

Finding Australia's Disabled HASS Students in the Regions

Jessica White and Amanda Tink

OVER 2022 AND 2023, THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INVESTED \$2.7 MILLION TO conduct a review of Australia's higher education as part of the Australian Universities Accord. The Accord's objective was to 'devise recommendations and performance targets to improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of higher education, in order to achieve long term security and prosperity for the nation' (Australian Government Department of Education). The *Australian Universities Accord: Final Report*, released on 25 February 2024, mentions the word 'equity' two hundred and twelve times, and the word 'disability' sixty-two times. A focus on equity is one of twenty-nine findings in the report. This finding states:

Every Australian should have the opportunity to experience the life transforming benefits of tertiary education. This is vital for Australia's future. Only by expanding access to tertiary education to currently under-represented groups—including people from low SES backgrounds, First Nations, people with disability and regional, rural and remote students—can the nation meet its projected skills needs. Access to tertiary education must include high quality teaching and learning targeted to students with lower educational attainment, alongside access to income support where necessary, affordable

student housing and the ability to find reasonable work and placement opportunities. (O'Kane et al. 11)

The Final Report acknowledges that '[r]eforms to reduce inequities in the early learning and schooling systems will take time to reach full effect, as will reforms to the higher education system recommended in this Final Report, should they be implemented by the Australian Government' (113). However, this intention for effectual reform is belied, as highlighted in the response to the Accord tabled from nine representative bodies in the Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability (ATEND), by the Final Report's 'use of ableist language and its deliberate exclusion of people with profound disabilities' (ATEND 1).

Under the Accord's guidelines, as we detail below, the profoundly disabled authors of this essay would be excluded from participation in higher education. This is troubling, not only because our research centres on advocacy for disabled people, but also because our careers in the humanities enabled us to critically evaluate representations of disability and to articulate how disability is fundamental to our identity, research, and writing. Through the knowledge we have acquired from our critique of representations of disability, we have developed a successful Australia Research Council Discovery project—*Finding Australia's Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community*. Our project aims to connect readers with disabled authors and their works and, in doing so, educate communities about disability and how it shapes Australia's national literature.

Additionally, the Final Report's failure to dwell upon the intersections of marginalised groups, such as disabled students in regional areas, indicates that the Accord's objective of improving accessibility is not supported by critical analysis or data. This is of particular concern to one of the authors of this paper who attended a regional university, and who attributes her success to that university's regional location.

In this essay, we contemplate the ways that reading and critiquing fiction and non-fiction such as memoirs and autobiographies by disabled writers, and about disability—high-level reflective skills we acquired in our humanities degrees—helped us to consider our own impairments and how they shape our writing. We apply the tools that we acquired as literary studies scholars—in particular the use of close reading—to analyse the Accord's report and its inconsistencies. We then survey, through a review of academic literature, the limited research available on disabled students who study in regional universities, particularly those undertaking studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We close with a call for more research in this field, particularly given the Accord's emphasis on equity for undergraduate students, as well as our firm understanding of the benefits for disabled people of studying in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Finding Community Through Disabled Writers

Jessica grew up in regional northwest New South Wales and undertook a double degree in Arts and Creative Arts, majoring in literary studies and creative writing, at the University of Wollongong. She has been severely-to-profoundly deaf from age four, and was raised to communicate using speech and lipreading rather than sign.¹ She had her first, sustained interaction with a deaf person in her mid-thirties, at which point she realised she had thought of herself as a deficient hearing person. She began reading about deaf history, and reading books by deaf writers, and realised that the way she responded to her environment and to other people was not because of a deficiency, but because she could not hear. Jessica then realised that her life was an extension of the nineteenth-century project to eradicate deafness through eugenics—the assimilation of deaf people into hearing populations by encouraging them to lipread and to meet and marry hearing people, so as to reduce the incidence of deafness in babies born to them. Jessica then detailed her intellectual and personal journey through literary expression, in her hybrid memoir *Hearing Maud*.

Because of the remoteness of her upbringing, and because of the difficulty of social interaction, Jessica learned about the world through reading. When, as an adult, she drew upon her skills in research, analysis, and writing, she came to understand the impact of her impairment upon her relationships and her career as a writer. Life at a regional university, the University of Wollongong, made it easier for Jessica to transition from school to tertiary education. She grew up on a farm and attended school at small regional towns. The shift from that town to the small city with the regional university meant that she could work out how to get around easily. Had she attended university in a major city like Melbourne or Sydney, learning would have been more difficult, as she would have had to learn how to navigate a city as well as her education. As it was, she flourished in the small classes, which made it easier to hear, and become acquainted with her classmates and lecturers.

Despite Jessica's testimony of how study in the Humanities and Social Sciences gave her the skills to reflect on her own experience, no study yet exists of disabled students' experiences of HASS. In fact, only one discipline-specific study on disabled undergraduates appears in the academic literature, with a focus on Social

¹ It is sometimes customary to use upper case 'Deaf' to refer to those who use sign language and identify culturally with Deaf communities, and lower case 'deaf' to describe deafness as a medical condition. Jessica uses the term 'deaf' to describe herself. This usage has been proposed by Kusters, de Meulder, and O'Brien in *Innovations in Deaf Studies* (2017). They challenge this late-twentieth-century convention as it simplifies what is an increasingly complex set of deaf identities and language practices.

Sciences and Law at a university in Spain (Aguirre et al.). Currently there is no research that examines the experiences of disabled undergraduate students who, like Jessica, choose to study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Australia, and there is certainly no such study of disabled HASS students at regional Australian universities. This is a major gap in the literature given that, with its large land mass and sparse population, regionalism has shaped Australian literature and Australian writers—including those with disability—in particular ways, as our ARC project has demonstrated.

Famous Australian writers such as Henry Lawson and Alan Marshall forged their careers in rural Australia and had to learn how to adapt given that technology was often rudimentary at the time. They drew on the classic rural habit of making do. Alan Marshall, for example, had a great affinity with animals, and particularly horses. After contracting polio when he was young, he relied upon crutches. When he taught himself to walk with crutches, he 'practised different walking styles, calling them by names applied to the gaits of horses. I could trot, pace, canter and gallop' (99). For him, animals represented freedom and movement, hence his desperation to learn to ride. The end of the novel sees him, having skipped class at school to steal away on a horse, riding past his father. Marshall must adjust his position on the horse, and the points of the saddle onto which he holds for balance, in order to stay on the animal. As Amanda Tink writes, 'Marshall's breakthrough comes, not as retellers of his story would have it, when he "overcomes" his impairment, but when he gives up on trying to ride horses in a standard way, and develops a method that utilises his impairment as a resource'. Tink challenges the stereotypical view of Marshall's horse riding as a problematic 'triumph over adversity' narrative, revealing it instead to be a triumph of adaptation and ingenuity.

Like Jessica, Amanda also learned to analyse representations of disability at university. Amanda and her older brother are blind and autistic, and grew up as part of the disability community. Nevertheless, Amanda did not learn the language, theory, and history that enabled her to articulate her experiences as a disabled person until her mid-twenties in a humanities degree. This led to a career both inside and outside academia, educating others on how impairment engenders creativity. It is therefore alarming to Jessica and Amanda to find that the Accord's Final Report seeks to exclude students who, like them, are profoundly disabled.

The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations

The *Australian Universities Accord: Final Report* proposes participation targets to increase the proportion of undergraduates from under-represented backgrounds by 2035. It recommends a growth of 2.1 percent to 3.3 percent for First Nations students, 17.0 percent to 20.2 percent for students from the lowest quartile SES

backgrounds, and 19.8 percent to 24 percent for regional, rural and remote students. For students with disability, however, the Final Report merely recommends 'maintaining participation rates' (O'Kane et al. 21). Its justification for doing so is the claim that disabled people have already achieved parity in higher education, currently constituting 11.6 percent of enrolments, as opposed to an expected share of 8.4 percent (O'Kane et al. 114).

However, the Department of Education's method for calculating parity for people with disability was vastly different than their methods of calculation for other underrepresented groups. Parity for other underrepresented groups is based on their proportion of the entire Australian population. The Final Report states that 'the Review's vision is to create a higher education system that delivers opportunities for all and, importantly, that this is delivered in a student population that closely reflects the Australian population' (114). However, while parity for every other underrepresented group reflects the Australian population (that is, every age group), the Report's calculation of parity for disabled people only reflects the Australian population between the ages of 15 and 64 (O'Kane et al. 116). Certainly there are not likely to be as many Australians attending university who are younger than 15 or older than 64; yet this is not the point. Rather, other equity categories are calculated across the whole of the population, and by restricting the data to these ages for only the disabled equity group, rather than spreading it across the population, the percentage of disabled people attending university appears to be higher, which is misleading.

The Final Report acknowledges the inconsistency in its representation of data in relation to disabled people, stating that although the figure of 11.6 percent suggests parity of participation in higher education for disabled people has already been achieved, 'this result more likely reflects complexities in data collection and comparison' (O'Kane et al. 116), such as definitions of disability, underreporting of disabled people's enrolment, inconsistencies in data collection between universities, and a reliance on self-reporting of disability (O'Kane et al. 116-7). Nonetheless, the Final Report persists with its argument that parity has been achieved for disabled people. Additionally, while it assumes that other represented groups can participate in higher education if given the opportunity, the Accord Final Report assumes that profound disability precludes participation in higher education (O'Kane et al. 116).

Continued Exclusion

The Final Report does not provide a definition of 'profound disability', but the Australian Bureau of Statistics defines it as 'sometimes or always needing help with daily self-care, mobility or communication activities, having difficulty understanding or being understood by family or friends, or communicating more

easily using sign language or other non-spoken forms of communication' (ABS 2019). This definition, if adhered to by the Final Report, would exclude the co-authors of this paper from inclusion in higher education. Moreover, as numerous disabled scholars and advocates have pointed out, the exclusion of 'profound disability' from equitable higher education would exclude people such as Graeme Innes, Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner from 2005 to 2014 and current Chancellor of Central Queensland University, who holds a Bachelor of Laws. It would also exclude Rosemary Kayess, the current Disability Discrimination Commissioner, the Vice Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, who holds a number of academic appointments, a Bachelor of Laws, and a Bachelor of Social Sciences. Kayess points out that 'Stephen Hawking is someone that would have been captured by the field of profound disability' (Gordon). The Final Report even questions its own methodology of excluding people with profound disability (O'Kane et al. 117, footnote 173). Despite this, it remains committed, to use Graeme Innes' words, to the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' (par. 58).

Perhaps this is not so surprising given that such cultural barriers mirror wider societal attitudes to disability, which in Australia have been so pronounced that in 2019 the Disability Royal Commission was established 'in response to community concern about widespread reports of violence against, and the neglect, abuse and exploitation of, people with disability' (Royal Commission, 'About', par. 5). The need for this commission speaks to the longstanding denigration of people with disability in Australia, with 44 percent of the complaints received by the Australian Human Rights Commission in the period 2019-2020 related to disability discrimination (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare). The Disability Royal Commission concluded in 2023 with the publication of 12 volumes canvassing 222 recommendations (Royal Commission)—testimony to the scale and significance of discrimination against disabled people in Australia. The authors of this essay consider that, despite its focus on equity, the Australian Universities Accord reflects the continuing dismissal and denigration of disabled people.

Disabled Students in the Regions

The Final Report also notes that 'participation in higher education is geographically uneven' (O'Kane et al. 114), with those in regional, rural, and remote areas acquiring degrees at a considerably lower rate than those in the major cities (23.8 percent as opposed to 44.6 percent). It acknowledges that individuals from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote students, First Nations students, and students with disability 'may fall into one or more of these groups, with multiple group membership associated with lower chances of successful participation' (O'Kane et al. 113). It is worthwhile considering, then,

research on experiences of disabled students in regional universities, to see if these might affirm or depart from Jessica's experiences.

An academic literature review on the topic of disabled students in the regions has found that research is, unfortunately, scant. A small-scale qualitative study on disabled students at regional universities, undertaken by Cate Rooney, has revealed that one of the most substantial barriers to students in a regional university is not so much architectural or physical barriers, but cultural barriers. Rooney found that there is 'a gap between inclusive policies and rhetoric and actual practices at the study university that have consequences for students with disability and their educational success. At worst, they reinforce inequality, stigma and dominant normative discourses' (44). Rooney also highlights that the barriers faced by disabled students were informed by institutional avoidance of understanding how to foster an inclusive environment for disabled students. Similarly, in a different study that involved interviewing Australian students with learning disabilities, Janette Ryan writes that students 'are promised equal opportunity of access to higher education' but 'then face a very different reality when their learning needs and experiences are not accepted or understood' (440). These findings articulating the barriers faced by disabled undergraduate students are likely to be amplified by those attending regional universities.

However, reports such as 'Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities' by Karen Nelson, Kylie Readman, and Ian Stoodley, which were motivated by questions such as 'What is the 21st century student experience in regional universities?' and 'Is an additional set of metrics required to ascertain the performance of regional universities and their graduates?' (2), do not mention disability once. Nelson, Readman, and Stoodley acknowledge that 'rhetoric aligning the characteristics of regional university students with their academic outcomes' masks a 'more complex and nuanced set of conditions influencing the experiences of regional university students' (v), and thus it is puzzling that disability is not considered amongst these conditions. Further, a study into the retention and success of disabled students in higher education from 2007 to 2013 notes that disabled students experience consistently lower retention rates than the total student population (Kilpatrick et al. 757). The study's authors assert that 'higher education institutions need to do more to redress this situation' (757).

While the above review of the published research finds that more needs to be done to support disabled students at Australian universities, we also discovered, in reviewing it, that most available published research about students with disabilities in higher education does not centre rural and/or regional experiences. Kilpatrick and co-authors, in exploring the retention and performance of higher education students with disability, mention that some of their disability service manager interviewees were recruited via 'institutional characteristics, e.g.

research-intensive network, regional university network' (750), but the geography of interviewees is not elaborated on in the results or discussion, so it is unclear as to the impact of a regional location on their research into interactions with disabled students. In yet another report, by Ayse Collins, Fara Azmat, and Ruth Rentschle, the researchers interviewed forty students and staff at a 'well-known and established institution in Victoria [that] is ranked among the top 2 per cent of universities worldwide' to ascertain the experiences of students with physical disabilities and their learning environment, but the location of this university is not mentioned. It would appear that regional and rural backgrounds of disabled students in higher education, and regional and rural contexts of higher institutions for educating students from these backgrounds, constitute large gaps in the research on supporting students with disabilities.

In their submission to the Australian Universities Accord consultation, authors Paul Harpur, Lisa Stafford, and Katie Ellis delved into the challenges faced by Australian disabled students. The authors designed an anonymous survey to gain a range of disability perspectives on barriers and enablers, and changes needed, in the higher education sector. Of the 198 qualitative responses, 76.26 percent of respondents had a disability and 23.74 percent did not. The authors note that this 'included 5.63% of responses from regional and rural areas and spread across Australian jurisdictions' (Harpur et al. 10); however, it is not specified if these respondents from regional or rural areas identified as having a disability. The authors also undertook focus group discussions with disabled people who work as academics, professional staff, or office holders in the chancellery—drawn from capital, regional and rural universities in all states and territories except the Northern Territory and South Australia (10). These replies informed their 2023 report 'Disabilities and the University Accord', which was their response to the Universities Accord Panel discussion paper. One participant from the senior executive focus group noted that regional universities, as they do not have the same numbers of international students, are unable to 'generate the same kind of surpluses as G8s and as a result our infrastructure lags behind, which means that much, much more of our infrastructure is older and not compliant with current accessibility standards' (16).

An additional issue noted by Harpur, Stafford, and Ellis is that '[i]t is very difficult for a high school student in a regional or lower socio-economic area to imagine university is for them' (19-20). This can be addressed through leaders with disability who can act as mentors or role models, but as the authors note, 'the few leaders with a disability who have succeeded in higher education are massively over-committed. To enable these leaders to connect with students requires resourcing' (20). The authors recommend 'a state initiative which buys out teaching for academics with a disability, to enable them to spend time connecting with high school students with disabilities' (20). This suggestion recognises the

intense demands of working as disabled academics (teaching, for example, requires vast reserves of energy for this authors of this paper), and their suggestion of additional resourcing to connect with disabled students is positive and welcome. This response is one of the few pieces of research that refers to the experiences and challenges of disabled regional students, and it is disappointing that the Accord Final Report largely ignored the time, scholarship, and effort of disabled researchers.

Disabled Students Studying HASS in the Regions

As thinkers, researchers, and writers who have benefitted from a HASS degree, as noted earlier in this essay, we consider it productive to contemplate what the Humanities and Social Sciences can bring to disabled students. The humanities provide students, in general, with experience with critical thinking and analysis 'by offering a grounding in ethics that, in turn, encourages a willingness in students to consider and evaluate multiple perspectives' (Edwards and Ritchie 18). More specifically, scholars in literary disability studies, which falls under the umbrella of the humanities, explore language, literature, and literary subjects from the perspective of disability studies. A disability studies perspective 'studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and expression' (Siebers 4). As noted earlier, the analysis and exploration of disability identity was critical to the development of a deaf cultural identity for one of the authors of this piece.

Moreover, HASS degrees, particularly in the social sciences, prepare students to work in the disability sector, which has one of the fastest growing workforces in Australia. As the Accord Final Report points out: 'Over the last 5 years, growth in the care and support workforce—which includes nursing, aged and disability care workers, medicine and allied health—has been 3 times faster than total employment' (O'Kane et al. 60). HASS degrees are where disability studies subjects are commonly found, and these subjects are sometimes also the only opportunity that medical and allied health students get to learn about disability. It is imperative that people with disability are among this cohort as they have the lived experience that is crucial for appropriate policy and practice in these areas.

Despite the benefits of a HASS education for disabled students, in its 'Jobs Ready' legislation package of 2020, the Morrison Liberal government increased the fees for arts degrees by 115 percent in an attempt 'to steer enrolments towards courses with good employment prospects' (Norton par. 2). The government ignored research, as cited by a submission from the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) into a senate inquiry into the package, which indicates that arts and humanities train students in skills that are in high demand in Australian companies, such as 'creativity, initiative complex problem-solving, leadership, and

emotional intelligence' (AAH 2). The AAH also noted that 'Australia's regional economies are major employers in education, social services, health, tourism and creative industries, all of which are underpinned by knowledge and skills derived from training in Society and Culture' (5). In regional Queensland, they state, 'creative industries are bigger employers than both mining and agriculture' (5). Without students in the regions studying in the Humanities and Social Sciences, both disabled and nondisabled, employers in regional economies, and the communities they support, will be much poorer.

Due to the paucity of research on the experiences of disabled undergraduate students studying in the Humanities and Social Sciences in regional universities, the authors are preparing a survey to collect more data in this area. Given our positive experiences of studying humanities and social sciences subjects, and the criticality of this to our identity as disabled subjects, it is remiss that data on regionalism, community and disability among undergraduates is sorely lacking.

Conclusion

Professor Andrew Norton, writing in *The Conversation* in October 2020, predicted that 'Job-ready Graduates will probably not significantly alter student course choices' (par. 10). So it came to pass, with recent reports indicating a spike in demand in arts degrees (Cassidy), at least at metropolitan universities. Given, however, the lack of information on disabled students studying humanities and social sciences subjects at regional universities, it is unclear if they are also part of this cohort. Regional universities are locations where there are particular challenges, as well as particular benefits, for disabled students which deserve to be better understood and supported.

Given, too, the vague and disheartening wording as well as the puzzling calculation of attendance rates of disabled students in the Final Report, it is clear that much more research is needed to support the equitable experiences of disabled students in Australian higher education. This includes the experiences of disabled students undertaking HASS courses in the regions, and whether their experiences might help them to situate themselves in the world, and to contest and reframe stereotypical representations of disability. As disabled writers and researchers who have benefitted from a HASS degree, the authors of this paper are committed to producing more research in this area to highlight the experiences of disabled students undertaking HASS subjects in general, and at regional universities in particular.

JESSICA WHITE is an award-winning author of fiction and creative nonfiction. She is chief investigator on the ARC Discovery Project 'Finding Australia's Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community' and is co-president of the Association for the Study of Environment, Literature and Culture (Australia and New Zealand). Her essay collection *Silence is my Habitat: Ecobiographical Essays* will be published by Upswell in 2025. Jessica is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of South Australia.

AMANDA TINK is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UniSA Creative, University of South Australia, and Adjunct Research Fellow at Western Sydney University's Writing and Society Research Centre. She is a proud disabled person with research interests in Australian disabled authors, crip poetics and memoir, and the Nazi genocide of disabled people. She is currently working on the Australian Research Council discovery project 'Finding Australia's Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community'.

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