly equitable and supportive. This might include across further study, employment, life satisfaction, and quality of life. Many metrics measuring these items are currently collected through the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveys including the Student Experience Survey (SES) and Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS). These surveys also collect disability status, so this data can be easily disaggregated for ADS purposes. Further, under the Employment and Financial Security outcome area, only VET graduate employment outcomes are tracked: university graduate employment outcome measures should be introduced in this section to reflect a holistic view of employment pathways and higher expectations for students with disability entering employment through university study.

Incorporating these metrics will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how well actions under the ADS are improving the experiences of students with disability on the ground, enabling the Australian Government to make policy decisions which target areas which are acting as barriers to the full realisation of Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

# Conclusion

The ADS has the potential to be a powerful tool in advancing the educational outcomes of students with disability in higher education and VET settings. By expanding the scope of the education outcome area, setting aspirational targets, and aligning with Article 24 of the UNCRPD, the ADS can ensure that these sectors are truly inclusive and supportive of all students. ADCET looks forward to continuing to work with the Australian Government and other stakeholders to achieve these important goals.

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