

**TASMANIAN**

**UNIVERSITY**

**STUDENT**

**ASSOCIATION**

**Broadening inclusion of students with disability at  
UTAS: Recommendations for the Tasmanian University  
Student Association**

TUSAxUC Student Lead Research Project

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## Executive summary

Universities operating in an international setting have a responsibility to embrace the ideals of equality and justice proclaimed by international treaties (McLean, Heagney & Gardner 2003). As the only University in Tasmania, and an institution that caters for equity groups, it is of utmost importance that the University of Tasmania (UTAS) creates an inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities. UTAS currently ensures equitable access to education through learning access plans, disability services, personal counsellors, physical and digital infrastructure facilities (UTAS 2021).

However, UTAS currently does not have a codified inclusion policy or a disability action plan (UTAS 2021). Such plans have been proven to increase inclusion within higher education institutions (Buitendijk, Curry & Maes 2019). This report seeks to inform the development of a codified inclusion policy within UTAS, which will foster a culture of respect, understanding, and create a sense of belonging for students with disability at UTAS. (Buitendijk, Curry & Maes 2019).

To identify the areas an inclusion policy should cover, a survey tailored to understand the problems faced by students with disability at UTAS was released. A simple statistical analysis was used to analyse the quantitative data and a thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data collected through the survey. The results of the statistical and thematic analysis were synthesised with the findings of the desktop analysis which examined disability policies at other universities. This enabled providing TUSA with recommendations to address issues faced by students with disability at UTAS. Accordingly, the report recommends that TUSA organises disability awareness training (DAT) camps to reduce stigma and improve inclusion at UTAS. Next, the report recommends that TUSA collaborates with UTAS sport to establish an accessible sports program, while highlighting the importance of disability sport in promoting engagement of disabled students within the university. Finally, the report suggests that TUSA presents a report to UTAS outlining the importance of increased physical and digital accessibility within UTAS spaces.

The limited timeframe allowed only for the analysis of a small quantity of data gathered through the survey. Therefore, TUSA should analyse the remaining data obtained from the inclusion survey to further improve disability inclusion within UTAS.

## Introduction

Now more than ever, educational institutions are paying increased attention to diversity and inclusion (Maggiolini & Molteni 2013). In this landscape, it is important that UTAS provides access for all students, regardless of their personal abilities and circumstances. However, to this date, UTAS does not have a codified inclusion policy to ensure equity for students with disability (UTAS 2021). Although each faculty at UTAS has the discretion to set their own inclusion standards, there has been minimal drive towards ensuring a fully inclusive university environment.

As the student representation body within UTAS, it is important that TUSA takes headway in fostering such an inclusive environment within the university (TUSA 2021). This project seeks to identify the problems faced by students with disability at UTAS and provide recommendations to inform the development of an inclusion policy. Fundamentally, this project aims to assist in fostering a culture of respect, understanding, create a sense of belonging for the students with disability and provide them an equal opportunity to actively engage within the university.

Firstly, this report provides an overview of the context in which this research is conducted, within an emphasis on UTAS's approach to inclusive education. Next, the report provides a summary of the methodology adopted to collect and analyse data to identify issues faced by students with disability at UTAS. The findings of the project and the discussions of such findings will follow. Then this report provides recommendations that will enable TUSA to foster an inclusive environment. To conclude, the study highlights its limitations.

## Background

Internationally, equity, together with quality and efficiency, is widely regarded as one of the three primary indicators of a higher education system's efficacy (James 2012). This is because equity focuses on our views about justice as well as our ambitions for a more just society, social change, and national progress (James 2012). Such views and ambitions are often enshrined in treaties and conventions. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2013 (CRPD), state unequivocally that everyone has the right to an inclusive education at all levels.

Australia's commitment to the CRPD is proven through the significant improvement in accessibility within Australian universities over the past decades (Tait & Purdie 2000). Australian universities have taken a wide range of approaches to improve inclusion including disability action plans, inclusion policies and learning access plans (University of Sydney 2021; University of Deakin 2021; University of Tasmania 2021).

In this context, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) also strives to foster an equitable, inclusive, and accessible learning, teaching, and research community (UTAS 2021). While learning access plans are the primary source of improving accessibility within UTAS, disability support workers are also employed to assist students with disability at the university (UTAS 2021). However, UTAS's effort to improve inclusion has failed to address all obstacles encountered by students with disability at the university.

TUSA, as the student association of UTAS, is committed to addressing gaps in inclusion within UTAS (TUSA 2021). Currently, TUSA is working with the university to develop an inclusion policy, to foster more inclusion within the university. The University Equity Committee, a subcommittee of TUSA, draws on the University's extensive expertise in diversity and equity, and serves as a venue for discussion and the production of ideas that

inform the development of the inclusion policy (TUSA 2021). Organising events is not an easy task. It requires significant time, energy, and money for promotion, tickets, ticket distribution, and participant validation (Wibisono, Primasari & Kurniawan 2020). Using digital media could make this process simple, more effective, and more efficient (Wibisono, Primasari & Kurniawan 2020). Interactive online apps, such as QPay, take advantage of the internet's widespread availability and advancements in web development to offer more personalised access (Ginige & Murugesan 2001) and more cost-effective options for event management and registration (Johnson et al. 2013).

## Method

### *Research design*

The findings in this article are based on data gathered through the Inclusion Survey 2021. The survey was used as the primary source of data gathering for the project because it enables the collection of a large volume of both qualitative and quantitative data, within a limited timeframe (Ponto 2015). Data were gathered by TUSA from September 2021 through October 2021.

### *Quantitative Data*

It was pertinent that a statistical analysis was conducted to ensure the reliable interpretation of the quantitative data generated through the inclusion survey (Dixon & Massey 1951). This resulted in uncovering patterns in the structured and semi-structured data. However, it is to be noted that the limited timeframe only allowed for an underpowered statistical analysis, resulting in limitations in interpretations (Klaus 2015).

### Qualitative Data

The survey also contained open-ended questions to better understand the pressing issues faced by students with disability at UTAS (Amemiya 1981). While most of the open-ended questions received a significant number of responses, the data from the following questions were taken into consideration for the thematic analysis:

- Are there ways that UTAS Sport could create a more inclusive environment for you to participate?
- What is one thing that UTAS could do to make you feel safer/more welcome on campus?
- What is one thing that TUSA could do to make you feel safer/more welcome on campus?

### Desktop Analysis

A desktop analysis was also conducted alongside the survey to understand the approaches taken by other universities in addressing issues faced by students with disability. The University of Sydney, University of Deakin and the University of Oxford were chosen for the project report, owing to their prominence in online searches regarding disability inclusion. Journal articles and official publications were analysed to understand the approaches taken by the chosen universities in fostering an inclusive university environment. In addition, grey literature was gathered from university webpages and linked social media pages using purposive sampling (Campbell et al. 2020).

Sample

The data was gathered from a sample of 154 students at UTAS by means of a survey. Most of the students were pursuing a bachelor’s degree, whereas a significant number of masters students were within the sample. 71 percent of students were Australian, whereas the remaining 29 percent were of international origins. 60 percent of students did not identify with a disability whereas 40 percent of the respondents identified as having a disability.

Findings

Quantitative

The following tables provide an overview of the simple statistical analysis conducted.

**Table 1:** *Barriers for students with disability to engage in sports at UTAS*

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Students with disability</b>	<b>Students without disability</b>
Unwelcoming sporting culture	33%	10%
Lack of support from TUSA and UTAS	12.5%	3.1%
Lack of facilities	16%	6.2%
Education	20%	37.5%

**Table 2:** *Physical and online accessibility variance between of students with disability and students without disability at UTAS*

<b>Type of Accessibility</b>	<b>P-Value</b>
Physical Accessibility	0.02674
Online Accessibility	0.005176

Since both P-values are less than 0.05, it can be established that there is significant gap in accessibility for students with disability, compared to students without disability.

*Other quantitative findings*

- 31 percent of students with disabilities were discriminated based on their circumstances.
- 44 percent of students with disability felt excluded from the community at UTAS.

*Qualitative (Thematic Analysis)*

While most of the perceptions of students were largely subjective, common but meaningful patterns within the issues and terminology were identified to arrive at 3 themes. Table 4 provides a summary of themes identified.

**Table 3:** *Themes identified*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Coding Rule</b>	<b>Example</b>

Absence	Absence is the inexistence of a culture, support and facilities that promotes disabled individuals to socialise in a sporting environment.	'UTAS has no disability sports'
Disability Awareness	This refers to the understanding about the causes and effects of disability, which in turn assists in subsiding the stigmatisation of people with disabilities.	'Emphasising tolerance and having awareness campaigns and having a no-tolerance policy to discrimination on any grounds'
Accessibility	This entails the practice of optimising both physical and digital spaces so that they are useable by students with disability.	<p>'Stop building on hills, make more elevators, I have to make my schedule revolve around physically safe rooms, which limits my time'</p> <p>'Make it very simple to get quick support to improve my IT skills'</p>

Desktop Analysis

The findings from the desktop analysis are grouped as follows.

**Table 5: Disability Services within UTAS**

Facility	Description
Disability advisers	Provide information regarding UTAS facilities and services that serve people with disabilities and/or health conditions.
Student Access Study Centre	This facility provides specialized equipment in a study atmosphere that is completely accessible.
Digital Accessibility  Learning access plans	<p>JAWS, ZoomText, Dragon Naturally Speaking, Read and Write</p> <p>Plan developed by Disability Services on a case-by-case basis, detailing out specialist services, study, and assessment accommodations available at UTAS for disabled individuals.</p>
TUSA	<p>Equity committee with disability representative.</p> <p>Student Promise to ensure diversity and equity in all its actions.</p>

	Student research project for improving disability inclusion.
Personal counsellors	Free counselling services for all students at UTAS.

**Table 6:** *Additional approaches taken by other universities to foster inclusion.*

<b>University</b>	<b>Approaches</b>
University of Sydney	<p>Disability Awareness Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Disability Confidence for University Staff', 'Disability Confidence for Managers and Supervisors' and 'Supporting Students with a Disability' are two-hour workshops that are made available to all staff.</li> </ul> <p>Disability Inclusion Week</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improving disability awareness within the university.</li> </ul> <p>Disability Action Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overall plan to improve education, employability, and experience of disabled students within the university.</li> </ul>

	(Sydney 2021)
University of Oxford	<p>Active at Oxford: Accessible Sport Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Includes a wide range of sports including para-Archery, Para-Athletics, Para-Badminton, Wheelchair basketball and Para-Swimming.</li> </ul> <p>Oxford University Disability Law and Policy Project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continuous research on how to create inclusive academic environment within the university.</li> </ul> <p>(Oxford 2021)</p>
University of Deakin	<p>Deakin TALENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An education and employability plan for students with disability.</li> </ul> <p>Diversity and Inclusion Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve inclusivity and connectedness for students with disability.</li> </ul> <p>(Deakin 2021)</p>

## Discussion and recommendations

Based on the findings, it is quite evident that UTAS does not provide an environment that is fully inclusive for students with disability. As the body of student representation, it is the duty of TUSA to take headway in fostering a more equitable environment within the university. This section synthesises the findings from the statistical, thematic and desktop analysis to provide TUSA recommendations on how to promote disability awareness.

### *Disability Awareness*

This refers to the understanding about the causes and effects of disability, which in turn assists in subsiding the stigmatisation of people with disabilities.

As identified in the findings, 44 percent of students with disabilities in UTAS find the university environment exclusionary, whereas 31 percent were subjected to discrimination based on their conditions. These patterns were further reflected through the thematic analysis, which identified that exclusion occurs from the lack of student and staff awareness with regards to disability awareness:

“Have better support for people with ADHD and autism. Also make it so lecturers and unit coordinators and tutors take into account the accommodations from the LAP.”

“Emphasising tolerance and having awareness campaigns. Having a no-tolerance policy to discrimination on any grounds.”

To create an inclusive environment for students with disability within UTAS, it is necessary to ensure that the university community puts on a lens of disability over all activities, while being conscious that even a minor change can have a big impact on people with disability (Bines & Lei 2011; Ohajunwa et al. 2014).

A study conducted at the University of Sehan proved that disability awareness training can bridge this gap of awareness and result in a significant decrease in the prejudice towards differently abled students (Park & Kim 2018). This is because disability awareness training raises awareness about the causes, symptoms, prejudices related to independent living skills, social adaptation, passive attitudes as well as responsibilities of disabled people (Park & Kim 2018). disability awareness training also increases positive attitudes towards disabled students which results in students being more likely to be friends, work together and spend time with students with disability (Park & Kim 2018; French 1992).

**Recommendation 1:** That TUSA develop annual disability awareness training retreats to promote disability awareness and tolerance among students and staff.

### *Absence*

Absence refers to the lack of a culture, basic facilities and programs which promotes students with disability to engage in sport and extra-curricular activities.

The inclusion survey revealed that 33 percent of the differently abled respondents did not partake in sporting due to the lack of a welcoming sporting culture, whereas lack of facilities barred another 16 percent. Moreover, UTAS does not offer any sporting program or extracurricular activity in which individuals with impairments can participate in (UTAS 2021).

However, sport have been identified as an important and successful tool that can be used to integrate individuals with different disabilities in society (Martin 2006). Some of the benefits of physical activity for people with disabilities includes instilling self-discipline, a competitive spirit, and comradeship:

"Its value in promoting health, physical strength, endurance, social integration, and psychological wellbeing is of little doubt. It is not difficult to understand why sport is so important for the wellbeing of people with disability." (Chawla 1994)

As identified through the desktop analysis, leading universities facilitate disability sports to foster inclusion (Oxford 2021). One may argue that the lack of a sufficient number of individuals to partake in disability sport acts as a barrier to establishing it within UTAS. However, UTAS sport currently hosts 'social sporting' events within campus premises, it is possible that disability sports can also be organised in a manner so that both UTAS students and outsiders can take part (UTAS 2021). TUSA could also evaluate the feasibility of appointing a Tasmanian Para-Olympian as an ambassador for promotion and awareness of the disability sports within UTAS.

**Recommendation 2:** That TUSA collaborate with UTAS Sport to establish and promote an accessible sport program within campus.

### *Accessibility*

This entails the practice of optimising both physical and digital spaces so that they are useable by students with disability. Although it is understandable that addressing infrastructure concerns is generally not within the scope of TUSA, the sheer number of responses within the inclusion survey underlining both digital and physical accessibility within UTAS makes it a mandatory theme of discussion.

It is to be understood that for individuals with physical accessibility issues, a curb, a staircase or even a slope can be large barriers (Hill 1992). Announcements and lectures can sometimes be difficult to understand for individuals with perfect hearing; for those who have impairments in

hearing, they may not hear them at all. Signs, no matter how effectively positioned, may not do any good for individuals with vision impairments (Biggeri, Di Masi & Bellacicco 2020).

Although UTAS currently does have facilitates to ensure both physical and digital accessibility (UTAS 2021), it has been highlighted throughout the inclusion survey that UTAS needs to be more aware of the accessibility concerns within its premises. This is also important since it is possible that the locations and layouts of the new campuses might add on to the accessibility concerns of students.

**Recommendation 3:** That TUSA should develop a report to UTAS, informing the infrastructure requirements to ensure both physical and digital accessibility within the university, with a focus on the new campuses.

## Conclusion

It is important that TUSA takes initiative to improve disability inclusion policies to ensure that all students have equal opportunities at UTAS. This report focused on identifying the issues faced by students with disability through a survey and highlighting some institutional strategies that TUSA can take to aid the development of an inclusive environment for differently abled students within UTAS.

Firstly, the report highlighted that globalisation and diversification have resulted in a move towards an inclusive tertiary education system. Then it provided an overview of the current measures taken by both UTAS and TUSA in creating an inclusive environment. Next, the report identified and explained the methodology applied to understand and identify the issues faced by students with disability at UTAS. The findings from the statistical, thematic and desktop analysis were presented in the discussion, followed by the recommendations and implications.

While the statistical analysis managed to identify that UTAS is not a fully inclusive environment the thematic analysis revealed that the perspectives of students were based on three key areas: disability awareness, absence and accessibility. These themes demonstrated the need for further measures within UTAS to foster inclusion.

Accordingly, the report recommends TUSA to investigate the possibility of establishing disability awareness training camps within campus premises to combat social stigma and enhance the university experience of students with disability. The report also identified that TUSA should collaborate with UTAS sport to establish disability sports within campus premises, to enhance engagement of students with disability. Finally, the research recommends that TUSA submits a report to the university identifying both physical and digital accessibility concerns within the university.

Since the study was conducted within limited timeframe, the report was unable to utilise all the data generated from the inclusion survey. Moreover, it should be noted that the small sample size might result in imperfect information. TUSA can counteract these limitations by conducting further research based on inclusion data.

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## Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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